

Acts Series Part 40

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Date: 15 August 2010

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[0 : 0 0] Jimmy Reed died last week. Famous, perhaps not so famous now for an up-and-coming generation because the events that he was involved in were so long ago, but for many still a well-known and famous union leader. And in the many tributes and obituaries there has been, invariably, a reference made to his famous Rat Race speech, as it has come to be known, which was delivered in 1971 on Reed being installed as rector of Glasgow University. And in the speech he highlights and warns against the danger of the crowd mentality. His audience was largely university students, given the occasion. And he warned them very vigorously and very passionately against an unthinking and sheep-like going with the flow, and so being caught up in the Rat Race, heading we know not where, and following the rules and values imposed by the pack. To quote what he actually said, or some of what he actually said, a Rat Race is for rats. We are not rats. We are human beings.

Reject the insidious pressures of society that would blunt your critical faculties to all the happenings around you, that would caution silence in the face of injustices, lest you jeopardize your chances of promotions and self-advancement. And this is how it starts. And before you know where you are, you are a fully paid-up member of the Rat Pack. So he spoke 40 years ago. Well, 40 years have indeed passed. But the danger of going with the flow, of adopting our values, not by careful and considered thinking and reflection, but by a servile submission to peer pressure or an insidious process of cultural osmosis, we could call it, that danger remains very present. The rabble still rouses, and the masses still lead many lambs to the slaughter. We would do well to take heed of the mildly humorous, but also quite perceptive words on the back of the t-shirt. Maybe you've seen a t-shirt like this, that on the back says, don't follow me, I'm lost too. Well, this morning I want to consider lessons that can be learned from a crowd, a crowd in Lystra some 2,000 years ago, and also the manner in which Paul and

Barnabas relate to and engage with the crowd. 2,000 years have passed, but a crowd remains a crowd.

To give some structure to what I want to say, I'm going to order the content of the sermon around three references that we have in the passage that we've read to the crowd. If you notice with me in Acts chapter 14, and especially from verse 11, the first reference that we're going to comment on and explore is there in verse 11. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language. So, the first thing we notice about the crowd is that they see and they shout, and we want to think a little bit about that and lessons that can be learned from that. But also, further down in the passage, as the apostles respond to what the crowd do that we'll be noting, we find a second reference to the crowd. And on this occasion, it is a reference to what Barnabas and Paul do in relation to the crowd. We read that the apostles there in verse 14 rushed out into the crowd. So, that's the second reference to the crowd that we will be thinking about. The apostles rushed out into the crowd.

And then finally, or thirdly, the third reference to the crowd that we're going to consider is in verse 19, where we read, Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They won the crowd over.

[5 : 01] First of all then, the crowd saw and shouted. And these two verbs I'm going to think about a little bit this morning. First of all, we read there in verse 11, the crowd saw what Paul had done.

What did they see? What did the crowd see? I think we can distinguish between what occurred and what they saw. It may seem a bizarre distinction, but bear with me. What occurred was a wonderful miracle brought by the power of the living and true God. This man who was crippled, who had been lame from birth, was able to stand up and jump and begin to walk all by the powerful hand of God upon his life through the apostle Paul. That is what occurred. But what did the crowd see?

Well, I think it's reasonable and I don't think it's unfair to say that what they saw was a spectacle. A spectacle that was visually impressive. Of course it was. They knew that this man had been crippled from birth. They'd seen him perhaps every day there begging. And now he's jumping up and down. He's able to walk. Anybody would be impressed. Whatever your religious predilections, whatever your thoughts, to see this man jumping up and down, it is an impressive sight by any measure. It was quite a spectacle. And they were impressed. They were, we might say, greatly entertained by what they saw.

They wanted to see more of these wonderful things that these men could do. And not only did the crowd want to see more, I am sure, they wanted to laud and to celebrate the miracle workers.

And that is what they do. They shouted in their language, the gods have come down to us in human form. And really what I think we could say is happening without stretching things too much is the beginning of a celebrity cult centered on Paul and Barnabas. It didn't get very far, as we have noticed in the reading, but that's what we have. The crowd are impressed. The crowd are entertained. The crowd want to see more. And they are lifting up these men as new celebrities who have come to town who are going to be praised and celebrated by the crowd. The crowd saw.

[7 : 46] Is it so different today? We maybe smile at what we think is a very unsophisticated response of the crowd. But is it really so very different today? The crowd continues to have an insatiable appetite to be entertained. And the crowd continues to idolize its celebrities. And I wonder if we often just go with the flow. The crowd saw. But we're also told here in this verse, in verse 11, that the crowd shouted. And of course, that's what crowds do. Crowds shout. Crowds don't speak.

Carefully and quietly and in a reasoned manner. No, crowds shout. They shouted. Volume matters more than content. Presentation more than substance. What is pleasing to the ear more than what is true.

These are the ground rules for crowds. And just for a moment, consider what they were shouting. Well, we've read the passage. They shout, the gods have come down to us. The gods have come down to us in human form. Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul they called Hermes. This is what they're shouting.

Think of Barnabas, this unlearned, very ordinary, unknown Cypriot Jew called Barnabas. He is, according to the crowd, Zeus. Not just any god, but a seriously big hitter in the pantheon of Greek gods.

Now, what they're shouting is plainly ridiculous. It plainly bears no relation to the truth. It is grounded in no arguments or reason. It is a ridiculous statement that is being made by the crowd.

[9 : 54] But the crowd shouts. And in a perverse way, the crowd convinces itself. The crowd generally doesn't have some individual, or sometimes, of course, crowds can be manipulated, as we'll notice in a moment. But generally, the crowd takes on a life of itself and convinces itself it's a victim of itself. It's a victim of itself, in this case, in this fantastic delusion, this nonsense affirmation concerning the identity, in this occasion, of Paul and Barnabas. And crowds will believe anything. And modern crowds are no different. This wonderful universe that on a day such as today, we look around and we enjoy the beauty of it. This beautiful universe, in all its beauty, its complexity, is just the product of a big bang. Yeah, right. You see, the crowd will believe anything. Lots of money will make you happy. The crowd can believe that. Getting smashed at the weekend, that's what it's all about. Well, the crowd seem to think so. Killing the agent and the infirm, that's compassion. Gay sex is natural. Yeah, of course, the crowd can believe that. Scotland will win the World Cup in 2014.

Well, the crowd isn't quite that credulous. We should credit it for that in any case. You see, as long as what is proposed is declared loudly and confidently enough, the crowd is prone to believe and join in the shouting. Crowds shout.

Volume is more important than content. But another thing about the shouting of the crowd is that necessarily it involves shouting down and out all dissenting opinions. If we just think of the occasion that we're considering here in Lystra, imagine, just for a moment, imagine, if from amongst the crowd some brave soul had stood up and in the rabble had suggested that perhaps Barnabas was not Zeus. The crowds are shouting, the gods have come amongst us in human form. This man is Zeus. Imagine if somebody said, well, just a moment, I'm not actually sure. Are we sure that he's actually Zeus? Is this actually reasonable? What would have been the plight of this poor soul? Well, he would have been shouted down. You see, the crowd cannot contemplate dissenting opinions. You're not allowed to think differently.

You're not allowed to say, well, I don't agree with that. I think that what you're saying is wrong. And so today, pity the poor soul who suggests that God, a living, personal God, created the universe out of nothing. Pity the poor soul that suggests that Adam and Eve are historical figures from whom we all descend. Pity the poor soul who contends that marriage is, by definition, the exclusive and permanent union of one man and one woman. Pity the poor soul who suggests that getting drunk and having sex with your girlfriend is actually sinful and displeasing to God. Such will be pillory and ridiculed often into silent submission, though I hope not always. And so the question for us is, will we go with the flow?

Will we sing or shout? It's not even singing. Will we shout from the same hymn sheet as the crowd? Or will you think and discern in the light of what God reveals in the Bible and reject that which is false and foolish, however loudly the crowd may shout? So, first of all then, as we consider this matter of the crowd, here on this occasion at Lystra, the crowd saw and the crowd shouted. But the next reference to the crowd that we want to focus in on and consider is the manner in which the apostles respond. The apostles were told there in verse 14, rushed out into the crowd. Before we think a little bit about the actual circumstances on this occasion,

[14 : 43] I just would pose the question in the light of how we're applying this matter. The question for us as Christians is, what do we do in the face of the crowd? And at the risk of being overly simplistic, I think historically there have been two contrasting positions that have been adopted. How does the church, how do Christians relate to, respond to the crowd? And the two contrasting positions, again, this is simplifying things somewhat, but I think is a reasonable portrayal, are the following. First of all, the church becomes part of the crowd and becomes indistinguishable from the crowd. And that is largely what has happened and is happening in many churches in our own country. Indistinguishable from the crowd.

Adopting the crowd's view of life. Adopting the crowd's opinions on what is right and what is wrong. Simply going with the flow. And maybe a decade later or two decades later, but simply going with the crowd. Indistinguishable in any real or meaningful way from the crowd.

Another position that has been taken is to flee from the crowd. Again, if we look in church history, the whole monastic movement is largely inspired by this notion of fleeing from the crowd.

The crowd, the world, is wicked, is sinful, it's dangerous. We can have nothing to do with the crowd, and so we will flee from the crowd, and we will live in our ghettos, in our monasteries, in our own wee, comfortable world, and we will be spared the danger of being polluted by the crowd.

Perhaps in a measure, in our own tradition, there has been always that temptation of fleeing from the crowd, lest we be polluted. What did Paul and Barnabas do as they're faced with this crowd shouting? Shouting things that were very difficult for them to bear. Shouting things that went totally contrary to their convictions. What do they do? Well, we've noticed what they do. They rushed out into the crowd. This was a conscious decision that they took. No doubt they were greatly roused emotionally by what they saw. That is true. But nonetheless, the decision to rush out into the crowd was a conscious decision that they took. They needn't have done that. They could have done something else. Paul and Barnabas could have said, well, these people, we can't deal with them.

[17 : 41] We can't engage with them. We simply must leave them and go our way and retreat gracefully in the face of the ridiculous things that they're saying and the ridiculous things that they want to do.

And they could have simply withdrawn and said, well, we'll head elsewhere and look for a more promising audience. But they didn't do that. Let's just consider a little bit more carefully what they do or the process that is going on here in their response to the crowd, in the manner in which they engage with the crowd. Of course, first of all, they need to understand what the crowd are saying. And there is an issue here that would perhaps explain why the crowd are able not only to make these great claims concerning Paul and Barnabas, but also to arrange for these sacrifices to be offered and the priest of the temple of Zeus to be involved. And presumably all this took some time, certainly an hour or two, perhaps more. And it would seem that Paul and Barnabas, to begin with, don't know what's going on. And the reason for that, I think, is made clear by Luke when he explains that they shouted in the Lycanian language there in verse 11. So when they begin to shout out, the gods have come down to us in human form. Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul they called

Hermes. Presumably at the beginning, Paul and Barnabas didn't know what was going on. They couldn't understand what was being said. But soon enough, somebody would have translated for them, would have explained what was going on. Or in any case, they would have been able to see with their own eyes as these sacrifices are organized and possibly brought to them.

We can't be sure about this, but the manner in which we're told there in verse 14 that they rushed out into the crowd would suggest that possibly they had actually retreated from the crowd, where perhaps in their lodgings, where they were staying, and the crowd come with these sacrifices.

We don't know for sure. But it's possible that that is what's happening. And then they discover what's going on. And what do they do? Well, they rush out into the crowd. They need to know what's being said. They need to know the folly that is being peddled by the crowd.

[20 : 09] Of course, it's a very perhaps obvious application, but that is also true for us. Unpleasant as it may be, it's important for us to know what the crowd are saying, to know the lies that are being peddled, to understand the worldviews that are being offered in the marketplace, and what people are buying into, what people are believing, however foolish and however offensive some of these opinions might be.

We need to know what they are. Paul and Barnabas heard what was being said. How do they respond? Well, first of all, they do respond, we might say, emotionally. That's not to say that that isn't also at the same time intellectually and in a pensive way that the two go together. But there is an emotional response. They are disturbed. They are grieved by what they hear. There we read in verse 14, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd shouting.

They too are shouting, possibly here simply because they need to be heard in all the furore. But there is an emotional response. And why? Why are they so disturbed? Why are they so grieved by what the crowd are saying and doing? Well, fundamentally, the cause of their distress is their concern for the honor of God. They are grieved that they who are mere men are being accorded the worship that is due only to the living and true God. And this is for them a cause for great sadness and indignation and grief. And there there is surely a challenge for us. Have we become so insensitive to what the crowd says and does and believes that we are unmoved by it? Perhaps if we're honest with ourselves, we have to recognize that in a measure that is true of us. The crowd are heading to a lost eternity, babbling nonsense, and we're unconcerned. It doesn't cause us the grief and the indignation that we find evidenced here in Barnabas and Paul. They were concerned for the honor of God, but I'm sure they were concerned also for the well-being of the crowd. They didn't want the crowd to continue thinking these things that were foolish.

So, they understand what the crowd are saying. There is a response to it, but they also, thirdly, do something about it. They rush into the crowd, and they rush into the crowd with a message to tell.

They rushed out into the crowd, we read there in verse 14, shouting, Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. And they go on. They bring a message to the crowd, and they rush into the crowd.

[23 : 28] They get as close as they can so that they will be heard. This message needs to be heard by this crowd, by this rabble. And so, they go into the crowd. And the message that they bring, and much could be said of it, but time doesn't allow. But I would say or notice three characteristics, just very briefly, of this message that they bring to the crowd. First of all, it was an appropriate message. This is an interesting occasion, a significant occasion in the development of the book of Acts, indeed, and the development of the Christian church, in that for the first time, we have what we might call a purely pagan audience. On the previous occasions in this first missionary journey, Paul, as we've noticed, would go first to the synagogue, and he would address the Jews or the God-fearers, Gentiles who were sympathetic to the Jewish faith. That would be his point of initial contact. But here at Lystra, for the first time, the audience is entirely pagan. And this is reflected in the message. It is an appropriate message for a pagan audience. He makes no reference to Old

Testament promises and prophecies that would be ordinarily what we would expect in a message from Paul. No, what he speaks of is God, of the living God, of the one true God. To a Jew, you didn't need to persuade them about there being one living and true Creator God, but to these pagans, yes. The God who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. So, the message that he brings is appropriate for the audience that he is addressing. And of course, I don't need to labor the point about how we too have laid upon us the challenge to bring a message to the crowd that is appropriate, that will be understood, that is able to address them where they are in a manner that they can respond to and understand. In fact, the message that we have here, which we don't know if it's the totality of what was said, it may be a summary, but in any case, it bears a striking resemblance to the message that Paul brought in Athens. It's almost like an executive summary of the sermon in Athens, again, to a pagan audience. So, the message is appropriate, but the second thing I just want to notice about the message is that it is a very positive message. Here is this crowd doing what is repugnant to Paul and Barnabas.

Their behavior causes them great grief. They tear their clothes, and yet they don't come in and in the first instance criticize them or bang them on the top of the head and tell them how pagan they are and how wicked they are and how they're all going to go to hell. Yes, they do tell them that these things are worthless things. But notice how they introduce their message. We are bringing you good news. We are bringing you good news that you can turn from these worthless things, and yes, they are worthless things. These idols that you worship, they're worthless things.

Now, that could have been offensive to their audience, but they're saying turn from these things and turn to the living and true God. Turn to He who is so much greater than that which you are bowing down before. This is a positive message of good news for a crowd that doesn't know what to believe and will believe anything that is presented to them. We too have a positive message to bring. We have good news to bring to the crowd that is Scotland in the 21st century.

But in order for this message to be heard, we need to, with Paul and Barnabas, rush into the crowd. If we're not in the crowd, if we're separated from the crowd, then they will not hear, however good the message might be. But the message not only is appropriate and positive, it is a demanding message. There is a call to the crowd to turn from their current behavior. It's not simply a philosophical discourse. This is a call to repentance. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things. There is a demand placed upon them. You must turn. You must turn from these things and turn to God. You must repent of your sins. And this too must form part of the message that we bring to the crowd, whether it is welcomed or not, a call to turn, to turn from ourselves, from our sin, to the living and true God, to put our trust in His Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us.

[28 : 33] I make reference there to Jesus. And one of the comments that is made by those who comment on this passage and the question is posed, there seems to be, in what we have before us, no explicit or direct reference to Jesus. And that is debated greatly. What is going on there? There are different ways to understand that. One could be simply a question of time.

There was the intention to get on to that, as it were, but this is a rabble. This is a crowd that evidently doesn't want to hear. And so simply, though it was Paul's intention to come on and to develop more fully, his message opportunity didn't present itself. It's a possibility. There's no doubt that there is implicit in what he says the expectation that there is something more to be said. Very particularly where we read there in verse 16, in the past, he let all nations go their own way, and so on and so forth.

And anybody who would be listening carefully, though I suspect most weren't listening carefully, would say, well, if in the past it was like so, what about now? There is that expectation of something still to be said. And possibly the opportunity simply did not present itself to take things any further. Well, no doubt we could consider more the possibilities in regard to this matter, but we won't do so.

We live in a generation where the crowd is increasingly babbling a message that is both incoherent and dangerous, a message that is certainly dishonoring to God. And what will we do? Will we babble along, parrot-like, with the crowd? Will we retreat into our ghetto and lament the state of the world?

Or will we, with Paul and Barnabas, rush into the crowd with a message that is appropriate, that is positive, that is demanding? The apostles rushed out into the crowd. Finally, and briefly, the third reference to the crowd that we want to just notice is in verse 19.

[30 : 59] Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They won the crowd over. Now, these are enemies that had already been made on previous, or in previous cities that Paul and Barnabas had visited. And they follow Paul and Barnabas, seeking to make mischief, much more than mischief. So anyway, these Jews arrive, and we're told, and this is our concern, given our focus this morning, is that they won the crowd over. Now, what is said here about what the Jews are able to do in winning the crowd over, and what follows in the treatment of Paul, reveals certainly two things about the crowd. It reveals the fickleness of the crowd, but it also reveals chillingly the fury of the crowd. The crowd is so fickle. Here are these people, this crowd that had been proclaiming with great energy and with great enthusiasm and with great conviction. So it would seem that Paul and Barnabas were the gods come down to us in human form, and yet seemingly so easily they change their opinion. And of course, the crowd is like that. The crowd is very fickle.

And given that the opinions that they hold are not the product of considered thought or the reflection of strongly held convictions, the crowd is prone to about turns, and the crowd will quickly change its tune. So it was in Lystra. Its newfound celebrities wouldn't play along, and so they're quickly discarded. And so today, of course, the fickleness of the crowd is dangerous and opens the door to frightening possibilities as to what they would be capable of believing and what they would be capable of supporting. But though that fickleness is a disturbing feature of the crowd, I wonder if we try and rescue something positive from it, if it could not be seen also as an opportunity to recognize that so often the message that is proclaimed by the crowd that seems to be held with such conviction. But such conviction is actually devoid of any foundation. And as an alternative message that does indeed have foundation is brought by God's grace and with God's blessing, it could easily displace the dross that the crowd currently believes. The crowd is fickle, but the crowd is furious also.

It's not just difficult going against the flow. It's dangerous. Paul discovered that very clearly on this occasion. The crowd were won over and were told they stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city thinking he was dead. The fury of the crowd. But as we close, what then will we do as we consider the crowd? Well, certainly don't go with the crowd. Consider what you believe. Consider the opinions that you hold. Be aware of how easy it is to be dragged along by what the majority think, what the crowd claim to be true, what the important people say is right. Be very careful that you're not dragged along with the crowd.

So don't go with the crowd, but do, do rush into the crowd. If we can paraphrase a familiar text, we are not of the crowd, but we are in the crowd. For we ought to be in the crowd. Now this can be very frightening for us. We saw what happened to Paul. He rushed into the crowd and nobody wanted to hear.

And he was dragged out and stoned to death, or so they thought. But the account does end, or at least the end that we highlight in this passage. It ends in an intriguing and in a heartening fashion. The stones that were thrown at Paul certainly hit their target. Paul, on other occasions, makes reference to this stoning. Indeed, when he writes to the church in Galatia, and this is in Asia Minor, this is, these are the same people who received that subsequent letter, the same location in any case. He speaks of the marks, the stigmata that he bears in his body for his loyalty to Christ, and possibly a direct reference to the physical marks that remain on his body as a result of this stoning. So the stones hit their target. And yet, intriguingly, we read there, but after the disciples had gathered round him, he got up and went back into the city.

[36 : 10] Is there a miracle that is happening here? We don't know. We're not told. But what certainly is true is that the Lord was pleased to protect him and to spare him the death that the crowd certainly had in store for him, that he would do what? But what does he do? And again, there's a challenge here, surely. He went back into the city. What would we do? We would run in the opposite direction, perhaps. But what did he do? He went back into the city, spared by God, conscious that God was with him, and that he would die when God so chose. And in the meantime, he would continue to rush into the crowd with a message of hope, a message of good news for those who were babbling and nonsense.

Well, that we would be like Paul, that we would be like Barnabas, that we would be of those who rush into the crowd with the good news concerning Jesus Christ. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you.