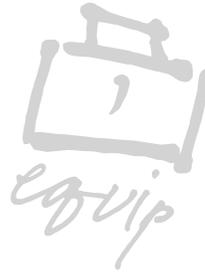


# confronting prejudice

BY BOB ROBERTS



- \* GENESIS 17:1-8, 21:9-21
- \* DEUTERONOMY 7:7-11

## STUDY 1:

### LOOKING THROUGH TAINTED LENSES



I was raised in a culture that said skin color mattered. I was a Southern Baptist pastors' son and though we would never admit it, we were affected by societal norms at that time. We definitely didn't consider ourselves racists but knew we probably held prejudice—I'm not sure we knew the difference.



In time, it dawned on me that racism and prejudice are not only sinful but detrimental to society. These sins violate the command of Jesus to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39) and are in outright contradiction to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-19). Sin's curse fell on every person, no matter skin color, culture, people group, gender, religion, social/economic status or anything else. God's blessings and promises are also available for every person in the world.

#### »» All men are created equal



I always wondered about the statement from "The Declaration of Independence" that "all men are created equal," because people are different. I grew up with a girl with special needs who was a part of our church family. We all loved her and watched out for her. But she was not equal in intellect or in her ability to care for herself. My dad also had a pastor friend who had a son with cerebral palsy. He was confined to a wheelchair and had to be institutionalized. On occasion, the pastor would bring him to our house.

I grew up in Southeast Texas, not far from KKK headquarters. My family didn't approve of the KKK or racism, especially my mother, but I wasn't proactive as a boy in keeping my friends from making racial slurs as I should have.



BOB ROBERTS IS THE FOUNDING AND SENIOR PASTOR OF NORTHWOOD CHURCH IN FORT WORTH, TEXAS, AND AUTHOR OF *TRANSFORMATION*, *GLOCALIZATION*, *REAL-TIME CONNECTIONS* AND *BOLD AS LOVE*. HE AND HIS WIFE, NIKKI, HAVE TWO CHILDREN.

My school principle called my mom one day and asked if an African American student could be seated in a desk next to me. Because other parents had demanded that the student not be seated next to their kids, the principle hoped I could since my dad was a pastor. Of course, my mother agreed. This young student became my friend, actually my first black friend. I remember thinking about the missionaries who lived in Africa who came to our church or camps to speak. Why couldn't people in my community accept this student like the missionaries loved Africans?

*the journey*

I remember the day Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered. I was 10 years old and unaffected, except for wondering if there would be riots. A few months after Rev. King's assassination, my dad, my little brother and I were grocery shopping. We walked out carrying our groceries and as we were putting them in the car, an elderly black woman came from behind the store with a box filled with vegetables. She stumbled and fell, and vegetables went everywhere. To our horror, people began to laugh and make demeaning comments. My dad immediately said, "Come on, boys." We walked over and picked up her vegetables while others watched. The vegetables were rotten, and I realized she had probably gotten them from the dumpster. My dad taught me by example that day when he treated another person with dignity.

3

## »» **Missions and God's love for all**

3

When I was eight, I wrote a letter to Baker James Cauthen, former president of the IMB, to let him know that I wanted to be a missionary, possibly to Africa. As I grew up, I had to ask myself if I would show love not only to people who lived in far-away continents, but also to people who were different from me in my own community. Was missions a "religious enterprise," or was it an "eternal enterprise" based on God's equal love for all? Now as a "pastor-missionary," not showing deference would become the base of missions for me and our church.

3

The Great Commission means that Jesus' followers show love and make disciples of all peoples and nations. If we discriminate against any peoples and nations, we get in the way of fulfilling the Great Commission. God's equal love for all peoples didn't start with Jesus giving the Great Commission; it started from the beginning in Genesis.

### \* **Read Genesis 17:1-8.**

God told Abram that he would be called Abraham, because he was going to be the father of many nations.

\* **Read Genesis 21:9-21.**

Who would be the first of a new nation coming from Abraham? What does this say about God's love of nations, past and present?

*the journey*

\* **Read Deuteronomy 7:7-11.**

Why did God choose Israel to be His example?

Israel was to be a light and example to all nations. Since believers in Jesus Christ have been "grafted in" as God's people (Romans 11), we are to be a light to all nations. Isaiah 49:6 states, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (ESV). No matter if people don't look like, talk like or believe like we do, God's salvation is available for all people.

So what do I do with my own prejudice? Psalm 139:22-24 (ESV) is a great place to start: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

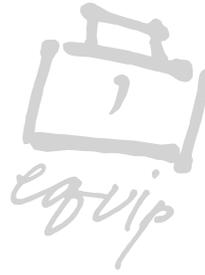
1. If you honestly examined yourself, would you find any racism or prejudice in your heart? If you feel comfortable, share a reason you believe this about yourself with the group.
2. If you look at those who attend your church, do you believe that your church is a place where everyone is welcome?
3. Why do you think people are more accepting of different people groups outside their home country?
4. Do we have the right to elevate or denigrate any nation? How could prejudice affect our prayers for a nation?
5. What will you do this week to overcome racism and prejudice?

### (OPTIONAL) DIGGING DEEPER

Read Revelation 7:8-10; Acts 10:34-35; Romans 2:10-11; James 2:1-10, 3:17. What did you learn about showing partiality?

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- \* ACTS 10
- \* ACTS 6:1-8, 7:58

## STUDY 2:

### THERE ARE PEOPLE WE LOVE TO HATE

Pain and suffering that are inflicted on you by someone can lead to a unique kind of hate called vengeance. God warns us about vengeance in Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19; and Hebrews 10:32: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." Only God has the authority to judge.

Σ Since my dad was a pastor, I remember one time as a child sitting outside a funeral home with the car windows down. I could hear a family wailing, because they had lost their son in Vietnam. The casket had to be closed, because the body was so badly injured. Another family who lived down the street had a son in a "prisoner of war" camp in Vietnam. I remember the father praying that his son wouldn't be tortured. Unfortunately, the son never came home and still remains "missing in action." Each night, I'd listen to Walter Cronkite report about the war, as I saw graphic images of death and destruction. Frankly, I was afraid.

At 18, I registered for the draft and wondered if I'd have to go to Vietnam and face the Vietnamese. People referred to them with profane slurs in my high school. Fortunately for me, the draft ended and that was that. But images from the television from the time of my childhood were burned in my mind. I thought the Vietnamese must be evil people.

In 1985, I became the pastor of Northwood Church. A few years later in 1992, after some spiritual brokenness, I began asking God what my life and the church were all about. Several questions brought to my mind were: Wasn't the Great Commission given to everyone, not just missionaries? Why had we limited it to a job description? What would it look like if a church mobilized all its members to engage the world? I certainly see the necessity of vocational missionaries; our church has over 20 couples serving as career missionaries around the world. Yet, what would it look like if church members would use their professional vocation as a platform to serve God in a city in another country?

Σ

## »» **What I didn't expect**

*the journey*

§ We got a team of church members together and began to brainstorm. One man on the team, Dr. Perot, had been an atheist before becoming a Christian. He also had piloted helicopters that transported wounded soldiers and survived three crashes when flying due to being shot down three different times. His survival led to him becoming a doctor. In our meeting, Dr. Perot said, "What about Vietnam?" I didn't expect that. My response was that I thought our veterans in the church might have a problem with that idea. But he replied, "I'm a veteran, and I think they'd like it. We dropped bombs during the war, but why not drop Bibles or something?" I then said the famous statement when we want to say "no" but still appear spiritual, "Let's just pray about it!" He could tell I was struggling. The people group I had "hated" the most was suggested to be a our people group we adopted.

The Vietnamese did become our focus. I remember the first time I flew into Vietnam in the early 1990s. After landing, we sat on the runway in the plane after the engines had been turned off. The heat was stifling. Soldiers came on board and walked through the plane. I was on the same runway that our American forces had flown in and out of in Saigon. I thought of all the dead American bodies in coffins that were held at this airport before being shipped out, and I became angry. The television images of my childhood returned, and I felt no love. I knew I shouldn't feel like this, but I did. I thought, *What am I doing here? These people are evil, and I despise them.*

But the next day when I was out on the streets visiting with people, the walls began to come down. I wound up spending entire months with my family in Vietnam on an annual basis. Today, we not only have hundreds of church members who have gone to this country regularly, but many have also hosted hundreds of exchange students who have come to the States and are now involved in our youth group. The people I hated have become the people that I love the most. Why? Because I built relationships with Vietnamese and began to see them through God's eyes. And I had never seen the war through the eyes of the Vietnamese people. They lost nearly 3 million people during the war.

## »» **Peter's prejudice**

From Scripture, we learn that Peter also had a problem with racism. He traditionally had shunned the Gentiles.

### \* **Read Acts 10.**

Did Peter or anyone mentioned in Scripture have an interest in reaching the

Gentiles before Peter met Cornelius? Why did God reveal Himself to Cornelius? How did God prepare Peter to seek out Cornelius? Why do you think God choose Peter? What happened when Cornelius and other Gentiles converted?

(*the journey*)

**\* Read Acts 6:1-8, 7:58.**

Stephen was a Greek Jew who was chosen to reach out to the Greeks (Gentiles) even before the story of Cornelius is recorded. Peter was sent to reach Cornelius and his family. Later, Paul would be called to go to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

God has a desire for all people to come to know Him. He has given the Great Commission to the church. When we as Christians harbor prejudice in our hearts against certain people groups as a result of war, terrorism, traditions or anything else, how can the Holy Spirit possibly use us to participate in the Great Commission? He can't.

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

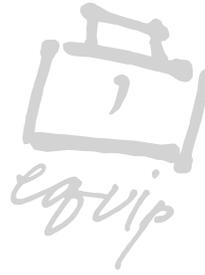
1. If it had been up to the early church in Jerusalem alone, do you think that Gentiles would have ever been reached?
2. Do you think this attitude still impacts the spread of the Gospel today?
3. Can you think of a time when you showed prejudice toward a people group and it kept you from ministry?
4. Explain how even in churches, people can have double standards when it comes to reaching out to the community?
5. Are the demographics of the community reflected in your church membership? If not, why not?
6. What has God shown you through this lesson about personal racism?

### (OPTIONAL) DIGGING DEEPER

Read the Book of Jonah. What did God call Jonah to do? Why did Jonah balk? Write down the steps Jonah went through before he obeyed.

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- \* ACTS 17:1-4
- \* ACTS 26:1-3
- \* ACTS 19:21-41

## STUDY 3:

### PEOPLE WE FEAR AND AVOID

Prejudice comes in many forms. Not only can we show prejudice against race, nationalities or ethnic groups, but religion is another area that discrimination can rear its ugly head. I've learned about it first hand, because I've had to deal with it personally. I have had to examine my own prejudice against other religions, especially the leaders.

Other religions and their leaders weren't just wrong, in my opinion, they were deliberately evil. I was taught in the church to compete with other religions, and I had no friends of other religions nor did I respect them. Somehow there was a disconnect in my understanding of the Gospel and the world. The reality is that all people need Jesus, and I should have been showing love and building relationships.

#### » Judging a whole group unfairly

I was particularly narrow-minded toward Muslims. Not only was Islam a false religion, but I believed Muslims were all terrorists. I was particularly upset that they were "evangelistic," and we Christians had to compete with them for "converts" globally. I was also afraid of them.

I remember on September 11, 2001, sitting at the table with my family for supper. We live near the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, and there are always airplanes in the sky, except that day. Our Vietnamese exchange student had been with us less than a month, and I wondered what in the world his family might be thinking after the tragedy of that morning. Our student's fears were much different. He later told me that he was not afraid of war—he was used to that—but he was afraid of not being able to finish his education in America.

I was glad God had called me to Vietnam to share the Gospel with communists. I no longer feared them and had become friends with many. They had sharpened my understanding of why I believe in God. I was forced to ask the

question, “Why should a person believe in God?” and “How do I answer that when they don’t accept the Bible?” I was compelled to study philosophical apologetics, which helped me to explain my faith to anyone. I had become comfortable in talking about my faith with people who didn’t have a strong religious background, but I definitely was not comfortable to share my faith with someone whose religion was radically different from mine—like believers of Islam.

*the journey*

A couple of months after 9/11, our church had the opportunity to go to a Central Asian country where Islam is the dominant religion. I wasn’t personally ready for that and didn’t want to, but God began to work in my heart and open doors for our church to move forward. Once there, I met a community leader who needed a school in his village. The national leaders in the area knew I was a Christian and a pastor, but I didn’t know if this man knew. To be up front with him, I told him that I was a Christian. He became excited and without my knowledge, he scheduled a meeting for me with several young Islamic imams. When we met, the leader told them that I was a Christian imam (pastor), and they could ask me anything. We talked for many hours, and then my friend told them I was building a school for his village. They asked if I would build schools for their villages too!

## »» **Paul’s approach**

\* Read Acts 17:1-4, 26:1-3.

The Apostle Paul reached out to leaders on many occasions in Scripture. He tried to speak to Jewish rabbis, and he even spoke to King Agrippa. When I faced these leaders in Central Asia, I literally prayed, God, I believe this is a door you are opening, but I don’t ever want to do anything that would hurt your work. I knew if we worked in some of the villages, it would have to be approved by these very imams, and here they were asking me! So I agreed.

As several churches partnered together to build schools and work on other projects, we were able to get to know and love Muslims. In my book, *Bold as Love*, I wrote about some of these experiences. I began to see Muslims as people who were sincerely seeking for God, just not in the right place or way, and I needed to love them and serve them because of the Great Commission. I had to move from seeing the world through American-religious eyes to seeing the world through Jesus’ eyes—there is a big difference. The people I feared the most have now become my friends.

\* Read Acts 19:21-41.

How did Paul determine where he would go? Why do you think Paul always partnered with others? What was the conflict Paul had with Demetrius? Did Paul state the truth clearly? Why do you think people liked Paul? Who defended Paul? Was it a "Christian crowd" Paul spoke to? Who invited him?

*the journey*

Paul is in a public square after being invited to speak by the leaders of Ephesus. He didn't trash other religions; he simply exalted Jesus. The city clerk basically said that Paul wasn't disrespectful of their religion. Paul gave us an example of how to be respectful to others who have different religious beliefs. How can we possibly share the truth of the Gospel with others if we show disrespect to them in any way?

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

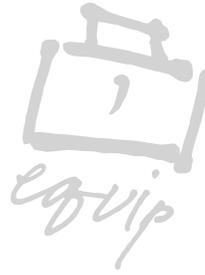
1. Do you have secret fear or disdain toward people of other religions?
2. After 9/11 or even the recent bombings at the Boston Marathon in 2013, did you find yourself building resentment toward Muslims?
3. How many Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or atheist friends do you have? If you have none, why?
4. What can you and your church do to reach out to those in your community who have different religious beliefs?
5. If you do have a friend who has different religious beliefs, share with the group how you have developed a relationship and how you have shared your faith?

### (OPTIONAL) DIGGING DEEPER

Research to find where mosques, temples or cultural centers are located in your community. Try to learn where different people groups live in your community, including international students. Discuss with your church leadership how your church can reach out to people groups in your community and overseas.

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\* COLOSSIANS 4:1-6

## STUDY 4:

### BRIDGING THE GAP

I was asked by a Muslim friend from the Middle East, "Bob, it's great what you do here, but what about in Dallas? What do you do there?" I told him, "I'm a risk taker but not suicidal, because Dallas is to Baptist as Saudi Arabia is to Islam." However, I learned that Dallas/Fort Worth is actually more global and less Baptist than I thought. Forty-four percent of the people who live in my metropolitan area were born in non-English speaking nations. In 1973, there was one mosque, but now there are 45.

Flying into DFW, one can see a mosque on the southeast corner just outside the airport. I arranged to meet the imam of that mosque and with a rabbi at one of the largest synagogues in my city. I explained to the imam and rabbi that I was an evangelical Christian and wanted to build a relationship with them. They both told me that evangelicals, Baptists in particular, were some of the people who attacked them the most and made life difficult. I apologized for that. I told them that I do believe the Bible is God's Word and that Jesus is God and the only way to God, but I felt that since we all lived in the same city, we as people of faith should work together to see our city stronger and to bring down barriers between people of different religions. I told them that the real challenge for people of different faiths to live in harmony is overcoming barriers set up by religious people who are motivated out of fear and tradition. Because I consider myself a conservative Christian, I should be the most humble, kind and gentle of all, because I care about them and where they will spend eternity. That meeting began the connection for our church with Jews and Muslims in our city.

#### »» **Being honest with no secret agenda**

When we came together after that, instead of focusing on what we all agreed on, we focused on who we were and stated up front the differences. In spite of that, the best of evangelical Christianity says we should love and serve others, and we were ready to do that. Some people would say that we should find the things we have in common and gradually share what beliefs and how it is

different. We found the opposite worked. Muslims and Jews felt we were being honest with them and had no secret agenda. I've told people of these two faiths, "I want to baptize all of you!" Being transparent allowed us to build a relationship quicker and deeper. We began to do projects together in our city, built relationships and had conversations. We focused on hands (serving and sweating together, which builds friendship and trust), then heart (developing trust and friendship) and finally, head (true relationship exists, which brings about deep conversation). Our gatherings together started with a few dozen, but now thousands participate.

*the journey*



## »» **Ruffling feathers in the "tribe"**



In the beginning, some of the members of my church didn't like this direction, and I wasn't prepared for it. We've been a "big" mission church with mission leaders coming in and out, so I just assumed everyone would be excited that we were breaking new ground in building personal relationships with people that most evangelicals in our city were ignoring. Some members said if we became friends with the people of other religions, some Baptists might convert. Some said bombs might be put in our building. Some said we were at war with Islam and had no business reaching out "at this time." Some people said we had been called the "Muslim church" for reaching out, and it was a bad label to have. We actually had many families leave our church over this very issue.

I was learning that we are all part of a tribe. My tribe, the Baptist tribe, existed to see the glory of God extended to the ends of the earth, but some in my tribe preferred American foreign policy or hatemongering over the command to spread the Gospel to all nations. There is no place for American politics or hate in the Good News of Jesus Christ. We are to love and share the Gospel with all peoples, not just halfway around the world, but down the street and next door as well. As a matter of fact, if we don't love people of different cultures here, chances are we really won't care that much about them overseas.

It makes me sad when non-Christians view evangelicals as hateful and mean-spirited. If we truly believe that Jesus is the *only* Way, the *only* Truth and the only Life, we especially should be kind, loving and definitely the most humble. Our goal should be to live the truth in love and point all men to Jesus. The only people Jesus ever got upset with were the ones in His own tribe. Through our experience, it disturbed me that Christians I thought loved me the most turned on our church, because we weren't just preaching, we were reaching out and loving others that were not politically, socially or religiously popular to love.



## >> Paul's model for evangelism



A few months ago, we had a gathering at our church of a few thousand people—Muslims and Christians—who gathered to do community projects. I shared the Gospel and also talked about serving the city together. As I walked through the crowd, our building was jammed so full that one hardly could turn around. I knew that God was pleased. Who would have thought there would be thousands of Christians and Muslims in a Baptist church in Texas building friendships. What was God about to do?

*the journey*



### \* Read Colossians 4:1-6.

What are the components of evangelism according to Paul?

Paul's evangelism model in this passage speaks of how we should view and reach out to others. All outreach starts with prayer, because that allows us to see people how God sees them, and it opens doors to share about Christ. We are to live wisely in front of non-believers, making the most of opportunities with them. We are to speak with grace and truth so that others will want to ask questions and get our answers. We need to be watching for each opportunity to be the example of God's love and to share the Gospel.

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The topics in these four lessons were perhaps difficult to think about and may bring controversial dialogue within the group. However, discuss God's view of all people groups and what impact His view may have on you and your church.
2. Would your church consider building relationships with congregations of other religions in your community? Why or why not?
3. Do you think it is easier to reach out to people of other religions in other countries rather than your community? Why or why not?
4. What is the most significant thing you learned after completing these four lessons?
5. Write a prayer to God concerning any prejudice you might have toward people of other cultures, religions, moral beliefs, political ideas, skin color or anything else different from you.

### (OPTIONAL) DIGGING DEEPER

Spend time in prayer concerning how God may be leading you after these lessons. Search the Bible and find examples of how others overcame personal barriers so that they could reach out to people different from them. Consider ordering and reading Bob Robert's book, *Bold as Love*, found online or in bookstores.