

THE CHURCH - THE PEOPLE OF GOD
I PETER 2:4-10

NEED: **TO UNDERSTAND WHO WE ARE SO WE CAN DO
WHAT WE OUGHT.**

PROPOSITION: **WE ARE HIS PEOPLE WITH A PRIESTLY CALLING.**

OBJECTIVE: **TO PREPARE GOD'S PEOPLE TO TAKE UP THEIR
PRIESTLY RESPONSIBILITY IN THE CHURCH AND
IN THE WORLD.**

INTRODUCTION:

There is a lot of confusion in the church concerning the church. Many are not certain what the church is, or what the church is to do. Win Arn, a well known consultant on church growth, tells of a survey he made in over 1,000 congregations. He asked the same question in each of these congregations, "Why does the church exist?" Of the church members surveyed, 89% said, "The church exists for the purpose of taking care of my family and my needs." They saw the role of the pastor and staff as that of taking care of the sheep and to make sure that they are happy. Only 11% said, "The purpose of the church is to win the world for Jesus Christ."

In this same survey the pastors had different answers. When they were asked concerning the purpose of the Church they gave an answer that was the exact opposite. 90% of them said that the purpose of the Church is to win the world to Christ and only 10% said that it was to care for the needs of the members. It is easy to understand much of the tension that exists between the members of the Church and the pastoral leadership of the Church. They are looking at the Church

from an entirely different perspective.

It is extremely important in our day that we go back to our source documents to consider the nature and the purpose of the Church.

No statement in the New Testament is more basic to our understanding of who we are and why we are here than this extended paragraph in I Peter chapter 2. Peter mixes together several metaphors to present before us the Church as the people of God. For our own clarification concerning who we are and what we are to do, let us take a careful look at these inspired and authoritative words from the pen of Simon Peter.

I. YOU ENTER THE CHURCH THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

This insight helps us understand who we are and why we are here. There is much confusion about the Church and its relationship to our Christian life in our day. Peter begins this paragraph by saying, "As you come to Him, the living stone" - "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood."

1. YOU BECOME A PART OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD THROUGH CHRIST.

"As you come to Him," addresses the initiation of the Christian life and the continuance of the Christian life. The participle used by Paul in this statement is one that has the continuous force in it. It could be literally translated, "As you continue to come to Him." There is a point in which you initially come to Christ as the "living stone." This is the moment when you make your

initial decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ. You place your faith in Him and begin to build your life upon Him as the unshakable, immovable rock of ages. But the Christian life continues as you continue to come to Christ. There is never a time at which Jesus Christ is not the very center of your life. You come to Him with the same hunger and regularity that the new born babe comes to the mother for sustenance day after day after day. The Christian life consists in staying close to and in fellowship with Jesus Christ, the living stone.

2. He makes you a living stone in the Church.

This is the other side of the Christian experience. When you come to Christ and make Him the living stone for your life, He in turn makes you a living stone. He imparts to you the life that He has in himself so that you share His life. Then, as your Lord, He places you in the great spiritual edifice that He is building, even the Church. You become a vital living stone in the structure of the Church itself.

This act of Christ puts you into a relationship with other living stones. No living stone by itself can ever make a temple. No two living stones by themselves can ever make a temple. Have you ever tried to calculate how many bricks there must be in this beautiful structure in which we assemble for worship this morning? I am sure an exact calculation could be made, but there are obviously thousands of them. When they set out to build this building, they knew that it would require thousands of brick. Likewise, the Lord Himself when He set out to build the great spiritual temple that He is building, He knew that it would require millions of living stones.

Consequently He has been placing as living stones each person who comes to Him in faith and makes Him the Lord of their lives.

Individualism has done terrific damage to the Church in our day. We have come to a time in which many members have very little appreciation for the corporate life of the church. For them church is something they can take or leave it. But a Christian who is not vitally connected to the Church is like a football player without a team; a soldier without a platoon; a tuba player without an orchestra; a sheep without a flock; a child without a family; a stone without a wall.

The great truth that we are to understand is that we come into the church through Christ. We do not come to Christ through the Church, but rather we come to the church through Christ. But everyone who comes to the Christ finds themselves placed in the fellowship and in the life of the Church. This is true both of the universal church of Christ and of the local expression of that universal church, a local assembly like this First Baptist Church.

II. THE PEOPLE OF GOD HAVE PRIESTLY RESPONSIBILITIES.

This is the place where Peter begins to mix his metaphors. As living stones we come a part of the great temple itself that the Lord Jesus is building. But then the living stones in the wall of the temple actually become the holy priesthood that ministers in the temple. "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." The stones then become the priest.

Because the priest occupied such a prominent place in God's Old Testament people, this term has a rich background when we find it in the New Testament. We learn both from this passage and from the Old Testament that there are two aspects of this priestly ministry that belongs to the corporate church, the people of God. It is noteworthy that in this passage the word priest does not occur in the singular, but rather you see the priesthood as a corporate group. It is true that we are individually priest of God, but we hold this priesthood in common with all other believers. We make up the priesthood together. We could no more be the priesthood by ourselves that we could be the temple by ourselves.

1. Worship - sacrifices to God.

The basic purpose of a temple is worship. A temple is a place where the worshipper bows in the presence of and ministers to and before the deity. The priest is the one who enables that worship to take place. Peter makes this clear in the passage when he reminds us, "are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The priest in the Old Testament system served the people as they stood in the temple and enabled the offering of sacrifices to God. The sacrifices that they offered were physical and material. They offered animals and grain and wines. The priests in the New Covenant have a different kind of sacrifice to offer to God. They offer to God "spiritual sacrifices." There is no need for the type of sacrifices that the Old Testament priest brought before God. Atonement has been

made for our sins through the death of Christ upon the cross once for all. Based on the sufficiency of that sacrifice we are able to bring to God spiritual sacrifices - - the sacrifice of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, a surrendered life, special gifts for ministry, love and gratitude.

It is this understanding of priesthood that is fundamental in the New Testament. Much of the discussion of the priesthood of the believer in recent years has focused upon the direct access that the priest has to God and the truth that we do not need to come to God through any other person.

While that is obviously a fundamental understanding in our priesthood it is not the primary emphasis of the New Testament. The primary emphasis of the New Testament is that we are responsible as priest of bringing to God sacrifices. It is not that one of us is to bring a sacrifice, but it is rather that all of us collectively are to bring to God spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to Him through Jesus Christ our Lord.

2. Witness - sharing a witness with the world.

We are not only "a holy priesthood" but we are also "a royal priesthood." Some scholars think that the distinction to be made between these two descriptive words is the realm of ministry. We are made a holy priesthood so we can minister before God, but we are also made a royal priesthood so we can minister in the world and to the world. In the great statement Peter writes, "But you are a chosen people, royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light." This meaningful statement gives us insight into the purpose of the Church. We are the people of God, a royal priesthood, so that we can share with the world, "the praises of Him who called you

out of darkness into His wonderful light."

The word translated in our text "declare" has in it an interesting idea. It could be translated into this context "advertise." There would seem to be two things implied in this verb. One is that we ourselves become an advertisement of the mighty power and grace of God as we live in the world. We walk in the world as a "royal priesthood". As those who have received a new understanding of their own identity and have had their lives transformed. We stand in the midst of the world like a large highway sign advertising the kind of God our God really is.

The other idea that would be in this word would be that we advertise in the sense that we bear a verbal witness to the greatness of our God. We are ready and prompt to share with the world that our God is the Creator, the heavenly Father, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God who raised Jesus from the dead, the God who is in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, the God who does all things well. This world will never know the kind of God that we serve until we become the advertisement in the world that God wants us to be. It is the advertisement of witness that this world so desperately needs.

Someone has observed that members of the church are like an impressive machine I once read about. It had hundreds of wheels, cogs, gears, pulleys, belts, and lights, which all move or light up at a touch of the button. When someone asks, "What does it do?" the inventor replied, "Oh, it doesn't do anything - but doesn't it run beautifully?" This must not be said of us. We are not just an impressive machine where everything runs efficiently; we are the people of God with a

ministry. We are the people of God with a priestly ministry. This priestly ministry brings up before the presence of God in worship and into the midst of the world with witness. Our vision is to worship God and to share a witness of His love and grace with the world about us.

We need to see that the ministry belongs to each of us. Each of us has worship and witness responsibilities. Howard Hendricks tells the story that explains a problem that we have in the modern church. He said his father, a military man, once told him: you can tell where your troops are by what they are complaining about. If they are complaining about warm beer, you know they are no where near the front lines; but, if they are complaining about a lack of ammunition, you know they are in the heat of the battle. Many of the complaints I hear today would fall into the category of the "warm beer." It is rarely ever that I hear a complaint about a shortage of ammunition. When we get into the ministry that God has given us as a people it is amazing how our perspective on the Church will begin to change.

III. THE PEOPLE OF GOD HAVE RECEIVED HIS MERCY.

Peter closes this encouraging passage with a memorable statement, "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy." These words of Peter were first addressed to those believers scattered out across that part of the world in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. They were primarily people out of a pagan background. They had not grown up with the benefits of the Old Testament faith. It was a total surprise to them that they had the privilege of being a part of God's saving activity in the world. Peter borrows an Old Testament text to help us understand

that as non-Jewish people we have actually been made a part of His elect and chosen people.

1. None of us deserve to be a part of the people of God.

This is the underlying truth of this great statement by Peter. We sometimes lose our perspective and begin to view the Church as a group of people that ought to be honored that we have chosen to be a member of the Church. None of us deserve the privilege of being a living stone in the great temple God is building or a part of the priesthood that served in that spiritual temple. We are in the temple and in the priesthood totally because of God's mercy.

2. Mercy means we have received something that we did not deserve.

Our being in the temple and in the priesthood requires the mercy of God as an explanation. It was because God had pity upon us that He called us out of the darkness of our sin and our ignorance into the life of His love and grace. It was his mercy that changed our darkness into light and gave us hope of eternal life. What a privilege has come to us through the mercy of our God. Unto Him be praise for ever and ever for making us a part of His people.

Now, do you understand who we are and why we are here? We are the people of God! We are a holy and royal priesthood! We are here for God's purposes! We are here to render worship unto God and to share a witness with the world about us. If we are not presenting acceptable worship before God and joyful witness to the world about us, then we are denying the very purpose of our existence. Let me close with a little jingle that I came across entitled, "Ten Little Christians."

10 LITTLE CHRISTIANS

10 little Christians came to church all the time;

one fell out with the preacher, then there were nine.

9 little Christians stayed up late;

one overslept on Sunday, then there were eight.

8 little Christians on their way to heaven;

one took the low road, then there were seven.

7 little Christians, chirping like chicks;

one didn't like the singing, then there were six.

6 little Christians seemed very much alive;

one took a vacation then there were five.

5 little Christians pulling for heaven's shore;

one stopped to rest awhile, then there were four.

4 little Christians each as busy as a bee;

one got his feelings hurt, then there were three.

3 little Christians couldn't decide what to do;

one couldn't have his way, then there were two.

2 little Christians each won one more;

now don't you see, two and two make four.

4 little Christians worked early and late,

each brought one, now there were eight.

8 little Christians, if they double as before....

in just seven Sundays we'd have one

thousand twenty-four.

In this little jingle there is a lesson true---

you belong either to the building or to the

wrecking crew!"

May God help all of us to be a part of the building crew! The holy priesthood.