

Series: None

Sermon: "Together"

Text: Acts 15:36-41

RGJR/FBCCS 8-9-2025 **UNEDITED**

- Prayer (*this worship time is supposed to be about Jesus not about his servants*)
- Over the years a preacher naturally develops a sermon style. It always seemed best to me to have an **inductive** style to the sermon arrangement.
- An *inductive* sermon is meant to have a big or small "**eureka**" moment. "Eureka," means "***I have found it!***" Eureka moments are those tiny shock moments when the light finally comes on and we have learned something.
- However, today, I am not intending to use the shock-power of a *eureka* moment. Instead, I will reveal one specific application of this sermon now—up front—and hope you will still listen to the rest of what I say.
- *That application is this: **This sermon is intended to be my last sermon as pastor/teacher of Fellowship Bible Church. We are resigning from our current role.***
- When Mary tells you *her* heart following my sermon, it is intended that it will also be her last time to address you in the role she has had as a teacher and as the wife of the pastor/teacher of Fellowship Bible Church.
- This decision was *not* demanded by the FBC elders. They have not *fired* us from a job. I suspect when you speak with them, most, if not all of five of them, may say they do not agree with our decision. However, I don't wish to speak for them about that. I will say that we were encouraged by the elders not to resign.
- I also hope you would know that we did not come to this decision quickly without much prayer, thought, conversation and heart-pain. We did not come to it without questioning our own motives and

without having to admit our own weaknesses and sinful proclivities to ourselves and God.

- For some time, we have wondered about a much earlier decision to stay in the role of pastor/teacher for more than 5 years after resigning as an official elder of FBC. Because of how so many of us see the role of pastor in a church, even after resigning, we remained *de facto* leaders in the eyes of many.
- To me *de facto* leadership means that a leader is a leader just by the fact that they are there even if they may have relinquished the official role and title.
- More than 5 years ago, I relinquished that official (what some churches call) "**governing**" elder role when I resigned as an elder of FBC but the *de facto* role of leadership remained as a teacher.
- Mary and I knew that change would be very difficult to navigate. We didn't know then if that was best thing to do. We thought it was. We committed to ourselves that we would do our best to trust God to enable us not to *snipe* from the sidelines as the "governing" elders of FBC officially led us. I think we mostly succeeded at that but I'm sure that sometimes we failed—even if failing just in our own thoughts.
- After 23 years you may still not know this but both Mary and I like to *lead* in things. We have lots of wild ideas—pirate-church ideas (there are fewer for me now that I am older—there are more for her now that she is also older but living under a pronouncement from her doctors).
- AND, you may not know this as well but we also we both have personalities that just don't believe in **landing the rocket ship** when it comes to Jesus' Church on God's Cosmic Redemptive Mission—that mission we just saw in *Ephesians*.

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- I know that a rocket ship is a stupid or at least a clumsy metaphor. In a quick moment, without much time to be creative, I began to use the rocket ship metaphor about **18** years ago.
- We then had the largest FBC Elder group I remember having in my time here. At that time, that elder group was going through a phase of ***fear*** rather than ***faith***. They were thinking about how FBC could possibly ever survive financially 1 year, let alone 10 years doing the crazy missional stuff we were doing.
- One business-minded elder even made a PowerPoint with a chart. It was a colorful chart like the ones professional financial planners do to show you when your money will run out and you will have to stop eating and die based on how little you have saved for old age. This elder, who has been gone from FBC for many years now so don't try to figure it out...this elder whom I still love—purported to show with *certainty* in his chart that FBC would likely be out of business in 5 years and absolutely could not survive 10 years.
- In the end, the reality of FBC's life has never once lined up with the predictions of that chart.
- Since, the facts said we would not survive, the answer among the elders back then was to land the FBC rocket ship safely and be a pretty good Bible church supporting one missional ministry that the charting elder liked.
- This idea of landing a rocket ship for safety was suggested even before Elon Musk proved you could land rocket ships safely catching them in loving metal arms to save them for the future carefully securing your financial resources.
- Our decision to resign now, was not a quick, emotionally-driven decision and it should not be a complete surprise to anyone who has

been in leadership or who has talked to us about what we believe constitutes a church on mission—biblically.

- We have thought about and talked to the elders, even preached about the issues that Mary and Raleigh saw in FBC for a number of years.
- I have two important notebooks. One I recently revealed the existence of to Beth so she would know where it was and what it was about should Mary and I be gone. That notebook is call "**bro-me-kay...care-doph-oria**"—which is Greek for "**Filthy Lucre.**" So, I do understand the need for basic planning for the future.
- This "filthy lucre" notebook is so thick because I have been partly responsible to manage funds for my parents, Mary's parents and ourselves for many years now and it contains all the papers related those responsibilities. I should probably weed out all the outdated stuff that makes it so fat...but I haven't had the time to use for that.
- This 2nd notebook was collected over the last 5 years from the written-down matters about values and issues surrounding them that Mary and I have raised with the elders. It also contains notes on what we have said in the past about such things when I was still an elder. It is a short, sketchy history of what we truly care about when it comes to governing values for FBC.
- I've kept it as a reminder. Mary and I had committed to each other that we would not stay as pastor and teachers in FBC if the governing values changed. All us elders had agreed upon these values verbally when I was still an elder on that team. We would not remain unless those values were **actually** still governing the choices—still the driving forces for the future actions of FBC even when I was no longer an official elder.

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- I was surprised, when in our last meeting with the elders, it was suggested our current decision was sudden and we had not spoken along the way of what now led to resigning. I have gone through this notebook over the last 6 weeks asking if we had not been clear about values along the way. I think we were.
- In past months, I think we have also been very clear with the elders, and even overly zealous according to some, particularly on the values of being biblical (related to teaching that was presented to the body) and being missional (related to current views of financial security).
- I am clear, in my heart, that what we said to the elders in the many communications we had with them some (individually and some collectively—some provocative and relationally painful) sometimes in nearly weekly lunches, others times in special meetings in our home where we were allowed to set the agenda about these things and also in written documents...I feel that we had often been clear that we were struggling with their direction or non-direction based on actual events or actual outcomes controlled by their governing values.
- Also, to be clear, we did not present these perceived values differences openly to the Body but felt they should be dealt with through the elder leaders. So, you may be surprised we are resigning. The elders should probably not be surprised.
- Therefore, **first**, we have not been fired. **Second**, we have not made a quick emotional decision because of hurt feelings. And, **third**, I want to clarify that this is not us **retiring** to go play shuffleboard in Florida. There will be no **retirement** party today to soften things. Sorry no punch and cake. This isn't something we want to celebrate.

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- Mary and I do not believe in **retirement from a calling**. It is fine that others hold other views but that is our view. This does not mean that we don't understand the reality that *how* and maybe *where* one expresses their calling can change and especially change with age. This has been a reality on our minds for as long as we can remember in our thinking about FBC.
- Since our very early days in FBC, with ministries such as MIB "Missional Integration Boyz" 20 years ago (reading thinking and discussing the next generation church)—and the idea of **second-mile servants** (it was never about cleaning the building—20 year-olds don't know how to clean—it was about introducing them to humbly serving in Kingdom Partnerships) and then also the increasing focus on emphasizing multigenerational multi-church leadership in ministries like Mission Survivor, and then taking precious time to teach behind-the-scenes seminary level courses such as Bible exposition and hermeneutics for sermonizing , in one-to-one mentoring relationships with younger "Timothys" & "Timotheas"—all of this, even if we didn't always see it for what it was—all of this for Mary and me was motivated by the heart of us passing values and the mission of the church on to the next generation.
- We knew that they wouldn't do it the same way we did it. That sometimes hurt our egos but it didn't matter. Were they governed by being **biblical, free grace** and **missional**? **Then go for it!** *"Here is the control for the rocket ship! One request... may Mary and I please stay on board. If you need us, we will be there in in the back likely shaking with some fear because you guys are crazy (just like we were crazy at your age.)"*

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- By resigning from FBC, Mary and I are not choosing to get off the rocket ship of the mission. In fact, we are finishing ministry here because we feel we must stay on that rocket ship.
- So, again, we have not been **fired**. We have not made a rash **emotionally** driven decision. We are not **retiring** because we need or deserve rest from the Cosmic Redemptive mission. Although we have lost muscle strength, joint flexibility and brain speed, we have not have lost our passion or calling and especially the desire to see that fomented in the next generation undergirded by the values of being **biblical**, teaching and living **free grace** and being **missional** as Jesus' big "C" church.
- Now, please indulge me as I read to you the short letter Mary and I wrote as somewhat naïve *youngers* in our 40's and as we addressed to you as somewhat *youngers* of FBC. We addressed you specifically as "*The People Who Are Fellowship Bible Church of Colorado Springs.*" You may already notice in that greeting I was teaching a different idea of church which is the same idea of the nature of the church I have continued to teach for 23-plus years here TOGETHER.
- I will read the letter and make one comment that tells you why **WE** BELIEVE we need to do the painful thing we are doing today by resigning. I will then preach a short sermon from **Acts 15**. Having heard what I have already revealed this morning, this short sermon will hopefully not produce a sad Ah! Ha! Eureka! moment.
- I suspect from what they have said to us, although I do not ever want to speak for them, that the elders of FBC do not come to the same conclusion we have come to over these last 5+ years. I will only tell you what Mary and I conclude at the end of reading the letter...

October 31, 2002

To the People Who Are Fellowship Bible Church of Colorado Springs:

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The Greshams are thanking God today for His gracious call to join you on the future journey of FBC. We are excited about all He has done through you in the past and all He has for us to do together in the days ahead.

God has been intensely developing our hearts over the last years. He has been increasing our passion and vision for vital ministry in a church for our times. Through His life-changing Word and His life-giving Spirit, He has called us to join Him on **His mission**. He has burned into our hearts the powerful truth that we, the church—the body of Christ, are called to **incarnate** Jesus Christ for each other and for the world God loves. This is not a call to “business as usual” but a summons to an awakened commitment to be exactly the church God wants us to be. ***This is not a call to comfort but to faith.***

In our changing times, we stand looking at a new horizon together. None of us knows exactly what lies beyond our ability to see. Still, we know God calls us to trust Him even as we sail into uncharted waters. With God, **together**, we can brave the rough and exciting seas of our times. With God, **together**, we can be a church that shows the world of our day what the grace of God can do in the lives of men and women just like them. With God, **together**, we can bring glory to His name in Colorado Springs and beyond.

Can you see why we are so excited? With God, **together**, we are in for a journey that we can’t even begin to imagine. We are glad to be with you on this journey.

In His grace,

Raleigh

Raleigh G. Gresham, Jr.

- Now...Here is my simple statement about why we are leaving our role in the mission here. I wrote it on a sticky note and attached to this letter in my notebook some time ago. It reads in all caps—I guess for emphasis to myself and it speaks of the leadership direction of FBC ***not of any of the people***—It reads...
“WE ARE NO LONGER TOGETHER”

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- In addition to issues concerning governing values, Mary and I also believe it has been the tendency of this leadership group to try to protect you from hard things by not always being open about their plans. I believe they have felt it is possible that you might not understand them or might misunderstand or they might even upset you or raise questions and cause disunity.
- Along the way, and leading up to me resigning as an elder years ago, there were, in my opinion, some critical examples of the elders' collective reticence to speak truth when I thought truth desperately needed to be spoken in love.
- More recently, the elders, perhaps not unanimously but still collectively in communication signed as a group, have questioned my fitness for ministry and my work in exposition of the Word of God. I'm told that this was, at least in part, due to me very strongly questioning their actions around the stated value of being biblical in our teaching.
- To me, this was a critical moment in the life of FBC and needed to be openly explained to the body. Some of you asked me questions about what was going on at that time, as different men preached but I didn't feel free to answer and actually wasn't sure myself.
- I asked for body life meetings to explain and clarify. These issues were not raised or explained to the body and some of the actions taken, some even publicly, led to more confusion about what was actually taking place. Again, Mary and I felt we could not proactively tell the truth when some of you asked what was happening.
- For us, this was an untenable situation. We were beginning to feel like we were not speaking the truth in love. If we had a 4th specific governing value for FBC, we would add that one... "speak the truth in love. Don't try to be a church without truthing with one another."
- Of course, contrary to what Mary and Raleigh may believe about certain teaching candidates, financial priorities, buildings and even

personal pastoral fitness, the elders may be right. But, we believed that the body, as much as possible, should always know what the elders are thinking behind what they are doing.

- In any case, based upon Mary and Raleigh's understanding of our governing values we disagree and thus we cannot continue to seem to support this, as acquiescing *de facto* leaders, by being quiet about these conflicts, plans, allegations of unfitness and value-level disagreements.
- We have tried not to speak what is not ours to speak but some of you naturally have then assumed, since we are the pastor and his wife, that we must be in authority and must be in agreement with all that is happening. Again, when we believe this impinges on the truth about values, we are not in agreement and feel we cannot unintentionally give that potential appearance in any way any longer.
- **Paul and Barnabas** set out **TOGETHER** sent by the mostly Gentile church of Antioch with great vigor and passion on an exciting missional journey for the sake of God's Cosmic Redemptive Mission.
- Along the way, **TOGETHER**, they saw miracles. **TOGETHER** they saw people trust Jesus for eternal life. **TOGETHER** they saw God work.
- **TOGETHER**, they also saw people who hated their message and thus also **TOGETHER** hated them. They were chased out of cities **TOGETHER** by angry mobs. In one city, where they were at first welcomed wrongly as being gods **TOGETHER**, they were then chased out and Paul was even stoned with rocks by the people to try kill him. (Maybe Barnabas had gone off to pick up some chicken at the chicken shack because this stoning was not **TOGETHER**.)
- They came back to *Antioch* and then went to *Jerusalem* **TOGETHER** to stand against that day's enemies of the absolutely free grace of God in Jesus.

- After standing up for pure grace **TOGETHER** against the biggest figures in the Jerusalem church, They went back to Antioch **TOGETHER** and with others there, **TOGETHER** they taught and preached the Word of the LORD.
- Then **TOGETHER** they had an idea. Let me read it to you **in Acts 15 beginning at verse 36...**

³⁶ Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

- ***Now, for some reason, they are not TOGETHER!***
- I have done something else I never do in preparing for today's sermon. I have read numerous sermons by others on this passage. I have asked myself what is this about? Have I turned it into something it is not for all the years I have understood it as a deep governing ***values disagreement*** of which John Mark coming along or not was merely a symptom?
- Most preachers want the Antioch church to serve "*cake and punch*" at the separation suggesting the two happily wave and depart their separate ways.
- They want to make the division that took these two men who were so **TOGETHER** apart to be about mere *preferences* or variance in some *opinions* of John Mark and his future.

- I don't think they broke apart over preferences. These two men had been **TOGETHER** in theology, on mission, for life and death consequences. It was no slight matter of opinions that ended that **TOGETHER** of life.
- Beyond the history of what they had been through and were looking forward to **TOGETHER**, the text itself is rather clear by its choice of words.
- The NIV recognizes this by translating the matter as "*such a sharp disagreement.*" The NIV chickens out a little bit by then translating, "*they parted company.*" The word for that is used not simply to say they chose different routes on *Google Maps*—no big deal. It is used in contexts of **divorce** of separating, not simply geographically, but in life.
- They were no longer **TOGETHER** at the level of some **value** that mattered. I find both of these men represented in Scripture as mature enough believers for that division not to have been an emotional reaction to differing preferences or opinions.
- I believe they differed at a level of what they were valuing when it came not simply in statements of values in words but in governing values that actually moved their actions.
- They were **TOGETHER** but when their actual governing values no longer aligned, they decided for all the world to see forever recorded in God's Word that they were no longer **TOGETHER** in some important way because of something that mattered deeply to them.
- I wish such things never happened but they do. As far as we know, Paul and Barnabas didn't hate each other after this. There are even some indications that John Mark grew and Paul was encouraged by him. John Mark stayed closer to Peter in ministry and never seems to

have partnered again with Paul again but it also seems he was the same Mark who later got to write a Gospel.

- I believe there can be a valid reason for those who have been so close in life **TOGETHER** on God's Cosmic Mission of Redemption not to be **TOGETHER** any longer. I believe it is when their actual values that produce their actions no longer are **TOGETHER**.
- Without trying to prove that Mary and I see things in FBC and see the FBC elders' stances absolutely correctly, we, after long painful, deliberation and many attempts to clarify things with the elders conclude we should no longer be **TOGETHER** as leaders.
- Just as in October of 2002 we wrote to you that we were excited about what God had done in the past through the people called FBC and that we were excited for the future, we remain excited for what God can do in a submitted FBC in the future. We will be praying.
- We love you. We love the men who are elders.
- We regret any pain or confusion this may cause some of you. We did not want our 23 years to finish this way.
- We are trusting God for powerful things in your life **TOGETHER** and in ours—wherever it is that the rocket ship takes Raleigh and Mary, hopefully with some new younger rocketeers excitedly steering into the unknown.
- Now, Mary also has something prepared to tell you from *her* heart. For nearly 55 years, starting on a church bus route picking up little kids in the ghetto to go to Sunday School in Detroit we have always been *partners* in ministry. She has been the greatest Godly influence on my life. Her role in FBC, although mostly untitled, has been at least as important as mine for these 23+ years. Please hear her heart.

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- I want to thank the elders sincerely for loving and respecting us enough to allow us to talk to you about what we believe in this honest open way this morning.
- I also want to let you know that we have thought deeply about what is best and have decided not to stay for discussion or questions after this service. We love you and we will talk with any of you in the days ahead but not in the corner of the lobby today. We don't think that would be helpful.
- ***May God give you grace and bless you as you glorify Him on the Mission!***