

# Not the homecoming he'd hoped for...

Acts 21-22

Why can't Christians just get along? Have you heard that challenge put to the church? There are absolutely loads of different Christian denominations and groups and branches and so on. And perhaps your friend says "This Christianity thing can't be true, since you can't even agree on what *it* actually is", perhaps you wonder yourself... Perhaps it distresses you how Christians can sometimes find it very hard to agree. Or perhaps you yourself find other Christians incredibly frustrating, unnerving, or difficult to be around. And it's true that we often come from a similar position, or seem to, yet have a totally different perspective, and that can be difficult.

It seems to me that these days a big part of how our world views the church is all bound up with some of the internal struggles and conflicts and confusion that we have. It makes good press coverage, and everyone likes to laugh at a group like the church – looking confused or inept. Perhaps, like me, you actually feel ashamed of what some other Christians, even parts of our denomination, the Church of England, seem to say and do. Does the church "disagree well" as Justin Welby says we should?

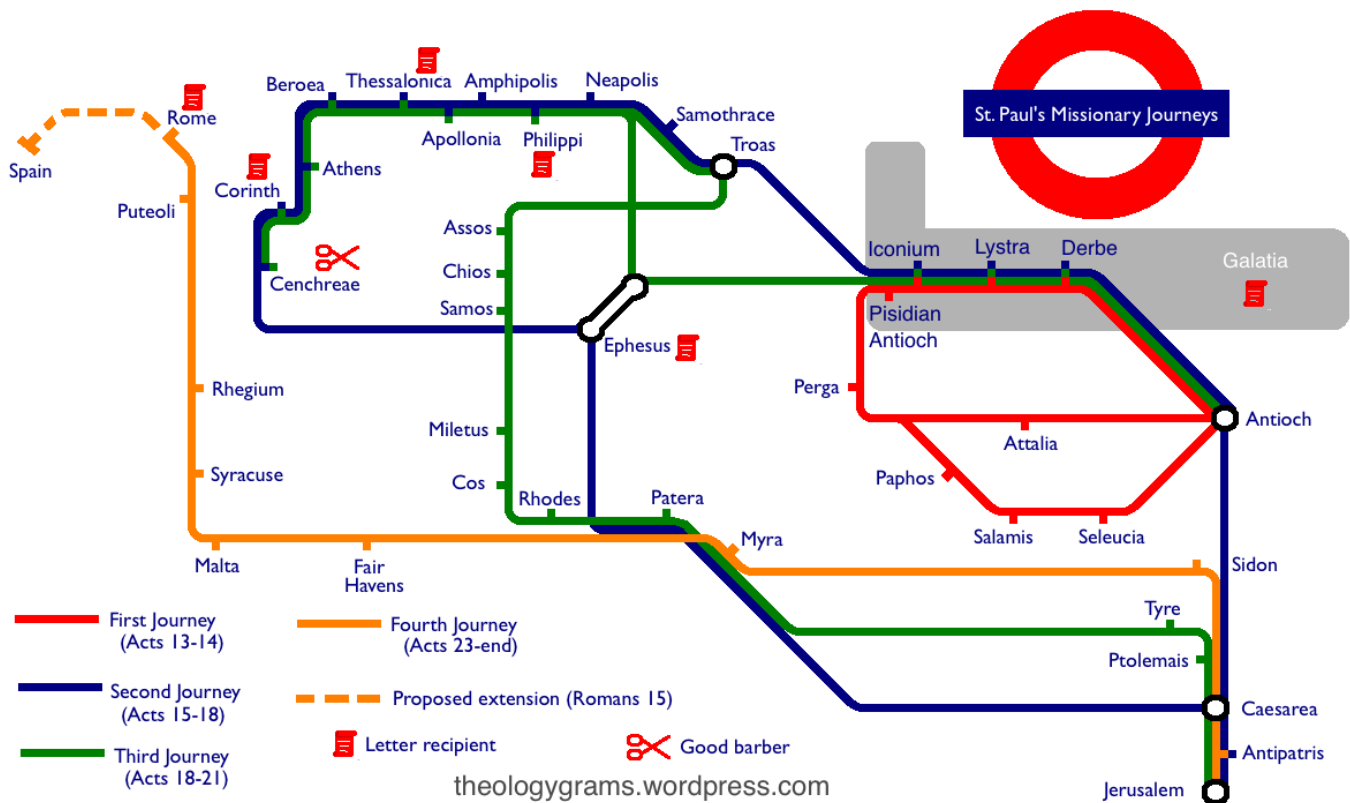
Then, it's 500 years ago this year the Reformation began in Europe, when Martin Luther nailed 95 statements to the door of his church objecting to the way his denomination was run, and what they taught.

Luther wanted to change the church, not cause a split – but sometimes that isn't possible, and out of it, the Protestant faith was born.

And we are Protestants. But we don't look back, well, at least I don't look back and say "hurrah, we got away from those nasty Catholics". No, rather, I praise God, we rediscovered and stood up for salvation by faith, and other wonderful truths which are precious and life giving - things that were worth really standing up for!

At the end of the month we're going to have a film night and then we will begin a series about the teachings of the Reformation, and already we are learning a song which will fit with that.

So we have this issue, division, difference and disagreement within the church – It's present in our own time, was present 500 years ago in Martin Luther's time, and it was present 2000 years ago, just after Jesus in the time of Paul. And as we look at today's passage we are going to get... Not the answers, but a challenge about our attitude towards other Christians (if they're different), and also towards people who aren't Christians.



If you haven't been here, we are working through the book of Acts, step-by-step. If I can have the picture up on the screen, we have been following the missionary journeys of Paul all around the Mediterranean, helpfully drawn on this tube-map style picture.

His first three trips, the red blue and green lines, were fantastic evangelistic journeys, where he started churches and had great success – lots of people believed.

But as we reach the end of the book of Acts, there's a real change in feel, it's a different period of his ministry. (Ministry does that).

In this last section we get stories of imprisonment, arrest, and trial after trial before magistrates, courts and Kings – and there's no converts, no new churches started, and instead of a miraculous escape from prison we see God strengthen Paul to face time *in* prison.

Paul is heading towards Jerusalem, on this green line. He knows that he is going to face suffering and possibly death, by doing that. In fact, it's only in verse 11 of chapter 21 when someone has prophesied that if Paul goes to Jerusalem, he will have his hands and feet bound, and he will be handed over by the Jewish leaders into the hands of the Gentile authorities (the non-Jewish ones).

But he decides to go anyway, and in v17 he arrives.

Why does he go when it's risky? Because Paul will do anything to win a soul for Jesus, to save some. And he will do anything to help a brother or sister in the faith, anything he can that is.

We're going to see two principals at work, the first principle is:

**Our attitude to other Christians: bend over backwards to help them follow Jesus and live for Jesus.**

Paul is the leader of the gentile (or Greek) Christians. They don't have a Jewish background, they hadn't grown up going to synagogue, and they don't and they don't need to, follow Jewish customs and rituals. Although obviously God wants his followers to be good upright moral people.

James is the leader of the church in Jerusalem, full of Jewish background Christians. They have spent their lives living a certain way to please and honour God, and they've now accepted Jesus as their saviour, they're saved by faith in him alone! But they're used to Jewish ways, and they keep up with lots of Jewish habits and regulations.

Two important leaders in the church, but perhaps it's helpful to picture the churches they lead as having very different styles!

There's tension, some people would even expect conflict.

But, actually they've been face-to-face before, at least 4 times, and in one of those they put out a joint statement, a theological statement: The Greek Christians didn't need to do this Jewish thing and that Jewish thing – they didn't *need* to keep the law. They were justified by faith, and the Jews were justified by faith to. They only asked that they stay away from certain idolatrous things, some foods, and asked them to be especially concerned with sexual purity, and caring for the poor!

So, there has already been agreement, even though there is great difference, at the core they believe the same things. Unlike what happened at the reformation.

And what's the mood like? In v17 the brothers *received Paul warmly*. v20 they praise God! Why, because lots of gentiles have become Christians, they praise God, It's great.

But there is some concern. James explains to Paul that **thousands** of Jews have become Christians – accepting Jesus as their saviour and following him. Praise God! Jesus is indeed the *Jewish* messiah. But people have heard, incorrectly, that Paul is teaching Jews to abandon their Jewishness and particularly the Jewish law, and they don't like that. These are racially Jewish, Christian-by-faith-people, who might take Paul the wrong way.

Look at v21 "They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to *turn away* from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs." Which is not right. Now, we need to be really clear about this. And slightly careful.

Paul would have taught, that you're not acceptable to God because you keep his law or his rules. No one can be good enough for God, because of how they behave. Not a Jew who kept the law, and not a gentile who just lead 'a good life'. And that's true today too, and oh how I wish people understood this! It's not just about trying your best, God doesn't just accept 'good people', the Christian faith is not about being nice!

Rather, anyone can be forgiven because of Jesus. Really bad people, or quite bad people, or people who seem to look like good people – all need forgiveness from God, which is received through faith in Jesus.

But... obviously, if you want to you **can** keep the Jewish law... if you want. And those who had been doing so all their lives, really wanted to, they needed to, and that's fine. And God's laws are still really helpful, and they're good, many of them teach us about what God wants and thinks is important. And there are some things (like meat from pagan idol sacrifice services, sexual immorality, and looking after the poor) which they are told to follow. So Paul isn't turning people away from God's law, saying they *mustn't* keep it – do you see that? You *can* keep it. It's just that what *actually matters* is faith in Jesus.

So, when James suggests that Paul join in the final week of this one month purification ritual which 4 young men have begun. That's no problem, Paul isn't going back on his teaching, it's just inconvenient – giving up a whole week of his time. And actually expensive. Look at v23, he pays. “There are four men with us who have made a vow.<sup>24</sup> Take these men [James says] join in their purification rites and **pay their expenses**, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself *are living* in obedience to the law” If Paul is does this, if he joins in their ritual, it will appease their concerns.

Now I don't know about you, but I think I would have preferred the option of explaining carefully. Of sitting down and putting people straight with theology. Well, perhaps I might have been willing to go through some rituals and services and so on, as long as they were free! But to spend money, going through a ritual that I know I don't need to do to be spiritually clean! Just for the sake of some other (admittedly genuine) Christians who happen to think differently to me, well I'd rather sit down and talk to them about it!

But, v26 he doesn't – he joins in, he joins the men, he pays for them, he does it. And he gets right to the final day, when interrupted by the mob of **not-Christian Jews**, just before he completes it. We will come to all that later, but just stop for a second and think about what he's willing to do. It's the principal, that with other Christians we should be ready to **bend over backwards** in order to help them to live for and follow Jesus. He won't change his message, but he doesn't want to risk losing unity and he's desperate for them not to lose hold of Jesus and their faith in him.

Now, I want us to think carefully about how this principle might apply to us. The obvious thing your minds might jump to is the conflict within the church about sexuality. We heard just this week that the Scottish Anglican church has been **disciplined**, that is 'partly cut out', for changing its official teaching about marriage to include homosexual couples. The media certainly has a lot to say, you might have lots of thoughts or not know what to think. So how do we apply this principle? Our attitude to other Christians should be to *bend over backwards* to help them to follow Jesus and live for Jesus. Well, that doesn't mean “as long as they are sincere and genuine, that's ok they should be able to do it”. No, people can be very sincere, and wrong. And this teaching is one example of that, the bible, God, is *really clear* that romantic relationships are intended for 1 man and 1 woman, and that's his plan for marriage, it absolutely cannot be any other way.

But without a doubt, I think some of the things that I see written, whether it's newspaper articles or blog posts or whatever, really could use with having a different tone and a attitude. People seem to be viewing their opponents as *the enemy*. Sometimes I think, where is the gentleness, where is the love, would you not *bend over backwards* for their sake?

But that is a complicated example, let me give some simpler examples. For me personally, I don't think doing 'healing on the streets' as a method of evangelism is a good idea at all. Asking non-Christian people if they will stop, and let you pray for God to fix some health or other problem, hoping that he will and then they'll want to come to church and perhaps become a Christian. I don't like that, but, not to talk about that issue, I do work with Christians who do that and think it's the way to do evangelism. I'm friends with them, I work with them, I've organised services with them – I deal with my internal struggles, I want to encourage them in their faith. I've worked with Christians in churches where I think they're far too strict. Not free enough, and communicating a feeling of rules, Christians need to do this, this and this... and I suppose like Paul, whilst I've been there I've slotted in, worked with them and amongst them, and tried to point people towards Jesus. In just a few weeks I'm leaving St. Nicks and going to a new church in the North. I guess there might be some things which are tricky. I actually yet know how they'll do some things. I might find some things not done quite how I'd like, they're not necessary, or they seem odd to me, but they're fine... What will I do – I don't know, but my attitude needs to be: "I'm ready to bend over backwards, do anything which will help people in their faith, to keep them settled with Jesus and help them to follow him"

I wonder what it is for you? I wonder who the Christians are who you find a bit tricky? Perhaps some who make you feel uncomfortable? I wonder if there is another church nearby, or a church you visit when you're with family? What the challenge is for *you* regarding other Christians?

For many of us part of that challenge will be right here. For us as a fellowship – some of the people around you are difficult! I'm difficult! Not for all of you, but for some of you. And you probably are, to some people. There will be people here, for whom you need to bend over backwards to help them, to encourage and support them. Is that your attitude? Are you willing to? **That should be our attitude to other Christians: bend over backwards to help them follow Jesus and live for Jesus.**

Secondly, and far more briefly, our attitude to the non-Christian world. Actually, I think this is the same attitude, but it obviously expresses itself in a different way: **Our attitude to the world – bravely try to win the world**

We see this in Paul's reaction when he's mobbed, and then eventually rescued by being arrested! Paul isn't content to be safely taken away... he asks the roman soldiers, let me speak to them! And he turns, and addresses the crowd in their own language, the Jewish language – that gets their attention, and they quieten down.

He goes to great pains in all he says to show he's a Jew!  
He says so in 22v3.

He then, almost boasts, that he studied under Gamaliel (one of the most important and well known rabbis). He reminds them he was jealous for God – it wasn't long ago the very people trying to kill him, ago were giving him letters of permission and encouraging him to go out and get rid of these Christians. He was a proper Jew.

And actually, he argues, he still is. After he encountered Jesus, and became a Christian, he was still loyal to the lord, he came back here to the temple, where he had a vision – and we know on his missionary trips he always went first to the synagogue.

Paul wants them to know he still serves the lord. But that he now follows Jesus. Not because of anything wonderful he's done, but because Jesus broke into his life, and turned him around, to become a Christian, and to serve "the way".

But Paul doesn't just jump in with the same speech, he is sensitive to the audience, he tries to win them over, by speaking of his own Jewishness, and essentially trying to persuade them that a true Jew actually would follow Jesus.

However, he doesn't change his message. He knows that if he mentions God accepting Gentiles, they will turn on him. So he leaves that for a while. But he doesn't miss it out. And sure enough, in v21, even though he's clear that it's God's idea for him to go to the gentiles, he says it, and then, that's when they shout him down and demand he be killed.

He's smart, and he's brave. He does tell them the whole story, but in such a way as to try to win some if he can... I think it's the same attitude, except expressed to unbelievers.

If there's anything he can do to win some – if he needs to suffer, if he needs to be imprisoned, he will. So again I want to challenge us, do we have something (anything) of this attitude? Do we invite people to church, or to the identity course (it's not too late). Or are we too concerned what they might think of us. Do we pray for people to show an interest? Do we ask them if they have a faith? It's not a hard question, do you have a faith? Have you thought about who Jesus was, since you became an adult? But people might think we're weird, so we back away... Be brave! If there was *anything* you could do, to try to win just one person, would you do it? I don't know who that might be, you might not even know. But don't just wait for other people to ask you about Jesus, sometimes we need to step out.

Paul went to Jerusalem, into the danger, he was willing to... go through these purification rituals, because of his intense care for his brothers and sisters in the faith.

And he was willing to stand up and speak, and carefully craft how he spoke, knowing the people he was speaking to, and out of longing that some might listen, understand and respond.

May the lord give us that care for other Christians, and those outside the faith too, for his own name's sake.

Amen