

“The Church God Builds” | Ephesians 2:19-22 (Part 2)

The Rev. Dr. Sam Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican

Preaching Draft | June 15, 2025

(Discussion questions on page 7)

I was in Egypt at this time last year for an international gathering of Anglican ministers. Our group was given an audience with the head of the Coptic church, Pope Tawadros II. He leads one of the oldest branches of Christianity, understood to go back Saint Mark himself.

During our time with him he spoke about the culture of Egypt, which he described as being built over thousands of years upon something like seven or eight layers. There was pre-Egypt (before 3000BC); Ancient Egypt with its several kingdoms (ca 3000-332 BC); the Persian Period (525-332 BC); the Greek Period (332-30BC); the Roman and Christian period (30BC-641 AD); Islamic Egypt (641-1517 AD); Ottoman Egypt (1517-1798 AD); the French and British Period (1798-1952); and now, Modern Egypt (1952-present).

I cannot think of another place with such an ancient, varied, and unbroken witness to human civilization. You can see it in the buildings. In Cairo, in just hours you can find yourself before pyramids over four thousand years old, churches nearly two thousand years old, mosques over a thousand years old, all while driving past hotels and fast-food restaurants just a few years old.

Being in a place like Egypt is a reminder that human beings do more than just exist. We build. From our earliest days, we sculpt, carve, paint, set brick up on brick, all to construct our cities and temples. These structures we create and leave behind only point to whatever it is we are trying to build—a name for ourselves, meaning, a legacy, something that will ultimately last, something that connects us with heaven. With our lives—both individually and collectively—we don’t just want to get by; we want to build something that matters.

Today is our second Sunday in Ephesians 2:19-22, which tells us that we come by this itch to build naturally. This passage is all about the fact that our Maker Himself is a builder. Though you cannot hear it in English translation, six terms in these verses share the same Greek root-word for *house or building*: “aliens (19),” “members of household of God (19)” “having been built (20)” “whole structure (21)” “built together” (22), “dwelling place (22).”¹

What is being built is the church. However, Paul uses three rich metaphors to help us understand what the church ultimately is: *a kingdom, a family, and a Temple*.

Last week we considered the foundation of the structure being built—“the apostles and prophets” (20). This Sunday we turn to the structure itself. We do so by noting first, *Who is the builder?* Second, *What type of structure is being built?* And third, *How it grows?* A simple outline, **(1) The Builder, (2) The Building, (3) The Growth.**

I. The Builder

¹ The root word if from the Greek, οἶκος, which means house.

The theme of this section of Ephesians, 2:11-22, is Gentiles and Jews being brought together. Now in verses 19-22, we see that the purpose for this involves a structure being built.

What we ought to notice about this structure first, is that the Christians being drawn into a new community are mainly *passive* in the building process. We are the stones being laid, not the builder laying them. We see this in the tense of the verbs: The Christians are “built on the foundation (20),” “are being joined together (21)” and “are being built together” (22). We are not laying the foundation and building the structure; rather, we are built onto the foundation and built up upon it.

The point: God himself is the builder. Which is not to say that human agency plays no role—we will come to see that we have a role to play in the building’s growth. Rather, it is to emphasize that when it comes to what God is building in the world, it is as the Psalmists, “unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps 127:1).

And let us notice a few things about God as the builder:

Trinity

First, notice that the three persons of the **Trinity** are all at work. They are there in verse 22:

In him [=Jesus, The Son] you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God [=the Father] by the Spirit [=the Holy Spirit]” (2:22).

In Ephesians, we have seen that the church begins in the mind and heart of **God the Father**, it is part of His “plan” made “before the foundations of the world” to “unite all things in Jesus” (1:3, 9-10). It is then **God the Son** who comes into the world to do the decisive work to create the church: “we have redemption through [Christ’s] blood” (1:7); those “far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13). And it is **God the Holy Spirit** at work in the present, nurturing faith, sanctifying, building: “you are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (2:22).

This Sunday is Trinity Sunday according to the Church Calendar. And while the doctrine of the Trinity—God is One and exists as Three Persons—is mysterious, its implications are glorious. I wonder if you can notice ways different Persons of the Trinity are at work in your own life? How about in our church? I wonder how this might impact how we pray?

Different Tools, Same Builder

Second, because God is the chief builder, we can recognize that even though different instruments are used, it is always the same architect at work. A **surgeon** may use several different instruments in his or her work; but at the end of the day, it is not the *instrument*, but the *surgeon*, that did the surgery. So too with the spiritual growth in our lives. You may come to faith or grow in faith by the influence of a parent, teacher, pastor, friend, podcaster, book—but in each case these are just instruments in God’s hands. He is the builder. Ultimately it is God at work through these people.

Confidence

And this fact, should, thirdly, lead to great confidence for Christians. When it comes to the

church—despite external threats and inward failures—it is ultimately God who will see to it that his church grows. This was notable to me standing there in Egypt a year ago: It is not the gods of the Pyramids or Persians or Greeks or Romans that drew ministers together from around the world. It was Jesus Christ—who continues to build his living church today.

That is the builder. Let us turn now to the structure, the building.

II. The Building

As noted, Paul uses three different images to describe the church that is being built: a *kingdom* (noted by the phrase, “fellow citizens,” v. 19), a *family* (noted by, “members of the household of God,” v.19), and a *Temple* (noted by, “grows into a holy temple in the Lord,” v. 21). Let us consider each in turn, and what they tell us about the nature and purpose of the church God is building.

Kingdom

In verse 19, Paul writes of the Gentiles, “... you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow **citizens** with the saints” (19). “Citizens” is a word that comes from the language of a city, state, or kingdom. Paul introduced the idea back in verse 12 when he wrote that the Gentiles formerly were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel” (12).

When it comes to building things, *kingdoms and citizenship* speak to our need for laws and governance that organize and guide our common life.² In what sense is the church building people into God’s kingdom? With “citizens,” Paul tells us that the church are the people being built according to the Law and Ways of God.

The church is the community that comes under the law or order of the True God. And if a citizen lives under the law of the land, it means they are willing to be **judged** by it. Because of the forgiveness of sins that we have in Christ, a Christian is now *justified*—meaning, judged in the King’s court and found upright.³

And a citizen lives according to the law of the king, meaning they increasingly order their lives by God’s ways.

That is the sense in which God is building us into a kingdom

Family

The image of family comes up immediately after in the same verse, “... you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and **members of the household of God**” (19).

² Citizens in a kingdom or state not only have certain obligations to the state—perhaps taxation, military service, obedience to laws. They also have privileges, access to the benefits of the kingdom. These Gentiles who couldn’t even enter the main courts of the physical temple in Israel; now have access to the holy of holies; God’s presence himself.

³ Thomas Oden, *Systematic Theology: Volume Three, Life in the Spirit*, 255, writes, “in court, justification is the reversal of a sentence of death for sin.”

Citizenship and kingdoms do not necessarily convey intimacy and belonging; but the idea of a household does. God is building a family. He not only declares us righteous citizens in court but also adopts us as sons and daughters into his family. Paul introduced this theme back in chapter 1, where “predestined us for **adoption to himself as sons** through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will” (1:5), and sounds it again in verse 18 with God’s title, Father, “through [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the **Father**” (2:18).

God is building in the world a new family. And this means that in the church God intends to meet some of our deepest needs.

I recently was reading a book by a pastor and professor, Joseph Hellerman, titled *When the Church Was a Family*. The author was dealing with a theme many have written on in past decades, the growing sense of disconnection and loneliness in societies that move from collectivist to individualistic. I came across a sentence that jumped out at me, “Young mothers in America suffer more than anyone from the acute georgical fragmentation that characterizes our individualist society.” He goes on,

Raising a child is a task for which no new mother can ever be adequately prepared. Collectivist societies recognize this, and young mothers find great network of support among the more mature women in their extended families. By contrast, American women with preschool-aged children are often ... isolated... Even our neighborhoods have become less and less family friendly, as people hole up in their homes and apartments.... Mothers with little ones are left isolated and alone to sort through the most utterly daunting task imaginable: raising a human being.⁴

As I read this, I thought of what I see out of office window on so many Thursday mornings. Well over a hundred women from our church—many of whom are mothers—arrive for a time of fellowship, prayer and life together. Out of this comes support networks for helping with meals or car rides, networks for prayer and support.

Jesus once said to his disciples

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29-30).

If you are a Christian, God has brought you into his “household,” his family. The local church is meant to be the place where you find new sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters. I wonder in what ways you have experienced the church as family? I wonder in what ways God may be asking you to be as a brother or sister, a spiritual mother or father, to someone in this church? Can you think of who this person might be?

Temple

⁴ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community*, 28.

Finally, our passage closes as this kingdom and family meld into a Temple:

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 (2:21-22)

Temples represent, in their various ways, a need for humans to become holy and approach the divine. Yahweh, the True God, gave Israel the design for the Temple, the priests and sacrificial system, and the Law, so they could become Holy, and so that He could dwell with them.

Paul is telling us that God is building the church into a place where he can dwell with us by His Spirit.

There is a worldview or philosophy known as “Materialism” that teaches that all that is real is the physical or material. In this view, all our thoughts, emotions, dreams, pains are due only to physical processes attributable to our brains and body. Materialism denies the existence of anything like spirits or souls. Materialism may appreciate the state and the family—but it has no place for Temples and indwelling spirits.

This is not the view of things offered by the Bible—nor, in my opinion, by our experiences. The Bible presents a far more complex and richer world, where there are angels and demons and clean and unclean spirits. And the Bible tells us that these clean and unclean spirits can come to *indwell* our world.

Jesus teaches that an unclean spirit once cast out, may come back to its hosts now numbering seven, and “they enter and **dwell** there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first” (Matt 12:43-45).

In Revelation 18—where this term “dwelling place” from Eph 2:22 appears—we read of unclean spirits indwelling places:

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven ... he called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a **dwelling** place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit.... ³ For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living (Rev 18:1-3).

So, when the Bible tells us we are being built into a Temple where God will dwell by His Spirit, it means that there is a spiritual renovation occurring, where the unclean is being driven out, to the truly holy can come in. How does he do this? By the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in us. And Why does God do this? So he can make a home for himself to dwell in us—both individually and collectively.

A human being needs more than citizenship and family. They need to be made holy. They need the presence of God himself to indwell their lives.

Sum: Here, then, is what Paul is telling us God is building with his church: a kingdom of citizens; a family of sons and daughters; and a holy priesthood of those who are indwelt not by the spirit of the age, but the Spirit of God.

We have a third and final point to make. We have seen the builder and what he is building. Finally let us ask about growing—for there is a dynamic quality to this structure.

III. Growth

Last week we noted that the foundation of this building is complete. This is the Word of God, the testimony of Jesus that is Holy Scripture. This cannot be added to.

However, the structure growing from that foundation is not yet complete. There are both more people being added to it, and those people are maturing. Here is how Paul envisions growth of the building,

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom [Jesus] the whole structure, being joined together, **grows** into a holy temple in the Lord (2:20-21).

A few things to suggest to us about how we grow based on this verse.

Growth and Community

First, growth requires some level of relationship. Christian growth involves, as this verse attests, life within the body of Christ. You can see this in verse 21, “in Christ, the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple” (2:21).

Christian maturity involves character—honesty, selflessness, encouraging, even loving one’s enemies. These are not qualities you mature in by reading books on them in the comfort of your own home. These are skills you develop by practicing them in the relational webs that form a local church. And they often form slow. The local church is the place where our doctrine meets relationships—and must grow from beliefs to practices.

Growth and Humility

Second, Christian growth moves downward before it moves upward. Meaning, its roots are humility. That little phrase, “in whom” at the beginning of verse 21, tells us that this growth only happens “in Christ,” or when we are submitted to Jesus and following him. This only happens when we have confessed our sin, and humbly offered ourselves to Christ. If we approach Christian maturity hoping mainly for more influence and more gifts to we can be more important, we have gotten off on the wrong foot. We need to approach growth by wanting Jesus’ to be made much of, not ourselves.

Growth and God-Hunger

And third, Christian growth, at its heart, is marked by our collective desire for God to dwell among us, in richer and richer degree: “In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (2:22). A sign of growth, therefore, is our community’s hunger for God.

Do you taste the presence of God when you are here on a Sunday? You know that God inhabits the praises of his people (Ps 22:3).⁵ Do you feel just a bit closer to God when we kneel together to pray the prayer of confession? Are you encouraged that God is real, and really there, when you see all your friends gathered to praise him?

Friend, do you not long for more of *this* experience—the presence of the living God?

As a community, let us grow in our hunger for God. Let us work at our own sanctification, that we may be living stones in this building that invite God's presence. Let us gather together regularly, expectantly, prayerfully, to grow as that Temple, where God himself dwells.

While I was in Egypt, I toured some of the most remarkable Temples every built—the Temples in Aswan and Luxor, the structures built by the great Pharaohs. But I tell you those places are dead now—just stones, that's all. But when I come into this place, the Church, on a Sunday Morning, it is alive. And the God who dwells here makes all the glory of ancient Egypt, appear as a lightening bug before the sun.

Small group questions

1. How does the truth that God himself is the builder of the church impact how we view our role in our church's founding and growth? How does it impact how we face challenges in our church? What confidence does this give us in seasons of weakness or discouragement?
2. In Ephesians 2:19-22, we see all three Persons of the Trinity at work in building the church. What are some ways you see the Persons of the Trinity at work in our church? How might this impact how you pray and participate in our church?
3. Paul uses three metaphors for the church, *a kingdom, a family, and a Temple*. Which of these metaphors resonates with you most right now, and why? Which one challenges you the most?
4. In what ways have you experienced the church as family? Where do you see opportunities for our church to grow in providing that kind of relational support—especially for the isolated or struggling?
5. Verse 21 says the church “grows” as it is “joined together.” What are some practical ways we can lean into relationships that foster spiritual growth? Where do you sense the Spirit nudging you to take a next step?
6. The goal is for the church to become “a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” Do you sense the presence of God when you are with other Christians, or assembled at church with them on a Sunday? What might it look like for our small group—and church community—to grow in hunger for God's presence?

⁵ “But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.”