

# Racism and the Church: Overcoming the Idolatry

## Lesson 3: Barriers to Overcome

One of the great challenges for the New Testament church was a barrier that existed between Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles). If that challenge had not been met and dealt with satisfactorily, there is no doubt, at least humanly speaking, that Christianity would have been doomed to be a tiny sect outside Judaism with no message of salvation for all people everywhere.

One of the most dramatic accounts concerning this barrier is recorded in Acts 10. This is the story of the conversion of a Gentile, Cornelius, and what this meant to the Jewish Christian leaders, beginning with Peter.

Read Acts 10:1-8.

Read Acts 10:9-23a. Explain the vision of the “large sheet.” What meaning did it convey to Peter about the Old Testament dietary laws?

Read Acts 10:23b-43. Peter came to the house of Cornelius and entered it. However, crossing the threshold into a Gentile’s home was a momentous step. Why? To what did Peter refer when he spoke of what God had revealed to him?

In verse 33 Cornelius has unwittingly issued a challenge. Is Jesus Christ meant for everyone or for Jews only? It is as though he were saying, “We’re all here waiting, Peter. Now what?” What was Peter’s response in verse 34? What did Peter do in verses 35-43? What is remarkable in Peter’s words in verse 43?

Read Acts 10:44-48. What happened in verses 44-46? What did Peter conclude in verses 47-48? What did he do?

On pages 35-38 of the Study Document, several “Barriers to Overcoming Racism” are listed and described. They are **denial, untenable assumptions, paternalism, differing meanings and frames of reference, fear of differences, fear of change.**

Because of their background as devout Jews who observed the dietary and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, what forms of “denial” prevented the early Christians from sharing the Gospel with Gentiles?

It is important to note that the barrier between Jews and Gentiles that should have been recognized as no longer existing did not come down immediately. Read what happened to Peter in Acts 11:1-3. After Peter explained what had happened (vs. 4-17), what did the “apostles and brethren” do (v. 18)?

Yet it still was not over. The same problem plagued St. Paul’s ministry. Read Acts 15:1- 5. After hearing the testimony of Paul and Barnabas, the Council at Jerusalem sent a letter (Acts 15:23-29) that should have settled the whole matter. It did not, and much of Paul’s great epistle to the Galatians was written to counter the false teaching that the Gospel of God’s grace through faith is not intended for all people.

The early Christians were dealing with untenable assumptions that, if left unchallenged, would have distorted and eventually negated the Gospel itself (e.g., the legalistic requirements of the Judaizers).

In the Study document's section on "Untenable Assumptions" (pp. 36-37), there are four untenable assumptions described.

1. The first untenable assumption that frustrates attempts to deal with racism in the church is what some have called the "good will assumption." This is the popular belief that "all Christians" (i.e., people of "good will") will automatically recognize that racism is morally wrong and that they will therefore spontaneously do the right thing. Thus, the church (so the thinking goes) need not concern itself with this issue.
2. A second assumption that the preaching of Law and Gospel merely in some abstract, detached sense—without careful and specific applications of the way the sin of racism actually works in the lives of people—will root out the sin.
3. A third assumption that frequently impedes efforts to identify and remove racism is the notion that solving this problem is a short-term process.
4. A fourth untenable assumption is that racism in the church will be solved by "education," that is, merely by imparting the "right facts" to people.

In what ways can acceptance of these assumptions distort the Gospel? If possible, give examples of how this might happen.

Another "barrier" listed in the study is that of "Different Meanings and Frames of Reference" (p. 37).

"When majority and minority groups come together to discuss the issue of racism, they frequently use the same terms, but assign completely different meanings to them (e.g., "qualified," "minority"). Unless carefully planned and executed, such discussions only serve to confirm preexisting suspicions and tensions."

How did the Holy Spirit prepare Peter and Cornelius to get past their differing frames of reference? What were still present for each? (See Acts 10:25-26 for Cornelius and Acts 10:34 for Peter.) What frames of reference has the Holy Spirit given us to deal with differing "frames of reference"? What is the most important thing the Holy Spirit did to Cornelius and Peter even before they began talking to each other? How does the Holy Spirit do something similar to you and your "frame of reference"?

Although the barriers that have developed between races are in many cases very high and thick, in Christ they have already been brought down.

Read Ephesians 2:11-22. It is our task in faith to realize that the barrier is down and to live with and in the new reality of the Gospel's power.

Yet there is fear—fear of changing neighborhoods, fear of economic realities that accompany change, fear for one's life or property, fear of being misunderstood. On the other hand, there is resentment, the resentment of a young African American woman who said, "I have no respect for a society that crushes people and then blames them for not standing up under the weight."

## **Conclusion**

Read Galatians 5:19-26. How does the Gospel affect our thoughts and conduct towards those of another race?

## **Last Lesson: Guiding Principles**