

Making a Commitment to Christian Community

Rich Nathan
January 9 & 10, 2016
Risky Commitments
Ephesians 4:1-8

Everywhere we look these days, we see signs of growing fear. But today I'm not speaking about the fear of terrorism which is certainly pervasive or even economic fears. I'm talking about a fear that has penetrated every realm of life. That is the fear of commitment.

A. A Loss of Commitment

Americans are balking at all long term entanglements: financial, romantic, even child-raising.

So, for example, Americans have historically taken a great deal of pride in owning their own cars. Last year, a quarter of all car transactions were leases, with lease terms as low as two years, with no money down. Health and fitness clubs used to press people to make 3-year commitments, but fewer and fewer people are willing to do that so health clubs are changing their marketing and now they have month-to-month memberships. Cell phone companies are getting in on the act. A growing portion of the market is selling cell phone service without long term commitments. The fear of commitment is resulting in fewer babies being born. As a general rule, the long term trend line is toward a lower childbirth rate and fewer marriages.

Single men are particularly commitment shy. Here's an interesting stat from the National Association of Realtors.

21% of all home purchases are by single women. Only 9% of all home purchases are by single men. So, less than half. Given that men in America still on average make more money than women, lack of home purchasing by single men is clearly not driven by economics but by something else. When realtors survey single men, they find over and over again the perspective "Hey, I don't want to be tied down" by owning a home. I want to keep my options open. I want to be free to move. Women, on the other hand, I want to settle down. I want to feel rooted, connected.

You see the same gender gap in making a romantic commitment. If you walk into any bookstore and look at the titles of relationship advice marketed to women and the relational advice marketed to men. Try it out. Go to the Self Help section of Barnes & Noble and look at the advice to women section. You'll see shelves overflowing with books about how to find a responsible partner to settle down with. Books with titles like:

- *Why Hasn't He Called?*
- *It's Not You*
- *If I'm SO Wonderful, Why am I still single?*

Take a few steps over and look at the relationship books marketed to men. You'll, first of all, find very few books on how to have a relationship. It's like 50 to 1, women to men, on relational advice. And the books that are marketed to men are all about how to pick up women. So, you'll find books like:

- *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*

In *The Game*, the author gives men pick up lines where they can have an easy, no strings attached, hook-up with a woman that they meet for the first time.

The gender gap shows in surveys in the relative importance of marriage to younger women and younger men. Over the last 15 years, the percentage of millennial men who say that having a good marriage is one of their highest goals in life has been steadily declining. At the same time, the percentage of millennial women who say having a good marriage is one of their highest priorities in life has been steadily rising.

Single women, have you ever had a conversation with your boyfriend where you asked about your relationship – where it's headed – and he changes the subject? Or if that fails, and you don't let him change the subject, have you ever heard any of these excuses?

"Marriage, why would we need to get married? It's just a piece of paper."

"What we have right now is so perfect why would we want to change anything?"

"Marriage? Gosh, I've never really thought about it?"

"Now is not the right time. I can't afford the expense right now, let's talk about it in a few months when I get my promotion."

"I need to focus on my career right now, before we get married."

If your boyfriend is regularly changing the subject every time you want to talk about your long term future or every time the subject of marriage comes up there's another excuse, I say this with all affection, but you'll probably be met with the same kinds of excuses in three months or six months. The only way to bring your relationship to a decision point is either to end the relationship now or to issue an ultimatum. "Marry me, or I'll walk!"

Single women, have you ever asked the question, where are all the good men who are willing to make a commitment? What happened to these good men? Why does every single, measurable statistic we have tell us that women on average are more interested

in making a commitment than men are? I've discovered that sociologists explain the male commitment problem in various ways. The two main explanations are these.

1. The rise of sexual freedom and co-habitation

Now you can see this trend across countries and across cultures. The higher the prevalence of co-habitation and pre-marital sex, the lower the marriage rate. For example, in Berlin, Germany, which is one of the most sexually liberal places in one of the most sexually liberal countries in the world, they have unsurprisingly, one of the lowest marriage rates and one of the lowest birth rates in the world. In south Asia and in China, where marriage is still virtually universal, marriage rates remain at an unbelievably high 98%. Rates of pre-marital sex and co-habitation are very, very low. Here's a basic rule across countries and cultures, there is an absolute inverse relationship between the rates of co-habitation and pre-marital sex as compare with the rates of male commitment to marriage. More co-habitation, more pre-marital sex, less male commitment to marriage. Less co-habitation, less pre-marital sex, more male commitment to marriage.

There's a recent book titled *Pre-Marital Sex in America*.

Picture of the cover of the book

It's written by two sociologists and they cite this incredible statistic:

If sex takes place within 30 days of a new relationship, there's a 90% probability that the relationship will dissolve within 12 months.

You see this disparity between men and women because of the rise of sexual freedom and co-habitation. And you see this disparity because of the rise of online dating.

- The rise of online dating.

There's obviously a positive aspect to online dating. The internet has made it easier for single people to meet other single people with whom they will be compatible. But the internet has also multiplied choice for individuals. It's raised the bar on what a relationship ought to be like. You know the advertisement. Your perfect mate is just a click away. Yes, you're ok, but there's maybe somebody out there who has all of your positive traits and none of your negative traits. If I could match your personality with her body. Somewhere out there who is prettier than you, who makes more money than you do? Economists tell us that more choice doesn't lead to more commitment, more choice leads to less commitment. In *Atlantic* magazine, an article was published saying that online dating far from making marriage easier, it's actually making it harder and making commitment less likely.

Today I want to begin a New Year series titled “Risky Commitments”. In a commitment-phobic age, why push through our fears and make a commitment to another person or to God or to church or to anything? Here at Vineyard Columbus, we have a mission statement which reads,

“Our mission is to develop a **community** of disciples who experience God, love one another, and partner with Christ to heal the world.”

Today I want to focus on this word, community. I’ve called this first talk in the series Risky Commitments, “Making a Commitment to Christian Community”. Let’s Pray.

Ephesians 4:1-8

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8 This is why it[a] says:

“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”

If I was going to outline this text, I’d say:

- v. 1 – The goal necessary to build community
- v. 2 – The attitude necessary to build community
- v. 3 – The commitment necessary to build community
- v. 4-6 – The foundation necessary to build community
- v. 7-8 – The gifts necessary to build community

I’ll just tackle the first three today.

Lots of people are afraid of making commitments because they think to themselves, “What if I’m wrong?”

B. A fear of commitment

What if I move ahead and commit to this job and end up hating up? Or if I move ahead and commit to this church and I end up disagreeing with the church or the pastor about something? Or even worse, I move ahead and I say I’m going to commit to this person

and we're going to get married and I end up feeling bored by them or trapped or I don't want to be with them in two years, much less 20 years, or they end up hurting me.

This is a common problem that people bring to pastors. They say, "Pastor, I'm thinking about marrying this person, but I want to make absolutely sure that this relationship works out and this other person doesn't hurt me."

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrong and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal."
- C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis, my favorite Christian author, wrote this years ago. In other words, if you don't want your heart to ever be broken, never be vulnerable. Because there is no way to have an intimate relationship without becoming vulnerable to being hurt. If you're the sort of person that says, "You know I'm thinking about marriage. I've certainly done enough investigation, enough testing of the relationship, enough praying." Maybe you've even gone through our classes here, we have incredible resources through our Marriage & Family Ministry. We have a class called "How2Become1".

How2Become1 Premarital Class

Contact Mindy Layman, mindy.layman@vineyardcolumbus.org

I've been through the classes, I've invested in this relationship, but I'm still not sure. I'm still afraid. How can I be sure? The answer is, if you are looking for absolute certainty and a guarantee that you will never be hurt – forget about marriage.

To be totally safe, turn your romance into a business partnership. Make sure you're lawyered up. Sign a really lengthy contract. There's no way to have a close relationship – I'm talking about a really close friendship or a love relationship or deep involvement in a church, certainly not a marriage – without opening your heart to another person or group of people in such a way that that other person can hurt you. If you insist on playing it safe, you'll never have a close relationship.

Christianity is the only one of the world's major religions which teaches that God made Himself vulnerable to be in relationship with us. We just have gotten through the Christmas season, and what is Christmas all about? Christmas says that God doesn't just love us in some abstract way while He remains way up in heaven, untouched, unmoved, unhurt by rejection. Christmas says that God came down and became a little baby. You can't be more vulnerable than that. God allowed himself to be hurt, to be betrayed, to be misunderstood, to be rejected. God became someone who could be beaten and tortured and spit on and killed.

Why did He do that? Why did God become so vulnerable? He did it to win us back, to bring us into relationship with himself by dying for us on a cross and paying for our sins. Here's the deal, friends, for those of you who are afraid of making a commitment, if you take this message into your heart, if you accept this God who made himself vulnerable and allowed himself to be open to hurt in order to be in relationship with you. If you take this message into your heart, you'll be able to risk commitment with someone else.

Because here's what's going to happen to you – if you receive this message, you will know at the core of your being that you are loved by the one infinitely wonderful person in the universe who will never leave you or forsake you or betray you. When your heart is secured by God's love, you can be vulnerable to someone else. Ultimately, even if they turn on you, you're not left to your own devices. You'll be able to say, "This hurts, but I'm ok because I'm being held up by a God who totally loves me."

Let's say you come to the point of saying I don't want to be one of those people who is afraid of being hurt or being vulnerable so I never make any commitment and I lose out on every really deep intimate relationship. How do you go about making a commitment? First of all, I think we need the right goals.

A. The Right Goals

You know, one of the great challenges of successful living is choosing the right goals. We've all been around people and heard of people who choose the wrong goals. For example, if your goal in life is to be popular or well-liked, if that's what drives every decision, you are going to have major relational problems. If you're a parent you won't be able to discipline your children because being liked in the moment is going to be more important to you than the long term impact of your child's behavior.

If your goal is to be well-liked, you won't be able to manage or lead a department at work because you won't be able to hold people accountable to anything. If your goal is to be always be well-liked and popular, you won't be able to teach a class because you won't be able to correct bad behavior.

Or think of another wrong goal, like the goal of being wealthy.

Picture of Floyd Mayweather

Here's the boxer, Floyd Mayweather, who absolutely flaunts his wealth. If being wealthy is your total goal then you'll sacrifice everything to get there. If you've gotta lie, you lie. If you've gotta do something immoral or illegal – hey – my goal is to amass a fortune. If you've gotta step on people along the way then you'll do it.

If your ultimate goal is to become wealthy then you'll sacrifice family, you'll sacrifice marriage, you'll sacrifice children on the altar of becoming wealthy. Of course, wealth is incredibly fragile. One catastrophic event like losing a big client or losing a law suit or having a fire or becoming sick, then it all just evaporates.

Then there are those folks whose goal in life is to be beautiful. You've heard of the woman who is through plastic surgery turning herself into Barbie.

Picture of Human Barbie

No matter how beautiful you are, the Bible was absolutely right when it said more than 2500 years ago, "Beauty is fleeting." Trust me, I'm 60 years old now. Looks fade.

There are few areas of life where you will see the wrong goals more publicly on display than in sports. If you believe that the goal of your basketball is for you to personally score as many points as possible and not for your team to win, then you will chuck the ball up every time you touch it whether you have the open shot or not. You won't play defense, you won't pass, you won't rebound and even if your team loses you'll be happy that you scored a lot of points.

Or how about the football player who forgets that the goal of football is for your team to score more points than your opponent. Rather than to be on Sports Center because you perfected your end zone dance. Here's a football player who clearly forgot that the goal of football is to score.

Video of Desean Jackson

The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4:1:

Ephesians 4:1

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Paul exhorts us to live a life worthy of the call that we've received. I believe that if we're going to make a commitment to a local church then we need to be committed to the right goal. Most church people don't know or have forgotten what our calling is. So, we may be passionate, but we're passionate for the wrong things. Often churches pursue the wrong goals. We're living out the wrong calling.

If you think that the church's calling is to be the world's moral policeman, to point out continually where the larger society is going to hell in a handbasket then your Christianity and your church will be centered on moral crusades. The church will be

defined by what it's against rather than what it's for. People will experience Christianity is essentially condemnation, moral superiority.

If you think the goal of church is to protect American values against foreign values, then you will have a confusing mix of God and country. It won't be clear in your mind what is biblical and what is just your culture or your country.

If your goal for church is having a nice, comfortable Sunday morning experience – will I get to listen to music that I like? Do I hear a teaching that I like? Do I get to sit in a building that I like? And be around people who look like me so that I'm never stretched or confronted or made uncomfortable in any way? If that's the goal, being comfortable – then you're in the wrong place if you join a church like Vineyard Columbus.

What is the goal of church? What is the calling of the church? Ephesians 4 is built upon Ephesians 1-3. When Paul speaks about living a life worthy of the calling that we've received, he's building upon the foundation that he's laid in great detail in first three chapters of Ephesians.

In chapter 1, Paul talks about God's goal for the universe.

1. God's goal for the Universe

Ephesians 1:9-10

⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

What is God's goal for the universe? To bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. To bring everything together under Christ. When Paul says, "All things together under" he's translating one single Greek word, a Greek mathematical term. You know, when the Greeks added a series of numbers together they listed them down on a piece of paper like we would. We draw a line at the bottom of the list of numbers and we write the total beneath the line. The Greeks drew the line above the column of numbers and then they put the total above the line.

What Paul is saying here is that God is drawing a line above the entire universe of people and things and above it He is putting Jesus Christ, as the summing up of everything. He's pulling everything together under Christ who is raised from the dead and is now Lord. The pulling together of everything, the healing of every division, the unifying of all things, is what God is doing in the world right now.

When Jesus returns, He will be met either with joy for those who have received him or in dread by those who have rejected him. Either in joy or in judgment, everything will be pulled together and unified under this one ruler, Jesus Christ.

What is the goal of the church?

1. God's goal for the church

The church is God's main instrument to work out his plan to pull together all things under Christ, to heal all divisions, to reconcile all relationships.

Ephesians 2:13-15

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace

What Paul is saying is that when Jesus was hung spread-eagle on the cross, with one arm he reached out and brought to himself the Jews. With the other arm, he reached out and brought to himself the Gentiles out of the raw material of Jews and Gentiles, God created a new race of people. The church is not defined by who our ancestors are, what country we came from, or what color we are. The church is an entirely new race, a new man Paul calls us, a new humanity - a unified people under this one head, Jesus Christ.

God's goal is to heal all the divisions in the world. God is working out his goal by creating the church, a new race of people – natural born and immigrants, rich and poor, men and women, old and young, Asian, black, white, brown. So in Ephesians 4, Paul says it's in the local church where the rubber meets the road and we work out in a very practical, flesh and blood real way, God's goal of healing the universe's divisions.

We need the right goal. The right goal of the church is to heal divisions between us and God and us and each other. Then we need the right attitude.

- a. The Right Attitude

Ephesians 4:2

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

If we are going to pull people together, if we are going to heal divisions, if we're going live in reconciled relationship with one another, then not only do we need the goal of reconciliation, but the attitudes necessary to produce that reconciliation.

Paul says in Ephesians 4:2 "Be completely humble." I want you to think of a husband and wife completely at odds with each other they've settled into a cold war of virtual non-communication about anything that is really significant. Whenever they start moving toward talking about their relationship or the kids or money or something that's really significant the war really flares up. It creates more hurt.

They say, "I don't want to live this way anymore. I don't want the fighting or the cold war where we just go to our own corners." So they decide to fix it. They go to a counselor. But no amount of counseling or reading, no amount of advice will ever bring a couple together unless there's a change in their attitudes, a change in their hearts. Couples can schedule date nights from now until ever, they can go through all the motions, they can go to all the classes but there will be no healing unless there's an inward change of heart of attitude.

Paul says, "Be completely humble." Humility is an absolute prerequisite for the healing of relationship. If you're at odds with someone else, you look at the situation and you say, "You know, weighing it out I believe they are 90% wrong. I can't believe they said what they said." Humility makes you look at yourself and you go, "Well, honestly in this situation I think I'm only 10% wrong. I shouldn't have done this or said that." Then you can move toward healing. That is God's goal for the universe. Simply go to the other person and in humility say, "I'm sorry for doing this or saying that."

The reason that so many people are kept apart is because of pride. Everyone is standing on ceremony. I'll do that after they come to me. I'll move towards them after they move towards me. I'll acknowledge my wrong, after they acknowledge their wrong.

Paul says, "Be completely humble and gentle". For over 25 years as a pastor, I have tried to in my written and oral communication to live by Proverbs 15:1.

Proverbs 15:1

A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

As a pastor of a large church, I often get letters from folks criticizing something that I said or something that another staff member said or did or something that happened in their small group. About 95% of the time, Proverbs 15:1, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Communicating back a gracious, open to reason, kind response will heal the hurt and dial back the anger.

If we're going to build Christian community, we need to have the right goal for the church, we're God's healing instrument for the world – we need the right attitudes: humility, gentleness, patience. And we need the right commitments.

C. The Right Commitment

Ephesians 4:3

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Paul says make every effort. Spare no expense. Give yourself entirely to building the local church. Without a deep commitment to a local church, putting your roots down somewhere and working out your relationships even when you are uncomfortable or disagree or somebody hurts you, without committing to a local church, your spirituality, whatever you say it is, will remain really shallow. You will never achieve God's purpose for your life unless you are deeply engaged with, intertwined with, anchored in, and rooted in a local church.

Your spirituality becomes real only if it is expressed in the context of a deeply rooted commitment to a concrete, flesh and blood, community of people that you don't entirely choose – people who are called by God together and form a church.

Folks say, "I don't know why I need church. Why do I need to join a church? Why do I need to commit?" Let me suggest a few things that you give up by not being willing to commit yourself in a very practical way to a church.

People say, "I find God in nature. I find God when I walk in the woods. Why do I need to join a church community?" My response would be that every Christian finds God in nature. Psalms tell us that "the Heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of His hands."

Yes, it's wonderful that you find God in nature, but I tell you that apart from deep involvement in the local church you will not find God in cancer or in tragedy. Only a local church will help you find God when the bottom falls out. You will not be able to do that on your own. You and the trees and the birds will not find God when your life caves in and you're going through a divorce or you lose a loved one or you are out of work. You'll need the church.

Why do you need the local church? My kids don't want to come, my 10-year old fusses, my 13-year old doesn't want to go, and my 15-year old says "forget it!"

Why should you fuss and fight with your kids and drag them to church? Listen, if you don't choose deep commitment to a local church for you and your family, you're making a choice about what's going to shape your kids. What's going to shape your children is

not church, what will shape them is media – the values of people like Miley Cyrus and Kim Kardashian and Nikki Minaj and the Real Housewives of Atlanta. It's not like the larger society doesn't have a message that it's shaping people with. It has a message.

What message do you want your children to lay hold of? That will cause them to succeed in life and family and marriage.

You say, "I don't need to join a local church to be a good person." Really? Tell me where outside of church will you ever be challenged, these days, to be humble, to restrain your impulses, to restrain your selfishness or your self-indulgence – where outside of church will you ever be encouraged to reconcile relationships, to admit when you're wrong, to forgive other people, to be civil in what you say? Where outside of church will you be challenged to serve other people or care for the poor or even love and be committed to your spouse? We all need church to become good people!

There is a law that God has set in the universe that governs everything. It governs nature, it governs finances, and it governs relationships. And the law is "You reap what you sow." People who invest deeply in church, who sow into their relationships, they show up and serve, they reap an incredible harvest, especially in times of need. You will get out of church what you put into it. If you make a big commitment to church; you will receive a big commitment back.

I have seen on hundreds of occasions, small groups rally around people who are committed to the group. We have many instances where people have been in car accidents or suffered from a debilitating disease and small groups have literally rebuilt their house. We have folks in our church who have wheelchair ramps built for them, restructuring of their entire downstairs, groceries for months on end, support for their children, financial help. Why? Because they invested deeply and in their time of need, they reaped. You will get out of church what you put into it!

We have people who come to Vineyard and never commit, never join, never connect to a small group. And they reap from the church a very small harvest. So, what would it mean for you to commit to Christian community in this New Year and reap a big harvest for yourself and if you have a family, for your family?

Let me close with three suggestions:

1. If you're not a member of the church yet, in this New Year 2016, [join the church!](#) We have a membership class coming up on Sunday, January 24 at 2:30pm at our Cooper Road campus. I teach the class. We have childcare. This New Year, if you haven't joined Vineyard Columbus yet then make a commitment to come to Membership Class in two weeks.

2. If you're a member of the church, but you haven't joined a small group yet, there are two ways for you to get involved with a small group here at Vineyard Columbus. You can join an existing group. At all the campuses this weekend, and every weekend, we have staff and volunteers who want to help you connect with small group in your part of town at a time you're available. We have hundreds of small groups across central Ohio. Immediately after the service, go to the small group area in the lobby at your campus.
3. Beginning in the middle of February, on Ash Wednesday, we're going to be doing a campaign here at Vineyard Columbus called "The Good Life: Living the Life God Created Us to Live". It's going to run from Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday, it's unlike any campaign we've ever done because it's not about raising money or building buildings. It's about discipling our church and reaching our central Ohio community. During the campaign, my messages are all going to be around how to live "The Good Life" – the life God created us to live and Jesus came to bring us.

What we want to do during the campaign is start hundreds of new small groups. So, we've created a six week small group study and during the fall, I videotaped six 20-minute teachings on themes from the good life that we want everyone in the church to be able to see. We want to start hundreds of small groups – 350 to be exact – and we're asking hundreds of people to host a group of their friends, families or co-workers.

H.O.S.T.

- H – Have a **heart** for people!
- O – **Open** your home, your space
- S – **Serve** a snack
- T – **Turn** on a video

If you can do those things and gather 2-3 people, you can host. So, if you lead a small group here, encourage people in your group to pray about hosting a group themselves with their neighbors, their friends. If you are in a group but don't lead think about hosting. If you're not in a small group, you can host. Over the next month, you'll hear me encouraging the entire congregation to consider hosting. If you decide to host a group, you can simply go to vineyardcolumbus.org and click on "The Good Life" banner on the home page.

Make a commitment.

Join the church.

Join a small group.

Become a H.O.S.T. for a new small group.

Commitment starts with a commitment to Christ.

Making a Commitment to Christian Community

Rich Nathan
January 9 & 10, 2016
Risky Commitments
Ephesians 4:1-8

I. The Problem:

- A. A loss of commitment
- B. A fear of commitment

II. The Answer:

A. The Right goals

- 1. God's goal for the universe
- 2. God's goal for the church

B. The Right Attitude

C. The Right Commitment