



### III. Are New Believers Disciples?

*"But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'" Acts 14:20-22*

Does the Bible teach, or imply, in this passage that new believers may be called disciples? No. The answer is a resounding *no*. Answering yes contradicts other New Testament passages, promotes a works Gospel rather than a grace Gospel, makes unfounded assumptions about the elapsed time in the passage, and reads into it for-drawn conclusions.

**Other New Testament passages.** Four New Testament passages present Christ's definition of a disciple. His definition of a disciple is much different from the Biblical definition of a believer. His requirements for a believer being His disciple are abiding in His Word, loving fellow disciples, bearing fruit, and paying the daily price to follow Him. This is more fully developed in the Acts One Eight lessons *Disciple or Believer* and *Once a Disciple Always a Disciple?* In those lessons, it is clearly shown that there is a significant difference between a believer and a disciple. Every disciple is a believer. However, not every believer is a disciple.

**A believer by faith ... but a disciple by works.** A publication from a disciplinemaking ministry states that, "the term *disciple* is broad, including all of Christ's followers, from new Christians (Acts 14:21) to mature believers (Acts 16:1)." A cursory reading of that quote could cause someone to infer that new believers can be disciples. I am not sure what the author meant by his initial qualifier, "all of Christ's followers". Does he mean all believers ... or all followers? Believers come to Jesus ... disciples also follow Jesus. Becoming a believer is based on faith not works, Ephesians 2:8-9. Following Jesus is a work that a believer does in also being His disciple. One does not become a believer by works. And a believer does not become a disciple without works. Once a person is saved that is permanent. Once saved, always saved. However, the Bible does not allow us to say that *once a disciple, always a disciple*. Many disciples ceased following Jesus after His Bread of Life teaching, John 6:66. Therefore, to equate the terms *believer* and *disciple*, one must hold the false opinion that one can be saved by works and that a believer can lose salvation. However, that is unbiblical. Disciples are Christ's followers attaining His stated standards. How could new believers attain those high standards while still in their newness? Believers mature over time into being disciples through abiding in the Word, loving other disciples, bearing fruit, and putting Christ above all. That certainly does not describe the attributes and disciplines of new believers.

**Unfounded calendar assumptions.** We must properly interpret Acts 14:21. We are not told how long Paul and Barnabas were in Derbe. We are told that they were there long enough to declare the Gospel to the city. Was it a week ... a month ... a year? We are not told. We must not assume anything about Paul and Barnabas' Derbe calendar. The book of Acts is a highlights history covering about 28 years, 64 geographic locations, and travels of over 8,000 miles (greater than the distance from Los Angeles to London). In the book of Acts, on average, there are only 36 verses per year ... just under two words per day. We must not fill in the time gaps by means of our imaginations. Nevertheless, let us imagine that they stayed in Derbe for twenty weeks and taught the new believers 10 hours per week (less time than you might spend watching TV or surfing the Internet). That would mean that they taught a total of 200 hours ... equivalent to 400 half-hour Sunday morning messages (eight years worth). I would guess that Paul could have made some disciples in that setting. However, I am imagining that scenario ... something I should not do anymore than I should be assuming they were there a short time.

**We cannot make believers.** They *made a considerable number of disciples* there. The Greek word translated as “*considerable*” could be translated as *sufficient* or *adequate* as it is in some other places in the New Testament. I wonder what Luke meant when he wrote that verse. The verse states that they *made disciples* (the same singular Greek word used in the Great Commission to *make disciples*). We cannot make believers ... only God can do that. We do not save anyone ... only God does. Therefore, we must conclude that Paul and Barnabas did not make new believers ... but rather, they made disciples out of new believers. We cannot use this passage to conclude that the Bible includes *new believers* in the term *disciples*.

**Reading truth into a passage or reading truth out of a passage.** The varying interpretations of Acts 14:21 offer a good illustration of how not to read into a verse what we want it to say. We must read God's truth out of a passage rather than read our truth into it. That is equally true for translators of the Bible. If translators of a particular translation are of the false opinion that the terms *believer* and *disciple* are synonymous, they might inaccurately translate this passage as some form of *winning disciples* or *making converts* ... neither being consistent with the Greek ... and neither being possible. You make a disciple ... you do not win one. Moreover, you do not make a convert ... God does. The Greek text states specifically that they *made disciples*. If your translation does not accurately translate this passage as *made disciples*, it might be time to get an accurate, more literal translation.

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