

## **Church Covenant Renewal: Why, What and How?**

Joshua 24:1-28

Mark Vroegop

---

We are taking a planned break from Romans 8 this Sunday so that we can talk about some very important ideas related to who we are as a church, where we are headed, and what that means for every one of us.

This is a very important year for us as a church family. It marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the planting of our church, and we are marking a special Sunday in the fall to celebrate God's faithfulness. College Park Church was founded in 1985 through the Indiana Fellowship of Regular Baptist Churches and met at the Holiday Inn, in Casino Room B. The church outgrew that temporary location, moved to a nearby warehouse, and then purchased property at 96<sup>th</sup> and Towne. In 1992 the first sanctuary was built, and you can still see the original steeple when you drive onto this campus. Our nursery and children's ministry space (by the tree) was the second sanctuary, and it was constructed in 1997. Three and a half years ago we moved into our present sanctuary.

Over these thirty years, the church has grown from ten families to a weekly attendance of 4,000, and we now sense the Lord's leading to reach the Fishers area with a new church campus. At the same time, our Elders are asking some very important questions about how to really care for and shepherd our large congregation and our growing membership.

### **Why this Topic?**

Today I want lay out our biblical, historical, and practical vision for something we are calling "Covenant Renewal." This is our first official step in an ongoing process of seeking to know how to care for the spiritual needs of a large church.

At our January Elder retreat, we looked back over the last five years, and we rejoiced over the following blessings:

- In the last five years our attendance has increased over 34 percent.
- Our membership has increased by 57 percent and small group participation has increased by 67 percent.
- We have seen two Christmas offerings of over a million dollars in the last two years.
- Our church has given over \$8.4 million to Christmas Offerings since 1996, and over half of the total was given in the last six years.
- The incubator for Fishers is starting next week, and we presently have 178 adults and 105 kids who have signed up to participate.
- Over the last 90 days, 8,000 people have participated in some kind of College Park activity.

There is something thrilling about those numbers, and there is something really wonderful about being a part of large church. I know that there are challenges too, but God has blessed us with a unique opportunity to make a difference in reaching unchurched, underserved, and unreached people.

For a number of months, our Elders and Pastors have been wrestling with two very important questions:

- 1) What does it mean **biblically** to shepherd a church of 4,000 people?
- 2) What does it look like **practically** to shepherd a very large church

While there are great blessings of being a large church, there needs to be a very intentional effort in shepherding people. When I was serving in a smaller church, it was easier to keep track of everyone and to care for people because I could look around and see who was in our services and who was not. That is just not possible with a church our size, and yet our Elders feel a calling to try.

Therefore, our first two steps are 1) to highlight the importance of the church covenant so that we can better understand what it means to be College Park Church and 2) to invite the members of our church to take some time to reflect on this covenant and to personally renew their commitment to what it means.

The process will allow us to know what it means to be a church, and it will help us to know who is in the church. Covenant Renewal is a tool for our Elders to facilitate shepherding at a better level in our church.

### **What it Means?**

Let's start with a definition of covenant. This is an important place to start because our present culture does not think very highly of covenants. We rarely use covenants, and we tend not to view them with the level of respect and seriousness that they deserve. Here is one definition of the word covenant: ***"Oath-bound promise whereby one party solemnly pledges to bless or serve another party in some specified way."***<sup>1</sup> A covenant is a solemn, relationship-defining promise.

The concept of covenant is central to the theme of the entire Bible. God establishes and defines His relationship with mankind in covenantal terms. There is the covenant with Adam (Gen. 1:26-30), Noah (Gen. 9:11), Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), and David (2 Sam. 7:8-16). There is the Mosaic Covenant (Deut. 11), which identifies the blessings of obedience and the curses of disobedience, and there is the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), which promises a new heart and total restoration with God. Covenant is a vital part of the message of the Bible.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cowan, Steven B. "Covenant." Ed. Chad Brand et al. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 2003 : 355. Print.

## **Covenant Renewal in the Bible**

Throughout Israel's history, there were strategic moments when God's people renewed their covenant with God. Those solemn occasions were designed to do three things: 1) remember what God had done, 2) reflect on the spiritual significance, and 3) recommit to future obedience. You might compare it to what should happen to a married person when he or she attends a wedding and listens to the marriage vows. The renewal does not mean that the covenant has expired. Rather, it highlights what is already there.

Joshua 24 is a very strategic moment for Israel, as they have finished the conquest of the Promised Land, and they are now ready to settle into it. But prior to settling into their allotted territories, Joshua assembles the people at Shechem, the place where God first promised the land of Canaan to Abraham (see Gen. 12:6-7). Joshua wants them to remember, reflect, and recommit. We find that all three aspects of covenant renewal are present.

**Remember** – Joshua calls the people to remember the faithfulness of God by rehearsing a number of redemptive events in their history. The text highlights Abraham's call "beyond the river" (Josh. 24:2), the birth of Isaac (v. 3), the promise of land (v. 4), the deliverance from Egypt (v. 5), the Red Sea crossing (v. 6), the wilderness wandering (v. 6b), the conquest of the promised land (v. 8), the blessing from Balaam (v. 10), and the settlement in Canaan (v. 12).

The point of this remembrance was to call to God's grace to them: <sup>13</sup> *I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.* Joshua 24:13 (ESV)

**Reflect** – Joshua then calls the people to reflect on their allegiance to their God. He leverages the past grace of God and invites them to think carefully about who they are and what they are called to do. Joshua does not need to do this because of a weakness in God's covenant. Rather, he does it to strengthen the people's commitment. In other words, covenant renewal is for the benefit of God's people who have a tendency to forget, especially when promises are fulfilled and the crisis is over.

<sup>14</sup> *Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.* <sup>15</sup> *And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.* Joshua 24:14–15 (ESV)

**Recommit** – A key part of the covenant renewal is the recommitment of the people. After remembering what God has done and reflecting on their commitment to God, Joshua invites the people of God to recommit, renew, or reaffirm their allegiance to God and his covenant.

<sup>16</sup> *Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods, <sup>17</sup> for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the*

*peoples through whom we passed. <sup>18</sup> And the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.” Joshua 24:16–18 (ESV)*

To make sure that the people take this seriously, Joshua presses them in verses 19-20, and after they affirm again that they are recommitting to God’s covenant, Joshua does three things: 1) he makes a covenant with them (v. 25), 2) he records the words of their covenant (v. 26), and 3) he sets up a large stone as a reminder (v. 28).

The people renewed their commitment to be faithful to their covenant. Together and as one people, they affirmed who God was and how they would live.

Joshua 24 is not the only place covenant renewal occurs. If you were to read Deuteronomy 27-28, you would find Moses’ instructions for a covenant renewal ceremony as soon as Israel enters the land. And if you read Deuteronomy 29 -30, you will find that the people were called to renew their covenant while in Moab, just east of the Dead Sea in the wilderness, and just before the death of Moses. What’s more, the entire book of Deuteronomy is really a second record of the Mosaic Covenant and a series of sermons that Moses gave to the people as a repetition of their corporate with God and the obedience that was required (Deut. 5:1-5).

The New Testament also contains examples of covenant renewal. As in the Old Testament, there are activities that serve to rehearse the beauty of spiritual realities. Let me give you a few examples:

**Baptism** – The ordinance of believer’s baptism does not create a union with Christ. Rather it rehearses it and renews it. Think what happens. A person testifies to his or her relationship with Jesus. Then the person is brought into the water, immersed in it, and raised up again. Baptism rehearses God’s grace, and it renews a believer’s commitment to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). It is an important public renewal of a person’s faith in Jesus.

**Lord’s Supper** – The ordinance of communion is a regular renewal in the life of a believer. It is a meal that is shared together, as the body of Christ, in which, as we receive the elements, we remember together the covenant vows that Christ promised, sealed, and kept for us (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Additionally, the Lord’s Supper is a time for personal examination and reflection to be sure that we are not participating in a manner that does not discern the significance of the gospel in our lives (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

**Sex in Marriage** – Now this connection may surprise you at first, but the Bible describes the union of a husband and wife as a “one flesh union” (Gen. 2:24), and as a great mystery that pictures Christ’s relationship with the church (Eph. 5:31-32). Sexuality in marriage is the physical display of a spiritual reality, and it reinforces and renews covenant promises, which is why sex outside of marriage is wrong (1 Cor. 6:14-20), and why sex in marriage is not only encouraged but commanded (1 Cor. 7:1-5).

Here is what Tim Keller says about marital sex and covenant renewal:

*“The Bible says don’t unite with someone physically unless you are also willing to unite with the person emotionally, personally, socially, economically, and legally. Don’t become physically naked and vulnerable to the other person without becoming vulnerable in every other way, because you*

*have given up your freedom and bound yourself in marriage. Then, once you have given yourself in marriage, sex is a way of maintaining and deepening that union as the years go by . . . , there is a need to rekindle the heart and renew the commitment. There must be an opportunity to recall all that the other person means to you and to give yourself anew. Sex between a husband and a wife is the unique way to do that. Indeed, sex is perhaps the most powerful God-created way to help you give your entire self to another human being. Sex is God's appointed way for two people to reciprocally say to one another, "I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you." You must not use sex to say anything less. So, according to the Bible, a covenant is necessary for sex. It creates a place of security for vulnerability and intimacy. But though a marriage covenant is necessary for sex, sex is also necessary for the maintenance of the covenant. It is your covenant renewal service."<sup>2</sup>*

I would not be surprised if that is a really new thought for many of you when it comes to sex or even as it relates to baptism and Lord's Supper. You see, part of the problem is the fact that we live in culture where covenant is not valued or cherished like it used to be or like it should be. Our post-modern mindset has affected our appreciation for what covenant means and what covenant renewal moments are really saying.

What's more, it affects how we approach church and how one looks for a church. At one level there is nothing wrong with "church shopping," if by that we mean that we are prayerfully evaluating needs in our life and the strengths of the church to help meet those needs. However, we really need to think about how deeply consumer-oriented we can become. It is so easy to think of church as place where you go and not a place where you belong. It is too easy to make corporate events like baptism or the Lord's Supper just another thing that we do. But they are more than that.

The gathering of God's people in a church, as the church, is a very important reality, and one of the ways to make that clear and memorable is by the use of a church covenant.

### ***Covenant Renewal in Church History***

A church covenant is not a new idea historically. It began in the United States in the 1600s, as the early Baptists and Congregationalists were establishing new churches unaffiliated with the Anglican Church or other established denominations. The question was simply: "What made a group of people a church?" And their answer was a covenant.

Richard Mather and John Cotton, in 1649, said that a church cannot be established merely on a bare profession of faith, attendance in services, or baptism, since none of those make a person a part of a particular church. What establishes the visible union of believers into a church is that they make a covenant with each other to be the church.<sup>3</sup>

Covenant Renewal was also an important part of the life of these churches. The covenant and its renewal were a means of reforming the church and an attempt to call the congregation to a renewed commitment to Christ-likeness.<sup>4</sup> Church leaders were concerned about the number of people, especially children of church members, who failed to understand the significance of what it meant to

---

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 223.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/why-a-church-covenant>

<sup>4</sup> Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 131.

belong to a church. Therefore, they called for a season of renewal where church members would engage in self-examination, repentance, fasting, and a serious reflection on one's godliness. The renewal was designed to be a corporate reminder, a time of reflection, and an opportunity to recommit. This renewal movement created an appetite for spiritual renewal, and some historians believe that it laid the foundation for the First Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s.

Our church covenant has a rich history to it that is connected to our roots in the Baptist denomination. Although we would now identify ourselves as a non-denominational church, we still hold to and use the best of what came out of the Baptist church movement. Our covenant was written in 1853 by J. Newton Brown. He was a prominent Baptist pastor, theologian, and publisher in New Hampshire, and he helped author the New Hampshire Confession of Faith, one of the most widely used Baptist confessions of Faith. Brown's covenant was distributed widely through its inclusion in a popular hymnal, and it was accepted by many kinds of Baptist churches including the two largest Black Baptist denominations and the Southern Baptist Convention.

In fact, the Southern Baptist Convention of 1927 recommended that churches should highlight Brown's covenant and designate March as "Church Covenant Month." This was to be a time where churches were "encouraged to print the covenant in their bulletins, to read it publicly . . . and to make loving, sympathetic, and persistent effort to impress upon all our people the fundamental Christian virtues and obligations contained in the Covenant."<sup>5</sup> Here is yet another example of covenant renewal.

### ***Covenant Renewal in our Church***

One of the many reasons that we have a formal process for church membership is because we believe that it is important for people to publicly identify that there are mutual commitments to God and to one another. For years we have asked members to agree to our Confession of Faith and our Church Covenant. However, the Elders are realizing that we have not used the Church Covenant as well as we should, and we have not talked enough about what it means to be a church. We are striving to change that, and that is why we are talking about this today.

As Elders we believe that we need to more clearly define what it means for us to be a church family and what it means to shepherd each other, and to renew our commitment to that covenant. As we have examined the challenge of shepherding our large congregation, we have come to some important conclusions:

- We believe that the oversight of shepherding is a mandate for church leaders (1 Peter 5:1-3).
- We believe that our first and foremost focus must be on those who have identified themselves as members of College Park Church. This does not mean that we will not care for non-members, but we believe that biblically we have a different responsibility for those who are covenant members.
- While we are rejoicing in God's blessing with many people in our church, we must find creative and intentional ways to be sure that people are in shepherding relationships.

---

<sup>5</sup> Charles Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 68.

- We are committed to equipping lay leaders, especially through Small Groups and Adult Bible Fellowships, who can shepherd one another. A church of our size cannot be adequately shepherded by Vocational or Lay Elders alone.<sup>6</sup> We need to embrace this need together.
- We intend to more regularly rehearse our Member Covenant and to elevate its importance.
- We believe that our first step is to talk about the Covenant and to invite our members to remember, reflect, and recommit through this Renewal process.

Our hope is that we can rejoice in God's goodness to us, reaffirm our commitments to one another, and really understand who are members of this body.

### **How it Works?**

Let me conclude by walking you through some very specific action steps of how will this work.

In a moment I am going to read our Church Covenant to you, and we would ask that you take time over the next month to prayerfully consider what it means to be a member at College Park Church. I'd love for you to read this covenant once a week, to pray over it, to read it to your children, and to talk about it in your Small Groups. If you are not a member or if you have not been baptized, perhaps this might be a good reason to consider taking that step.<sup>7</sup> But I would like all of us to really consider the meaning of church and a church covenant.

Second, our Elders have made a few wording adjustments to our historic covenant so that it communicates clearly and accurately what members agree to when they join the church and what members have covenanted together. On February 15, after our Fresh Encounter Service, we will have a Members' Meeting (note wording change) to seek your approval of this new member covenant.

Third, on February 16, and pending congregational approval of the covenant, we will be sending an email or a letter to every member on record which will ask for a response from you stating that you are here and that you are renewing the member covenant, and letting our Elders know if there is any way that how we can be praying for you. This is simply a tool for us to know that you are still here and on board.

After March 15<sup>th</sup> our Elders and staff will begin the process of following up with people who have not responded, to determine if they have moved, if they are members of another church, or if there are any other concerns that prevented them from being involved in the Covenant Renewal.

Finally, our plan is to share the results of our efforts with the church in another Members' Meeting in May. And then we will seek the Lord for his direction on what we have learned and where to go next.

---

<sup>6</sup> Some churches have tried to resolve this by dramatically increasing the number of Elders or hiring many more staff. We are concerned that an Elder Council that is too large or too staff-heavy tends to create an undesirable and dangerous environment.

<sup>7</sup> For a great article on Why Membership? See: <http://www.yourchurch.com/the-college-park-blog/why-membership-is-important/>

Our prayer is that the Lord will use this in each of our lives, in the strengthening of the shepherding in this body, and in deepening our collective understanding of what it means to be a church.

God has been faithful to this church for 30 years, and He has showered upon us some unbelievable blessings and opportunities. As Elders, we want to celebrate God's kindness and commit to work even harder to lead all of us in effectively shepherding the souls entrusted to our care.



## 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.

© College Park Church

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)