

Kyle R. Hughes
 NT330A The Book of Acts
 Box #531

THE GOSPEL FOR PAGANS: PAUL AND BARNABAS IN LYSTRA
 Acts 14:8-20

Exegetical Idea

The result of God's revelation in Christ is that Gentiles must respond to this new dispensation by turning from idols to the living God upon hearing the contextualized Gospel message.

Phrase Outline

- I. The Occasion for the Speech: Healing and Controversy (14:8-14)
 - A. Paul Heals a Man Crippled from Birth (14:8-10)
 - B. The Response of the Crowds (14:11-13)
 - C. The Response of Paul and Barnabas (14:14)
- II. The Speech: The Living God Proclaimed to Gentiles (14:15-17)
 - A. *Exordium*: An Introduction to the Living God (14:15)
 - B. Narration: God's Past Dealings with the Gentiles (14:16)
 - C. *Probatio*: The Gentiles' Accountability before God (14:17)
- III. The Aftermath of the Speech: Mixed Results (14:18-20)
 - A. The Immediate Reaction: Measured Success (14:18)
 - B. The Later Reaction: Rejection and Violence (14:19-20)

Exegetical Commentary

Introduction

The account of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra is part of Paul's so-called "first missionary journey" (Acts 13-14) following their commissioning at Antioch. These two men arrived in Lystra after being forced to flee persecution from both Jews and Gentiles in Iconium (14:1-6). They then began to preach "the good news" of Jesus Christ throughout the region (14:7), setting the stage for this pivotal moment in their ministry there (14:8-18) and its consequences (14:19-20).

In terms of form, "the episode is basically a narrative, including a miracle story of healing, which becomes the occasion for a speech" (Fitzmyer, 529). Adding the aftermath of the speech into the equation, the account is easily divided into three sections: the healing and subsequent controversy that is the occasion for the speech (14:8-14), the speech itself (14:15-17), and the aftermath of the speech (14:18-20).

The text of this account features several Western expansions characteristic of this text-type's text of Acts. In this paper, I follow the editors of the critical editions in considering these expansions to be just that: additional details incorporated into the text of Acts after its publication. Significant textual additions from the Western witnesses (Codex D and its allies) will be noted briefly in the commentary below, but are not to be considered authentic.

Well-known commentaries on Acts will be cited parenthetically, while bibliographical detail for other works will be provided in footnotes.

I. The Occasion for the Speech: Healing and Controversy (14:8-14)

The action is set in the city of Lystra, established by Augustus in 26 B.C. as a Roman colony (Witherington, 421). The city, located just 18 miles southwest of Iconium, was founded as a base for combating marauders from the Tarsus mountains (Bruce, 272-73). Not surprisingly, Roman religion accompanied the founding of the city, which will play a major role in this pericope. That Paul appears was likely preaching in Greek outside of a synagogue suggests that a purely Gentile audience is in view (Bock, 474).

14:8 The account opens with a description of a man crippled from birth. Luke provides little detail about this man, but we can assume that he had already heard enough of the preaching of Paul and Barnabas that he believed they could heal him (Marshall, 236). The description of the crippled man (χλωδός ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς αὐτοῦ) exactly matches that of the crippled man Peter healed in 3:2 (Bruce, 273). As will be the case with the following two verses, these healing miracles of Peter and Paul will be demonstrated to be both similar (though not identical). Yet not only is the man crippled from birth, Luke tells us, but he could not use his feet and had never before walked. This unnecessary repetition highlights the man's disability and thus "enhances the greatness of the miracle" (Haenchen, 425).

14:9 The crippled man, as he hears Paul preaching, has faith that he could be healed. Perhaps the man had heard the message of Jesus on previous occasions (cf. 14:7), the effect of which was that he responded with faith when he heard Paul on this occasion (Marshall, 236). Luke records that Paul stared intently at the man, using the same aorist participle (ἀτενίσας) used to describe Peter's gaze at the crippled man in 3:4. Several Western MSS suggest that the cripple was in fact a Jewish proselyte, but the text does not require this.

Paul then prophetically discerns that the man had faith necessary to be healed. In the phrase ἔχει πίστιν τοῦ σωθῆναι, the infinitive could either indicate purpose ("the faith necessary for the purpose of saving," so Bock, 475), or qualification (an exegetical infinitive: "the faith to be healed," *ExSyn*, 607). This phrase has both theological and non-theological connotations. On one level, the crippled man believes that he will be delivered from his physical disability. But, on the other hand, as is typical in the Gospels and Acts, "faith is regularly emphasized as a condition of receiving both physical and spiritual healing" (Bruce, 274). The gospel brings life, both in this world and in the next.

14:10 Paul now commands the man to stand upright. Paul makes the command in a loud voice (μεγάλῃ φωνῇ). This phrase is commonly used in Luke-Acts to describe someone who is speaking by the power of either the Spirit or a demon (Haenchen, 425); in the Greco-Roman world (especially relevant for the context of this pericope), speaking with a loud voice was often associated with stories involving the coming of the gods (Bock, 475), which likely contributed to the crowd's misidentification of the apostles.

The man obeys, demonstrating his faith, and walks for the first time in his life. Forms of the same verbs used in this verse to describe the man's response (ἄλλομαι and περιπατέω) are also used to describe how the man Peter healed jumped up and began walking around (3:8). In both cases, the imperfect verb περιεπάτει is most naturally taken as an ingressive imperfect, emphasizing what the healed man began to do (cf. *ExSyn*, 544).

Paul has now performed his first public miracle recorded in Acts. The connections to the Petrine healing account are significant because they show that Paul possesses the same power and authority as Peter. Witherington sees a "larger sequence of parallels between the actions of Peter and Paul" at work in this pericope, "involving first the giving of a paradigmatic

sermon followed by the healing of a lame man and then a strongly negative, even violent reaction to each man” (Witherington, 423). As Paul takes the gospel to the Gentiles, Luke is eager to show continuity between his ministry and the ministry of Peter to the Jews. Codex Bezae and its allies further assimilate the account to Peter’s healing by adding “I say to you in the name of Jesus Christ” before the command to stand up (cf. Acts 3:6).

14:11 The crowd now responds to the healing by declaring that Barnabas and Paul are in fact gods. Luke notes that the people in the crowd, when they are talking amongst themselves, speak neither Greek nor Latin but their Lycaonian vernacular. This explains why Paul and Barnabas did not understand what the crowd was up to until well after preparations to honor them had begun (Bruce, 274).

Ovid records a famous myth that serves as the likely backdrop to this incident. According to this story, Zeus and Hermes come to earth disguised as humans, and go to a thousand homes looking for shelter. They are turned away time after time, until finally one pious couple who lived in a humble home invite them in and provide food and hospitality. The gods reveal themselves to the couple and bless them for their good deeds, transforming their house into a temple and making them into priests (*Meta.* 8.626ff.). Thus, when the people of Lystra behold Paul’s power to work miracles, they assume the gods have come down to them in human form (ὁμοιωθέντες ἀνθρώποις).

That Lystra was likely aware of this myth is demonstrable, first, from the fact that the myth was set in the nearby Phrygian hill country, and second, because inscriptions and altars found near Lystra contain references to Zeus and Hermes, the key gods in this story (Witherington, 421-22).

14:12 The people of Lystra now explicitly identify the apostles with the gods from this local myth: Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes. Reliefs discovered near Lystra depict Zeus as an elderly man with a beard, and Hermes as his young assistant (Witherington, 422). This suggests that Barnabas was an older man than Paul (Bock, 476). Luke adds that Paul was identified with Hermes because he was the “leading speaker” (ὁ ἡγούμενος τοῦ λόγου). A very similar expression (θεὸς ὁ τῶν λόγων ἡγεμῶν) is used to describe Hermes by a later Neoplatonist writer (Bruce, 275); Paul’s powerful rhetoric is therefore compared favorably with how Hermes was supposed to speak.

14:13 With Paul and Barnabas still unaware of the crowd’s plan to pay them divine honors, preparations for the ceremony are well underway. The seriousness of the plan is underscored by the work of the priest (or priests, according to Codex Bezae) of the temple of Zeus, who brings bulls and garlands to the city gates. These details cohere with what we know from ancient writers who describe a typical “celebratory and commemorative sacrifice of thanksgiving,” which involved “parading the oxen, dressed for the offering with garlands, that would have accompanied the crowd to the temple” (Bock, 476). In light of the supposed judgment that came on the people the last time the locals had failed to honor the gods, the people of Lystra were no doubt “anxious not to repeat the error” (Marshall, 237).

14:14 The apostles were clearly familiar enough with pagan religious rituals to understand, at last, what was happening (Witherington, 425). Their response (tearing their clothes) is a typical Jewish response signifying “horror” of perceived blasphemy, with roots as far back as Gen 37:29 (Fitzmyer, 532). Rather than taking advantage of the situation and accepting divine honors (like Herod Agrippa in Acts 12), Paul and Barnabas clearly reject the crowd’s response. Bock notes that “taking advantage of gullibility may have been an accusation

made by some of the more elite people in the culture against the early church's success among poorer people" (Bock, 476). This account, however, clearly demonstrates that the apostles did not take advantage of people's gullibility to lead them to Christ, and contributes to Luke's overall defense of the new Christian movement in Luke-Acts.¹

Two other points are worth noting here. First, Barnabas is named before Paul. This is a rare move on Luke's part, as he normally gives Paul's name first. Second, this is the only place in Acts where Paul and Barnabas are explicitly called ἀπόστολοι (also implicitly in 14:4). The Western text is clearly uncomfortable with Barnabas being called an apostle, as ἀπόστολοι has been omitted. The combination of these facts suggests that this account has been taken over by Luke from an existing source that told of Paul's first missionary journey (Bruce, 276). It is also possible, however, that Barnabas' name is listed first because the people of Lystra associated him with the higher deity Zeus (Bock, 477).

II. The Speech: The Living God Proclaimed to Gentiles (14:15-17)

This short speech stands at the center of this pericope. This speech is significant for several reasons. First, it is the first speech to an exclusively Gentile audience recorded in the book of Acts. As Acts has already recounted several speeches by Paul to Jewish or mixed audiences, this offers a chance to compare and contrast the messages given to these different groups. The most immediately noticeable difference is that this speech "is neither kerygmatic nor christological, as were the missionary speeches addressed to Jews, but rather *theological*, as the apostles preach about 'the Living God.'" (Fitzmyer, 532). The speech preserved in Acts 14:15-17 is by all accounts a summary; Paul's address to the crowd would surely have been longer than what has been preserved here (Bruce, 276).

The speech also to some extent foreshadows Paul's address at the Areopagus in Acts 17. The Lystra and Areopagus speeches both focus on creation and natural theology, rather than the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures, as these Gentiles likely had no acquaintance with Jewish monotheism until this visit by Paul and Barnabas. Though while the content is tailored for a Gentile audience, it is permeated with the language of the Hebrew Scriptures (particularly the LXX).² While the Areopagus speech is on a higher intellectual register than this speech, this speech focuses does in fact contain some elements of ancient deliberative rhetoric aimed at persuading an audience towards a change in action (Flemming, 68).³ As such, this speech can be broken into an introduction (*exordium*), narration, and proof (*probatio*).⁴

14:15 Paul begins his introduction with a question, asking the Lystrans why they are doing these things. In its context, this question has the force of a command to stop (Haenchen, 428). Paul addresses them as "men" (ἄνδρες) in place of his usual "brothers" (ἀδελφοί), as befits an address to a Greek audience (Flemming, 68).

¹ Some scholars, in fact, see this apologetic aspect as the primary purpose for the existence of this account. See Dean F. Bechard, "Paul Among the Rustics: The Lystran Episode (Acts 14:8-20) and Lucan Apologetic," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 84-101.

² Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: SCM, 1956), 71 n. 23.

³ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005).

⁴ For further defense of this outline of the speech, see Marianne Fournier, *The Episode at Lystra: A Rhetorical and Semiotic Analysis of Acts 14:7-20a* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 187-93.

Paul now identifies with his audience, insisting that he and Barnabas are not gods but are men, with “natures” (ὁμοιοπαθεῖς) the same as theirs. “Rather than starting with a shared *history*, as in the sermon at Antioch (Acts 13:17-22), Paul appeals to a shared *humanity*,” not only does this approach convey respect for the Lystrans as fellow people created in the image of God, but it “begins at their most basic point of need - to acknowledge the one true Creator God” (Flemming, 68-69). In other words, “Instead of beginning with the gospel about the saving work of Jesus, [Paul] recognized the need to start further back in their presentation of biblical revelation to this audience” (Peterson, 409).

Thus, when Paul next goes on to say that he is “proclaiming the good news” (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) to them, the content of this good news is necessarily different from what was presented to Jewish audiences. Before they could hear about the salvific work of Christ, the pagans of Lystra first needed to know that the Creator God is the one true, living God (Bruce, 277).

The core of Paul’s message is that the pagans must “turn” (ἐπιστρέφειν) from dead, worthless idols to the one true God. The verb “turn” is frequently used in Acts to describe the act of conversion (3:19, 9:35, 11:21, 15:19, 26:18, 26:20, 28:27). Specifically, they are to turn from things which are “worthless” (ματαίων). The adjective μάταιος is used throughout the LXX (e.g., 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5) to describe not just the false gods of the Gentiles but “everything which resists the first commandment” (Bauernfeind, *TDNT* 4.522). Only the one living God is not μάταιος, and it is to him that the nations must turn.

This true God is described in two ways: he is alive and he is the Creator of everything. The statement that God is living is in contrast to the gods of the pagans; this is “an essential starting point for addressing people in a context of idolatry and religious pluralism” (Flemming, 69). The second statement, that God is Creator, is the basis for humans’ accountability to God; “this point is the foundation stone of Jewish thought about the relationship between God and God’s creatures and is a classic way to address Gentiles” (Bock, 477). Indeed, the notion of God as Creator is a central theme of the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Gen 1-2; Ex 20:11; Ps 146:6), but Paul does not cite an actual Scripture here, as the Scriptures’ authority would of course carry little weight in this context.

Thus, in this *exordium*, Paul identifies with the Lystrans on account of their shared humanity, and then calls on them to turn to the one true God. This God is identified as alive and as the Creator; these two points serve as the foundations for his outreach to Gentiles.

14:16 Paul now turns to a brief narrative of God’s dealings with Gentiles in the past, simply asserting that in previous generations God has allowed the Gentiles to “go their own ways” (πορεύεσθαι ταῖς ὁδοῖς αὐτῶν). This statement is most naturally interpreted in light of Paul’s parallel statement to the Gentiles at the Areopagus, in which he argued that in the past “God has overlooked such times of ignorance” (Acts 17:30). The implication is that God, in some sense, “did not regard their ignorance of himself as culpable” (Marshall, 239).

How, then, do these statements square with Paul’s statement in Rom 1:19-20 that God’s general revelation leaves the Gentiles “without excuse”? The next verse sheds some light on this problem: the Gentiles’ ignorance was more than it should have been, given God’s general revelation. Moreover, God’s willingness to “overlook” the Gentiles’ ignorance should not be interpreted as indifference, for “even if such ignorance was not free from blame, God in mercy had passed it over” (Bruce, 340). This seems to be exactly the same point that Paul makes when he writes that “God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed” (Rom 3:25). Further, God’s abandonment of a person or a people to do their own thing is always an act of judgment (cf. Rom 1:24-28); God’s lack of involvement with the nations “was a curse and

an anticipation of final judgment” (Peterson, 410). In summary, it seems that God’s treatment of the Gentiles before the time of Christ was characterized by both mercy *and* judgment.

Regardless of how one puts all of these pieces together, what is important is that this was how God acted “in past generations” (ἐν ταῖς παρωχημέναις γενεαῖς). This suggests a contrast with what God is doing in the present time, an idea to which we will return.

14:17 At last, Paul turns to his *probatio*, appealing to the audience’s present understanding of God. For while God did not give these Gentiles special revelation as he did the Jews, he nevertheless did not leave them “without a witness” in the form of general revelation. While God did not hold the Gentiles’ lack of explicit knowledge of him against them, “it should have been possible for men to realize that he existed, since he had given testimony to himself in the world of nature by providing *good* things for men,” such that “the world of nature should thus have led men to recognize the existence, power, and goodness of the Creator” (Marshall, 239).

But whereas God had previously overlooked such ignorance, Christ’s coming has inaugurated a new age, “a fresh start in God’s dealings with the human race” (Bruce, 340). In other words, Jewish eschatology has been redefined so that “the present evil age is overtaken by the new age in Christ, in which salvation is made possible for Jew and Gentile alike” (Peterson, 501). The Jewish division of time into two eras has been retained, but the extension of God’s Spirit to the Gentiles was undoubtedly unexpected. For the Gentiles, this means that reconciliation with God and cleansing from sin is now possible, but it also means that they are now responsible for how they respond to the revelation of Jesus Christ. “If ignorance was culpable before, it is inexcusable now” (Bruce, 340). This is precisely because “*now* apart from the law the righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) *has been disclosed*,” such that “there is *no distinction*, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:21, 3:22b-23, italics mine). Jews and Gentiles alike must respond to God’s revelation in his Son.

This is the end of the speech as Luke has recorded it in Acts. But it is likely that Paul either said more or intended to say more than this. Presumably, he would have gone on the subjects of Christ crucified and the last judgment (cf. Acts 17:31; Rom 3:24-25; 1 Thess 1:10). The speech as recorded must not have been the entirety of what Paul said; “the description of what God had done in past generations cries out for a contrasting description of what he is doing now to reveal himself in a new way” (Marshall, 239). Either Luke has not recorded the rest of Paul’s message because he is concerned only to show what was distinctive of this message (Marshall, 239), or Paul was unable to conclude his intended message because of the crowd (Bock, 478). The fact that speeches in Acts are often interrupted (cf. Acts 7:54, 10:44) suggests this explanation is likely.

III. The Aftermath of the Speech: Mixed Results (14:18-20)

The conclusion of this pericope is easily divided into two parts: the crowd’s immediate reaction, which is mixed (14:18), and the later reaction of rejection and violence (14:19-20).

14:18 Luke notes that this speech was barely able to stop the crowd from sacrificing to the apostles. “What Paul said was sufficient to restrain the crowds from their original intention of sacrificing to the missionaries, but only just; their superstition was deeply entrenched, and the miracle had made a strong impression on them” (Marshall, 239). On the assumption that the crowd was so chaotic that Paul’s speech was interrupted, “rather than dampening the audience’s enthusiasm, this speech seems if anything to have fanned the flames”

(Witherington, 427).

Nevertheless, the apostles did succeed in their immediate goal of stopping the crowd from sacrificing to them; in that sense, the speech fulfilled its intended purpose. The fact that some Lystrans converted to faith in Jesus (Acts 14:20; 16:2) suggests that Paul's preaching did persuade some in the audience that day.

14:19 There is likely a time gap between this and the previous verse (Bock, 479; the expansion in Codex D supports this reading). Luke reports that a group of Jews from Antioch and Iconium, presumably after hearing of the apostles' activity in the region, arrive in Lystra. After winning over the crowds (the adverbial participle *πείσαντες* is likely temporal), the Jews and the crowds together stone Paul and leave him for dead. The theme of Jewish opponents of the gospel working with Gentiles to hinder the missionaries' work is prominent in this section of Acts (cf. 13:50; 14:2, 5-6; Peterson, 411). The Western text gives additional detail about the Jews' criticisms of Paul and Barnabas.

The text specifies that Paul alone was the subject of this persecution, which coheres with the fact that Paul performed the healing and was the main speaker to the crowd. Bock notes the irony of the parallel between the actions of the Jews pursuing Paul and Saul's mission to persecute Christians in Damascus (Bock, 479). The text is also clear that Paul was not in fact dead; rather, the crowd presumed (*νομίζοντες*) him to be dead. He was likely unconscious. Marshall suggests that this is the stoning to which Paul refers in 2 Cor 11:24-25, Gal 6:17, and 2 Tim 3:11 (Marshall, 239).

14:20 The Lystran believers (proof that the apostles' ministry in that city did have some success, cf. also Acts 16:2) surround Paul and assist him back into the city. Some scholars have suggested Paul was miraculously healed by the believers, but this is unprovable (Bruce, 279). The following day, he and Barnabas depart for Derbe, some fifty to sixty miles to the southeast (Witherington, 428). The crowd has rejected the apostles just as the crowds had rejected Jesus.

The Western text adds several colorful details to this verse, including the crowd's departure and that Paul got up with great difficulty only after darkness had fallen.

Conclusion

Faced with a pagan crowd desperate to pay divine homage to them, Paul and Barnabas attempt to defuse the potentially blasphemous situation by addressing the crowd with news of the one true God. This speech, the first gospel presentation to Gentiles in the book of Acts, is best seen as a "translation" of the Christian message for pagans who were unfamiliar with the Hebrew Bible and Jewish theology. Even while engaging with their presuppositions and finding points of contact, Paul ultimately subverts the Lystrans' pluralistic worldview by calling them to repent and believe in the one true God; "this speech thus models a context-sensitive approach to unsophisticated pagans and lays the vital groundwork for a fuller proclamation of the Word" (Flemming, 71-72). Though likely making some converts, the vast majority of the crowd does not accept this preaching and, when stirred up by Jews from a nearby city, nearly kills Paul and forces him and Barnabas to depart for Derbe.

Application

Acts 14:8-20 suggests the following applications for today's mission-minded church:

*We should be careful not to manipulate or take advantage of gullible or poor people. Paul and Barnabas could have used the fact that the Lystrans saw them as gods to increase their status and give authority to their message, but they adamantly refused to do so. Likewise, we must be careful not create "rice Christians" in poor or remote areas who claim to accept Jesus, but do so solely for the access to Western money, power, and knowledge that Western missionaries have.

*A contextualized gospel message is not merely a good idea but is virtually required for audiences who do not have any knowledge of the one true God. While these people will ultimately be responsible for how they respond to God's revelation in Christ, preaching Christ crucified right away to such people will not be intelligible unless a foundation of the biblical metanarrative has first been laid. As Hinkle concludes from this speech and others in Acts, contextual sermons must tell the biblical story, include the hearers, and use truth-claims to connect preacher and audience.⁵

*The gospel is proclaimed in Lystra with both word and deed. "Miracle and message have become the two facets, visible and invisible, of the mystery of salvation."⁶ At the very least, our lives should be characterized by a ministry of both proclamation and action.

⁵ Mary E. Hinkle, "Preaching for Mission: Ancient Speeches and Postmodern Sermons: Acts 7:2-53; 13:16-41; 14:15-17," in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. R. L. Gallagher and P. Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 87-102.

⁶ Fournier, *Lystra*, 214.