DNA Test Opens Family Mystery, Launches Questions of Identity

Five years ago, Alice Collins Plebuch, now 69, sent away for one of those DNA test kits available from sites like Ancestry.com, but the results were a stunner. Her parents, both deceased, were Irish-American Catholics, and half her DNA confirmed a not unexpected mix of British Isles bloodlines. The other half, however, was a completely unexpected combination of European Jewish, Middle Eastern and Eastern European.

The Washington Post recently detailed what happened next: After a five-year search, Plebuch eventually ferreted out that her father had been switched at birth in the hospital, presumably by accident, with another infant born the same day in 1913 and delivered by the same doctor. The baby born to Plebuch's grandparents was sent home with the other infant's parents, who were Jewish. That baby was named Phillip Bamson by the supposed parents, and raised Jewish. The baby who became Plebuch's father was named James "Jim" Collins, and raised Catholic. In short, the Jewish family's child had been sent home with an Irish family and the Irish family's child had been sent home with a Jewish family. No one was aware of the mistake and Jim Collins lived his whole life believing he was of Irish descent.

Along the way of her search, Plebuch met and became friends with the daughter of Phillip Bamson, and they refer to each other as "swapcuz" even though they share no genetic link. What's more, the discovery of the switch answered several questions for both families about why Phillip and Jim, both deceased, didn't bear much resemblance to other supposed relatives.

Plebuch and her actual siblings agree that if their father were still alive, it would be right to tell him the truth about his birth. But she considers it a mercy that this information wasn't available during his lifetime. Jim was so proud of his unknowingly adopted Irish heritage that he'd even had an Irish wake, with one of his daughters singing "Danny Boy." The truth might have robbed him of that identity.

Being born Jewish, but raised Catholic, put Jim Collins's identity more in what he believed than in who he actually was. In fact, who he actually was, was completely different than who he believed himself to be. What can those who are the least like us teach us about our identity?

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Acts 17:26
From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live ... (For context, read 17:24-28.)

According to Paul in the verse above, God has determined where and when you were born, and from what nation. In Paul's time, each nation had its own beliefs and customs. This is still true today. Based on Paul's assertion one could assume that is what God intended.

Questions: What is the essential point Paul wants his hearers to understand? What does this mean regarding our relationship with Jesus as individuals and as a community? What does this mean about our cultural diversity?

Galatians 3:26-29
... for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (For context, read 3:19-29.)

Ephesians 2:19
So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God ... (For context, read 2:11-22.)

In both of these passages, Paul is talking about the family of God comprised of Christian believers.

Paul was not telling people to ignore their ethnic heritage; rather he was probably saying that it was important to maintain their ethnic heritage, *while being Christian*. Galatians remained Galatians, Graeco-Romans remained Graeco-Romans, and Jews remained Jews, when they became Christians. But the common ground was faith in Christ.

Christianity does not have an indigenous culture that all Christians must join. Rather Christianity seeks to transform the cultures in which it is planted.

Questions: Should being "clothed with Christ" eliminate major cultural barriers? How do you think Paul intended the household of God to relate to those who are not believers in Christ? What impact, if any, should these verses have on longstanding divisions between groups of humans?

Romans 8:15-17

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ ... (For context, read 8:12-17.)

Questions: If we are "joint heirs" with Christ, what does that make Christ's relationship with us? How do you think God wants us to think about those who do not profess faith in Christ?

Prayer for All Sorts of Conditions of Mankind (BCP p.814)

O God, the creator and preserver of all mankind, we humbly
ask you for all sorts and conditions of men; that you
would be pleased to make your ways known to them, your
saving health to all nations. More especially we pray for
thy holy Church universal; that it may be so guided and
governed by your good Spirit, that all who profess and call
themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth, and
hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in
righteousness of life. Finally, we commend to your fatherly
goodness all those who are in any ways afflicted or distressed,
in mind, body, or estate; [especially those for whom our prayers
are desired]; that it may please your to comfort and relieve
them according to their several necessities, giving them patience
under their sufferings, and a happy issue out of all their
afflictions. And this we beg for Jesus Christ's sake. *Amen.*