

Covenant Renewal

No Longer Strangers: How the Church Changes Our Relationships

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark Vroegop

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Ephesians 2:11–22 (ESV)

When I say the word “church,” what comes to mind? Does your mind immediately pull up an image of a church building? If you grew up going to church, maybe you imagine the exterior of your first church or the sanctuary in which you worshipped, complete with the red carpet and wooden pews. Or maybe your mind travels to the people who were a part of your life at a really important moment. Or maybe, because of some bad experiences, your heart has to work hard to not get stuck on a really bad church business meeting or a group of divisive people or a really painful situation from which you are still recovering. Our personal and diverse experiences cause the word “church” to be loaded and varied in its meaning.

In fact, this diversity makes the church both challenging and beautiful. Let me ask you a few questions to illustrate this reality:

- How many of you would say that you grew up going to church? How many did not?
- How many of you have attended a church for more than 20 years? Less than 20 years?
- How many of you grew up in a church whose attendance was 300 or less? Between 300-800? Between 800-1500? Between 1500-3000?
- How many of you grew up in a church of 4,000 or more?

These numbers represent something more than just size or the number of people. In many respects the size of the church impacts a person's experience and view of the church more than anything else. Don't get me wrong: doctrine, philosophy, and a sense of mission matter as well. But your experience of a church's size affects your vision of the word "church" more than what you might think.

How to do Church?

After moving into our new sanctuary in 2012 and seeing our average attendance continue to climb (by the way, last week 4,400 people attended services at North Indy and Fishers) our Elders began a very important discussion about two important questions:

- 1) How do we encourage our church toward a greater passion for living on mission? Some of you may remember the metaphor of the difference between a cruise ship and a battleship. The result of that discussion was the launch of the Next Door Mission, and specifically, the Fishers Campus.
- 2) How do we effectively shepherd a large congregation? For years we have said that we wanted to make a big church *feel* small. And I think we have made great progress in that area. But what does it look like to effectively care for the souls of so many people?

Our Elders are acknowledging that being a large church allows us to be involved in some wonderful things together. We are able to leverage this ministry for amazing things. The Christmas Offering, planting Nehemiah Bible Church, our impact in the Brookside neighborhood, and the launch of a new campus in Fishers is all possible because of the size of the ministry.

However, there are downsides, too. A large church can be overwhelming and isolating. You can easily feel lost, or you can easily hide. What's more, the sheer size of the congregation makes it more challenging to know if someone has stopped coming to church or if they are spiritually struggling. Small churches have the same problem, but it is often easier to identify these issues because of the smaller size.

Last year we took our first of many steps in a more effective shepherding model. College Park has always had great Elders who really care about our people, and I think that the church has been more effective than most churches our size in caring for people. We've had a formal membership process, we've practiced church discipline, and we've taken the needs of our people seriously for years.

However, we've roughly doubled in size in the last eight years, and the shepherding challenges of a church of 4,400 are not the same as a church of 2,500. The church should always be reforming, and we need to keep working on how we "do church."

Today and next Sunday, with our THINK conference, we are going to talk about the importance of the church. The Lord has blessed us in that Dr. Mark Dever has agreed to be our guest speaker. Mark is regarded as one of most influential theologians and pastors when it comes to an Evangelical understanding of the church. His writing and a ministry he founded called 9Marks has helped to bring great definition and biblical vision for what it means to be the church. So, you need to come. This is a rare opportunity.

Why Covenant Membership?

For the last two years, our Elders have been wrestling with two primary texts in the New Testament that speak to the matter of shepherding:

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight . . .” (1 Peter 5:1–2)

“ . . . for they {your leaders} are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:17)

As we have studied these texts and others, we have determined that there is a unique relationship between church leaders (Elders) and church members. While our Elders will always minister to anyone who has spiritual needs, we believe that our primary responsibility and accountability before God is for those who are covenant members of our church. Therefore, we spent some time studying, editing, and re-emphasizing our membership covenant. While our church covenant had always been a part of our membership process and our by-laws, we wanted to place a new focus on it so that we could be reminded about what church membership really means.

We also came to a new appreciation of the need to keep emphasizing the value of church membership. I taught on this last year at Covenant Renewal¹ and also during the LIVE series,² but let me just remind you about a few key ideas:

1. **Membership affirms your belief in Jesus.** There is something powerful and helpful when a person in spiritual leadership hears the story of your conversion, your belief in Jesus, and your understanding of the gospel. Membership affirms the legitimacy of your faith.
2. **Membership makes your faith public.** By joining a church, you openly and officially identify yourself as a Christian.
3. **Membership makes you accountable.** Who is keeping watch over your soul? Who are you watching over? Who will seek you out if you wander away? Church membership settles those questions.
4. **Membership unites you to a people.** Spiritual growth was never meant to be something that we do on our own, and in covenanting with a particular group of people, you enter into a special relationship of love, spiritual care, and mutual concern.

In the midst of a culture characterized by low commitment, individualism, and misplaced identity, church membership makes a significant statement about the transformative power of the gospel. Membership officially identifies what we mean when we refer to College Park Church, and it

¹ <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/church-covenant-renewal-why-what-and-how/>

² <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/the-context-of-ordinary/>

establishes which people in the Indy-metro area have a different relationship with one another because their membership covenant.

Membership publicly identifies you with a savior and with a people. It connects you to Christ and His church.

How are Church Relationships Different?

Our text this morning, Ephesians 2:11-22, helps us understand the spiritual significance of the relationships created in the context of the church. This text helps us to see that coming to church is more than just an event in the week, a place to go, or a service to attend. Rather, being a part of a church fundamentally affects one's sense of identity as the spiritual realities talked about in the Bible are lived out. Human beings are always looking for identity and community.

Who am I? Where do I belong? The two questions define us more than we probably even know. These questions are why junior high and high school can be so traumatic. These questions are why social media has so much power. These questions are fundamental to our life experience, and they are addressed in the gospel and the community of the gospel – the church. Allow me to show you.

There are three key sections in this text delineated by the following words: “therefore” (v. 1), “but now” (v. 13), and “so then” (v. 19). Each portion of scripture tells us something important about the church.

“Therefore” (vv. 11-13)

This word always identifies that a statement is coming which is an implication of something else. It is a pivot point from one idea to another. What was the prior idea?

Ephesians 2:4-5, and 8-9 are probably the best verses to examine for what came before verses 11-13. If you are not a Christian, these verses really capture the essential difference between Christianity and all other religions. These verses talk about the gospel – the central message of the Bible that salvation comes by grace, through faith, and not by works.

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— Ephesians 2:4–5 (ESV)

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV)

Sometimes this message is called the “Good News.” Essentially, the heart of Christianity, and the way that people are reconciled with their Creator, is by receiving forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus, as God's perfect and sinless son, provided atonement for sin for all those who put their faith in Him. In other words, human beings are made righteous, not by their works, but by the work of Jesus. Christians do not work in order for God to forgive them or to be merciful to them. God grants them forgiveness through the work of Jesus, and that is why it is called grace.

The Bible heralds the most amazing and transformative message that mankind ever received: “For by grace you have been saved through faith.” And that is what Paul has been talking about in Ephesians 2:1-10.

In verses 11-13 he reminds them about their past. You see, what a believer was saved from is central to the beauty of grace. However, this passage is not just about individual believers. Before coming to faith in Christ, these people were spiritual outsiders. They were not only lost individually, they were lost as a people. Notice the five descriptions of their spiritual condition:

- **“separated from Christ”** – They were not united to the person who could save them.
- **“alienated from the commonwealth of Israel”** – They were neither citizens in God’s kingdom nor a part of His spiritual family.
- **“strangers to the covenants of promise”** – They were cut off from all spiritual blessings.
- **“having no hope”** – They were trapped in an endless and depressing cycle of failure.
- **“without God in the world”** – They were alienated from their Creator and under divine judgment.

Before Christ they were lost. They were spiritual outsiders. Part of the amazing beauty of being a Christian is what God has saved you from! Every Christian has a past marked by sin, separation, alienation, judgment, and hopelessness. No one came to Christ clean. No one gets a pass on their past. All Christians have failure in their personal history. We are all a mess.

But the problem is not just that we are lost persons; we are a lost people. Our alienation from God impacted more than just our spiritual lives. It affects our identity and our relationships with each other. This makes the problem of sin exponentially worse as it impacts friendships, marriage, parenting, work relationships, and society as whole. We bring our “lostness” with us everywhere, and it spoils everything.

Remembering this reality helps us understand and value the beauty of what it means to be the people of God who gather in a local assembly of believers called a church.

“But now” (vv. 13-18)

The next section provides additional color and meaning to the work of Jesus Christ on behalf of His people. The church is a group of people who are eternally affected by the grace that comes through Jesus. We have already talked about this at one level when we looked at Ephesians 2:8-9, but it is worth noting the following:

- v. 13 – Because of Christ (“in Christ”) spiritually alienated people are able to be brought near to God. Reconciliation with a holy God is possible.
- v. 14 – By becoming a man and dying on the cross, Jesus personally brought about the possibility of peace with God and peace with one another.
- v. 15 – Salvation through grace alone places people “in Christ.” Lost human beings are “in Adam,” but because of Jesus, they each become a new man. Jesus has removed the condemnation of the law and made peace.

- vv. 16-17 – through the cross and the preaching about the cross, Christ reconciled people to God from different backgrounds. Peace was preached to those who were religious and to those who were irreligious.
- v. 18 – The result is spiritual access to God the Father, facilitated by the Spirit, and purchased by Christ.

Paul intends for this to be a laundry list of spiritual benefits which believers should celebrate individually and corporately. Something glorious, supernatural, and life-altering has taken place. Are you starting to see how the church is so much more than a place that you go on Sundays?

“So then” (vv. 19-22)

These final verses capture the implications and the powerful effect of the gospel on human relationships. The text tells us that something remarkable, even supernatural, now defines those who have put their faith in Jesus. Paul uses multiple concepts to connect individuals to something beyond themselves.

Fellow Citizens - Verse 19 is amazing! Instead of being strangers and aliens, those who have put their faith in Jesus are now fellow citizens with saints. They are given a new identity and a new connection with other believers. They are not just citizens; they are fellow citizens. They share something spiritually significant with other followers of Jesus.

Household of God – The other metaphor is a household, and believers are called members of it. In other words, they are part of something bigger and beyond themselves, and it resembles the sense of belonging and closeness of a family. Church is more than a place you worship; it is a family

Temple – The most important and historical place for worship was the temple. And now the worship of God is marked, not by a facility, but by a gathered people. Believers are the new temple, and as new members are added, the temple actually grows. Therefore, the new “temple” is alive! And it is comprised of people who are joined together.

Dwelling place – The final description has a supernatural dynamic to it. The people of God are being built together into a dwelling place for God. This was the hallmark and the purpose of the temple in the Old Testament. God met with His people in the temple. He dwelt in the temple, and Israel was unique from all other nations because of this. Now, the people are the dwelling place.

What’s more, there is a supernatural context here as the Spirit enters into the equation. The church is knit together and built up by the power of the Holy Spirit as He teaches us through the Word, convicts us of sin, and produces the fruit of the Spirit in us.

Do you think this way about the church? When you come on Sundays, visit with people after services, or connect with one another in small groups, do you think about the church through the lens of fellow citizens, family, temple, or dwelling place? Do you see that church was meant to be more than a place that you go or a service that you attend? God designed church to be a place where you belong.

The church creates a new kind of relationship among its members. Despite the fact that we come from different backgrounds and unique pasts, the Spirit unites us in a way that says something powerful about the gospel. A relationship with Jesus not only changes your heart; it also changes how you relate to other people. The moment when you make that official is what we call church membership.

Why Covenant Renewal?

For those of you who were here last February, you may remember that we rolled out something we called “Covenant Renewal.” It was the most visible and tangible expression of a concerted effort toward a more effective congregational care model.

The Elders wanted to reach out to each of our members and ask them remember what it means to be a member, to reflect on the significance of the member covenant, and to recommit themselves to the spirit of membership. We called this process Covenant Renewal, and it produced some great fruit in our church:

- It allowed our Elders to receive over 750 prayer requests that our Elders then prayed over.
- It helped us update our membership role as we discovered who was no longer attending, who had changed churches, or who had some kind of issue that we needed to work through.
- It provided a great opportunity for our staff and Elders to personally follow up on approximately 600 people who requested a call or who needed some personal contact with an Elder because of some kind of need or concern.
- It produced an accurate membership count of 2,210 members in 2015.
- It brought a new focus on membership, leading to a 59 percent increase in the number of people who attended a membership class and a 32 percent increase in membership over the last year, giving us a total membership of 2,483 members between North Indy and Fishers.

Covenant Renewal helps us connect members to Elders as a shepherding tool. It provides a way for us to remember, reflect, and recommit to what church membership means. Now, I know we just did this a year ago, but think of it as you might other important moments in life such as an anniversary or a birthday. Some events are important enough to officially celebrate them on a regular basis.

Our Elders have not decided if we are going to enter into a Covenant Renewal season every year, but it served us well last year. It helped us take some great steps in shepherding. Other churches take attendance every week. Smaller churches can just more easily tell when people are no longer there or if there is a struggle or concern. When a church is as large as ours, we need to take a few large-scale and unusual steps in order to be sure we know and keep track of each other.

You might think of it like a large family. The Gates family are members who attend the Fishers Campus, and they have six wonderful, active boys. With a large family the Gateses have unique experiences: using an entire loaf of bread when making sandwiches, seeing a tip automatically added to their bill because they are a party of eight or more, and driving a “church bus” everywhere. But they

also find themselves counting their children all the time to be sure that they have everyone. Counting kids is just part of being a family of eight.

And I would tell you that the season of Covenant Renewal is just something that helps us be a better church with so many people. It reminds us what membership is all about, it connects our Elders to our people, it helps us shepherd more effectively, and it allows our members to reflect on what is really means to be the church together.



MEMBER COVENANT

Having been led by the Holy Spirit to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and on the public confession of our faith having been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God and this assembly, solemnly and joyfully endeavor to keep the spirit of this covenant as one body in Christ.

We purpose, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness and love; to promote its fruitfulness and spirituality; to attend its services regularly; to sustain its worship, ordinances, and doctrines; to submit to its discipline and the authority of its officers; to give it a sacred preeminence over all institutions of human origin; to give faithfully of time and talent in its activities; to contribute cheerfully and regularly, as God has prospered us, to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, to the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel throughout all nations.

We also purpose to maintain family and private devotion to the Lord; to train our children according to the Word of God; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk carefully in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our conduct; to abstain from all activities, habits, and lifestyles that dishonor our Lord Jesus Christ, cause stumbling to a fellow believer, or hinder the gospel witness; to be zealous in our efforts to advance the cause of Christ, our Savior, and to give Him preeminence in all things.

We further purpose to encourage one another in the blessed hope of our Lord's return; to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember each other in prayer; to aid each other in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feelings and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation.

We moreover purpose that when we leave this church we will as soon as possible unite with another church of like faith where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

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