

The greatest human divide in the world (Jew/Gentile) was temporarily erected by God and finally destroyed at the cross, therefore we must apply the gospel to all human divides because it only has the power to heal what divides us.

Introduction – Racial divide between black and white in the U.S. Story of how Pee Wee Reese (a white southerner) on the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team in 1947 put his arm around his hated black teammate Jackie Robinson on the field to begin healing the divide. As deep-seated and heated as the black-white racial divide was in this country, it was nothing compared to the Jew-Gentile divide in the ancient world. The conversion of Cornelius is the longest narrative in Acts because it is the story of the final and most significant divide the gospel heals. For a Jew, it was conceivable that Galileans and Samaritans could be saved. But Gentiles? God’s answer is a resounding Yes! The story of Peter and Cornelius tells us how it happened. But this story is not just a history lesson. It has practical implications for us today.

I. How God Erected the Great Human Divide

A. The most ancient and fundamental divide in the world

1. Seed of the woman vs. seed of the serpent (Gen 3:15). From the beginning of human history, God created strife between his children and everyone else. Again and again, the OT recounts the battles between these two divided peoples, which typify the cosmic battle between Christ and Satan. Although the serpent’s seed even infiltrates the Jewish people, the faithful remnant continues to resist by being holy and separate from unbelievers.
2. Circumcision: covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:9-14). This sign of inclusion in the covenant community set Israel apart from the nations. If any male descendant (or household member) refused circumcision, he was “cut off” from the community and regarded as an “unclean” Gentile.
3. Dietary laws (Lev 11). Animals divided into either clean or unclean as God’s approved menu for Israel. Not for health, but for holiness. Even Israel’s diet set them apart from the Gentiles!
4. Sacrifice (Ex 19:5-6a; Lev 2:2, 9, 16; 5:12; 6:15; 24:7). Israel set apart from the Gentiles to be a kingdom of priests (those who offer sacrifices to God). Sacrifices were pleasant memorials before God. They brought Israel into a state of forgiveness and holiness—unlike the nations.

B. Why erect the divide?

1. Protect the seed of the woman (Gen 34; Dt 7:1-4; Ezra 9:1-2, 12; cf. 2 Cor 6:14-18).
2. Distinguish between the holy & common/clean & unclean (Lev 10:10; 11:45b; Deut 7:6-8). “Clean” meant fit for God’s presence because God is holy; “unclean” meant unfit for God’s presence. The “clean” could be dedicated for special service as holy to God. For the “unclean” to become holy it must first be cleansed and thus made “clean”. Clean and unclean classifications were based on either the moral or natural order of creation, and had theological implications.

II. How God Destroyed the Great Human Divide

A. God and Cornelius, the devout Gentile God-fearer (vv. 1-8). Notice Cornelius’s devotion to the God of Israel, praying, teaching his household about God, and giving alms to the poor. As a good person, he still needed the gospel of Jesus Christ to save him from his sins as much as notorious sinners like Paul. God “remembers” (as a sacrificial memorial) his devotion by sending him an angel in a vision. Cornelius responds in prompt obedience, eager for Peter’s important message.

B. God and Peter, the devout Jewish Christian (vv. 9-23). Peter also is busy praying when he receives a heavenly vision. But this vision is cryptic and requires contemplation to interpret. Since the vision's meaning marks a new movement in redemptive history, God repeats the vision twice, orchestrates the timely arrival of Cornelius's messengers, and prods Peter into understanding. This vision had tremendous spiritual depth for Peter (as a Jewish believer) because keeping God's covenant (including its dietary regulations) had profound implications on one's relationship with God. Peter also responds in obedience, eager for Cornelius's important message.

C. Peter and Cornelius Together (vv. 24-33). When they finally meet at Cornelius's door, both must broach the Jew-Gentile divide. Cornelius falls down before Peter in worship, treating him like a god. Peter rejects the gesture, but instead of despising the ignorant Gentile, Peter restores Cornelius to a level equal with himself and crosses the Jew-Gentile divide into his home. Peter finds many Gentiles awaiting him. He explains how it is taboo for Jews to even associate with Gentiles, but God has shown him in a vision that Gentiles are no longer considered common or unclean. Cornelius and his friends respond to Peter with thankfulness and eager expectation of his message.

D. Why destroy the divide?

1. Fulfill God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3).
2. Glorify the seed of the woman who died to redeem and heal the Jew-Gentile divide (John 10:14-16; Gal 3:16).
3. Display God's mercy on the nations, whom God has declared clean (Isa 49:6; Acts 10:15).

III. How Only the Gospel Can Heal What Still Divides Us

A. How should you respond to God (vv. 4, 7-8, 21, 23)? Worship (specifically prayer) and prompt obedience. Cornelius and Peter knew well that when God prompts us to begin healing a human divide, the only correct response is obedience. Neither argued with God because he is the living God, not a make-believe god in our image. He is the God of salvation, and he is able to heal any human divide. There is only one true God, and he is worthy of our worship and obedience. Anything else we worship or obey is an idol.

B. How should you respond to your gods (heroes) (v. 25)? Do not put them on a pedestal (like Cornelius did), but see them as people who sin just like you. This is obviously idolatry. No man is a "god." But Christ fulfills your deep need for a human hero. Worship Jesus! He alone is the sinless Savior. He alone can heal whatever is still dividing us since he already healed the great human divide. The gospel heals you from slavish devotion and hero worship by leveling the playing field.

C. How should you respond to your dogs (zeroes) (vv. 26-29; 34-48)? Recognize that you must not call common or unclean who God has made clean. Search your heart and examine your thoughts to discover your zeroes. None of these are outside the church's mission field. This is a subtle form of idol worship. When you refuse God's judgment (no one is unclean or common) and instead cling to your own judgments about other people, you put yourself and your standard of acceptance above God. You worship and obey something higher than God. That is idolatry. No man is a "dog."

Conclusion – The back-story of Jackie Robinson's role in healing the American black/white divide used to be well-known. It's not just a story from a bygone era of colorblind heroes acting on principled morality. The gospel of Christ's forgiveness of sins (and its implications for human reconciliation and social justice) was the engine driving the decisions of many of the key players in the story. God has healed the great human divide between Jew and Gentile. The healing power of God and his gospel is able to heal what still divides us. Believe it, be reconciled to God, and be an agent of Christ's healing.