

Acts 14: Seven Qualities for Effective Ministry

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Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave a final but all important command to His disciples in Acts 1:8, “you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” Over 15 years later, no one had taken the gospel into Asia Minor, Macedonia, or Greece. The largest city in Syria was Antioch, and a large church had been built up there by the late forties. The Jerusalem church, hearing of its rapid growth had sent Barnabas to Antioch to minister there. There was so much potential that Barnabas recruited Saul to help him. They ministered there for over a year, and it was there that the disciples were first called Christians, meaning Christ’s men or Christ’s followers. The leaders at the church in Antioch were led by the Spirit to commission Saul and Barnabas to go on a series of missionary journeys to Cyprus and Asia Minor, and then where ever the Spirit led them. From Acts 13 on, the book could be called The Acts of Paul instead of the Acts of the Apostles. Saul, or Paul as they called him on his first missionary journey, took center stage in the history of the church for the next 15 years. The time was about 46-48 AD, and for the next 15 years Paul took three wildly successful mission trips into Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. At the end of his third trip, he took a large offering to the suffering Jerusalem church, where he was arrested and held in jail in Caesarea for about two years. He then appealed to Caesar for a trial, and was shipped to Rome where he remained in prison for about two years. We have copies of thirteen of Paul’s letters written to the various churches and disciples of Paul. In Acts 13-14, we have the record of Paul’s first missionary journey, and we can discern the qualities necessary for an effective ministry.

Use of Spiritual Gifts

According to 1 Corinthians 12:7, Romans 12:6-8, 1 Peter 4:10-11, and Ephesians 4:7-12; all believers in Christ have been given spiritual gifts. At that point in time that you believed, God gave you some gift of His choosing to be used for the edification of the church. In the first century, the apostles were given speaking gifts and sign gifts. We read in Acts 14:1 that when they entered the town of Iconium, they spoke in such a way that a great multitude believed in Jesus, both of Jews and Gentiles, and in the end of verse 3, God granted that signs and wonders be done by their hands.

Today, the speaking gifts are still in full effect, but I believe the sign gifts expired with the apostles. It was necessary that God enable them to do miracles because it was that important time of great transition from Judaism to the church and from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. I am not saying that miracles ceased, but I am saying that the spiritual gift of doing signs and wonders ceased. If you are wondering what your gift is, then let me remind you that the purpose of the gifts is to serve others and not yourself, so the best way to find out is to get involved in every manner of service until you find it. Typically after a lot of work and experience, the Lord will reveal it to you. Here is a tip—if you are being asked to do certain things, and it is clear to you that you are needed in that area, then that’s it. Don’t be fooled or misled by a desire for the more “prestigious” gifts. Paul devoted several chapters in his first letter to the Corinthians about the importance of humility in serving, and how important the other gifts are. The church can easily replace ministers and administrators, but without servers the church stops.

Boldness

In all of the activities in the book of Acts, the disciples are met with opposition and persecution, but they still went out in the open and boldly preached the gospel. They not only boldly went into new places, but after being run out of places, they returned to the same places. In Acts 14:3, after the public was “stirred up” against them, they still spent a long time there “speaking boldly” with reliance upon the Lord. They could not be intimidated because they knew they were spokespersons for the Lord, and His will would be done. How great was the threat to Paul’s group? In Acts 14:19, when Paul was speaking in a town called Lystra, they stoned him, dragged him out of the city, and left him for dead. Small wonder that in his letters Paul was always asking for prayer that he continue to speak boldly like Eph.6:19, “pray on my behalf that utterance may be given to me to speak boldly”.

Humility

When you consider the miracles, the signs, the wonders, and the great success the apostles enjoyed in the book of Acts, it is easy to see that they could have become arrogant and prideful. Which of us doesn't have a tendency to puff up when people pat us on the back and tell us how great we are? Pride is something we all have in common to varying degrees, and we are easily corrupted. In Acts 14:10, Paul healed a lame man in Lystra, and the crowd there went wild. They immediately began shouting that Paul and Barnabas were gods, and began calling them Hermes and Zeus. Paul was called Hermes because Hermes was the Greek god of orators. He was the messenger of the gods to human beings in Greek religion. His name Hermes gives us our word "hermeneutics" which means the study of interpretation. Hermes delivered messages and interpreted them to the lowly mortals. The crowd thought Paul was Hermes because he did all the talking and explaining. They called Barnabas Zeus who was the Greek god of sky and thunder. He was also the king of Greek gods.

In Acts 14:13, the local pagan priests brought gifts and sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas, and the crowd was trying to worship them. Now I confess that the first thing that crossed my mind was that this would have been a great time to do fund raising for the ministry. We could have raked in a small fortune, and what could it hurt to be treated like celebrities for a while? Fortunately, Paul and Barnabas were not corrupted by this great opportunity for personal fortune and fame. They were offered a chance to be treated as gods with all the riches and power that go with it, but not only did they decline, but they were horrified. Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes in grief, and rushed into the crowd yelling for them to stop. In verse 15, Paul said, "We are also just men as the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things (statues of Greek gods), to the one true living God who created all things." How did Paul keep his perspective of humility? He was all too aware that the power and results were from God, and he was just a vessel for God's use. Paul said it well in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "we have this treasure (the gospel) in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves." Peter explained how important humility in ministry is in 1 Peter 5:5-6, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God". Those who seek recognition, have personal ambition, seek financial opportunity, and demand their rights do not please God.

Persistence

As we study Acts, you might notice that there are more "downs" than ups, and the persecution, arrests, beatings, and threats of death seem to outweigh the successes. Consider Paul's own description of his life in 2 Cor. 11:23-26, "imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received thirty nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned..." If it was me, I would remember where that stuff happened and never go back, but Paul continued to return to the same places to minister. The day after he was stoned, he walked 40 miles to the next town of Derbe to minister there. The most amazing thing of all though was that he then returned to the scene of the stoning (Lystra in Acts 14:19) in verse 21-22 to "strengthen and encourage" the believers there.

Caring and Commitment

Why did the apostles return to these sites? Why did they care more for the believers there than they cared for their own lives? They were the embodiment of Jesus' command at the Last Supper, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another, even as I loved you." Jesus loved them by sacrificing Himself for them, and that is precisely what the apostles were willing to do to minister to the church and convert the world around them. They were committed to the max. They took every opportunity to share the gospel and disciple the churches as they planted them. There was no where they wouldn't go, and nothing they wouldn't do in God's service.

Reverence for the Lord

They were very careful to give credit where it was due. All praise and honor and glory was always directed to the Lord. Not only did they quickly redirect the crowds attention that it was God who healed the man and only God deserved the glory, but when they got back to their home church of Antioch, Syria they did the same. You can imagine all the compliments and pats on the back they got when the church at Antioch heard all the awesome stories; but Acts 14:27 says that "they began to report all the things that God had done...and how God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." The apostles used the gifts God gave them boldly and with all humility, always remembering what God had done for them and how God was using them. They were persistent in the face of opposition because they cared for the lost and the church they served. They were totally committed to their calling and opportunities, and gave all glory to God for their success.

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