

The Gospel Brings Division

May 5, 2019

Acts 14:1-20

As we continue to chronicle the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, we come to Acts 14:1-20. Here we see our dynamic duo entering into new towns, and yet received in what is becoming a familiar way. That is the main point I see in this passage: when the gospel goes out, it creates a division among people. Some receive it with gladness, indeed such a group in this passage goes way overboard in receiving it, leading them to do something appalling and unthinkable. But at the same time, others reject it as not only false, but offensive and threatening. They see the message and the messengers as threats to their livelihood, their very existence, leading them to take drastic steps to stop the gospel in its tracks. It makes no sense to us that people would feel this way, but this is the truth, and the truth continues to show itself. The gospel divides.

Follow along as I read today's text, Acts 14:1-20. You are excused if you (like me) see some humor in the way some energetic worshippers show their acceptance of the message of Paul. READ.

Main point: The gospel unites very different people, and divides people you thought were your brothers and sisters.

Maybe it's just me, but it always surprises me when such a division occurs. It surprises because we naturally think such people would be with us, agree with us, accept us as brothers and sisters, welcome the spread of the gospel. I am surprised by the level of animosity, rejection, sometimes downright hatred by those you would otherwise think of as being on the same side.

And yet, I am often equally surprised at the level of acceptance by those who we would naturally think would tell us to get lost. But the truth is that when God moves in someone's heart, such natural barriers can come crashing down and people will do things we never would believe, sometimes to the point where we have to hold them back from their over-exuberance.

So, as we go through the text, remind yourself that you are not responsible for how people respond to the good news of Jesus. You are only responsible for utilizing the opportunities that God brings before you. He is responsible for the responses. (2 parts)

I. Expect a divided response to the message of the gospel. vv. 1-7

I've struggled a bit as I prepared this message as I feel I could say the same thing every week. This is one of the primary lessons of the book of Acts. How many times should I say it? And yet, I think it is a primary lesson because it is the truth and we need to remember it. Why? Because otherwise, the enemy will mess with us and convince us that we should just give up, or move on, or leave the mission to others who are more "gifted." But I believe these passages are here so we might have weapons to use against the enemy. We go into such battles knowing, expecting the mixed response of our audience. We remind ourselves that Paul preached boldly, was the target of intense persecution, attempted assassination, and yet kept on preaching. And the result was a church with excited believers in his wake. We keep going because God has sent us there for that purpose. We stay there as long as He makes it clear we should stay. And we move on when He makes that clear as well.

v.1- At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.

Again, don't gloss over this verse, but allow it to sink in, not the part that they "spoke so effectively" but the part that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. I say this because the enemy will try to convince you that you are not so gifted. No, the underlying message here is that God was speaking through them in a powerful way, resulting in new believers. So, the point here is that God was at work in His typical way. They went into a place where the gospel had not been, and many people of all stripes believed. Amazing!

2 But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

Again, the response was typical. Just as there were new believers, so there was intense opposition. Here, they are described as poisoning the minds of the Gentiles. The enemy was at work, trying to destroy the credibility of the messengers, making it so people would not dare to listen to them. I don't know about you, but I have experienced such treatment. Even more, I have seen others who have had to resort to taping their messages lest they be dragged into court through false accusation. Oh yes, the enemy hates it when the gospel is preached in a compelling way. He sends in his troops to poison the minds of those who might hear and believe.

3 So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.

Did you catch that? They didn't move on, they kept preaching. They didn't tone down their message, they spoke it boldly. Their message was affirmed by God when He empowered them to do the impossible, the miraculous. Our God was not going to be stopped by the enemy's tactics.

4 The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles.

There it is, the theme of this morning. The preaching of the gospel left the city divided. It caused people to have to take a side. The gospel unites people who are different from each other and divides people you would otherwise thought were on the same side. We must expect that. We must not be taken off guard when it happens. We must remember that it is not us, it is the gospel. Some will receive, embrace, believe. Others will reject, disparage, persecute. The gospel divides.

Pause: can you see how different this is from the message that so many preach: that we can all just get along, that if we just "love each other" then we will all sit in a circle and sing, "Kum By Yah?" That might be true if you leave out the gospel. And in truth, it is so often those who believe such a thing who

come against the faithful preaching of the gospel most strongly. They hate it when a message is preached that only some will be in heaven, that it is only through Jesus Christ that one can be saved. That message goes directly against their core beliefs, even if they claim to represent the God of Scripture. We still face the same situation faced by the Apostle Paul. It just has a different face to it. But the opposition is the same. Resume.

5 There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them.

This is serious. These angry defenders of the status quo were now motivated by the rage to take action, hurting, persecuting, even putting to death the ones sent by God to reveal the truth. A line has been drawn in the sand.

6 But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, 7 where they continued to preach the good news.

They were not successful in stopping the preaching of the gospel. Yes, the missionaries moved on. Yes, they left that territory. But this just meant they did the same thing in a new territory. Just as we have seen so many times, the persecution caused the gospel to spread.

So you will know, the people of this region are known to you by a different name. Indeed, there is a book of the Bible written to these people. These are the people of the region of Galatia. These are the Galatians. And Paul will later write a letter to these churches in Lystra, Derbe, and others, called Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. I urge you to take some time to read it, to put what you're reading here in a better context.

So, the gospel was preached in Iconium, boldly preached, extensively preached, with the result of leaving behind a great number of new believers, but a divided community. New alliances were formed, both for good and for evil. A major shift has taken place. And now, on to the next city.

II. There is a natural urge to fold the gospel into what you naturally believe. vv. 8-20

Here, in a humorous way, we see exuberant believers attempt to show their acceptance of the apostles' message. And yet, the concept on display here is not humorous. The concept is called syncretism, the combining of two faiths. I've see a lot of syncretism in Haiti, where the native faith is a form of animism the residents brought with them from West Africa. In Haiti, that system of belief was combined with Catholicism, forming what we know as Voodoo. That's what voodoo is, the syncretism of Catholicism and African animism. And I assure you, it creates a mess. We must always be on guard for syncretism and seek to stop it in its tracks.

8 In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked.

Just from the description, we know what is going to happen. The three-fold repetition of his medical condition highlights the hopelessness of the situation. Something tells me God is about to do something special for this man.

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.

This man happened to be placed in a position to hear Paul preach. Paul made visual contact with him. We are not told how, but Paul could tell (from God) that the man was believing, not only the message of the gospel, but the message of healing for him as well. Again, how Paul knew this we are not told. All we know is that Paul could tell, God wanted him to heal this man. So, prompted by God, Paul calls on the man to stand up. And he did. He stood up and began to walk. I imagine him not just shuffling around, but walking with confidence, maybe dancing???, as if he had been doing so for decades. God healed him, a man all would have known could not 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!”

This is where the situation gets a bit chaotic. Here you have people who were not Jewish, they had no framework for the one true God of Scripture. They had the Roman, the Greek pantheon of gods. They could tell the man was healed with the power of God, they just wrongly concluded that Paul and Barnabas were human forms of those gods. They put what they saw into their pagan mindset. They folded biblical faith into their own faith.

This would be the opposite of the perspective of the Jewish opposition. The Jews would have heard Paul claim to represent their God, Yahweh, the God of Scripture. But to see him heal the man changed their worldview. Their priests could not do that, so it must mean they were phony, using the power of some other god. These pagans recognized the power of God, but their framework of belief told them Paul must be the human incarnation of their gods. So, the one side said, “This is not from God.” The other side said, “This is from God, and we must worship it. The gods have visited us!” Now, which side is closer to the truth?

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.

They came to the conclusion based on their roles that they must be Zeus and Hermes. Hermes was the spokesman, so Barnabas must be Zeus. Even the priest of Zeus left his temple to pay homage to their god in human form. They were welcoming Paul and Barnabas, but with a completely wrong understanding. Can you see how opposite this is from the Jews’ response?

14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 15 “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. 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.”

Paul and Barnabas were horrified. This was the opposite of the intended response. They came not as the gods to live among them, but as spokesmen for the one true God, who had come to bring good news, to challenge them to give up their former beliefs, their worthless systems to appease the gods and to finally honor the One true God who has been blessing them for all this time even though they never honored Him as God. In other words, this was not THEIR god, but the One true God they could now know and worship. They had worshipped a false god who had done nothing for them. Now they could worship the One True God who had been blessing them all along without recognition.

Paul and Barnabas were totally human. They were no better than their listeners. Don't honor them, worship them, sacrifice to them. Honor the God they represent, worship Him. These messengers of the gospel were there to proclaim to them a new faith, the one true faith in the one true God. Don't fit Him into their mold. They needed to give up their mold and embrace the truth.

18 Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

It didn't seem to stop them too well. They had just seen God in the flesh as evidenced by their wonder-working power. They went into their worship mode to the god they just saw. I just laugh to myself, thinking of them trying to get them to stop. The harder they tried, the more the people were determined to do it. This is like the poster child of fervent followers gone amuck. They saw it but missed the point.

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 around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

Sadly, into that setting, the agitators from both of the last towns showed up to poison the people. Here, they convinced the crowd that Paul was not one of the gods, but an evil man who needed to be killed. So, the same people who were wanting to sacrifice to him now took up stones to kill him. The agitators won the crowd. They stoned Paul. But as it is told to us in unbelievable form, the believers gathered around Paul and he just got up and left town. . . No! He went back into the city. He went back to work. But the next day, they left for new territory. Their work in Lystra was over, another divided city.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will expect mixed response to the gospel.
- 2) We will continue despite the mixed results.
- 3) We will not appease those who push us to all just get along.
- 4) We will be on guard for any attempt to fold true belief into false beliefs.
- 5) We will not allow people to put us in God's place.
- 6) We will give thanks to the One True God, who has blessed us and brought us salvation.