

“PRIESTS IN THE TEMPLE OF GOD”

I. INTRODUCTION

This passage emphasizes our new identity in Jesus Christ. If you are a Christian, your identity is determined by your union with Christ. A Christian needs to look to Christ in order to discover who he or she is. This is exactly what Peter does in these verses. He explains who we are by virtue of our union with Christ. He tells us that those who come to Christ are being made into a holy priesthood in the temple of God. That is the basic message conveyed in this text. In this sermon, we will consider this message in two points: (1) the church is the house of God; and (2) the church is a royal priesthood.

II. THE CHURCH IS THE HOUSE OF GOD

Peter says that the church is the house of God. We are being made into God's temple, the place where he makes his presence dwell with man. In the OT, the Lord took up residence in the temple in Jerusalem. But after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he takes up residence in the church. We are his house. And he is building this house upon the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the cornerstone upon which the church is being built. And the only way anyone can be a part of God's house, the only

way a person can become a part of the community in which God makes his presence dwell, is by coming to Jesus Christ in faith and living in communion with him.

Notice how this passage serves as a corrective to our tendency to think of the Christian faith only in terms of an individual's personal relationship with God. On the one hand, it still affirms the need for personal faith in Christ. It tells us that a person needs to come to Christ in order to be made into a living stone. However, the thing that makes these stones significant is how they are used. They do not have any particular significance in and of themselves. Rather, their significance comes from the fact that the Lord uses them to build his house. We American Christians tend to get this backwards. Too often, we think that the church exists in order to assist us in our private walk with the Lord. But this passage says the exact opposite. It tells us that individual living stones exist for the sake of the whole spiritual house. We are the building blocks out of which the Lord's spiritual house is being built. The individual Christian finds his significance as he becomes a part of the church as a whole. At the very heart of your identity as a Christian is the fact that you have become a part of the church of Jesus Christ. When you come to Jesus you become one living stone in the house of God. There is something fundamentally corporate about the Christian life, and this is something upon which we who live in such an individualistic culture need to reflect.

Those who come to Christ in faith are being built up as a spiritual house, with Christ as their cornerstone. But for others, for those who reject Christ, he becomes a stone of stumbling. Instead of being built up in him, they trip and fall over him. Have you ever wondered why people reject Jesus Christ? After all, the gospel really is good news. It tells us that God has provided a way by which we can be saved from the condemnation that we rightly deserve. Why would anyone reject this? Why doesn't everyone accept Jesus Christ? Peter provides this answer in verse 8: "They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do." People reject Christ for the same reason that other people accept Christ: because God is sovereign over salvation. While the church is called to preach the gospel to everyone, an individual's response to Jesus Christ is ultimately dependent upon God's sovereign decree. Before the foundation of the world, because of his sovereign grace, God ordained some people to eternal life. At God's appointed time, those people will believe the gospel. This is what Luke says in Acts 13:48, where he writes: "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." God has appointed the elect to eternal life, and he grants them saving faith at his appointed time. But Peter tells us that God has also appointed other people to eternal destruction, and that these people are therefore destined to disobey the gospel's summons to repent and believe in Christ. We may find this teaching difficult, but we have to remember that God is free to have mercy upon whom he will have mercy and to have compassion upon whom he will have compassion. He is a debtor to no man.

III. THE CHURCH IS A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

We turn now to our second point: the church is a royal priesthood. This is what is sometimes referred to as the “priesthood of all believers,” a doctrine that was recovered by the Protestant Reformers at a time when the Roman church had essentially cast it aside. But the Reformers did not invent this doctrine. Nor was it invented by the writers of the NT. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was just as true for the OT church as it is for the NT church. We may find this surprising, because we usually think of Israel’s priesthood in terms of the priesthood in which only the Levites served, the priesthood that only permitted Israel’s high priest to enter the holy of holies once per year. However, Exodus 19 says that the entire nation of Israel would be a “kingdom of priests.” The Lord redeemed the entire nation of Israel in order to make her a priestly kingdom. Israel had two kinds of priesthood: the priestly offices in which the Levites served, and the royal priesthood in which the entire nation participated. We see something very similar to this in the NT. On the one hand, the church has a special office of ministry, the ministry of word and sacrament. On the other hand, the church also has the priestly ministry in which all believers participate.

What is the priesthood of all believers? It is a familiar phrase for many Protestants, but it has often been misunderstood. It does not mean that each individual Christian is free to interpret the Bible however he pleases, or to determine for himself what a faithful

Christian life should look like. Nor does it mean that individual Christians have no need of the church's ministry of word and sacrament. Such notions are easily refuted by the Scriptures. Instead, the priesthood that Peter is talking about is the corporate priesthood in which every Christian participates by contributing to the worship and work of the church. This is why, when someone becomes a member of our church, they have to affirm that they will "support the Church in its worship and work to the best of [their] ability." We exercise our priesthood by making the flourishing of the church our greatest aspiration in life. The church is the place where the Lord is doing his greatest work in this world. It is his temple. If you belong to Jesus Christ, then you are called to priestly service in his temple, the church.

What does our priestly service in the church look like? Peter says that our priesthood involves the offering of "spiritual sacrifices." What are these sacrifices? They are all of the duties that Christ requires of his people. Even though our service to the Lord is still corrupted by indwelling sin, the Lord finds it acceptable when it is done through faith in Christ. Calvin writes,

"For we who are defiled in ourselves, yet are priests in him, offer ourselves and our all to God, and freely enter the heavenly sanctuary that the sacrifices of prayers and praise that we bring may be acceptable and sweet-smelling before God." (*Institutes*, 2.15.6)

We offer spiritual sacrifices in our praises, in our prayers, in our giving, in our self-discipline, and in our acts of love and service to others. All of this constitutes our priestly service in Christ. And, as Paul writes in Romans 12, our entire lives are to be lived as “living sacrifices” to the Lord.

Peter also says that our priestly service involves proclaiming the excellencies of the God who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. God has saved us and made us living stones in his temple so that we might declare his praises. At the heart of our priestly service is our worship of the Lord. Worship is your chief calling as a Christian. It is the most important thing that you do. A Christian should not think of worship as something to be endured for ninety minutes each Sunday. Worship is what you were created for. It is what you were redeemed for. It is what you will do for all eternity. Worship should not be a burden for a Christian. It should be your greatest delight.

IV. USES

This passage teaches us that the church is God’s temple and God’s priesthood. Consider now two points of application that you can draw from this text. First, this passage shows you that it is of the utmost importance that you come to Jesus Christ and cling to him in faith. This is the only way you can become a stone in God’s temple. You need to come

to Christ. And there are two senses in which you need to come to Christ. On the one hand, you need to come acknowledging your sin, repenting of it, and looking to Christ alone for your salvation. That is Christian conversion, and without it, you cannot become a living stone in God's house. And if you are not being made into a living stone, then Christ will be a stone of stumbling for you. Consider today where you stand in relation to Jesus Christ. Do not assume that you are a Christian simply because you are here today, or because you were raised in the church. In order to come to Christ, you first need to see your dreadful state without him. No one truly comes to Christ to be saved from his sin until he is convinced that he is in need of salvation. Have you seen the wretchedness of your sinful condition? Do you realize that Jesus is the only rock upon which you can stand? Do you believe that he is both willing and able to save you? Consider the greatness of his grace and mercy. Do not delay. Come to Christ today. Let him be your cornerstone, not your stumbling stone!

Conversion is crucial, but it is not the only sense in which you need to come to Christ. You also need to keep on coming to him for all the days of your life. In fact, this is probably what Peter is emphasizing in verse 4, since the Greek verb that he uses suggests a continual coming to Christ. Christians need to abide in Christ. He is the foundation upon which your entire life needs to be built. He is the living stone that gives you spiritual life as a stone in God's temple. You need fresh supplies of his grace each and every day. Keep coming to him. Come to worship each week. Pray, read the Bible, and

feed upon Christ by faith each time you partake of the Lord's Supper. Worship in private and in your families throughout the week. You need to keep coming to Christ, so that he may be your source of life, your living stone.

The second application that I want to point out is to remind you of your priestly calling as God's people. You are called to proclaim the excellencies of the one who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light. But you can only proclaim something if you know what it is. You need to understand the excellencies of the Lord. You need to know what the Lord has revealed about himself and his plan of salvation in his Word. You cannot proclaim something if you do not know it.

Furthermore, you cannot proclaim that something is excellent if you are not convinced of its excellence yourself. Just try convincing a child that brussel sprouts are excellent without being willing to eat them yourself! Are you convinced of the excellence of the Lord? Is he truly your heart's greatest treasure? Is he your soul's glory, joy, and crown? Do you truly love him more than anything else? He must be excellent to you if you are to be a herald of his excellence. Christians, consider the excellencies of our God:

Shall we still dread God's displeasure, who to save freely gave his most cherished Treasure?

To redeem us, he hath given his own Son from the throne of his might in heaven.

Sermon on 1 Peter 2:4-10
OT Reading: Isaiah 8:11-22

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Rev. Andy Wilson

He becomes the Lamb that taketh sin away and for aye full atonement maketh.

For our life his own he tenders; and our race, by his grace, meet for glory renders.

Dearest Lord, thee will I cherish. Though my breath fail in death, yet I shall not perish,

But with thee abide forever there on high, in that joy which can vanish never.