

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 101 | The Crisis Of Western Culture

Featuring: Autumn Gardner, Philip Moore, and Hunter Beaumont



Autumn: Welcome to the Vision for Life podcast, an ongoing conversation between the pastors of Fellowship Denver and the church at large. Each week we talk about life, faith, the Bible, and how to follow Jesus as we go about our daily lives. I'm Autumn, host of the Vision for Life Podcast, and I'm joined today by Hunter Beaumont and Philip Moore. Hunter is a regular guest on the podcast-

Hunter: I get no introduction.

Autumn: Hey, Hunter, you don't need an introduction, but Philip, we're so glad you're joining us on the podcast today. Philip is visiting from France, and I'm going to just toss it to you, Philip, and ask you to introduce yourself to our listeners. Let us know something about your life, your family, and what it is that you do in France.

Philip: Thanks. I've been here a few times. I've seen Denver, stayed with Hunter a couple of times, and I actually preached at this church. And I really love Denver, and I love Fellowship Denver as well as the church. I'm here this time for an Acts 29 conference. I guess most people are aware that that's going on. I've left behind my whole family to come here, so I'll tell you about my family. I'm married to Rachel, and we've got five children. Our eldest three are all at university, Julia, Anna, and Abigail. And our youngest two still at home, Theo, thirteen, and Zoe's ten, so that's a lot of fun. We've also just recently added a dog to the family, so that's been a lot of fun. And he's called Alfie. It's his first mention on any podcast you guys are very-

Hunter: Okay, he's going public.

Philip: He's gone public.

Autumn: Is Alfie still a puppy?

Philip: Alfie is six months, so, yeah, I guess he is still a puppy and a lot of fun. Yeah. So, I've left Rachel under the care of Alfie.

Hunter: Okay, a couple of things you said here. First, I would guess many of our listeners don't know about this Acts 29 conference. So, Acts 29 is the global church planting network that Fellowship Denver partners with. And we have partnered with them since our first days of being planted. And the US National Acts 29 Conference, which brings really, church workers, not just pastors, but church staffs as well, and perhaps future church planters and partners, that conference is taking place this week here in Denver, downtown.

Philip: Yeah, I think about 1400 people expected.

Hunter: Yeah, 1400-1500 are going to be there at this conference. And so, Philip, one of the bonuses is my friends are all coming to town. That's one of the bonuses. So, you mentioned that I wanted to make sure our listeners knew what was happening. Yes. The second thing, you didn't say this, but it is implicit in everything you're saying, and that is that your English accent is not a French-English accent.

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Autumn: I did say you live in France.

Philip: I do live in France. I've been in France since 2006. So, Rachel and I moved to France when we just had the three big girls, as we call them. They were five, four, and two when we moved, and then we added Theo and Zoe later. So, we moved in 2006, and we essentially moved our whole life to France. A church in the Paris area called me to be the pastor of the church. And so, I arrived there and we pastored that church, and then we started planting churches from that church, not very well. And so, we were looking for help to do it better.

Hunter: But your accent is Irish.

Philip: Irish. That's where we came from.

Hunter: And Philip was a French teacher. And so, he speaks impeccable French. I mean, I guess it sounds impeccable to me.

Philip: Yeah, well, I don't know. Modesty forbids me from commenting on that any further.

Autumn: We would just take your word for it.

Philip: Yeah, I know, but that's kind of- we're going to come back to that.

Hunter: Okay, and maybe we can guarantee our listeners, too, if they will listen to the end of the podcast, we will do our favorite parlor trick where I recite the lyrics to Guns and Roses, Paradise City, in French, and then we ask Philip to translate and see how close I got.

Autumn: Okay, I didn't know this was our favorite parlor trick. This is also new to the podcast. Phillip is new to the podcast; Hunter's speaking French is new to the podcast.

Philip: Also showing his age by calling Guns and Roses.

Hunter: *speaking French*

Philip: I'm sure the words were great, but the accent was just a bit impenetrable at times, if I'm being honest.

Hunter: 'Impenetrable,' by which you mean impeccable, cannot be indicted.

Philip: -some syllables, but it's not exactly the same words.

Autumn: All right, so let's redirect from Hunter's French and Philip's French because we're speaking English today. But, Philip, we're so glad you are able to join us today. And as Hunter and I were anticipating your visit and being able to have this conversation here on the podcast so our listeners can join in, we were kicking around different ideas about what we would want you to comment on and to hear you speak about. And so, we were discussing how we probably in some ways live- there are similarities between our cultures, for sure, between the American culture in which we live here in Denver and the culture that you live in in Paris, and probably also some differences. But we would love to share some time in conversation today and ask you about this current moment in Western culture from your perspective.

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Hunter: And this kind of came up as Philip and I were talking this week. We both live in Western cultures, and by that we mean kind of the cultural west that would be Western Europe and then North America that was really under their influence. And Western culture for the last couple of hundred years, if not longer, has been very committed to individual rights. Sometimes it's called 'liberalism.' And it doesn't mean liberal versus conservative, it means liberal in the sense of freedom. So, individual freedoms. This is sometimes called classical liberalism and sometimes called Western liberalism. So, what's the French political saying? Liberty...

Philip: Yeah, exactly. So, I was just about to- on the front of every townhall in France, the three words appear—liberte, egalite, fraternite—and that means liberty and equality and brotherhood. In those three words, they're trying to kind of bring together things that ultimately people say are quite irreconcilable, because we start with liberty, it's good—everyone wants to be free. And equality, everyone wants to be equal. But already, when talking about equality and liberty, what kind of liberty are you talking about? What kind of equality are you talking about? Are you talking about equality of opportunity or outcome or equality before the law? So, already, you only at the second word and you're kind of losing your way a bit because you're not agreed on what kind of equality you're actually aiming at and what kind of liberties are necessary to arrive at that equality. And then when you get to fraternity, then you're in a whole other different kind of mess because fraternity means that we're going to lay aside some of our liberties in order to achieve the fraternity or the brotherhood they were aiming for. But which ones? And on what basis? And how do you move from an individualistic point of view, which is where liberty starts, to get to the common good, which is what fraternity or brotherhood implies. And so, the whole French society has been debating these things ever since. And when you do your kind of leaving exams in school, you're obliged to take philosophy. And so, philosophy, one of the kind of key questions they ask in philosophy classes is, what about liberty and equality and brotherhood—where does that get us? And how do you reconcile those things?

Hunter: And essentially, American history is a debate about that as well. We founded a nation that was committed to the perpetuation of individual rights. We enshrined them in a Bill of Rights in our Constitution. But we also strive to be a nation, meaning a political state that exists together in fraternity, in brotherhood, in common living, right? And so we have the same desire here. The great French philosopher, would it be, Alexis de Tocqueville, when he visited America, studied democracy in America and was writing his observations about how Americans both pursue individual rights while also cultivating the common good. And he commented on what he saw as some tensions in the American project, of course, which have really proven to be true, right? So, my point in bringing this all up is to say this Western culture that we live in, which is primarily committed to liberty, classical liberalism, as we're discussing it here, is in a bit of crisis right now. And we're seeing across the Western world, we're seeing societies that are becoming more and more polarized, more and more divided. There's a lot of tension. This is not just an American thing; it's happening in European countries as well. So, our listeners may have never thought about all the stuff we experience, the problems we experience in our society like this, Western culture is in crisis or Western liberalism is in crisis. But it really is. And we've talked actually quite a bit about individualism on this podcast. So, when I was talking to Phil about this. I thought it'd be really interesting to have someone who lives in a similar but different corner of the Western world speak to us as Americans about some of the tensions that he's seen in his corner of the world which might help us reflect on the same tensions that we're seeing in our corner of the world, and therefore what it looks like to live as Christians in light of this particular moment in our culture.

Philip: You would need a number of podcasts to get through all of that.

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Hunter: Well, fortunately, we really summarized it in two points. Literally driving in my car today, home from a bike ride, we summarized two big points. So, we've really diagnosed the crisis of Western culture in two simple points that you will now share with our listeners.

Philip: But if I can remember them, they were individualism damages not just the individual but society at large. And the second one was emotional reasoning; the ways in which we reason things out as individuals, are actually driven not by logic or by reason or even by the culture in general, necessarily, but by what we want to be true and what we feel will be the right outcome. So, we have the outcome first, and then we get on with the business of working on how we can justify it. But that's the second point.

Hunter: Okay, well, let's go to the first one.

Autumn: Yeah, let's go to the first point. You said individualism harms individuals in society. That seems counterintuitive.

Philip: Well, because I think that many people end up because they're driven to themselves to work out what their point is, what their origin is, what their end goal is, what life means. And because they don't have either the equipment or the ballast in order to do that by themselves as individuals, they find themselves adrift on a sea of competing and contradictory ideas. And we see this in our young people, I think, in particular, it is a dreadfully confusing place to be. And so, as you look at how social media is used, as you look at how people respond to their classmates, either in flesh or on social media, as you look at how they try to project themselves in the future, our world in the west is characterized by anxiety. We're the most anxious age that there's ever been because we haven't been able to define together what it means to be a human being, what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman, what it means to celebrate sexuality. We haven't had a common definition of that or the conditions that we had has been.

Hunter: And it's something to each individual to work that out for themselves.

Philip: Exactly. But how can you expect somebody to do that? In Scotland, part of the UK, they've got some absolutely incredible laws that they brought in in terms of the whole gender debate where they're giving people permission as young as twelve, even before, to decide whether they're going to identify as a man or as a woman. And they're even cutting parents off from that kind of decision quite early on. I hope I'm not misquoting things that are going on, and you can fact check this later, and please don't just take my word for it, but there are a number of really worrying signs that as early as pre puberty people are being asked to answer the question are you a man or a woman? Not based on biological gender, but based on a whole host of other factors and criteria that they have no hope of understanding, never mind working out individualism is harming individuals. It's not helping individuals; it's really casting them loose on the sea that is raging against them and where they're likely to drown. So, those are dramatic words and it's a kind of a dramatic image. But I really believe that that is the kind of crisis that we're in. And when you can get someone like J.K. Rowling, who wrote the Harry Potter novels and who is actually very liberal in everything-

Hunter: -on our cultural spectrum she's not a conservative, right.

Philip: Absolutely not. But when she's being canceled because she believes that as a feminist to stand up for certain rights that are attributable only to biological females, she's being canceled for that, that kind of culture that we're living in is desperately confusing for people to live in, and it's harming individuals. But it's not just harming individuals, it's also

harming society at large. And so, the way in which people cast their votes, the way in which people think things through, the way in which people arrive at conclusions—and we'll come on to this in the second point—we're living in Western Europe, at any rate, a crisis of confidence and a crisis of institutions, a crisis of politics. And Brexit, for example, is one example of that. And it doesn't matter whether you think Brexit is a good idea or a bad idea, but the ways in which that question was debated and the ways in which people interacted over that were deeply damaging in family units but also for the society as a whole. And so, we're now a very polarized society around that question, and that is likely to happen again. It's likely to happen, I think, in Italy. There's been elections in Italy and the party that has been elected, the coalition has been elected, is likely, I think, to head down the same road in terms of bringing Italy out of Europe if they already signs are to be believed. And at the same time, Scotland, which is part of the UK, which is in love with Europe and wants to remain European, is going through a crisis of confidence as to whether or not it wants to remain part of the United Kingdom. In my mind, the ways in which they argue those two ideas—we want to stay part of Europe, but we want to leave the UK—they use similar sets of arguments in opposite ways to arrive at those two very different conclusions. And I think that's a fascinating thing to observe, and you can multiply that across the political spectrum in all kinds of different countries.

Hunter: One of the things I notice is that as definitions of basic human realities, like you mentioned, what is a man? what is a woman? As these definitions become open for each person to interpret themselves, the loss of a common definition makes it harder to hold our common world together. And then you have people raising their hands saying, no, wait a minute, I want to stay with the old or the traditional definition, and that puts them at odds with people who want to just leave it open to the individual to decide. And so, all of this, to your point, doesn't just make it really hard to be an individual who has to figure out how to navigate this world we live in and make all these decisions for yourself—like, to put the weight of deciding what gender you are on a child is incredibly damaging just to that individual child, right?—but the point you're really bringing out is, this also is really affecting our politics in the biggest sense of the term politics. And we talked about politics and the big sense here on the podcast, which is not just the process of having elections and Republicans against Democrats, but it's the question of how we live together and order our society as people so that we can have a society and do things together. And that loss of shared meaning about even basic realities is creating a lot of political division. And you're bringing examples of people who are essentially traditionalist, you might say, in terms of their committed to the more historic answers to these questions, and they are more and more at odds with those who are advancing the hyper individualist answers to these questions. And that's creating a lot of political distortion in countries across the west.

Philip: Absolutely. In fact, part of the discourse that Putin has in respect of the West and respect of Ukraine is just that. He's saying to his people, and I have an immense compassion for the Russian people—I've got many Russian friends who are amazing human beings—but whose country is being run by somebody, as I see it, who is picking and choosing elements of the individualistic Western discourse which are to be criticized and which I criticize myself, but he's highlighting those, making them emblematic of the West and therefore justifying his war in Ukraine. And his war in Ukraine is actually a war against Western values, as he sees them, and as he said in his speech just last week when he was kind of celebrating the annexation of the four territories in Ukraine. He is deliberately setting out to paint the West as individualism gone mad. And so, he mocks the West for its inability to define what a man or woman is. And his countrymen rally around that idea. And at the same time, there's people in the West who are sitting thinking, I tend to agree with that criticism, which seems to me to be valid of rampant individualism—we shouldn't be here, but we are here. But it's been instrumentalized, obviously, by Putin for his unjust war in Ukraine. So, it's deeply damaging in any

number of different directions not to have settled answers to these questions and not to know how to arrive at settled answers to these questions.

I'll just give you an example. I'm reading a book at the minute about the twenty most spoken languages in the world. It's called *Babel*. It's a good book. And when they get to the French language, I have a particular interest, obviously, and Hunter would have a particular interest given that he mastered the language so extensively. But they described the attempt, largely successful, of the French government just after the revolution to standardize French. They wanted everybody to be able to speak French correctly. And so, they standardized the spelling, they standardized the grammar, they standardized everything. They banned people from using their own dialects and so on and so forth. Now, if you take that correlation and bring it down to the topic we're talking about, what they're saying is you as an individual, don't get to choose the language that you speak. You as an individual don't get to decide what words mean. You as an individual don't get to create the kind of grammar that you would like to create. There is a language, it's called the French language. It has a certain number of words. These are the words. It's got a grammar; this is how it works. And you have to speak this language in order to be part of the French nation. And to this day, there's an academy called the Académie Française that decides whether word is French or not French, that decides how you spell it, that decides how you have to say, etcetera, etcetera. Now, obviously, at the fringes, people are always inventing new words. And in fact, it's one of the ways you can rebel against the French theater is to kind of speak *un-French* French. But, in a sense, there's a way in which we have to arrive at a common language that we all speak where the words mean the same things as I say them and the same things as you say them. Because if we don't arrive at that point, then we can't have a common good, we can't have a common state, we can't have the kind of fraternity or the brotherhood or the common purpose that we're looking for because we don't understand each other. And so, language is a kind of a token, therefore, a kind of house. Because if I accept the grammar and the vocabulary, I can say anything I want. So, my individualism is not being repressed if you like, but I'm submitting myself to rules that exist. And what I would love to see is for people to agree that the language is there, it's a given, I don't get to make it up. The words are there. They're given. I don't get to make them up. The grammar is there, and I use it individually and with a plumb or not a plumb, it doesn't really matter. If I submit myself to a language, I can be understood. But I don't, I can't. And that's the same for everybody. And I would love people to get to a point where we speak the same language about these really important issues and where we can actually understand each other and have a dialogue that makes sense. It's an analogy that's got strengths and weaknesses, I'm sure, but I think it's got its...

Autumn: So, at this point about individualism, it seems that there are a couple of key ideas. One is that, ultimately, pursuing your own good as an individual person at some point brings you into tension or friction with the people immediately surrounding you, and then, as you said, that multiplies out. So, we can see that on display intentions experienced between individuals and families. And then if you said, as you multiply that out, Philip, then in organizations of the next scale up—so, for instance, in schools, churches, organizations of that size—if we continue to multiply that out, we see that in politics, in governments, local, state, federal, and so on. And then, even as you described, we see that in larger organizations like the EU and then even in larger instances like countries. So, your example of Russia, Putin, using these ideologies in the West as a way to frame his own contention with why Western culture is potentially damaging and why the Russian people should be wary of these ideologies contained within it. So, we see that the individualism, innately at some point, and then in these sorts of outward ripples, causes these tensions. I think then the other idea in this part of our discussion is that then this causes this crisis of confidence or questions of authority. So, where does the authority lie if our highest value says that it lies with the individual? And as we've discussed on the

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podcast before, Hunter, in expressive individualism, your own ability for self-actualization and self-fulfillment, if that is the highest good, then that cannot be ultimately reconciled with a perspective that says, 'But I'm also seeking the common good,' or the good of my family member or the good of the person I live alongside or attend church with or whatever within that organization. So, it causes this tension individually between people and then organizationally. And so, that leads us into, I think, our second point, which is when we experience this authority crisis in an individualistic society that upholds the good of the individual as the highest good and ultimately reasons on really relativistic terms, then who do you appeal to in crisis of confidence or a questioning of authority? What outside either entity or person can you appeal to rectify this situation, this tension, to ease this tension? And I think what you're saying is in western society right now there really isn't one. It's sort of up for grabs.

Philip: That's right. And I think people reason emotionally and those two things kind of create a kind of paradox because you think that reason should be at least to some extent separated from emotions, or there's something prior to or above the emotions that we might feel about a particular thing that could direct us as to its rightness or its wrongness. And yet, I think what we see in any number of different cases is people feeling a certain way about an outcome, about an action, or about a policy or whatever it might be—they feel a certain way about it, and therefore the outcome is decided in advance of any reasoning. And so, the way in which people and I think we need to include all of ourselves in this it's not just people out there that do this. I think we're all caught up in this moment. We try to find ways to justify the emotions that we feel about anything and so we build sometimes very sophisticated and elaborate systems with step-by-step logic as we see it that leads us to this conclusion. And we reject anything that would budge us from that or move us away from that or make us question the assumptions that we have because we feel so strongly about the outcome that we're committed to. And so, that emotional commitment to an outcome means that we're less able to navigate the thinking that might lead us to change our mind and that therefore might lead us to question our emotions or feelings about an outcome that we previously espoused. But we call this repentance when we go through that process; that's essentially what repentance is. It's stopping wishing what you used to believe. It's stopping wishing what you used to do. It's saying sorry for all of that. The whole lot, the thinking that went into it, the feeling that went into it, the actions that went into it it's taking that whole package and saying sorry for it and saying that you got it wrong intellectually, you got it wrong emotionally, you got it wrong in acts and in consequences and you're sorry for that. And that's repentance essentially, the outcomes that we then realize. Our sin becomes sin to us and we say, hey, that was wrong. And so, therefore, we go through that process. But in the absence of any ability to look outside and to examine that. It's very hard to get to that point.

Hunter: You're using the term emotional reasoning too in a way that may be slightly different than I think our listeners might be used to hearing it. We're not talking about people who are just really emotional and let themselves be guided by their emotions. So, we're not talking about that, right? Some people are more emotionally expressive than others. They're more emotionally up and down than others. We're not talking about that. We're talking about all of us, even people like me, whom people might say, you're not terribly emotionally expressive. Sometimes people like me will essentially start to reason like this. I will reason back to I'll use logic to get back to or to buttress or to reinforce the answer that I want to be true. That's right. Because it feels intuitively good to me or right to me or what I would hope to be true. And so, I'll find reasons to justify that exactly. And when we do that, we can actually be incredibly illogical one thing to be true and then we can want something that really is logically different from it to be true and we can use reason to buttress both of those opinions. And so, we kind of become not very consistent people, is the outcome, I think, that leads to.

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Philip: Absolutely. And also we become very defensive about certain things and we get very defensive particularly if people bring the logic that we brought to certain questions to the question that we are not considering as concluded. And we get very frustrated. We don't like that at all. But in fact, it's absolutely what we should do. We should use the premises that we're absolutely happy to accept in one set of logical statements. We should use those premises or the analytical tools or the ways that we do things on all of our even most cherished conclusions. Do you remember that bit in *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe* where Lucy is convinced that she's been into Narnia through the wardrobe and she comes back and all the children make fun of her and they go to the professor and Professor Gannon gets involved. I just want to read you a quote from this, "'Logic,' said the professor, half to himself, 'Why didn't they teach logic at these schools?' There are only three possibilities; either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn't tell lies, and it's obvious that she's not mad, for the moment then, unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is telling the truth," which is doing what he does best, which is showing us what we do all the time. We know certain things to be true and yet we don't act by them. And we import other bits of evidence that we would like to be true in order to justify. But the opinions that. We have already come to the conclusions that we've already made based on a number of different factors that might be personal, might be circumstantial, might be societal. But we reason to the emotions that we want to be true, that we want to hold on to, rather than let reason or revelation, which is another topic which we might get onto in a minute, guide us in those fields. We're all guilty of it. It's not as if we escape from that criticism.

Hunter: Yeah, so if I could kind of summarize the crisis that we're experiencing in Western culture. It's first of all that we've essentially given individuals permission to settle a number of fundamental questions about reality for themselves in a way that suits themselves. And, second point, the way that we as individuals tend to do that is just to not to use some consistent standard of logic, but just to decide what we hope is true based on how I'm inclined or disposed. And therefore we don't have a common basis that we share across a majority of our society of how to do that. And that really caused us to ask even more basic questions like, can we even live with each other? I'm seeing this with parents who have their kids in school, for example. The best way they can navigate this right now is they essentially just have to find a school where they agree with the political positions of most of the administration and just go in that direction. There's not a lot of hope that people that have different core convictions can actually even educate their children together because there's such little shared meaning on even basic questions like how do we know what gender we are?

Philip: But also the whole educational enterprise has gotten very confused. It used to be about the passing on of a number of facts and also the ability to teach people to think. But it's been more and more, how to put this, hijacked?—it might be a too strong word, but you know what I'm trying to say—by a whole bunch of ideologies. Now, those ideologies haven't always been from the left. There have been moments in time when the ideologies have been from the right, politically speaking. But either one, if you hijack a system for your ideological benefit, it's wrong. You need to define what education is for and then stick to that. Anyway, that might be another debate. But just on that note, just so nobody gets the wrong end of the stick in our earlier conversation, we're not just saying that people and that individualism affects only certain areas of society and we kind of touch on some of the ones that might be dear to the left. But if we look at the right, rampant individualism and capitalism gone wild are equally damaging both for the individual and for society in some ways. And so I'm not trying to polarize things as a left or right. We tend to do all of those things, whether we're on the left or whether we're on the right in ways that are damaging for individuals and in ways that are damaging for society. So I just wanted to make sure that people didn't think we were-

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Hunter: Yeah, thanks for that clarification. I'm going to pick up on something that you said as a way to segue into our third point. And you use the example of education used to be about passing on a body of knowledge and now it's not so much about that, right? We have been having in house conversations in our church about how to create a church based educational process for normal people in our church in order to shape them and form them—we've used the term 'mold them'—into the tradition that we get out of the Bible and out of Christian history with the idea that it would really be to pass on something, not to personalize it for them, but almost to not personalize it and say, no, this is the body of tradition and of Bible that you need to have your whole life conformed to, and let's give you enough time and space that you can learn it and consider it and figure out if you want to give your life to that. So, we're not just going to kind of give it to you in snippets. We're just going to show you the whole thing over the course of a couple of years and let you be formed and shaped by that, where we're literally now handing on this tradition rather than just kind of ad hoc speaking to individuals. So, we've been having that conversation in our church. We're actually going to roll something out for our church this next year, 2023, to call people to that and to give them that opportunity, which I think leads to the question, what does this mean? If this is the world we live in, what does this mean for how we should be thinking about our work, our jobs as Christians, our calling to who we are to be in this culture and world?

Autumn: Before we get into that, Hunter, which does lead us very well into our third point. I wonder if, based on what you just said, explaining that our desire is to sit under the word of God and ask how it is that we as a church and as people are shaped by it. I think we can even take the idea that you just explained and that we look to God's Word to help us grasp the nature of reality and then ourselves within it and then a response to it. So earlier, Philip, you used the word repentance; we come to the realization that we have something wrong, what do we do about it? You used that biblical example of responding in repentance. So, let's take this idea of individualism and ask, just as you explained, Hunter, if we sit under the Word of God, how even does Scripture, and particularly in the Gospel, in Jesus presentation of the Gospel to people and to the nations, in sending His followers out, His disciples out to the nations. How does Scripture help us think about the individual and individualism and our place then, within this whole picture?

Philip: There's so much to say on that. I think I would start with the way in which the Bible amazingly but we shouldn't be amazed hold everything in that kind of perfect balance and tension. So, for example, the Bible creates us that we're all created in the image of God, and the Bible tells us that we're created male and female. The Bible tells us that we're created for His mission and that we're equal in His eyes and that He has sent us. The Bible tells us that we're all individual. So in Genesis, one of the big themes in Genesis is this idea of blessing. So, when God creates man and woman, he creates Him to bless them and he blesses them. And it's all about blessing, essentially. And then right at the end of Genesis, when we have Jacob blessing his sons, he calls all his sons to him and the author, Moses, summarizes what Jacob does in this way: he says, 'And thus Jacob blessed them, each one with a blessing that was particular to Him.' So, the blessing that is for all of mankind is also particularized in each individual Son's blessing that their Father Jacob gives them. And so we're both individuals created uniquely for God's glory. And we're also members of what we might call the people of God or the image of God in ways that are common to everybody. So, I'm both an individual, but I'm part of this call out people to be the image of God. And so I don't get to opt into one of those, not the other. I don't get to take a box and then kind of exempt myself. I am called at the same time and by the same God to be a unique individual who's responding to God's call in my particular life and also to recognize the order of creation and to find my place in it, not as I would like it to be, but as God has given it to me to be. And so, we're always presented with that in the Bible and even in the New Testament. When you get to something like Ephesians 4, it's the kind of classic example of this. Verses 1-6 are all about unity. And so, Paul is pleading with the Ephesian Church to be united and he gives them four

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emotions that will guide them towards unity. He also talks about humility and bearing with one another in love and so on and so forth, and therefore maintaining the bond of peace, unity that is in Christ. And then it gives them seven theological reasons why they should be united because there's one God, there's one Father, there's one Lord, and so on baptism, one church, one faith. And then in the very next verse, verse seven, he says to each one of you, the grace has been given. In other words, each one of you who's to strive for unity is also to recognize that you've been given a unique gift in the church in order to be able to live that calling out. So, it's not uniformity, it's unity, but unity and diversity, which leads to maturity, which is what the rest of the chapter is all about. So, we're always presented with these two things at the same time in the Bible and with hope so that we can kind of work those things out together. So, I think that the Bible is full of resources to answer both the question about, am I a unique individual? Yes, you are. Does that give me the right to make everything up around me as I want? No, it doesn't. But you're also part of the Created order. God is our Creator, and God is our redeemer, and God is our transformer, and He will move things towards the ultimate consummation.

Hunter: I love where you're going there, because what you're doing is holding out a picture for us about the significance of being Christ people who are, number one, connected to his body; number two, we are working out our unique gifting the way Jesus has uniquely the Holy Spirit is uniquely gifted, each one of us, for the good of the whole. We're working that out in the church, and we're doing it as we all strive toward what Ephesians four calls the unity of the faith. Meaning and the faith in Scripture is not a term that means like, my individual faith. It's not about me having faith in Jesus. Whenever the definite article shows up, *thee* faith, it means the body of the teaching that constitutes the gospel that's right. That has been handed down.

Philip: So you don't get to pick and choose.

Hunter: I don't get to pick and choose what that is, right? And Paul makes the point that one of the reasons God gave pastors and teachers is to equip the saints for the works of ministry until we all attain to the unity of the faith. And so part of his expectation is we actually have to learn the faith and grow in it. We don't just kind of get it all instantly. There's aspects of the faith that even if I kind of know them in outline form or skeleton form, or I could check the box and go, yeah, I believe that I still don't understand and haven't seen all the implications. And so I need to be taught and I need to learn. I need to study to grow in the faith. And as we do that, we experience something that our world doesn't offer us, which is we experience both individual flourishing and we experience the common good flourishing.

Philip: And so, when you get to the bit which is often misquoted, I think or misunderstood, where Paul says, thus speaking the truth in love. And we think that means like insulting people but nicely. Saying something, really insulting somebody, but with a nice tone of voice, correctly, but I'm going to do it with love. So, I'm going to speak my truth about you to you, but in love. I'm saying this to you in love, brother, but that's not what it means at all. Speaking the truth in love means speaking the truth of the gospel that I've now learned from the pastors and teachers of the church to one another in love so that everybody grew up to maturity. So, in other words, the idea behind it is there's this body—the faith—the truth of the Gospel, which I learned so that I can speak that language to my brothers and sisters in Christ. That's they can be built up in the faith. The whole church can be what Paul says it will be, which is to say the thing that fills the whole earth with the glory of God. In verse, I think it's verse ten of Ephesians 4, when Jesus ascends to high, He gives gifts to men and He fills the earth by giving all these individual gifts to the Church and by forming the Church as His people. That's how Jesus fills the earth. And so, we get to participate in that. And that's an amazing thought. As we speak the truth in love to one another in our local church contexts, we are participating in the cosmic Christ's filling of the

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whole earth. That's alright, isn't it?

Hunter: It's amazing. Along the same lines, I often think what is one of the simplest corporate or political units in our experience? And I think one of the simplest is a marriage, because a marriage is literally the first one God created. It's the first society God created. It's just two people, so it's not more complex than two, a man and a woman. And I have noticed a pattern, and that is this: most really good marriages—and by good I don't mean idealistic, I just mean like they're solid and they're meaningful and they're fulfilling—most good marriages are committed to something bigger than the good of the two individuals in the marriage. So, they're about something bigger than, 'I'm going to help you become your best self and you're going to help me become my best self,' and we are going to stay in a partnership as long as we're both kind of growing and maturing into our best selves. They're committed to something bigger than that. They're committed to something that they are going to do together in common. And then they have a habit to remind themselves what it is that they hold in common. And that habit is called they worship regularly in church and they centered God's teaching and His Word together. And it's amazing how the best marriages I know are regular church attenders who don't just do it in a formal dutiful sense, but who do it in a sincere sense that, hey, if we're going to do this thing called marriage, we need to come and be under God's Word together. We need to worship our God together. We need to learn the faith together and that's going to help us figure out what it is that we hold in common and then everything else flourishes out of that. And couples that don't commit to that, I just noticed their marriages are pretty rocky.

Philip: Just to get back to Ephesians 4, now we're nerding on Ephesians 4, I'm sorry about that, but what's the order that Paul puts these things in? He says, first of all, the Church, chapter 4. So, the headline is so I beseech you, therefore, to live out the calling to which you've been called. That's chapter 4, verse 1. And then he says, and the first way you do that is you get stuck into a Church like this and then you live it out in the world like this. And then you live it out in marriage like this. And then you live out your kids like this. And then you live out in the workplace like this, and then you live it out in front of the whole spiritual dimension like this, amen. But he says that the Church first, because when you get the Church right, then the rest of the stuff flows from the faith that you see from the Church that informs how you live in the world, how you live in marriage, how you live with your kids, how you live in the workplace, and how you live in prayer.

Hunter: And that's actually empowering for those of us who aren't married.

Philip: Absolutely.

Autumn: That brings us exactly to where we want to land with our final point. So if we look at our examination of culture today and say in your expert summary that we came up with these two observations about Western culture. So, both culture that, Philip, you live and work and minister in, and Hunter, that you live and work and minister in here, that we live in highly individualistic societies that creates tension is creating tension in our societies in a crisis of classic liberalism right now. The second is that in these individualistic societies we heavily rely on emotional reasoning and it is ultimately unfulfilling. And then the third observation we made is not from culture at all, but we appealed to a view that scripture tells us is true about us as individuals and us as a part of the family of God and the Church. So, to wrap up our conversation today, what do these observations mean for you as pastors, as church leaders, as church planters, in light of our churches, the people who we love and serve?

Philip: So, I think that the first thing is that the ministry is Word ministry. So, ultimately what we're asking church pastors to do in Acts 29, or what we're encouraging each other to do as pastors within Acts 29 is to have a ministry that is

reflective of and submitted to the Word of God in its entirety. Because the Word of God does the work of God. That's how it functions and it's designed to do that. And so, as we trust God's Word to do God's work, then our churches are formed by that very word into the people that God is calling to be. I'm not by saying that excluding the work of the Holy Spirit who inspired the very Word I'm talking about, I'm not excluding the work of walking alongside people, or I'm not excluding the work of being a community that loves each other. I'm just saying that all those things are predicated on what the Bible says about them. Because in the absence of the Bible, we have strictly nothing to say to the world.

Hunter: My mind went to the exact same place as I'm looking for good church planters or pastors, especially in the lead pastor kind of role, as we would call it in our context, I'm looking for someone who wants to have a Word ministry. Their first commitment is going to be to teaching and feeding and leading the flock through God's Word. And we do see a lot of pastors who want to use ministry as a platform to promote kind of their own brand. And so, I'm actually very wary of that. And I'm looking for pastors who really have a heart to simply open and explain and apply God's Word, not as the only thing they do—so, sometimes you have to sit young pastor down and say, 'Hey, you can't spend 40 hours a week working on a sermon because there's people to counsel and there's leaders to develop and train,' right? There're all kinds of other work to be done. But as a first priority or first emphasis, out of which everything else flows, I'm looking for Word ministry. That's actually what drew me into ministry. What drew me into ministry was fascination with God's Word and just a love for it. And I had been a Christian for a while before I actually experienced someone teaching it to me, a pastor teaching it to me. I had been a Christian and been in churches before I actually experienced a pastor and a church that it was their clear priority that I just not know it in an intellectual sense only, but that I know God's Word and be rooted and grounded. And when I experienced that, my faith came alive in a way that hadn't been alive before. I started to see God in a way I hadn't seen God before. I started to see myself under God in a way I hadn't seen before. Everything just kind of started to come into place in my sight. It was like when an eye doctor puts those goggles, those lenses on you and dials them in. I'm like, oh, I can see everything now. And I just love that I fell in love with that and I thought that's what pastors should do. And when pastors do that, it frees the whole church up to do all the other great things that flow out of the work of the body of Christ.

Philip: And then the second thing I would say is because what we've been talking about is being all of this individualism and emotional reasoning is that when we sense friction with the revealed Word of God, that's not something to run away from, it's something to consider carefully. I think lots of people, when they get a kind of point of friction with the Word of God, they do one or two things. They run away from the faith or the prevention never happened. And they kind of brush it under the carpet. And if they brush it under the carpet, then what they do is they deprive themselves and everybody else of an amazing opportunity to learn what it is in them that is reacting negatively to God's Word revealed. And therefore, they deprive themselves of a huge opportunity for growth. Because when I find myself disagreeing with God, I need to repent, I need to work out what it is about me that is not in sync with the Word as it is. And so that might take me a week or it might take me a year, or if it's very deeply embedded in me, it might take me a number of years walking with a faithful community before I resolve the point of friction that I have with the revealed Word of God. But that's alright. So as long as I'm acknowledging that in terms of my epistemology, I'm dedicated to finding out truth from God's Word, as long as I've got that framework and I'm determined to do it, and whenever I find God's Word, I will submit to it, then we're in a good place. Then we can have a dialogue. We've agreed on the point of departure and we've agreed on the point of arrival, God's Word and my obedience to it. And then we've got time and space to work that out. So, I think that acknowledging moments, times, areas of our lives, areas of society where we struggle to square what we emotionally feel with what God's Word says. That's at the point where we actually begin to think correctly and we

actually begin to repent of our bad thoughts, repent of our bad emotions, and repent of our bad decisions or acts and start to put ourselves in line as a whole people with what God's Word says.

Hunter: I'm going to start using that in my preaching. I'm just going to start naming those points and describing that process because you're really helping us. You're describing the people who are accustomed to emotional reasoning, what it feels like to come under God's Word. And I actually think that's really helpful to people. We've got to meet them where they are and where they often are starting is they're accustomed to being guided by what they feel. So, I do think we have to maybe narrate a little bit what the process of coming under God's Word might feel like and to describe that tension and then encourage them to lean into what God's Word says.

Philip: That's right, exactly right. And then we've all got examples of when that's happened. I'll give an example which reflects really badly on me, and that might be a good thing or a bad thing. But I remember one time I was on a train to go and meet Rachel, who was then my girlfriend, and on the train I was doing some reading for an essay that I have to do in French literature. And I was reading this particular essay, which was absolutely brilliant, and I thought, 'Fantastic essay, I'm going to use lots of this in the essay that I have to write.' And I turned to the back of the collection of essays to find out who had written this essay. And this essay had been written by a woman and I was surprised that it was so good even though it had been written by women. And I thought to myself, 'You're a sexist.' I'd never realized before that my unspoken assumption was that men were essentially the norm, that men essentially were kind of clever than women and that all the best ideas came from men and etcetera, etcetera. Kind of a whole world came tumbling down and I thought, I had no idea I had all those prejudices built into me. But I do, because I was surprised that the woman's name was at the bottom of this essay. So, I got to the end of my train journey and Rachel met me off the tree in and I said, 'Rachel, I gotta confess something.' I'm not sure it's going to go that well for me, but here you go. That process of realizing that mentally I'd got it wrong because emotionally I was committed to a particular set of conclusions that were in my favor. It's kind of humbling, it's kind of stupid; this was 1993, so it seems like a long time ago, but it's not that long ago, really. I should have been up to speed with the fact that men and women were equally intelligent at that point, but I wasn't, so there I was.

Hunter: And how did it go from there for you?

Philip: Well, we're now married with five children, so we're just alright. It worked out okay in the end. But what I'm saying is that kind of process where you realize something like part of your psyche or part of your personality that is actually out of sync, out of whack. And where you have to repent not just of a thought. But of a system that you have built in. It's an interesting experience. But I think if we would embrace the idea of that as opposed to reject the idea of that. Except that there might be possible that I would find in God's word something that I didn't know or that God would reveal me. Something that I needed to know. If we had that as a kind of a humble approach, this is what, as I said and as I said, He says, here's the one I esteem, the one who is humble and contrite and who trembles at my word. And I think that's kind of our basic approach to the Bible humble, contrition, and trembling. Then we listen, we hear, and God does what He does. And so, I think what we want to do in Acts 29 or elsewhere is have churches that are committed to that kind of word ministry and create those kinds of expectations in the congregation and the members of the church.

Autumn: Thank you, Philip, for that illustration from your life.

Hunter: It's a good place to leave this.

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Philip: Individually, can I just apologize? I'm no longer that person.

Autumn: Well, seeing as that realization came to you in 1993, I think it was well ahead of our meeting today. Well, this is, I think, a good place to conclude in that we—Philip, Hunter, me—we want to our desire is to do what you just described, Philip, to consciously sit under the Word of God. Under the authority of Scripture and to experience what you described, the forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation that occurs through that and then in our church families. To see that happen as well in the people who we love, serve, invite in to be a part of God's family. To sit consciously and, as you said, collectively under the Word of God. And that assuages many of these tensions that we feel then within God's Word, within the family of God, we can't actually find answers to the tensions that we experience and to the lack of answers within the emotional reasoning that is rampant in our cultures. Thanks for spending time with us on the podcast today.

Philip: Pleasure. Thanks for inviting me.

Autumn: If you have questions or suggestions or any questions about today's episode, you can send all of that anytime to podcast@fellowshipdenver.org. Vision for Life is a ministry of Fellowship Denver that exists in two forms. One is this podcast, our Vision for Life podcast that releases episodes weekly. The other is in person classes that are held periodically at Fellowship Denver Church in Denver, Colorado. We have one of these in person classes coming up soon, will begin on October 12. It will be held for three consecutive weeks from 6:30 to 8:00 in the evening. This Vision for Life class is on the topic of understanding abortion, and we'll examine both a theology that helps us understand this issue and gives us biblical categories to help us navigate it, and we'll discuss some of the history of this issue as it's existed in our American politics and in the American church. So, if you, like many of us, are struggling with how to think about and engage and be discerning about the topic of abortion that's really contentious within our culture and within the Church right now, I would love to have you join us for this class. You can register by going to fellowshipdenver.org/calendar and looking for the sign up for Vision for Life Understanding Abortion. Thanks for joining us on the Vision for Life podcast. Special thanks to Adam Anglin for our theme music, to Jesse Cowan, our producer, and to Judd Connell, who provides transcription for these episodes.