**Acts 15:1-35 “Grace is Amazing… don’t spoil it”  
CCH Sermon 19MAY24**

v11

* I was going to call this sermon “Church Council”, because it’s the story of a really important council, making a key decision in the early church.
  + And we have a wonderful church council ourselves (we met last week) who gather to oversee our church and make key decisions.
  + But that could sound a bit shallow, and a bit pedestrian.
  + The more I dug in the more I saw what this council was debating.
  + Something absolutely at the core of the Christian message.
  + Something each one of us so often battles to remember.
  + v11.
  + Grace- God’s riches at Christ’s Expense.
    - If you give me a birthday present, I don’t have to pay for it.
    - It’s free! It’s wonderful- totally a gift. Marmite mug!
  + So I changed it to Grace is Amazing… but here’s the twist in the tail…
    - Don’t spoil it!
    - Pull out bank card, £5 note
    - I don’t contribute 1p.
* **Let’s pray!**
* Our 4th series in the book of Acts- calling it UNBOUNDED
  + If we go back to 1:8 ripples
  + ch1-6 Jerusalem & Judea (UNSTOPPABLE) where it starts.
  + ch7-12 Samaria & Paul’s conversion& first nonJewish (UNEXPECTED)
  + ch12-14 Paul’s first missionary journey (UNLIMITED)
  + Now, ch15-18 we have the Jerusalem council
    - which is right at the heart of the book where it falls
    - and theologically
    - been described as the
      * centrepiece
      * watershed
      * turning point.
  + And Paul’s second missionary journey. (UNBOUNDED) based Antioch.
  + Maybe one day we’ll come back to the end of the book where we see that nothing is going to stop the good news of Christianity spreading to Rome despite the odds (UNBEATABLE).
* So we’re right at the core of the book, and we’re seeing a massive breakthrough for the early church, something that has benefitted us today,
* it starts with a big question.
  + **Do we need to become Jewish to become Christian?**
* How many of you have some Jewish DNA? So we’re Gentiles.
  + **Do we need to become Jewish to become Christian?**
  + That was far from clear in the early church. All comes down to grace.
* We’re going to look at the story, then the lessons.
  + We’ll have 3 points in each.

**1) THE DISPUTE (V1-5)**

* v1
* Now this sounds a bit technical and irrelevant.
  + None of us are interested in Circumcision any more.
  + That was the Old Testament sign of belonging to the people of God.
  + All Jewish males at 8 days had a piece of skin removed to signify that they belonged to the family line of Abraham.
* But in the time of the early church it was a massive issue….
  + Because of course, remember that Jesus was Jewish, the first disciples were all Jewish.
  + It’s only very recently in Acts chapter 8 that an Ethiopian has come to faith and then in ch10 that the gospel has broken out to the non-Jews (Gentiles) through Cornelius, a Roman.
* That’s why we need this council that we are going to look at today,
  + So that this matter became settled and that we take it for granted that we don’t need to be circumcised.
  + For us this is a no brainer. Someone becomes a Christian, they don’t have to get circumcised. Phew.
  + But for them it was huge.
* You see a group of Jewish believers
  + who had become genuine Christians,
  + came down from the area around Jerusalem saying yes,
  + They were convinced that a Gentile also had to become a Jew.
* And here’s the key issue- had to be circumcised **to be saved**. v1.
* Now this is why this debate that feels a little irrelevant to us is so absolutely relevant.
  + Do you need to add anything to faith in Jesus to be right with God?
  + Do you need to do any rituals or activities to be a true Christian?
  + baptism, confirmation, taking communion (as we are doing today).
    - Are those things essential to salvation?
* Now in the past church people have said **yes**.
* They weren’t saying that you didn’t need Jesus. They weren’t preaching another religion. They still spoke about Jesus. But they were preaching another gospel.
  + Not **Jesus only**. But **Jesus AND**.
    - Jesus and penance, (before the reformation)
    - Jesus and saying the hail mary, (in Roman Catholicism)
    - Jesus and baptism (in some evangelical churches).
* Do we need to add ritual to simple trust in Jesus to be saved?
  + Hopefully if you have been brought up in a Bible teaching church you know that the right answer is NO.
  + Even Baptism and communion which are important signs (it would be abnormal for a Christian not to be baptised) aren’t essential to be saved.
* But here’s why we still need this chapter, even if we’re clear on that...
  + Have you ever felt superior or inferior because of something you did or didn’t do?
  + Other Christians read their Bible every day.
  + Other Christians listen to Christian podcasts.
    - that can make you feel slightly inferior.
  + Someone else turns up at church
    - they don’t know where the book of Acts is
    - they don’t wear the right clothes
    - their language is a bit ripe.
      * Do you feel a little bit superior?
      * DO they need to become a bit more middle class or a bit more whatever before they become Xns?
      * We may not say it but we may think it.
        + But salvation is 100% Jesus performance and 0% mine.
* This is a really important dispute, back then, and today.
  + Paul wasn’t having a “JESUS PLUS” gospel.
  + So he does two things.
    - He argues with those teaching this wrong message. v2a
    - And he goes up to the Apostles in Jerusalem (the other eyewitnesses of Jesus) to settle it once and for all. v2b-4
* Shockingly when they get there, there are believers in Jerusalem as well who are also claiming that you need to be circumcised, AND KEEP THE LAW OF MOSES to be saved. So this question is live there too. in fact it’s metastasized. Not only circumcision, but all the law. Food laws, mildew laws, etc.
  + v5.
* So this brings us onto part 2 of the story… (where they shut themselves away until they’ve resolved it. I’ve called it….

**2) THE DISCUSSION (v7-18)**

* This next section is the longest, but basically, it’s a set of three speeches.
* Let’s start with Peter. v6-7a.
  + Referring back to the Cornelius incident Peter reminds them of the incontrovertible evidence that God choose non-Jews:
  + 1) God chose to give the gentiles the gospel. v7
  + 2) The Gentiles believed the gospel v7
  + 3) The Gentiles received the Holy Spirit (giving clear evidence of their conversion) v8
  + 4) The Gentiles just like the Jews were purified in their hearts, NOT BECAUSE OF WHAT THEY DID, but BY FAITH v9
    - Believing is receiving.
    - Saved by faith alone.
  + What’s more v10 Peter says that it wasn’t by obeying the law that the Old Testament people got saved anyway. They could have done if they lived a 100% holy life, but read the OT and you see that again and again the people fail, just like we saw in Ezekiel.
  + We need a NEW covenant.
  + The law of Moses as a way to get saved was a heavy burden like what a cow has to wear to drag a load. It didn’t get them anywhere.
  + He sums it all up in v11.
  + Now Peter’s speech is interesting. When we cross reference this story with the book of Galatians, which we are going to study in the Autumn, what is interesting is that Paul has already had a bit of a discussion with Peter.
    - “discussion”- code for argument in our family.
    - The parents are having a “discussion”.
    - a frank exchange of different opinions hopefully not getting ungodly!
  + Well Paul has to challenge Peter because he actually fell into the same trap of having one rule for Jews and one rule for Gentiles.
  + But by this stage, he’s got it clear, and he’s adamant.
  + If you add RULES to simple faith in Jesus, you aren’t just adding a little bit onto the faith.
    - You are taking it apart.
    - “Gospel plus” is “gospel minus”.
    - You add to the good news, you are left with no good news.
    - If salvation is even 10% my work (90% Jesus on the cross, and 10% my church attendance, or 10% my kindness), then I’m going to blow it. I’m adding law to grace.
      * DON’t DO IT
  + Paul and Barnabas share the next speech v12, we don’t have it recorded, but they only confirm everything that has just been said by Peter as they testify to what they had seen on their first missionary journey.
  + Again and again God showed that he was saving non- Jews by simple faith.
    - You just have to come and put your trust in Jesus, turning from idols.
    - You don’t have to add RITUALS to faith in Jesus.

Now that we’ve done this work, let’s make the journey from the 1st century to the 21st Century and to lesson 1.

**LESSON 1: DON’T DENY THE GOSPEL WITH RULES**

* You have a friend who is interested in the Christian faith.
  + Amazingly, you talk to them, and as you share the Bible, and the story of Jesus, they realise that they are a sinner who is on a head on collision course with God.
  + And yet they discover that God loves them so much he sent his very only Son to pay their debt instead.
  + They discover a totally free gift of salvation.
  + They put their trust in Jesus.
    - Can they be a Christian and not come to church? YES
    - Can they be a Christian and not give to church? YES
    - Can they be a Christian and not get baptised? YES. the Thief on the cross didn’t have time to get baptised, but Jesus said he would be in paradise.
  + Do they have to turn from their sin? YES because that’s part of trusting in Christ, this is not cheap grace. But that is a response
    - But if they genuinely turn to Christ but they are still struggling with alcohol addiction can they be a Christian? YES.
    - If they love Jesus and don’t have a tidy middle-class life can they be a Christian? YES
* Don’t deny the gospel with rules.
  + Some Christians say, it’s great you’ve become a Christian, now you’ve got to experience God in this way. You’ve got to go on this conference, you’ve got to worship God this way.
  + That’s JESUS PLUS.
  + You aren’t adding, you’re taking away from the true gospel.
  + Don’t deny the gospel by adding rules.
* Let’s get back to the story, to hear what James has to add in.

JAMES

* v14. He picks up on what Simon Peter has just said. v14
* And then he proves from the Old Testament that the Bible always said the Gentiles would come to faith. v16-18.
* I love this combination.
  + EVENTS Peter, Barnabas, Paul.
  + BIBLE EXPLANATION James.
* I was taught that Revelation = Event + Explanation.
  + The Bible tells you what happened, and then it tells you what it means, so that you can measure your experiences authoritatively from God’s Word.
* Like any good church council, whether the great ones of the 4th century that were figuring out how to describe the divinity and humanity of Jesus,
  + or the smaller synods, like the CofE has been having….
    - Things should be resolved by referring to the Scriptures.
    - If the Bible says it, that settles it.
  + And I hope it does for you too.
    - The Bible doesn’t need updating, it’s God’s word for today.
* We now build into the **final part of the story** and that is what the council does ask from the Gentiles going forwards.
* And this is kind of surprising, but once you get it, it makes perfect sense.

**3) THE DIRECTIVES (V19-35)**

* James makes a judgement on the way forward.
  + v19-21.
* Now why is that surprising? Not a rhetorical question. Let’s have some participation?!
* Yes- we’ve just heard no rules, and he seems to be adding rules to faith.
* But look at it carefully.
  + James doesn’t want to add burdens to the Gentiles.
    - v19 “make it difficult”
  + The council has already established that they don’t need to add circumcision or the small print of the Mosaic law as a condition.
  + But he does want them to avoid doing things that their Jewish Christian neighbours would have found hard.
  + Because the Jewish Christians had grown up all their lives thinking you couldn’t eat bacon, and that blood had to be drained out of a piece of meat, and that strangled food was off limits,
  + they shouldn’t eat those things.
  + Not because they can’t. There’s nothing inherently sinful about that- we saw from Peter’s vision before Cornelius that all food is now declared clean.
* Well why these 3 things
  + abstaining from sexual immorality
  + from the meat of strangled animals
  + from eating blood.
  + There’s a fourth one in the letter in v28- food sacrificed to idols.
* We’ll take a deeper dive into this in lifegroups
  + But
* We’ll see this again next week with Sho.
  + Paul is flexible on flexible matters in whatever way it will help the gospel.
  + How will Jews come to faith if they hear the gospel from a Gentile who’s tucking into a bacon sandwich. They need to be sensitive
  + How will Jewish and Gentile Christians be able to have table fellowship if there’s strangled squirrel on the table.
* So here’s the second lesson….

**LESSON 2) DON’T HINDER THE GOSPEL WITH BARRIERS.**

* If your friend is a muslim, do whatever you can to be respectful to her culture and background.
  + You mustn’t add **burdens** to what she has to do to become a Christian- simply repentance and faith.
  + But don’t add **barriers** that make it hard for her o
    - This book Williiam gave me says…
      * Don’t put your Bible on the floor that’s disrespectful.
      * Don’t be confrontational, instead be warm and interested asking questions
      * Do open your home for a meal, do serve Kosher food, so that you aren’t letting anything get in the way of the gospel.
      * Yes you need to insist when it comes up in conversation that Jesus was more than a prophet, he was God the Son, and that salvation is by grace not works. But don’t add other barriers like cultural or culinary faux pas!
* In the final part of the story (still under this heading of directives), the Apostles and elders send out a **letter** back to the church in Antioch to explain the way forward with the conclusions of the council.
  + there’ll be more time in lifegroups to study it.
* But notice one thing as they go out in v30-35. Let me read that.
  + Did you see how positive everyone was?
  + Did you see the note of peace in v33.
* When the Christian church works hard to not let any barriers get in the way, and when the church works hard to make sure that there’s nothing added to the gospel there’s peace. There’s mutual love just like Jesus commanded in John 15.
* Yes you do have to challenge false teaching. We saw that at the start of the chapter. And even next time there’ll be a disagreement.
* But the outcome can be
  + v3 gladness.
  + v31 encouragement
  + v32 strengthening of the believers.
* I really felt all of these things at our weekend away last week. It was pure gospel joy.
* So final lesson…

**LESSON 3) DON’T DISHONOUR THE GOSPEL WITH STRIFE.**

* Do all you can as Paul will say to the Ephesians to “maintain the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace”.
* Be inflexible on the inflexibles (salvation, sexual morality).
* Be flexible on the flexibles (what colour
* **Don’t dishonour the gospel with strife.**
* Work hard at peace, fellowship, goodwill and encouragement.
* And the gospel of grace is what produces all that.
* Teach Jesus and his death on the cross and you’ll have unity.
* Start teaching **additional rules**, insist on **certain experiences**, only allow one type of Christian or background, and you’ll have disunity.
  + because you’ll have a charismatic club over here  
    you’ll have a die-hard Anglican club over here  
    you’ll have a public school club over here.
  + And they’ll all slightly look down on each other.
  + But come to the foot of the cross (as we shall do in communion)
    - And see that we’re all the same.
      * whether you have tattoos or pashminas
      * whether you speak with a
        + cockney
        + polish
        + aussie accent

or NO accent like me! Only kidding.

* + - * Whether you are
        + a cessationalist or a continuationalist
        + a paedobaptist or a credo baptist
        + an egalitariaon or a a complementarian
        + a supralapsarian or an infralapsarian
        + Or whether you have no idea what I’ve just said.
      * At the cross, we are sinners saved by grace.
      * We are brothers and sisters.
      * Jesus welcomes us, so let’s welcome each other.

**Let me lead us in our prayers now…**

1. **Sermon**.
   1. Help us not to deny the gospel by adding rules.
   2. help us not to hinder the gospel by building barriers that are unnecessary
   3. Help us to seek the unity of the Spirit through the bond of love.
2. **Hope Church Chesterton**.
   1. Pray for all the things we’ve prayed for ourselves for the people of **Hope Church Chesterton** and **St Georges Chesterton**, two congregations in the same building pastored by Andy Atkins in N Cambridge. Give them unity, love, care, outreach and gospel centredness.
   2. We praise you father for the way the **Hope Fairbite shop** has brought more **and more people into a community** where food, practical support, friendship and the good news of Jesus is shared. We pray for **Karen** as, God willing, she takes up a new role as Manager of the shop in the summer, and for their plans to open the **shop twice a week**. We pray that this would enable many more individuals and families to experience the love and hope that knowing and following Jesus brings.
3. **Let’s pray now for our retired folk.**
   1. Pray for those struggling with ill health or poor mental health at the moment. Help them
   2. We thank you that Ronnie has a place at Poppyfields
   3. We pray for Sheila, Bernie’s wife suffering with demensia at a care home St Ives
   4. We pray for those retired folk who are part of a Lifegroup. May they be a great encouragement to others
4. **We pray for those doing exams at the moment.**
   1. Give them patience, perseverance and skill
   2. help them to remember what they have been learning
   3. may Christian kids find their identity in your grace and not in their performance.
   4. May unbelieving kids discover the wonder of a saviour who loves them whether they get a 1 or a , an Astar or unclassified.
   5. Pray especially for the FEED outreach that many kdis will hear the gospel and be saved.
5. Finally **the Anglican collect for today, Pentecost or Whit Sunday**…
   1. Almighty God, who on this day opened the way of eternal  
      life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy  
      Spirit: Shed abroad this gift throughout the world by the  
      preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the  
      earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns  
      with you, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, for ever  
      and ever. *Amen.*

Let’s sing about amazing Grace.