
Gospel Helper or Sell Out?

BOB HEERSPINK

Our behavior is a key part of how we communicate the Gospel, but sometimes how we live obscures the Gospel message. Is it ever okay to be flexible with our behavior in an effort to remove stumbling blocks to the faith for someone else, or is that just selling out? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, I wonder whether you have ever been intimidated by what people think to the point where you really feel you sold out with regard to living your faith in the world?

DAVE BAST

Yes; doesn't everybody? I mean, fear is...fear of others' opinion is a huge, motivating, behavior-shaping factor, I mean, for all of us I think.

BOB HEERSPINK

We want to be people pleasers; we want to make other people happy.

DAVE BAST

I also think that the pressure of fear gets ratcheted up when we are in the particular situation where to live out our faith – really, to be true to the Gospel – requires us maybe to confront someone else about *their* behavior. I mean, that is even harder, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

That is really tough.

DAVE BAST

I tend to avoid confrontation, don't you?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I tend to blink when I am in a situation where I have to confront someone with their behavior when I know what they are doing just is not Christ-like, and I know I should say something. There has been some kind of racial slur; there has been some kind of comment that I really feel I should respond to; and what I find is while I am busy trying to think of the perfect words to say, the opportunity has just slid right on by.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you are right. I hate trying to do that. I still remember something that happened 35 years ago. I will never forget it; and I remember being a student in seminary, being asked to preach at a church – a country church. It was a Sunday evening service. We had gathered a few minutes before the service was to begin with the elders, as they used to in those days.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; that was the style.

DAVE BAST

So, you gather for prayer before the service, but there are a few extra minutes, and people are chatting and visiting a little bit; and the vice president of the consistory – the leader of the elder board – told a racist joke that included the N-word.

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay.

DAVE BAST

And as the chuckles subsided, he said: Well, let's pray. And I just remember sitting there shocked, but also chagrined because I had kind of chuckled; you know, I didn't want to...

BOB HEERSPINK

You wanted to be part of the group.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and if I had had the courage and the integrity... I was 24 years old... a seminary student, I would have said to him: No, let's not pray, because what you just did is wrong and I cannot go in there and preach a Christian Gospel with that in my ears.

BOB HEERSPINK

The Gospel had really been denied in that moment just before worship is going to begin.

DAVE BAST

And honestly, I wonder if I would have the strength now – the courage to respond that way – to challenge that behavior. You don't like to give offense to people, but when they are wrong, what else can you do?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; you know, you go to scripture and you find out that some of the pillars of the Church had that same problem. It is hard to believe that an apostle would blink in the face of doing what is right, but that is exactly what happened in the passage that we are looking at today in the book of Galatians. Let me just read that encounter between Peter and Paul, and I think we are going to discover that his experience is pretty much our experience, too.

^{2:1}But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face (says Paul) because he stood condemned. ¹²For 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. ¹³And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy; ¹⁴but 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?"

DAVE BAST

That is a very interesting encounter. Paul has just been sort of giving a narrative of his life since his conversion. He is doing it in the context of defending his Gospel; that is to say, his account of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, which is our salvation, to the Galatians because he has been attacked there in that church by people who have come with a contrary message. So Paul explains how he got this Gospel by a direct revelation from Christ. He was commissioned. It is the word of God, it is not just his opinion; and he then gives an account of what happened to him after his conversion. He went to Arabia, he visited Jerusalem; and it is interesting because he talks about his encounters with Peter; and he says he met with Peter for a while – he became a colleague of Peter – but now, in the city of Antioch, he confronts Peter face to face.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and this whole passage is really addressing this whole problem with the Judaizers. Tom Wright, in one of his books, has a great story. It is a metaphorical story that really helps us understand what is going on here in Galatians. Wright says: Let's suppose you are a building designer, and you have laid out this wonderful community center in South Africa in the 1970s during the height of apartheid; and this building is going up and it has one central entrance; everyone is going to come into the building through the same door; and then you are called off to another project, and when you come back, you find other workmen have moved in, someone has reworked the plans; there is now one door for blacks, there is another door for whites; and when you talk to the community folks about this, they say to you: Well, these folks who have come on and taken over the project have explained to us that your plans just don't work – they don't meet code. They are not acceptable; and this is an improvement. That story really illustrates what is happening here in the Galatian church, where Paul is saying: Everyone has to come through the same door: Jews and Gentiles alike all come into the Church; and now others have come and said: No, there is a door for the Jews and there is a door for the Gentiles; in fact, if you are a Gentile, you really have to become a Jew and then enter the Church.

DAVE BAST

And it also illuminates Paul's confrontation with Peter in the city of Antioch, which took place earlier than Galatians; and we want to pick that up and unpack that story in just a moment; but first, let's pause and talk about how listeners can join us in this conversation through our website. It is listeners like you that make *Groundwork* what it is. Our website, groundworkonline.com, is another way that we work to join you as you dig deeper into the scriptures.

BOB HEERSPINK

There, we continue to reflect on today's discussion about our world and the Bible, as well as many other conversations that listeners have begun about scripture and how it interacts with their lives. Plus, we look to you to help us think about upcoming programs. Finding us is easy, just visit our website: groundworkonline.com.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, we are talking about the encounter between Peter and Paul in Antioch, when Peter actually aligned himself with the folks who wanted to take that one big entrance where all people could come into the Church and start building multiple entrances, for the Jew, for the Gentile, and how Paul had a real problem with that.

DAVE BAST

Antioch was the place where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. It was one of the major cities of the ancient world; on the Mediterranean, a great seaport; it still exists today, called Antakya in southeastern Turkey, and that was where, really for the first time, Christian evangelists went out and directly shared the Gospel with the Gentiles, rather than going first through the synagogue and Jewish Christians; and so Paul also was brought there by Barnabas and it became a center – kind of their home church as they went out on various mission activity; and at some point according to Paul's narrative here in Galatians 1 and 2, Peter had arrived in Antioch for a visit. So here are the two great apostles of the early Church, Paul and Peter, and they have this falling out – this disagreement – and really what happened was, for a time Peter had enjoyed fellowship with Gentile Christians. They were all one in Christ. He ate with them, and that was a key step because no devout Jew would ever share a meal, or even enter the house of a Gentile. They were ritually unclean, and so they had to keep this separation; but then, Paul says, certain people from James, in other words, from the Jerusalem church, which was headed by James the brother of Jesus, arrived in Antioch, and Peter, out of fear of offending them or what the consequences might be, stopped having this fellowship – this table fellowship – with the Gentiles, and drew back into a purely Jewish way of life. So, that was the issue.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, it is interesting there that here Paul uses the word *hypocrisy* of what is going on; and the word hypocrisy has behind it a word in the Greek language, which means wearing a mask. A hypocrite was actually an actor, someone who would put before his face or her face a mask to show a certain emotion; and what Paul is saying is that Peter has gotten into mask wearing. You know, he knows better; he has had the whole experience with Cornelius; he knows that the Gospel opens up now to the Gentile world, and he has been eating and drinking with these gentile believers, and now he puts on this mask and he becomes someone totally different; someone who is selling out the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

I think that is really an important point to bring up to remind us of that story about Cornelius; that is told in Acts Chapter 10, where God sent Peter this vision, you know, of the animals and the sheep; and he says: Oh, I cannot eat that, that is unclean; and God says: Don't call unclean what I have called clean; and he is not talking about animals, of course, he is talking about people; and the key thing...the reason why the Jews separated themselves from Gentiles is because they deemed them unclean; they were dogs, you know; and Peter, by his action, is conveying that message. It is a total denial of grace – of Christ. He is saying: Oh, okay, yes; you are a believer in Christ; you have been forgiven; you are accepted by God, but to me you are unclean and so I won't have fellowship with you.

BOB HEERSPINK

And this whole issue came to a focal point at the dinner table. I think we have to understand the importance of that in the biblical tradition; because for us, well, you know, we walk into a restaurant and we just sidle up to the lunch counter; we are eating next to someone that we don't even know. We are just rubbing elbows with a total stranger; but table fellowship in the ancient world was so important; and of course, this table fellowship spilled over from just having dinner together to sharing the Supper together – the Lord's Supper together.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; it is probable, isn't it, that that shades into that meaning of having communion?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is hard to know exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, the church gathered for a love feast; they gathered to break bread together and have dinner together, but from what we know, that then culminated in the Lord's Supper; so what the text is really suggesting is that Peter is saying to these gentile believers: Hey, I am not joining you at the table of the Lord.

DAVE BAST

So, there is this sort of message that he is sending about them. They are not really cleansed by faith in Christ – by the blood of Christ. They are still, in his eyes – his Jewish eyes – unclean; but there is also this two-door issue. He is really dividing the church by his behavior.

BOB HEERSPINK

He is really saying with those who had come up from Jerusalem: You need to become a Jew and then you become a Christian. You know, I look at this and I am so struck by the fact that being a Christian means being in community. I think as Christians today we often become very individualistic about our faith. You know, it would be easy for Peter perhaps to say to those gentile believers: Well, you know, you have your relationship with Jesus. You know, you are saved; and whether we have table fellowship together, whether

we are all really one; whether we affirm that in a public way doesn't really matter; but it does.

DAVE BAST

Well, the question of pragmatism arises. When I went to seminary one of the big, hot topics was church growth, and one of the great practitioners of this, Donald McGavran, who was a missionary in India, argued that the best church growth happens when we have homogenous congregations. They should all be the same kind of people – the same race, same class – because people like their like and that is how churches will grow; and I remember being troubled by it then. I think that is extremely problematic, isn't it? Don't you? That homogeneity principle? And you argue: Well, no, we believe we are all one in Christ, but for practical reasons we should kind of keep to our own.

BOB HEERSPINK

The Gospel breaks down social and economic barriers, and I think that is one of the great, transformative realities of the Good News. It is countercultural, because we do want to go into our own little tribes and we want to be with people who are like us; and the Gospel won't let that happen. I think of the trips that we have made together to India, where the caste system, even though it is technically illegal in India, that whole notion of castes still has its grip on society; and how the Gospel comes and starts to break that down. There isn't a church for the Brahman; there isn't a church for the untouchable; but now we are all one in Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

But I still wonder, practically speaking, how far do we go? Is there some role to be played for... what shall we call it – realism – that says: You know, people have their own cultures, and maybe monocultural worship is more effective in helping people. How far do we go? Do we become all things to all people, as Paul says, or do we confront Peter to his face and say: No, what you are doing is wrong?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think we have to push a little harder on why Peter did what he did because, you know, I look at this story and there is a piece of me that says this is just typical Peter. He was always waffling back and forth. This is the guy who hops out of the boat and he is going to walk on water; he sinks like a stone. He is going to go to death with Christ and ends up denying him three times; but I think that if you were...

DAVE BAST

First he eats with Gentiles and then he stops eating with Gentiles...

BOB HEERSPINK

But I think if Peter were at this table today and having a conversation with us, he would say: Look, guys, I had some reasons in my head that seemed to make sense at the time; and I really had in mind the good of the Church; and I would like to come back and push on that a little bit after we take a break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink; Dave, we have been talking about why Peter acted the way he did. Was it just because he had a personality that waffled back and forth? I don't think so. Yes, he was intimidated by these folks who came up from Jerusalem...

DAVE BAST

Yes, it says Paul says it was for fear.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; but I think if Peter were here...

DAVE BAST

That is pretty clear, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; he was intimidated – he was afraid; but I think if you were to ask him, he would say: Look, I had concerns for the Church back in Jerusalem. Word was going to get back – and was already probably getting back – that Peter is having dinner with Gentiles; and the more this is shared in Jerusalem, the more pressure the church in Jerusalem is going to be under. There was a certain sense in which the Roman government was protecting the Church at this time because they were seen as a Jewish sect. That was all going to change; and so, I think Peter would say: Look, I was being pragmatic. I was trying to save the Church from persecution by just tweaking the Gospel a little bit.

DAVE BAST

Well, not only save it from persecution, you can clearly get the sense that the argument was: If you don't stop this, you are going to kill our outreach among the Jewish population; not just in Jerusalem and Judea, but throughout the world. There is a very interesting episode from Paul's first missionary journey, actually, in the area of the Galatians, where he appears and he starts preaching in the synagogue, and he kind of preaches this Gospel of openness to Gentiles, and the next week he preaches again, and all the gentiles have come to hear him and the Jews are very much upset. You know how that works, right? The old line members of the church don't want all this crazy stuff going on. It is bringing new people in, but you know, it is upsetting us. If you don't stop doing that, you are going to lose your old members.

BOB HEERSPINK

Christian pragmatism keeps pushing against us again and again in so many different ways. I think about our tendency in a post-modern world, where truth is relative, to really compromise on that basic teaching that we talked about last week: Christ alone. Christ alone for salvation. It is so tempting to say: Well, you know, can't we just back off a little bit on that? It is going to make a Gospel that is more acceptable to a post-modern community?

DAVE BAST

Well, it might make the Gospel more acceptable, but it comes at too high a price. You know, Bob, they were right – the conservative party here – they were right, because Jews did stop believing by and large; I mean, it is one of the greatest tragedies in the whole history of the Christian movement. As soon as large numbers of Gentiles began coming to Christ and the Church shifted to a largely gentile society – community – by and large Jews stopped believing.

BOB HEERSPINK

You can lose your audience...

DAVE BAST

Think of the tragedy...yes, think of the tragedy that that led to in history.

BOB HEERSPINK

You can lose your audience, but you cannot lose the Gospel; and it is a reminder, Dave, that as the Church proclaims the Gospel, it is not just counting numbers.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is being faithful to the truth of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, and this is why...exactly why Paul confronted Peter the way he did. Listen again to what he writes in Galatians 2:14: But when I saw that their conduct...(meaning Peter, but also this conservative party from Jerusalem) their conduct was not in step with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "How can you do this? Because you are not really keeping the Jewish law anymore," (and he meant the ritual law. We are not talking about morality and the Ten Commandments. We are talking about dietary rules and restrictions.) You are not doing that anymore. You've got this freedom in Christ. How can you try to force Gentiles to accept what you don't even follow anymore? And so, he challenged him. Never mind if it has bad results. Sometimes if the truth of the Gospel of grace is what is at stake, we have to stand on the Gospel no matter what happens.

BOB HEERSPINK

And yet, Paul himself recognizes that we cannot put stumbling blocks in front of people that don't need to be there. In fact he, in one of his letters says that he is willing to become all things to all people to win some to Christ. So, I think one of the challenges we face, Dave, is to say: Okay, where is that line? When do we overstep that line when it comes to selling out the Gospel, and when can we accommodate ourselves in such a way that we win a hearing for Christ?

DAVE BAST

Yes, compromise, right. To me, the key question to ask to begin with is: What is your motivation? Are you being motivated by fear? Fear of offending? And especially fear of offending people who are quick to take offence.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

We all know situations where strong-willed – strongly opinionated people try to manipulate you by saying: Hey, if you do that you are going to offend me; and I don't think that is a valid or legitimate motive for compromising. So, that is the first question: Are you being motivated by fear or are you genuinely being motivated by a desire to adapt yourself to so identify with someone that you come into their life on their level in order to share the Good News of Jesus with them?

BOB HEERSPINK

Peter was not doing what he was doing to win Gentiles for Christ. If anything, this was becoming now a barrier for Gentiles to come to Christ.

DAVE BAST

Right; and he also knew better. He knew very well that...

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I think that gets to a second point: Are you willing to defend what you are doing to the broader church?

DAVE BAST

Good, yes; that is a good point.

BOB HEERSPINK

You lay it before the church and you say: Does this make sense? This is not simply my personal way of relating to the world, but is this something that other Christians would come alongside and say: Yes, with

regard to what you are doing to win a hearing for Christ, this makes sense.

DAVE BAST

And most important of all, is what you are doing consistent with the whole Gospel of grace in Jesus Christ? Peter's problem was not with his doctrine – it wasn't with his teaching – it was with his behavior. So, can your behavior... there is where the hypocrisy thing comes in again. Hypocrisy is when our behavior is contradicting our core beliefs; and that is what Peter was doing.

BOB HEERSPINK

The Gospel stands. Christ alone, grace alone. Anything that would contradict that core teaching is simply out of bounds when it comes to proclaiming the Gospel, even if we think it is going to become very successful in terms of evangelism.

DAVE BAST

So the question for us is: Do we have the courage...

BOB HEERSPINK

The guts...

DAVE BAST

To do what needs to be done in order to stand up for the Gospel?

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So, tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/gospel-helper-or-sell-out>

Printed on January 10, 2025