

The Gospel Divides.

Text: Acts 13:42- 14:7

We live in world where we crave peace and harmony.

Trying desperately to keep everybody happy.

But is that possible?

Someone once said to me that you can spend all your time trying to make everybody happy...And you end up making nobody happy.

How true is that?

The government comes up with tax cuts...

ACCOS says it is not enough for low income earners (probably right)

Business says it puts pressure on the economy and we'll see inflation (probably right).

Our society wants everyone to live in peace and harmony with each other...

But if you say that Jesus is the only way...

then you are upsetting the delicate balance.

With the strong emphasis on social harmony today, evangelism with the goal of conversion is considered a major hindrance.

Ajith Fernando (evangelist and commentator) talks about their work amongst Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

He writes:

'...the gospel sometimes does divide communities...

I remember being at a Buddhist temple facing the wrath of the monks and their lay supporters in an area where we had started an evangelistic work.

Our accusers said to us they had lived in peace for many centuries and that now we had come and ruined the peace of the community. And we knew this was partly true.

It was a hard accusation to take, for Christians seek to follow Paul's advice: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Rom 12:18). We who aim to be instruments of peace had become agents of disharmony.' (NIV Application Commentary- Acts; p404-5).

For reasons like this some Christians are not enthusiastic about evangelism.

They feel that conversion is desirable...

But if it is going to cause so much disruption to family, friends and society...

Then they downplay its importance.

So how do we respond?

The gospel has the potential to divide...it will divide.

In this passage of Scripture we read today...that's exactly what happened.

There are two main groups of people...
Those who embrace and accept the teaching of the apostles,
And those who reject it.

We still have those two groups today.

They never understand what they are missing out on.

Maybe you know someone like that?

People sceptical about the gospel message and what it involves.

Maybe you are like that?

Heard the message many times, over many years;

come regularly to church, but you just haven't got it yet.

If that is you...listen again to the message.

The other group of people are those who have responded eagerly to the message that Jesus saves.

If you are that follower of Jesus...fantastic!

Rejoice in that!

But I also want you to think about this point as we work through this passage together...

How am I affecting the people God has placed around me?

Am I being the witness that God has called me to be?

Not everyone will roam from town to town preaching and teaching like Paul and Barnabas

But there are times that you are given in which you can share the gospel in your own special way.

I wish at times that I was as brave and bold as Asher.

Last Sunday Zoe had a school friend over to play.

During lunch Asher innocently and openly asked her which church she went to.

When she said 'none'

Asher's immediate, shocked response was, 'Why not?'

Now there was an awkward silence.

Finally the friend answered, 'Because we don't believe in God.'

Without a moments hesitation Asher blurted out, 'Well that's bad isn't it dad.'

How would you respond?

The gospel has the potential to divide...but we don't want it to.

Paul and Barnabas didn't want opposition...

But it came.

We pick up the story of Paul and Barnabas as they continue their work in Antioch.

P & B have excitedly explained the gospel and a door to continue the work opens up.

They're asked back the next Saturday to continue to explain the good news.

A door of opportunity has opened up but...

As the opportunity opens up...so quickly it turns to opposition.

In one short week the news had spread through the whole city of Antioch.

So much so, that on the following Sabbath almost the whole city had gathered to hear what Paul & Barnabas had to say.

This huge and unusual turnout was likely due to the Gentiles telling and coming.

Since Jewish attendance in the Synagogue was probably fairly constant.

The Jewish leaders in attendance were filled with jealousy.

It led the leaders to speak abusively against Paul's message.

The wording 'talked abusively' has, at its root meaning, blasphemy.

Instead of accepting the truth, the Jewish leaders stirred up opposition.

So, at this point, Paul and Barnabas boldly confront their antagonists.

They say – "Hey, if you guys are going to reject the gospel as we have presented it here, then you are forfeiting the eternal life that you could have received by believing in Jesus."

Quoting Isaiah 49...they talk of the role God had for them (47)...

To take the gospel message to the gentiles...who would turn and believe!

The nation of Israel had failed miserably in this, because they had fallen so deeply into legalism and the spiritual bondage that comes from legalism.

Christianity wasn't like that though. It was a gospel of grace, not a gospel of rules and regulations, it was something fresh, something freeing, and the gentiles responded to it, as we see in the next two verses. (48-49)

The gentiles hear the gospel from Paul and Barnabas, and they were overjoyed!

We are told here that they glorified the name of the Lord.

This is a stark contrast to the Jews there in Antioch who blasphemed the name of the Lord.

The next sentence here is a curious one.

'As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.'

It's a strong statement about the sovereignty of God.

about God's electing grace.

God has an elect people!

This truth is taught often and plainly throughout the Bible, and yet many Christians try to dodge it.

Jesus spoke plainly about the elect (Matt. 24:22, 24, 31; Luke 18:7).

Paul began his sermon at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch by referring to God's choice of the fathers of the nation Israel (13:17).

His point was that God is active in reaching out to men...

It is not men who are trying to find God.

When people believe they are simply responding to the work of God in reaching out to them.

Many try to turn that around...

Trying to say that God elects those he knows in advance will believe.

But Scripture is abundantly clear that election is *unconditional* on God's part. It is based on His sovereign choice, totally apart from anything that He foresees us doing.

Our choice to believe the gospel is *not* why God elected us.

His electing us is why we chose to believe the gospel.

You may be thinking, "Why bring up such a controversial matter?"

The main reason is that our text brings it up! Why does Luke do that?

Did you know that understanding the doctrine of election when you are witnessing to someone gives you confidence?

If salvation depended on man's decision...

you have no guarantee they would decide to trust in Christ.

In fact the Bible says...none will trust in Christ.

No-one comes to Jesus, unless the Father draws them (John 6:44)

But, if God has an elect people whom He chose for salvation before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4);

if He has the power to raise them from the dead and impart repentance and saving faith to them (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25);

then, you can share the gospel with the confident faith that He will use the foolishness of the message preached to save some (1 Cor. 1:21).

No man would invent the doctrine of election,

because it pulls the rug out from under human pride.

We cannot glory even in our faith, which is also the gift of God.

The gospel is a message of grace to undeserving sinners.

Luke refers to it as "the grace of God" (13:43), and as "the word of His grace" (14:3).

It is obvious that Paul's message was different than anything these people had ever heard before.

They were begging that these things might be spoken to them again (13:42).

It was like water to the thirsty soul.

The gospel confronts every sinner with his sin.

It confronts the religious sinner with his pride.

It confronts the immoral sinner with his immorality.

It confronts the greedy sinner with his love of money.

It convicts every sinner of his guilt before the holy God.

Then it offers to every sinner the free grace of God, who sacrificed His own Son as the just substitute for sinners.

It shows that no sinner can save himself, but that God will save everyone who looks to Jesus alone.

If we are saved, it is because God chose to save us, and all the glory goes to Him.

When we come to the cross of Christ as guilty sinners and simply receive what the Son of God did on our behalf, He saves us by His grace, and He gets all the glory.

You would think that everyone would welcome such good news.

But the fact is, many hate it.

So we have division and we should expect division.

While the Word of God spread...so did the opposition (49).

Now, there were a number of prominent women from the upper classes of Greek society who worshipped at the synagogue. This was common of this day and age.

The Jewish synagogue rulers used these women to stir up their husbands against Paul and Barnabas, to thwart the gospel being spread throughout the region.

These leading men of the city persecuted Paul and Barnabas, and had them thrown out of the city of Antioch.

It never ceases to amaze me that people like P & B could be filled with joy after being run out of town.

But that joy was not because of circumstances but because of the results of seeing lives changed by the power of the gospel.

The Jews had done what they had set out to do, to get rid of Paul and Barnabas.

But, one more thing to note here is the symbolic gesture of Paul and Barnabas as they left town.

They shook off the dust from their feet as they left town.

It was a customary action for Jews to shake the dust from their feet when they left a pagan town, and returned to their own land.

This was to symbolize their cleansing from the pagan area that did not worship God.

They wanted no part of the pagan area,

not even the dirt from the place touching their feet.

For Jews like Paul and Barnabas to do this to other Jews was to compare them to pagan gentiles, and the general meaning was that Jews who reject the gospel, are no better off than pagan gentiles.

So, we see the missionaries leaving Pisidian Antioch here, they get on the Roman road going East towards Lystra, but turn a bit off to the north to stop at Iconium.

[Put up map]

Iconium was a large city also in the Roman province of Galatia, about 150kms east of Antioch. The city was a thriving economic and agricultural centre.

It was famous for its weaving industry, they grew highland flax in the plains around the city, and raised sheep and goats there was well to feed this industry.

This industry no doubt attracted some Jews who had left their homeland, and there were enough Jews here as well to have a synagogue.

As was his custom...of going to the Jew first...

Paul begins to teach in the synagogue.

Again his message is well received...

and they stay around for awhile to teach and preach.

The good reception is short-lived however, as word spreads from the synagogue in Antioch about Paul and Barnabas, and the gospel message that they were presenting.

The Jews that did not believe the gospel there in Iconium stirred up the gentiles that had not heard the message yet against the new Christians there in Iconium, along with Paul and Barnabas.

They sought to sabotage the gospel through slandering the names of those who believe in it.

They gossiped about the believers, and in the first century, just like today, gossip spreads like wildfire.

They continued to preach and teach...despite opposition...

God blessed their outreach there, and they did signs and wonders there, by the power of God working through them in that part of the country.

But, at some point, the opposition to the gospel had grown so great, that the people of the town decided to stone Paul and Barnabas.

But, when Paul and Barnabas learned of this, they left town, to carry the gospel to more cities, Lystra and Derbe, to the south of Iconium, and that is where we will pick

up next week, with Paul and Barnabas.

Conclusion

If we take a stand for Jesus Christ, we will encounter opposition, sometimes even from our own families.

While we should always be sensitive and gracious to each person, and be careful not to be personally offensive, there is an inherently divisive quality about the very message we proclaim.

The gospel is good news, but it is good news that divides.

It seems to me that we are in danger in our day of taking the offence out of the gospel. We've made it a safe, palatable message that would offend no one.

We avoid confrontation, and we don't like division.

Maybe that's one reason that most of us are afraid to tell others about Jesus Christ. We know that the other person may not respond favourably, and we'd rather not create conflict.

And we know that Satan will oppose the one who tells others about Christ.

Who wants to engage in combat with the prince of darkness?

Why would we want to proclaim a message that is inherently divisive?

There are a number of reasons.

We know that the gospel is the truth, and that those who do not respond to it in faith will face God's eternal judgment, but those who believe will be eternally saved.

But one of the main reasons we should proclaim the gospel is that God is glorified through it when He saves sinners.

Our text shows this when it says, "When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord".

This has to do with rejoicing and glorifying God.

That's what we are on about in every area of life.