

CHURCH, KNOW WHO YOU ARE (PART 1)

An Exposition of 1 Peter 2.4-10

For many, many centuries, Christians have confessed the Apostles creed and our belief in “the holy catholic church,” meaning the separate and universal church, that single body of people distinct from all others, spiritually speaking, by the sovereign grace of God, in contrast with the world, everyone else who isn’t part of the church.

As we continue expounding the apostle Peter’s first epistle, we come to a passage that teaches us about our identity as Christ’s church, 1 Peter 2.4-10. It describes Jesus Christ in His spiritual identity and His church in relation to Him with respect to our spiritual identity and calling. Hear the biblical passage with all reverence now, because it is the Word of God.

⁴ To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ⁵ ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. ⁶ Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. ⁷ Unto you therefore which believe *he is* precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, ⁸ and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed. ⁹ But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: ¹⁰ which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.

Amen. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. To summarize the main idea of this passage, we say,

Church, know who Christ is and who you are in relation to Christ.

Peter ranges through five basic characterizations of the church’s identity in relation to Christ, with ample comments about His identity, too: 1) a temple, 2) a priesthood, 3) believers, 4) the new Israel, and 5) receivers of God’s mercy. The first three are for today’s sermon, the last two, for another.

I. The Temple with Christ (vv. 4, 5a, 6a)

Two metaphors are mingled together in verses 4-6: “a spiritual house” or temple, and “a holy priesthood.” The priesthood is in the latter part of verse 5 and we will consider it separately. First, look at everything else in verses 4-6a:

⁴ To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ⁵ ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, . . . ⁶ Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious.

“To whom” refers to “the Lord” mentioned in verse three, which is a reference to Jesus Christ in particular. “Ye have tasted that the Lord [Jesus Christ] is gracious. To whom [Jesus Christ, ye are] coming,” is the sense. The translation takes this as stating a fact that you Christians are those who are coming to Christ. It is probably best to take this coming as including not only your conversion, but your

continuing to worship and serve Christ by faith. For this is what true Christians are: those who are coming to Christ for the rest of their lives, until we see Him face to face one day.

Peter interrupts his statement about the church's identity as the Temple to state important and relevant things about Christ's identity in this regard. Christ is a "living stone," the first stone to be placed in the construction of the living and spiritual Temple that Peter has in mind.

The grand theme appears here and throughout Scripture of a Temple for God's dwelling among and with His people. The OT physical tabernacle and later the Jerusalem Temple were but temporary types of the spiritual temple God would raise up in the latter days—first Jesus Christ, then the church of believers in Christ, and finally, the whole redeemed cosmos in the consummation at Christ's second coming.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus identified Himself as the Temple in the more profound sense. He said to the Jews who asked for a sign of His divine authority, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." They thought He was talking about the Jerusalem Temple, but He was speaking about "the temple of His body," specifically, of His death (their destroying Him) and His resurrection (His raising Himself from the dead on the third day of His burial). All this is in John 2.18-22. Jesus is the new and spiritual Temple, the hope of spiritually-minded saints of the OT period, based on oral prophecies at first and later the written prophecies of the OT Scriptures.

Furthermore, Jesus is the first stone that would compose the living, spiritual temple of the last days, built with many living stones. The prophet Isaiah had foretold this centuries before, and Peter quotes the ancient prophecy in verse six. An English translation of the Greek OT cited here runs like this, "therefore thus saith the Lord, even the Lord, Behold, I lay for the foundations of Sion a costly stone, a choice, a corner-stone, a precious *stone*, for its foundations" (Isa 28.16, Brenton LXX in English). And Peter acknowledges that Christ Jesus is "disallowed indeed of [or, rejected by] men." In relation to the reprobate sinners who never shall be saved, Christ is "the stone which the builders disallowed [rejected], . . . a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence" to them who disbelieve and continue to disbelieve (vv. 7, 8).

This is relevant to the church's unique identity in the world. Christ is objectively "chosen by God" and that negates any diminishing of Christ who is "rejected by men." Christ is also objectively "precious," and as we see later in the text, the church recognizes that He is precious (v. 7). Our special identity as the church is bound up in the reality that, unlike the world, we are not rejecting Christ, or stumbling over Christ to our ruin, or offended by Christ. God has made us like Christ the living stone. Being redeemed by His grace, we are now also living stones built upon Christ the living foundation stone as "a spiritual house," that is, the new spiritual Temple where God's glory is especially seen and His people, starting with Jesus, enjoy fellowship with God in and among us!

The church is, then, the spiritual temple God is building in the last days, with Christ as the first and charter member, our entire spiritual foundation, and the rest of us in living union with Him, as the sacred dwelling place of God in fellowship with His holy people. I know we are not much to look at, but we should behold ourselves by faith and know that we are God's Temple in the world. O church, knowing your spiritual identity in your unique relationship with Christ, like Him and united in Him, glorifies God and has vast implications for our worship as the church and our service to God in this world.

II. A Priesthood Through Christ (v. 5b)

Peter's second characterization of the church is as "a holy priesthood," and this, too, throws much light on our identity in our special relation to Jesus Christ. Just like with the living stone, where Jesus is the first and foundational living stone and the church is composed of redeemed people who are living

stones built upon Christ, so it is with the holy priesthood mentioned here. Christ is the High Priest, and it is through Christ our mediating High Priest that we, too, are priests with a priestly ministry, after a fashion. As our High Priest, Christ gave Himself on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, and in this act He was both the priestly offerer and the sacrificial offering that was offered up to God for our redemption. Since the cross, Christ rose again, ascended to heaven, and now serves constantly as our High Priest by His intercessory prayers for us, so that we are “acceptable in the Beloved” (Eph 1.6) and not on account of any merit in us, whether it be our faith or prayers or good works.

Admittedly, the priesthood of old Israel was holy because it was ordained by God. But Peter’s use of the word “holy” here is comparable to his use of the term “spiritual” of the house or Temple. It intends a contrast with the old covenant form of worship. Christ is the first and only “High Priest” of the new spiritual Temple. Just like the Jerusalem Temple was a mere temporary type of the spiritual Temple which would finally appear in redemptive history, so, too, the Jewish priests were mere temporary types of Jesus Christ our High Priest. This is an important theme in the book of Hebrews, which says, for example, that Christ has come as a high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building (Heb 9.11). We Christian believers now have “a high priest over the house of God” (Heb 10.21) in our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one Mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2.5).

These things assumed, Peter presses further and makes a statement about the identity of the church in Christ. He expressly teaches here “the priesthood of believers.” “Ye are . . . a holy priesthood” (v. 5). But the old priests did more than intercede and mediate for sinners. They also offered sacrifices as acts of thanksgiving and praise to God. This is our role and calling as believer-priests. “Ye are . . . a holy priesthood, to offer up *spiritual* sacrifices,” as opposed to physical sacrifices of animals like the OT priests. And we offer up spiritual sacrifices to God in His Temple which are only “acceptable to God by [through] Jesus Christ.” A similar remark is found in the book of Hebrews. “By [through] him [Christ] therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name” (Heb 13.15). The fruit of our lips giving thanks to God is one form of the spiritual sacrifices we offer to God. We also offer up ourselves in thanksgiving sacrifice (Rom 12.1), and our financial giving for the ministry is also “a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God” (Phil 4.18). All these are activities we perform in our identity as a holy priesthood.

III. Believers Prizing Christ (vv. 6b-8)

The third way Peter characterizes the church is as believers who prize Christ, to whom Christ is unspeakably precious. This is suggested by the passage from Isaiah that Peter is reciting here, from the latter part of that quotation. Again, I quote to you the English translation of the Greek Old Testament Peter evidently had in mind, and it says, “he that believes on him [i.e., the costly stone, corner-stone, precious stone, for Zion’s foundations: i.e., Christ] shall by no means be ashamed” (Isa 28.16, Brenton LXX in English). The KJV translation says “make haste;” the sense seems to be of a person who becomes panicked and so is put to shame regarding their trust in the precious stone which is Christ. The KJV translates the text in 1 Peter 2.6, “be confounded,” which English word used to mean to be ruined or destroyed (MWCD11).

So Isaiah prophesied of people in the future who would come to believe in Christ when and after He came into the world. Their faith in Christ will most certainly issue in salvation. Then Peter wrote, “Unto you therefore which believe he [Christ] is precious” (v. 7a), as Isaiah had prophetically declared Christ to be objectively precious. Peter reasons from that passage, then, that believers, in particular, are the ones in the world who recognize that this Messianic stone, Jesus, is “precious.” Here’s an alternative translation of this small part of First Peter that may help us see the connection of ideas: “For it stands written: ‘I lay in Zion a choice corner-stone of great worth. The man who has faith in it

will not be put to shame.’ The great worth of which it speaks is for you who have faith” (NEB), or, “For you who have faith it [Christ the precious stone] has great worth” (REB).

And indeed, through faith, Christ is prized by every real Christian and by the true church as a whole, being made up of believers. Matthew Henry said, “Whatever differences of apprehension and affection there may be among Christians in other things, this they are all agreed in, Jesus Christ is precious to them” (on SS 1.2-6). Thomas Watson said, “A child of God desires Christ for himself; to a believer, not only heaven is precious, but Christ is precious” (Discourses 2.176). Alexander Maclaren said, “Whatever good any soul seeks, Christ is the highest good, and is all good” (The Beatitudes and other Sermons, p. 181). Thomas Goodwin said, “As the soul sees the spiritual excellency and the glory that is in Jesus Christ, so the will sets the highest value and esteem upon that excellency that is in him, a value and esteem far above what a man hath for all other things whatsoever; and *this is to believe*. . . . *This is the first thing in believing on Christ*, which is an act of the will. He that believeth on him, unto him Christ is precious” (Works 8.303, emphasis mine). O praise God, my brother and sister, if you have been made to love Jesus Christ as the most precious One above all others and above all things to you. All with this mark are people that God is determined to save. Jesus said, “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10.37), and, “If any *man* come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14.26).

However, the fact is, that vast multitudes of people in the world do not prize Jesus Christ. He is not precious to them. They do not love Him. In fact, to say they dislike Him would be an understatement. They are not His disciples but His enemies. They live in a constant state of disobedience to Him. And to explain Peter here, “unto them which are disobedient [to Christ, He is] the stone which the builders disallowed [rejected], the same [stone] is made [by God] the head of the corner, and [also, to them, Christ is] a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” This is the sad condition of everyone who persists in refusing to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and to follow Him as their Lord. “They stumble at the word, being disobedient,” Peter says. To disbelieve in Christ always entails disobedience to Christ.

Now we might wonder, why, O why, do some people believe the gospel and not others? Why do some people go to their deathbed without ever prizing Jesus Christ as the blessed Savior that He is? Why do they reject Him again and again and again, stopping the ears of their heart to every gospel sermon, resisting every Christian witnessing to them in private, failing to seek God in solitude through Jesus Christ? Well, they are sinners, you say, and rightly so. Of course they bear personal responsibility for their incorrigible unbelief. But you who are now Christians were also unconverted sinners just as they are, and yet Christ is precious to you, now. Who made you to differ from anyone else? What good thing do you have that you did not receive as a gracious gift from God to your unworthy soul?

Yes, Peter says that unbelievers who perish in their sins are disobedient, but he adds another reason besides that. Look at the end of verse eight. These Peter has in mind are “being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.” The Geneva Bible translation of 1560 says, “disobedient, unto the which thing they were even ordeined [ordained].” In other words, unlike you who are chosen by God for salvation, other particular individuals of the world who never believe in Christ, are appointed and ordained by God to their unbelief and disobedience!

In God’s eternal plan, He chooses some to be saved to display the glory of His mercy and appointed others to be lost to display the glory of His wrath. These people that Scripture calls “vessels for wrath” are “fitted” by God “to destruction,” as a potter makes one vessel for an honorable use and another from the very same lump for dishonorable use (Rom 9.21, 22). God is the potter and all humanity is the clay, and the sovereign Lord makes the difference which kind of a vessel you will become.

Now I know this is a hard saying but Peter's doctrine here is clear enough concerning the non-elect, also called the reprobate (which means rejected). John Gill explains it very well.

This passage, in connexion with the words preceding, plainly shows, that as there were some, whom God had appointed and fore-ordained to believe in Christ, on whom he determined to bestow true faith in him, to whom he is the elect, precious corner-stone; so there were others, whom he determined to leave as children of disobedience, in the infidelity and unbelief in which the fall had concluded them; through which disobedience or infidelity, they stumble at Christ, and his word, and in consequence thereof, justly perish (The Cause of God and Truth, 136).

The old Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) taught this same doctrine in these words:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished. . . . The rest of mankind [not elect], God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extends or withholds mercy as he pleases, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice (WCF 3.3, 4, 7).

We must break off the sermon here and finish the topic another time, but, in closing, let us feel more powerfully than ever that Christ is precious to us, dear brethren. You and I have only the free and sovereign grace of Jesus Christ to thank for our salvation. He did not save you because you believe. You believe because He was pleased to save you! You believe because you are eternally chosen by God for salvation. You believe because, despite the fact that you were an unbeliever like everyone else, you were not appointed to ruin for your sin like so many others are appointed, and there is nothing anyone can do about it!

I close with sacred verse from a seventh-century Latin hymn about our themes today:

Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the Head and Cornerstone,
Chosen of the Lord and precious,
Binding all the church in one;
Holy Zion's help for ever
And her confidence alone.

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IV. The New Israel of Christ (v. 9)

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V. God's People by Mercy Through Christ (v. 10)

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