

Title: Expectations in the Church  
Text: Acts 20  
Theme: What should we expect from the church  
Occasion: Elder installment, January 2013  
Prop Stmtnt: It takes the whole church to be the real deal.

Read Text:

On Sunday mornings, my normal habit is to preach a sermon that is based from a passage of the Bible that we are studying. There are times, however, when I take a break in order to address a matter that is beneficial for the church, that may not be in that particular study. Usually, at the beginning of every year, I preach a sermon about the church, reminding us of what on earth we are here for.

It is very tempting to take a casual and even selfish view of the church. But the church is not a take-it-or-leave-it proposition for a true follower of Christ. Church is not optional. Church is not like an athletic event or a league, a hobby or a project. Oh no! When Paul addressed the elders of the church at Ephesus, his charge to them was, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." Do you see it? The church is the people who have been purchased for God by the payment of the death of Christ. We are the blood-purchased possession of Christ. That is why the church is so sacred. That is why church is so important. That is why church has such an impact upon one's life. We do not have to try to make the church meaningful. God already did. He established it on the basis of the cross. Whatever Christ does, the Father takes special interest in. Whatever Christ loves, the Father loves dearly. Whatever Christ bleeds for, the Father cherishes. Whatever Christ has died for, the Father guards, whatever Christ is married to, the Father is jealous to protect because God the Father treasures what is the most precious treasure of the Son. God is one in three persons. The tri-unity of God (trinity) is all in for the church.

God loves the church. God treasures the church. God is committed to the church. God is all in, all the way through. He invested the blood of His Son, and there is no greater investment, because there is no greater treasure than the church. Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that when you pour your life into that which Christ has purchased, you make an eternally wise investment. When you love what God loves and treasure what He treasures and rejoice in what He rejoices in, then He increases your reservoir of joy because as you understand the church it will give you manifold reasons for joy and will give you a much greater capacity for joy. There is no greater satisfaction than knowing Christ and being known by Christ. How do you know Christ? The answer to that question is called the gospel, because the word gospel means "good news." Here is the gospel: God made us in order to have a relationship with him. But, we rebelled against God because we did not trust Him and decided to trust ourselves and make our own laws in direct disobedience to our Creator. The result has been catastrophic. Sin not only cursed our world, it cursed us. We are guilty of sinning against God and deserve the eternal and righteous judgment of God. But, instead of judging us, God sent His own Son, Jesus

Christ, to become one of us in order to redeem us. He came to this earth 2000 years ago and lived the life that we were supposed to live, but could not and did not. He lived it in our place. His life fulfilled what God demanded of a life. He then died as our substitute and paid the penalty that we deserved to pay (but could not) by dying on a wooden cross in our place. He was credited with our sin. He was treated as if he had committed all of our sin. When he died, he was separated from His Father, and received the righteous wrath of God poured out upon him instead of us. The only way we could not be condemned for our sin, was for a perfect substitute to be condemned in our place. Christ was our substitute. He died, credited with our sin, in our place. But, because His death was so perfectly complete for our sin and because the payment for our sin was made in full, death, which is the payment for sin, no longer had a hold on Christ. Christ rose again from the dead. He appeared to his disciples who had followed him during his teaching ministry on this earth and told them to go into the entire world and preach the good news of what he had done and call people to trust in Christ. People who do that become followers of Christ. They are, at the moment of faith, adopted into the family of God and made as members (in a general sense) in his church. God called his followers to organize themselves into local groups called churches all over the world in order to help each other understand what it means to live as a follower of Christ and to help each other do this until he returns. This is what we are. But, it is easy to lose sight of that. It is easy to slip into the thinking that church is something I attend, or go to, like I would a movie, a concert or a restaurant. We say things like, "how was church today?" Was? This event is not church, it is the gathering of the church. This gathering is an expression, an experience of the church, but the event itself is not the church.

### 1. **What is a real church?**

This question is best answered from the account in the Bible that speaks about the beginning of the church. Turn back to Acts 2. Jesus told his disciples before he died that he would build his church (Matt 16.18 - future tense). Before this event in Acts 2, the people of God on the earth had been associated with a particular nation (Israel). But, God's plan had always been for that nation to be a visible example of what he wanted to do with people from all over the world. Sadly, they were a terrible example. In fact, most of the people who were supposed to be his people were not his people. This was clearly demonstrated when they crucified Christ. But now, God was expanding the borders of what "his people" would be. His people would no longer be identified primarily by their ethnic orientation but by their faith in Christ.

Following the resurrection of Jesus, the Disciples of Christ, gathered together as they were told to do. Jesus told them to wait until they received the Holy Spirit who would empower them to be witnesses, not only in Jerusalem, but eventually to the entire world. So, this rather small group, gathered regularly for prayer, Scripture, eating, and encouragement. During one such gathering, an unusual event took place. It was during a Jewish holiday known as Pentecost when on this particular day the apostles had gathered that the sound of a mighty rushing wind filled the entire house in which they were sitting. Little flames of fire, rested on each of them and they were filled with the Spirit of God and were able to speak in other languages. This proved to be very useful since there were

so many people in Jerusalem from other countries for this festival. The promise that Christ had made had now been fulfilled. Now, was their time to be witnesses. They went into the Temple area and began to preach. Peter was the main preacher that day and after preaching the gospel, about 3,000 people “received his word” and “were baptized.” These (2.42) “devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Do you see why we believe what we believe about the church? The preaching of the gospel calls people (previously unbelievers) to believe in Christ. Those who believe, give evidence of that by making a public statement about their belief by getting baptized. Those who are baptized are identifying themselves with the other followers of Christ, which is why they devote (commit, join, glue) themselves to: 1) the teaching (right doctrine), 2) to the fellowship (the specific group of believers) and 3) to the life of the church, which included participating in the Lord’s Supper (communion). You cannot separate coming to faith in Christ from becoming part of his family and part of his church. Why did God set it up that way? God himself is Trinity. He is a community of perfect love and harmony. He made us in his image, which, amongst other things means that he designed us to function like him. He made us to be part of a community. But sin isolates us. It not only cuts us off from God, it cuts us off from other people. We live in fear of rejection because we have experienced it and in some cases, we have caused it. And yet, there is a longing inside each of us to belong to others and ultimately to belong to God. Christ established the church as the people to which his followers belong. It is not only a preview of heaven, but he made it so that our identity and our maturity as believers would be a group project. Just as God made Adam to be incomplete without Eve, he re-birthed us to be incomplete without the church. So, in a general sense, the church is the group of people from all over the world who are called by God’s grace to faith in Christ and are committed to putting him on display (give him glory) in obedience to the Scriptures. In a specific sense and local sense, a church is the specific members who comprise that local congregation.

I formed this definition based upon how the Bible uses the word church. You see it here in Acts 20. The actual word never refers to a building, but to a people, and the people are separate and distinct. They are identifiable. They are specific. That is why membership is so very important and so very biblical. Membership in a local church is the means to identify who is a follower of Christ and who isn’t. The Bible never presents the church as a fuzzy, loose-knit, autonomous, self-directed, individually-governed, come, if I feel like it, kind-of-like-association. The church is not simply people who attend a weekly gathering. There are local bingo clubs that do that. A true local church is comprised of a specific group of people who have publicly identified themselves with and committed themselves to the other professing believers. You cannot carry out the commands that the Bible give to the church without membership. But our view of membership tends to be very deficient and unbiblical. Membership in Sam’s club or at the YMCA is not like membership in the church. When the Bible uses the term “member” in 1 Corinthians 12, it is speaking of the members of a body. Like an arm, hand, or foot. What do you call it when a person has an arm removed? It is dismemberment. How can I be a Christian without being a member of a local church is like asking how can I be an arm without being attached to a shoulder? But, does the Bible teach this, or is this just some church rule?

In Matthew 18.15-20 Jesus taught that if you have a person who refuses to repent of his sin that you have to bring this matter before the local church. What person? Any person? No! This is speaking about other members of the church because a church only has authority over its own. The congregation is involved in this. In 1 Corinthians 5, we see an example of how the apostle Paul followed this teaching of Christ. There was a man in the church who refused to repent of his sin and Paul called upon the church (not just the elders, but the congregation) to remove this person from the church. What does that mean? Does it mean that we have bouncers who throw the person's body outside of the building? No, it means that we no longer view this person as a member of the church, that is someone who believes and follows Christ, but as one who needs to come to faith in Christ. The church at Corinth did this and in 2 Corinthians 2, Paul referred to this action as something that was done "by the majority". The majority of what? The majority of the church is what Paul is saying. How do you know what the majority is if you do not know the whole? So, a local church is a specific group of people who have come to faith in Christ, and have committed themselves together to put Christ on display in obedience to the Scriptures. That brings us to the second question.

## 2. What is the purpose of the church?

What on earth are we here for anyway? Since, 1 Cor. 10.31 makes it very clear that "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" and since Eph. 3.21 says, "to him (God) be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." it is clear that the church exists to glorify God. But how do we do that? How do we accurately put God on display? How can we be a people who look like Jesus? How can we be a people who make the gospel visible?

We will only look like Christ as we listen to Christ. The Bible is the Word of Christ. Col. 3.16 says "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." He speaks to us through his Word. He governs this church by means of his Word. That is why if we are going to fulfill our very reason for existence (to make Christ and the gospel visible), we have to make much about his Word. When we study the Word we discover that Jesus is the hero of the Bible because he is the very focal point of life. We also discover from the Word that the gospel is not only the means by which we become followers of Christ, but the message of the gospel is the means by which we grow as followers of Christ. We never, ever move beyond our need to hear the gospel. This is so good and so needful because the gospel speaks clearly about our need and that is humbling. Humility is the foundation for harmony. And to be in a community of people marked by mutual love and gospel-based humility is about the closest thing to heaven that we can experience on this earth. That is why we have to keep the Word before us in the manner that it was intended for us. The Word exposes our need (Law) and our hope (Gospel). The Word reveals our failure and our Savior. We have to teach the Bible in sync with its purpose.

The Word also teaches us about the church and what our purpose is. The Word teaches us that if we are going to glorify God, then it is an absolute priority that we worship God. The Word not only informs our worship, but our worship helps us understand and apply

the Word. But the Word teaches us more. As you examine the New Testament letters to the churches, particularly Ephesians and Colossians you will be struck with how much God works through the relationships of the people in the church to help the church look like Christ. The fellowship of the church is designed by God to help each believer grow because each believer is loving and serving, and is being loved and is being served. Spiritual growth is a community project and the community is a healthy church. When the church is experiencing spiritual growth, there is naturally a joy and a heart that longs for others to know and experience this same dynamic. That is called evangelism. Evangel is another word for gospel. To evangelize means to tell others about Christ.

So, when we put together everything that the New Testament says about what the church is and what it should be doing, we can summarize it in this one statement of purpose. **Cornerstone Baptist Church exists to glorify God by leading believers to maturity through Worship, Instruction, Fellowship and Evangelism.**

This is something that we are all responsible for. While there are leaders who focus their energies on certain areas, we are all responsible to worship God, grow in Christ, develop and practice love for the body and communicate the gospel to others.

### 3. How do we carry this out?

God-focused Worship, Christ-centered Instruction, Gospel-driven Fellowship and Evangelism are absolutely critical to the life of this church. We are serious and intentional about worship and seek to help you know who God is and help you respond appropriately to him. Our Sunday morning service is the primary time when we gather as a congregation and answer the call of God to be a people who worship him. That means that our Worship Service is not to be a spectator sport, but is to be a time when every believer whole-heartedly responds to all that God is. There is a high priority placed upon the preaching of the Word in our worship service because the Word is how we hear from God.

Instruction in the Word is critical so that we can understand the person of God, the plan of God and the purposes of God. Good, balanced, Christ-centered instruction is critical to your spiritual health. As we read from Acts 20, Paul charged the elders of the church at Ephesus to be very discerning about themselves and about what is being taught in the church. The elders of this church are likewise very involved in the instructional diet for our church. These men function like dietitians helping to guard that we do not have spiritual junk food and ensuring that a spiritually balanced diet is being offered. Our Adult Bible Fellowships (ABF) are the primary means (not exclusively) for instruction to take place. In the context of these classes, we know that there is going to be some fellowship that will take place, but due to the size of the groups and limitation of time, the level of fellowship will be very limited. The ABF's therefore have a capital "I" and a lower-case "f". Every church has a choice to be a bag of marbles or a bag of grapes...

Spiritual growth is not as simple as knowing the right answers to the Bible questions. Spiritual growth is a matter of knowing, being and responding based on the gospel. God

has never called you to do this by yourself. You need others to help you with that because you have blind-spots, and you need to help others. God has called you to be part of a group of people who know you and trust you and encourage you, and pray for you, and pray with you. That is why we have a Small Group Ministry. We have over 30 groups of adults who regularly meet together (most in homes) in order to help each other at the heart level look more and more like Christ. Most of these groups simply discuss the Sunday morning sermon. I write discussion questions from the sermon that are designed to help us process the truths that are preached, apply them and ask one another for help and prayer. Cathi and I are members of a small group that I do not lead because we need biblical fellowship from members of our church just like you. This is a priority for us because we have to have the ministry of the other members in our lives. So do you. Some of you are too proud to admit it, aren't you? Some of you fear getting close to other people because they might discover that you are a sinner and you might discover that they are too. My small group knows that I am a sinner. The staff and the elders know that as well. Do you know how comforting and secure it is to be trusted by people who know your failures and by God's grace, love you anyway?

Brothers and sisters, this is what we are. We are seeking to help others discover who Christ is, come to faith in him and grow in him, who will in turn do the same with others. We are to be disciple-making disciples of Christ, which means that we are to be a church-reproducing church. We have a strong commitment to doing that through the missionaries and mission ministries that we support. We also are committed to doing that in this area. We desperately need to be a healthy church in order to put Christ on display, make the gospel visible and so that we can reach, build up and send out people to plant and renew churches in metro Detroit and around the world until Christ returns.

It takes every single member to complete the body. You matter. Your spiritual growth matters. Your serving matters. Your integrity matters. Your priorities matter. Your giving matters. Your learning, discernment, humility, relationships, harmony, forgiving, reconciliation, matters. You matter. We're all part of the stuff.