

One in Christ

BOB HEERSPINK

One of our greatest human desires is to belong. Deep down, we seek to be loved and accepted unconditionally by others; and yet we continue to divide ourselves into groups based on money or education, ethnic backgrounds. How do the Law and the Gospel address our divisive society? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, 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, the other day I was watching the film *The Blind Side*, and I don't know if you have seen it or not...

DAVE BAST

I haven't, but I read about it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Ah, you should see it.

DAVE BAST

It's the football player guy, right?

BOB HEERSPINK

It is, Michael Oher. True story. Michael Oher was a homeless kid; he is on the streets, and the Tuohy family opens their home and bring him in, and what really impressed me about the film was that it is portraying a Christian family in a very realistic way...

DAVE BAST

But a positive light.

BOB HEERSPINK

A very positive light; but at one point, they say: Hey, maybe we should adopt this kid into our family; and so they go to Michael and they say: Michael, how would it be if we became your legal guardians? We want you to become part of our family. Do you want to become part of our family? And he gives this shy little smile, and he says: Well, I thought I already was. And you know, when I saw that on the film, I thought how important family is to everybody. Everybody needs family.

DAVE BAST

Yes; whether we make it legal or not... well, that is important, too, I guess, to finalize that and make it official. It is kind of like getting married.

BOB HEERSPINK

They could only do certain things because they officially, legally adopted him into the family.

DAVE BAST

But the hunger to belong someplace... You remember the old Beatles song: I look at all the lonely people; where do they all belong? Eleanor Rigby. It is built into us, and we grapple with these divisions that run so deeply between people and between people groups. I think that is the story of the Tower of Babel, really; how language divides us in the original story in Genesis.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, how everybody wanted to be one. They all gathered around and said: We are going to be one people; and then where there was one people evil developed so that God had to break this one group apart. This desire to come together we see in our own day. The talk about a global village – the notion that, hey, the world is shrinking. The world is flat. We are all going to come together. You know, it is a wonderful vision, but we just have a terrible time pulling off the reality.

DAVE BAST

Yes; because it runs up against our nature. We are not just human beings generically. We belong to a particular race, a particular class. We like to think of ourselves as a classless society in America. We know that is not true. There are all kinds of gradations based on income and education. There are differences between the sexes – the war between the sexes, you know.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

It was all symbolized in the New Testament by the Temple in Jerusalem. Paul talks about this in Ephesians 2. He speaks of the dividing wall of hostility, and it was literally a wall in the Temple that had a sign on it saying: No Gentiles may proceed past this point upon pain of death; and that is the wall, Paul says, that is broken down in Christ. The solution to these terrible divisions is, in a word, the Gospel. That is the message of the New Testament.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; we have been looking at the book of Galatians, and you know, we have explored the classic Christian truth of justification by faith; but sometimes we have made that whole understanding a very private kind of thing. It is me and God. When you look at the book of Galatians as a whole, you see that the whole point of Paul's argument is to say God is creating one family; that these divisions that seem impossible to be broken down any other way are being broken down in Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

We have made reference in this series repeatedly to Paul's confrontation with Peter over the issue of full inclusion of Gentiles into the Church; and the reason Paul was so passionate at that point was because he really saw what was at risk here. Peter very understandably wanting to accommodate the more conservative wing and not offend the Jewish Christians in the Church, backed away from the Gentiles; and Paul saw that the danger there was in turning Christianity into just another sect – just another ethnic group; and that the Gospel blows that out of the water. It is really a corporate thing; and justification by faith has these social consequences. You are right to say we are too individualistic about it a lot, because in Galatians, Paul wants to zero in, toward the end of Chapter 3, on what this means for us as a body.

Let me read Galatians 3, beginning at verse 26:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, the heirs according to the promise.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Paul says faith has come, and he is really talking about faith in Christ Jesus because... We talked earlier about the fact that Old Testament folks were saved through faith in the promise, but faith has come in Christ Jesus, and that has changed the way we relate to each other. It has changed our social relationships with one another.

DAVE BAST

I think the fact that God was dealing with the people of Israel in the Old Testament was one of the temporary phases of salvation history. He had a purpose for them and he wanted them to be distinct as a people, and we can talk about that and explore that sometime, too; but, as we have emphasized, they didn't have a different means of salvation... a different means of justification. It wasn't through keeping the Law; even for them it was faith, as you say, faith in the promise; they still didn't know exactly what would happen at the cross, but they had faith in the coming Messiah; and that is what saved them; but now, now faith has come for everybody...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And God no longer has one ethnic group as his people.

BOB HEERSPINK

In the Old Testament, the election – the choosing of Israel – was to bless peoples around the world. I mean, that was the point of the promise given to Abraham: Your children are going to be as numerous as the sands on the seashore...

DAVE BAST

Or the stars in the sky.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly; and so, the purpose of Israel's election was not to create a people that eternally would be blessed by God to the exclusion of others, it was so that Israel would bless others by being this people from whom would be born – would come – the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

DAVE BAST

In a sense, it is a kind of a narrowing down from one group to one tribe to one person, Jesus; and then it explodes open again to all peoples and all groups and all tribes and all languages; and Paul emphasizes here in Galatians 3, in this classic passage, sort of BC and AD; what a difference now that faith has come – now that Christ has come. Before it was this one group, but now that faith has come, he says, you are in Christ Jesus; you are children of God, baptized into Christ, clothed with Christ, all one in Christ, and belong to Christ; and that is what we really want to explore – that aspect of what the new thing is.

BOB HEERSPINK

Anybody out there who is looking for an identity, who wants to be part of something much larger than themselves, needs to come and take a look at what Paul says here about being part of the family of God.

DAVE BAST

Which we will do in just a moment; but first we want to pause and invite you into our conversation; and you can do that through our website.

BOB HEERSPINK

Listeners like you make *Groundwork* what it is. Our website, groundworkonline.com, is another way that we work to join you as you dig deeper into the scripture.

DAVE BAST

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; so give us some suggestions. Finding us is easy. Just visit our website, groundworkonline.com.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, Paul says some really powerful things here about how the Gospel – this Gospel that transforms us personally – also transforms our relationships with others; and I think one of the most shocking things he says to a First Century listener is when he starts out by saying: You are all sons of God through Jesus Christ by faith. Now, this would just be shocking, because to a good Jew of the First Century the only people who were really children of God were Jewish folks who kept the ceremonial law; and now Paul says: No, no; wait a minute. The deck is cleared. Anyone who has faith in Jesus Christ is part of God's family.

DAVE BAST

A child of God; and that is really what the word implies that he uses, but he chooses it very carefully. He says sons literally, not to emphasize gender. It is not as though women aren't included; but to emphasize the age of the child in question. He really means that we are grown up children of God in Christ. We are adult children of God; and that gets at that idea that the law was keeping us down when we were sort of immature.

BOB HEERSPINK

It was our tutor; it was there to train us for now the something more that we have ventured into as grownup kids.

DAVE BAST

But we don't need that anymore because we are adult children of God, and the proof of that is the Spirit. Paul says in Chapter 4, just a few verses on: It is the Spirit who prompts us to call God Abba – that wonderful word, Father – Daddy, even; that term of intimacy that children use, and the Spirit himself is bearing witness, as Paul puts it in another place, that we are the children of God; we have been adopted into God's family – that beautiful picture, like Michael Oher, of being adopted.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, I think about what this means and how it really challenges us in our Christian communities to be grownups, to treat each other with the kind of respect, the kind of spiritually birthed maturity that allows us to really care for each other and come alongside each other with the various needs that we have.

DAVE BAST

And the next thing he says is that we all belong to Christ: ²⁷For all of you were baptized into Christ and have clothed yourselves with Christ. So, not only are we God's children, we are members of Christ – of Christ's body.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, the truth is, we aren't going to be the kind of mature grownups that we are called to be as Christians unless we keep focused in Jesus Christ, and that is what Paul keeps on coming back to in this passage here when he talks about that we are baptized into Christ. In baptism, you have this powerful picture of dying and rising with Jesus. The early Church probably, for the most part, conducted baptism through

immersion and there are different ways to...

DAVE BAST

Of adult converts anyway, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, right; and certainly immersion is a legitimate form of baptism, but to go under the water and to come up from the waters, death and new life in Jesus Christ, so that you are a different kind of person. You are not just justified – declared legally innocent before the bar of God – before the judgment seat of God – but you are a new person now, clothed in Jesus. The character of Christ is now yours.

DAVE BAST

That's another metaphor that is common in the New Testament – the idea of putting on Christ or being clothed... and again, it owes something to baptism, probably. As far as we understand it in the early Church from other descriptions, the candidate for baptism would... it would be segregated by sexes... but they would literally go down into the water naked, and when they came up they put a white robe on to symbolize that putting on of Christ – that being clothed with Christ...

BOB HEERSPINK

Putting on the newness...

DAVE BAST

The newness, yes; the new nature. And then there is a third thing that he says. Because of this; because we are all children of God, because we all belong to Christ, that makes us all one.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and Paul talks about that in terms of the transformation of ordinary human relationships. He says there is now no Jew or Gentile, there is no slave or free, there is now no male or female; you are all one in Christ.

DAVE BAST

Ethnicity, class, gender; none of them matter anymore as far as being in Christ is concerned. We are all brothers and sisters of one another.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, there is a very interesting background to this text because the Jewish tradition has a prayer in which Jewish men would pray and say: I am so thankful, Lord, that you did not create me to be a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I have often quoted that to my wife; jokingly, jokingly of course; yes, it is true...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, she might be listening.

DAVE BAST

But that kind of sort of elitism based on our birth – the class or the category that we are born into; and then others, of course, are second class; they are lower; and Paul says: Not in Christ; huh uh; no way. Not that these things are erased; I mean, Paul himself remained a male; he remained a Jew; he was a Roman citizen; and he could emphasize those things in the appropriate place – in the appropriate context. He often made use of his Roman citizenship. He was thankful for it. So, it is not that all these distinctives are erased; it is that they shouldn't matter, not in Christ.

BOB HEERSPINK

Not in Christ; and the challenge comes to not only believe it, but live it out; because we still struggle, I find, in our churches with, for example, economic disparity; and people at certain economic stations in life having more to say about what happens in the church than others. It is interesting to go back to the First Century and to see that there is evidence that in some churches there were actually bishops who were slaves, and had that role in the church in a congregation that might have their master as a member.

DAVE BAST

I don't think there could be a much more dramatic illustration of Paul's gospel principle than something like that.

BOB HEERSPINK

The reversal of roles that could happen because of the Gospel; and all of this really ties back in with Paul's earlier point that he makes in Galatians when he talks about the fact that we are all Abraham's descendents; that there isn't a Jew/Gentile division anymore in the Church, but that all God's people by faith in Jesus Christ – faith in the ultimate seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ – are part of Abraham's family.

DAVE BAST

He keeps coming back to Abraham, doesn't he? There is something about that; but to me, I think it is very moving because the idea was so prominent in the Jewish mind that we are the children of Abraham. We have Abraham as our father, they once said to Jesus. As if to say: Who are you? To imply that others could be included. *We* have Abraham as our father; and now Paul says: You know what? Everybody with faith has Abraham as their father. You're proud of your ancestors? They came over on the Mayflower or whatever? It doesn't matter. We can all trace our spiritual descent from the father of all of the faithful, Abraham himself.

BOB HEERSPINK

So that is who we are in Christ. We are one people; but living out those implications, that is the challenge we face; and that is what we really need to talk about next on this program.

DAVE BAST

Let's try to be real about application.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

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, we are trying to get real a little bit now and bring this home and apply it in real terms in our churches, in our communities. Paul has said that, really, understanding the Gospel – experiencing it – new life through faith in Christ – is the solution to the problem of all the divisions in our world, because if we understand that through faith in Christ anyone and everyone, whatever their race, whatever their background, whatever their status in worldly terms, whatever their economic ability, we are all one in Christ. We are sons and daughters of God. We are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. I read a wonderful quote from a second century Greek writer named Lucian. He was not a Christian. He was, in fact, contemptuous of Christianity. He made his living as a public lecturer. He would go around giving talks and entertaining people with his wit and cleverness; and he once said of Christians with a sneer: Their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are brothers and sisters of one another; and he meant it as a putdown; but they believed it. They actually accepted that, the first Christians. So what does that mean?

BOB HEERSPINK

Sometimes I think we don't realize what a bombshell this is in social relationships. We do ministry in India, Dave, and there is a very established caste system. When Christianity comes, it starts to take that caste

system apart; and there are people who become very angry about that because they recognize that the privileges and perks they had as a people who were at the top of the caste heap, so to speak, are now being lost; and Christianity is doing this. Christianity is transforming society; and I think we need to take some of that back into our own lives and say: Okay, we don't have a caste system here in North America, but are our churches still segregated according to race? Would folks who come from a different economic level feel comfortable walking into my church? These are still huge problems for the Church of Christ today.

DAVE BAST

Yes; do we really unwittingly contribute to the old way of the world – of division; and do we have unwritten castes within our churches? We had better not if we really believe the Gospel.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, my tradition has a history of actually going out and planting chapels for people who were different from us; different ethnicity, different socioeconomic... lower classes....

DAVE BAST

Lower class, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and you know, there was a church for them and there was a church for us. Now thankfully we are beyond that, but to really be a community that welcomes people different from ourselves, that is something we are still learning.

DAVE BAST

I remember visiting a historical Presbyterian church in Mississippi, or maybe Alabama, one of those; and there was a slave gallery in the building. It dated back to before the Civil War. What a difference in the early Church, where that slave was a bishop overseeing the church. So, this physical division... we have to address that somehow.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it does mean that we have to get out of our comfort zones. To be different and to live who we are isn't going to come in the sense natural. This comes by grace; it comes by the Spirit; but this is not the way that sinful human beings want to organize their social lives; and it is going to mean that we reach the point of saying: Hey, I am going to put myself into situations where I have to learn about other people that are different from myself. I am going to maybe step back from some friendships which are very comfortable for me so I can make some new friends. I had one person say to me: You know, all of us can maintain about six friendships. We are kind of like a Lego block... and there are six knobs...

DAVE BAST

That's how many knobs we've got.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and you know, if we are really going to be a church that welcomes; if we are going to be a New Testament church, we are going to have to snap some of the comfortable blocks that are in our social relationships off so we can add people in who maybe aren't quite like us, but that we can learn from, and that we can now experience what it really means to be the community of Christ.

DAVE BAST

I wonder, though, just to be – to push a little bit on this, whether Paul is too restrictive, because for him this is all in Christ, and it is well and good to say we are brothers and sisters, we have to eliminate prejudice, get rid of any kind of class system or caste system; but isn't there a kind of secular gospel that says: Really, the whole human race are all brothers and sisters, and everyone should practice peace and brotherhood. Isn't that a little bit more expansive a vision than the Christian one? Is Paul still too prejudiced just to limit it to

Christians?

BOB HEERSPINK

If we think about who God is, he is the Creator God. He is the Father of all; but that kind of classic liberal vision doesn't deal with the problem of sin. You know, we have the vision. People talk about all being one, but we are not; and the power to really become family is found as God deals with our brokenness and shapes us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. That is the real possibility for overcoming the walls of division that exist in our world today.

DAVE BAST

Thank you 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 discussion.

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