



Big God, Small Men

Acts 15:22-41 | Mark Foreman | July 19, 2026

✕ The Letter from the Council - Unity Over Doctrine (22-35)

- The challenge: Will the momentum of the gospel among Gentiles be lost?
 - The threat: Gentiles converts were being told by Judaizers that they must be circumcised to be saved (v.1)—i.e. they must become Jewish and obey the entire OT Law.
 - The process of this decision was: dispute → journey to Jerusalem → apostles and elders debate and listen (vv.2-6).
 - The ultimate testimony: Peter (vv.7-11), then Barnabas and Paul (v.12), then James (vv.13-21) – Scripture (Amos 9) and lived experience both weighed.
- The big, inclusive heart of God on display
 - Peter's argument rests on God himself: he "made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith" (v.9).
 - James roots himself in Scripture: Amos 9 promised "the rest of mankind may seek the Lord... all the Gentiles who are called by my name" (vv.16-17) – Gentile inclusion isn't a concession, it's the culmination of Israel's story.
 - The decree itself is a relief, not a restriction: "we should not trouble those... who are turning to God" (v.19) – the posture is welcome, not gatekeeping.
- The key distinction: the Gospel and cultural context
 - What is not required: the boundary markers that made Israel visibly distinct (dietary, cleansing, and temple laws).
 - What is retained in the decree (v.20, 29): abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from what is strangled and from blood – not a new legalism, but a minimal moral and practical standard so that a mixed Jew-Gentile church could actually eat and worship together.
 - The pattern: ceremonial/ cleansing/dietary law recedes; but the moral law (idolatry, sexual immorality) remains. The line isn't "law vs. grace" but what was pointing to Christ and is now fulfilled vs. what is God's unchanging character.
 - This is not deconstruction—making God in your own image, but the theological heart of God to all tribes: "come as you are": Gentiles don't need to become culturally Jewish to belong to God's family; they need only turn to God in faith.
 - Grace removes the cultural barrier without removing the moral one.
 - The result: "they rejoiced because of its encouragement" (v.31) – real, felt unity, rooted in a God whose heart was bigger than anyone's assumptions.
- We have this issue today.
 - This missional question lingers: how Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, or Calvary Chapel must I be to be accepted by others?
 - What are the major doctrines versus minors beliefs not necessary for salvation?

✕ The Disagreement Between Paul and Barnabas - Unity Fractured Over Opinions (15:36-41)

- The situation of division.
 - They were taking a return visit to strengthen the churches (v.36).
 - The dispute: whether to bring John Mark, who had deserted them before (vv.37-38).
 - The severity: "sharp disagreement" (paroxysmos) – strong, almost visceral language (v.39).
 - The outcome: no outside advice or council, no resolution narrated – they simply separated (vv.39-40).
- The deeper pattern exposed.
 - God's patience with Mark's failure is not matched by Paul's patience with Mark's failure – the same God who bore with Israel's centuries of unfaithfulness (and just extended grace to entire Gentile nations in the previous scene) has an apostle who won't extend a second chance to one young man.

- This is the built-in contradiction of being human: we receive mercy more easily than we extend it. Peter's speech (v.9) and Paul's refusal (v.38) sit in the same chapter, almost as a rebuke by proximity.
- Underneath the personal conflict is something more primal: humans are tribal at heart. We instinctively divide into "reliable" vs. "unreliable," "us" vs. "them," "in" vs. "out" – the very impulse the Council had just overruled at the Jew-Gentile level resurfaces immediately at the interpersonal level. Barnabas defends kin/companion (and possibly literal kin, Col. 4:10); Paul defends mission integrity and efficiency – each drawing a tribal line.
- We are tribal:
 - Maybe the "darn right" Saul was still more alive than he thought?
 - This is not a doctrinal dispute but a relational one – trust, character, kinship loyalty. Luke records it without excusing or resolving it and in doing so shows that the tribal instinct just defeated at one level simply migrates to another.

✂ Comparison and Resolution - What This Juxtaposition Teaches

- The comparison
 - A God with a big, welcoming heart united the church on doctrine;
 - Two of his own apostles fractured over a person – showing unity is commanded at both levels (John 17:21; Eph. 4:3; Phil. 2:2; Phil. 4:2-3), not just the doctrinal one.
- The typical excuses – 3 common moves teachers make, each quietly lowering the bar.
 - The gospel spread faster because they split" – an outcome-based justification that skips past whether the split itself was right.
 - Paul eventually needed Mark anyway" – a resolution borrowed from outside the text (2 Tim. 4:11) to retroactively soften a rupture Luke leaves raw.
 - "He commands unity not uniformity." Separate opinions are just going to happen, so don't expect the ideal" – the most dangerous of the three, because it doesn't just excuse this instance, it lowers the standard itself. It quietly redefines "unity" from a command to an aspiration, from something we're responsible for to something we simply shouldn't expect. But Paul never tells the Philippians "conflict happens, don't sweat it" – he tells two named women to agree (Phil. 4:2). The command doesn't come with a realism clause.
 - Later Paul changes commanding love and unity as more important than being "right:"
- An honest reading: Luke lets a real command and a real failure stand side by side, unresolved, without letting either cancel the other – and without letting any of the three excuses above quietly rewrite what was commanded.
- The resolution: Paul later calls Mark "useful to me for ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11); reconciliation is implied, not narrated.
 - This also implies a softer Paul later on.
- The application:
 - The same "come as you are" heart that welcomed Gentiles without cultural prerequisites is the heart that should have welcomed Mark back without proving himself first – real unity is proven less by shared belief than by sustained relationship with people we distrust, have been hurt by, or instinctively tribe against.
 - Elasticity of love allows for temporary differences while holding onto the unity.
 - Acts 15 doesn't teach us to expect painless unity. It shows us a God whose patience erased the Jew-Gentile divide, and two godly men whose patience with each other ran out faster than God's patience with either of them – until grace, in time, restored what effort could not.

✂ Taking It Home

- You can see the tension between truth and love. Which are you better at?
- When you are right in your own mind, how do you treat those who disagree?
- Do you believe unity is a command or just nice if you achieve it?
- Would you choose efficiency or love if you had to make a choice?
- How do you manage to speak and stand for truth but do it in a loving, united way?