



## Under Construction

Message by Pastor Andrew Kulasingham 20<sup>th</sup> September 2020

### Scripture Reading: Acts 15:1-2

The epitaph of Ruth Graham, wife of Billy Graham reads **“end of construction—thank you for your patience.”** She saw her entire journey on earth with God as one always under construction.

The first century church has always been the reference point on how to do church the way God intended us to. In the book of Acts, we read about the phenomenal growth of the church. How united and dedicated they were to Christ’s mandate to preach the good news. Under the severest of persecution, they scattered and went everywhere but kept preaching the Gospel with signs and wonders accompanying the preaching of God’s word. We also see how they cared for each other and the poor among them. The early Christians have been our north star, the apostles have been our role models. Rightfully so.

The Bible however, doesn’t portray only the good and sanitized version of the early church. Luke in his presentation of the early church provides us an honest and true account of the church he was part of – the good as well as the messy bits. Acts chapter 15 is one such example.

*Acts 15:1-2 (NKJV) And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.*

Imagine some visiting speakers creating a scene in your local church on a Sunday morning. What would we think of our leadership if they were involved in what Luke called “no small dissension and dispute”. What would our opinion be about our leaders. I frequently hear Christians speak about their disappointment with the church and church leaders. Many of them have stopped attending church due to certain actions of these said leaders. I am not condoning bad behaviour among church leadership. As leaders we are called to be role models. The church is called to be a city on a hill, to stand out as a beacon for the world. If we are honest we have fallen short many times. We aren’t alone though. The early church was not a perfect church and the New Testament presents the Bride of Christ warts and all.

## Warts and all

When we read the New Testament, we see an honest portrayal of the apostles and the early Christians. There was a deliberate intention of the writers to portray themselves and the events around them as transparently and honestly as they could. They quarrelled, they had disputes, they misbehaved. The New Testament is honest and transparent even about the giants of our faith. In the midst of unity, individual leaders still had very strong disagreements. Here are two recorded “before and after” examples of conflicts in Paul’s early years in ministry. If we notice the language used by these men who were involved in these incidents, both during and after each conflict, we get some insight on how they grew through the years in their Christian walk.

### PAUL AND PETER

→ BEFORE: *“I withstood him to his face”*

*Galatians 2:11-13 (NKJV) Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.*

This incident probably happened earlier on in Paul’s ministry. Paul probably wrote the book of Galatians before the great council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), where the pillars of our faith sat together and made a monumental decision that separated the church from Judaistic ritual practices, into the faith based Gospel that added no further requirement apart from repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross.

In this particular passage in Galatians, Paul seems to speak of a public disagreement he had with Peter. Look at the strong words used in his letter – “I withstood him to his face”, “he was to be blamed”, “played the hypocrite”. Here the apostle Paul outs his fellow apostles Peter and Barnabas, not just on that day the incident happened but also later, recording it in writing as he writes to the Galatian church once he returned to Antioch. Peter was grappling with his response on how to continue to fellowship with the Gentile believers who did not keep the dietary laws of Moses and yet be faithful to the interpretation of those Mosaic laws prescribed by the Pharisees of his day. This dispute continued among the Jews in Antioch (Acts 15:1-2) until a decision was made by the leadership at Antioch to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem so they could have a wider conversation with the rest of the apostles and come to an agreement about the place Jewish rituals and practices had among gentile believers in the New Testament church.

→ AFTER: *“our beloved brother Paul”*

*2 Peter 3:15-16 (NKJV) and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.*

About 18 years after the incident in Galatia, we see Peter writing to the churches in Asia Minor. By this time, Paul had written all his letters we have in the New Testament except for his last letter to Timothy – 2 Timothy. Both apostles were probably in prison or about to be imprisoned prior to their execution. In this second letter of Peter, we hear a tone of love and mutual respect to his fellow apostle. He calls Paul “our beloved brother”. He speaks highly of Paul’s wisdom and places his letters in par with “the rest of the Scriptures”.

I wonder how we might have responded if we were in Peter’s place. Wasn’t Paul the one who publicly called him out for his inconsistent behaviour? Didn’t Paul reiterate in writing his failings and refer to Peter as one who was playing the hypocrite? How would we look at

#### PAUL AND JOHN MARK

→ BEFORE: *Sharp contention – parted from one another*

*Acts 15:36-41 (NKJV) Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.” Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

The backdrop to this incident is Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey. Very early into the mission, John Mark decided to return to Jerusalem, where his mother lived. We are not told why he left the mission field all we are told is that as soon as Paul and his team arrived in Perga, John Mark left - “*departing from them, returned to Jerusalem*” (Acts 13:13). Three years later, Paul and Barnabas decide to make a second trip to visit the churches they had planted during the first journey. The sharp contention arose because of John Mark.

Barnabas being a natural encourager (after all he is known as the “son of encouragement”), saw something in John Mark that was worth investing into and chose to give him a second chance. Paul on the other hand, on face value seems to suggest he was a “one strike and you’re out” kind of man, strongly disagreed. They parted ways.

→ AFTER: “he is useful to me”

*2 Timothy 4:11 (NKJV) Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.*

Fifteen to twenty years later, writing his final letter to Timothy from prison while awaiting execution he writes fondly about this same John Mark. This time he commends him as useful to the ministry. What changed?

What changed? John Mark changed. We are not given any information and whatever little we piece together we can only make an informed guess. John Mark was mentored by Barnabas from the time they sailed to Cyprus till about twelve years later when we see his name appear in Paul’s letter to the Colossian church. It would seem that John Mark was by

then part of Paul's travelling team once again. John would become a useful member of Paul's team and would later travel to Rome where he spent some time with the apostle Peter. It is during this time, prior to Peter's martyrdom that John Mark would pen the Gospel of Mark.

What changed? Paul changed. From the seemingly task oriented young power evangelist in the early years of his missionary journeys, Paul seemed to have grown into a spiritual father. We see a change in the tone of Paul's letters as he shepherds the flock of Christ all across the then known world as a father nurtures and nourishes his own.

I thank God for the honest portrayals of our forefathers of the New Testament church. The early Christians were flawed just like us but they didn't remain that way. Underlying their faith in Christ was the assurance that God accepted them as they were but loved them too much to leave them as they were. The Holy Spirit worked in them and through them shaping the body of Christ in the New Testament to become more and more like Jesus.

Our Christian life is a life of constant change. We are never to remain stagnant. We are always being made more and more like Christ. We are always under construction. Three things to remember about our Christian journey:

#### THE GOAL OF OUR CHRISTIAN LIFE IS TO BE TRANSFORMED INTO CHRIST'S IMAGE

God accepts us as we are – warts and all. He however will not leave us as we are. He calls us to be disciples and make disciples that live like Jesus, talk like Jesus, love like Jesus and treat others the way Jesus did. To that extent we are to accept everyone as they are, warts and all, but as disciples of Christ we are all committed become like Jesus.

*2 Corinthians 3:18 (NKJV) But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.*

#### OUR TRANSFORMATION BECOMES GOD'S PRIME EXAMPLE

The transforming work of God in a Christian's life is a display of His amazing grace. None of us are changed by our own effort. It is by grace and grace alone. Any change that occurs in our lives is a testimony of what God can do to one who is willing to let Him have his way. The apostle Paul highlights this by using his own life as a prime example.

*1 Timothy 1:15-16 (NLT) This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.*

#### THE ENVIRONMENT FOR DIVINE TRANSFORMATION IS TLC

*1 Thessalonians 5:14 (NLT) Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are lazy. Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone.*

The only way we are going to see true Christian transformation occur in the church is if we all begin to practice true Christian love. Paul encourages us to respond to everyone according to their needs. Some may need a warning as they make choices that may have dangerous consequences. Some may need encouragement, while others may require tended care. But always to all people we are to be patient.

THE CHURCH IS A PLACE WHERE EVERYONE IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION. MAYBE WE NEED TO HAVE A SIGN THAT SAYS “WORKS AHEAD – PLEASE SLOW DOWN”.

If we want to take the church to the community, we better learn to treat each other with tender loving care. That means changing – not to be a better version of ourselves – but changing to be like Christ.

Remember:

The goal of our Christian life is to be transformed into Christ’s image. To look like Jesus, to talk like Jesus, to treat each other and others like Jesus did.

The purpose of our transformation is to become examples for others. People look up to those they admire. Jesus’ qualities are very attractive. When someone experiences such transformation they become a living testimony - “if God can change me, He can change you too”.

The environment for divine transformation is tender, loving, care. Warn, encourage, take tender care – but always be patient with everyone.

**WE ARE ALL UNDER CONSTRUCTION – THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE.**