

Of Gods and Men

Acts 14:8–20

⁸ In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰ and called out, ‘Stand up on your feet!’ At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’ ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵ ‘Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. ¹⁶ In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: he has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.’ ¹⁸ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

¹⁹ Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰ But after the disciples had gathered round him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

Acts 14:8–20, NIVUK

1. Introduction

Sometimes you have to agree with atheists. Over the centuries and still to this day human beings have an uncanny knack of finding gods in all sorts of places. Over the millennia humanity has worshipped just about everything as a god at some point.

- The Sun has been worshiped in numerous cultures. Shemesh was the Canaanite goddess of the sun, daughter of El and Asherah. It's likely that Abraham's ancestors worshipped a sun god in Ur.
- Similarly, the Moon has been worshipped.
- When humankind has not looked to the heavens to find something to worship then animals have sometimes been proposed as gods. E.g. Cats in Ancient Egypt.
- The weather too has been the focus of gods. Thunderstorms, for example, because of their destructive power. There's Thor, the Norse god of thunder. In the ancient biblical world Baal was a weather god, with particular power over lightning, wind, rain.
- Elsewhere in the Bible human beings are said to be gods. In the later writings of the New Testament there is the background of a Roman Emperor recognised as Lord or god.

2. Misunderstandings in Lystra

It is the latter—men as gods—that we find in Acts 14. There's an irony to this story. Paul and Barnabus arrive in Lystra well into what we now know as Paul's first missionary journey. They bring a message of good news; that God came to the earth as a man to enable humanity to find peace with the creator God.

They not only come with this message. Their message comes with power. Paul commands a lame man to rise and walk—and he does. As the story begins we might well anticipate that this is the start of a flood

of new convert to the Way. Surely a multitude will believe Paul and Barnabus' message, all made tangible in a miracle. Surely a new church in Lystra will be born.

Of course, that's not what happened. Instead a peculiar case of mistaken identity takes over. The talkative Paul is mistaken for the god Hermes, and Barnabus for Zeus.

Such a mistake is puzzling until we realise that the people of Lystra were obsessed with the legends of Zeus and Hermes. In the region of Galatia every city and large town had a temple dedicated to Zeus. In the vicinity of Lystra carvings and inscriptions have been unearthed which show and mention Zeus accompanied by Hermes.

There's even a story of Zeus and Hermes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* set in nearby hill country. The story starts:

Here came Zeus in the guise of a mortal, and . . . Hermes, . . . To a thousand homes they came, seeking a place for rest; a thousand homes were barred against them. Still one house received them . . .

The familiarity with these two gods and this story meant that the two miracle-working missionaries are misunderstood as these gods.

What has this got to do with us? Is this not the least promising passage in the book of Acts?

It reminds us of a common problem for humanity – we are too often blind to the things of God. We miss the real God and find false gods here, there, and just about everywhere. This sort of blindness is illustrated in the previous chapter of Acts.

There Paul and Barnabus encounter Elymas the sorcerer who keeps on leading the proconsul from faith even as the missionaries seem to be having success. Paul does a miracle that makes the truth apparent, as Elymas is made literally blind to match his spiritual blindness:

⁹ Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰ 'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? ¹¹ Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.'

Acts 13:9–11, NIVUK

In Acts it is not so much lack of belief in gods or God, but blindness to the real God and faith directed elsewhere that is the issue. Although we live in an age when atheism is a 'thing' I want to suggest that most people we know are not really atheists. They tend to believe in alternative gods. Whilst they're unlikely to mistake us for Zeus or Hermes they have us much baggage as the people of Lystra. As well as the same brokenness that can blind them to the truth about God.

3. Misunderstandings Today

This story is a reminder that even the best missionaries can be misheard when culture and context eclipse the gospel of Jesus Christ. If Paul and Barnabus struggled sometimes then we can expect this to be a challenge for us too!

Right from the outset the Church had to battle to preach and teach about the right Jesus. The four gospel accounts and the Book of Acts were put together from eye-witness stories of what happened during Jesus' ministry and in the life of the Church founded on the twin pillars

of the truth of his resurrection from death and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The gospels and Acts represent the apostles not only recording events but interpreting them too. Understanding just who this Jesus was. It actually took centuries to formalise what was evident to the disciples in the days after the resurrection. This Jesus was both God and man. A carpenter from Galilee was God himself come to this earth to fulfil all the promises he made to his people.

Caught up in the moment the people of Lystra confuse the two men, Paul and Barnabus, for two gods. This typifies the challenge of conveying the gospel centred on a man who is also God. The case of Lystra is just one peculiar instance of getting the gospel wrong.

In the early centuries of the Christian faith there were those that saw Jesus as an angel not the God-Man. There were those that saw him as only God and not a man. There were those that saw him as a man but not as God. If you delve into Church History there's a bewildering array of variations on these themes.

Perhaps this still does not sound like it has any relevance for us. We aren't from Lystra and so committed to local stories that Zeus and Hermes eclipse Jesus Christ. But we still have a knack of making Jesus one-dimensional.

Some have likened appreciating who Jesus is to looking down a well. Looking to the past as we consider the biblical account. If we do this with the wrong glasses, we tend to see our own reflection rather than Jesus. We make Jesus a one-dimensional character sympathetic to our ideals and outlook.

This is why Christianity is a corporate religion. We worship and know Jesus together. It is also why Christianity is an historical faith we can look back on the mistakes of the past and of course to the Scriptures that occupy a special place in testifying to Jesus Christ. Both testaments of Scripture testify to Jesus Christ the God-Man.

When we look at the Book of Acts we see the multidimensional Jesus in his ministry, his cross, his resurrection, and his ascension.

Ministry

In his ministry Jesus did remarkable things. In the words of Michael Card:

He came, He saw, He surrendered all
So that we might be born again
And the fact of His humanity was there for all to see
For He was unlike any other man and yet so much like me

We need to celebrate Jesus in his full humanity. But if we take this to an extreme we can end up with Jesus who is a great philosopher. He is, but this strays far from the fulness of Jesus Christ. We can end up with Jesus the miracle worker. He was and is, but not even miracles can define Jesus Christ.

Jesus' earthly ministry is just one angle on the God-Man. The Book of Acts also reminds us that Jesus ministry continues to this day (Acts 1:1, note 'all that Jesus began to do).

Cross

If we lose the cross, we empty Jesus of his saving power. But too great an emphasis on the cross has its dangers too. A focus only on sin and the cross distracts from the wider needs of those around us. It can also lead to an emaciated faith that is blind to the gifts that God has given

each of, it can ironically leave little place for the freedom and fulness of life that is won through the cross but lived through the resurrection.

Resurrection

Without the resurrection the cross is of course incomplete. It is a reminder of the age to come:

¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

1 Cor. 15:17-22, NIVUK

Too much attention of the resurrection has its dangers too—e.g. the false triumphalism of the so-called prosperity gospel.

Ascension

Risen and sitting at the righthand of God the Father. Jesus is not a person of the past, as his ministry and cross might seem to indicate. He is Lord right here and right now. He rules from heaven and he interceded for us. We can know and learn about the Jesus of the four gospels, we can understand the theology of cross, we can celebrate his resurrection on that first Easter. We can only have a relationship with the ascended Jesus Christ who intercedes for us as both man and God.

We don't worship Jesus, nor do we worship Christ, we worship Jesus Christ—Both God and Man. He is the beautiful multi-dimensional

saviour known through his continuing ministry, by the cross on which he died, in the power of the resurrection, interceding for all his people at the righthand of the Father.

This is the multi-dimensional saviour who we can know and who bring to our family, friends, and neighbours.