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Acts 10:23b-43

Outward Church: Barriers to Multiethnic Reconciliation

Jonathan M. Romig
CornerstoneWestford.com

Last week we talked about the Bible's vision of churches working towards becoming diverse multiethnic congregations that reflects his church family in Revelation 7:9-10. Today I want to talk about the things that hinder us from doing that, barriers to unity in diversity.

When we look at the New Testament, we find one of the most commonly reoccurring themes is racial tensions between Jew and Gentile. The church had to call a council in Acts 15 to deal with the “problem” of the Gentiles coming to Jesus. When we think of the conflict between Jew and Gentile in the Bible, we typically think of religious differences. But their differences extended far beyond this. They were differences of ethnicity, culture, nationality, socio-economic class, and religion too. In Ephesians, Paul addresses the division between Jews and Gentiles.

Ephesians 2:13-14 (ESV)

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility

The letter to the Ephesians is to a church like ours. It tells us God wants to create a place where people from all ethnicities and minorities can come and be a part of his church family. But there are barriers to this, literal walls. The temple itself had a wall separating the priests from the men, a wall separating the men from the women, and a wall separating the Israelites from the Gentiles. There were signs on that wall that said if you as a Gentile crossed over, you would be killed. Those physical walls expressed the deep ethnic-rifts dividing the culture. But when Jesus died on the cross, God tore the temple curtain in two from top to bottom. This curtain had separated us from him, but now no more. Now God begins to tear down the dividing walls between us and us. As believers, we are to be ministers of this reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19 (NIV)

18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Because we've been reconciled to God we too have a mission to reconcile others to God and each other. Originally I entitled this sermon *Barriers to Racial Reconciliation* but my mentor pointed out to me that the concept of race was a foreign one at Jesus' time. The word “race” wasn't used till the 1500s during Colonialism. The concept of race was invented to classify others as “less than” and justify taking advantage of them, typically non-white people (*The Myth of Equality*).¹ The civil rights activist John M. Perkins explains how the concept of “race” is wrong.

The truth is that there is no black race—and there is no white race. So the idea of “racial reconciliation” is a false idea. It's a lie. It implies that there is more than one race. This is absolutely false. God created only one race—the human race.² - *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love* by John M Perkins

He suggests talking about “multiethnic reconciliation”, so that is what I’m doing today. The book of Acts is a story of reconciliation between ethnicities.

Acts - A story of reconciliation

God is reconciling Jew, Samaritan, and now starting in Acts 10, Gentile to himself, and to each other. God gives Cornelius, a Gentile Roman Centurion, and Peter, a Jewish follower of Jesus, visions that bring them together. Cornelius, located in northern Caesarea, sends for Peter in southern Joppa. Right before his servants arrive Peter has a vision of a heavenly buffet full of all kinds of animals, cows, pigs, lizards, sheep, lobster, muscles. It’s like the best of *Cracker Barrel*, *Legal Seafood*, and *Smokey Bones BBQ*. That would have sounded terrible to Peter. He wouldn’t be caught dead eating pork, but Jesus tells him to take and eat the unclean animals along with the clean ones. At first Peter resisted but Peter goes with Cornelius’ servants. Peter is about to welcome the non-Jewish Gentiles into the full family of God. He is about to become a cross-cultural agent of reconciliation and we can too. But in order to become agents of cross-cultural reconciliation, we need to understand the barriers we face.

Barriers 1: Personal & Systemic Racism

Before we look at Peter we go back and remember that starting with Abraham and up till this point God had intentionally set apart the people of Israel to know him and be in relationship with him. He had given them special food, a sacrificial system, civil and religious laws to set them apart as holy, different from all other nations. God didn’t give these laws to his people to foster racism, if anything the Israelites were supposed to treat foreigners with respect and dignity (Exod 22:21). Genesis 12:2-3 tells us God intended to bless all nations through Abraham from the very beginning. Speaking to him God said:

Genesis 12:2-3 (ESV)

2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Many of the laws did divide the Israelites from foreigners. They weren’t supposed to marry foreigners (Deut 7:3; Ezra 9:20) and could legally enslave a foreigner but not an Israelite (Lev 25:39-46). However, all people, even foreigners, were made in God’s image and had value and worth (Gen 1:26-27). Over time some people distorted God’s laws and turned them into something they were not supposed to be. The *Book of Jubilees*, written about 100 years before Jesus, taught Israelites to not associate with Gentiles.

Jubilee 22:16

Separate thyself from the nations,
And eat not with them:

And do not according to their works,
And become not their associate;

For their works are unclean,
And all their ways are a Pollution and an abomination and uncleanness.

It’s in this context that we find Peter resisting God’s call to take and eat food that is both ceremonially clean and unclean. How we understand Peter’s reaction to the unclean food, helps us understand his reaction to Cornelius. Peter obediently enters Cornelius’s house, the home of a Gentile, something Jewish tradition told him not to do (Letter of Aristeas, 139–42), and says this:

Acts 10:28 (ESV)

28 And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.

Peter looks inside himself and outside to his culture and admits three things: 1) I am a part of a system that rejects other ethnicities; 2) God has radically transformed the system; and 3) God is changing my heart. Peter identifies systemic prejudice external to himself, prejudice within his own heart, and God’s work to change it all. God is not simply fixing a broken system, he is transforming it into what he intended all along, and that change begins with Peter.

What does God need to transform in our culture? Maybe he wants to orchestrate change starting with you. The first step to fixing personal and systemic racism and injustice is individual acknowledgment of its presence within ourselves and within our culture. Have you done that? Will you do that? Will you examine your own heart for your prejudices and openly examine our culture for its systemic prejudices? We don’t do this to shame our culture or country, but because “...the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). To become agents of multiethnic reconciliation we have to understand racism is not simply a personal issue, but one that reaches far beyond individuals to systems and power structures.

Racism is the diminishment of worth in men and women in and through bias, systems, and power structures that disadvantage them in tangible ways based on skin color.” - *The Myth of Equality* by Ken Wytsma

Personal bias is a part of it; it’s just not all of it. There are systems and power structures like red-lining that has disadvantaged our neighbors, setting up barriers and making equality difficult. After the Great Depression, the government created housing programs to help Americans get mortgage loans. It was incredibly successful, helping millions of Americans purchase their first homes, millions of white Americans. Between 1935 and 1940 the government created “residential security maps” that established the risk levels of loaning to certain communities, singling out poor black and also white communities.

Here’s a map of Boston and the suburbs. A is colored green for “Best.” B is colored blue for “Still Desirable.” C is colored yellow for “Definitely Declining.” D is colored red for “Hazardous.” You can tell that many of the suburbs have high-ratings while those living in the inner city have low ratings. If you zoom in on one part of Boston you can read this [description of a red-zone](#). Please excuse my language:

...Area becomes less desirable north of Dover St. with Orientals concentrated in this spot. Portion west of Tremont is quite desirable - exception being Springfield St. which is solid negro. Between Columbus Ave. and the railroad north of Rutland are houses selling \$1,500-2,500 housing all negro.

If you were black, you were much less likely to get a loan, much less likely to be able to build wealth, much less likely to send your kids to college, much less likely to pass your wealth onto the next generation. If you were black, realtors didn’t want to lend to you because you would bring their property values down.

The practice of redlining was not outlawed until the Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968 (so if you’re 52 or older you were alive when redlining was in use). By that time the damage had been done; redlining created disparate wealth and economic opportunities. Between 1983 and 2013, homeownership rates among whites were roughly 25 percent higher than among nonwhites. Meanwhile, the median wealth of white families grew from \$46,160 in 1963 to \$134,230 in 2013, while African American wealth grew from \$2,390 to \$11,030, and Hispanic wealth grew to \$13,730. In 1983, whites held eight times more wealth than African Americans, and in 2013 they enjoyed twelve times more wealth. - *The Myth of Equality* by Ken Wytsma

Personal and systemic racism has created barriers, dividing walls, literal red-lines, that has harmed our neighbors. God calls us to love our neighbors and we can do that is by thinking of how we can restore what was lost (Matt 22:34-40). If we want to be agents of black and white reconciliation, we need to understand “the dividing wall of hostility” between us.

The Bible doesn't tell us about the multiethnic tensions between Jew and Gentile so that we know how to reconcile Jews and Gentiles. The Bible tells us about these things to be an example for us today. In our country right now we're facing cultural tensions between black and white. We have an opportunity to take what the Bible has to say, and apply it to our situation. We can be agents of reconciliation.

That takes understanding the problem. Several of us have been reading *The Myth of Equality* and are discussing it on Zoom on Wednesday, September 23rd, at 7pm. We're all learning together. You're all invited. Please consider picking up this book and reading it. You could try the audiobook while commuting.

Cornelius invited Peter to come and explain the gospel to him. We are living in a cultural moment where we too as Evangelical Christians are being extended an invitation to care about this issue. If we show we care, we too may have an opportunity to share the gospel. How will we respond? Will we take advantage of this opportunity? *The first barrier to racial reconciliation is personal and systemic racism.*

Barriers 2: Group Pressure & Personal Vulnerability

I want to jump ahead a little bit. Peter preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his Gentile family and they come to saving faith in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit falls on the new Gentile believers and everyone is amazed, well, almost everyone, not those in Jerusalem.

Acts 11:1-4 (ESV)

1 Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 3 “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” 4 But Peter began and explained it to them in order:

The circumcision party is a group of Jewish Christians that believed you had to be circumcised and keep the Jewish law to be saved. Peter explains his vision and how the Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles. Those in Jerusalem accept his defense and rejoice that God saves Gentiles.

Acts 11:18 (ESV)

18 When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

But even though Peter does okay here, he actually stumbles and falls back into habits of personal and systemic racism later when this same party, the circumcision party, applies pressure to him. Paul writes:

Galatians 2:11-14 (ESV)

11 But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. 13 And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

A group of people comes along and pressures Peter to separate himself from the Gentiles and he gives into their demands. But in doing so, Peter actually denies the gospel.

Today there are groups who don't want us as Evangelical Christians to admit that personal and systemic racism is still a problem in our country. But if we buy into that narrative, we miss an opportunity to become agents of reconciliation. We miss an opportunity to break down the dividing wall of hostility with the blood-bought message of Jesus Christ. We miss an opportunity to share how the gospel can transform hearts and communities. *Barrier #1 to racial reconciliation is personal & systemic racism and barrier #2 is group pressure and personal vulnerability.*

It's healthy to learn about a problem. But we also need a solution. Thankfully, I think we see a solution in our text, starting with the gospel message. That if we repent and believe in Jesus Christ, he can forgive us of our sins, even our deepest darkest prejudices, and help us change and work towards a new and better world. Maybe you're not a Christian because you feel like Christians don't prioritize racial justice. I'm sorry. Jesus cares. Jesus came to heal broken relationships, to reconcile black and white, he came to reconcile protesters and police officers, he came to reconcile any in conflict. Next week I'm going to be talking more about the solution—*Bridges to Racial Reconciliation*. I hope you'll come back.

The evangelist Billy Graham is famous for his huge revivals all over the world. When he arrived at one of them in 1953 in Chattanooga Tennessee he found ropes separating the white people from the black people. The white people could sit in the front but black people had to sit in the back. Billy Graham came down from the stage and told the head usher to take the ropes down. The head usher resigned so Billy Graham took the ropes down himself.

What about the ropes that divide us today? What about the social and economic dividers that so many of our black neighbors have to deal with everyday? What about the things we're seeing in the news this week? Here's the question. Are we going to take down the ropes? Are we going to personally acknowledge this is an issue, address it, and work towards systemic change? I believe we can and we will. The gospel calls us to do nothing less than take down the ropes.

Galatians 3:28 (ESV)

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What's the problem with the phrase "racial reconciliation"?
2. What are barriers to multiethnic reconciliation?
3. What is racism? Where is it?
4. What pressures do you feel to ignore the problem of racism?
5. What does it mean to be an agent of reconciliation?
6. How does the gospel help address the problem of racism?

7. What's one next step you can take?

¹ Wytsma, Ken. *The Myth of Equality* (pp. 36-37). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

² Perkins, John. *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love* (p. 17). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.