
The Church: It's Not What It Used to Be

DAVE BAST

Have you ever sat in church, looked around you and thought: Things sure have changed around here; or maybe you have noticed shifts in Christianity around the world; a concern for the global Church as well as the local Church. Well, how does the Church's current reality line up with the biblical nature of the Church? 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. Okay, Bob, I want to try a little thought experiment here...

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay, here we go...

DAVE BAST

Imagine that you are Rip Van Winkle; let's say a Christian Rip Van Winkle...

Bob Heerspink: Of course.

DAVE BAST

And you have fallen asleep in your comfortable church pew... Yes, we do know that happens. We see who is awake and who is asleep.

BOB HEERSPINK

I have nodded off.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but you have done so in the 1950s, and suddenly you wake up in 2010.

BOB HEERSPINK

Nobody woke me up at the end of the service.

DAVE BAST

What would your reaction be? Now, you get the picture.

BOB HEERSPINK

Oh, yes.

DAVE BAST

Fifty years ago and today.

BOB HEERSPINK

I would wake up and I would look around and, well, where are the suits?

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I think the first thing you might notice is: Man, it is really loud in here. Where did all of these instruments come from?

BOB HEERSPINK

What happened to the organ? All of a sudden, we've got guitars up there and...

DAVE BAST

And trap sets – bang, bang, bang on the drums.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, it is rock and roll music come to church.

DAVE BAST

I can just imagine my father and how he would react when he noticed these big flat screen TVs – where did they come from? And suddenly they are showing music videos of Christian music in church.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, I remember when I was a child there were people even wondering whether Christians should have a television set in their homes...

DAVE BAST

Yes, and now they are in the sanctuary.

BOB HEERSPINK

And we couldn't watch TV on Sunday because that was a day of rest – a day set apart; and now the screens are up in the sanctuary.

DAVE BAST

And then, just think about that is all maybe window dressing or style or music – the way people are dressing; think about some of the issues that would be shocking to folks that we are debating and discussing in the Church today: Abortion, gay rights – gay marriage; wow!

BOB HEERSPINK

Those were things that weren't even talked about in the 1950s.

DAVE BAST

So, what has been happening to the Church? That is our question today that we are focusing on.

BOB HEERSPINK

The Church today looks so different from the Church that I grew up in even during the 1960s. The Church I grew up in looked like a church. There was a cross at the front of the sanctuary. Today Christians are gathering in sanctuaries that really look more like high school gymnasiums.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, the mega-church. Just imagine you went to sleep in your little local congregation and you wake up in a mega-church; or on the other end of the spectrum, a little house fellowship, which is the worshipping body for many Christians today.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and the result is a lot of people just look at what is going on in the Church and say: Wait a minute; this isn't the Church at all!

DAVE BAST

Yes; I heard a great quote just the other day from my pastor. He was talking about this in a sermon and he said: All change... it wasn't his original quote; he got it from I don't know where... but, all change, he said, is initially experienced as loss and accompanied by grief and met with resistance; and that explains a great deal, I think, about what has been going on in our local congregations today. All sorts of controversy and conflict over the changes that have come, and even on a denominational level, shaking denominations apart because of the change that people are experiencing – at least older people – as the loss of something, and they are grieving for that, and they are resisting it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; in recent history, I think, there has never been a time when the Church is called to greater discernment. You know, looking at a changing culture and trying to deal with what it means to be a church in a changing culture; not being left behind, but still looking at culture and saying: Okay, what can we accept, what should we embrace, what can't we embrace? This calls for great discernment, and then as those changes are made, you are absolutely right, it is grief. I have seen people in my congregations that I have served go through the grief of losing the organ at every service; that made the service for them; or a certain style of music; and then to sort through as a congregation: Okay, what is really core and what really are the cultural trappings? What shouldn't change, but what *has* to change if the church is going to be relevant for today?

DAVE BAST

Because the fact is, change is a constant; that is another truism. The only thing that is constant is change. Nothing can stay the same. Culture is always changing, language is always changing, and the Gospel in some respects... or maybe I should say it a different way: The Church has to change. The Gospel doesn't change. That is the core, I guess. We are trying to discern, as you said, what we have to hang onto and what is negotiable, and even needs to be adjusted in order to keep from being irrelevant, because the truth is, if you drive a stake in the sand and say: This is it; this is who we are; we will not change; we will be faithful, we will be constant; pretty soon you are going to be left high and dry.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; because the Church actually needs a way in which it can change intelligently. The congregations that have said: This is where we're at; we are never going to change. I pity them because at some point they are going to have to find a way to change, and they have basically taken a certain style – cultural style – and said: This is the one true manifestation of the Church.

DAVE BAST

Well, just think about it. If we had said that 500 years ago, we would still be worshipping in Latin, and nobody would be able to understand the sermon. So, even at the time of the Reformation, this great upheaval, and a recognition of the need to change.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, Dave, a lot of people would go back to the early Church and say: Oh, let's just go back to the way they did it then.

DAVE BAST

Well, then we would be worshipping in Greek, okay?

BOB HEERSPINK

That's right; but even if you go to the New Testament, you discover the Church is wrestling with issues of how to express itself in different cultural settings.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think that is the message of the book of Acts, and that is where we want to look next; not so much this section or that section, although we will look at a few specific passages, but the whole trajectory of the book of Acts is the story of the first great change that the Church had to go through when it changed from a Jewish Christian fellowship into a universal, worldwide really, predominantly Gentile body.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And so, that is where we will look next; but first we need to take a break for just a moment; and then when we come back we will open up Acts together.

Segment 2

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

Dave, we have been talking about the nature of the Church, how the Church has changed so much in the past 50 years. To a person who would just emerge out of the 1950s and walk into a church today, the church in some respects would be unrecognizable. Is that good or bad? If we go to the book of Acts, I think we get some help here in terms of sorting through what it means to live in a rapidly changing cultural situation.

DAVE BAST

Well, the fact is that change is going to happen, and change has to happen – cultural change – in the Church if we are going to be true to our mission; and Acts is really the story of that, I think, in the New Testament; especially the first great seismic change that took place in the early Church when it turned from a basically Jewish fellowship of believers in Jesus – they accepted him as the Messiah – into a predominantly gentile society: God's new people – multinational, multilingual. Just imagine the incredible changes that meant for those very first Christians, and how tough it must have been for them; but to me, the key verse in the book of Acts occurs early on in the first chapter. It is Acts 1:8; Acts' form of the Great Commission, if you will, where Jesus says to his disciples: I want you to wait in Jerusalem; you are going to receive power when the Holy Spirit comes, and then he adds this:

And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Not a command so much as a statement of fact: You will be my witnesses, and that movement is going to go out to the ends of the earth.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, that turned the whole mission of God's people inside out because if you go to the Old Testament, there was a call to the Israelites, to the Jews, to be a people that attracted others into the fellowship. There was this centripetal force: Come and join us...

DAVE BAST

A city set on a hill...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; but become a Jew with us...

DAVE BAST

Right; kind of a magnet; Jerusalem would draw the nations.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now it is a centrifugal force. It is pushing us out.

DAVE BAST

Wait a minute; I never could remember the difference between those two. Which is which again?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, centripetal is the force that you see as the water sucks down the drain. It is pulling things together...

DAVE BAST

Okay.

BOB HEERSPINK

Centrifugal is pushing us out; it is what you see when you tie a string to a rock and swing it around your head...

DAVE BAST

All right; got it.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is what we have to do; we have to get out there; and suddenly we are dealing with all different kinds of cultures as we go out into the world with the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

In a sense, it is the difference between a church that expects non-Christians to come in and join us as opposed to a church that says let's get out into the neighborhood – into the countryside – and go out and...

BOB HEERSPINK

A church that says the doors are always open. You can come in; you can become like us. That is really going back to an Old Testament model. The New Testament says let's get out there; and that is exactly what happened in the history of Acts.

DAVE BAST

Well, you could also read that key verse, Acts 1:8, as the table of contents of the book of Acts, because of course, everything begins in Jerusalem; the disciples go back there, the story of the upper room and Pentecost in Acts 2, and then they are evangelizing in the city of Jerusalem up until the stoning of Stephen, which is in Acts 6 and 7; and then in Chapter 8 suddenly we find that the action shifts to Samaria, to that region nearby but culturally different – racially different; and then in Chapter 9, lo and behold, here comes this character, Saul of Tarsus, and what happens to him, and the rest of the book then really looks primarily at his mission to the Gentiles.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, I think a lot of folks when they read Acts don't understand what a massive cultural shift this really was. If you take a close look at what the Church was like in Jerusalem, it was a church that had high respect for Torah – the Law – the Old Testament Law. It was a church that gathered in the Temple for worship.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they are still going to the Temple.

BOB HEERSPINK

That's right; and suddenly, even with the move now to Samaria... what do we know about the Samaritans? Well, the woman at the well said: We don't worship at the Temple. We worship at Mount Gerizim. So already there it was: Okay, if you are a Christian now and you are a Samaritan Christian, how important is the Temple?

DAVE BAST

Right; you can also sense the struggles that happened as the Gospel went out into all these gentile cities, but there were always synagogues in those places, and that is often where Paul would begin. He would share the Gospel in the setting of the synagogue, and some of the Jews would believe in Christ, but there were also Gentile hangers-on and they would really become interested, and they would suddenly flock... more and more of them. We see that story told in Acts 13, in the city of Antioch in Pisidia, and all of a sudden, I can just hear what is going on. Change is met by resistance; these Jews are saying: Wait a minute, if we are overrun with Gentiles, there are a lot more of them than there are of us; we are going to lose control of our synagogue. Forget it; nothing doing. They have to become Jews if they are going to...

BOB HEERSPINK

They have to become part of our culture, and then you can be a Christian.

DAVE BAST

They can believe in Christ, but they have to be circumcised, and that is the fundamental conflict in the rest of the New Testament. We see it in Acts, we see it in the epistles of Paul especially.

BOB HEERSPINK

Paul understood that there was a difference between culture and the Gospel. The Gospel transforms culture, but you don't have to become part of Jewish culture to become a Christian; and when he went out, he also then confronted the gentile culture in ways that really called into question what the Gentiles believed: Acts 17, when he is out announcing the Gospel, he says: All of this has been accomplished through a man whom God has raised from the dead; and all of a sudden the Gentiles are saying: Whoa, wait a minute. Raised from the dead?! We don't want our bodies back. Why would we want that? We want to be set free from our bodies. So Paul, as he goes out with the Gospel, is ready to confront cultures with what is a denial of the Gospel, but he also recognizes that the Gospel is going to find its place within culture, and there are some things which have to be accepted as just a natural part of expressing the Church in that setting.

DAVE BAST

You know, we have been talking about this whole problem of change, and it really comes down home to us when it is our own church or our own lives, and we don't like to have them upset. We like things the way they were – the way they are. It is comfortable for us; but to me, it is crucial to see that the change that the Church has to make is driven fundamentally, not just by cultural forces or this or that, but by God's passion – God's heart – to reach the nations; and that is the story of the book of Acts, and that is the story of Church history, and that is reason why we have to be constantly pushing outward...centrifugal force; and adapting our worship, you know; our methods, our habits, our practices as we take that central, unchanging Gospel, but apply it in different cultural contexts in order to reach more, because God wants to reach all the nations.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is such an encouragement to know that a name better than Acts of the Apostles is Acts of the Holy Spirit; and you know, that means that the story of the birth of the Church is continuing on today, because the Church is still being pushed out to the edges of the globe. You have a story in Acts of moving from a Jewish culture to a Roman-gentile culture. Now we have a story of the Church bursting out in expression in a hundred and a

thousand different cultures.

DAVE BAST

Which is happening today.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly; all led by the Spirit of God.

DAVE BAST

So, how do we take those experiences and match them up with this biblical insight about the truth of the Gospel and the need for change? Well, we will dig into that as soon as we talk about how our listeners can interact with us in our *Groundwork* program by visiting our website.

BOB HEERSPINK

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 scripture. There you can listen to today's program again or you can listen to any of our past *Groundwork* programs, or you could leave your comments and questions. We also post a "we are wondering" question every week so you can give us your thoughts on topics for upcoming programs. Finding us is easy. Just visit our website: groundworkonline.com.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

So Bob, the question I guess that we want to come down to now is, what does this all mean for us today? The Church has always experienced change as it has reached out into new cultures. Actually, this is the first program we are doing here in a series on the Church, and we are kind of taking our guide from the ancient Nicene Creed statement: I believe in one holy catholic and Apostolic Church... and we pick out that word "catholic" or universal... worldwide, global, we might say today. Of all of those things, that is the easiest to confess our faith in because it is so obvious. It is true. The Church truly is today universal in every culture and language and place.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is the thing that we have to recognize that has taken place over the last 50 years in such a dramatic way. It has been said there is a greater redistribution of the Church in the last 50 years than at any time since the First Century.

DAVE BAST

So, I guess one thing I would want to say to people: If you are a little bit upset, or maybe disconcerted by the changes that have taken place here in America or in your local congregation, you should be encouraged by the changes that have taken place on a *global* scale, because the Church truly has grown. It has exploded as never before in places unimaginable 50 years ago.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; there are probably more Christians worshipping on a given Sunday in China than in all of Europe; and there are more Christians – more Presbyterians – in Ghana on a given Sunday worshipping than back in Scotland.

DAVE BAST

Right; that is amazing. We work quite a bit at Words of Hope with people in Iran, and we broadcast into Iran, and we also work with Iranian believers, encouraging and discipling them; and nothing is more rewarding to me I think than to experience fellowship with these believers; and I am told reliably that there are more Christians now inside Iran... that harsh environment... that closed country... more people have come to Christ in the last generation than in probably the previous 300 years or more; so, you know, amazing change.

BOB HEERSPINK

And as I look at my own experiences with the global Church, I just find that there are so many things to learn from these fellow believers. When I took on my job at Back to God Ministries I expected as I traveled to meet often very small groups of Christians in various places around the world. What I found is that God is just running ahead of us and doing this immense work. I remember visiting Indonesia for the first time, and I was asked to preach in some of the churches there, and I expected maybe 50-75 folks. The first church I walked into had 3,000 members.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and this is a Muslim country – a Muslim majority country.

BOB HEERSPINK

This is a Muslim country. You know, going to Beijing and worshipping at one of the large Three-Self churches, that has four or five services on a given Sunday. It is incredible.

DAVE BAST

But at the same time, it is also true that Christians in many places are meeting in house fellowships. They are small in number. There is a real need for leadership training and development, as we have experienced that talking to them. And persecution is real in a number of places throughout the world. People pay a real price for confessing faith in Jesus Christ; and in a way, that is even more encouraging to me as I meet people like that from Iran or from the Middle East because it reminds me that the Gospel is true; that that core message transcends cultures. How different could we be, me and an Iranian, how different could our lives be...

BOB HEERSPINK

But there is this sense of oneness as soon as you meet with a fellow Christian that transcends the culture.

DAVE BAST

Sure, exactly; and they have become Christians because they believe it is true. It has no pay off for them in human terms, in terms of their society, of getting ahead...

BOB HEERSPINK

A prosperity Gospel does not work in Iran, no.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. So, you know, it's true – it's true, and we ought to believe it and we ought to pursue that.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think, Dave, these churches that are undergoing this kind of pressure for the Gospel have a lot to teach us. I know they come to us and they say: Bring us resources – train us – teach us; but I see ways in which we can learn from them, because we are living in a culture here in North America that is becoming less influenced by orthodox Christianity. We are under more pressure for our Christian faith; and these believers, say in Indonesia, which have been working to find ways to effectively communicate the Good News as a minority really have something to teach us about standing firm, enduring pressure for the faith, and thinking of creative ways to communicate the Gospel to people who don't think like Christians anymore.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think for me the big takeaway of this whole question of culture and change in the Church is that I should be primarily concerned on the Gospel reaching out to new people and new places and less concerned about whether I am satisfied or happy with exactly how things go in my church.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I agree, Dave. Our concern needs to be for the Samaritans in our midst; people who live geographically close to us, but are culturally different. They are often the toughest people to reach because we want to welcome people who are like us.

DAVE BAST

That is Jerusalem.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is Jerusalem; and you know, when people live halfway around the world and we never meet them... you know, that is the ends of the earth.

DAVE BAST

We are good at missions to Africa.

BOB HEERSPINK

We can handle that cultural difference; but to reach out to people close to us geographically, culturally different than us is, I think, one of the great challenges that we face as Christians today.

DAVE BAST

And it is going to demand change, isn't it, in the way we worship and the way we do church.

BOB HEERSPINK

Precisely.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks 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 you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-church-its-not-what-it-used-to-be>

Printed on January 21, 2025