

Picking a Church in a Buyer's Market

BOB HEERSPINK

Sometimes looking for a new church home can seem a bit like looking at a bowl of alphabet soup. Most communities have a lot more than one church, and there are all kinds of variations: Baptist, Assemblies of God, Lutherans, Methodists, Reformed congregations; and then you've got your non-denominational and Bible churches, too. What does it all mean, and how do you pick just one? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, 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, there is an expression out there... people say to me: I am going church shopping; and when they talk that way, you know, the good news is they are looking for a church; they are looking for a congregation to belong to. Church shopping is a little uncomfortable for me; in fact, quite uncomfortable because it suggests church is a consumer product that we purchase like...

DAVE BAST

Like going clothes shopping or grocery shopping.

BOB HEERSPINK

Like our morning breakfast cereal; but I know what they are getting at. They are saying: Hey, there are so many churches out there, I need to find a church that fits – that is appropriate for me and my family.

DAVE BAST

Well, the other problem with that expression, church shopping, is that it implies the pastor is the shopkeeper. That is an image that Eugene Peterson uses in one of his books; so, the pastor's job is to attract customers to come in through the front door, and then to satisfy them so that they stay there; and that is how he or she is going to be judged as to their effectiveness... and that is a bad thing.

BOB HEERSPINK

But, you know, Dave... that is a bad thing; but I know something of what this is like because my wife and I recently joined another church. The last congregation I served... my denomination encourages us not to stay in a church that we have pastored... and now working in media ministry, it was time to move; so we experienced some of this dynamic of trying to decide what is really important in terms of making a move.

DAVE BAST

Right; our kids... one of our sons and his wife and their two little children recently moved to a different community in another state, and now here they are; they are church shopping, and they recognize it. They don't like it, but they need to find a new fellowship. It is hard; it is uncomfortable; you are a stranger; do you feel welcome? They went to one church – it was a mega-church in their town – which may be wonderful in many ways; it has all sorts of programs, but they had to be fingerprinted to leave their children at the nursery.

BOB HEERSPINK

Really?!

DAVE BAST

I don't think they are going to go back there. So that is the reality, you know.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I have had many young adults come into my office through the years and say to me: I am moving to a different part of the country; it is a part of the country where there aren't churches of our denomination. How do I find a church? What should I look for? And I think that is a very intelligent question to ask, and one worth exploring.

DAVE BAST

Most people very naturally look first at the worship experience. What is it like? How is the preaching? What about the music, does it fit my sense of style? Or they will look at programs: How many programs do they have? Do they have programs for me? Do they have programs for my kids? I mean, in my experience, again and again I heard people, especially with teenagers, say: We are going to go to a church where our kids want to be part of the youth ministry. We just want them to go to church, you know.

BOB HEERSPINK

As long as the kids want to go, that is good enough for us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and to be led around by your kids' likes and dislikes? That may not be great, but that is reality today, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and that means that perhaps we also have to say when we say to a young person or to a couple: Hey, this really matters; we also have to say: Some things aren't critical. The size of the church; how padded are the pews; the number of programs; all of those things are really peripheral to what I think is much more core.

DAVE BAST

Can we get past the consumerist approach?

BOB HEERSPINK

Can we get past the packaging?

DAVE BAST

Yes, and focus in on the core essentials. So, what would you say... what *have* you said, Bob, to a young person who is looking for a church? What do you tell them to focus on?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, Dave, there is a passage in the book of Acts that I have found very helpful. A text that really describes what the life of the church is all about. It is a passage that I have encouraged young adults and couples to think about as they have looked for a church in their own new community. It is Acts 2:42. This is what we read:

They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Now, that is as basic as it gets, but that is really the key that people have to look at as they visit churches.

DAVE BAST

And the first thing in that text that is mentioned is the Apostles' teaching. I don't know how many of us in thinking about finding a church would list as #1 the characteristic that it must be Apostolic; but that is what

the Nicene Creed says: We believe in one holy catholic and Apostolic church. That is what Acts 2:42 says. So that is what we want to really focus on: How do we identify a church that is truly Apostolic?

BOB HEERSPINK

Get out there and find an Apostolic church in your community. That is what we have to define when we get back.

DAVE BAST

That is a question that is going to lead us directly into that text from Acts; and we will dig into it after we talk first about how our listeners can interact with us on our website.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

So, we are talking about what to look for in a church, and we are focusing on this key verse: Acts 2:42. Let me read it again:

They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. That is the first Christians in the early church in Jerusalem, and the first thing that is mentioned is the Apostles' teaching. The first thing we need to look for in a church that is authentic in the New Testament sense is that it is Apostolic.

BOB HEERSPINK

Apostolic; now that is going to be confusing to some people because they are going to say what does that mean? Does that mean we have to be a church that simply seeks to image itself after the First Century? We looked in a previous program at the fact that every church has to find itself imbedded in its own culture, speaking to its own cultural context; so we are not asking people to run around in robes and emulate the apostles or the worship style of the First Century.

DAVE BAST

Well, and other churches say: That means we have to have apostles; so they designate some pastors as apostles, or some missionaries; in fact, there is kind of a movement today that says: Well, we do need apostles to go out and reach virgin territory with the Gospel... but I don't think that is it either.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and that notion of sentness – you know, the concept of an apostle is one sent. That certainly continues to be true of the Church today, but the notion that an apostle has any kind of unique revelation beyond the New Testament revelation I find very, very difficult.

DAVE BAST

Right; we have to have a clear sense of divide between the original, commissioned Apostles – the twelve followers of Jesus – the disciples – plus Paul, the Apostle, who was specially commissioned by the risen Christ...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

They are eyewitnesses to his resurrection, to the facts of the Gospel, and equally important, to the meaning of those facts; and they have an authority that no other teacher in the Church, no theologian, no so-called apostle can equal.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is why I would say to any young person or couple out there looking for another church, look to the Apostolic teaching to see whether that core Gospel is being proclaimed faithfully Sunday by Sunday.

DAVE BAST

There are some traditions, very significant ones, that have said: Well, the way you are ensuring that your church is Apostolic is by having a priest who has been ordained in an unbroken line back to the first apostles – back to Peter, the first Pope. That is what the Catholics teach, that is what the Eastern Orthodox teaches; some Anglicans teach that, even; but I agree with you, Bob. In the Reformed Church we have always said that it is the content of the teaching.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is the Apostolic witness...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

The message that is being shared.

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

In fact, if you go to a passage like 1 Corinthians 15, you actually find the summary of the Apostolic witness there. Paul says:

³I passed on to you of the first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter and then to the twelve. If you look at that summary of the faith, there is the core Apostolic witness.

DAVE BAST

I remember reading some time ago a comment by a New Testament scholar who said that the preaching of the Gospel is the true apostolic succession...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; this message and what it means: Christ died – that is the message; for our sins – that is the meaning of the message; and taken together, that is what we need to look for. Is this church preaching the authentic Gospel? Is it teaching the core? Is it faithful to the New Testament? Because the Apostles' teaching, after all, came to be written down in the Gospels and the book of Acts, and the Epistles of the New Testament; so we still have it in book form – in written form.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and you know, as you look at what churches do with preaching, it is so easy, I think, for churches to really wander away from a focus on that Good News. I mean, this really is the Good News of the Gospel. So much preaching will often go to: Well, this is the way you should live. Here is some practical advice as to raising your family and such; and I am not saying that there isn't room for talking about the Gospel as it is applied to life; but sometimes I think preaching ends up being announcing good rules, and not announcing good news.

DAVE BAST

I couldn't agree with you more. In a bygone generation it used to be poetry and eloquence and Shakespeare, and all that stuff; and today it is more likely to be five principles for a successful marriage. There is a place, certainly, for application – for New Testament ethics – for how we ought to behave; and a lot of the sermon

has to be devoted to that, making it real in our lives; but if it isn't the Gospel, if it isn't focusing on what happened, what God in Christ has done, the plan of God for the salvation of the world as that is taught in the scriptures, well then, it is not Apostolic.

BOB HEERSPINK

And without this clear Apostolic teaching, all we do is burden people. You know, I have talked to folks and they say: When you stand up there and just tell me how I *should* be living, I am not doing it and I don't know, really, how to make these changes in my life apart from God; so just to tell me to be a better person... I know that, but that doesn't keep me going into the coming week.

One of my former parishioners said to me one time: You know, you preach a lot about grace; and I took that as a compliment because at the core of the Gospel – this Apostolic teaching – is grace.

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

The death, resurrection, ascension, victory of Jesus Christ, is centered in the grace of God for us; and that is what people are really needing to take hold of week by week by week.

DAVE BAST

Well, I just preached recently from Galatians 1; you know, where Paul talks about people bringing different gospels – different messages – and one of the key differences is that Paul talked a lot about what Christ has done – what God has done in Christ – human messages talk a lot about what we have to do, and that is an important difference; but there is a bigger sense, too, isn't there, about the message of the Gospel. It doesn't just talk about the cross. There is this larger biblical sort of shape to it, which is also exciting to bring people into the core of this message. I mean, you and I have taught this as we have done some leadership training in different parts of the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, very often people only focus on the fact that we are sinners and Christ died for us; but if we look at the whole expanse of scripture from beginning to end, you see it begins with creation – it begins in a garden – the Garden of Eden. The story of salvation ends with the New Jerusalem, it ends in a city with the creation restored; and by setting the Fall and our salvation in Christ between those two bookends: Creation and recreation; we really understand the full scope of what God is doing in the world.

DAVE BAST

So, the big picture Gospel message is not just sin and salvation for individuals, it is our fallenness, our broken world, the cross and how that is God's means of putting things right, and ultimately his purpose to recreate – to restore – to bring shalom or peace. It is this... and that is exciting to people. That is the Apostolic message that we are looking for.

BOB HEERSPINK

So when we talk to someone about, okay, what are you looking for in a church? That Apostolic message that embraces the whole sweep of scripture, I would say that is number one.

DAVE BAST

But, there are a lot of churches that do teach that and preach that. So maybe there are some other things that we need to look at, too – some other factors. Let's talk more about those specifics in just a moment.

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 HEERSPINK

So, Dave, we have been talking about what really matters when it comes to looking for a church. We have said the first, critical factor is Apostolic teaching...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

The summary of the Christian faith that is centered in Jesus Christ: his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and how that really encapsulates the whole Gospel message – the whole scriptural message – from Genesis to Revelation.

DAVE BAST

So the first thing to look for and to ask about is the preaching and teaching of this particular congregation. Not so much the worship style or the programs that they offer or...

BOB HEERSPINK

Those are secondary.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I know that is what we tend to evaluate first; but is what is preached and taught in this church in its whole ministry faithful to the Bible? Is it grounded in the New Testament Gospel in particular, but ultimately the whole message of the Bible?

BOB HEERSPINK

But now here is the thing, Dave: You can go to such a church and the preaching can be correct, orthodox, centered in that Apostolic truth, and yet you can walk away from a church and say: There isn't any life here. There is something missing; and that is where I think it is very important to go back to that Acts 2 passage and recognize that the early Church was marked, not just by the Apostolic teaching, but also by something called the fellowship.

DAVE BAST

I think that our biggest failing as Protestants – let's be honest – is that we tend to evaluate a church by the quality of the preacher; you know, is the person entertaining? Do they give a good message? Not too long, not too boring...

BOB HEERSPINK

Keep me awake for 15 minutes.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I enjoy going to church because of that and that is about it; and no, it's true, it is much more important *what* is said than *how* it is said; it is much more important to be able to evaluate a message in terms of its faithfulness to the teaching of scripture, but it is also very important, not just to pass some church because it is orthodox, but to ask: Is there real life there? Is there real fellowship? Is the love that the New Testament talks about being lived out?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and that word *fellowship* here in Acts is a very interesting word. It is the word *koinonia*, which means to have things in common; and actually, the ancient Greeks envisioned something of a past golden age when people were sharing together and supporting each other, encouraging each other. They thought that was gone;

that golden age was past; but now, along comes the Church and says: No; in Jesus Christ there is this community, where we come together, we share, we support each other, and it is not simply something from the ancient history, but it is here and it is growing.

DAVE BAST

And it is grounded in a certain kind of love. Now, the word *agape* doesn't appear in Acts 2:42, but it certainly is used throughout the New Testament to describe the foundation for our *koinonia* – for our fellowship with each other; and that is the kind of self-giving love that God in Christ has demonstrated toward us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; Christ has shown us *agape*, now we put that on display in our own lives; and I think what, then, we are really saying here, Dave, is that this orthodox teaching, this Apostolic teaching in the fellowship now comes to life. It is not just words anymore that we are hearing from the preacher, but we are living this out in our own community life as a church. That is what people are looking for.

DAVE BAST

You see that in Acts 2, don't you? I mean, if you go on past verse 42.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, you find that in the fact that people come together. They are selling property; they are sharing with each other. Sometimes this is called Christian Communism, where everyone was forced into this pattern. That is not so. People still had the right to their private property, but there was such a love – *agape* love – that they were willing to sacrifice their own resources for the good of the Church.

DAVE BAST

Well, and somewhat moving on into the later stages of the New Testament and the book of Acts, you see Paul paying a lot of attention to this offering that he is collecting in the churches in Greece for the church back in Jerusalem; and that is an early illustration of a basic Christian principle, that we live out our love for other Christians, even if we don't know them personally, by sacrificing... those who have give so that those who don't have can just live.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that great collection, as it is sometimes called, Dave, was so amazing because it was Gentiles bringing their gifts to Jewish Christians. This, to Paul, was just a sign that the kingdom age was here. Everything had been turned upside down. That is the kind of fellowship that the Gospel of Jesus Christ creates.

DAVE BAST

That is the kind of church I want to be a part of. That is the kind of church you ought to be looking for; a church where love is real and where fellowship can even transcend natural ties of family and close friends. We were talking about this with some of our staff before making this program, and one of them was just saying: You know, my church has orthodox preaching; that is not the problem. I hear about grace; it is all good; but something seems to be missing. I want to experience that more. I want to be able to live this out. I want to be helped with ways of living my faith for real in the community where I reside.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Dave, when we were looking for churches – at churches – my wife and I – we looked to the preaching, to the teaching, but the other issue was: What is this church doing in the community? Is this church manifesting a life of *koinonia*? And people we talked to said: This church really comes alongside and supports and encourages the members of the church; and they also said there are things happening, and we could see that, outside in the community, where they were stretching beyond those normal cultural boundaries; even reaching out to people culturally different from themselves, because really, this fellowship transcends culture. It is bigger than any one culture because it is rooted in Jesus Christ; and seeing those

dimensions of the church really excited us.

DAVE BAST

Well, there are two other things that are mentioned in Acts 2:42. I also think they are important, and we are just about out of time, so we can't go into them deeply, but the breaking of bread and prayer, and I take that prayer to mean that the life of the Spirit was clearly evident in that particular fellowship in Jerusalem; that it wasn't just a social thing; it wasn't just a community action agency, but that everything was bathed in the presence of God and in prayer; and that breaking of the bread deal? Probably the Lord's Supper; again, not just a kind of a potluck after the service, but the Lord's Supper was central to worship there, too; and I for one would love to find a church with Apostolic preaching and teaching and the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a regular part of worship.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, Dave, there is so much more we could talk about with regard to what we would look for in a church, but I would like to hear from some of our listeners. What do they think? What do they look for in a church? Visit us online and let us know your thinking.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, Bob. Join our *Groundwork* conversation. It is actually listeners like you asking questions and participating that will keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you have heard; suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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