

Gospel Unique

DAVE BAST

When it comes to religion, our world offers many options. For children and adults this can be very confusing. Many of the moral teachings are the same among different religions; but does that mean the religions are the same? Do we all know the same God and just use different names for him? It is important to find assurances in these matters. We need a solid foundation on which to cultivate our faith. So in a world with religious options, how do we know Christianity is true? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

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

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, I was in Japan a while ago, and while I was there I visited a Buddhist temple. We were being taken around the grounds by this tour guide who spoke very good English. We came to this one display where there is the Buddha, and behind the Buddha there is this panel with a rising sun, and we began to have some conversation about Buddhism and Shintoism – you know, how do they relate?

DAVE BAST

Shintoism, the national religion of Japan; that is the rising sun part of the...

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly; and we said: How do these connect? And he said: Well, you know, they are all the same... Buddhism, Shintoism, Christianity... it is all about the rising sun. They are all alike.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, he was right in one sense. Christianity is about the rising *Son*, but in a different sense. Yes, that is a common view I suppose, isn't it? Many paths up the mountain, all leading to the same destination. Many different ways – the god of a thousand names and a thousand faces – all that kind of stuff is just sort of the default position of many people today, including, I think, many Christians, at least nominal Christians; some maybe more than nominal.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and today when we look around us, there are so many people of different backgrounds, and even different religions living in our own neighborhoods. I think the question becomes much more real, much more personal: What do we do with other faiths? We have been looking at some questions that 8th graders have asked. What is on the agenda for an 8th grader who is wrestling with the truth of the Gospel; and we got some questions back from an 8th grade class, and one of the questions that came to us is: What do you do with all the religions around you? How do you know that the Christian faith is true? That is not just an 8th grade question, as you say, that is a question Christians are wrestling with as well.

DAVE BAST

And one way that people are responding today, as we have pointed out, is to say that all religions are true, more or less. They are all just teaching about ethics – what you should do to be a decent person – basic morality – and they are teaching about God in one way or another – the God who is above us or over us all; and maybe that God is unknowable and we all just have different takes on him, you know. Another thing, though, that is being said increasingly today is that all religions are false – they are equally false – because there is no God, and all we should do is just try to live good lives.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, it strikes me over the course of the years that the questions have changed in our society. You know, at one time people said: Well, the Christian faith cannot be true because it is not scientific; you cannot prove it; there is no way you can test the truths of Christianity by empirical means. You know, that kind of thinking now is pretty much thrown out the door. I just find people believe anything and everything. I turn on the television set and here is Ghost Hunters and here are people going after the spirit world with...

DAVE BAST

The paranormal.

BOB HEERSPINK

With their little Geiger counters, as it were, and recorders; and it is like we have gone from the fact that religion is unscientific to basically saying anything goes.

DAVE BAST

It reminds me of a line... I think it was the Russian writer Dostoyevsky who said when people stop believing in God they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

But you will also hear today folks saying: What you believe is true for you and what I believe can be true for me, so you shouldn't try to impose your views on someone else; and when Christians try to make this claim that *our* faith is true – Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life – that is being impolite, at the very least, and maybe bigoted even at worst, and who wants to be a bigot? Nobody wants to be thought to be not nice.

BOB HEERSPINK

We went to Facebook and we asked the question there: Has anyone ever called you intolerant? And we had people who said yes, that is exactly what has happened... for being a Christian.

DAVE BAST

And for making Christian claims – truth claims.

BOB HEERSPINK

One person said: You know what? I have been accused of that, and it does push me back; it mutes my testimony because, yes, who wants to be considered a bigot? Who wants to be considered someone who just goes around judging their neighbor?

DAVE BAST

And let's be perfectly honest at this point, there are bigoted Christians, and there are those who have given us all a bad name and a bad reputation because of their intolerance, their harshness, their sense of superiority, the way they just lash out and attack other people; and that is not right either. There is a right way and a wrong way to go about confessing the Christian faith and holding up its truth and making those claims in a

way that is not demeaning or hostile or insulting to other religions and other people.

BOB HEERSPINK

So I think of the middle schooler who asked that question, and I can imagine this person says: Hey, I want to be kind, I want to be gracious. It is so easy just to say: Well, whatever you believe, its okay; and yet, there is this sense that the Christian faith has something that is unique; or is there something unique? That is really the question we really have to wrestle with today.

DAVE BAST

And I think that is a question that the Apostle Paul would have welcomed because the truth is, as you look at the New Testament, and especially if you look at the book of Acts, you realize that their world was exactly like our world. It was a syncretistic, pluralistic world with lots of truth claims and lots of different gods and lots of different religions, and this overwhelming sense that you cannot claim to have the unique truth; and that is the world in which Paul operated as a missionary.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I think for us to go back to the New Testament and read the New Testament today, we are more into the New Testament world than we often know, because this was not a world of science and empirical truth; this was a world where people believed everything and anything, and they were simply plucking from the tree of religion, you know, their own personal fruits; and so Paul really wrestles with the same thing we are going through right now.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, and that is the story we want to look at. It comes from Acts Chapter 17, and it is a great example of how the Apostle confronted multiple truth claims with the Gospel. We will look at that after this short break.
Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink, and with me is my co-host, Dave Bast. Dave, before the break we were talking about the fact that we wrestle with the uniqueness of the Gospel; and yet, Paul wrestled with that same uniqueness, too; at least, that became one of the challenges as he shared the Gospel on his preaching journeys.

DAVE BAST

And that story is told in the book of Acts; the whole last half of the book of Acts follows Paul on this great series of missionary journeys; and in the second one of those journeys he made a significant leap. He passed from Asia over into Europe – into Greece; and as he made his way through Greece he eventually reached the city of Athens, and that story is unpacked for us in the 17th chapter of Acts.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, when I read that passage I am struck by how many options there were in Athens for the religious propensities of people. I mean, there were the traditional gods... Paul talks about the fact that there are these temples all around...

DAVE BAST

Zeus and Apollo and all those.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right. If you want to go back to the old time religion, so to speak, in Greece and in Rome, there they were.

DAVE BAST

But there were also many philosophies that were competing, because by the First Century historians tell us most of the people did not literally believe in the old gods...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, they weren't buying it.

DAVE BAST

With the statues and the old myths; but they would follow one philosophy or another; like the philosophy of stoicism, which sort of meant grin and bear it. We still talk about stoics today; you just put up with life and tried to be brave.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, there were stoics according to Acts 17 that met with Paul; and Epicureans who... they didn't so much take a stance of saying: Hey, here is life. Deal with it rationally. Their emphasis was more on enjoying life. Enjoy what comes. Live a tranquil life. Enjoy the pleasures. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

DAVE BAST

Yes; they would have fit in pretty well in 21st Century Western culture.

You know, one thing that strikes me about this story is you begin it in Acts 17. Luke begins by saying while Paul was waiting in Athens he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols; and that phrase really strikes me. He was distressed at the idolatry. I think that a lot of Christians today who take this line that, yes, well, you know, it is one among many and let's not be bigoted, don't share with the Apostle that sense of almost, not just grief but outrage that Jesus is neglected. He ought to be worshipped. Are we distressed by all the idolatry around us; by all the people who are not acknowledging that Jesus is Lord? That is one of the great motives, I think, that drives real Christian witness. It certainly drove Paul – the desire to see Christ take his rightful place as Lord, and to be acknowledged.

BOB HEERSPINK

It seems to me that the passion for mission in a church is really a sign for how much we have taken seriously the fact that Jesus is unique, and that we need to have a heart for people and for those who are going in directions that eventually simply lead to destruction.

DAVE BAST

Yes; a heart for people, but also a heart for the glory of Christ. I think that is what motivated Paul; and many great missionaries down through the ages have shared that same thing, that Jesus deserves to be worshipped. He almost demands to be worshipped; and when people turn aside to idols, it is greatly distressing to him.

BOB HEERSPINK

So let's read some of that story, which you find in Acts 17: ²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, "People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious; ²³for as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship I even found an altar with this inscription: To an Unknown God. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship, and that is what I am going to proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands; ²⁵and he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out the appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him; although he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸For in him we live and move and have our being, as some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

DAVE BAST

Okay; he begins by saying: I see you are very religious. Is that a compliment or is he simply making an observation? Is that a positive thing?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, the word actually could be translated: I see you are very superstitious; but I do think it is worth noting that Paul doesn't stand up and start to blast people. There is this notion that people have that, okay, if Christianity is special, then we simply stand up and rant at people. Paul is not doing that here. He is actually trying to build a bridge to those that he is trying to reach.

DAVE BAST

And he looks for a point of connection, doesn't he? He wants to engage them, so he points to this altar that they have actually erected to an unknown god in case they missed one of them, you know. They say: We'd better build an extra one in case there is one out there that we haven't found yet; and Paul... here is the point at which he shifts from respect and engagement to something that might sound even a little offensive because he says: You know what? You are really ignorant when it comes to true worship, and I am going to tell you; I will fill you in on what you don't know.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you see, Paul is honest. He calls it as it is, but he also recognizes that within everyone there is this, well, John Calvin called it the seed of religion. There is this desire to worship someone that is beyond ourselves.

DAVE BAST

Like Ecclesiastes 3 has that phrase: God has put eternity in their hearts so that they might seek him; and Paul picks up on that here, too. There is a sense of the divine in human beings.

BOB HEERSPINK

And then in this passage he even starts to quote some of their own pagan poets insofar as they speak the truth. We are his offspring. That was not said first by Paul, it was said by a Greek poet; but here Paul is saying: You know, we share some things in common in terms of how we see ourselves. I understand, he says, that you see yourself as in some way made in the image of the divine, so let's talk about that.

DAVE BAST

Well, and certainly one of the things we share is in the area of human ethics; and that ought not to surprise us that God has made known to everyone everywhere roughly speaking what they ought to be doing. I mean, everybody deep down has some sense of maybe the Golden Rule; that they are their brother's keeper. In fact, C. S. Lewis points out somewhere that Jesus didn't really say anything new in the area of ethics. The kinds of things he taught were taught in China by the Taoists or Confucius, and they were taught in the Old Testament, obviously, in the Law of Moses. So that is not really trailblazing, and that is a point of contact that we all have as far as what we ought to be doing. Now here is the difference, as someone said: We all know what we ought to do, only the Gospel tells us how. Where do we get the power?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and there are those who have boiled down religion to ethics, and so then they say: All religions are the same. All religions say love one another. Well, religions typically do, but the power to love and the notion that I am in contact with God – I have a relationship with God – that is what Paul is picking up in this passage, and he is saying: You know, you Athenians, in spite of all your temples and all your worship and all your philosophy, you don't have that.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you are ignorant. In fact, that is something Jesus said once to the woman at the well. It also sounds very offensive, if we stop and think about it, on his lips: You worship what you do not know; and what you don't know I am going to tell you, Paul adds, and that is the rest of his message as he goes on here in Acts 17; but let's take a break first and then we will pick that up.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink, and with me is Dave Bast.

Dave, we have been talking about the fact that Paul sought to build a bridge to his listeners; he looked for ways in which he could connect the Gospel into what they already thought about religion and faith.

DAVE BAST

And he showed respect for their religion. He quoted what was good and what agreed with what the Bible taught.

BOB HEERSPINK

But he couldn't leave it there. It is not enough to go to people of other faiths and say: Well, there are some things we have in common. He had the courage in his sharing of the Gospel to push beyond that and to talk about, well, you could say what they didn't know, and that they needed to know.

DAVE BAST

And here it is. I will read the rest of his message from Acts Chapter 17:

²⁹“Therefore, since we are God's offspring... picking up on a quote from one of their philosophers, Paul added: we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent; ³¹for he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” ³²And when they heard about the resurrection of the dead some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Paul there cuts right to the chase. He says: Okay, let's talk about Jesus; let's talk about Christ; and then he brings up in his proclamation the one thing that he knows is going to offend those philosophers, the whole notion of resurrection.

DAVE BAST

Of the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the grave, yes. Their idea was, well, the soul escapes the body and flies off to heaven when it dies.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and the last thing you would want is to have your body back, a Greek would say.

DAVE BAST

But this is the heart of the Gospel, Paul says; and this is the heart of God's way of reconciling the human race to himself; and all that Jesus promised and all that he did on the cross – it is all confirmed by his resurrection from the dead. That is the key point.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, he pulls another tough little bit in here. He talks about judgment, where we often don't want to go. Someone has said that this passage or this speech begins with creation and there is the ability there to build a bridge as to who we are as those created in God's image, but it ends with resurrection and judgment.

It goes right to who Jesus Christ is and what he yet will do in this world.

DAVE BAST

And here is another extremely important point. He hits the note of repentance. He says: God has commanded everyone to repent. This is not sort of a universal message that is just going to flow over everyone. You need to repent. You need to turn from your sins and embrace Jesus Christ by faith; that is the way the whole thing works. If you don't repent, this is not for you; all that is left is judgment. So this is clearly the Gospel message that Paul is proclaiming here to the sophisticated philosophers of Athens, and some of them sneer at it, but others are engaged and want to hear more.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, and to that middle schooler who says: Okay, what makes Christianity unique? I would say Christianity is a faith that is rooted in history. Something happened in the First Century that turned the world upside down. I go to other religions and I see different philosophies, I see various systems by which if you practice these rules you can get right with God; but Christianity puts Jesus front and center and says his life is what makes all the difference.

DAVE BAST

And his death and resurrection. The other religions are about ideas; the Gospel is about a story, and the amazing thing is, God saves people through that story when they hear it and they believe it and they respond to it, that changes them and gives them the power to live out the ideas and the ideals and the ethics of the Golden Rule and all the rest.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it is a story, but it is a story that we confess really happened in history. It is a unique story that is true.

DAVE BAST

I have a friend who is a pastor who has a really great illustration that I have heard him use: Imagine that we are all human beings – a group of people sitting in a circle around a fire and out there is the fog and the mist and you cannot see, and there is death out there, and God may be out there somewhere; and one person says: I think we should go this way. I think he is down that path. Another person says: Well, I think it is over this way. A third one says: No, it is the other way. And then imagine that someone comes into the circle from the darkness and the fog. That is what Jesus has done. It is not us going out there searching for God, but he is coming back from the dead and telling us: Look at me. That is who God is.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is true, and here is the way.

DAVE BAST

Here is the truth; this has happened; but that still raises the question: How do we relate, then, in a pluralistic culture? How do we share this Good News with those around us who don't agree or don't accept it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, someone put on our Facebook site the fact that what they try to do is keep open those lines of communication; that it is so easy to come across as judgmental, alienate people; but this person said: By showing respect, by listening, by allowing yourself to engage in conversation, you can build a bridge. I think Paul was building a bridge. You can build a bridge so that you can share the truth of your faith.

DAVE BAST

Well, a lot of it, I think, might be sort of clearing the ground of misconceptions and misunderstandings. I think we have to keep telling the story and saying: I believe this really happened. Here is why... here is why I think it is true. There are things that point to it. There are certain evidences that point to God and point to the truth of the resurrection; but ultimately it seems to me people are going to be loved into acceptance of the

truth. They are going to be drawn into it by what they see of our life. If we are really living out the life of Jesus and showing that we have been changed by the truth of this story, that is what is going to be attractive.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and to be able to relate to people in an unapologetic way. We don't have to apologize for our Christian faith or its uniqueness. We can say: This is what God has done in history, and because of that my life has changed and your life can be changed, too.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks Bob, and thanks to you, too, for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today; and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating in the conversation that will keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you have been hearing, or suggest some topic or passage you would like to hear us talk about on a future *Groundwork* program. Visiting us is easy; just go to groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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