

Title: Game over, play on!
Text: Acts 20.28
Theme: Why we love the church and what we are doing about it.
Occasion: January 2010
Purpose: To encourage, inform and unite the family around priorities for this year.

Introduce Elders, Finance Team, Missions Team

Read Text: Acts 20:26-32

The film *Searching for Bobby Fischer* tells the story of a young chess genius named Max who at the age of 7 begins his assault upon the world of chess. “In one particularly intense scene, Max is playing against another boy in a championship match while the parents and coaches observe via closed-circuit television from an adjacent room. With only a small number of pieces having been captured by either player, Max, after studying the board for some minutes, calmly extends his hand to his opponent. ‘What are you doing?’ the other boy asks. ‘I’m offering you a draw,’ Max replies. Stunned and insulted, the boy exclaims, ‘But the game isn’t over yet!’ ‘Yes, it is,’ Max answers, ‘trust me.’ Having determined not only his own next series of moves but every possible countermove and scenario of defense, this young prodigy knew that the game was effectively over. While the pieces had not actually been played out their destinies, this was simply a formality. The victory was in hand – Max was just trying to save time.”¹

On the cross, Christ triumphantly announced, “It is finished!” And the exclamation point to that announcement came the moment that Christ arose from the dead. The game was over, but we play on. We play on with joy at his victory. We play on with focus on his plan. We play on with confidence in his work. We play on with trust in his instructions as to how we are to play on. This morning, I want to lay out for you some goals that the leadership desires to see accomplished this year. By the way, next week we will be starting Hebrews. The elders gathered for a series of meetings that was encouraging and humbling because the love and commitment that God has for the church was freshly pressed into our souls by the Scriptures. I am going to string together some of those texts to remind us of the high esteem that God places upon “the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. And he is the head of the body, the church. You were called in one body. Now you are the body of Christ. You, . . . , are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. You are God’s

¹ Dual Citizens, by Jason Stellman, p. 88

temple. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

I had a wedding yesterday. For most couples, the wedding seems like it takes forever to come. And then, suddenly it is upon us! God made Christian marriage to reflect the great marriage. And this is what God has said about the ultimate wedding. (Rev. 19.6b-7) The great multitude in heaven says “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready....” Then these words that I love to read to you beginning in verse 11. “Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is the Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.” Brothers and sisters, that is what we call – Game Over! The game is effectively over, but we are called to play on.

Our mission is to press on in view of the victory that is assured. How is the church supposed to do that? Many would say that the church is so antiquated, so irrelevant, and so unappealing, that in order to be successful, the church must re-invent itself and find out what is working on Wall Street (ok, forget that), or what is working in Washington, DC (ok, forget that too) or what is working on main street and copy it, which is a tacit admission on the part of those people that they do not believe in the message of the gospel, nor the God-ordained means by which the work of the gospel is to be carried out. So, when we ask the question – How is the church supposed to carry out its mission in view of the victory that is assured? We do not have to try to come up with some new, creative, cool, out-of-the box, pushing the edge of the envelope kind of strategy. In fact the strategy that the church is called to pursue, frankly appears to be rather uncool, unsophisticated, institutional and dated. We are given very explicit orders for what our priorities, values and actions are to be. Let me give you a sampling of what I mean:

“Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke and exhort with complete patience and teaching. Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Let the word of Christ dwell

in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in our hearts to God. Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. Praying at all times in the Spirit. In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Continue steadfastly in prayer. Pray without ceasing. I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling. Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together...encouraging one another. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. Do this in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

In a sentence, our strategy is rather simple. Preach, pray, disciple, be the church and spread the kingdom. That strategy is ordained by God, we cannot change it. So for us, the question is not so much, what are we supposed to do since that has already been made clear from the Scriptures, but how can we do that in a more God-honoring manner? Therefore, we are summarizing our goals for this year around three areas that we are pursuing; Unity, Strength and Growth. Since we are pursuing them, we will use the terms unifying, strengthening and growing.

The message of the gospel is the message of how in Christ, God and sinners are reconciled. Only by means of Christ is there unity between people and God. But, that unity is glorious. Unity with God is what allows us to have what the world cannot achieve, and that is unity with one another. Unity in the church is a joyful, important and necessary adornment of the gospel by the people of God. Since, we are called to make disciples to participate in ministry that expands the borders of the gospel through church-planting, we have looked at what we need to do in order to do that. So, our objective for this year is to *take a major step forward in unifying, strengthening and growing our church family in order to position ourselves in such a way that we are able to affect our community with the gospel, assist other churches with leadership and be ready to support more of our own missionaries.*

A church can grow as the result of the problems or weaknesses of other churches. (transfer growth) Some of that is going to happen because there are some churches who are ashamed of the gospel and are starving their people from a diet that is rich in biblical content. That is tragic, but it happens. We will be a refuge, a resource and a people of renewal for those who come here because of that. But, it is sad. We would rather see churches in our area strong and vibrant in the gospel. So, our desire is to be an Antioch church. Acts 13 tells us about the church at Antioch that was economically, culturally and racially diverse. That was astounding in those days. The body life was vibrant. Their teaching and worship were rich, and God raised up people in that church in order to send them out to strengthen and to start other churches. (visual) While some of this has been happening, we want to see more of this. And we have identified a few rocks that are in the stream that are causing unnecessary ripples and slowing down the flow.

Therefore, in order for us to be in a position where we can help strengthen the gospel in other churches locally and globally, we need to address a few matters here at home.

1. Unifying the Body – (The key is the gospel)

We recognize that while we enjoy a large measure of unity, there are areas in which it needs to be better. Our assessment is that we can really help all of us stay on the same page, if the leadership will do a better job of printing that page – if you know what I mean. Therefore, we are going to do a few simple things in order to facilitate better communication between the elders and the congregation.

Weekly updates:

Starting this week you can sign up for a weekly blog that will be sent to you that will keep you informed of what is going on. We will probably call it the grapevine, or something like that, but it will keep you in the know. For those without internet connection, it will be available at Guest Services.

Family Meetings

We will also do a better job of planning and communicating our quarterly family meetings so that you know the times, and the topics ahead of time as much as possible.

Elder Availability

We also will let you know of the meeting times for the elder meetings because, before our meetings, we are going to have 3 elders available an hour ahead of time to talk with, pray with any member of the church. We will also attempt to arrange our agendas in such a way, that the first portion of our meetings are open to any member of the family to come and observe.

2. Strengthening the Body (The key is the gospel.)

Part of the process that we go through in examining the health of our church is to look at what our strengths and weaknesses are, and we look at the some of the things that distinguish us or uniquely situate us as a church and what we should do about that. For example, we look at the fact that we are located in an urban setting that gives us a great opportunity to reflect the body of Christ in ways that some churches simply can't.

Our Diversity

We are asking God to strengthen our commitment to the gospel in such way that we enjoy the fruit of that in a church that has wonderful racial diversity. Pray that in our context, we put God's glory on display by modeling one holy race at the foot of the cross. Over and over I have seen this desire put on display. I do not raise this issue in order to

chastise you, but only to encourage you and to call us to pray that the Lord of the church will be pleased to call to this flock people in such a way that we can model for our broken, angry and hateful community what the power of the gospel can do.

Our Mercy Ministry

This has been such an encouraging area of growth in recent years. Your ministry with MCREST, with Lighthouse Outreach Center, with our Clothing Closet, with our Food Pantry, with the Good Samaritan team, with quietly responding to needs in your Small Groups and Adult Bible Fellowships and with assistance from the Fellowship Fund has been absolutely wonderful. You contributed 60k to the Fellowship Fund this year and we distributed 46k to help with needs. That is by far the most that we have ever done.

The Missions Team is exploring another community, gospel-opportunity ministry as well. What is becoming apparent is that this is an area that has so many additional ministry opportunities and can become disconnected and lose focus if not organized with an overall structure. The interesting thing is that this is really why deacons and deaconesses were initially raised up by God within the church. So, this year we want to develop a Mercy Ministry through deacons and deaconesses that organizes what we have, and utilizes these ministry opportunities for the sake of the gospel.

Our Ministry to other Churches

We are aware that there are many unhealthy churches in our area. We desire to see the ministry of the gospel strengthened in this entire region. We have been intentionally building relationships in the gospel community in order to earn the right to be able to influence other ministries in a good way. So many churches have just lost their way. We believe that the most effective way to help renew these churches is through solid leadership. Therefore, we eventually want to see to our internship ministry develop in several areas. I think you know what a treasure our ministry staff is. Denise has been here for over 20 years, and is a sought out and respected leader of women's ministries. Terry has been in this church all of his life and has been a strategic part of our staff for ten years. Patrick is coming up on his 10th year anniversary as our Student Ministries pastor. And Brien, wow – what an impact that Brien has had already in the 3 short years that he has been here. Keith does such a good job in providing care for the body and now Nathan's arrival only illustrates the point that we not only have a hard-working and capable staff, we have a team that can and should be training others. One of the things that excites me so much about Nathan's role here is to exploit his position in order to train other worship leaders for churches, since that is such an enormous need. I believe that this is one of the areas where God may use us in a more unique way to serve the body of Christ in a very significant way in years to come. (More on that down the road) Meanwhile, God has been pleased to continue to raise up some of our own people who not only want to be trained to serve, but some want to serve in other countries and we need to be prepared to send them and support them. But in order to be able to bring in more interns, and in order to increase our commitment to global missions, we need take

care of our building debt. So, we are asking the Finance Team to develop a plan for us so that we can pay off our building debt in 10 years.

Our Financial Position

We are so grateful for this facility. We could never do what we do without it. For example, the Connect ministry is currently ministering to 650 public school students on a monthly basis. This school year, there have been 20 professions of faith and we have families that we are connecting with and families that are visiting the church as a result. We will soon begin a mentoring ministry with a local school. This facility has facilitated our growth and we have leveraged it's usefulness for other things. This spring we are hosting a major Women's Conference here in conjunction with Michigan Theological Seminary and this fall we are hosting a pastor's and wives retreat. But if this building debt was eliminated, or even significantly reduced, our ability to commit more resources toward internships and missions would be dramatically increased. We want to keep moving in that direction and we really want to add at least another intern in 2011 if possible.

Our Ministry Staff

We miss Jerry. Several ones of us have added to our plates additional responsibilities in order to cover what he did, but it is not enough and we know it. But, at the time, we could not see our way clear enough to do anything differently. We would love to see our way clear to able to replace his position by the fall of this year if possible. Which brings me to our last area of focus.

3. Gospel Growing

We are very clear about this. We want to reach more people with the gospel. Do you ever get bored of our baptisms because you are hearing people tell their stories of how God hijacked their lives with the gospel? We want to be able to affect more lives with the gospel. We have no interest in being stagnant in any way. We want to reach as many people as we can in order to help others reach even more. So we will preach, pray, disciple and be the community of Christ. So, we are praying that God will use the gospel to grow our church. We are praying for, planning for and encouraging gospel growth in our **Adult Bible Fellowships** knowing that very soon they will be out of space. We need to start at least one more ABF class this year. We are also praying and planning for gospel growth in **Small Groups** knowing that we will need to keep training additional leadership, supporting and encouraging the ones we have and add additional groups. We are praying for and planning for gospel growth in the church as a whole, believing that God is going to use your life and conversations to expose people to the gospel who will become part of the family here and be established in Christ. We recognize that if our current growth trends continue, we will have to look at some point adding a **second morning service**. As the church grows, it may enable us to take care of our debt sooner, continue to strengthen the ministry here even as we continue to make plans to build a

solid internship ministry that will help rejuvenate needy churches, plant churches and increase our global footprint for the gospel. (We got your back)