

The One, Fractured Church

DAVE BAST

As Christians we claim we believe in one holy catholic or universal church, but a critic might point out that the one Church really isn't one. It is fractured beyond belief. Churches and denominations continue to split, creating a splintered, broken world of practicing Christianity. So what does it mean to speak of the unity or oneness of the Church? What does it mean to confess the Church is one? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, 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. So Bob, we are in this series on the Church, and today we want to talk about the unity of the Church or the oneness of the Church, but we have entitled this program: The one fractured Church, because it really is a contradiction, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it is a contradiction in terms, and yet that is what people see when they look realistically at the Church today. I was doing a little Internet googling of the Church and I came up with a number of 33,000 different denominations in the world today – 33,000! Fifteen hundred right here in North America!

DAVE BAST

Just this morning I was reading an article about an event last summer where a new Lutheran denomination has been formed, and the writer said that about 70 years ago there was somewhere between 20 and 24 different Lutheran denominations in the United States – just here – and after 70 years of work at unifying...

BOB HEERSPINK

Bringing churches together.

DAVE BAST

Right. Today there are between 20 and 24 different Lutheran denominations...

BOB HEERSPINK

The same number.

DAVE BAST

Here in the US.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you look at our own denominations, Dave, and your denominations split 150 years ago, and since then in my denomination there has been at least two additional church splits. The diversity of the Church continues to grow much to the embarrassment of the Church.

DAVE BAST

And you wonder what is the cause. I mean, what makes all this happen, this fragmenting or fissuring, fracturing? As I sum it up maybe... I talk about three H's...

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay, lay them on me.

DAVE BAST

The first is heresy, because some church divisions – really the fundamental ones – happen when part of the church goes off the rails and really denies some basic biblical truth, and that is real; that happens.

BOB HEERSPINK

And one of the struggles with those kinds of splits is how much does the church have to deviate from the truth...

DAVE BAST

Exactly, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

To really bring about a split, or is there something here whereby orthodox Christians should continue to work within the body to maintain unity? But you are right; heresy is one issue.

DAVE BAST

Sure, but that is a tough one, as you say, because one person's heresy is another person's: Nah, that really doesn't matter. That is my second H, actually: Hairsplitting; because clearly there are many instances where a congregation will split over a trivial issue; what kind of music to play or what version of the English Bible to use, or...

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, if you look at what split our denominations 150 years ago, you know, we look at those things now and you say: We actually split over whether we are going to sing hymns or psalms?

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, and that brings me to my third H, which is human nature. A lot of the divisions, let's be honest, a lot of the divisions in denominations or churches are because of cantankerous, sinful people who argued with each other and didn't get along; and that is basically... most of us, I think, would agree that is what caused the Reformed Church, my denomination, and the Christian Reformed Church, your denomination, to divide back in the 1800s.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, some of that roots into cultural differences with, for example, the Reformed/Christian Reformed Church. Immigrants came over, they were speaking a different language, they didn't understand North American culture; and that, with some personality conflict, fueled division.

DAVE BAST

Well sure, and some of these divisions are okay, I think we should say, because we do cling to our own language and some of our own cultural traditions; and maybe it is not all bad that we have different ways of worshipping God. Some denominations are more free and easy and expressive; others are more maybe tight or strict or more doctrinally focused; and I don't think those divisions are all bad, but the question is, where is the underlying unity? How do we express this; and especially, what does the Bible say about it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, the fact that the Church, even in its diversity, doesn't come across to the world as one, is certainly one of the great stumbling blocks when people hear the Gospel. How can the Church be so divisive and yet worship the same Lord? For that, we have to explore some biblical passages, because Jesus is very concerned about the unity of the Church; Paul is concerned about the unity of the Church; and we have to be concerned about that unity as well.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, so we want to look at what the New Testament says on this subject, but first let's talk about how listeners can interact with us in this program by using our website.

It is listeners like you that really make *Groundwork* what it is, and our website, groundworkonline.com, is one way that we can work to join you as you dig deeper into the scriptures.

BOB HEERSPINK

There you can listen to today's program again or any of our past *Groundwork* programs, or you can leave your comments or questions. We also post "we are wondering" questions so that you can give us your input as we plan future programs. Finding us is easy. Just go to groundworkonline.com.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

So Bob, we are talking about the unity of the Church, and especially the disparity between the Church as it *should* be ideally, and the Church as it actually is, fractured and fragmented. You mentioned the fact that this is significant to Jesus. As we turn to the New Testament, the text that clearly jumps out is Jesus' high priestly prayer, the night before he was crucified, in the upper room as we find that in John 17. He prayed:

^{11b}Father, that they may be one (meaning all of his followers) as you and I are one. So the unity of the Church is grounded in the unity of the Trinity.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right. The unity of the Church is not, first of all, something we attain; it is something that is given us as a gift; and there is a passage in Ephesians that really speaks to that. I would like to read it. It is the first six verses of Ephesians Chapter 4. There Paul writes:

¹I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in the manner worthy of the calling to which you were called; ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love; ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call. ⁵One Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all.

DAVE BAST

So, the thing that jumps out at me from that passage is the hammering away on the word "one."

BOB HEERSPINK

Seven times.

DAVE BAST

One God, one Father, one... There could just as well be many churches as there could be many gods. If there is only one God, there is only one Church, and whatever the world looks like in practice as we look at Christians, in fact it is one.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I find it very interesting that in those seven affirmations of oneness, the Trinity is highlighted. There is one Spirit, there is one Lord, and there is one God and Father of us all.

DAVE BAST

Yes; there it is right there.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, the threeness in one of God himself is now reflected in the diversity of the Church, which is one body.

DAVE BAST

So, maybe the oneness – this essential unity – is spiritual in nature? Do you think that is what he is suggesting? It is not really flesh and blood; in the real world we live out our dividedness, but somehow spiritually...?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, there is a deep spiritual unity, but I think sometimes we as Christians can take that idea and then say: Well, what we look like to the world really doesn't matter. We can defend our division by saying: Well, at the end of the day, the unity of the Church is all a matter of just being one in Jesus Christ; but Paul talks about one baptism here; something that is very much on display, and he talks about maintaining the unity. It is not something...

DAVE BAST

Yes, you said that was the key phrase: Maintain.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; it doesn't say *attain*, as though we achieve it. This is something that comes as a gift to us and we have to maintain, we have to put on display.

DAVE BAST

Well, think about 1 Corinthians Chapter 1, where Paul is sort of decrying the fact that there are divisions in the church of Corinth. There is a Paul party and there is a Peter party and there is an Apollos party; and then there is this other group that says: We just belong to Jesus. So clearly, there were already divisions from the very beginning within the Christian Church, and Paul is attacking that sort of head on with this idea that this is something we have to work at.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, even in Ephesians in Chapter 2, he talks about the fact that there is Jew and Gentile and that Christ is making us all one. There is that word again.

DAVE BAST

He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly; and he is not doing it just on some spiritual plane, where we can say: Well, that is something that we don't have to put on display; but as you know, when Peter refused to eat with Gentile Christians, Paul said: Hey, display publicly, Peter, your commitment to the oneness of the Church.

DAVE BAST

Right; because you are not walking in unity with the Gospel; you are not walking consistently with what you know is true. So, it has to somehow take root in the real world in our visible relationships with each other.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and I think that is why in Chapter 4, Paul starts out by talking about something that seems really disconnected with this theological concept of oneness. He says: You have been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love. I think those attributes, those characteristics of a Christian life, are key if we are going to pursue the kind of oneness in Christ that lets the world see that the

Gospel is true because we love one another.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think it is interesting, as we wrestle with this, it seems like the Christians who have been most concerned with visible unity have been toward the left end of the spectrum theologically; and the Christians that tend to be more conservative theologically are the ones that are quickest to divide and splinter; but if we are truly Bible believers, surely we must pay more attention to Jesus' prayer that we would be one, and to Paul's injunction and teaching that we are one and we need to maintain that somehow.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Dave, just that we are doing this program together, two pastors from different denominations talking about one faith, I think is a demonstration of how we can come together and demonstrate the unity of the faith to the world to witness to that.

DAVE BAST

Well, and just very practically, we work for two different ministries that are affiliated with those two different denominations, but more and more, we are doing our work together because in the real world on a practical level, we ought to be one in our witness to the world; but there are other steps that we can take, and in fact, are being taken to express a kind of a visible unity; and we are going to welcome a guest in the second part of our program who has been very active at the center of a new effort to bring Reformed denominations at least from all over the world together. His name is Peter Borgdorff, and he will be joining us in just a few moments.

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. We have been talking about the importance of the unity of the Church; not just the spiritual unity, but the way the unity of the Church needs to come to display before the watching world; and joining with us now is Peter Borgdorff. He is on the executive committee of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Peter, I know you have been involved a great deal in church unity work over the past years. Can you tell us what is happening now with this new organization that has been formed: World Communion of Reformed Churches; what is it about?

PETER BORGDORFF

Well, ecumenical organizations for many years were churches of similar faith traditions who looked for partners around the world who thought pretty much like they did; and the more they agreed, the closer they were within fellowship of ecumenical organizations.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches has really emerged out of a different premise – not fundamentally different perhaps, but at least visibly different in the sense that we began with the principle that all those who confess the name of Jesus Christ are fundamentally unified, not because they choose to join together in an organization, but because that is the gift that God has given them.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, very much what we have been talking about on this program, that the gift of unity comes from God and is rooted in our Savior.

PETER BORGDORFF

It is; it is fundamentally something that God intended for his people.

DAVE BAST

Is that why you chose the term “communion?”

PETER BORGDORFF

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Because that struck me. It is not a council; it is not a confederation...

PETER BORGDORFF

That is exactly why we chose “communion,” because the fundamental principle is a fellowship we share, not one that we created.

DAVE BAST

Yes, *koinonia*; it is a New Testament term.

PETER BORGDORFF

Exactly right. It is a *koinonia*, it is a fundamental unity that even when there are differences of opinion or viewpoint or geography or culture or language, the fundamental principle is one of unity in Christ. So, in the broadest sense, ecumenicity and organizational expressions of ecumenicity are really based on that principle; and therefore, those who are followers of Jesus Christ are one. We don't make them one.

DAVE BAST

Yes; how many churches are involved in this?

PETER BORGDORFF

Well, the particular branch of the World Communion of Reformed Churches represents 230 denominations around the world in 107 countries, representing about 80 million members; and therefore, is a significant voice in the ecumenical scene around the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

So as these churches now come together, they have experienced the *koinonia* fellowship, are they being changed, do you see? I mean, this experience of oneness as it comes to expression, does it change us as churches?

PETER BORGDORFF

Well, what it does is it places them in a more visible unity, and in doing that, they can develop a more common voice on the issues that face our world as a global community; and so, numbers are not the most important, but if you have a significant membership spread throughout the population of the world, then governments listen better, other partners listen more, and we ourselves get an emotional sense of what it means to belong to a larger body that goes well beyond our own personal experience.

DAVE BAST

So that is the value of an event, say, like happened last summer in Grand Rapids. There was this gathering of several hundred delegates.

PETER BORGDORFF

The analogy that I have used again and again is one of a family reunion. You can live without or survive without family reunions. There may even be days when you would like to live without them; but they are significant for staying connected, meeting people with faces and names and identities that are different from our own; and so, yes, it is largely in the experience of being together, and then from that develop a more common voice and a greater unified expression of a principle that is embedded in all of us.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, the concept of family reunions suggests that, okay, we are going to have our differences. We don't always think exactly alike; and that is exactly what is experienced when a group like this comes together.

PETER BORGDORFF

I have cousins in our family reunions who have very strange ideas...

DAVE BAST

Yes; no doubt they think the same.

PETER BORGDORFF

No doubt they do; and when they do, or when I do, it doesn't diminish the fact that they are my cousins.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

PETER BORGDORFF

And I think that is an important part of this.

BOB HEERSPINK

Because family is a gift, just like the Church family is a gift from God.

DAVE BAST

And the reunion is more than just a feel-good event. I mean, it can be that. It is kind of exciting and it is fun; but it also goes to shape our own self image and self understanding of who we are.

PETER BORGDORFF

You know, at this most recent conference when we had over a thousand delegates from 107 countries, we found unity in our common confessions, in our expression of the faith in its most basic sense; we found unity in our deliberations and developing statements about significant issues in our world; but the experiential unity that the body received was a tragedy at the end of the conference, where its chief organist and musician was accidentally killed on a local street; and when that body came together the next morning – when all those people gathered in a memorial service – we could say: This, too, is unity; but it was a unity of an experiential kind.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the unity under the cross.

PETER BORGDORFF

Under the cross and in the hope of the resurrection.

DAVE BAST

Just tell us, though, how might this make a difference to an ordinary church member sitting in the pew? I mean, this is not a delegate, not somebody who is going to get involved in meetings; but does it really matter, or is it just sort of window dressing as far as the ordinary person going to their congregation on Sunday?

PETER BORGDORFF

Well, unfortunately I think that for many people who attend a worship service on a Sunday morning, ecumenicity is not high on their agenda, especially in our culture; but think for a moment about this: What if the Christian faith experientially, or the Church as we know it, is no greater than what we ourselves have experienced? How provincial we soon would become. How limited our view and how closed we would be to

the learning of others; and I think that a great value in the whole ecumenical movement in all of its expressions, whether you go to a meeting as a delegate or whether you hear about it by reading the news releases is an awareness – a building awareness – that the body of Jesus Christ is as broad as the globe and includes people of many different forms and expressions and cultures and language; and that the unity is therefore such a great gift, because we ourselves could never accomplish that at its most basic level.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, I wonder if there are ways in which what was experienced at WCRC could be translated into local communities of churches in such a way that we take what was an international event, but we also say: Okay, those Christians at the church down the road...I need to know what they think; I need to listen; I need to be in dialogue. Let's talk.

PETER BORGDORFF

Let's talk and let's become more familiar with the diversity of the body of Christ. One of the remarkable things about the Gospel is that it can unify people, not because they are people of good will, not because they have all of their theologies straight, not because they are from the right places in our world, not because they are from the West or the South or the North or the East, but because they share a common faith in a risen Lord, and have the benefit of being infused by the Holy Spirit; and so, I think ecumenicity and the experience for people sitting in the pew is, in the first place, fundamentally spiritual and part of what it means to be a Christian in our world.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, I think we have all experienced that in our international work, how you meet someone with a different language or a different culture, but in Christ there is this immediate bond that existed that you didn't develop. It is given of God, and you cannot quite define it; it is there.

DAVE BAST

It makes me think of, you know, the Apostle's word: If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus, let them be anathema; but the reverse is true: If you do love the Lord Jesus, you instantly have a bond that crosses and transcends all of these differences.

PETER BORGDORFF

And different ages, going all the way back to the First Century Church, we have had symbols or gatherings that identified people as belonging to the same Lord; and the most common symbol of that early age was the fish. It has reemerged in a more modern time, at least in the West; but you know, you need the experience and the symbols and the possibilities of viewing the body of Christ for what it really is and how it really is.

DAVE BAST

Peter Borgdorff, thank you for joining us. It has been a pleasure.

PETER BORGDORFF

My pleasure, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

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 conversation.

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Printed on September 5, 2025