
Jesus: God and Man

BOB HEERSPINK

For centuries, the Christian Church has taught that Jesus is both fully human and fully God; but do you ever find this hard to wrap your mind around; or have you ever found yourself wondering how it works and why it matters? Why have Christians fought so hard to make sure we don't lose either the divinity of Christ or the humanity of Christ? Join us as we seek to understand one of the foundations of our Christian faith. 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 BAST

Bob, in this series of programs – of *Groundwork* programs – we are trying to answer questions that have been raised by a group of 8th graders in their religion class at an area Christian school; and there are a lot of good ones that have come out. Here is the one we are addressing for today: How can Jesus be fully human and fully God? Does that work?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; when I looked over this list of questions that came my way, there were some real practical issues like what about war, what about suffering...

DAVE BAST

And about relating to people who bully me.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; events of ordinary life; but this one really surprised me because this seems such a theological issue for a 13-year-old to be wrestling with.

DAVE BAST

Well, maybe this is a budding theologian we are talking about here. It is the kind of person who goes to grad school perhaps...

BOB HEERSPINK

Maybe so.

DAVE BAST

But I think we have all struggled with this foundation truth of the Christian faith. I mean, frankly, you cannot be a Christian, I don't believe, if you don't really believe Jesus was God incarnate, come in the flesh. If you don't believe that, then you are something else; but at the same time, to hold firm to the truth that he was really and truly a human being just like us in every sense except for sin, the Bible says.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, I was thinking about why a middle-schooler would ask this question, and it struck me that these kids are reaching the age of saying: How do I relate to Jesus? And this question is going to be forefront in their mind: He is God? He is man? So, do I relate to this great and mighty king? Do I relate to this fellow human being, as we often talk about being a friend of Jesus? How do I relate to him? I think that is really behind the question that is asked today.

DAVE BAST

Yes, we have seen this in these questions. This is a great age because these kids are coming out of their sort of Sunday school childhood, childish sort of approach to God and to life, and they are starting to wrestle with things that we are still wrestling with as adults, all through our lives. We never leave behind some of these deep, deep questions.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I think for all of us we have struggled with how to relate to Jesus. I know when I made profession of faith as a teenager and I was asked the question: Who is Jesus to you? My response was, well, he is my Savior and he is my Lord. I emphasized the divinity of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Me too. I said he is the Son of God. That is what instinctively comes to me. He is to be worshipped.

BOB HEERSPINK

When I have now, as a pastor, asked that question of teenagers, they will often respond by saying: He's my best friend. And they move more in emphasizing the humanity of Christ; and both of those answers are true – he is Savior – he is Lord – he is my friend...

DAVE BAST

What a friend we have in Jesus...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; we have sung it for years; but finding that balance... you know, maintaining the reality of both sides of Jesus' identity, I think for us is often difficult.

DAVE BAST

Well, we want to talk today and dive into this issue. How did this come about that the Church confessed Jesus as God and man? How does it work? Can we come to at least partially understand or grasp these great truths? To do that, we are bringing in some heavy lumber. We are not going to carry the freight on this one by ourselves. So after a short break we are going to be joined by Dr. Ronald Feenstra, who is Professor of Theology at Calvin Seminary; and one of his areas of expertise – sort of specialization – is the early Christian Church and it's attempt to formulate answers to the question: Who is Jesus Christ really? How is he both God and man? So stay tuned.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. We are very happy to welcome to *Groundwork* today Dr. Ronald Feenstra. He is professor at Calvin Seminary, and he is here to help us unpack really the mystery of the incarnation. Welcome, Ronald, to the program.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Thank you very much. I am glad to be here.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, as we think about the mystery – and there is mystery of the incarnation – there are people who come along and say: Well, you know, the Church really thought of this later. They wanted to make Jesus something more than what he really was, and so they said he is divine, he must be God; but if you go to the Gospels, you can really explore what the disciples and what Jesus thought about his identity, can't you? What does Jesus say about himself? What do others say about him?

RONALD FEENSTRA

Well, we find in the New Testament already that Thomas, for example, at one point says: My Lord and my God. Jesus at several points in the Gospel of John has statements where he says: I am the Truth and the Life or I am the Bread of Life. These "I am" sayings are really echoing Old Testament statements about God; so we see in the Gospels in several places Jesus being identified doing miracles and other things that suggest that he is something exceptional and really like God.

DAVE BAST

You mention the "I am" sayings in John, and the most striking one, I think, comes from Chapter 8. It is not, "I am the Bread of Life, or I am the..." Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I Am," which got the attention of everybody around him, too, because that is God's name in the Old Testament – that is his personal name, right?

RONALD FEENSTRA

Yes, and the response was that they thought... Some people were agitated because they recognized that as his identifying himself with God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; the normal way of anyone to relate to Jesus would be to think of him as a human being – another human being – maybe a prophet who had come with a word from God; but it seems like Jesus himself always keeps pushing back, doesn't he, in terms of saying: I am really more than what you think.

DAVE BAST

Yes, Bob, that struck me, I think, as I read the Gospels. Nobody ever came up to Jesus and doubted that he was a real flesh-and-blood man. No one sort of scratched at him to see if he would bleed. Everyone knew that – everyone who met him knew that he was human. It was only later that the people began in the Church to struggle with the concept of his true humanity. I think that is the way it happened, wasn't it?

RONALD FEENSTRA

Yes; even the Gospels talk about how he grew in knowledge and wisdom; so it is clear that he was a human being like us, and the Gospels present him that way.

DAVE BAST

And yet, you also see this movement of people who are all Jewish at first – the first Christians were all coming out of Judaism. They had all been raised with the confession that there is only one God, and perhaps the clearest thing that they were taught was that it is idolatry to worship anyone other than God – any creature – any human – anything, right? What we find is, they begin to worship Jesus.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right; and that is actually one of the key biblical points, that the fact that they begin to worship him suggests that they thought of him as God, and that he is being presented as divine.

DAVE BAST

So where is this? Give us some examples in the New Testament of this movement.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Well actually, one of the earliest writings that we have in the New Testament is probably Philippians 2. People think that that was one of the earliest Christian hymns that Paul is now quoting, and in that early hymn already Paul speaks of Christ as having equality with God and as having emptied himself and taken human form. So that has really both of the things we are saying in that one brief passage, which everybody thinks came from the earliest Christian worship.

BOB HEERSPINK

Maybe I could read those verses from Philippians 2. Paul says this:

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had; ⁶who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. ⁷Rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant; being made in human likeness, ⁸and being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even the death on the cross.

You are saying that is one of the first confessions of the early Church, which deals with Christ's humanity and divinity.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Yes, it is.

BOB HEERSPINK

And how they relate to one another.

DAVE BAST

Well, and look at how Paul goes on: ⁹Therefore, God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth; ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. There is the worship – Jesus Christ as Lord.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right; so that passage was one of the key scripture passages that the Church looked at as it was trying to understand who Jesus really was.

DAVE BAST

In one of the translations of that hymn in Philippians 2, it says that Christ emptied himself; though he was God in very nature or equal to God, he didn't consider that he should cling to that, but he emptied himself. Does that mean, you think, that the way it works is, first he was God and then he stopped being God and became human, and then he started being God again after... is that what this is getting at?

RONALD FEENSTRA

I think that that is not what the passage is suggesting; I think the passage is suggesting that he emptied himself of *something*; he emptied himself of divine glory, perhaps; he emptied himself of whatever it is that he had with the Father that he gave up in order to be like us – that there was some kind of a stepping down – some kind of lowering himself to be among us as a human being, learning, growing, as is suggested, and even being tempted. Another really interesting point... this comes up in the book of Hebrews in a couple of places, where it says that he was tempted. So somehow he emptied himself in such a way that he could be tempted by sin; and therefore, he can sympathize with our being tempted.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yet, you know, this really confronts the tendency that so many Christians have to really minimize what Jesus went through on earth. I have had people say to me: Oh well, you know, that wasn't hard for Jesus because he was God. Yes, he went to the cross, but he was God. But this emptying means his humanity engaged life

the same way *our* humanity engaged life. You know, the temptations, the struggles that he had, yet without sin; but the struggles were there; they were real.

RONALD FEENSTRA

And again, in Hebrews – I think it is really key – in Hebrews the fact that he was tempted as we are is for us a comfort, because when we face temptation, we know that we have an advocate with the Father who himself was tempted, and he knows what temptation is like.

DAVE BAST

I know it is easy to speculate. We can quickly get into areas that we just don't know and maybe shouldn't go, but it does seem like in the giving up of his divine position and status and rank, he also voluntarily limited himself. I mean, he gave up perhaps his invulnerability – can we say that? He made himself able to die. He gave up, certainly, his immortality as God. Could he have given up some of his knowledge as well?

RONALD FEENSTRA

Well, in Mark 13 there is a question that is raised about the time of the end of the world, and Jesus responds in Mark 13:32, saying that not even the Son knows the time of the end of the world. That is a very curious and interesting passage, which does suggest something like what you are saying.

DAVE BAST

How can Jesus be omnipotent, omniscient God and at the same time be limited in his humanity so that he is ignorant of some things?

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right; and that is one of the mysteries of trying to understand the incarnation.

BOB HEERSPINK

But you know, that whole point of the vulnerability of Christ, I think, is a powerful truth. I think of Jesus going to the cross and people saying: Well, he died, but he knew he was going to raise himself on the third day. No, he didn't raise himself on the third day, the Father did. He went to the cross in obedience and he put himself into the hands of his Father; and he did that because, I think, of that self emptying.

RONALD FEENSTRA

And then you hear in the Garden of Gethsemane, in the prayer, he really trusts. He puts himself in the hands of the Father and trusts that the Father will vindicate him finally.

DAVE BAST

Well, I was just going to bring that up, Ronald. It is great that you were thinking of the same thing, but that Gethsemane scene... I don't think there is anywhere in all of the Gospels where we see the humanity coming through of Jesus like there. He is frightened. He is trembling. He is sweating, crying out. He doesn't want to be alone. He feels lonely. He feels fear; all the things that we feel, Jesus feels and experiences on our behalf. A deep mystery.

RONALD FEENSTRA

It is.

BOB HEERSPINK

Very God and yet very human – fully human – and what that means – the implications of that we need to explore when we come back after a break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi; welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with my co-host, Bob Heerspink; and today also we have a special treat. We are joined by Dr. Ronald Feenstra of Calvin Theological Seminary. He is a professor of theology, and we are exploring the divine and the human natures of Christ. It is a question, believe it or not, asked by an 8th grader – how does that work and why is it important? So let me throw it to you first, Ronald, with the question: Why is it important that Jesus was really and truly human?

RONALD FEENSTRA

I think it is important that Jesus was really and truly human in the early Church already the theologians said that whatever Christ did not assume or take on he did not heal; so if he didn't take on our true, full humanity, then he did not heal us. That was a key point in the early Church, and it remains a key point today.

DAVE BAST

Actually, they got into a debate about how it worked that the divine and the human kind of came together in the person of Jesus, didn't they, in the 4th and 5th centuries; and that was one of the things that the Orthodox insisted on.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Yes; they insisted that he was fully like God and that he was fully like us. They even used a technical term called *homoousios*; that he had the same substance as God or the same being as God, and the same substance as human beings have.

BOB HEERSPINK

There was always this tendency, it seemed, in the Church to push back either his divinity or his humanity, trying to figure out, maybe, a more logical way to bring the two together; and yet, the Church said the mystery has to stand: Fully human, fully divine.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right; and I think we see – even in our own day – we see ways in which we sometimes push back in one way or another. For example, even in the song that we sing: Away in a Manger – at a certain point in the song it says: The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes. And it suggests maybe that somehow he didn't cry, and then the question is raised: Well, was he really human? Didn't he act like a normal baby acts?

BOB HEERSPINK

He could not have been that difficult for Mary, because after all, he is the Son of God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but, he teethed just like other babies do...

BOB HEERSPINK

Of course.

DAVE BAST

And went through all that. I have sometimes compared it to Superman, you know. We have a tendency to look at Jesus and think he is like Clark Kent. He only appears to be a mild-mannered human being, but he rips his shirt open and underneath he is really God; and that gets back to one of the mistakes that some of the early theologians made in saying, for example, that he didn't really have a soul; it was God's nature that took the place of his human soul.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right; and that again comes back to the point he had to take on full humanity, the early Church said; he had to be fully divine in order to save us, and he had to be fully human because only a fully human person could save human beings like us.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, when the Church was debating this, the Church understood this wasn't really just about some highfalutin theological concept. They were really saying: This gets down right to the basis of our salvation.

DAVE BAST

It wasn't angels dancing on a pinhead. It wasn't one of those...

BOB HEERSPINK

This is the kind of savior we need.

DAVE BAST

Not one of those ivory tower debates that we sometimes caricature.

RONALD FEENSTRA

It wasn't; they thought that fundamental issues of salvation were at stake here; that if Jesus wasn't fully divine, he couldn't save, and if he wasn't fully human, he couldn't save us. That was fundamental for them.

DAVE BAST

Do you think that is still important today? I mean, that it is a matter of salvation what you believe about Jesus?

RONALD FEENSTRA

Well, I think that what is a matter of salvation is what Jesus was. I think that sometimes we don't always understand, or these are mysteries beyond us, so I am not sure that we have to understand all these intricate details to be saved. I wouldn't say that at all; but I do think it is important that Jesus be fully divine and human and for the same reason the early Church thought it was important.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I think that is a great point. We may not be able to understand it, or even we may not use the right words when we try to explain it or confess it, but he had to be that. That was the crucial point.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, as I think about the incarnation, in the Bible it is really saying if you really want to know what God is like, you have to look at Jesus; and if you really want to know what we are supposed to be like, you look at Jesus. I mean, it is like he is a lens both to God and to what God really wants to accomplish in our own lives.

RONALD FEENSTRA

You know, one of the things we say is we want to know what God is like. We want God to reveal himself to us. In Jesus, God revealed himself to us more fully than in any other way; so if we really want to see into God or to understand God, the best we can do is to look at Jesus.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; there are so many people who say: I want a revelation of God. I want to know more from God; and yet, they shy away from Jesus. You know, really, what we need to do is go to him. I mean, to look upon the face of Jesus is to look upon the face of God.

DAVE BAST

I think it was another of the Church fathers who said that the reason for the incarnation – at least, one of the reasons – is so that we could see God.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Because God is invisible; but he became visible in the person of Jesus Christ. So if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right; and I would say if you want to know what God is like, sit down and read one of the Gospels.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

But you could also put it the other way: If you want to know what a true human being is like, look at Jesus.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Sit down and read one of the Gospels.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

That's right.

DAVE BAST

Which is a wonderful thing; you know, you hold them both – you hold them both; and he is the model of both; both what we are supposed to be and what God actually is.

BOB HEERSPINK

When the Bible talks about becoming Christ-like, that to me is the focus of what it means to be in the image of God. The image of God for us is now perfectly reflected in Jesus.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right.

DAVE BAST

Let me ask you one other thing, Ronald, shifting now more toward the God side of his double nature. I think one of the biggest criticisms that is brought in, often by sort of ignorant people, in my opinion, is this idea that it was really the Church that invented all this stuff. We touched on it earlier in this program, but it has especially been popular in *The Da Vinci Code*, books like that, you know; it was all imposed and cooked up. How do you respond to that? I mean, we pointed to some of the biblical stuff, but what would you say, sort of in a nutshell, to that?

RONALD FEENSTRA

It seems to me, again, the earliest Christian writings that we have, including the Gospels, but also some of the writings of Paul, all indicate that this was an issue already there; that they saw Jesus as divine, as having Godlike character, and as being human; so the earliest that we can go in any Christian writings, this is an important issue.

DAVE BAST

So, we read Philippians 2, and that dates from – if it is a hymn – that has got to be like 10 - 15 years only at most after the crucifixion and resurrection; so already this question is engaged...

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right.

DAVE BAST

It doesn't wait 400 years before they are starting to talk through these things.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, I think of the question that was posed at the beginning by that 8th grader; have we answered that question, do you think, for that middle schooler? What would be a way we would put it to a 13-year-old?

DAVE BAST

Well, I think on a practical level I would say we don't know how it all works, but the fact that he is really human means we can identify with him and he can identify with us – he sympathizes with our weakness; and the fact that he is really God means we can worship him; we bow down and we trust him.

RONALD FEENSTRA

I would agree.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I would say to that 13-year-old: You know, the very fact that you are both pulled to worship him and you are pulled to confess him as your best friend, that is what he invites you to do. I mean, that is inherent in who he really is.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Yes; it seems to me that one of the key points in scripture and in the Church's reflection on this is that Jesus Christ had to be fully God if he was going to be able to do the work of saving us, and he had to be fully human in order to be like us and save us.

DAVE BAST

I like that, because what it really comes down to is salvation: Do we have a savior? The fact that he is the God-man means the answer to that is yes.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well Ronald, we really want to thank you for being with us on this program. We appreciate your insights. Thanks so much.

RONALD FEENSTRA

Thank you very much. It has been a joy to be part of your conversation.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keeps 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 explored on future *Groundwork* programs. Visiting us is easy; just go to groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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