



Rob Kelly:

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Speaker 2:

You are listening to the Faith & Work Podcast, where we explore ways to serve God and others in our daily work to bring life and hope to workplaces and cities.

Ross Chapman:

Rob Kelly is the founder and CEO of the FORCLT Network. He's also the co-founder of the City Leaders Collective, which connects and equips city network leaders globally. He's the co-author of a book called *Metanoia*, with Alan Hirsch, and he's the founder and the of the State of Our City Platform.

Prior to this work that Rob has been doing, he served for 13 years as a pastor, along with other numerous positions, including co-founding CLT/ONE, lecturing at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. And he's a graduate of the University of Washington and has a degree from Gordon-Conwell as well, and is now pursuing his doctorate from Bakke Graduate University. He's married to Ani, and they have two kids, Addison and RJ. And Rob is a great friend of mine. I'm so excited to introduce you to him today. This is going to be an awesome conversation.

Rob, thanks for joining the Faith & Work Podcast. I'm totally excited to have this conversation with you, because we've had this conversation a lot in our friendship.

Rob Kelly:

We have.

Ross Chapman:

And I really want the audience, the person listening, to really think about, what does this idea of union with Christ ... how does that really, first of all, show itself in scripture? And maybe why have I maybe not heard that as much in my Christian life? But also, why does it matter for my everyday life? So we're hoping that you can



help us with that. So maybe walk us through a little bit of your journey with it and how you see it in scripture and why that's made such a big difference.

Rob Kelly:

Sure. So when Dave and I, who was on this podcast, were in seminary, I remember we ... this is around the time we started this ministry, CLT/ONE, that you ended up leading later on in years. And we came across John 17 in reading this text, where Jesus prays this amazing high priestly prayer. This is the last night that he would be with his disciples, literally hours before he would be betrayed, captured, tried, tortured, eventually crucified on our behalf. And what's he pray? This is the last thing that he would say to those he was closest with in his earthly ministry.

He says, "Father, I pray not only for them, but I pray for all those who would believe in me through their word, their message." And what was his final prayer? "That they may be one. Even as we are one, I and them, you and me, may they be in us so that the world may believe that you sent me. The glory you've given to me, I've given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I and them, you and me." He says it a third time. "May they be perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and have loved them even as you've loved me." And I remember reading that, Dave and I together, going, "Oh, my goodness." Our minds were blown. And once you see this prayer of Jesus in the text and let it actually sink into you, and then you begin seeing it everywhere. It's not just the upper room. It's literally on every page of the text, that Jesus wants his church, his people, his ekklesia, his called out ones to be one. And that oneness isn't just this kumbaya relationship. It is a oneness rooted in God. He says, "May they be in us." In whom? The trinity, that somehow, right now, present tense, Paul would say that we are hidden with Christ in God, Colossians 3. It's amazing.

And then you start seeing it on every page of the text. And so when I saw it, it's like this is one of those once you see it, you can't unsee it moments. And it begins to reframe how you live. It begins to reframe how you see the scriptures. It begins to reframe everything. And so my journey into it came 20 years ago as a young pastor, a young seminarian, going, "Oh my goodness, why have I not been taught this before?" And it began now a pursuit just into the text to like, "Okay, what does the text actually say about this?"

Ross Chapman:



Well, this is a great start. So let's unpack a little bit of this.

Rob Kelly:

Sure.

Ross Chapman:

First, there's the conversation about the trinity and what union has to do with the triune God. And then we can go from there on the thing you just said, which was, "Why have I never seen this before?" So start us with the trinity, and then we'll go to the-

Rob Kelly:

Beautiful.

Ross Chapman:

... "Where has this been all my life," question.

Rob Kelly:

So we worship a God that's perfectly one, right, one God, three persons. And right now, because of the finished work of Christ on the cross, we have been brought into the godhead. In the ancient Greek world, they had this amazing phrase called the perichoresis. And it's this reference to this divine dance of love that existed for all eternity within the members of the trinity, and that somehow we are being invited into, brought into this dance, because we've been united to Christ; this amazing truth, right now, that no matter who's listening, if you are in Christ, that we have been united to God and each other in the person of Christ Jesus. We're going to spend forever together because of that. And again, that's where Paul would say that we are hidden ... Where? With Christ in God. So this amazing truth, that the oneness that we have is rooted in the oneness that is shared within the godhead from all eternity.

Ross Chapman:



That's amazing.

Rob Kelly:

Yes, it is. It's crazy.

Ross Chapman:

So no matter where we are right now, no matter where we are, where we actually are is in the trinity.

Rob Kelly:

Yes. It helps when you say it out loud.

Ross Chapman:

It helps when you say it out loud.

Rob Kelly:

It helps when you say it out loud.

Ross Chapman:

We're talking right here, and we are in the trinity.

Rob Kelly:

Yes.

Ross Chapman:

And that is the mystery of the good news.

Rob Kelly:

Okay, can we talk about the mystery?



Ross Chapman:

Tell me about the mystery.

Rob Kelly:

Let's talk about the mystery of the gospel. So people talk, "Okay, we want to preach the gospel." What is this mystery that we hear about in the scripture? Paul could not be more clear. He defines it. Go back and read the book of Ephesians, or Colossians; well, a lot of places in the New Testament. Let's just start in Ephesians.

And what does Paul say? That this mystery that was kept secret from eternity past is now being revealed. And this mystery is to what? To unite all things together. Where? In him, in Jesus. This is the mystery of the gospel.

And then Paul goes on to say in literally every chapter of Ephesians, Ephesians 2, he said, "Through the blood of Christ, the dividing wall of hostility came down." And he made what? "One new humanity out of the two," talking about Jews and Greeks coming together.

Ephesians 3, he defines it exactly, that now the Gentiles are become partakers in this mystery of the oneness.

Ephesians 4, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism. We're growing up into him who's the head, who's Christ."

Ephesians 5, Paul talks about husbands and wives. Any pastor that's ever done a wedding is going to preach Ephesians 5 at some point. And what's he say? That, "The two shall become one flesh. And this is a profound mystery." But he's not talking about husbands and wives. He's talking about Christ and the church. He says that.

But then the most amazing thing. This is a little personal story. 20-something years ago, I was wrecked by Ephesians 6, just the way I was wrecked by John 17. And I remember reading it, and I had never literally ... I was a young pastor. I don't even know why they hired me. I don't know if I'd ever read the Bible fully before. And they assigned me to teach Ephesians 6. And I was like, "Well, I should probably read it." And I get towards the end of the chapter, and Paul asks for prayer. And he says, "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me that I may fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel for which I'm an ambassador. Pray that I would declare it fearlessly, Lord, as I should."

Well, that little prayer of Paul became ... not little, but that prayer of Paul became my breath prayer. I just thought it sounded so awesome. It was like a football player that's about ready to go into battle. It's like every time I would go up and preach or teach for the last 20-something years, 23, 24 years, I would pray that under



my breath. And it wasn't until about 10 years later, before going up to preach at a church that I was at, that it actually hit me that Paul defined in every chapter of Ephesians what he was actually saying.

And I had this amazing aha moment where my eyes were opened, that Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, that wrote literally nearly half of the books of the New Testament, said every single time he opened his mouth, that he wanted to proclaim the mystery of the gospel. The one thing that the apostle Paul wanted to preach every single time is our union with Christ, that all things have been united together in Christ. He uses physical examples, societal examples of Jews and Greeks coming together, Gentiles coming together. He uses a physical example of husbands and wives. But they all point to the greater reality of our oneness with him. That's the message Paul wanted to preach every single time he preached.

Ross Chapman:

All right. So you're challenging maybe some things we often hear, which is the gospel, is that Jesus died for my sins so that I could be forgiven so that I could go to heaven and live with him forever. That's true.

Rob Kelly:

It is true.

Ross Chapman:

But what you're saying is a little more or different, and so unpack that for us a little bit.

Rob Kelly:

When you understand your union with Christ, it changes how you even understand your salvation. What did you just say, Ross? When we talk about salvation, you're talking about what you're saved from, which is our sin that did ... What? Separated us from God. So if our sin separated us from God, then what did our salvation do? It united us to him. So can we not talk only about what we're saved from, but more joyfully, what we're saved into? Yes, Jesus died for our sin. Yes, our sin needed to be washed. It's through the blood of Christ the scripture says, right? This is amazing truth, that he paid the price for us that we could not pay for ourselves. Yes. But in so



doing, he brought us back into the place that we were always created for in the first place, which is literally in God who is our salvation.

Ross Chapman:

That's awesome. So we're on the Faith & Work Podcast. And I'm thinking about, okay, well, how does this apply to me as a worker? And one of the things I'm hoping that we can apply is this changes how I think of who I am when I show up in all the places God has me, one of them being my workplace where I spend the majority of my time. I don't know, how would you help us think differently about our identity in Christ? We say this phrase a lot. I think you're unpacking that for us a little bit more. How does that help me show up in the places where God has made differently?

Rob Kelly:

Yeah, no, that's a great question. I think first off, we don't just say "In Christ" a lot. Paul's theology is defined by two words: in Christ or in him. It's the summary of his theology, he uses it 164 times in his letters, which is a direct reference to our union with Jesus. So if you understand that you have been united to God in Christ, that you are literally in Christ, it changes everything about the way you live. It changes everything about your identity. It allows you to rest in a way that ... This is so common in the church. Let's just unpack this for one second. Let's bring this down to the ground.

It's like so often, Christians, when they have a misplaced theology of salvation, of works, of whatever it might be, that they're always striving, they're always trying to ... "I have to do the extra Bible study. I have to do the extra thing. I got to pull myself up by my bootstraps and try not to sin and try not to do this or look at that or say this or say that or consume this or consume" ... It's like you're always trying to do the next thing.

But when you recognize that you are deeply rooted, that you right now somehow are united to the second member of the godhead, that there's nothing that you can do to strive to be loved anymore by God, that when you think about the fact that when Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan, John baptizes him, the clouds part, the spirit descends like a dove and you hear the father's voice saying, "This is my son whom I love, in whom I'm well pleased," you're united to that son. That same God that was well pleased of his son is well pleased of you



because you, because you are in him. There is a rest when you know that you are loved of God perfectly, and it's not because of you, it's because of him.

Ross Chapman:

It's his faithfulness.

Rob Kelly:

It's his faithfulness. You're not going to be faithful. "For all have sinned and fall short," scripture says. Praise God that we don't have to because he did. And there is a rest in that. If you're united to Christ, all that is his is yours. His inheritance is your inheritance. And that just changes the way ... Take a deep breath if you're listening to this right now, I would just say. This is incredibly good news, by the way. You want to talk about gospel? This is some really good news.

Ross Chapman:

That's awesome.

Rob Kelly:

It changes everything.

Ross Chapman:

It changes everything. It also changes ... All those then who are in Christ belong to him, and they are the church. So help us think about, how does this impact the way we might think about our participation in church? What does it change? How does it help us think about people who don't go to the church we go to on Sunday morning? How does it help me think about the place where I do worship every Sunday?

Rob Kelly:



Yeah. I mean, when you understand that all the people of Jesus, his church, his ekklesia, his called out ones, are in Christ, it should change the way you see and interact with them. Sometimes I find it helpful to state blatantly obvious truths, that you're going to spend forever with them, perfectly united to God and to them in Christ. So that should change the way you interact with them. You're not going to agree all the time, but why is it that in Christ, Paul says that our first ministry is reconciliation, our first message? It's like if there's brokenness, you're going to pursue reconciling the things that the world or the evil one has divided us over. You're going to pursue that. You're going to not see the church down the street as your competition or someone else. You're going to see them as your teammate. Why? Because you're going to spend forever with them, because you're both in Christ. You're going to recognize that, by the way, your church isn't the church in the city. It's one beautiful expression of Christ's church in the city. And by the way, the most common expression of the church in the New Testament is the city church.

Ross Chapman:

That's right. That's totally right.

Rob Kelly:

Far and away, actually. It's not even close.

Ross Chapman:

Yeah, and there's plenty written in the New Testament about division. And I'm reminded of Lesslie Newbigin, who said, "Disunity in the church is an unbearable self-contradiction."

Rob Kelly:

So good.

Ross Chapman:



I mean, it's just such a good sentence to reflect on. It's an unbearable self-contradiction, meaning we have made division of the church bearable. We put up with it. We move on from it. And we don't quite understand what it means by self-contradiction until we understand union.

Rob Kelly:

We are one. It is a reality that we have. We don't do a very good job of acting like it most of the time, which is why you have all these 58 or 59 one another passages in the scripture that could tell you to bear with one another, love one another, spur one another on, be reconciled, over and over again, is because we get the acting it out, living it out part wrong. That's the norm.

Ross Chapman:

That's the norm, yeah.

Rob Kelly:

That's the norm. But that doesn't change the reality that we literally spiritually, theologically are one in Jesus. And so Newbigin couldn't be more right, is that to act in a divided way is a self-contradiction when you are already one, period. So what does it look like for us to live out the oneness that our Lord Jesus both prayed for and commanded in the upper room, right? And this oneness that he says will be the greatest declaration, the greatest demonstration of his gospel, of his good news to the world. John 13, "Love one another." How? "Just as I've loved you, so also you should love one another. By this, the world will know you're my disciples, if you love one another." John 17, "May they be one so that the world may know."

This is the oneness that when we do that well, when we love one another well, when we operate in this oneness that is rooted in the triune God that we've been brought into, the world sees it and they, pardon the double negative, can't not take note. It's just so prevalent. From an evangelistic standpoint, it's the greatest evangelism that church has for it. It's the thing that Jesus says would be the greatest declaration.

You think about it; practically live this out. Let's make this again on the ground. People see people coming together across racial, ethnic lines, across political divides, across socioeconomic divides, across geographic divides. It's like, "Why are these people that are so different loving each other? Why are these people that are so



opposed, what the world should say are so opposed on these different things, serving their community, loving their community, being one with one another?" It's because they're family. They're united in Christ, they have the same father, and now they're able to operate in this beautiful oneness. And that's just ... the world takes note.

Ross Chapman:

Hi, I'm Ross Chapman, CEO at Denver Institute for Faith & Work. We want to see a future where every person's work brings hope and life to their city, which is a contrast with society's views of work. And for now, it's often a contrast with the views of work we hear at church. That's why I'm excited to share with you that we are currently in the midst of our FOR campaign. That's the FOR campaign, meaning this is a vision for the future of work, workers, church and cities.

Like you, we've noticed a lack of accessible, biblically grounded and excellent vocational discipleship opportunities. This gap is causing many to have an anemic or a lifeless vision of their work. Vocational discipleship can come from many places in your life, such as this podcast. And as we seek to expand those opportunities with high quality content over the next five years, our aim is to help 100,000 people recognize and affirm their daily work is central to joining God and his vision and work to make all things new.

If you've been encouraged and discipled by thoughtful conversations that you hear on the Faith & Work Podcast, or if your life has been shaped by Denver Institute in some way, I encourage you to help advance this mission through the way you work and by giving. Will you consider a one-time quarterly or monthly gift to support this work? If so, visit the give page at [denverinstitute.org](https://denverinstitute.org) to get started.

Well, okay, so we talked about how unity with Christ, being in Christ, changes the way we might think about our own lives. We've talked about it, how it might impact the way we think about or participate in church, especially the church in our city. Just to set up the next part of the conversation as, how does this impact how we think about the place where we live, the place where God has asked us to live and move and have our being? I'm reminded of Abraham Kuyper. He says that, "Unity is the ultimate aim of all the ways of God." And you had referenced earlier Ephesians 1:10, which basically says that God's bringing everything together in heaven and on earth, in Christ.



Rob Kelly:

In him.

Ross Chapman:

And we would say at Denver Institute, one of the best ways to help those two realities come together, where heaven is a little bit more visible right now in our current reality, is through our everyday work. And so what is, what will be, we get to participate in the what can be in our everyday work and where we live. But how has this idea of union with Christ shaped how you are doing your work and how you think about Charlotte or cities in general?

Rob Kelly:

So in Ephesians, Paul makes a couple really fascinating correlations that I think oftentimes go overlooked. He talks about a couple things that God created in eternity past. It's just really important. One is that all things would be united together in him. Two, in Ephesians 2, he talks about all of the works that he has created for each of us to do in eternity past. Coincidence? I think not.

So the idea of that when we're one, God intended this for always, he also intended us to be living that out. And he knew exactly the times and places where we would dwell. Think of Paul when he's in Athens. He created from one man, Adam, every nation of mankind, that they might inherit the whole earth. And he determined for them the exact times and boundaries, the places that they would dwell. And he did this so people might seek him, reach out to him, perhaps find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

So okay, think about this. Somehow, God knew exactly when and where you would live in eternity. He planned that you would be united to everyone, and he planned the things that you would do. I don't know how all that works, but that's what the word says. That's what it says. So when you understand that, how do you think about and pursue and come into alignment with the things that God designed you for from eternity past? And there is a joy and there is a freedom when you come into alignment with that plan.

And I'm not here, by the way ... We're not debating free will, predestination. Listen, whether you're Presbyterian or Pentecostal listening to this, we're not having that debate today. But can we agree that God's will is perfect somehow, right? And so now there's a joy in pursuing, what is the thing that he designed for me, whether it's



through my family, loving and serving, whether it's your spouse or kids, if you have those, or whether it's the vocation that God has for you and your work vocation and calling and the job that he's created for you ... How do you love and serve people well in that space? How do you create jobs that are caring for families and others, and how do you be a good employee? How does that affect the way that you see those in your community and those ... they call them the third places, where you're meeting and interacting, whether it's your kids' sports teams or the coffee shop down the street; not that you know anything about that, Ross

Ross Chapman:

Oh, I love coffee shops.

Rob Kelly:

Yeah, Ross does love coffee. But I'm just like, it changes the way you operate, because you know that God had a plan for you where you are. And I think some of the joy of life is just that pursuit. It's the discovery of that. It's the process of that. And I just think that that's ... what a gift he's given us.

Ross Chapman:

Absolutely. Well, I'd love just to maybe, as we wrap up our conversation, what are some of the key things that you would want us to take away from this concept of union? Hey, if somebody could really grasp what this means, what are the one or two final things you'd leave us with?

Rob Kelly:

Once you see it, you can't unsee it. It's everywhere. Jesus is patronizingly clear on this point. It's literally everywhere. You can go back to the old covenant too, Psalm 133, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together, where in unity." It's everywhere.

Ross Chapman:

It's on every page.



Rob Kelly:

It's on every page. And so it changes the way you see the scriptures. And if it changes the way you see the scriptures, it'll change your view of God. It'll change your view of people. It'll change your view of self. It'll change your identity. What is it? Some of the greatest works of all time, Augustine, Calvin, whatever, the great theological works, there's no true understanding of God without understanding of man. There's no true understanding of man without understanding of God.

This doctrine, which is the scarlet thread of Christian theology, if you track it from the scriptures through the early fathers, through the medieval, up to the reformers to today, it is the common thread of theology. And I don't know how today we don't talk about it more. How have we lost this? It's everywhere. It changes everything. Once you see it, you can't unsee it. It changes the way you see the world, people, God, self. I mean, dig into it. I promise you, it's beautiful. It will change you.

Ross Chapman:

Well, that's a great charge to wrap things up on. We didn't really unpack, why don't we think about this more, hear about this more, talk about it this way? Before we go, do you have any answers for that? Help people wrestle with, "Okay, this sounds kind of new. I know it's in scripture. I've heard it before, but it hasn't been emphasized the way that you're emphasizing it right now. And if it is really clear in scripture, why is it not a really clear message for Christians today?"

Rob Kelly:

I don't think it's a very simple answer. I can make it short, but it's going to step on a whole bunch of toes.

Ross Chapman:

Well, let's record it and see what happens, Rob.

Rob Kelly:

Generally speaking, especially in the last couple of hundred years, especially in religious fundamentalism, we have a reductionist gospel. It's become two parts, and it's highly Platonic, meaning rooted in Plato's thought.



And it is all about getting saved and going someplace else. It is about getting our souls to heaven to be with God. It's not about the present reality of the union that we have with God in Christ. And it's not about operating and living that out in our day-to-day lives, which means here, bringing heaven to earth here. "Father, may your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven." And so when you're only thinking of salvation-

Ross Chapman:

As escape.

Rob Kelly:

... as an escapist ... This is a reductionist view of salvation. Let's just be really clear. Reductionism, by the way, is the beginning of heresy. And that's why this steps on a lot of toes. Most heresies begin in the Bible studies of really smart Christians. And this is a reductionist view of salvation that is leaving half of the conversation out. Yes, we are saved from our sin. Yes, our eternal souls will be with God, which Paul says is much better by far, right? But it is a reality of it is in the person of Jesus where we are, where our souls are. And that reality is a reality that will be fully embodied, that Jesus himself, the firstborn from among the dead, that his resurrection body is a foretaste of what we have coming, where we will spend forever together, perfectly united to God and each other in a perfectly redeemed city, the new Jerusalem, the embodied place.

This is the culmination of the creation mandate, that in the end, that we will ... We start in the garden with two, we end in a city with multitudes, a fully cultivated creation where we are one with God, where every tear is wiped away, everything is set back to right. Everything is not just set back toward the Edenic state, but in a more full, beautiful, shalom Edenic state, greater, that it's no longer perishable, but it will be raised imperishable. How? Because Jesus' body is made imperishable. It is because he is the new creation. "If you are in Christ, a new creation," Paul says.

Ross Chapman:

And now we participate.

Rob Kelly:



And we then become partakers, Peter says, participants. Where? In the divine nature of Jesus. This should blow our minds.

Ross Chapman:

That's right.

Rob Kelly:

It's crazy.

Ross Chapman:

So we've kind of put the focus on getting a bunch of people out of here and to heaven, and that we should be focusing on bringing heaven here as much as possible.

Rob Kelly:

I would say we should be focused on operating in our union with Christ. And it is God in his mission that is focused on bringing heaven here, and showed us that in himself, stepping into this place. This is what the incarnation was. And we're in that. This is mind-blowing theology. I know we're speaking in large, grand schemes, but it's a joy. That's what we're a part of.

Ross Chapman:

It is. And if we take this view seriously, this reality seriously into our everyday work, it really should change our everyday work. It gives permission for us to recognize our everyday work as our primary ministry opportunity, or at least a big one. So we don't have to define ministry and spiritual activity in a narrow sense. It really broadens it.

Rob Kelly:

Yes.



Ross Chapman:

Well, Rob, this has been great. Thanks for taking time to hang here in Denver. We're so glad to have you in the office to do this, and thanks for sharing what you've learned.

Rob Kelly:

Awesome. Thanks, Ross. It's great to be here.

Ross Chapman:

Well, friends, if you haven't listened to part one of the series on union, I'd encourage you to take some time to do so. It's an incredible personal story of how the idea of union with Christ and our oneness with Jesus really changed a couple and changed how they work and lead their company. It's definitely worth your time. Union with Christ is a really important conversation, because at the heart of all work is a recognition that you are working with God for others, for his purposes in the world. So let me leave you in this two-part series with an encouragement. It comes from Jesus' prayer just before he goes to the cross. He prays to his father, "So that the love you have loved me with may be in them, and I may be in them. So that the love you have loved me with may be in them, and I may be in them."

Speaker 2:

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