

A Divided Multitude

Psalm 2, Acts 14:1–7

I sincerely hope that all of you had a happy Thanksgiving. One of the major news networks recently labeled Thanksgiving “a celebration of white supremacy.” That is dishonest. America has been a beacon of hope to the world for nearly 250 years. The Thanksgiving holiday is a time to reflect on and cherish our nation’s history, and to honor the goodwill of the American Indians who helped the early settlers survive. We should be thankful for our country. The Bible teaches, “In everything *give thanks*: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” All men and women are duty-bound to cultivate thankful hearts. “Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation.” We are greatly blessed.

Today we begin a new chapter in the book of Acts. Paul and Barnabas have been expelled from Antioch in Pisidia. They were courageous men and did not easily back down. But they took the persecution in Antioch of Pisidia to be an indication that the Lord was moving them on. He had instructed his apostles, “whosoever will not receive you, when ye go out of that city, shake off the very dust from your feet for a testimony against them.” So as they left Antioch they did just that. The Jews in Antioch of Pisidia, in rejecting the gospel, had judged themselves unworthy of everlasting life, so Paul and Barnabas took the message of salvation to others.

The journey to Iconium wasn’t easy. The city was about ninety miles southeast of Pisidian Antioch and is currently called Konya. Paul and Barnabas traveled along the Via Sebaste, through rolling countryside, then past the snow-capped peaks of the Sultan mountain range to reach Iconium.¹ Consider with me three points, first,

1. A great harvest

MacLaren summarizes Paul’s typical experience in his missionary journeys: “preaching in the synagogue, rejection there, appeal to the Gentiles, reception by them, a little nucleus of believers formed; disturbances fomented by the Jews ... and finally the Apostles’ departure to carry the gospel farther.”² This typical experience played out in Iconium, as it had in Antioch of Pisidia.

Our chapter opens with the words, “Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed.” Note the words “a great multitude.” The gospel got off to a good start in Iconium. I’m sure Paul and Barnabas were

¹ Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary, Acts 14:1

² <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/macLaren/acts/14.htm>

encouraged. Here, it seemed that there was more than a little nucleus of believers formed, there was a great multitude of both Jews and Greeks.

When a budding entrepreneur goes into business, he or she doubtless wants the business to grow. Success is measured in sales, in numbers of new clients, in profits. Nobody starts a business with the goal of failing. But preaching the gospel is not a business. The preacher offers the best news in the world, the message of eternal life. It is not for sale. The richest man in the world could not afford it. It is a free gift. “The wages of sin is death; but the *gift* of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” It is not received in exchange for money. Nothing we do can earn it. It was paid for by the shed blood of the Savior. It is a gift freely and graciously given, and it must be received by faith. The preacher preaches Christ crucified: the Savior laid down his life for us, that we might live. He tells people, “You were rebels, you were like sheep going astray, but God sent his Son to save you.” God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. Receive the free gift of salvation. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. The preacher wants to get people’s attention. He wants people to see their need of Christ and come to him. The preacher doesn’t want his message to fall on deaf ears. But men’s hearts are spiritually dead by nature. People don’t change easily. They don’t want to admit that they are unworthy sinners, that they have been going down the wrong path. We all like to retain a measure of self respect. Human pride gets in the way. Only the Holy Spirit of God can open up the human heart to receive the gospel. But the preacher wants to be persuasive. Paul, speaking for all preachers, would later write, “Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we *persuade* men” (2 Cor. 5:11).

It is the goal of every true minister of the gospel to see men and women come to Christ and receive the message of salvation, and then to see those men and women transformed into faithful disciples and worshippers of Christ. There is no monetary cost to salvation, but the gospel demands our whole lives; we are called upon to present our bodies and our whole selves as a living sacrifice to God. If God is God, then he rightly demands our worship, that we spend the rest of our lives as his devoted followers, that we be faithful unto death.

When Paul and Barnabas got to Iconium, they went together to the synagogue of the Jews and preached Christ. Perhaps their message began with the words, “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen” (Acts 13:16). They wanted to show the Jews, the Gentile converts and the God-fearers that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of Israel, the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6). Jesus of Nazareth is the “him” of Isaiah 53:6! The LORD has laid on him—Jesus, the eternal Son—the iniquity of us all. Our sins were laid on him, and his perfect righteousness is credited to all who put their trust in him. What a deal! This is the good news, the gospel. You, like the

hearers in Iconium, are invited to receive it. You are a sinner. You have failed to keep God's holy requirements. There is no hope for you. You are on your way to hell, and you cannot save yourself. You cannot buy God's favor. But Christ has done what you failed to do. He lived a perfect life. In him alone the Father is "well pleased." Of him alone the Father could say, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." He could not say that of the apostle Peter. He could not say that of Paul. He could not say that of Mary, the mother of our Lord. But at Jesus' baptism the heavens were opened up, and the Holy Spirit came down like a dove and lit upon him, and there was a voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Jesus is unique, he is the only Savior. The good news of the gospel is that God the Father is well pleased with Christ—and with all who are in Christ, trusting in him alone for salvation.

Paul and Barnabas preached that message in the synagogue in Iconium, and lo and behold, "a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed." Here was a great harvest. God gave the increase. There was not just a little nucleus formed, there was a great multitude of both Jews and Greeks who believed and committed their lives to Christ. The angels in heaven rejoiced. One would think that spiritual leaders on earth would rejoice as well. But the Jewish leaders saw the gospel as a threat. A true shepherd wants to see his sheep in heaven, but a false shepherd doesn't care about the sheep. He cares only about himself—his own little domain and kingdom.

When the gospel was preached in Iconium, not only did the Lord give a great harvest of souls, he also granted signs and wonders to be done by the hands of the apostles. These served, in the days before the completion of the Scriptures, to validate the apostles' message. God had said, "'Behold, your God . . . will come and save you.' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing" (Isa. 35:4–6). Christ would come to save his people. He himself would do miracles, proving himself to be the Messiah, and his apostles likewise would do miracles, proving their apostolic authority. The blind would see, the deaf would hear, the lame would walk and those who had never spoken would be able to speak. God would perform similar miracles in human hearts. In the present day it is not required that a preacher do physical miracles. The saints can know that a preacher speaks for God if he preaches the message of Scripture. The truth or falsehood of a message can be ascertained by its conformity to God's written word, the Bible.

Here, then, was a great spiritual harvest. God was at work. But secondly we see **2. A divided populace**

Verse 2 informs us that "the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren." How very telling! Nearly all the

persecutions in the Acts originated in the hostility of the Jews.³ They are here called “the unbelieving Jews,” but it was “unbelief breaking forth into rebellion.”⁴ Ordinarily, the Jews would have nothing to do with the Gentiles. But now both Jews and Gentiles would unite in the common cause of opposition to Christ. They were co-belligerents seeking to stamp out the truth and keep the people in chains of darkness, lost and without hope. Our Old Testament text asks the question, “Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, ‘Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us.’” In Iconium the unbelieving Jews unite with the Gentiles (“the nations”) to plot against Christ.

It took time to win over the populace. Verse 3 records that the apostles “stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord.” But lies told often enough and fervently enough in time take on an air of truth. Things that at first seemed so implausible now seem plausible. Just ten years ago the idea that there are two and only two biological sexes seemed self-evident. Nature itself confirmed the biblical teaching that “he who made them at the beginning made them male and female” (Matt. 19:4). End of story! But now, there has been a seismic shift. The lie has been repeated often enough and passionately enough that a person’s sex is a matter of self-determination. A boy who thinks he is a girl *is* a girl—and woe to the person who disagrees! J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books, expressed her belief that biological sex is real, and a great furor erupted. She has been axed out of an upcoming HBO retrospective on the Harry Potter films, and her name has been removed from a London primary school,⁵ all for expressing a belief that was mainstream ten years ago.

In the case of the apostles, the unbelieving Jews told lies about Paul and his fellow missionaries that were ready to erupt in violence. The apostles were not trying to seek the world’s approval, they just wanted to be left alone. They were not forcing anybody to believe in Christ, they were just presenting the facts and calling upon God to change hearts. But due to the lies that kept getting repeated, the religious climate had changed. “The multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles” (Acts 14:4).

Before sin entered into the world, God and man enjoyed perfect communion, but when sin entered into the world, that communion was broken. God and man were estranged. So it has been ever since. Isaiah said, “Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you,

³ Ellicott, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/acts/14.htm>

⁴ *Expositor’s Greek Testament*, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/egt/acts/14.htm>

⁵ <https://www.spiked-online.com/2021/11/23/jk-rowling-the-making-of-a-modern-folk-devil/>

that he will not hear.” Satan is the great divider. He rebelled against the God of heaven at the beginning, and he is still in rebellion. He incites people to plot against the Lord, and many do. Those who are on their way to hell want to take as many people as they can with them.

One of our young men recently had a friendly debate with a group of Muslim men at a local library. He said to them, “I believe that if you deny that Jesus Christ is God, *you* are going to hell, and you believe that because I confess Jesus Christ is God, *I* am going to hell.” Right on! Islam and Christianity cannot both be true. If Islam is true, then Christians are on their way to hell; if Christianity is true, then Muslims are on their way to hell. Christ is the way, the truth and the life, but Satan wants people to believe a lie.

There is an article in Wikipedia about Jay Smith, a Christian apologist who works to evangelize Muslims in England. He has made appearances at Speakers Corner in Hyde Park, London for over 24 years. He also engages in formal public debates with prominent Muslim apologists and scholars. Smith’s polemical approach has actually been praised by the Salafi Omar Bakri Muhammad, who states: “I feel very comfortable with Jay (Smith, the apologist)—with him, what you see is what you get. He is no hypocrite, and neither are Salafis. His words and actions match his heart. He does not pretend by saying soft words about Islam. The Qu’ran calls for debate ... Most U.S. evangelicals refuse to debate Muslims, unlike the courage of Jay, who boldly cries, ‘Jesus is Lord!’”⁶ Omar Bakri Muhammad and Jay Smith are ideological opponents. They cannot both be right, but there is a mutual respect which is commendable. Sadly, the same cannot be said for all enemies of the truth. When he was here on earth, people lied about our Lord, and they will continue to lie and heap scorn upon followers of Christ till the last day. “The nations rage against the LORD and against His Anointed,” but at the last day every mouth will be stopped, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Christians pray that we may be able to live a quiet and peaceable life as we witness for Christ, but there are forces at work in our own day that seek to destroy peace and pit people against one another, resulting in great polarization in society. Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted of murder in a courthouse in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and there was, in the words of a liberal website, a “collective media and political meltdown.”⁷ Rittenhouse has been called a white supremacist domestic terrorist. On the other hand, there has been a deafening silence on the Waukesha massacre, where a black man drove an SUV through a crowd of people, killing six and injuring 62. Mass murder—yet silence from the left, as it doesn’t fit their chosen

⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_Smith_\(Christian_apologist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_Smith_(Christian_apologist))

⁷ <https://www.spiked-online.com/2021/11/20/kyle-rittenhouse-and-the-hysteria-of-the-elites/>

narrative of white racism. Luke's words, "The multitude of the city was divided" can apply to twenty-first century America as they applied to first-century Iconium. Yet Christ is on the throne and will continue to build his church. Let us pray for our country and pray for freedom to witness for Christ.

Our hearts ought to break for the lives that were lost. Murder is in the heart of man. The devil "was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him ... he is a liar and the father of it." The only hope for the human race is Christ.

We have considered *a great harvest* and *a divided populace*; finally, let us consider

3. An unshakable mission

As our text for today concludes, Paul and Barnabas once again have to flee, this time to Lystra, Derbe and the surrounding region, where they carry on their work. Then our text for today concludes with the words "and they were preaching the gospel there." Think of it! Here they were, preaching the gospel. Twice they were run out of town for this. We are told that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results. Yet Paul and Barnabas were back at it. They were not insane. What they were doing was not foolish. They were men of singular purpose, and that purpose was to be witnesses for Christ. They were sent out by their Lord and by his church, and they were faithful to that calling.

The Greek for "preaching the gospel" is "evangelizing." Though there were no doubt opportunities for the public proclamation of the gospel, what Paul and his teammates were doing here was evangelizing, that is, telling the good news. One need not be an ordained minister to tell the good news. An ordinary Christian can do that as he witnesses for Christ to his family, his friends, his co-workers or people he meets on the street. As we do this, brothers and sisters, we get better at it. All of us have to deal with fear, but God promises to be with us. We do not have the power to change hearts, but God does. His word will not return to him void, but will accomplish the purpose for which he sent it. Our job is to inform people about the word.

Paul and Barnabas had an unshakeable mission. At the beginning of the previous chapter the Spirit had said, "Separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." And they were faithful to the calling. As they talked to people in Lystra, Derbe and the surrounding region they did not tell them to try harder, they did not give them a pep talk, they did not tell them heartwarming stories, they did not tell them to turn over a new leaf; rather, they told people about Christ, the only Savior. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

Just as Paul and Barnabas had an unshakeable mission, so must we today. The church's mission is to preach the gospel to every creature, to make disciples of all the nations, to baptize them, and to teach them to observe all that our Lord commanded.

Paul and Barnabas had an unshakeable mission and did not veer off target. God himself has an unshakeable mission and is not going to change. He will pursue his mission until the last soul is saved before the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us all devote ourselves to serve Christ with all our power.

We have seen *a great harvest*, wrought by the power of God; *a divided populace* (divided by Satan, the great divider), and *an unshakable mission* (a commitment to preaching the gospel). The world is messed up on account of sin, but the kingdom of Christ standeth sure. God is working out his purpose in this world, and nothing—and nobody—can stop it. Amen.