

Greetings:

The study that Pastor Pat brings on Sunday mornings is a reflection of the study for that week. It represents a lot of research. Not all of what he has prepared is communicated. In an attempt to continue the learning process, he is making available his study notes to the congregation.

They are edited, but not “book” ready. To the critical eye mistakes can be found. So he asks that you take the material with humility, teach-ability, and charity.

Enjoy and if you should have any questions or corrections, please do not hesitate to email him at pastorpat@waukeshabile.org.

Date: June 7, 2009

Title: The Centrality of the Local Church in the Mission of God

Text: Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17

Theme: The Local Church is God’s primary means through which His Mission is unfolding.

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Waukesha Bible Church is a family of families seeking to live in **the Storyline of the Bible**. She is determined by design to have a **God-centered, Christ-exalting worship; a Word-centered teaching** focused on personal **discipleship** through intentional and systematic instruction; a **Global-impacting mission** that resolves to be a **church planting church**; and a **Grace-based fellowship** where disciples are invited to live under a **reigning grace** characterized by a **Gospel-driven sanctification** that celebrates a divine **monergism** to the Christian life.

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Introduction:

I have the strong potential of being misunderstood in this study. I believe the emphasis in the New Testament is on the local church. In saying this I am not saying there is not a larger idea called "the Body of Christ." The Body of Christ is made up of all those who were saved during the ministry of Christ forward. Yet the Body of Christ throughout the New Testament record is identified as local assemblies that are geographically definable with a biblically distinct structure and mission.

When referring to the mission of God, I speak primarily of that mission entrusted to the local church. I am not speaking to a larger mission of God carried out by all who profess Christ. God's story is played out in various venues, but there is a distinct part of the story that is most notable in the New Testament record that is in and through the local church.

There is a larger mission of God carried out by the church universal. Thus it is possible to speak of the mission of God as including all acts by those who work independent of local assemblies, but **the emphasis in the New Testament is on, in, and through the local assembly.**

I am also not speaking to the beginning of the church which I believe started in Acts 2 with the distinctive ministry of Spirit baptism.

Within the context of the local church there is a distinct and specific gifting of the assembly by God with apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers for the purpose of equipping the saints. It is by the equipping that the assembled will become mature and secure (Eph. 4:12-16). They will grow in the knowledge of His grace by celebrating the person and work of Jesus Christ. If the New Testament usage of the word "assembly" speaks to local assemblies, then the mission of God is carried out first and foremost through those whom He has called out to assemble for the making and maturing of disciples.

Thus for us, our purpose -- *Missions*, as used in all documents of Waukesha Bible Church, refers to the carrying out of the *Mission of God* which we believe to be the making, maturing, and assembling of disciples of Jesus Christ *by* local churches *into* local churches for the strengthening and building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13).

In each generation, we believe that God has delegated to every individual in the local assembly the above mission of advancing his kingdom on earth to their generation (Matt. 28:19-20). Practically, this necessitates that we as a church be intentional in

corporately proclaiming the message of Christ to every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev. 5:9), and then continuing the process of advancing God's kingdom to succeeding generations by making disciples of those who believe and encouraging them to meet together as an assembly or a local church. As a result we will actively be strengthening existing churches and establishing new ones for the glory of God.

THE BIG PICTURE:

- The Birth of the Church in the Story of God
- **The Centrality of the Church in the Mission of God**
- The Structure of the Church for the Mission of God
- The Purpose of the Church in identifying, equipping, sending, and supporting

Its Eternal Value:

Jesus said He would build His church (Matt. 16:18). The church was purchased by His blood (Acts 20:28). He gave Himself for the church (Eph. 5:25-27). He guards and protects the church from division and schism (1 Cor. 3:16, 17; Acts 20:29-31). This church is often identified by geographical locations (1 Cor. 1:2). In Acts 14:22, Luke records for us that Paul and Barnabas returned to the sites of their first missionary journey to "ordain elders in every church."

The Problem:

Seldom do I see a failure to appreciate the universal church. There are some who deny the word "universal church," but not the idea. There is however a real problem among the believing to dismiss and even denigrates the centrality of the local church in the life of the believer and the mission of God.

I appreciate how A.H. Strong speaks of the dynamic "between this invisible or universal church, and the individual church, in which the universal church takes local and temporal form, and in which the idea of the church as a whole is **concretely exhibited** [emphasis added]."¹ There is something strongly concrete about local churches. It is easy to love farming from afar and appreciate what the farm produces, but it is more difficult when the idea of a farm becomes **concretely exhibited**.

The Storyline:

In the writing of His story, God has four primary movements: creation, transgression, condemnation, and redemption. The physical or visible venue through which the story would be told is in the arrival of the Hero. It is this Hero who would rescue a people for Himself. The rescued would worship Him and enjoy His presence forever. The means whereby the created could worship the Creator would be by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Questions:

1. What is meant by the word "ecclesia"?
2. From what are we called and to what are we called?
3. What does the idea of "flock" communicate?

4. Are shepherds over all the flock of God or is their responsibilities and duties “flock” specific? How do you support your answer?
5. How would you define what is meant by the word “church”?
6. What makes a local church different than a para-church ministry? Explain your answer.
7. Are shepherds responsible for all sheep and are sheep under all shepherds? Explain your answer.
8. Are elders and deacons offices within the church universal or only in the context of a local church? Explain your answer.
9. What are three marks of a biblical community?
10. How has a generic view of the church hurt the local idea?
11. Why might it be easier to love the church universal and more difficult to love the church local?
12. Why might the NT commands be directed more toward the local church and not primarily for the church universal?
13. How do the words independent and inter-dependent fit together?
14. Why should local churches be indigenous and what are the potential dangers of a church not being indigenous?
15. Are you a part of a local church community?
16. Have you sensed and do you feel the protection of a believing community to whom you are responsible and for whom you are responsible?
17. Do you have an identifiable shepherd?
18. What place does this local church have in your life?
19. I’ve said this before and I will repeat it again. If this local church is not to your liking, then by all means find one that is. But for you to drift from church to church is an anomaly that is inconsistent with the New Testament record.

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

To Know: The Holy Spirit desires for us to know Christ as the head and His body as the church.

To Choose: The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose to love Christ and His church.

To Feel: The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of serving Christ in and through His church.

In this study, I am only speaking to the idea of the church being local as the primary idea of the New Testament record. This is in contrast to the church universal.

Outline:

- I. The idea of being called out and assembled

Here we simply note what the word translated “church” actually means.

- A. In the Old Testament
- B. In the New Testament

The word translated “church” means “called out from.” The idea of being called from something or someone must also include the idea of being called to something or someone. If I am called out of the world, sin, and death, I am equally called to Christ, purity, and life. I am transferred from the dominion of Satan and into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son.

In the outworking of God’s story His people would always be “called out” from the mass of humanity. In much of the Old Testament record these people were identified as national Israel and within the nation a spiritual or redeemed remnant. In the New Testament record, these people are identified as “the called out ones” (**ekklesia** = “to call out”) or “the Church.”

Now before we jump to any unnecessary conclusions let me attempt to be clear. I do not believe the remnant in the Old Testament is the New Testament Church no more than I believe the New Testament Church is the Old Testament Israel. I do, however, believe those who are saved, regardless as to time, are a part of the one people of God. These redeemed souls are distinct parts of one whole.

Thus I disagree with A.H. Strong who defines the church being “in its largest signification, is the whole company of regenerate person in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth.”² A second idea stressing the centrality of the local church is seen in the word “flock.”

“In the Bible, there are three metaphors concerning the church. A metaphor is a short similitude; a similitude reduced to a single word; or a word expressing similitude without the signs of comparison. (Webster's dictionary). The first metaphor is the **body**. “*And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.*”(Colossians 1:18). The second metaphor is the **building**. “*And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.*” (Ephesians 2:20-22). The third metaphor is the **bride** found in 2 Corinthians 11:2, “*For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.*” As we look at each of these, we see that they must all be local. If a body is scattered or dismembered it is no longer a body. A building must be built on a foundation and in one place. A bride must be in one place.”³

There is something very tangible when speaking of a body, a building, and a bride. You do not handle, attend, or embrace such objects in the abstract.

II. The idea of locally distinct assemblies in the New Testament (Universal and Local – 1 Pet. 5:2, 3; Acts 20:28)

“**Ekklesia** appears 114 times in the New Testament, 3 times in the gospels, and 111 times in the epistles. In the gospels it appears only in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17 (twice).

This helps establish the fact that the church began after the ascension as recorded in the book of Acts and is a particularly Pauline doctrine."⁴

Theologically, when speaking of the local church, we identify something that is distinct from that which is global or universal.

Biblically, when Paul speaks of the church he is primarily and (almost) exclusively speaking of the church local. When it speaks to the church global, it is still referring to local assemblies.

"The word "church" in the NT never refers to a building or a place. It always refers to a *people*: either the total number of believers who have ever lived, or a local group of those believers. For example, in Ephesians 1:22, 23 Paul says that God, having raised Christ from the dead above all rule and authority, "put all things under his feet and made him head over all things for the *church* which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." That is the universal church, the whole number of the redeemed who look to Christ as their life and their authority. In this sense there could never be such a thing as *churches*. There is only one church, "one body" (Ephesians 4:4)."⁵

Christ did not love the church in abstract. He loved and loves each of the parts as it represents the whole. The word occurs only twice in the Gospels (Matthew), is used extensively by Luke in Acts, expanded on by Paul, and then occurs almost exclusively in Revelation 2 and 3 (only one other time in Revelation 22:16).

The idea of local churches or "flocks" over which elders serve is clearly seen in passages like 1 Peter 5:2, 3 and Acts 20:28.

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**" (1 Pet. 5:2, 3).

"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).

Although it is difficult to define the church with complete objectivity, it is not impossible. The word "church" in English is taken from old English meaning "place of worship." This, however, is not the meaning of the word it represents in the New Testament. The New Testament word is "**ecclesia**." It is a compound word meaning "to call out from." It is best translated as "assembly." The idea of "called out from" is strongly concrete and not abstract. What are the characteristics of a local assembly? Let me suggest several ideas.

First, the assembled are a group of people who by grace believe and trust in the sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and

salvation from the punishment which would have been poured out on them by the righteous God.

Second, this group of believers commit to one Body and thus operate in submission to each other by participating in baptism, in meeting together weekly to listen to teaching from God's Word, in prayer, fellowship, singing of songs, the breaking of bread, and giving (Acts 2:47; Eph. 5:18-21; Col. 3:15-17).

Third, they are led by a local group of elders/shepherds who care for the flock through the teaching of the Word, prayer, and mentoring/discipleship (Titus 1:5-11; Acts 20:28-32). This is the intent of the "pastoral letters." They define the quality and function of those who would lead the local assembly. The organization of the assembly has leadership that provides instruction and protects the gathered sheep from false teachers (Acts 20ff; Eph. 4:10ff).

Finally, this group of believers recognize Jesus Christ as their head and, therefore, are involved in community as His body in the Mission of God (Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 1:6-10) and are actively assisting and equipping those within the assembly to go forth in this endeavor (2 Tim. 2:2; Acts 13:1-3). A third idea stressing the centrality of the local church is seen in the shepherd and sheep relationship.

John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in St. Paul Minnesota, defines the local church in the following manner.

"I would define a local church like this: a local church is a group of baptized believers who meet regularly to worship God through Jesus Christ, to be exhorted from the Word of God, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper under the guidance of duly appointed leaders. According to this definition there are at least seven qualifications if a group wants to be a church in the NT sense." ⁶

III. The idea of shepherds and sheep (gifting and office – Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17)

The New Testament does not recognize shepherd-less sheep or sheep-less shepherds. An individual might have the gift of teaching and caring, but unless and until they occupy the office of shepherd, they are not shepherds. The same is true concerning the "sheep." Sheep are designed for community. They were never intended to "go it alone." Sheep needs shepherds for provision and protection. Shepherds need sheep, otherwise their identity as shepherd is forfeited.

When Paul addressed the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:28), he specifically spoke of them being placed there by God for the oversight of the flock.

"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 flock is very specific. I am not a shepherd over all sheep. I am a shepherd over a specific flock of sheep. God has other elders in other geographical locations tending to His people.

The author of Hebrews reflects a similar idea in Hebrews 13:17.

“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).

I believe the idea of the elder giving an account of their specific flock is also noted in 1 Corinthians 3:1-15. I believe elders are placed by God over specific sheep and the sheep are to have specific elders. I do not believe this is true of the church universal.

I would equally argue the same point for the office of deacon/deaconess. A deacon/deaconess is unique to the local church. The church universal does not have deacons or shepherds. You may call spiritual leaders and go to people whenever you like, but they are not shepherds or deacons of the church universal. Shepherds and deacons are uniquely local church.

IV. The idea of community (1 Cor. 12:14-26; Gal. 5:13-16; John 13:34, 35)

The word “community” as used of the local church speaks to the one body, many members image. Perhaps the best passage celebrating this idea is 1 Corinthians 12:14-26.

¹⁴ “For the body is **not one member, but many**. ¹⁵ If the foot says, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. ¹⁹ If they were all one member, where would the body be? ²⁰ But now there are many members, but one body. ²¹ And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ ²² On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; ²³ and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, ²⁴ whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, ²⁵ so that **there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another**. ²⁶ **And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it**” (1 Cor. 12:14-26).

The church global or universal is real and each local church or Christian ministry is an expression of it, but the church universal has yet to assemble. Its ultimate and final gathering will be at the coming of Jesus Christ for His people. There is no question that para-church ministries provide a sense of community to believers. Yet the para-church operates primarily on a global church level and not at the local church level. My usage of the word "primarily" means just that, primarily and not exclusively. The local church, in comparison operates primarily on a local or community level and not at the global church level. The local church works globally, but in geographically distinct communities.

Within para-church ministries there is a sense of family and community, but I cannot think of any para-church ministry that identifies itself as a local church. I am only commenting on the sense of community that a local church is to bring and provide for its people. There are three ideas I would like us to consider within the word "community."

A. Community speaks to Dependency

The rugged individualism of American ideology runs counter to the biblical idea of dependency. We often recoil from the idea of having to need or depend on others for support or help. The local church is to provide a system of support and security for those who are a part of the family. The Christian life is not designed for isolation.

B. Community speaks to Diversity

The very nature of the body speaks to diversity and inter-reliance. Paul appears very clear on this point. We need each other. Each of us within the local family is very different. Even if we share the same gifting, we do not share the same personality or idiosyncrasies. The diversity within a local church was never meant to divide. It is this blending of the various parts that gives cause for great celebration. We are very distinct by design. It is in the context of community where the greatest displays of biblical love and grace can be manifested.

C. Community speaks to Charity

It is impossible to speak of one's love for the Lord and not speak of one's love for His church. To say you love the church at large and not the church local is simply wrong. If we were to reduce the truth of God into a simple statement, we might conclude with the following statement [READ Mark 12:28-31].

²⁸ "One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, 'What commandment is the foremost of all?' ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; ³⁰ AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.' ³¹ "The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE

YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these.'" (Mark 12:28-31).

John captures this idea with "you cannot love God and hate your brother."

²⁰ "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. ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:20, 21).

The issue of loving one's enemy is settled, but what about loving those within the Body of Christ? This is even more direct. What about loving one another in the local church?

Consider also Galatians 5:13-16.

¹³ "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (Gal. 5:13-16).

Friend, I believe we all believe that this is the New Testament call. Again, I have no difficulty loving someone in another church, state, or part of the world. Our difficulty is in loving the person who sits in the pew beside us or on the other side of the auditorium. You cannot separate a love for the Lord and a love for the local church, a community of faith, the family of families that make up this distinct body.

I believe the New Testament commands are best exhibited inside a community of faith/local church. One of the reasons why some people run from church is because of the hard task of living the Christian life in community. This is what makes a passage like John 13:34, 35 so powerful.

³⁴ "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34, 35).

I can love all believers generically without any difficulty, but to love those inside the community of faith can be problematic and troublesome.

V. The idea of independent, indigenous, inter-dependent churches (Local and Universal)

³ "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches

of the Gentiles; ⁵ also **greet the church that is in their house**. Greet Epaphroditus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia" (Rom. 16:3-5).

¹ "Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, ² To **the church of God which is at Corinth**, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:1, 2).

"The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with **the church that is in their house**" (1 Cor. 16:19).

¹⁵ "Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and **the church that is in her house**. ¹⁶ When this letter is read among you, have it also read in **the church of the Laodiceans**; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea" (Col. 4:15, 16).

"Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To **the church of the Thessalonians** in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace" (1 Thess. 1:1).

Each local church is to be an independent assembly that grows from the culture and community in which it is birthed and although independent it is a part of a larger community of faith as it is connected with other local churches both locally, nationally, and globally.

Think of the birth of a child. The child represents the context from which she comes. Who she is, is controlled by her parentage, geography, ethnicity, and culture of her context. Her parents hope she is able to care for herself as she matures, but they also hope she never forgets or loses sight of her family. This pictures the idea of independent, indigenous, and inter-dependent.

I am calling us to consider and remember the local church. We should and ought to love all Christians everywhere, and we should celebrate the enormity of God's body universal, but the New Testament emphasizes the local church. What place does this local church have in your life?

Shepherding the Sheep (What's the NEXT STEP?)

1. Are you a part of a local church community?
2. Have you sensed and do you feel the protection of a believing community to whom you are responsible and for whom you are responsible?
3. Do you have an identifiable shepherd?
4. What place does this local church have in your life?
5. I've said this before and I will repeat it again. If this local church is not to your liking, then by all means find one that is. But for you to drift from church to church is an anomaly that is inconsistent with the New Testament record.

¹ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907], 889.

² Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907], 889.

³ <http://www.baptistpillar.com/bd0263.htm>

⁴ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 347.

⁵ http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1981/290_The_Local_Church_Minimum_Vs_Maximum/

⁶ http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1981/290_The_Local_Church_Minimum_Vs_Maximum/