

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 14:1-7 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 14:1-7 ESV

1 Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. 3 So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4 But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. 5 When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, 6 they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, 7 and there they continued to preach the gospel.

STRUCTURE

- I. Division in the synagogue (14:1-2)
 - a. Jews and Greeks are united by faith in response to the apostles' preaching (14:1)
 - b. Jewish and Greek unbelievers unite against believers (14:2)
- II. Division in the city (14:3-4)
 - a. Believers and unbelievers choose sides in response to bold, powerful preaching (14:3-4)
 - b. Jewish and Greek rulers, with their populations, unite against the apostles (14:5)
- III. Conclusion: the apostles flee danger and continue preaching (14:6-7)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Continuing from the last section (but amplified), these seven verses highlight the theme of *division*. The gospel divides the world along new lines. In the first century, Jews and Greeks would have resembled whites and blacks of the Jim Crow era. The world has always determined "who's in" and "who's out" by observing ethnic and nationalistic demarcations. When we observe the same in Christian settings, we are "not in step with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14), which divides the world differently.

Jesus divided history between the Old Testament *age of promise* and the New Testament *age of fulfillment*. In dividing history, Jesus also divided humanity. During the age of promise, the nation of Israel stood apart from all the other nations because God chose her. They were the "chosen race" and "holy nation" that God elected as a "people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). Now, in the age of fulfillment, these labels apply to God's global, multiethnic church. As the early church noted, Christians are neither Jew nor Gentile but a "third race." In Christ, every race becomes part of the "chosen race." Those nationalistic divisions that once marked Israel's unique status say nothing of whether one receives new covenant blessings in the age of fulfillment. Jews and Greeks who believe join Team Jesus, while Jews and Greeks who disbelieve oppose Him. The dividing line is no longer ethnic or nationalistic but Messianic. How one responds to Jesus now determines "who's in" and "who's out" of the kingdom.

As the story unfolds, division in the synagogue moves to the city, traveling along sound waves of gospel proclamation. Wherever grace is preached, contrasts emerge. Some side with the apostles and others with the unbelieving Jews. The latter stirs up "both Gentiles and Jews" against Paul and Barnabas, with the commotion elevating even to "their rulers" (14:5). We have observed this theme throughout Acts. Politicians and populations typically move together, for or against Jesus. Mention of "rulers" reminds us that Jesus is the true "ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:5). His status as such divides humanity between those who pledge allegiance to King Jesus and those who resist. Political boundaries and allegiances only superficially divide the earth. Jesus rules over all peoples and territories (Matt. 28:18). Only those who receive "the word of his grace" experience it. The rest suffer wrath.

The story ends with Paul and Barnabas fleeing danger again but continuing to preach. Wherever the gospel goes, divisions follow, but we must not shrink back out of fear. The defiance of kings and their populations must never silence our testimony to the reign of King Jesus. We submit to a higher law than any politician on earth can enforce.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.

—"Iconium": about fifty miles from Pisidian Antioch, where they fled persecution (13:50-51).

—"entered together": the synagogue would be divided by the Word of God, but Paul and Barnabas "entered together". God's Word unites God's people, but it divides the world.

—"into the Jewish synagogue": the pattern of beginning with the Jews continues. The apostles feel passionately about their heritage. Paul's mission to the Gentiles did not derive from Anti-Jew bias. He dutifully bore witness to the descendants of God's promises.

—"spoke in such a way": God is sovereign, but the apostles' words mattered. Later, Paul would write Timothy about those who "work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). Teaching the Bible isn't just showing up and gushing Bible verses. God used Paul and Barnabas powerfully because they immersed themselves in Scripture, piecing together how Jesus fulfilled it. They spoke persuasively by the power of the Spirit, who used their study and prayer to move hearts.

—"a great number": in Pisidian Antioch, the "whole city" came out to hear the word of the Lord (13:44), and later the "whole region" received the Word (13:49). Technically, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch comprised the same region of Pisidia. The "great number" who came to faith through the apostles' preaching might have first heard of it when revival broke out and spread beyond Pisidian Antioch. Even if that's not the case, Luke's point is that Gentiles are experiencing the same wave of the Spirit as the Jews and Samaritans of prior chapters.

—"both Jews and Greeks believed": Paul would later say that "a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25). In the first century, Gentiles began receiving the gospel en masse, while most Jews rejected it. With that said, "most" does not mean "all." The first six chapters of Acts portray a revival in Jerusalem and Judea as the exalted Christ restored Abraham's descendants to Yahweh and His promises. Even as the gospel expanded to the ends of the earth, Jews of the diaspora continued receiving the gospel.

2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

—"the unbelieving Jews": Luke carefully distinguishes those Jews who sided with Jesus from those who did not. Historically, many Christians have blamed the Jews for killing Jesus and persecuting the early church. The real story is that unbelieving Jews cooperated with unbelieving Gentiles to kill Jesus and persecute His church. The problem is not ethnicity; the problem is unbelief—something both Jews and Gentiles are guilty of.

—"stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers":

- In verse 1, we had believing Jews and Gentiles; in verse 2, we have unbelieving Jews and Gentiles. Luke shows us that the dividing line is no longer nationalistic or ethnic; it is how one responds to Jesus. Jesus is the stumbling stone over which both Jews and Gentiles either stumble—or marvel at.
 - Matt. 21:42-44: "Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.'"
 - Rom. 9:32-33: "Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'"
 - Matthew 21 quotes Psalm 118:22-23, also adding an allusion to Daniel 2:44-45, where a stone (the kingdom of God) crushes earthly kingdoms that oppose His rule. Romans 9 quotes Isaiah 28:16, applying it to Jewish leaders who reject the Messiah, who is central to God's new temple.

- Putting it all together, the dividing line of who belongs to God centers not on ethnicity but faith. Some Jews believe and some don't; some Greeks believe and some don't. Those who disbelieve stumble over the stumbling stone—Jesus—who doubles as the cornerstone of a new temple, which is we who believe.
- As noted in other Study Guides, the aforementioned reality does not remove important distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. Paul went to the Jews first (v. 1), so ethnicity means something. It means that the Jews deserved first dibs on the gospel. It also means God will revisit the Jews and save most of them (Rom. 11). It does not mean, however, that Jewish ethnicity saves. It never did.
- Under the Old Covenant, "God's people" could be broadly defined as Israel, which technically included some unbelievers. Under the New Covenant, "God's people" includes everyone who submits to Jesus, regardless of ethnicity. And it includes no one else. Jesus, not ethnicity, determines who receives New Covenant blessings.
- "stirred up" (Gk. *epegeiro*) reminds us of other passages:
 - On the same missionary trip, at the prior stop, "the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city," and "stirred up (Gk. *epegeiro*) persecution against Paul and Barnabas" (13:50).
 - Later, Jews would come "from Antioch and Iconium" to stoke "the crowds" to stone Paul, dragging "him out of the city, supposing that he was dead" (14:19).
 - People think communally. It's called Groupthink. Believers must be careful not to let their minds go with the crowds. We must also be aware that the crowds can turn against us all at once. This is all the more true in an age of social media.
- "poisoned their minds":
 - All the major translations render this similarly except the NASB, which reads, "embittered them against..." It's a similar thought either way. The Gentiles fell prey to the manipulative words of their Jewish instigators. Christians must be SO careful against the "mind poison" pushed on us by bitter influencers with an agenda! As we enter the 2024 election, we can expect lots of "mind poison."
 - The Jews who poisoned the minds of these Gentiles were themselves embittered. One way to recognize "mind poison" is by discerning the source. Is the group propagating these views sober-minded or embittered?
 - I am reminded of the "naïve" or "simple" person of the Proverbs. This person is not devoted to evil but gullible. Bruce Walkte explains the term: "Both Wisdom and Folly compete for their [the gullible's] allegiance (ch. 9). But until they opt no longer to remain uncommitted to wisdom, they are wayward.... Without a commitment and open to various influences, he [the naïve/gullible youth] can either be led (9:1-6) or misled (vv. 13-18)."
 - Throughout Acts, gullible crowds are incited by jealous and menacing spreaders of strife. Only by devoting ourselves to wisdom—which Jesus personifies (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30)—can gullible crowds avoid being "stirred" and "poisoned".
- "against the brothers":
 - In verses 5-7, dissenters persecute the apostles, but they direct their ire toward "the brothers"—a broader group including new believers.
 - From the word "go," these converts endured persecution.

3 So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

—"So":

- The NLT translates this as "Nevertheless". This makes more sense to me because it explains the contrast between the opposition they faced and the duration of their stay.
- Most translations render it as "So", and I always hesitate to side with the minority (in this case, the NLT). Assuming the word should be translated "So", the paraphrase would be something like, "The Jews incited the Gentiles against the apostles, "so" the latter remained to preach boldly, countering the opposition and advancing God's kingdom."

—“they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord”:

- In the face of such opposition, their continued presence would require tremendous courage and boldness.
- Sometimes, opposition led them to move on (13:50-51); sometimes, they remained despite opposition (14:3; 18:11).

—“who bore witness to the word... granting signs and wonders”:

- This probably explains why they remained in Iconium despite the opposition. God was working through signs and wonders, confirming the word preached.
- Later in Acts 18:11, Paul remained in Corinth despite opposition because Jesus communicated his need to stay in a vision.
- Jesus doesn't send us and leave us alone. Mission work is co-laboring with Jesus. They would continue despite opposition as long as He bore witness through signs and wonders, validating their ministry. They'd rather work with Jesus against the world than work with the world against Jesus.
- The disciples bore witness to the resurrection of Jesus; the Lord bore witness through signs and wonders. Again, it was a partnership.
- As is the case throughout Acts, *word* and *sign* complement one another. The signs point to the word. The purpose of signs is not to make our meetings more interesting. It is to point to Jesus. It is to confirm the gospel. Why would anyone conclude that this no longer benefits the church? Don't we always want God to confirm His message?
- The complementarity of “word” and “sign” goes back to Acts 1:8, where Jesus says, “You will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my **witnesses**...” Some argue that the so-called “sign gifts” are no longer for today, yet they affirm that Acts 1:8 still applies to us. You can't have it both ways, though. “Power” and “witnesses” go hand-in-hand. The whole Book of Acts illustrates how. “Power” manifests as boldness, signs, and wonders; it bears witness to our words. We speak; God confirms. We bear witness to Jesus verbally; Jesus bears witness to Himself miraculously.

—“to the word of his grace”:

- Twice in Acts, we see this phrase, with the other instance appearing in 20:32: “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”
- Last week, the Study Guide analyzed verses in Acts with similar language. Here is what I wrote: *We commonly see language such as “the word of his grace” (14:3; 20:32) and “the gospel of the grace of God” (20:24). The entire story of Jesus is one of “grace.” He is the fullness of “grace and truth” (John 1:14). While it's true that wrath and judgment comprise part of the story, the message cannot be characterized as “the word of his wrath.” Wrath exists because God is love, and love repudiates evil. However, “grace” provides the best one-word description of the gospel. It is the “word of His grace.”*
- In 20:32, grace “is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified.” Grace is treated like a human agent, able to work. It is a metonymy (figurative device), meaning that God Himself will build you up and give you an inheritance in an expression of grace.
- Schreiner: “Rather than describing the message in kingly hues as at Pisidian Antioch, the Iconium summary is one of benefaction or gift.”

—“the Lord... who bore witness... granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands”:

- The Lord granted the signs and wonders as the chief and primary agent; the apostles performed them “by their [own] hands.” They partnered with the Lord Jesus.
- This explains the effectiveness of their mission. Many people decide what they wish to do and then pray for God to bless it. Paul and Barnabas joined the mission that Jesus had already begun. Rather than inviting Jesus to join them, they joined with Jesus.

4 But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles.

—We saw the exact same idea last week. The Word of the Lord divides. This passage continues the theme of division over the Word of the Lord, which is to say, division over the Lord Jesus.

—This verse does not say that “some sided with Jesus.” It says, “some [sided] with the apostles.” To side with Jesus is to side with His messengers. To oppose His messengers is to oppose Him.

—What began as a division in the synagogue (14:1-2) has become a division in the city (14:4). Revival broke out from the synagogue, with salvations and miracles spreading beyond it (14:3-4).

—“apostles”:

- The label for Paul and Barnabas will arise again in 14:14.
- Paul and Barnabas did not meet the qualifications of the Twelve (1:21-22), who stood out among the others. Those twelve names are written on the foundation stones of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14), and the New Testament refers to these special messengers as “the Twelve” (Matt. 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16; Acts 6:2; 1 Cor. 15:5). The distinction of the Twelve highlights their significance in redemptive history; the sharing of the label “apostles” suggests that others share their same mission.
- Apostles besides the Twelve include **Paul** and **Barnabas** (Acts 14:4, 14); **James**, the brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:19)—despite his unbelief during Jesus’ ministry (Jhn. 7:5); probably **Silas**, aka Silvanus (1 Thess. 2:6-7; cf. 1:1); **Andronicus** and **Junias** might have been apostles (Rom. 16:7); **Apollos** was probably an apostle (1 Cor. 4:6-10); there were “false apostles,” which suggests “twelve” did not limit the label (Rev. 2:2); **Jesus** is called an apostle (Heb. 3:1); there are **numerous** “apostles to the churches” (2 Cor. 8:23).
- The word “apostle” applies to perhaps seven named individuals besides the Twelve and the Lord Jesus. It characterizes the ministry of numerous others, left unnamed.
- We should expect “apostles” (Eph. 4:11) to continue their ministry “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11). In other words, until the church is perfectly mature and unified, it will require apostles.
- “apostle” means “sent one.” Outside of the Twelve, I would view other apostles as “messengers” or missionaries, sent from churches to serve God’s purposes abroad. The term does not inherently imply authority. James and Paul stood out as apostles beyond the Twelve who possessed unique authority over their churches. But this does not mean every apostle everywhere had that same authority. “Missionary apostles” might have natural, relational authority over the churches they plant, but wise and humble apostles establish elders to lead the church after they depart (Acts 14:23).

5 When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, 6 they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, 7 and there they continued to preach the gospel.

—“attempt... to mistreat them and to stone them”: this time, Paul and Barnabas escape the attempt to stone them, but these instigators from Iconium will reappear and fulfill their wish, stoning Paul and dragging him outside the city (14:19).

—“both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers”:

- In 13:27, Paul also emphasized the opposition of both populations and their rulers. Here’s how I commented on that verse: *Scripture seems to repeat this theme of “the people and their rulers.” Dating back to Psalm 2, it is both “the kings of the earth” and the “nations” they lead, which rage against God. God gives special notice to both categories. Politicians and their populations tend to move in unison with their acceptance/rejection of God.*
- Notice the emphasis on both politicians and their populations in Acts:
 - [Acts 3:17 ESV] 17 “And now, **brothers**, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your **rulers**.
 - [Acts 4:5, 8, 26-28 ESV] 5 On the next day their **rulers** and **elders** and **scribes** gathered together in Jerusalem, ... 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “**Rulers** of the people and **elders**, ... 26 The **kings** of the earth set themselves, and the **rulers** were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’— 27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both **Herod** and **Pontius Pilate**, along with the **Gentiles** and the **peoples of Israel**, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

- [Acts 13:27 ESV] 27 For **those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers**, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him.
 - [Acts 14:5 ESV] 5 When an attempt was made by **both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers**, to mistreat them and to stone them,
 - King Jesus holds everyone accountable, with a special emphasis on rebel kings who leverage their influence and steer their populations against Christ.
 - To elaborate on Psalm 2: politicians and their populations despise the rule of God, vowing to rebel against His supposed oppression (vv. 1-3); God the Father laughs because it's too late—already, He has established His resurrected King, Jesus the Anointed One, in heavenly Zion (vv. 4-6; cf. Acts 13:33); Jesus has begun His global reign which culminates in His judgment of rebel kings and their populations (vv. 7-9; cf. Rev. 11:18; 19:11-16); Jesus warns the kings to worship, fear, and trust Him before that judgment comes (vv. 10-12).
 - When Luke emphasizes both rulers and their populations, he develops his theme that Jesus is the king of kings, and every earthly king must choose to submit to His superior reign, making space for their populations to do the same (cf. 1 Tim. 2:1-4).
 - This does not imply “Christian nationalism”—the idea that all nations must become officially and legally Christian. It means leaders have a special duty before Jesus to submit their lives to Him, rule justly, and make space for their populations to worship Him (1 Tim. 2:1-4)—unlike the Beast of Revelation, who suppresses Christian worship (Rev. 13).
- “fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia”:
- From Iconium to Lystra would have been about 25 miles; from Lystra to Derbe would have been about 25 miles; the total journey would have extended about 50 miles.
 - Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe were in the province of Galatia. Paul's epistle to the Galatians was written to these.
 - “Lycaonia” was the name of the region, but it was not an official province like Galatia.
- “and they continued to preach the gospel”: no amount of persecution could prevent them from preaching the good news.