
Individualism & the Church

DAVE BAST

It is easy to live in our own little worlds today: personal computers, iPods, DVRs, all allow us to choose what we want when we want it; and this growing individualism even affects our attitudes and behavior with respect to the Church. Is there still a place for the Church in this kind of world? 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.

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, there are a lot of issues that are out there in the Church; issues that are returned to again and again by Christians, both on the right and the left, but in this series of messages, we are trying to explore some of the issues that are often ignored by the Church. The kind of personal issues that really bring the Gospel close to home.

DAVE BAST

Yes; there are these hot-button topics that everybody, even in the media, are talking about; but this series is called: What else we should be talking about. Not to say those aren't important, but there are other important things, including the topic that we want to address today: Individualism and the Church; or as we might put it: I don't need the Church, or do I?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; a number of years ago, a writer by the name of Robert Putnam published a book called *Bowling Alone*. For years, everyone had to join a bowling league, and why would you go bowling unless you were bowling with your friends?

DAVE BAST

Yes, it was a social activity.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly; and what he discovered was, people are actually out there renting a lane and bowling by themselves. They are not socializing with their neighbors. They are more and more drawing into themselves; and the kinds of social organizations and social activities that have historically been part of our communities are dying away.

DAVE BAST

I noticed an interesting example of this in another way. All kinds of social entities are struggling. I was listening to a baseball game last summer and an ad came on for the Free Masons. Now, this is a secret society, you know. It is...

BOB HEERSPINK

Advertising for members.

DAVE BAST

Right; they are advertising for members now. We have become so individualistic in our modern North American society that all these organizations, not just religious, but social, are having trouble finding and attracting members.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, technology today is driving us in those kinds of directions. People are not just bowling alone, they are plugged into their own little private worlds that technology has created.

DAVE BAST

Yes; there is a term for that. It is called *cocooning*...

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

We kind of put our headphones on, especially young people, or they are texting their pals. I saw an article this morning in the newspaper that said youth in America are spending an average of 53 hours a week using media – electronics, online. That is eight hours a day.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; we live in our own worlds and community begins to disappear. It has been said that electric garage door openers have negatively affected our neighborhoods because instead of having to get out of your car, open the garage door and drive in, and at that moment maybe wave to your neighbor, you hit the button, you drive in, the door closes, and you are home alone.

DAVE BAST

So, the question is, what does this do to the Church? The organized Church; and it certainly has an impact. Many people, I think, are saying: Yeah, I don't really need that. I can even get my religion online, or for that matter, let's be honest here, on the radio.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; well, people talk about the virtual church. Let me just connect through technology to the Church. I don't really need these folks in my neighborhood who gather Sunday after Sunday; I don't need to be part of them. I can develop my own spirituality apart from the Church.

DAVE BAST

Well, here is why this is problematic, and why we want to address the issue. Listen to this from Matthew Chapter 16. This is actually a passage that we addressed in an earlier program, where Peter makes the great confession: you are the Christ, the Son of the living God, in answer to Jesus' question: Who do people say that I am? And Jesus responds to Peter by saying:

¹⁶Blessed are you...for flesh and blood has not revealed this, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you...

(listen to this) I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.

You ask: What is Jesus' great work? He is a church builder.

BOB HEERSPINK

And Jesus is talking there about the Church at a point in his ministry when really the Church didn't exist. People were following him. They were coming out to the seashore; they were gathering on the mountainsides to hear him; but in terms of saying there is this Church that exists, well, there were twelve disciples who were

following him, but after that, where is this church that he is building?

DAVE BAST

So, clearly he is not talking about a building. He is not in the construction business. He is talking about the community of his followers – of those who believe in him and are living for him. That is the Church; and it is just astonishing to focus in on that. What is he doing? What is Jesus really doing in the world? Answer: he is building his Church. Why hasn't he come back yet to bring an end to all things? Answer: I am just simple enough to think maybe it is because he is not finished building his Church yet.

BOB HEERSPINK

But that really influences the way we think of the entire Gospel, because so many Christians think of the Good News as simply bringing individuals to a relationship with Jesus. They really think of the Gospel as snatching firebrands from the fires of hell, when in actuality, the Gospel, according to Jesus in that passage, is about community.

DAVE BAST

Well, sure; I mean, individual salvation is key. Nobody is denying that; at least, we are not denying that. The work of Jesus is to bring people to the Father through himself; but he says, yes, it is in community that this happens; not just in isolation. It is the building of the Church; it is the creation of that redeemed community that he is all about; and not only him, but those who have served him through the years, beginning with Paul. Look at the Apostle Paul's career. What did he do?

BOB HEERSPINK

He was a church planter.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he gave himself to the Church. To whom did he write his letters? To these little congregations – these little groups; again, no buildings; they are meeting in houses or wherever, but they are genuine, flesh-and-blood communities, real life with all of the problems and struggles of real-life people; that is what he is addressing often in those letters; but Paul's focus is on building the Church, just as Jesus' is.

BOB HEERSPINK

It isn't surprising that the Church has been important to Christian leaders down through the centuries. Cyprian, the Third Century bishop and martyr from North Africa, said that no one can have God for their father if they don't have the Church as their mother. You know, that is an incredible endorsement for the Church.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and here is something even more surprising, maybe. The great reformer, John Calvin, quoted Cyprian in his magnum opus: *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and agreed with him that properly thinking of the Church, there is no salvation outside of it. John Wesley, the father of modern evangelicalism, said that the New Testament knows nothing of isolated, individual believers. It is the Church that is the purpose of Christ, and that has been recognized.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, we have established that the Church is important to Christ, to Paul, to the Church Fathers, but what about for us today? What about for people who are experiencing real, live churches in their neighborhoods? Is the Church important to us?

Let's pause here. In a moment, we will talk about what this work in progress called the Church looks like today.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Hi. You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into the scriptures as the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. You know, Dave, we have been talking about the Church in abstract. We have looked at the theology of the Church in the New Testament; what the Church Fathers have said about the Church; but then you go out and you experience the Church as it really exists, and that is really where the problem comes for many people. They go out, they visit a church, and they become offended by the bickering, the quarreling, the divisions, by the sheer number of denominations that exist in our world.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I mean, you say I have to be part of the Church. Great, somebody says, which one?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and then there is the hypocrisy of sitting next to someone who is confessing all kinds of wonderful things, and yet, in their personal lives and their business life, they are living a totally different way.

DAVE BAST

The Church is full of hypocrites. How many times have we heard that? You and I have been pastors for what, thirty years or so, each? And we know it all.

BOB HEERSPINK

I have heard the objections; and I have heard people say to me: you know, I love Jesus. I respect Jesus. I want Jesus as my savior, but I don't want the Church; Jesus, yes; the Church, no. How do you respond to that?

DAVE BAST

Well, you have to start by acknowledging the truthfulness of many of the objections; objections, incidentally, which also apply to me personally. I am a mess, too, in some ways. You know, why aren't I better?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

The Church is full of hypocrites. Well, count me in because there is hypocrisy in my life. So, yes, right; we've got problems. I mean, if you read the New Testament, go to the book of Acts, you will find out that one of the earliest stories in the life of the perfect church, supposedly, was a story of hypocrisy: Ananias and Sapphira.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; you keep reading through, say, Paul's epistles, and you find that there were all kinds of issues that came up. The Corinthian correspondence talks about issues of major moral failure in the church.

DAVE BAST

Or Paul and Peter arguing with each other; Paul says in Galatians: I had to rebuke Peter to his face. So, here are the two chief apostles who cannot agree. They are completely divided.

BOB HEERSPINK

The Church has always been flawed; it has always been broken; right from day one. I like what someone once said, that the Church is like Noah's ark. If it weren't for the storm outside, you couldn't stand the stench inside. And that was as true back then as it is today.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and for all its problems, the Church – the real, flesh-and-blood Church – whether it is a little house fellowship or a gigantic cathedral or a mega-church somewhere, it is still necessary; it is still at the center of what God is doing in the world; and that means that if we want to really be faithful to Jesus Christ and be part of what he is doing, we have got to be part of the Church.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think that is key; to recognize that the main mover with regard to the Church is God. Sometimes we have thought of the Church as a gathering of religiously inclined people. It is another society that exists in our world today; and we have made the Church – we have created it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is like a club for people interested in religion.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

Sort of like others who are interested in, I don't know, knitting or quilt making.

BOB HEERSPINK

But if you look at what the Bible says about the Church, the Church is God's idea. It is his creation...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

And becoming part of the Church is really getting onboard God's program of salvation.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, you start with the word itself: Church in the New Testament is translated *ecclesia*, which means *called out*. It is, you could say, *assembly*; but it is an assembly of people who have been invited to come together.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; called out by God.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

God is the one who does the calling.

DAVE BAST

And that is the word in the Old Testament for the people of Israel. Israel is the first Church, if you want to think of it that way. They are the ones who are initially called out by God – called out from the world to belong together in a kind of a unique fellowship, but then, of course, sent back into the world to be an instrument for God's work in what he wants to accomplish.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think if we understand the Church that way then we can begin to make sense out of the language we have sometimes used of the Church. We have said the Church is one holy Church. Well, in reality, as we

have constructed the Church, from a human standpoint it is *not* one; it is fragmented; and it is not holy; but from God's point of view, in terms of what God is creating in the world, the oneness and the holiness that he calls the Church to become as his gifts, first of all, and then as *our* calling to realize in our own lives and in the Church's life.

DAVE BAST

Right. So, this is the work of God, and this is what he is pointing to. It is his idea, not ours; but why is it so important to him? Why in the world is he so bent on calling together a community that will be holy and united and fill the earth?

BOB HEERSPINK

So, why is God sold on the Church? That is what we really need to talk about; but before we do that, let's pause to talk about how someone can help inform our upcoming programs on our website.

DAVE BAST

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 scriptures. There, we continue to reflect on today's discussion about our world and the Bible, as well as many other conversations listeners begin about scripture and how it interacts with life. We would also like you to help us think about upcoming programs. One of the topics we are going to talk about is miracles and medicine. Do miracles still happen? Is medicine a substitute for prayer? Share your thoughts on these upcoming questions. Finding us is easy. Just visit our website, groundworkonline.com.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

So, the question we want to raise, Dave, is why is the Church so important to God? If it is important to God, it should be important to us; but why does the Church really matter to God?

DAVE BAST

Yes; we emphasize the fact that Jesus is a church builder; that is what he says he is doing; and I think that is the key to a lot of what is going on in the world, really, behind the headlines, or underneath the stories that the world is interested in. It is always about the rise and fall of political power, or some natural disaster, and all the time, what is really happening in human history, if we believe the Bible, is that Jesus is building his Church; a community of people that will be unified and holy and universal: One holy catholic church; and the question is: Why?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, perhaps one reason is because of God's own nature. You know, one of the uniquenesses about the teaching of Christianity deals with the Trinity. Now, I know the Trinity is a very involved, and some people think, a very esoteric doctrine, but at its very core what it is saying is that God is really three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit; and that means God is a community of persons eternally.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I love this idea because it shows how practical theology really is to our everyday lives, and even to our own nature. It is a clue – an important clue – to understanding who we are – if we are made in the image of God. You know, this idea of God as being triune: Father, Son, and Spirit – one God in three persons – eternally that way. As you said, that is not some esoteric doctrine; that is not some ivory tower speculation cooked up by the early Church, you know. That is an absolutely important clue to the meaning of reality.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, if you move from the uniqueness of God in the Trinity to the uniqueness of humanity, you begin to see how that community of persons is now reflected in how God has made us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; I mean, look at the story in Genesis. Genesis 1:26 quotes God as saying: Let us make humankind in our image. Now, the early Church Fathers read that as a clear clue to the nature of God as triune – as this eternally loving community of persons – unity, but also community. So, what does that mean? First of all, it means God didn't have to create people in order to have someone to love. He was perfect love in and of himself.

BOB HEERSPINK

And it certainly means that for us that community is reflected in who we are. God says to Adam: it is not good for man to be alone. A part of the way in which we reflect the image of God is in our relationship with other people.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

We throw away our relationship with others, we throw away life in the Church, and we have diminished who we really are.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. If we were made in the image of God, which is the very significant biblical and Christian understanding, then that means we were made for community. We were made to know and be known by other human beings. We were made for love, for giving and receiving it; not just in marriage, not just within the human physical family, but with a broader community of humanity – of the people of God.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that notion that we are made to love, to learn how to love, I think also gets us into what God intends for the Church. You know, we are not necessarily mature, loving people out of the box. We grow in love. The historic term is we are sanctified. We grow in holiness; and one of the places, one of the schoolrooms where we learn to love is the Church.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. If we think of that first reason that we talked about: We are made for community, that is why the Church is important, because God is a community, that is sort of a theological reason, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

But, the second one is very practical. We need the Church. The Church is important because that is the real rough and tumble place where God intends us to learn how to actually love each other.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that means when we join a church and we discover that, okay, people aren't always living up to our expectations; they are not what they should be, and we aren't what we should be as well, we don't walk away from the church, because we say: okay, God has put us into this community to learn how to love people who, honestly, sometimes are unlovable. That is what we are, and God loves us, and as we image God, we begin to love those who are tough to love, and one of the places we learn it is the Church.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, it is where we have to get real and make it real, right? If we just stay home, if we cocoon ourselves, if we only listen to what we want when we want, all that stuff we were talking about earlier about

what technology allows us to do; if we just sit on our back decks, you know, with our garage door closed, then love is just a theory.

Maybe an analogy is good with a family – a human family, because we often compare the Church to a family, right? We call it the family of God. I remember one of the best days of my life was when I conducted the marriage of the first of my sons to get married; and as I talked to the couple standing before me, whom I loved so dearly, in the sermon that I shared I said that marriage is really a school of *agape*...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

It is not just romance. Romantic love is not enough. No marriage will survive if you cannot make the transition from romantic love to agape, to that self-giving love that the New Testament talks about; and by analogy, I think the Church is the same thing. It is a school of agape; a place to learn real, self-giving love.

BOB HEERSPINK

And the wonderful encouragement that God gives, Dave, is that as we engage ourselves in the learning, in the school of agape – the Church – he promises to keep moving us forward, growing in him. In fact, he promises that there is going to be a day when the Church is going to really look like what the Church is intended to be eternally.

There is a wonderful passage in Revelation 7, where John describes the Church, and this is what he says: ⁹After this, I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰and they cried out in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

There it is; the Church as God intends it to be.

DAVE BAST

Yes, diverse in every way: Language, race, culture, class, gender.

BOB HEERSPINK

And yet, one.

DAVE BAST

One body; all washed in the blood of the Lamb; they are all wearing the same thing – the same white robe, which stands for the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.

BOB HEERSPINK

The one holy Church. That is what the Church will be eternally, and that is what we are called to be already living out today.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and someday that is all there will be. It will be the Church and only the Church. That is all that will exist. Make sure *you* are part of it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining us and listening in on this conversation. We would like to hear from you. What do you think about the Church? What has been your experience? Visit us at groundworkonline.com and tell us what you think. Let us know.

DAVE BAST

Yes; thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating in the conversation through our website that will keep our topics relevant to your

life and concerns. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and then suggest topics or passages that you would like us to talk about on future *Groundwork* programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/individualism-the-church>

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