

6. The gospel alone is the word of life and God's power for salvation, but it doesn't always yield the fruit of life. Paul and Barnabas proclaimed that gospel in Lystra as elsewhere and God did bring forth some disciples through it. That result was consistent with their ministry in every place, but there was also another point of consistency: The gospel that resulted in life also incited fierce and even violent opposition. The apostles' ministry in Lystra doubtless agitated many of its citizens, but that agitation escalated to the boiling point when Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived there, adding fuel to the fire and bringing critical mass to the opposition. Like a virus that begins to destroy the infected host once it has sufficiently reproduced itself, so the opposition to the apostolic gospel became deadly as more and more people were drawn into it.

Everywhere the gospel went it produced enemies; in some instances enemies so intensely aroused that they followed its heralds when they departed from their particular city. This happened first at Lystra, but not for the last time (17:13). Like Saul before them, many of Christ's Jewish opponents were resolved to pursue this "Way" to its death.

Whatever the level of opposition prior to the arrival of the Jews from Antioch and Iconium, their presence in Lystra soon escalated the tensions to the point that Paul was seized and stoned (14:19). Luke recorded that a multitude were implicated in this crime, but it was the Jews who actually stoned Paul. They needed to win over the people of Lystra in order to obtain permission from the authorities to carry out their intention. The Jews sought Paul's death for the crime of blasphemy against Yahweh; the Gentiles of Lystra likely went along because they saw in Paul and his message a threat to their culture and way of life (cf. 19:23-34).

This wasn't the first attempt on Paul's life (ref. 9:23-25, 14:5-6), but it was the first time that design met with success. Believing Paul to be dead, the crowd dragged his body out of the city and dumped it. The disciples had obviously watched while this scene played out and they followed the crowd as they dragged Paul's body away. They, too, likely believed that Paul was dead, but as they stood around him filled with shock and sorrow, he regained consciousness and rose to his feet.

Luke said nothing more about this incident except that the disciples helped Paul return to Lystra where they could nurse his wounds and give him a place to rest. The most astounding thing about Luke's account isn't Paul's survival, but the fact that he reengaged his ministry labors the very next day (14:20). The Jews knew how to stone a person to death and how to recognize the signs that the execution had been successful. As they examined Paul's bloody and battered body, they concluded that he was dead. His injuries were extensive and severe and left him on the verge of death, and yet he was back on the road one day later. This has led some to presume a miraculous healing, but Luke gives no such indication. *This turn of events highlights Paul's resolve, not divine intervention.* He understood the work that Christ had called him to and he was thoroughly committed to fulfilling his commission. Nothing short of death was going to hinder him. And so, while Paul probably didn't advertise his presence back in Lystra, he wasn't at all dissuaded from carrying on his work; not even his severe injuries were going to keep him down. As long as he could stand and hobble along, he was going to continue on.

7. When Paul and Barnabas departed Lystra they headed toward nearby Derbe. There they continued their gospel ministry and the Lord attended their labors by producing a congregation of disciples in that city as well (14:21). Notably, Luke’s account of the apostles’ ministry in Derbe consists of a single statement within a larger sentence, and even that one statement serves only to qualify the main point, which is the transition of their ministry back to Antioch in Syria.

Luke doesn’t say what moved Paul and Barnabas to end their journey into Asia Minor, but whatever their reason, they determined to retrace their steps as they made their way back to Antioch. The two apostles could have taken any number of routes home, but they wanted to visit and minister to the new believers they had led to the Lord. The nature of their mission necessarily made its outward progress evangelistic; now, by retracing their steps, their return home could be devoted to discipleship.

- a. Luke recorded that the predominant facet of that discipleship was instruction and encouragement (14:22). Returning to Lystra and then to Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas reengaged their ministry to the believers in those cities. But now their ministry was pastoral rather than evangelistic; their goal was to “strengthen the souls” of the disciples. They continued their instruction of these new believers, but not for the sake of enlarging their doctrinal knowledge. Their intent was to strengthen them in their faith so that they would be able to stand strong and steadfast in the face of what was coming.

The two apostles knew all too well what awaits those who determine to follow Christ in a world that finds Him and His gospel foolish and even vexing. These new disciples were only starting their journey with Him and it was vitally important that they understand what lay ahead for them. Tribulation, not accolade and ease, is the heritage of the sons of God, even as it was for the only-begotten Son. Those who hated and opposed the Master will regard His servants in the same way (John 15:18-21; cf. Romans 8:16-17; 2 Timothy 3:12).

Paul and Barnabas were burdened that their children in the faith realize the difficulties that awaited them. *But more than that, they wanted them to judge those trials and tribulations correctly:*

- When tribulations arrived – as they certainly would, these saints were not to view them as some strange, incomprehensible phenomenon, but as the loving and nurturing discipline of their heavenly Father (Hebrews 12:1-13; James 1:1-4; 1 Peter 4:12-19). He determined and would oversee their troubles and afflictions, but, more importantly, He had given them everything necessary to stand firm and triumph through them.
- The archenemy would employ his resources against them, and he might even succeed in taking their lives. Nevertheless, they had overwhelmingly conquered, having overcome him and the world under his sway by the power of the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.

*Paul and Barnabas recognized that that understanding, and not merely the expectation of coming difficulties, was the key to their encouragement and endurance.* Faith would enable them to stand against the myriad temptations that living by sight brings, and having trusted their Lord and endured to the end, they would live and reign with Him (2 Timothy 2:11-12).

- b. The essence of discipleship is equipping Christ's saints to run their race well. Its goal is *Christ-likeness* – working with the Spirit to nurture the life and mind of Christ in His own in order that they would live out their new lives in a discerning and authentic fashion. Thus discipleship has two fundamental arenas of concern: The first is the believer's life in the world; the second is his life in the Church.

Luke has repeatedly highlighted these two arenas by alternately addressing the Church's inward life and outward mission and the unique challenges each poses to the Church's well-being. So here the apostles' discipling efforts were directed toward both realms. If the new churches of Asia Minor were to remain strong and flourish, they would need to be equipped for meeting internal as well as external challenges, and toward that end the apostles remained with each congregation until they had appointed elders to oversee them (14:23).

Previous to this, Luke mentioned the eldership in Christ's Church only with respect to the congregation in Jerusalem (ref. 11:27-30, 12:25). By itself, this might suggest that the eldership was uniquely associated with the twelve apostles and their ministry to the church in Jerusalem. But Luke's treatment of it here (and later) makes it clear that this office pertains to every local church. And this being the case, it follows that the eldership is an important component of the life and function of Christ's Body.

- The fundamental importance of the eldership is that elders perform a *shepherding* role in the Church (cf. Acts 20:17-32; 1 Peter 5:1-3). In that sense, they stand in Christ's place: They are overseers, appointed by the Chief Shepherd to care for, nurture and protect His flock.
- The life of the Church is administered through the operation of spiritual gifts, and this is true of the eldership as well. The Spirit gives gifts suitable to leadership in the Church, but the eldership itself isn't a spiritual gift. It is an office and function to be executed by men who possess those sorts of leadership gifts (ref. Romans 12:6-8; also 2 Timothy 1:2-6 with 2:1-26).

Consistent with every spiritual gift and spiritual function in the Church, elders possess their authority as Christ's endowment by His Spirit and they exercise it in His name and for His sake. This means that their authority is not token or gratuitous, but neither is it their own. Their authority is real because it is His, but they oversee His sheep as His servants doing His work and not as popes or hirelings. Elders are sheep leading sheep on behalf of the Good Shepherd.

- In dealing with this leadership office the Scripture uses three terms in a roughly synonymous way: *elder*, *bishop*, and *pastor*. While there is no uniform consensus, it is widely accepted that the term “elder” (*presbyter*) emphasizes the practical dimension of the office while “bishop” (*overseer*) emphasizes the office itself. The noun rendered “pastor” means *shepherd*, which highlights the nature and orientation of the eldership function, particularly as it implicates the ministry of the word. But whatever the nuances of meaning, the New Testament text doesn’t allow for drawing sharp lines of definition and distinction between them.

*“Those whose names are the same, equally common and applicable unto them all, whose function is the same, whose qualifications and characters are the same, whose duties, account, and reward are the same, concerning whom there is in no one place of Scripture the least mention of inequality, disparity, or preference in office among them, they are essentially and every way the same.”* (John Owen)

These observations demonstrate the integral role that the eldership plays in the Church’s life and function, but this doesn’t imply that the Church is defined by or depends upon the eldership for its very existence.

- Roman Catholicism is guilty of one variation of this error by defining Christ’s Church in terms of its ruling Magisterium. The Church *is* its formal leadership, and the individual Catholic views himself as standing in relation to the Church, not as a “living stone” of which it is comprised.
- In practice if not in doctrinal conviction, Protestants are sometimes guilty of a similar sort of error. Particularly in churches that have a high view of the eldership, it’s not altogether uncommon to find a “top down” approach to congregational life and practice. In such situations, elders *effectively* function as the Church by insisting upon determining, sanctioning and administering every aspect of the congregational life. Those who are called to exercise servant oversight are deformed into overlords.
- Another example of the Church being effectively reduced to its leadership – and one directly related to the present context – is the notion that a local church only exists when it is constituted under a duly ordained plurality of elders. In the absence of such plurality, a congregation is an assembly of Christians but it cannot be regarded as the Church of Jesus Christ.

This passage, however, argues otherwise, for it has the churches in the various cities existing and functioning prior to having *any* elders, let alone a plurality. In answering this, some contend that the situation in Acts is unique in that it addresses the Church in its infancy: The uniqueness of the early Church’s situation demanded that some things be done in a certain way, but that doesn’t mean those practices are normative for the Church in every time and place.

Clearly there are some distinctions between the early Church and its contemporary counterpart. However, one crucial feature of it remains constant: Whether in the first century or today, churches still form as the Spirit unites to Christ individual people residing in a given community. By nature as well as definition, the Church is the Body of Christ; this means that the Church precedes and is distinct from the eldership, even in instances where a local church is established in connection with elder oversight. This is as true today as it was during Paul's missionary journeys.

A second proof of the distinction and primacy of the Church over the eldership is the fact that elders (and deacons) are to be drawn from and affirmed by the local church. Leaders aren't self-appointed and there is no scriptural warrant for the practice of imposing them upon a local congregation. Though the churches were yet in their infancy, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders from within their own ranks, and Luke's treatment of the process suggests that this was done after careful consideration, consultation and confirmation by the body of believers.

8. When Paul and Barnabas had completed their work in the newly formed churches they made their way back to Antioch (14:24-25). (Luke mentioned in passing a time of ministry in Attalia, a coast city near Perga, which possibly the two apostles were visiting for the first time; ref. 13:13-14. What led them there is unclear, but most likely it was their need of a ship to carry them back home. Whatever the reason, Paul and Barnabas made full use of their time in that city.) The saints in Antioch had laid hands on the two men and sent them out for the work of the gospel (14:26); now more than two years had passed while they prayed and waited for the apostles' return. Paul and Barnabas' arrival must have been a joyous occasion, and the two were doubtless as eager to share their many experiences as the Antiochan saints were to hear them.

Luke used the occasion of that celebratory reunion as the opportunity to summarize the first missionary journey, and he did so in two observations:

- a. The first is his acknowledgment that Paul and Barnabas' work was the work of God Himself (14:27a). The Spirit had set them apart and made known His call upon them, but He hadn't sent them out alone. Their mission was His mission; He had been with His apostles every step of the way, providing their opportunities for witness as well as the words they proclaimed. He also protected them and manifested His power in physical miracles and, most importantly, in the supreme miraculous work of bringing multitudes out of death into life.
- b. And at the heart of the divine work was the ingathering of the Gentiles (14:27b). This was one of the great paradigm shifts marking the messianic kingdom; it was predicted by the prophets, reaffirmed in Jesus' commission to His apostles, heralded in the salvation of the Ethiopian and the Roman centurion and then committed to Paul and his co-laborers. He and Barnabas were eyewitnesses that God had fulfilled His promise and opened a door of faith to the Gentiles; that truth and its implications would soon provoke a council in Jerusalem.