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 Date: October 14, 2007
 Title: The Structure of the Church
 Text: Acts 2:42-47; 20:17-31; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Misc.
 Theme: God has ordered that His people be in community with other believers where some are elder/shepherds and others follow their leadership as they follow Christ. **The New Testament knows nothing of sheep-less shepherds or shepherd-less sheep.**

⁴² “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

Questions: There are four fundamental questions needing to be answered as we consider “the Structure of the Church.”

1. Why are elders important?
2. Why are deacons important?
3. Why is membership important?
4. What impact, if any, does our view of the local church have on how we express our spiritual gifting and how the church goes about reaching its community, nation, and world?

It has been said, “What you win them with, is what you will win them to.” If you win people to Christ through meeting their expectations or through the venue of entertainment, then that is what you have won them to and what you must keep them with. But if you win them with the beauty and sufficiency of Christ, then that is to whom you have won them. Listen to John MacArthur on this idea:

“Becoming a Christian means being sick of your sin, longing for forgiveness and rescue from present evil and future hell, and affirming your commitment to the Lordship of Christ to the point where you are willing to sacrifice everything. I've said it before and I'll say it again: it isn't just holding up your hand or walking down an aisle and saying “I love Jesus.” It is not easy, it is not user-friendly or seeker-sensitive; it isn't a rosy, perfect world where Jesus gives you whatever you want. It is hard, it is sacrificial, and it supersedes everything.” (John MacArthur, Hard To Believe, 132, 133).

When the church talks about church growth, there are two ways of tracking the idea. **First**, church growth can be tracked as it relates to numbers and **second**, church growth can be tracked as it relates to spiritual maturity. Numerical growth in the absence of spiritual maturity is like the swelling of your hand after hitting it with a hammer. It will get bigger, but bigger is not always better. To talk about numerical growth in the absence of spiritual maturity is inappropriate and fleshly. There are two extremes needed to be guarded against. The first is always seeing numerical growth as the goal and secondly, seeing numerical growth as a sign of selling out to the culture of consumerism. The idea of numerical growth is found throughout the book of Acts. Consider the following verses in the book of Acts:

“So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and **that day there were added about three thousand souls**” (Acts 2:41).

“praising God and having favor with all the people. **And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved**” (Acts 2:47).

“But many of those who had heard the message believed; and **the number of the men came to be about five thousand**” (Acts 4:4).

“And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, **were constantly added to their number**” (Acts 5:14).

“Now at this time while **the disciples were increasing in number**, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food” (Acts 6:1).

“The word of God kept on spreading; and **the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem**, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).

“And the hand of the Lord was with them, and **a large number who believed turned to the Lord**” (Acts 11:21).

“for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And **considerable numbers were brought to the Lord**” (Acts 11:24).

“and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and **taught considerable numbers**; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:26).

“In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and **spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed**, both of Jews and of Greeks” (Acts 14:1).

“So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and **were increasing in number daily**” (Acts 16:5).

“And some of them **were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women**” (Acts 17:4).

“**Therefore many of them believed**, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men” (Acts 17:12).

“You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this **Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people**, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all” (Acts 19:26).

“When they had set a day for Paul, **they came to him at his lodging in large numbers**; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening” (Acts 28:23).

Acts describes a church that I would like to be a part of. I believe every church is a Corinthian church, and every church is an Acts church. The two are the same. From the New Testament record the early church saw significant numerical growth. This is the kind of growth I desire to experience as a New Testament local church, but it was through four venues:

- The preaching of a Word-centered, Christ-crucified message.
- Expecting repentance/confession as necessary expressions of regeneration.
- The aligning of the individual with a community of faith called the local church.
- And the individual and corporate exercising of spiritual gifts (i.e. signs and wonders) in and through the local church.

Each of these elements is essential to the New Testament church.

Our Present Danger:

We have fallen so far from the biblical ideal that such thinking sounds foreign to us. With so many choices and various messages, people question why they would commit themselves to any one local church. Yet the church in Acts gives us a real picture of what the church looked like in the first century, and what the church might look like in the 21st century. Let us briefly note these found ideas.

- The preaching of a Word-centered, Christ-crucified message (Acts 3:6; 4:10; 5:42; 8:5; 9:22; 10:36; 28:31; etc.).

The message of Jesus Christ cannot be neither inflated nor diluted with additions or subtractions. A church is biblical only in so far as it adheres to the centrality and singularity of Jesus Christ in the expounding of all biblical revelation.

- Expecting repentance/confession as necessary expressions of regeneration (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 17:30; 26:20).

In the absence of this idea no one will enter into the kingdom of heaven. All who might enter must come through the gate of repentance and confession. The early church grew through the gateway of repentance and confession.

- The aligning of the individual with a community of faith called the local church (Acts 2:42-47; 5:11; 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3, 4, 22; 18:22; 20:17, 28).

There is a significant idea lacking inside of the church universal and it is the understanding and place of the local church in the mission of God. If we imagine these four ideas being a part of a circle, then I would call us to close the circle. Just as I believe there must be (1) pre-evangelism, (2) evangelism, (3) discipleship, and (4) church planting, so also is there to be (1) Christ-crucified, (2) repentance and confession, (3) the exercising of spiritual gifts, and (4) the community of faith. Each part is essential in the overall health of a New Testament church. This community of faith is marked by a desire for (1) worship, (2) instruction/edification, (3) fellowship (i.e. mutual generosity and prayer), and (4) evangelism (i.e. being the body of Christ in the immediate community).

I believe we have a very fractured view of the local church and what it means to be a “member” of a distinct “flock” under the protection and guidance of God appointed shepherds. This is the area I desire to consider in our current study.

- And the individual and corporate exercising of spiritual gifts (i.e. signs and wonders) in and through the local church (i.e. signs and wonders [Acts 4:30; 5:12; 14:3; 15:12]).

As the body expresses itself in the manifestation of spiritual gifting through individual members, the church grows in stability and numerically. Christianity has never been a spectator sport. All members are to be team players and are to participate in the great work of kingdom advancement through the local church.

This idea is celebrated by the apostle Paul in his “one another” descriptions of the local church body.

The area I would like to concentrate on in this study is that of “the aligning of the individual with a community of faith called the local church.” I would like to show three ideas.

- First, (Mind): God wills for His people to be in community under the leadership of shepherds for the building up of His people and for the expanding of His kingdom.
- Second, (Will): As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must choose a local church and place ourselves under the leadership.
- Third, (Emotion): You should love the church as Christ loved the church and follow those who are placed by Him as shepherds over His sheep.

I would like to use the imagery of a shepherd and his sheep to ask and go about answering four simple questions.

I. What does a local church look like?

A. First, it is a place where sheep gather (Heb. 10:19-25).

Some people joke about the "Bedside Baptists" who attend the "Chapel of the Tube" on Sunday mornings. But it's more than a joke. Many people refuse to get near a church unless their nephew is playing the role of a sheep in the Christmas pageant! They claim they can get more out of a walk in the woods than from the typical sermon. Can a Christian survive apart from a church? Some Christians have no choice. [And] even though it's technically possible to live the Christian life in isolation, it's certainly not the norm. <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-acb/acb-t009.html>

The letters of the New Testament are almost exclusively written to churches and those written to individuals, of the five, three are written to pastors concerning the church.

It's illogical to say that you are merely part of the worldwide, universal church, yet refuse to gather with the segment of that universal church that exists in your geographical area. It would be like claiming you have a car, when the right fender is in Phoenix, the engine is in [Detroit], and the wheels are in [Los Angeles]! [Until of the pieces are put together and properly assembled] it just won't function. <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-acb/acb-t009.html>

The local church is a primary theme in the New Testament and within the redemptive purpose of God for the nations.

¹⁹ "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² **let us draw near** with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ **Let us hold fast** the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; ²⁴ and **let us consider how to stimulate** one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ **not forsaking our own assembling** together, as is the habit of some, **but encouraging one another**; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Heb. 10:19-25).

Let me give you five reasons as to why the sheep need to gather.

1. For the purpose of drawing near (v. 22)
2. For the purpose of holding fast (v. 23)
3. For the purpose of mutual stimulation in obedience (v. 24)
4. For the purpose of mutual protection from falling away (v. 25a)
5. For the purpose of mutual edification (v. 25b)

B. Second, it is a place where shepherds exercise oversight (Acts 6:2-7; 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4).

² “So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, **It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God** in order to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ But **we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.** . . . ⁷ **The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly** in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:2-4, 7).

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and **appoint elders in every city** as I directed you” (Titus 1:5).

“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).

¹ “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² **shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight** not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:1-4).

Our individualism has mismanaged the corporate nature of the New Testament document. Sheep resist the shepherds. Attending a church is not enough. Church hopping is not proper. Aligning yourself with a local church through membership is necessary for mutual support to “one another” and for submission to the protection and direction of local church shepherds. There is plenty of opportunity to talk about the dysfunctional nature of a local church, but this does not negate us as a fellowship to pursue the picture and pattern presented to us in the New Testament of a flock under the direction of elders who live in submission to the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

The imagery used by the New Testament to describe the relationship of Jesus Christ to His church speaks of a degree of structure that often goes overlooked in today's church. Not only is He the head of His body, but He is also the Shepherd of His sheep. This short writing will focus on Jesus Christ as the Chief Shepherd and those whom He has left in His wake as elder-shepherds who are responsible to oversee His flock in His absence. There are two passages highlighting this idea.

¹ “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² **shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight** not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:1).

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would **set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city** as I directed you” (Titus 1:5).

God, as the Chief Shepherd, has placed in His physical absence “lesser” shepherds whose chief responsibility is to shepherd His sheep. The New Testament calls this shepherding activity “oversight.”

“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).

The elders of a fellowship are specifically responsible for the sheep within their immediate “flock.” This flock is definable by those who have aligned themselves to a specific geographical location through membership. Although there is a larger group of sheep made up of all who are saved, this larger group is broken down into specific geographical flocks. Although some argue against the idea of membership, it would seem apparent that shepherding responsibilities are only extended to the immediate sheep of a definable “flock.” No shepherd is responsible for the sheep of another flock. Although I am not accountable for the soul care of sheep not within my immediate flock, there are certain responsibilities I have toward other shepherds.

First, shepherds have a responsibility to watch after the sheep of another fold when the sheep wander into their flock. Second, shepherds have a responsibility to notify other shepherds when their sheep persistently wander outside their immediate “fold.” This would appear only proper, but this simple gesture often goes overlooked by shepherds. Third, shepherds should seek to pull sheep into their “flock” through membership or push sheep back into the “fold” from which they originally came.

I believe the key here is to note how the New Testament does not know anything about shepherd-less sheep or sheep-less shepherds. The two are inseparably linked.

The New Testament knows nothing of elders who are without flocks. The idea of elder demands and necessitates a distinct flock over which they exercise oversight. Let me offer three reasons as to why shepherds exist in the local church.

1. They feed the sheep (i.e. a ministry of the word)

A primary area of responsibility is for the shepherds to feed the sheep through the systematic study of God's Word. It is through the feeding process that the saints are built up in love (Eph. 4:12-16). Ephesians 4:12-16 gives at least three ideas.

- a. A ministry of the Word equips sheep for the work of the ministry
- b. A ministry of the Word equips sheep for the unity of the faith
- c. A ministry of the Word equips sheep for the stability of the body

2. They protect the sheep from wolves and from themselves (i.e. a ministry of prayer - the rod and the staff)

Shepherds are to wrestle in prayer for the souls of their sheep. They are to protect them from "fleshly lusts" (1 Pet. 2:11). Paul exhorts the elders of Ephesus to guard the flock from wolves in sheep's clothing. We must fight for the souls of our sheep through the mighty channel of fervent prayer.

3. They guide the sheep in green pastures (i.e. a ministry of oversight - direction and visioning)

The New Testament is always calling the sheep to community. There is no such thing as sheep without a shepherd.

⁴ "He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity ⁵ (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)" (1 Tim. 3:4, 5).

"The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).

"Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7).

a. The role of the deacons/deaconesses

Assisting the shepherds and the sheep are the “sheep dogs” or deacons/deaconesses.

² “So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁷ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:2-4, 7).

There is much in how this works that is left up to the church. However, there does appear to be enough information for setting down certain guidelines. I will note three of those clear directives.

1. Free up elders from problem solving
2. Free up elders for the work of shepherding
3. Serve the physical needs of the sheep

b. The role of the congregant

The New Testament appears clear as to the role of the congregant in the local church. Two primary expressions will be considered.

1. Submit to the elders

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17).

¹¹ “Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing. ¹² But we request of you, brethren, that you **appreciate those who diligently labor among you**, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, ¹³ and that you **esteem them very highly in love** because of their work. Live in peace with one another. ¹⁴ We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people” (1 Thess. 5:11-15).

I find it unfortunate that sheep find it unnecessary to follow the leadership of the shepherds. Shortly I will note the dangers of shepherd-less sheep.

2. Serve in the ministry

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**” (1 Cor. 12:6, 7).

¹¹ “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, ¹² **for the equipping of the saints for the work of service**, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-13).

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. 4:10, 11).

God has designed His sheep in such a way that they are to be a means of encouraging other sheep generally and the flock specifically.

II. Why should I be identified with a local church through membership?

Although membership is not directly mentioned in the New Testament, membership as it is expressed in our culture is biblical and right. If we were living in a different culture where persecution and hardship were daily experiences, then perhaps formal membership would be unnecessary, but in our culture the procedures and patterns set forth by churches is proper and right.

A. First, all sheep are sheep.

There is only one body of sheep, but this one body is made up of multiple flocks. It is true that in Waukesha County there is only one true church, but it is equally true that this one true church is found in multiple and distinct flocks and each of these flocks have God appointed shepherds to whom and for whom they are accountable.

B. Second, not all sheep are from the same flock.

All sheep have an affinity with other sheep and there is enormous diversity among sheep that is to be celebrated, but not all sheep are from the same flock.

C. Third, shepherds are accountable for the sheep in their flock, not for the sheep in another shepherd’s flock.

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, **for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account**. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17).

This does not negate a general accountability we have for our neighbor, but there is a weight placed on the shepherd that can only be carried out and fulfilled with his own sheep. I believe this is the point of 1 Corinthians 3:11-15.

¹¹ “For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ **each man's work will become evident**; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴ **If any man's work** which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ **If any man's work is burned up**, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

There are sheep over which the shepherds are accountable. This accountability does not extend to all sheep, but to specific sheep.

Let me address two areas in conclusion. First, let me offer you three reasons as to why some sheep might not desire to come under the leadership of a shepherd. Second, the danger of being without a shepherd.

III. Why would sheep not desire to come under the leadership of a shepherd?

A. So that they may do what they want (i.e. pride).

1. By mingling with other flocks.
2. By giving where they want to.
3. By feeding from other pastures.

B. So that it can avoid necessary accountability.

“A Christian who answers only to himself can easily rationalize sinful attitudes or actions.”

C. So that it can avoid unpleasant confrontation.

If you are without a shepherd, then no one is holding you accountable for your actions and words and you are going without correction when you are self-deceived or failing. Consistent shepherding grows healthy sheep.

IV. What are the dangers of being shepherd-less?

Right now I can hear someone say, “But the Lord is my Shepherd,” and I would respond by saying you are absolutely right. And I would follow up with the statement that He, the Chief Shepherd, has put “lesser” shepherds in place to watch over His flock.

Shepherd-less sheep are unnatural. They are vulnerable to attack and susceptible to disease. Sheep are meant for flocks and shepherds. Perhaps, there might be shepherd-less sheep in the wilderness, but sheep are designed for flocks and shepherds.

As you and I consider this biblical idea, may we ask ourselves what our relationship is to the Chief Shepherd, His lesser shepherds, the sheep at large and those who are specifically identified in a geographical location. May God continue to sharpen us as we come to understand this necessary relationship.

APPLICATION: (Where do we go from here? What is the NEXT STEP?)

Making it personal:

1. Of what flock are you a part?
2. Who is/are your shepherd(s)?
3. How are you contributing to the overall health of the flock?
4. Do you make shepherding easy or hard?

Four practical action steps:

1. Become a member of a flock.
2. Submit to the leadership of the shepherds.
3. Give through ministry and finances to the overall health of the flock.
4. Encourage others to join the flock.