



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 19th October 2008
by Mark Ashton

10p

Acts 15:1-16:5

War and Peace

Samuel Johnston once said, “No two men shall be half an hour together, but one shall gain an evident superiority over the other”. We are a most competitive, argumentative species. (Women as well as men, I fear, although we men do it more blatantly). We love hierarchy—to arrange the human race into ranks, with some above us (certainly), but also a good many, reassuringly ranged below us, whom we look down on.

And this pride of place, this competitiveness, is what causes us to fall out with one another. It causes conflict between individuals, and wars between nations. And Christians are not immune: Acts 15 is all about Christians falling out with one another. It is about disagreement between believers; and some would want to ask, ‘How can Christianity be true if Christians argue so much?’

Perhaps you have heard this story from the USA?—‘I was walking through the city one night when I came across a guy about to jump off the bridge and take his life. I said, “Wait a minute—don’t you believe in God?” He said, “I do believe in God”. I said: “Really? Are you a Christian or a Jew?” He said, “I’m a Christian”. I said, “Me too—are you a Protestant or a Catholic?” He said, “A Protestant”. I said, “What denomination?” He said, “Baptist”. I said, “Me too. Northern or Southern?” He said, “Northern”. I said, “Northern Conservative Baptist, or Northern Liberal Baptist?” He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist”. I said “Me too! Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist, or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist?” He said, “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist”. I said, “Me too! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes region, or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Eastern region?” He said,

“Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes region”. I said “Me too! This is incredible! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes region Council of 1912?” He said “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes region Council of 1912”. I said, “Die, Heretic!” And I pushed him off the bridge’

Why do Christians disagree so much? Do you know the answer? It is because they are human beings. And humans disagree with one another. ‘Peace is the dream of the wise; war is the history of man.’ Conflict, strife, competition—that is normal human life. You know what has driven the current international credit crisis? The desire to get richer . . . than one another. Not just desire for riches—I want more than my neighbour. I want to rise up the scale. You know what they say about Switzerland? 500 years of peace, and what do you get? The cuckoo clock (with apologies to any Swiss present today . . . actually, as we know, they have some very decent chocolate . . . and some half decent cheese and a great tennis player). War is the history of man. Competition and conflict are natural to human beings.

No—the surprise is not the disagreement. The surprise is that agreement can come out of disagreement, that peace can come out of discord, that warring parties can be reconciled to one another. That is what we can learn from Acts 15, how they agreed (that’s the good news—not that they argued. That is normal human life). And that is what we are going to concentrate on this morning, mainly verses 6-21 (if you have questions arising out of the rest of our long passage, please bring them to Grill the Preachers

tonight, or write them on a Grill the Preachers card. I studied all 46 verses carefully in preparing for this sermon—so I would love the opportunity to preach some more on them!

1. Note how God acts

This was the constant refrain on Paul and Barnabas' lips—*On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles* (14:27); *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them* (15:4); *The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them* (15:12). “Look at what God is doing! Listen to what God has done!” It was the whole emphasis of Peter’s speech: ⁷*After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith”* (vv 7-9).

When, ten years earlier, Peter had preached to the Gentile Cornelius, God had acted so quickly that Cornelius and Peter’s other hearers did not even have time to confess faith with their lips before God’s Spirit fell on them. Nothing could have made it clearer that it was God saving them, and not them saving themselves. ⁸*God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith* (vv 8-9). God acts to save on His own initiative. It was God’s grace at work. Just what Paul and Barnabas were reporting as well. God saves people by grace. And, if he does it, we can’t add to it—So,

2. Don’t try to improve on it

That was what these folk in verse 1 and verse 5 wanted to do: *Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved”*

(v1). *Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses”* (v5). They saw what God was doing through Jesus as just being a part of something bigger. Two weeks ago we considered how Paul in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) tried to persuade his largely Jewish audience that all of their religious history pointed them to Jesus [Figure 1].

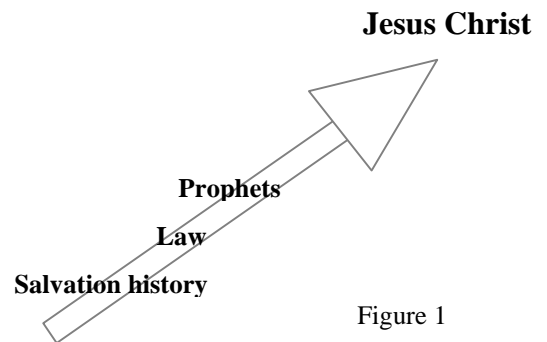


Figure 1

He pleaded with them not to reject Jesus and turn back on their faith. [Figure 2].

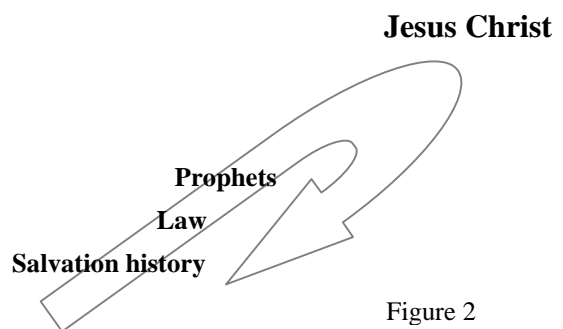
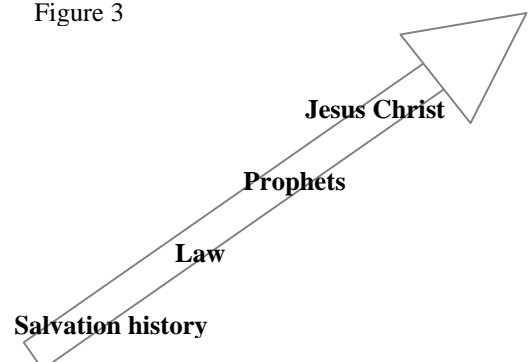


Figure 2

Now this Jerusalem council in Acts 15 made the point that Jesus is not just a part of something bigger than Himself [Figure 3].

Figure 3



You see that won’t do! He is not contained by something else. He is God’s definitive action to save us. *“No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are”* (v11). It is Grace. It cannot be contained by

anything else, and nothing can be added to it. We saw two weeks ago that our own religious experience points us to Jesus Christ [Figure 4]

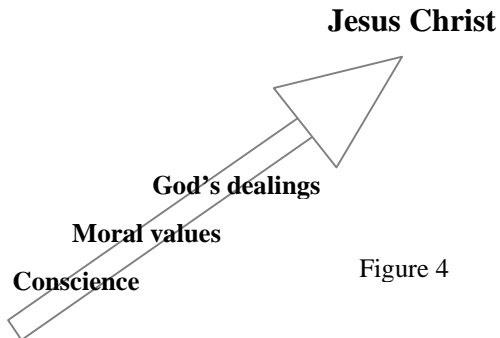


Figure 4

But we can't just add Jesus to our previous religious experience as if He can be contained by something bigger [Figure 5].

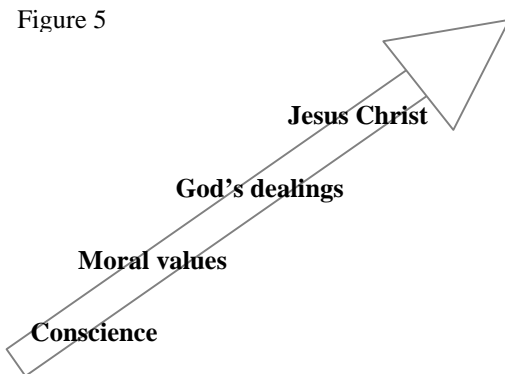


Figure 5

That won't do! A Jesus Who is just a part of something bigger is not the Jesus of the New Testament at all. No. Whatever our background may be [Figure 6] religious, moralistic, Jewish,

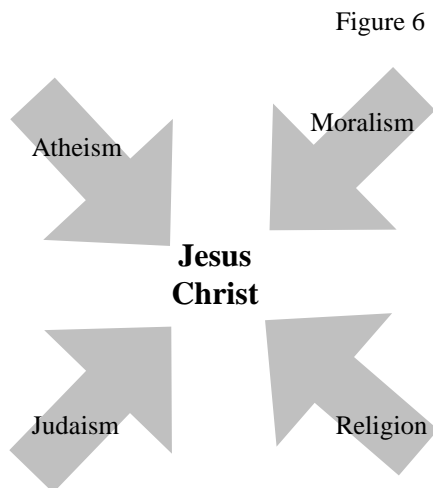


Figure 6

even atheistic, Jesus is the One, the only One Who Alone can bring us to God. I do not contribute anything. What God has done for me in Jesus is complete and perfect. If I try to add something, to go beyond Jesus, I will miss Him entirely. If I add circumcision—anything—to it, I spoil it.

One man was having his hair cut and chatting about the Christian faith with his hairdresser. He could not get the hairdresser to see that he had only to trust what God had done for him, and that he did not have to add anything himself—no religious practices, no good works. Now, the person in the next chair had just had his haircut finished, and so the man got up, picked up a pair of scissors and started to snip at the next-door man's hair. "Don't do that!" The barber cried. "It's finished—you'll spoil it." "Exactly!" said the man. "It is finished—don't spoil it!"

We cannot improve on what God has done. The church held onto this great truth: Salvation by grace alone. Other things they compromised on, like food laws in the letter; like Paul and Barnabas' disagreement over John Mark later in the chapter; or Paul's decision to circumcise Timothy (we're not told what Timothy thought of that idea), when circumcision was not a salvation issue at the beginning of chapter 16. But this one great truth was worth arguing for: we are saved by God's grace, and by God's grace alone! So we cannot discriminate between one another on the basis of how we stand with God.

3. Don't try to discriminate on the basis of what God has done

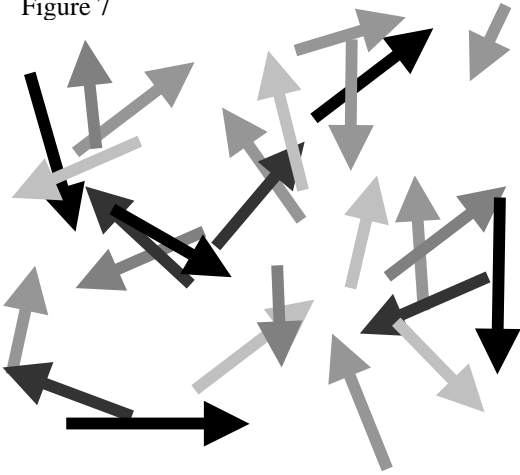
Did you notice: Peter kept making the point that God was making no distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles? ⁸*God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.* ⁹*He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.* ¹⁰*Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?* ¹¹*No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are*" (vv 8-11). If God saves all people on exactly the same basis, then why do we keep trying to discriminate between people, to rank the human race according to our own little hierarchies?

Remember the man on the bridge! That is the logic of James' speech, isn't it? Look at chapter 15 verse 19: "*It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God*". God was not making it difficult for the Gentile converts, so why should the Jewish Christians? He was saving them all in exactly the same way. The whole human race are sinners, who

can only be saved by grace: Robert Mugabe and Mother Theresa—they come in the same way as you and I. We love to use religion to erect man-made barriers between us, (think of the man on the bridge). But true Christianity actually dismantles them all. And here is a way out of our squabbling, and our conflicts and our competitiveness and our arguments.

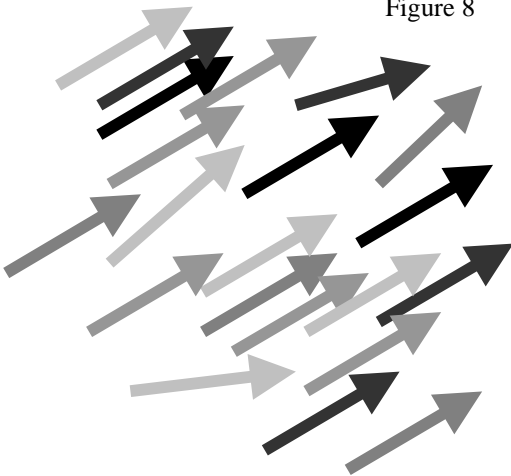
There is only one way humans can obtain a true unity: human life is like this most of the time [Figure 7]:-

Figure 7



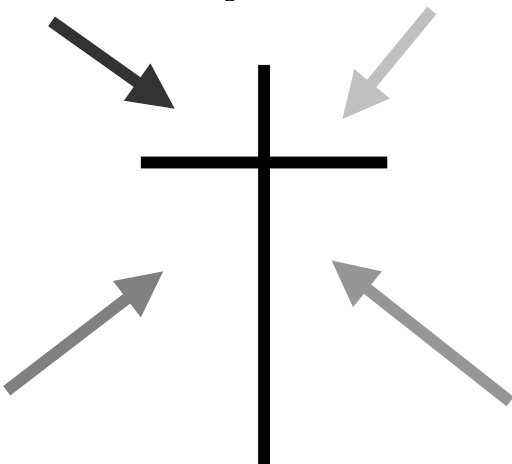
Human attempts at unity dream of this [Figure 8]:-

Figure 8



God sets before us this [Figure 9]:-

Figure 9



—to come to Him in the only way He has opened for us to come. The cross is the only way we will ever agree—that is why this communion is so precious to us as believers—it does not just tell us how we can be united with the God Who made us all, and gave us life through His Son's death in our place on the cross. It also tells us how we can be united with one another, because we all stand in the same place before God, sinners condemned by His righteousness and saved only by His grace. All under judgement, all under grace . . . if only we will accept it: the only basis for human unity. That is exactly what the Lord's Supper reminds us of.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)