

Breaking Down Barriers

Acts 11:1-18

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This week I shared something positive on Facebook and got pulverized. The criticism came quickly and repeatedly. Normally I'm more careful about posting about controversial matters so I wasn't prepared for all the venomous vitriol and overwhelming opposition. One person simply replied, "*Oh nooooo!*" Another told me to "*hush.*" One Edgewood member accused me of using a four-letter word.

I've decided to let you know what I posted even though I run the risk of causing more commotion and controversy, but I can't remain quiet any longer. I simply uploaded a video which captured white ice crystals falling peacefully from the sky with this caption, "*Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!*"

One of the first responses I received was, "*I say no, I say no, I say NO!!!*" One individual told me to go back to Wisconsin. Another said, "*Cheesehead statement for sure!*"

If you don't like snow, you'll have to take it up with God. Listen to what He says in Job 37:6: "***For to the snow He says, 'Fall on the earth.'***" Also, how can you be so against snow when this little guy obviously enjoys it?

BTW, because we know more snow is coming, we're looking for some servants to help with snow removal. You'll hear more about this serving opportunity at the end of the service.

As we continue in our series called, "Living on Mission" from the Book of Acts, we'll see how Peter was pelted with comments after experiencing something really positive. In Acts 10, we celebrated how Cornelius and his household were saved after the Holy Spirit interrupted Peter's sermon. As we walked through the passage, we discovered seven essential elements of the gospel of grace.

- 1. Assert that the gospel alone brings peace**
- 2. Acknowledge Jesus as Lord of all**
- 3. Absorb all Jesus did and said**
- 4. Agree that Jesus died on a tree**
- 5. Affirm that Jesus was raised from the dead**

6. Admit you deserve judgment

7. Accept Christ by faith alone and receive forgiveness

Acts 10 ends with Cornelius and his household being baptized and Peter staying with them in order to help them grow as disciples. Acts 11:1 tells us this news spread quickly, even without the help of social media: ***“Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.”***

The ***“apostles”*** were the ***“sent ones”*** and referred to the 12 men who followed Jesus. As we learned previously, ***“brothers”*** is a term of endearment used for fellow followers of Jesus and literally means, ***“from the same womb.”*** Born again believers are in the same faith family. I like what Michael Horton writes: ***“A church is not a group of friends you’ve picked. It is a group of brothers and sisters God has picked for you.”*** When I posted this on Friday, Aaron Langworthy added, ***“And like siblings, you better learn to get along because you are stuck with them.”***

The area of ***“Judea”*** refers to the south of Israel, where Jerusalem is the capital. Since most of the Israelites who returned from the exile were from the tribe of Judah, they were called Jews and their land, Judea.

The headquarters of the Christian movement in Jerusalem had ***“heard”*** reports about what had happened in Caesarea. The problem with reports is they invariably leave out important facts and exaggerate other details.

Look at verses 2-3: ***“So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’”***

Because Peter wanted to report to the new Christians living in the capital, he made the 75-mile journey ***“up to Jerusalem.”*** On a map it looks like he would have gone down, but since Jerusalem is elevated, one always goes up.

When he arrived, he was quickly and rapidly confronted by the ***“circumcision party.”*** This literally refers to ***“those on the side of circumcision.”*** These Christians, with a Jewish background, still held to the Law of Moses. They were OK with Gentiles becoming Christians *if* they first became Jews and were circumcised, *if* they followed the celebration days, and *if* they strictly observed the dietary laws.

Their beliefs bubble over in Acts 15:5: ***“But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.’”***

These Hebrew Christians had a hard time believing the hated Gentiles, especially Roman soldiers who occupied their land, had really repented and received Christ. When Peter arrived, they pounced on him and ***“criticized”*** him, which means *“to judge, to take sides against and to separate.”* The tense indicates they *“kept on”* criticizing him. Before Peter can even catch his breath after a long journey, they jump on him like a hungry dog on a bone.

Sadly, their biggest beef was not the Gentiles receiving the word of God, but Peter going into a Gentile home and having a meal. They couldn't celebrate the salvation of an entire household because they were aghast that Peter ate with unclean people.

Instead of rejoicing in the great news of gospel fruit, they attacked and accused Peter of two offenses. First, he went into the home of a Gentile and second, he ate with Gentiles. By the way, there's no Bible verse saying a Jew couldn't do this. It was tradition which led them to add a bunch of rules and regulations.

Here's one example of an extra-biblical prohibition taught by the rabbis. If a Jewish man walked down the street, he would hold his robe tightly when passing a Gentile so their clothing would not touch. If it did, he would be forced to burn his robe or go through a series of ceremonial washings. In some rabbinical writings, Gentiles were considered to have been created by God to keep the fires of hell burning. They were commonly called unclean street dogs. In fairness, four hundred years of Greek and Roman oppression had only hardened Jewish resolve to live separate lives.

By eating with non-Jewish people, Peter was simply following what Jesus Himself modeled for the disciples in Luke 5:30: ***“And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’”*** In Luke 15:2, their complaints about Christ crescendoed: ***“And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”***

Let me point out while some see Peter as the first pope and therefore authoritative or even infallible, the early church didn't see him that way. Nor did Martin Luther who said, *“...For I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is*

well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves...I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God." I believe the pope erred this week when he redefined the family and the biblical understanding of human sexuality.

As we unpack Acts 11, you might think, *"Wait a minute...this all sounds really familiar."* Have you ever heard someone preface a joke they're about to tell by saying something like this, *"If you've heard this before, please stop me..."*? I like what one guy said, *"If you've heard this before, please don't interrupt me. I want to hear it again."*

While the circumcision party might think this is all a joke, Luke, the author of Acts, retells the narrative three times because we all need to hear it again. Incidentally, whenever Scripture repeats something, we need to take notice.

The Holy Spirit is making sure these first followers of Christ don't view the church as just a sect of Judaism, but as the fulfillment of what God had promised – the enfolding of both Jew and Gentile into one body making up the church. If the Gentiles had been required to adopt circumcision and Jewish ceremonies in order to be saved, the gospel would not have gone around the globe. God's grace is for every race. One commentator puts it like this: *"The church's outreach to the Gentiles was thus a crucial step in the outworking of God's redemptive plan."*

Peter's response to these religious rule-keepers is a model for us as we face criticism or complaints. We'll see that Peter's answer is more pastoral than argumentative. I see seven correctives to help us handle criticism.

Correctives to Handle Criticism

1. Respond gently. I'm struck by how civil Peter was in his response. The old Peter would have lost his patience and spouted off in anger. He could have said, *"Do you know who you're criticizing? I was with Jesus at His transfiguration and I walked on water!"* He didn't say any of this.

Look at verse 4: ***"But Peter began and explained it to them in order."*** Peter simply started at the beginning and ***"explained,"*** which means *"to set forth."* He did this ***"in order,"*** point-by-point. He wants them to catch that God is doing a new thing. Or to use today's terminology, God is initiating a huge paradigm shift.

Peter is practicing Proverbs 15:1: ***“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”*** Humility keeps the conversation going in the right direction. This is a good word for us as political polarization is at an all-time high.

Speaking of politics, if you haven't already voted (over 50 million already have), I hope you'll take advantage of the privilege and responsibility of your citizenship and vote your values. I was greatly helped by Pastor David Platt's new book called, ***“Before You Vote: Seven Questions Every Christian Should Ask.”*** We posted a link on sermon extras if you'd like to order a copy. Here's a brief excerpt:

We have a responsibility before God and one another to steward our vote for the sake of good, God-glorifying governance...how we use our vote is a matter of faithfulness before God...God calls us to use every means of grace He grants us to love Him above all and love our neighbors as ourselves...make the stewardship of your vote your overflowing radical trust in Jesus, His Word to you, His Spirit in you, His rule over you, and His reign not only in our nation, but over all nations.

This weekend has been declared a time of prayer and repentance for our country. Allow me to lead us in prayer right now...

Related to prayer, our Mainspring ministry is hosting a time of prayer for repentance, revival and unity on Sunday, November 1st from 6-8pm in the worship center. This non-political prayer time is open to *everyone*. There will be individual and corporate prayer as we utilize the outline of the Lord's prayer as our guide. I plan to participate. Will you join me as we pray for our country right before the elections? Props to Reagan LaBerge and Claire Swenson for organizing this.

2. Recount details. In verses 5-6, Peter lays out what happened without defaulting to his feelings or giving his opinions. He doesn't say, *“I feel”* or *“I think,”* but rather, *“this is what happened.”*

“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air.” Peter describes the details and also mentions that he ***“looked at it closely,”*** which means, he *“fastened his eyes by gazing intently and then investigated and contemplated what it all meant.”*

This is an important step when dealing with criticism. Many times, people make assumptions without knowing all the details. It's easy to fill in the blanks with something negative. I've heard Pastor Ed say it like this, "*What people are not up on, they're down on.*" When we know some of the details, it's easier to understand and even embrace a decision.

I've shared this example before but it's a powerful reminder of how easy it is to get jacked up when we don't have all the information. I was preaching in our previous church one Sunday when I noticed a teenager up in the balcony texting on her phone during the entire sermon. I found myself getting upset even while I was preaching. I couldn't believe how rude she was being. It made me want to call her out, but I held my tongue.

After the service I made my way over to her, ready to tell her what I thought of her tenacious texting during my compelling sermon. Just before I corrected her, I overheard her tell someone she was really bummed out her friend didn't come to church that morning. When she realized her friend wasn't going to make it, she decided to text the sermon in real-time to her! I was busted. She was helping a friend learn about Jesus while I was being judgmental and legalistic. Because I didn't have all the details, I almost made a disastrous mistake.

Peter made sure people knew the details of what happened. Let's do the same.

3. Reflect personally. In this step, we see how Peter reflected on how he personally pushed back against what God was telling him to do. When we're real and vulnerable, the listener is more likely to listen intently. Listen to verses 7-10: "*And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven.*"

Peter spent his whole life living by verses like Leviticus 10:10: "*You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and clean.*" By reflecting on his personal struggles, he's inviting his listeners to put themselves in his sandals. Peter adds that the great sheet was "*drawn up again into heaven,*" showing this vision came from God Himself and therefore he couldn't disregard it, even though it took him three times before he surrendered.

4. Refer to God’s work. I marvel at how Peter didn’t get defensive or angry. Instead, he points the listeners to how God was weaving His way and His will through circumstances and His sovereign timing. Listen to verses 11-15: ***“And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.”***

He’s basically saying, *“How can anyone argue with what the Lord has done?”* Peter lists at least six ways God did His work.

- He points to God’s sovereign timing – ***“at that very moment three men arrived at the house”*** (11).
- It was the Holy Spirit who told him to go – ***“And the Spirit told me to go with them”*** (12a).
- He did not act alone – ***“These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house”*** (12b). Deuteronomy 19:15 states the importance of having two or three witnesses in order to establish something as true. Peter tripled the required two and doubled the required three.
- An angel went into the house of Cornelius and gave a command – ***“Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter”*** (13). Incidentally, if an angel went into the house of Gentile, then surely it was OK for Peter to do the same.
- The message Peter was to share was all about salvation – ***“He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household”*** (14).
- The Holy Spirit was given to the Gentile believers just as He had been given to the Jews at Pentecost – ***“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning”*** (15). The word for ***“fell”*** means, *“to embrace.”* God embraces those of other races and nationalities.

To keep you from being defensive, keep your focus on the story of God’s glory.

I saw the story of God’s unfolding glory on Thursday night. Again, I was reminded what a great job Sheila Kuriscak does leading our women’s ministry and our children’s ministry. Taking advantage of an opportunity to live on mission,

Sheila, along with Jeff, Jenny, Allie and Aiden Ehrardt and Melissa and Aerowyn Stanton, handed out bags filled with candy, information about our Trunk or Treat on Saturday, and a gospel tract to hundreds of kids during Fright Night at Sunset Park.

5. Remember Scripture. After focusing on God's work, Peter brought God's Word to bear on the situation according to verse 16: ***“And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”*** Everything that happened at Cornelius' house lined up with Scripture.

If your attitudes and actions come from Scripture, it's important to say so. On the other hand, if you are simply sharing your perspective or preference, make sure you allow for differences of opinion.

Peter experienced the work of the Holy Spirit as promised by Jesus in John 14:26: ***“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”*** The verse the Holy Spirit brings to Peter's mind is found in Acts 1:5: ***“For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”***

The Scriptures call us to remember over 100 times. In the Bible the word ***“remember”*** is not limited to cognitive recall, but also implies acting in accordance with what is remembered. We need to be reminded because we forget and become unfaithful. Later, Peter wrote these words in 2 Peter 1:12-13: ***“Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder.”*** Next weekend is communion where Jesus told us to ***“do this in remembrance of me.”*** We need to remember to remember our redemption and reconciliation to God.

6. Reason with people. Next, Peter uses logic and a rhetorical question in verse 17: ***“If then God gave the same gift to them as He gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?”*** The word ***“if”*** can be translated ***“since.”*** When they received Christ, they received the exact same Spirit, without having to jump through any holy hoops or Jewish religious rituals. Jesus said it this way in John 6:47: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.”***

By using a question, Peter is forcing his listeners to actively engage. Since God has gifted the Gentiles with salvation, how could he “*stand*” or “*prevent*” God from doing His work? That would be absurd. We are either standing in God’s way or we are walking in His ways. I’m reminded of Daniel 4:35: “*All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’*”

Essentially, Peter is saying, “*If you have a problem with this, take it up with God.*”

7. Rest in the results. It’s important to trust God with the responses of those who have been criticizing you. Their response is their responsibility before God. They may keep coming at you or they may get quiet. That’s what happened in verse 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.’*” To “*fall silent*” means, “*to acquiesce by ceasing to wrangle.*”

Their response is similar to how Job fell silent when he finally surrendered to God’s sovereign right to rule and reign supreme in his life. Listen to Job 40:4-5: “*Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further.*”

I love how they went from griping to glorifying God. They paused, they pondered and then they praised God. Their statement about how God had granted repentance to the Gentiles formed the foundation for the rest of the Book of Acts as well as the marching orders for missionary work to this day. This fulfills what Jesus said in Matthew 8:11: “*I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.*”

Let’s summarize. The best way to break down barriers with someone is to...

1. **Respond gently**
2. **Recount details**
3. **Reflect personally**
4. **Refer to God’s work**
5. **Remember Scripture**
6. **Reason with people**
7. **Rest in the results**

Call to Action

Will you pause and ponder with me a moment? I'm not sure why so many say 'no' about snow when the Bible uses it as symbol of purity and cleanness, like in Isaiah 1:18: ***“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”***

Cornelius and his household knew they were dirty, vile and wicked, and needed to be cleansed. So are we. The word **“come”** is an imperative or a command. And it's something we must do immediately – **“Come now...”**

To **“reason together”** is the idea of intimacy with God. One pastor points out the words **“scarlet”** and **“crimson”** refer to dye that was extracted from both shellfish and a type of insect. When white garments were dyed with these colors, they could never be made white again because they were colorfast and indelible. Once dyed no human could ever return them to their pure state.

Here's the glory of the gospel message, for both Jews and Gentiles. No matter how stained with sin you are, if you respond and repent of your sins, He will make you **“as white as snow.”** Rituals and ceremonies won't clean you up.

Are you ready to repent of your sins and receive the cleansing that only the cross of Christ can give you? Listen again to the response of those who finally realized relationship is more important than religious ritual: ***“And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”***

I've been talking to Andy Lakin about the need to believe and receive Christ. Recently, I gave him a gospel pamphlet and urged him to read it over. Then I said, when you're ready, pray the suggested prayer. I followed up with him this week and he sent me this email: ***“Yes, I did pray the prayer and asked Jesus to come into my life and save me from my sins!”***

On Friday, we talked on the phone and I celebrated his new birth by wishing him **“Happy Spiritual Birthday!”** I asked if I could share the good news with the staff and mention it in the sermon and he said, ***“Absolutely. This is something you don't keep in your back pocket!”*** Also, he gave me permission to use his name. Andy and his wife have gathered for several Edgewood services.

You can come to Christ right now and be cleansed of all your sins as well. If you're ready to repent, pray this prayer with me.

God, my sins have both stained and shamed me. I confess I am a sinner in desperate need of the cleansing only You can give. Forgive me for thinking I can clean myself up through religious ritual. I come to You now and ask You to grant me repentance which leads to eternal life. I turn from how I've been living and turn to You. Make me as white as snow in your sight through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I believe He is Savior and Lord, and I now receive the gift of Jesus into my life. I surrender to You now so You can do Your work in and through me, all for the glory of the story You are writing in my life. In Jesus' Name. Amen.