

BaptistWay Bible Series for April 15: Barriers do not have to be barricades

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Barriers do not have to be barricades

- Acts 11:1-18

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Barriers do not have to be barricades. Every major effort to succeed in reaching people with the gospel, to exceed the ecclesiastical status quo, to establish a new vision for God, to do something significant or to put new ideas into old thinking will encounter barriers of one kind or another.

My first church in Texas was in a small rural community and was made up of wonderful, loving, salt-of-the-earth kind of people who were faithful in Bible study, worship and financial support.





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I had taken the seminary course on Sunday school evangelism, taught by Othal Feather, who had developed a fresh approach that had been successful in other churches. Serious about evangelism, I was convinced the approach would work in our church.

Since the church was 150 miles away and contact was extremely limited, I followed Feather's book very carefully, spending hours of late night effort, examining in detail the Sunday school classes and organizing the church for outreach.

Announced in advance, on a Sunday night, I presented the plan to the church in explicit detail. Asking for discussion and input, one faithful deacon rose to speak and stated his appreciation for the purpose of the project, the work I had put in, and concluded with, "But, it won't work here."

There was no other person who spoke; the program died on the floor of the business conference. The barrier became a barricade. I learned quickly who was the leader of the congregation and that, regardless of the distance, I should have involved the leadership in the planning.

My assessment is that involving them in the decision-making process would not have changed the outcome. The leaders of the church were not going to do evangelism. No reason was given, no explanation offered and no details provided. The barricade was up.

Barriers come in many different shapes and sizes—prejudice, apathy, tradition, theology, training, leadership, attitudes, fear, governance, funding, protectionism and countless others. The churches can love and enjoy walls that isolate and insulate them from the community and from responsibility for the salvation of people, especially people who are not their kind.

The dominant theme of Pentecost is that the gospel is for everyone. When a church resists this example, admonition and commission, it resists the Spirit and becomes stiff-necked in defiance.

Affluence, race, language and education tend to segment congregations into divisions as a result of human psychology. After a time, these barriers become rigid, definable and expected.

In Cornelius' case, the barrier was both sociological and theological. Cornelius was of another race, of a despised vocation and sociologically elite. When religion is based on legalism rather than grace, nothing but havoc, division and antagonism will result. Righteousness demands rightness be tempered with grace, love and acceptance. Such creates the opportunity for healthy spiritual change.

Serious barriers brought about a crisis in the early church. Pentecost forced open new doors and confronted these old barriers. The initiative of God had brought about the transformation of life in the real world.

The success of the new church with the Samaritans, the Ethiopian and now the Gentile, Cornelius, forced the church to face their inadequate theology, national arrogance, crushing legalism and racial exclusiveness. Each step away from Jerusalem represented a wider racial and national barrier. The early church saw those barriers tumble down like Jericho's walls. The racial prejudice in America, at its worst, was miniscule compared to the gap between the Jew and the Gentile. How could or would the new Christian

Jew face their own community when such antagonism and hatred existed?

News spreads quickly (Acts 11:1-3)

Like reading the *Baptist Standard*, religious news travels fast and far. The experience of the conversion of Cornelius, the Gentile, spread like wildfire “throughout Judea” (v. 1). Those who criticized were Jewish believers, Judaizers, in the Jerusalem church still zealous for old, traditional beliefs and ways a Gentile had to be circumcised—become a Jew in order to become a Christian.

The theological battle that started here caused continual antagonism in the church known by Paul. I would have to imagine that every household in Judea heard the rumors and expressed their opinion on Peter’s disregard of Jewish thought and tradition. He had violated their inerrant word that Israel was God’s chosen people.

The comments might have been, “Who in the world does this poor fisherman think he is?” It was bad enough that he had fallen out of favor because he had become a follower of Jesus, the resurrected Christ, but now he had started meddling into the Jewish covenant made with Abraham. Peter should understand Israel is favored above all the nations of the earth.

The diatribe continued when they heard that Peter actually went into the home of an uncircumcised Gentile and ate with him. How could such things be, right here in Judea, the heart of Judaism? Observation by the non-Christian Jew might have been this: “Peter needs a rabbi and a scribe to bring him back to his senses. Perhaps he will be apprehended and placed in a dungeon or even crucified like his mentor, Jesus.”

When Peter arrived in Jerusalem, he faced severe criticism for the breach in the racial barricade. His liberal ways would have to be corrected. No one

could be included in the new Christianity unless they were of “like faith and order.”

Luke considered Cornelius’ entrance into the church, as the first Gentile, to be of incredible significance. The Samaritans and the eunuch had been converted, but they were not part of the new Jewish church fellowship. Distance allowed some comfort of soul and protection from traditional feelings of exclusiveness.

Modern Christianity is nonetheless stricken by this same abnormality where we rejoice at the salvation of all people, as long as they do not sit on our pew and stay in their place.

Explanation of the breach (Acts 10:16-11:17)

One has to observe the courage of Peter as he faces his contemporaries to explain the circumstances and his own personal experience. His leadership role continues to develop. There seems to be no fear, quite unlike facing his accusers at the foot of the cross (Luke 22:54-62).

The story of how Cornelius and Peter connected is marvelous and fits so well with how God communicated in biblical times. God had to do something powerful and supernatural to make an impression on Peter whose mindset of prejudice and religious favoritism had been taught to him and his family for generations.

Peter’s learning curve continues in a critical experience with similar impact as his revelatory declaration that Jesus was “The Christ of God” (Luke 9:20). Three times the sheet filled with unclean animals came down from heaven in the vision and three times the same message was given (Acts 10:16). God was convinced Peter had finally understood the message. The barrier between races, cultures, nations and people groups must come

down for the gospel of the risen Christ has universal application.

A Roman centurion, Cornelius, stationed in Caesarea, was a God-fearer, who was uncircumcised and consequently considered unclean. Cornelius, who was devoted to family values, social justice and worship of God (10:1-3), had a vision in which an angel spoke to him. Obeying the instructions of the angel, he sent some of his men to Joppa, about 30 miles south, to bring back Simon Peter (10:3-8).

During their journey to Joppa, Simon Peter fell into a trance and had this powerful vision of unclean animals let down out of heaven. Peter, who experienced Pentecost, still was struggling with prejudice and his old values. The vision was to teach Peter not to “call anything impure that God had made clean” (10:15).

Peter got this staggering and disturbing message, but was not quite sure how it applied when he was summoned to the door to greet the three strangers from Caesarea. Peter went with them, and when he entered the centurion’s home, the wall of partition was broken. The centurion, a symbol of Roman power and paganism, was loathed by the Jews. While seeking spiritual answers for his empty life, he became the chosen spearhead for opening the door to the world.

This pagan soldier-seeker must have been amazed when what he had seen in a vision took place as revealed and Peter was, likewise, when the lesson he had learned had to be applied to the unclean centurion (10:30-33).

The first thing out of Peter’s mouth was incredible, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (10:34-35). Before Peter completed his sermon, “the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message” and the “circumcised believers ... were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (10:44-45). This time the Spirit

came with the preaching of the word and before baptism. Evidence for the coming of the Spirit was “speaking in tongues and praising God” (10:46), similar to Pentecost, unexpected and unsolicited.

Then, Jews and Gentiles were baptized into the same fellowship of believers. No favoritism or distinction is made by the Spirit between Jew or Gentile. God’s position on his created humanity was understood and affirmed through the grace of God in the salvation experience.

Having recounted in 11:4-15 what had happened in 10:1-48, Peter quoted from the Lord the statement, “For John baptized with water, but...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5, Mark 1:8, Acts 11:16) and concluded, “if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?” (11:17).

Removal of the barrier accepted (11:18)

The criticism seemed to be, primarily, Peter’s association with Cornelius, the Gentile, and not his preaching to them or even their response to the gospel. What turned the tide, so to speak, seemed to be the argument or explanation that Peter would not oppose God’s will. Those who criticized had a change of heart and even “praised God” for granting “even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (v. 18).

Summary and Application

According to research, about 75 percent of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention are plateaued. The world is being brought to Texas

from the east and from the south. English is the language of the economic world, making communicating the gospel much easier. The demographics show rural areas are being repopulated, downtown areas are having urban renewal and our state is the second largest state in the union and growing rapidly.

There are churches on every corner, of every shape, size and color, yet the barriers to sharing the gospel are so strong. Bastions of impenetrable walls isolate congregations from the real world. Churches are wealthy, have buildings that stay unused most of the time, have budgets designed for internal programs, with worshippers who spend most of their money on themselves.

Governance allows a congregation to be guided by misguided people who study little and pray less, but with good intentions to see the bills are paid. There is more rejoicing over a financial report that is in the black, than over a lost sinner snatched from the doom of hell. While the population is growing and Baptists fight their political battles, fewer and fewer people are being saved, often because of barriers of tradition, theology, socio-economic concerns, racial prejudice, materialism, time, broken homes and so on, and so on, and so on.

What barriers exist in your church? Are they there because of God's will or do they need to come down? The church at Jerusalem was open, teachable. They listened to Peter's testimony and when convinced of the new truth, they made the necessary faith and lifestyle change. I commend the new church at Jerusalem that saw the light, changed their attitude and rejoiced the door to the world was opened. I doubt they had any idea as to the consequences of their change of heart or could conceive of the future of God's work because of what happened. Our obedience could change the course of Holy history. God only knows. What will you do about the barriers in your church?

Discussion question

- What barriers keep your church from doing all God wants you to do?

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Baptist churches, in Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.