

Text: Acts 13:44-14:7

Topic: The gospel

Theme: The divisive nature of the gospel.

My purpose for this message: To help believers realize that because the gospel divides, not everyone they share it with will like it; and help unbelievers considering faith to understand, that if they decide for the gospel, not everyone will be happy with that.

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[Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel] Both Hated and Wanted: How the Gospel Divides

PRAY.

For about 16 years (See Marshall Kirk & Hunter Madsen's book, *After the Ball: How America will Conquer it's Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 90's*), key imagemakers have been reshaping America's thinking about homosexuality, trying to eliminate any opposition. (FYI, I no longer use the word gay; these dear people that Jesus died for and that God wants for his own, are anything but...gay.) Many network sitcoms now have a regular character who is homosexual, and usually depicted in the most favorable light. There is now a TV fashion show that dresses up heterosexual men to look like homosexual men. ABC's Thursday night ABC's *Primetime* did a supposedly heartwarming segment about 2 homosexual men who are raising quadruplets. We were gradually being trained to think the homosexual behavior really *isn't* anything more than an alternative lifestyle.

But last week Massachusetts Supreme Court justices demonstrated just how divisive this thing is. They played God and rewrote Gen.2:24 to permit homosexual marriage in their state beginning May 17. An attempt to pass a constitutional amendment defining marriage as 1 man & 1 woman is all but inevitable.

The Massachusetts ruling is pushing a people getting off the fence. Many state representatives are Roman Catholics who agreed to permit civil unions in hopes of avoiding an all-or-nothing decision on homosexual marriage. But chair of the House Judiciary Committee Rep. Eugene O'Flaherty—a civil union supporter—said he would likely vote in favor of a constitutional amendment now. Conservatives frustrated with President Bush's openness to homosexual activists believe this will force the president off the fence. It has. He has now spoken out in favor of a constitutional amendment.

Rodney King immortalized the plea, "Can't we all just get along?" Not always. In fact, such an ideal is not compatible with the gospel and its proclamation. The gospel divides. READ Matt.10:34-39. If you are weighing a commitment to Christ, or contemplating sharing your faith, do it with your eyes open: the gospel is not only appealing, it's deliberately divisive.

Background

The week before these events, Paul had preached an evangelistic sermon in Antioch's synagogue: "Receive the Messiah, and be freed from God's wrath and condemnation." It was a welcome message to some, but not all. When Paul closed his sermon with a warning not to *reject* the good news, everyone knew some would.

Some surrendered to Christ (43) that day, and others who didn't, remained open. All invited Paul and Barnabas back next Sabbath to say more about the gospel, this good news. Who could know what would happen.

During the week, word spread about the guest speakers and the synagogue was packed. The many Gentile faces turned some Jews green with envy. Where did all these infidels come from and what were they doing in their synagogue? Weren't these preachers Jews; how could they be so sympathetic to Gentiles? And why wasn't their Messiah message rooted in the Law? And how comes these travelers could draw such a crowd?

Reception, rejection. Acceptance, objection. Friendship, opposition. Wherever Paul preached he found both: Iconium, Thessalonica, Athens, Ephesus, and Corinth. Why? Because he was insensitive? Or a poor communicator? No, simply because the nature of what he preached, divides. The gospel divides.

In Antioch, agitators began to mutter and criticize the apostles. To which the two apostles replied. "God pointed us to you Jews first..." Rom.1:16: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile.* But even though God gave you Jews the Scriptures, adoption as sons, the patriarchs, the covenants, the temple worship and every other spiritual advantage—since you do not think yourselves worthy of eternal life, we'll peddle our message to the Gentiles. (47, quote from Is.49:6): Like Jesus, God has made us a light to the Gentiles to offer them salvation.

The slap to the Jewish ego was heard 'round the synagogue. "Do not consider yourself worthy of eternal life? Meaning, not good enough to be saved? No, not *humble* enough to be saved. No one is *worthy* to be saved which is why God's grace is needed. But rejection goes beyond the absence of personal worth. When God freely offers his best to the worst and gets snubbed for his trouble, that's blasphemy. In fact, that is how Luke described what took place in v.45 (talked "abusively" is actually "blasphemy.")

But others said "yes." V.48 says all who were appointed for eternal life believed. Appointed by whom? God. Appointed when? Before time began (Eph.1:4-5.) Some believers deeply object to this. They think it unfair that God unilaterally picks His children quite apart from their decision. That His decision to pick me as His, predated *my* decision to pick Him as mine, by thousands of years—or more. Yet terms like election, predestination, the elect, and "God chose" throughout the Bible make it hard to dodge the idea that God selects who will be His.

I personally find great peace and solace in this. In a family, adults make the decisions, not the children. Why? Adults are wiser. In society, the police and not the criminals make the decisions. Why? The police are more righteous. So, if God is more wise than I, more righteous than I, doesn't it stand to reason that he should make important decisions?

And isn't our salvation based not on our merit, but on God's grace anyway? This also gives me more peace when sharing my faith. If this is ultimately God's work, then I will know success whenever I join Him in His work, His call. For we do not boast about our strengths and abilities, but our weaknesses (2 Cor.12:9-10).

The gospel spread through the region but the atmosphere in Antioch grew hostile. Many people had been saved and were faithfully following Christ. But opponents got to key people in the city and the apostles concluded their ministry there was over. In a typical Jewish expression of defilement, they shook the dust off their feet and left for Iconium.

Same pattern. Preaching at the synagogue brought both Jew and Gentile converts. But (v.2) Jewish opponents once again stirred up the locals against Paul and Barnabas. V.3 is fascinating. V.2 describes the hostile environment yet it seems that precisely because of the hostility, the apostles decided to stay and go head to head. REREAD v.3. Same thing in 1 Cor.16:9. *...because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.* Could it be that these two go hand in hand? Isn't it interesting that until the communists took over China and began systematically destroying the church, that the gospel's influence had been limited in that land.

To confirm the gospel message, God enabled Paul and Barnabas to do miraculous signs and wonders. But if you have any illusion that signs and wonders so amaze people that they quench opposition to the message, listen to 14:4-5. READ.

Eventually a mob formed to kill the two men and they left before the plot could be carried out. V.4 illustrates perfectly what normally happens with the gospel: "...the people of the city were divided..."

Concl:

It is not, and has never been, the purpose of the gospel to bring people together. Or perhaps we should say, it's never been the purpose of the gospel to bring *all* people together. To think so increases the possibility that we will dilute the gospel; to think so increases the possibility that we will silence gospel. By its nature, the gospel divides.