

The Myth of Neutrality (Acts 14:1-7)^a

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Context

1. **Paul and Barnabas, on their first missionary journey, in Antioch of Pisidia (in modern-day Turkey).**
2. **Entered the synagogue and shared that Jesus is the Son of David, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament.**
3. **Eventually led to persecution and they were expelled from the region.**
4. **Next stop: Iconium.**

Passage (Acts 14:1-7)

[1] 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. **[2]** But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. **[3]** Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. **[4]** But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles. **[5]** And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, **[6]** they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. **[7]** And they were preaching the gospel there.¹

To the Jew First

1. **At the end of the previous chapter, Paul and Barnabas were expelled from the region of Antioch in Pisidia.**
2. **Remember what they said in response to being rejected by many of the Jews in the previous chapter:**

Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'" (Acts 13:46-47)

- A. Upon reaching Iconium, we expect them to focus on evangelizing the the Gentiles, right?
- B. But where did they go upon reaching Iconium? *The synagogue of the Jews!*
3. **As I explained last time: Paul's statements—of which there are several—about turning from the Jews to the Gentiles—which occur several times in the book of Acts**

—are to be understood in a localized context.

4. Each new place Paul visits, he focuses once again on going to the Jews first. Only afterwards does he shift his focus to the Gentiles.
5. Therefore, we can say the same thing about Paul's similar statement upon reaching Rome in the final chapter of Acts: it does not indicate a final or wholesale rejection of the Jewish priority for presenting the gospel.

The Myth of Neutrality

1. **Freedom of conscience: the basic right of every individual to evaluate truth claims and accept or reject them in forming one's beliefs.**
 - A. If Paul and Barnabas promote beliefs which the leaders of the synagogue oppose, we would rightly expect they might be shown to the door.
 - I. Each religious body has an inherent right to protect what it views as essential teachings and to reject those considered incompatible or out-of-bounds.
 - II. Without this ability, no religious body can function—it loses its distinct beliefs among the great body of alternative views competing for acceptance.
2. **A reasonable response?**
 - A. Despite God witnessing to the message brought by Paul and Barnabas by granting signs and wonders done by their hands, they and their message were rejected by many.
 - B. It seems most likely they were expelled from the synagogue and continued teaching in a “neutral venue” such as open square [although it doesn't say].
 - C. The result: some sided with the rejecting Jews (although many other Jews believed) whereas others sided with the apostles.
 - D. So, one would hope, freedom of conscious would prevail . . . and we might read, “so the apostles were left alone to disciple those who wanted to follow their teachings . . . and they lived happily ever-after!” [NOT!]
 - E. Instead, there is a *violent* response: “. . . a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them . . . they became aware of it and fled” (Acts [14:5-6a](#)).
 - I. Paul and Barnabas will eventually make their way eastward to Lystra, where these same Jews from Iconium track them down and attempt to finish the job:

Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul [and] dragged [him] out of the city, supposing him to be dead (Acts [14:19](#)).

- II. Writing many years later, near the end of his life, Paul mentions this incident as an example of Godly living to Timothy:

But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me (2 Timothy 3:10-11).

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12).

- F. What accounts for this severe and dangerous result?
- G. How could disagreement over metaphysical, spiritual, or philosophical views, lead to such extreme physical violence?

3. Jesus as The Great Divider

- A. Luke records a prophecy given concerning Jesus, when He was not yet 2 months old.

And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms . . . Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this [Child] is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:25-35)

- I. Within this prophecy concerning the cuddly little baby, three divisive ministries are mentioned:
- a. #1 The fall and rising of many in Israel — some Jews will fall, others will rise, based on their response to this baby.
 - b. #2 A sign which will be spoken against — some will strongly reject and oppose the baby and those who follow Him.
 - c. #3 So *that* thoughts of many hearts may be revealed — the response to this baby will cause internal realities, generally hidden and suppressed, to manifest where they can be seen.

- B. Having grown to manhood, Jesus said much the same:

Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his [own] household' (Mat. 10:34-36).

- I. Jesus came, in part, to bring to light an enormous spiritual battle between . . .

- a. . . . disobedience vs. obedience
- b. . . . godlessness vs. righteousness
- c. . . . licentiousness vs. law
- d. . . . pride vs. humility
- e. . . . self-righteousness vs. the righteousness of God
- f. . . . the kingdom of darkness vs. the kingdom of light
- g. . . . those who reject God vs. those who accept God

C. Jesus as litmus paper

- I. Litmus paper is used to test the acidity of a liquid, such as water.
- II. Even though the liquid may *appear* clear, it may have a strong unseen component: either toward acidity or toward alkalinity.
- III. You can't tell which simply by looking at the liquid.
- IV. How can one tell whether the liquid is acidic or alkaline?
- V. Enter litmus paper: when dipped in the water, litmus paper turns red if the solution is acidic, else blue if alkaline.
- VI. The litmus paper vividly reveals qualities of the transparent liquid which were not previously manifest—it brings the characteristics of the liquid to light where it can be plainly observed.
- VII. And so it is with Jesus

4. No neutral ground

- A. The analogy of Jesus as litmus paper fails in one respect: the litmus paper may reveal the liquid as being neither acidic or alkaline—neutral.
- B. In response to Jesus, there is no “neutral middle ground,” no “riding the fence.”
- C. A key purpose of God in Jesus is to drive a wedge in such a fashion as to not only reveal, but polarize—to push reactions toward extremes where they can be clearly discerned.
- D. Jesus and Scripture have this in common: it is impossible to be truly neutral in response to them.
 - I. It is no accident that one of Jesus' divine titles is “the Word” (John 1:1).

- a. Scripture, being the written Word of God, has this same polarizing characteristic
 - i. *For the word of God [is] living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart* (Heb. 4:12).
 - ii. The word of God . . . is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12).
 - iii. So too, the Child . . . will be spoken against . . . that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed (Luke 2:34-35).

E. Yet, many in the world perpetuate a “myth of neutrality”

- I. They attempt to pass themselves off as “unbiased,” and “open minded.”
- II. They believe themselves to be “reasonable”, “objective,” “followers of the truth,” prepared to follow wherever it may lead.
- III. But, as Scripture makes plain, there is no neutrality of worldview when it comes to Jesus.
- IV. The fence between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light is razor thin—impossible to walk.
- V. God has seen to it!

5. Demonic influence

- A. If man's own heart-felt response to God, be it negative or positive, wasn't enough of a separating factor, add to that the influence of dark spiritual forces: fallen angels and demons.
- B. Paul wrote of “a spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience”, whom he referred to as “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2).
- C. John refers to him as “the ruler of this world” **ΚΟΣΜΟΣ** [*kosmos*] (John 12:31), as did Jesus (John 14:30; 16:11).
- D. John explained, “Indeed, the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1Jn. 5:19).
- E. Not only do these spiritual forces of wickedness operate on a personal level, it would appear they have influence over broader concerns, such as the kingdoms of Persia and Greece at the time of Daniel (Dan. 10:13,20).
- F. Such spirits are actively at work among those who disobey God, keeping them in the darkness by predisposing them to reject the light

- I. They are diligent about the business of ensuring that the truth remains “veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2Cor. 4:3-4).

6. Is a lasting truce possible?

- A. In certain regions and times of history where truth has gained favor, it may appear, for a time, that evil has taken a holiday.
- B. But make no mistake: this is nothing more than a temporary situation, a brief respite before the battle is rejoined.
- C. Why? Because evil knows no limits. The very nature of lawlessness guarantees it will relentlessly oppose any and all boundaries.

D. *All boundaries, you say?! YES!*

E. Lawlessness and Leviticus (18)

- I. *Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. 'According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances (Lev. 18:2-3).*

II. And just what were the Canaanites up to?

- a. #1 Incest — *None of you shall approach anyone who is near of kin to him, to uncover his nakedness (Lev. 18:6).*
- b. #2 Adultery - *'Moreover you shall not lie carnally with your neighbor's wife, to defile yourself with her (Lev. 18:20).*
- c. #3 Child sacrifice - “And you shall not let any of your descendants pass through [the fire] to Molech, nor shall you profane the name of your God” (Lev. 18:21).
- d. #4 Homosexuality - “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It [is] an abomination” (Lev. 18:22).
- e. #5 Bestiality - *Nor shall you mate with any animal, to defile yourself with it. Nor shall any woman stand before an animal to mate with it. It [is] perversion (Lev. 18:23).*

III. Was it really that bad? People mating with animals?!

- a. *Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you (Lev. 18:24).*

- b. By my count, our own “Obama-nation” condones 3 of the 5 practices I just mentioned: adultery, the murder of children, and homosexuality.
 - c. If Canaan serves as a historic warning, then incest and bestiality may be on the horizon.
 - d. Why? Because evil and perversion know no limits!
- F. This is why the reaction to Paul and Barnabas is so “over the top” when the only issue involved should have been freedom of conscience.
- I. The very *existence* of righteousness, of any *standard* of behavior, serves to place limits on evil and perversion.
 - II. Thus, righteousness must be strenuously opposed and persecuted at every turn, because it shines a light of restraint on those with an ungodly agenda.
 - III. Those who know God are standard bearers, we are restrainers in the midst of a godless world which would know no restraint!

And so the Psalmist wrote: 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.” (Ps. 2:1-3)

7. Examples from

- A. Under the guise of equal rights, those who oppose same-sex relationships are forced to participate in acts condoning them.
- B. The promotion of perversion now overthrows freedom of conscience.
- C. Counseling minors about gender distinctions—as taught by the Bible—is now illegal in several states.
- D. Alternative interpretations of our origins, such as creationism or intelligent design, are not allowed a hearing. They have been ruled out of the classroom and panned by the media, where they might call into question the reigning Darwinian paradigm.
- E. Scientists who fail to tow the Darwinian party-line find themselves disciplined, unable to publish, and subject to losing their teaching and research positions.
- F. Prayer in a growing number of public settings is restricted or barred.
- G. There is a rising clamor to strip all religious icons and practices from the public square.
- H. Where non-Christian systems of thought gain ascendancy, Christ and His followers become targets for physical violence.

- I. Christian principles by which alternate religions find the freedom to worship on our shores find no reciprocal privilege on foreign shores.

Summary

1. **Reaction to Christ, His message, and His followers is not about abstract philosophies, reasoned discussion, and impassioned tolerance.**
2. **We are in a spiritual war between powerful forces for good and evil, light and darkness.**
3. **Wherever godlessness gets an upper hand, the *spiritual* war will eventually turn *physical*—just as Paul and Barnabas found. Count on it!**
4. **As Jesus explained**

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before [it hated] you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (John 15:18-19).

5. **Fortunately, in the midst of this difficult reality, we can also find peace**

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

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Endnotes:

1. [Acts 14:1-7](#), NKJV

Sources:

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Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/46_Acts_14_1-7/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.