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THE **BIG** PICTURE



CURRENT SERIES

Church

Russell Johnson, Teaching Pastor

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As we think about where we are in this series called The Big Picture, as we are walking our way through the Bible, we find ourselves at The Church Era. The Church Era has a paradox of its own, doesn't it? I mean it is a paradox. I mean two competing values are at work it seems to be in The Church Era. And this is where we come to the story. This is our role in it the next couple of weeks. And as I think about the paradox of The Church you think about things like it's visible, we can see each other, it's local but yet it's invisible and it's global. There are people worshipping all over the globe right now that we can't see. So it's visible, but it's invisible or we are The Church. As people we are The Church. We're going to talk about that here in a moment, but the paradox is that you go to church, you still gather as a local body so you go, you are. Or maybe this one, how about this - the idea that we are gathered, The Church is a gathered group of people. Just like we do here, we celebrate baptism, communion, we worship, we hear The Word, we fellowship with one another, but The Church is also scattered. It doesn't end at noon today, but rather Monday through Saturday The Church is still present and at work, and maybe even doing greater things Monday through Saturday.

So you have this paradox in which we live in, and when I think about The Church what ends up happening sometimes is we want to focus more on the institution and we want focus more on the organization, and we focus more on one of these little parts of the paradox rather than The Church as a whole and what it's supposed to be doing. And so some of us just want to talk about the invisible, or some of us just want to talk about the gathered, or some of us just want to talk about the scattered when in reality The Church is bigger than that, and something we need to understand that this is who we are. And as we talk about this today, defining who The Church is, what The Church is, what is God's plan for The Church, and then next week we look at the mission of it. So if you've got your Bibles turn with me to Acts chapter 1 and let's begin the process of looking at this thing we call The Church.

Last week Tim went through all of The Gospels looking at the life of Jesus Christ, and when we ended there we saw that Jesus had offered this incredible gift of salvation and an offer of the kingdom. Unfortunately, he was rejected. The Jews didn't want to hear about it. They were looking for a king to come riding in on a white horse with a big sword, coming in and ushering in the kingdom that had been promised to them over and over again, and they said "That's fine. If you want to ride in on a donkey, we don't care, but we want the kingdom." And he didn't bring it, so he was rejected, he was crucified and buried, and on the third day he rose again. And so now we find ourselves in Acts chapter 1, and Jesus has been alive 40 days since the resurrection. He's appeared to the disciples, he's appeared to a great many of folks. He's helped

restore Peter after his denial. There's been some incredible conversations - matter of fact, we started the year looking at the commission statements that Jesus gives after the resurrection, and we're going to see the final one right here in Acts chapter 1.

So Jesus has been alive for 40 days. You can kind of feel the anticipation brewing, as the fellows, the 11 guys that are left now that Judas has gone off and hung himself after his betrayal of Jesus. The anticipation is building. Why is Jesus still here? He must be doing something more than just this servant, this suffering servant thing where he died, but he must be ready to usher in the kingdom. I mean that's why he's here, right? That's what all the prophecies are about, is this messiah who's going to come. And so for 40 days you can feel it, the anticipation is building. Jesus brings them up on top of the Mount of Olives, the guys are ready for the announcement. They don't know how it's going to come, but they think this is now the time. Look at it in Acts 1:6:

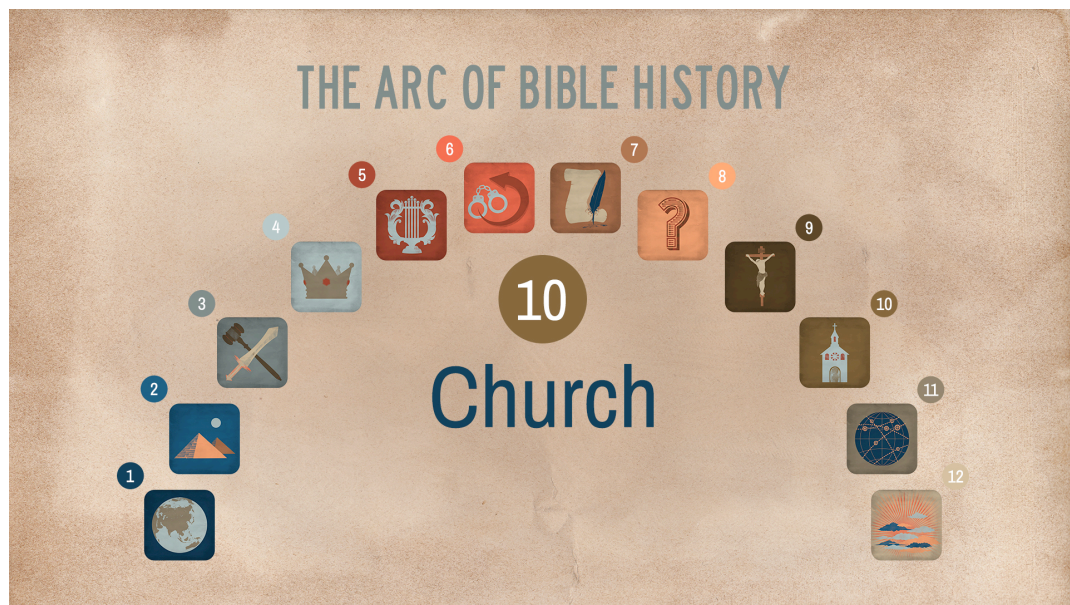
"So when they met together they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'"

"Like now? This is going to be good, right? Now you're going to do it. I mean, thank you - the whole death, burial and resurrection thing, that was really cool, but now this is what we're about." I mean we have all of these promises starting way back there at Abraham, Genesis chapter 12. We've covered a lot of ground since Genesis chapter 12, haven't we? "That promise of land, that promise of a blessing, that promise of a great nation, and then you made promises to David like, there's going to be a king who's going to sit on a throne, and then all of the things those prophets talked about, like the nation being restored. Come on, this is it. Now you're going to do it." And look at what Jesus says to them, you ready? Verse 7.

"He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.'"

It's not for you to know that right now. He doesn't say that's the wrong question. Notice he doesn't say that's the wrong question. He doesn't say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, that's not going to happen. Come on guys, focus in." He just says "You don't need to know that right now. The Father's got that taken care of." Then he's going to tell them what they do need to worry about, but I want to stop right here because I think this question is really important. I think we need to understand what exactly is the role of Israel from this point forward. Because last week they were offered salvation in the kingdom and they rejected him. So the question is, so now does Israel not have anything else to do? I mean, are they out of the picture. Is it like, "Sorry, you blew it, you missed out

on it”? I mean think about all that we have covered so far in this series. I mean here we are at the church, at #10, and everything from 1-9 has been about Israel and its Messiah. And so now are we just going to discard them? Is God going to say, “All those promises I made I’m not going to keep”? No, the answer would be no. So I’d like to just make sure we’re clear on this before we move on, because sometimes as we think about The Church we think, “Well maybe The Church just took Israel’s place.” But that’s not the answer either because God made some very specific promises to Israel and he’s not going to forget



about them and he’s going to bring them to fruition. In a matter of fact, in a couple of weeks Pastor Tim is going to walk through the entire book of Revelation and Israel’s going to come back onto the scene. Let me see if I can illustrate it to you like this as we think about how The Church and Israel exist today.

I have a son that just turned six a couple of months ago, and we had a birthday party for him. He had his birthday party and he loves jalapenos – I’m not sure why, but he thinks they’re really cool. So we had a jalapeno cake, a jalapeno piñata, jalapeno – you get it right? Jalapeno everything. We invited all of his friends over and we were hanging out in the backyard. We did wild and crazy games like water tosses, and we put shaving cream on their head and tossed puffs on them and it was fun, we had a blast, but who’s day was it? It was Caleb’s day. We sang Happy Birthday to Caleb, he got to blow out the candles, he got to make the wish, he got to do all of the things you typically do on your birthday, but he’s got four siblings. Did those four siblings have to sit in a corner while he was celebrating his birthday? No. What did they get? They got the benefits of being a sibling, didn’t they? They got to eat some cake, they got

to play some games, and their favorite part is they got to play with his toys too. This is the best! It's like, "It's not our day, but we get the benefits of it." This is the way The Church and Israel work. Is that God has made some specific promises to Israel and we are the beneficiaries of it, even though they are going to be marked out for Israel, and so the New Covenant was made to Israel, but we get to be the beneficiaries of it. The Holy Spirit is in us and the law is written on our hearts. We have this incredible benefit. Or when Jesus returns and he restores the nation of Israel and he sits on his rightful throne on his earthly reign, who's going to get the benefit of that? The Church. It's an incredible thing. And then when he returns - I wish I knew everything, I don't. There's mystery in it; somehow we're all going to be merged together and we are going to worship God and we are going to go into eternity together as one body. It is going to be amazing, but right now God is not done with Israel. That's why they asked the question, Jesus says "Hey let God take care of that. Let the Father take care of that. This is what you need to do." And this is what he says, you ready? Look at verse 8.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And after he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight."

That was it. That was Jesus' last words right then and there. "You're going to be my witnesses, don't worry about the kingdom. God's got the timing of that all figured out. Bye." (congregation laughs) So he ascends, he's hidden by a cloud. The guys are staring up into heaven, "Like what just happened? All the anticipation, we were wanting a little bit more." Two guys in white show up and say, "Hey fellas. You need to quick looking up into the skies, you've got work to do. The same way he went up, he's going to come back down. Let's go." The 11 guys decide to do it. They gather with 140 folks and they start praying. Not only do they start praying, but they recognize, "Hey we need to fill the spot of Judas." They cast some lots, they end up finding Mathias and they call him in. And then all of a sudden as they begin to wait another 10 days as they're praying, another 10 days as their waiting, another 10 days as they're thinking, "He said the Holy Spirit is going to come, the Holy Spirit is going to come," all of a sudden chapter 2 verse 1 takes place.

All of the Jews had began to gather in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot or Pentecost. This is where they celebrate the giving of the law and the springtime harvest. So Jews from all over the place are showing up, and look what happens. Acts chapter 2 verse 1:

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now they were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.”



Their own language. Can you imagine this. The wind blows, everybody thinks “We’re just getting together for our casual Jewish celebration of God giving the Torah, the springtime harvest,” and then all of a sudden the wind starts blowing. And it doesn’t just blow, but fire comes out of heaven and it begins to land on their heads, and there’s this flaming tongue of fire and everybody can understand each other. That was pretty cool, isn’t it? And not only that, but these guys are starting to look around saying, “There’s no way he knows my language and they know my language. It just sounds like this is crazy. You know what, these guys must be drunk.” That’s what they thought. They had way too much to drink. “There’s no way this is possibly happening.” Maybe I’ve had too much to drink if I’m seeing a flaming tongue on somebody’s head, right? What in the world. Peter, the good preacher he is – you know, the first guy on the boat, the guy who’s willing to stand up for Christ and say, “I’ll never deny you” and do all of that. He steps up and he does what every good

preacher would do at the moment. He says, "I have a captive audience. Everybody can understand every word I'm fixing to say." And he starts preaching and he preaches an incredible sermon. He preaches this sermon as he looks at them and he says, "Listen guys, this Jesus Christ is who he says he was. He was sent from God. He was fulfilling Old Testament prophecy." Take a look at just a few of the things that Peter said. Look at verse 22 of chapter 2:

"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's said purposes and foreknowledge, and you with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death."

And skip over to verse 36:

"Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.' And when the people heard this, they were cut to the heart."

I mean he preaches and he goes off, and the people are cut to the heart. And it says 3,000 people put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. That's a sermon, isn't it? Three thousand people sit back and say, "We're in, we blew it, we missed out on Jesus while he was here, but we want to get it now. We are putting our faith and trust in him. It must be the real deal." And then we have this famous passage starting in verse 42, of what these people started to do. Look at it, it's an incredible description of what these thousands of people started to do together.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. And all the believers were together and had everything in common, selling their possessions and goods and they gave to anyone as he had need and every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. And they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

People were still coming. They were seeing this community of people, these folks that were joined together by the bond of Jesus Christ because they had put their faith and trust in him. They said, "You know what, we probably ought to start doing life together. We probably ought to start hanging out together

because I need to know more about what Jesus taught, and we're going to devote ourselves to the teaching of the apostles. And we need to break bread, we need to do The Lord's Supper, we need to remember the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, and we need to sing, and we need to worship, and we need to go to the temple and proclaim to the other Jews that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. I mean what an amazing turn of events as this Jesus who was rejected is now being embraced as the Holy Spirit descends, and as the people begin to live in community because they're all bonded together because of their belief in Jesus Christ.

It gets even cooler. Peter and John, they're walking through town and get to the temple, there's a crippled beggar there. They get there, they have a brief conversation with him, they take him by the hand, stand him up. No kidding. Here he was crippled and they healed him. If we thought Jesus was the only one doing miracles, he's not; Peter and John are doing them. We find out that these guys are able to just heal people with the casting of their shadows. Man this is amazing what is taking place. Matter of fact, this crippled beggar just latches on to Peter. The Sanhedrin come around and they say, "What's going on? We've got flaming tongues, we've got chaos, we've got a guy getting healed. This was all supposed to end when we crucified Jesus." So they take Peter and John, they throw them in jail, rough them up a little bit, make them stay overnight, and then they ask them the question, "Where's all this coming from?" Well don't ask a preacher where it's coming from, right? (congregation laughs). What's Peter do? He starts preaching again. In order to get him to quit preaching they're like, "Okay you can go. Just quit talking about God." Like that's going to happen. They let them go, the people are ecstatic, the thing continues to grow and grow, and more miracles begin to take place. It's an amazing, amazing beginning of this, this thing we call The Church.

I can tell though some of you probably have some questions, and I know one of those is, "You know Russell, you get pretty worked up up there. You know you get to hollering a little bit and veins start popping out. We've got the spit section down here, right? And you start yelling and that's really cool, but Russell we have never ever, ever seen a flaming tongue on your head. And Russell, you know, it would be really cool if you would like heal somebody every once in a while. Then we would really be in, right?" And so my question is, what happens. I mean if this thing birthed with all these miracles and flaming tongues, the Holy Spirit descends and the question becomes, "If we're part of The Church and this is our part of the story, it just would make sense, how come we don't see these things all the time like that?" That's a great question. As I think about it, we just have to go through redemption history and we have to look at the wondrous signs and miracles of God. And as we look at them through the history of redemption, through the story of the Bible,

this is what we find. We find them clustered in history. So for example, the Exodus and Mount Sinai, incredible miracles clustered around that event, don't we? We see the splitting of the Red Sea and the plagues and manna from heaven. We see them clustered again at the judges, as the judges come in and Sampson is able to do incredible feats of strength, or Gideon defeating massive armies with just a handful of men. We see that. We also see it clustered again with guys like Elijah and Elisha after a long period of silence where there weren't those incredible signs and miracles as Elijah calls fire down from heaven. And we see this time of silence again where there's not the big working of miracles and the signs and wonders in this time of silence. And then Jesus shows up, and we really don't see a whole lot of signs and miracles until the last three years of his public ministry as he feeds thousands and raises people from the dead, and the cluster of miracles continue as the apostles now are gifted by the Holy Spirit to do some amazing things. And I believe that scripture teaches there's going to be some more clusters of incredible signs and works and miracles when Jesus returns at His Second Coming. It's going to blow our minds. But right now as we sit back and look at it I think we have to talk to ourselves about this and say, the acting of God, the normative act of God isn't always by signs and wonders and the miraculous. That doesn't mean he doesn't do it. It doesn't mean that there aren't some of you who have experienced miracles, who have experienced something absolutely amazing. It's just not God's normative way of doing it. Because what ends up happening is, is most of the time we end up spending all of our time focused on the wonder or the sign rather than on the giver of it. And we begin to think that the only way we can hear from God is through the sign and wonder and not in the still small voice. And I believe it was the prophet Elijah who said "You can hear him in the fire, but I heard him in the still, small voice." So the way that God moves isn't always by the big and audacious. He does sometimes, and if you've been blessed to see it, it's amazing. But God is always at work, he is always moving, and the challenge for us is to see him in the small and in the big. And what we would say is insignificant or when he's behind the scenes, he's not always moving in the big and the audacious and the signs and the wonders. So we find ourselves here needing to make sure that we are constantly focused on God and who he is, and what he could be doing even if there isn't a sign to accompany it.

So they continue to grow and they continue to see these miracles happen. In Acts chapter 4 we get another incredible description as Peter and John are released and they continue to preach. Verse 32, look at the description of these people that are coming to know Jesus. He says:

"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had."

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And much grace was upon them all. And there were no needy persons among them. From time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."

But I love the way it starts, look at it: "All the believers were one in heart and mind." All the believers, all the people that put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, the thousands that are putting their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, it says they were unified in heart and mind. Can you imagine what that would look like? Can you imagine what kind of unity that must have been; to make the priority the priority, and the priority was Jesus Christ. That would be cool, wouldn't it? It wasn't all hunky dory though. They had some problems. Acts chapter 5 tells us that there was a guy named Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They had sold some land and they were going to bring it to the apostles. They were making it look like they had given everything to the apostles when in reality he had stuck some behind, put it in his pocket, and he was being a hypocrite as he came and lied saying "I give it all to you," and then trying to show that he's given it all. Peter calls him out and says, "You've not only lied to man, but you've lied to God," and he dies right there. Falls to the ground. His wife shows up three hours later and she doesn't have a clue what just happened. Peter calls her out; she dies on the spot. Make an example to say, "We're not going to lie, we're going to be in unity. We're going to be together. There's not going to be hypocrisy. This is serious. If this thing is going to start and start right it has to all be of one mind, of one heart that we know what we're doing here." And look at verse 11 of chapter 5 at the end of this story. Look at what happens. I'll start in verse 10.

"At the moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband." Verse 11: "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."

This is the word "Ekklesia", it's very important. You might highlight it in your Bible. It is the first time it shows up in the book of Acts. It's going to show up some 22 more times. It's going to be referenced over 100 times throughout the entire New Testament. This is it. So no longer is this just a description, no longer is this just believers gathering together and we get a description of their unity, we get a description of this community, we get a description of this gathering. Now they have a word and this word is Ekklesia made up of two words, *ek* for called, for called out ones, and so we get this *ek* and *kaleo*, the called out ones. And every time it's translated, it's translated as church or gathering or community, or some translations even use the word congregation.

Not translated for building, not translated for temple. Translated for a group of people who gather, who are assembled, who are a congregation or who are a community of people who share the same bond, who share the same unity, which is the fact that they put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. The reason they are called The Church isn't because they have talents or abilities. The reason they are called The Church isn't just because they come together. The reason it's called The Church is because it's a community of believers in Jesus Christ. What a thought. You bring nothing to the table when it comes to joining the church. You bring nothing to the table. Our membership in the church is based solely on the finished work of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, right? Do you believe that? We have been brought into this institution called The Church, which is everybody from Acts 2 to the future who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. That is our bond, that is our unity.

And that gets us to the storyline of The Church Era, are you ready? Here's the storyline: **Peter, shortly after the ascension of Jesus, is used by God to establish the church, God's next major plan for man.** The storyline of The Church Era is very simple: Peter, shortly after the ascension of Christ, was used by God to establish The Church, God's next major plan for man. This is what he wants to do. He wants to bring a group of people all together who share one common identity, and that one common identity is your faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Let me read to you some, just some descriptions of it in scripture. It's going to be on the board. 1Peter 2:9, a popular passage, you may remember this one or have heard this one before:

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

That's who you are. You've been called out of darkness into his marvelous light. You are a people belonging to God. And then he goes on to say:

"Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

That's pretty incredible, isn't it? That's who you are. And as I look around the room, as I just think about my own life, my own thoughts, my own actions, my own motives, I recognize that I bring to the table a lot of baggage. And if we were all honest we'd probably say we are a pretty motley crew wouldn't we? But you're the people of God. You're the people of God. And it's not because of anything you've done, because you weren't a people, but now you are the

people of God. You once were in darkness, but now you've been called out into his marvelous light. You once had not received mercy, but now you have and so everybody in the room who has put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, you're the people of God. Does that sound pretty cool? I like the title.

It gets better - here we go. Check out Ephesians. Ephesians 1:22 says this:

"And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the church," Verse 23, "which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

We are the body of Christ. Not only the people of God, but now we're the body of Christ. We have stuff to be doing. We join together with Christ as our head and we function as one in mind, in body. We become the working out of what God wants to do in the world. It's pretty amazing, isn't it? As I think about everything I bring to the table I'm not worthy to be in the group. But it's because of what Jesus Christ has done that I get to be a part of it.

One more, Ephesians 4: 3, it says this:

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;"

This one body is a body of the Spirit. It's a fellowship of the Spirit. If you put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells you and we are to maintain that unity with one another. This is who we are. This is an amazing community isn't it? It's an amazing community. This is not a spectator event. This is something to come and know and be known. This is not a solo act. This is a joint effort as we join together as the body of Christ to fulfill his mission in the world. This is a new identity that's been given to us.

So here's the question: Will we act like The Church? Will we act like a bunch of brothers and sisters in community with one another, who share the greatest gift ever, which is Jesus Christ? Will you do it?

I used to, when I was in Kyle I used to drive a school bus. I did it upfront just for the job, get to know the territory a little bit. I did it for two years. I've been a part of several communities, but this is a community that was different. The minute I walked in and joined into that group, it was like we all shared a common bond. And it was the fact that we could somehow drive tons of metal and steel safely down the highway and deliver screaming kids home, right? I mean no one else really knows unless you've done it. And so when we would

clock out at the end of the day and we were hot and sweaty from being on a steam box, and you got a headache from kids screaming. The only people in the room who could identify with you were who? Your other bus drivers. And now somehow there was a community that was formed when we would get there early to the school we would sit out up front and share life together, and you would be amazed at the openness and the honesty just because we shared that one simple bond. Toward the tail end of employment with Hays CISD my wife was in the hospital for two months when she was pregnant with our twins. It was crazy; I was still having to go to work, and I'm going to tell you right now. The other three were at home with help, it was amazing to see a community of bus drivers come around. And there were many a time as I drove from Kyle to Brack downtown, I just thought, "These are good people." And they don't - they know me, but they don't know me, but they know me enough to love us through this and visit us and get us meals. I mean it was amazing. All I could think of was, "This is The Church, this is what The Church should look like." And for those of us who are in small groups and we're invested in relationships, you're sitting back and saying, "Yeah, I've experienced it." And we have people to walk us through the hard times. We have people to celebrate the joys that we share together. That we don't just come in, clock in at the service, sing a little bit if it's the right song, hope the message ends on time and leaves and never be known, but that we jump into this thing called community. And we understand that everybody in the room putting our faith and trust in Jesus Christ has the greatest bond ever. And if there's anyone who could walk you through it, it's a fellow believer in Jesus Christ, right? That's what we want to be a part of. That's why we log on to all of the social networks, because we want to be known. What greater place to do it than right here, The Church. This incredible thing that God has created a community and a body to walk people down the road, to see people come to know Jesus and to participate with him in his mission.

Acts chapter 6, the church is growing. Who wouldn't want to be a part of it? Who wouldn't want to be a part of it? They're hearing about Jesus Christ, it's growing, they need to get some guys out there. They elect some deacons and bring these servants along to disperse the food. One of those guy's name is Stephen. Stephen, an incredible evangelist and teacher has some miraculous signs and gifts. He begins to do some work and then he begins to preach, and the people don't like it. Matter of fact, he preaches so hard that they're going to kill him. Look at it in Acts chapter 7, just real quick. Acts chapter 7. He preaches, he tells them they need to repent, he tells them "You blew it" in verse 54 of Acts chapter 7 he said:

"When they heard this they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory

of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."

Remember that, we're going to talk about him next week.

"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep."

In chapter 8, verse 1:

"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him."

Can you imagine that? The first guy we lost in this cause. First guy. They hate us. It says they're dragging them out of their homes. They're scattering them. Will that stop The Church? No. If anything, it intensifies it. It becomes the catalyst for an incredible movement, but can you imagine what it was like to be those Godly men who take Stephen's body and bury it as they weep, as they mourn, as this guy was apparently known well enough to be elected as a deacon, to be elected as a servant. And they bury him and they weep and they mourn. And you can see the intensity of this community. That even though they get scattered, even though they get driven around, this church, this community, this body will persevere. And then it's an incredible story from here.

Man we want to be a part of that, don't we? You want to be a part of that? You are a part of that. You are The Church if you've put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ. "So Russell, give me practical, give me something practical. I need to know what do I do." You ready? Here it is. I've told you the descriptions of The Church. Let me tell you what's prescribed for The Church to do to each other. You ready?

John 13, love one another. Romans 12, be devoted to one another. Romans 12:16, live in harmony with one another. Stop passing judgment on one another. Accept one another. Greet one another. Galatians 5, "You my brothers were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge in the flesh, rather serve one another." Be completely humbled and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love. Be kind and compassionate to one another.

Forgive one another. Submit to one another. Bear with each other. Encourage one another. Let us consider how we can spur one another on to love and good deeds. Do not slander one another. Love one another deeply. Offer hospitality to one another. Love one another. You get it? That's what we're to do. And who better to love and easier to love than the people that we all have that unity with. And if we'll practice love on each other it will be easier to love our neighbor and our co-worker, and our coaches and our teachers, our bosses. And what would it look like if we joined together as the Body of Christ, loving, encouraging, doing life together as this community of saints. And to love each other well enough that it overflows into a community that's in desperate need of the love of Jesus Christ. Will you join me in it?

Let's pray. Father I love you. I thank you for the institution of The Church. I thank you that you, you give us this opportunity to join with you, not because of anything we've done but what your Son, Jesus has done. And so God I pray that as we walk out of these doors today we would see the people differently. Not folks fighting over a parking spot or not as just another person that I don't know, but that we would see each other as the Body of Christ. We would want to jump in to know and to be known so that we can love not only each other and to love you, but Lord to love our neighbors and to show them the incredible glories of your Son Jesus Christ and what it means to be a part of this body. God that's what we ask. It's in his name that we pray. Amen.