



SEPTEMBER 19, 2021 | PASTOR RON KWON

“Maturing Through Crisis” (Acts 15:1-21)

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.⁴ 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.

⁵ 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 keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question.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.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 did not discriminate 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 Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors 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.”

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me.¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ “After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things—

¹⁸ things known from long ago.

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”



Good afternoon CoaH! It's great to be worshipping with you both in-person and through the livestream. Thank you for this time and opportunity to share God's word with you today. Over the last two years, I've really only gotten to know a handful of people from CoaH because they're part of the leadership, parents of youth, or adult leaders serving in Delta. Hopefully I can get to know more of you going forward in being part of this community. Some of my students ask me this question, and in case you're curious as well, yes, Pastor Edgar would beat me in an arm wrestle. That's how we make most our decisions in the Education Department. Just kidding!

Today, we're continuing through the Book of Acts and the Scripture passage comes from Acts 15:1-21. It's a bit of a long passage, but it seems to providentially speak into our current circumstances. I'd also like to try something a little different if that's okay. I'd like to ask you to stand from your seats so that we can read God's word together in one voice. The same invitation goes to those joining from home through the livestream. Let's read together.

[Read Acts 15:1-21]

As you already know, tomorrow is a big day for Canada. Election Day. The next Prime Minister of Canada and governing body will be decided tomorrow by the people. If you've been following the campaign coverage, you'll know it's been getting pretty ugly, particularly for Justin Trudeau. His campaign had to leave from a rally in Newmarket because of protestors. At a stop in London, someone threw a rock at him. In Burnaby, B.C., a protestor openly challenged him to a fist fight and mocked his wife. It's actually a small minority of protestors that have been the most vocal and even forceful about what it means to live in Canada and be Canadian. I hope you'll go out and vote tomorrow as it's every Canadian citizen's right and responsibility regardless of the election outcome.

As the Church, we can't avoid politics or the discussions and debates and even emotional responses that can potentially result from having an opinion or particular view. We're guaranteed to find ourselves in such conversations even within the faith community. Yet in the midst of all of it, God is sovereignly at work and there is an invitation to respond differently than the culture around us. We know that hearing each other and listening to one another is more than just important. It's critical to do so. But why? What is the reason for doing so and to what end? Maturity. God grows maturity with critical discernment.

When I say critical, I'm talking about crisis. In the everyday sense it's a time of danger or intense trouble and difficulty. Afghanistan is in a crisis as the Taliban regained control. The global pandemic is a health crisis. Wildfires on the west coast and northern Ontario are an ecological crisis. But there's also another important aspect to any crisis: decision-making. In a crisis situation, someone or some group has to make the difficult choices to try and provide relief and/or working solutions. The Church in Acts has already gone through several crises prior to the Jerusalem Council. The neglect of Hellenistic Jewish widows leading to division, imprisonment of leaders, and wide-spread persecution. So, we shouldn't be surprised how a simple comment develops into another crisis for the Church.

Verses 1-5 says,

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.⁴ 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.⁵ 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 keep the law of Moses.

These “certain people” were most likely believers belonging to the Pharisees like the ones who speak out in verse 5. For the Pharisees, being a messianic believer, that is anyone believing Jesus as the Messiah and fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation for Israel, is like being in another denomination of Judaism. There’s the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes (like John the Baptist), and Zealots, and now Presbyterians, or “Christians” as they were first called in Antioch. In their view, the Gentile Christians are converting to the Jewish faith and becoming covenant members of the community of Israel. In the Books of the Law, God commanded that “no foreigner may eat [the Passover meal]”¹ unless “the foreigner residing among [the Israelites]”² had all the males in their household circumcised allowing the foreigner to partake in the Passover meal like an Israelite. Likewise, foreigners living in Israel were not to be oppressed³ and observe the Sabbath⁴ as various laws applied to both the Israelites and the foreigner.⁵

Yet, for Paul and Barnabas, to make Gentile Christians convert to Judaism doesn’t seem to be necessary for their salvation and there’s a big disagreement with the believing Pharisees. To what are the Gentiles being converted if not the Jewish faith? We have the luxury of maybe knowing the answer to this question, but this is a very new situation for the Antioch church. There’s no clear resolution. So what are they supposed to do? They seek the wisdom of the apostles and elders as they send Paul and Barnabas and others to get clarification. When you have questions about anything in church, who do you ask? Who do you trust to ask your questions?

Something worth noting at this point is that it’s the Antioch church, the church that has both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians as one local body, choosing to stay connected to the parent church in Jerusalem. This speaks greatly to their character and is an understated turning point for the Antioch Church. They could have easily chosen to say “No, we’re not becoming Jewish. You do you and we’ll try to be faithful to the Lord in our own context.” Yet, rather than focusing on their distinctiveness as a point of separation, the Antioch Church chooses to keep the fellowship with the believers in Judea who came before them. It’s a huge contrast against the believing Pharisees who, even on hearing all the amazing works God has done among the Gentiles, still insist that the Gentile Christians need to become Jewish. From this comment, a crisis has resulted, and a decision needs to be made that will inevitably impact the future of the Church, but let’s also keep in mind that a crisis is never outside of God’s sovereignty or power. If anything, it becomes an opportunity for the Church to follow the Holy Spirit’s leading and discern what God is doing in the crisis.

¹ Ex 12:43

² Ex 12:48

³ Ex 22:21

⁴ Ex 23:12

⁵ Lev 24:22



Look at verses 6-13,

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After 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 did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” ¹²The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

If you watched the English debate of the federal party leaders, each leader was just clamouring for time to be able to speak, either by interrupting others or going over the allotted time. The moderator on several occasions had to cut candidates off to ensure that others had their opportunity to answer the questions and debate with one another. With the Jerusalem Council, we can't be sure how orderly the apostles and elders discuss the question Gentile conversion, but we know that it was a long one as verse 7 says, “After much discussion...” What's amazing is that everyone seems to have been given the opportunity to speak their thoughts and opinions. The Pharisees have already made their statement clear, and it was received as part of the discussion because in any crisis all points of view, no matter how disagreeable, need to be considered when discerning and maybe everything that's needed to be said is said. It's at this point now that Peter speaks up. This is a different and more mature Peter than we read about in the gospels. Peter was usually the one who had more passion than patience as he walked on the water towards Jesus, rebuked Jesus for predicting his own death, and cut off the ear of a guard to protect his Master. As an older and more mature believer, he's waited for who knows how long to speak as he submits to the Holy Spirit's leading to listen and be patient. When Peter finally does speak, however, the power of the Spirit carries his passionate words to the ears of the council members, so much so that it must have been deafening as they go silent. The Gentiles were saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, not the Law and customs. They were purified by faith and the Gentiles were given the Holy Spirit without partiality. Cue mic drop.

In the silence, the Council is now really listening to hear what God has been doing. Paul and Barnabas are given the opportunity to share how the miracles of God were done among the Gentiles on their mission trip. All God's work among the Gentiles witnessed by reliable and faithful gospel workers. It's having to be part of God's plan, right? But it still has to yet answer the question: If it's the will of God, to what are Gentiles being converted? The answer comes from James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, who brings it all together.

While it might seem like the question is being overcomplicated, it's the burden of leaders in the Church to consider a crisis from various angles because, again, it will impact the future of the Church. James is considering the question from so many different aspects at this point: the testimony of gospel workers, the testimony of Scripture, this history of Israel, the gospel message, God's will, the Gentile mission and conversion, how will Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians have fellowship, differences in practice and culture. You can imagine what the Session must go through as sixteen Elders meet, discuss, debate, and make decisions. You'd probably be shocked to see what 400-500 pastors and elders go through at the annual KPCA General Assembly!

Now as James speaks, the answer to the question of Gentile conversion becomes more clear. In verse 19 he says, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are **turning to God** (my own emphasis added).” The Gentiles are indeed being converted, but it's not to religious laws and customs.



They are turning to the true God through the gospel because God included the Gentiles along with Israel in His plan of salvation and redemption. Paul calls this the mystery of the gospel in Ephesians 3 which God reveals through the Holy Spirit. As such, they also belong to the fellowship of believers.

I think James has already discerned the Antioch church's maturity in wanting to keep the fellowship with the Jerusalem church. His recommendation that they abstain from food offered to idols, sexual immorality, strangled meat, and blood are rooted both in God's Law and understanding how the surrounding pagan culture would hinder not only the table fellowship with the Jewish Christians living among them, but also the future fellowship in churches everywhere. Paul would need to address similar questions in his first letter to the Corinthian church with questions of food and a case of incest in the Church. And the maturity of the Antioch church gets affirmed as the letter from the Council is read and they respond with joy knowing for certain that God has included them in plan of salvation along with Israel and the fellowship of believers remains whole.

This is what it looks like to critically discern through a church crisis, and we can rest assured that God will mature the Body by going through it. Some might think it's better to stick with simplicity and not overcomplicated an issue or crisis, but then are we being good stewards of the rational capacity that God has granted to each of us?

If you're thinking, "I'm not in the leadership so I don't really know how to think about such things," I'm sorry, but that's a complete cop out. Your thoughts, opinions, and questions, no matter how basic you might think they are, they are welcome and helpful to the leadership so that we can get a much better view of how members are thinking and wrestling with an issue or crisis at the ground level. It's a concrete way to choose to keep yourself accountable in fellowship with the leadership. The same goes for the leadership. Pastors, Elders, Deacons, Life Groups leaders, we should remember and appreciate the trust that the Church has given us in leading and caring for the members. It may mean longer meetings, more discussions, and lively debates that will take time, effort, even mental and emotional energy. Yet, we have been granted the privilege and responsibility to shepherd and govern Christ's Church as we have received through Christ himself.

Right now, CoaH is in a crisis; a turning point that needs critical discernment together. Rather than sitting on the sidelines, I encourage and challenge each of us to recommit to the fellowship today and choose to be accountable to one another. Come out to the next Townhall meeting. Agree to making it safe space without any judgment. Be ready to listen to one another and bring all your questions. Let's go through the growing pains together knowing that God oversees the maturity process.

Let's pray.