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 Title: What I have learned about Christ and His Church
 Text: Acts 20:17-38
Theme: Jesus Christ is inseparably linked to His Church.

Introduction:

It is impossible to speak of one's love for Christ and not speak of one's love for His church. Since the Church is His body, you cannot speak of loving Jesus without also speaking of your love for His church. John uses this same language when he says in his letter, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

THE BIG PICTURE

July 20 What I have learned about the Shepherd and the Sheep
 July 27 What I have learned about the Word and Ministry
August 3 What I have learned about Christ and His Church
 August 17 What I have learned about Grace, "Counseling," and Disappointment

Its Eternal Value:

To be a part of His church is to be a part of something that is universal and global, intimate and personal. You cannot be a part of one without being a part of the other.

The Present Danger:

Our American culture idolizes the individual. We have no necessary connection with the idea of community. We have Christians who divorce themselves from a local church and its leadership and believe they are obeying God and are somehow more mature by doing so. This is an unhealthy way of thinking.

The Problem:

Although there is much we can say to fault the church and its leadership, we would be wrong if we failed to see what the church is. There are two extremes needing to be avoided. The first is not to see the church universal, and the second is not to see the church local. Both concepts are biblical, and both are essential. All saved people are by default a part of the church universal, and thus should be a part of the church local. The problem with membership in the church local is the need to place yourself in union with others who might not agree with you on every issue or point. That, however, is why we should align ourselves with the church local. It is my desire to show why we should view the church local as an essential part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

My fear for us is that we do not see the real need to align ourselves with the church. That somehow we fail to believe in either the church universal or the church local. We can say with our intellect we do, but in our heart of hearts we have no affection for either one.

Because I am trained in theology I have always maintained the existence of both the church universal and the church local. I have always supported the church local with my spiritual gifting and my financial stewarding. However, since becoming a shepherd and through the providential instruction of God, my affections for the church universal and the church local have increased significantly.

Overall I think our view of both is sick. It is unhealthy. I do not believe we have a balanced view or biblical view of either one. Some have given up on the church local and have given themselves to the church universal with their spiritual gifting and financial stewarding. Some are so small in their view of the church that everything is about them and their ministry. They see no need to embrace the church universal. Both perspectives are unhealthy.

The Storyline:

From the very beginning of time, God purposed to secure for Himself worshippers from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation. His people have always been a part of something larger than the individual. Under the Old Covenant these gathered people were called the nation of Israel. Under the New Covenant these people are called the Church. Those who are inside the New Covenant are organically united with Him.

Questions:

1. Is it spiritually healthy not to be a part of a local community?
2. How should I view the church?
3. What reasons could one offer as to why they would not align themselves to a local church?

The Holy Spirit is calling to us from this passage to consider three ideas:

To Know: The Holy Spirit desires for us to know that God loves His Church.

To Choose: The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose to align ourselves with His Church.

To Feel: The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of resting in the purpose of God for His people.

There are three ideas inside the text that I would like us to consider from Acts 20:28. All three thoughts create the identity of the church local. By identity I mean what the church is in her essence.

Outline:

- I. Her structure colors her identity - God appoints who leads His church.

He makes those whom He wills to be shepherds of His sheep. He gifts individuals to lead His people by feeding them the Word.

“They were overseers of the flock of God. That was not a duty they had chosen but a duty for which they had been chosen. The servants of the Good Shepherd must also be shepherds of the sheep.” (William Barclay, *Mark*, 152).

“By reminding them from whence their appointment came, St Paul would enforce on them the solemnity of their position. Though they are ‘in the flock’ they are not as others, more has been given unto them, and so more will be required.” (J. Rawson Lumby, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Cambridge: At the University Press, 1937], 362).

The church has a divinely established structure. God is the one who places people into positions of under-shepherds. God is the one who assigns gifts to each individual to be exercised according to His sovereign purpose.

A. God placed in His church overseers (v. 28; Eph. 4:11).

The word “overseer” in verse 28 is our English word “Episcopalian.” We use the word “Bishop” to translate the idea of “overseer.” In verse 17 the word “elder” is our English word “Presbyterian.” The “elders” of verse 17 are the “bishops” of verse 28. The word “shepherd” or “feed” in verse 28 is our English word “pastor.” Thus the bishops, elders, and pastors are all describing the same office. God is the one who puts them in their positions.

B. Those who are overseers have a distinct gifting and function in the church local (v. 28; Eph. 4:11).

1. Shepherds are to point sheep to Christ through the Word
2. Shepherds are to protect sheep from savage wolves

The word “shepherd” is used literally of those who are “shepherding cattle” (Luke 17:7, 1 Cor. 9:7). It is also used figuratively for those who are called on to “shepherd” the people of God (Peter – John 21:16; Elders – 1 Peter 5:2). It is also used of Jesus Christ when He will “rule” or “shepherd” the people of God (Matt. 2:6; Rev. 2:27; 7:17; 12:519:15).

In the absence of shepherds sheep flounder and are vulnerable to attack and sickness (Matt. 9:36; Mark 6:34). The stability and security of the sheep are directly tied into the presence of the shepherd (Matt. 26:31; Mark 14:27). Shepherds are to watch over their flocks even into the night (Luke 2:8 – we see this with the apostle Paul in Acts 20:31). Shepherds protect the flock from savage wolves even if it demands their own lives (John 10:11, 12). “We see it in David who fought a lion and a bear at the risk of his own life in order to save only one sheep of the flock.” (R.C.H. Lenski, *Acts*, 847). Shepherds know their sheep and sheep know their shepherds (John 10:14). All sheep are a part of one flock (the church universal – John 10:16).

Shepherds are divinely appointed by God to oversee the sheep through instruction and protection for the purpose of ongoing growth (Eph. 4:11ff). All shepherds are under the good and great shepherd Jesus Christ (John 10:11; Heb. 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25).

No under shepherd can ever replace the great shepherd. Ultimate accountability always rests at the feet of the great shepherd. Under shepherds are to point and protect the sheep. They point them to the chief shepherd and protect them from savage wolves.

“Neither Paul nor Jesus know of a flock that leads and manages itself and has a shepherd only to feed it. These inventions plague the church today.” (R.C.H. Lenski, *Acts*, 848).

- C. God’s appointment of shepherds are over distinct flocks (the church local) not over the church universal.

Practically speaking, I have no shepherding responsibilities to the people down the street or in another state. I do have a Christian responsibility, but it is not as a shepherd; it is only as a Christian that I minister to the larger body of Christ. My gifting as a teacher can be exercised to the larger body of Christ, but my gifting as a shepherd is primarily and almost exclusively exercised only to those who attend this flock.

If we believe I can shepherd other sheep outside of this immediate flock, then I believe we have a misunderstanding as to what shepherding looks like. Casual contacts, superficial communication, and unengaged meetings are not the fullest expression of what it means to “shepherd the flock of God.”

“All’ the flock - Paul binds every sheep upon the hearts of these elders. The true shepherd knows no dividing line, no factions, loves every sheep, especially the weak and the needy. The lambs as well as the sheep - how often these are neglected! **If your heart is not big enough to embrace ‘all the flock,’ it is not big enough to shepherd any of the flock.**” (R.C.H. Lenski, *Acts*, 847).

- D. Every believer has a spiritual gift and such gifting is to be used primarily in a local church family (1 Cor. 12:4-11; 1 Peter 4:10).

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

⁴ “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. ⁶ There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. ⁷ But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (1 Cor. 12:4-11).

1 Peter 4:7-11

⁷ “The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. ⁸ Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Be hospitable to one another without complaint. ¹⁰ As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. ¹¹ Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength

which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Pet. 4:7-11).

Each of you has the ability to reproduce other sheep. Each of you has a spiritual gift that should contribute to the overall health of the church local. The Bible knows nothing of detachment, independence, or isolation. Everything about our faith is designed for community, dependency, and engagement.

God has a special design for each of us inside His church. There is nothing arbitrary or random about you or us. All of us, in each of our parts, make up the whole. There is a second element inside our text that colors the church's identity.

II. Her ownership colors her identity - God owns the church, it is His.

We would be negligent if we did not note how the church is always described as "the church of God." This is God's church. Although we might say "my church" or "our church," the church as we know it is *His Church*.

All local churches are His church. There is only one church in Waukesha County and it is the church of God. Although the one church has several geographical locations and has very distinct personalities there is, however, still only one church and one flock. This idea is much like any large family. There are multiple personalities and idiosyncrasies present, but there is only one family and each member is directly tied into one another.

First Corinthians 11 assures us that although there are many members there is only one body. The union of all believers with Christ and thus one another is equally seen by Paul's Damascus road conversion in Acts 9:1-9.

A. The church reveals the character of God

The church looks like God in her likeness. If each of us are in Christ and He is working in us and through us to those around us, then the church gathered should equally look like Jesus. My desire is for the community around us to say, "Waukesha Bible Church looks like Jesus."

B. The church reproduces the mission of God

The church looks like God in her activity. What would God do if He were in this place? Who would He be "targeting?" How would He show Himself? I believe the activity of God is Christ-exalting, Word-centered, Global-impacting, and Grace-based. I believe a church where Jesus is present makes much of God, of His Word, is always reaching outward in the advancing of God's rule, and loves everyone unconditionally. There is a third element inside our text that colors the church's identity.

III. Her creation colors her identity - He purchased the church with His own blood.

“Here we have the true value of the church, which every pastor should keep in mind. This church entrusted to his care cost God’s blood.” (R.C.H. Lenski, *Acts*, 850).

I have always been arrested by this short, but pungent statement, “Purchased by blood.” Our view of this blood is pivotal in our understanding of God, our salvation, and the formation of His church. Jesus Christ was fully and truly human. As such He possessed real blood, blood that was fully and truly human. In the design of God He determined that without the shedding of blood there could be no forgiveness of sin (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22). Yet when the Bible speaks of blood it is not only literal blood referenced but also blood as it represents the totality of the individual. Thus the blood of the person speaks of the whole person in their essence and activity. Throughout the New Testament record “the word *blood* [should be] construed as theological shorthand for his *sacrificial* death”¹

Although it is rather lengthy, we would do well to read each of the listed verses and ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what He is saying through the written Word about the Living Word.

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which **He purchased with His own blood**” (Acts 20:28).

“...whom God displayed publicly **as a propitiation in His blood through faith**. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed” (Rom. 3:25).

“Much more then, having now been **justified by His blood**, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him” (Rom. 5:9).

“In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, “**This cup is the new covenant in My blood**; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” (1 Cor. 11:25).

“In Him **we have redemption through His blood**, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7).

“But now in Christ Jesus **you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ**” (Eph. 2:13).

“... and **through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross**; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col. 1:20).

“... how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, **cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?**” (Heb. 9:14).

¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 626.

“Therefore, brethren, since **we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus**” (Heb. 10:19).

“... but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:19).

“... but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and **the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin**” (1 John 1:7).

“... and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. **To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood**” (Rev. 1:5).

“And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and **purchased for God with Your blood men** from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

“I said to him, ‘My lord, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and **they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb**” (Rev. 7:14).

Think of the words used to describe the glorious work of His perfect life and substitutionary death: purchased, propitiation, justification, new covenant, redemption, reconciliation, peace, clear conscience, accessibility, purity, freedom, and a completely cleansing.

Everything about His people, His church is blood permeated, blood soaked, and blood bought. The value of a church is the price tag God places on it. The church has been secured by God as His own by the offering up of His own life-blood. There is nothing else that could call such a thing into existence. The only way and reason the church exists is because the second member of the Godhead took on the nature of man in order that He might die to secure for Himself worshippers from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation. God caused a situation in which as a man He could taste death for every one. It is impossible for us to comprehend this act. But in our inability to process the depth of this idea we would be foolish not to appreciate the church universal and the church local. We neglect both to our detriment.

- A. Her life came through His death.
- B. Her exaltation came through His humiliation.
- C. Her position came through His poverty.
- D. Her adoption came through His alienation.

Knowing how the church came to be it would appear sacrilegious to speak ill of the church and not to align oneself with her. As a shepherd of sheep, my affection for Christ and His Church has deepened. My prayer for you is that your affections for Christ and His Church will also deepen.

SHEPHERDING THE PEOPLE: (What's the NEXT STEP?)

1. Are you acknowledging the divine structure of the church? In what way is this showing itself?
2. Do you acknowledge the divine origin of the church? In what way is this showing itself?
3. Do you acknowledge the value of what He has done to bring His church into existence? In what way is this showing itself?
4. Although you might consider it a small thing and you might have every excuse imaginable to resist membership, look at what we are and consider the divinely established structure of the church and then reconsider whether or not you should align yourself with this family of families by membership.
5. Some of you have already taken the classes for membership, yet you have not finished the course. The elders would encourage you to finish the process and join this family. If you have never taken the course, the elders wish to extend to you a sincere and genuine invitation to take the course. We will be starting a study in the next couple of months.