

A Spiritual House - 1 Peter 2:4-12

Church has changed in recent months as we have spent months away from the building we are used to meeting in. But, what is the church fundamentally?

In this passage Peter gives a vision for what he thinks the church is.

Holy Buildings

For most of us our main experience of being part of church is meeting in a building! Indeed, our church buildings play an important part in supporting our identity and community.

But, what when you have no building? In a way that has been our experience as a church for the last few months. As we've been forced to fundamentally change how we do church, it is good to think more carefully about what church is.

The earliest Christians, especially those who Peter was writing to, people living in small Christian communities scattered across the vast regions of what is now Northern Turkey and was then a remote area of the Roman Empire had no religious building. There was no place set apart for God, no place where they could gather and no place people could come to find out about the Christian faith. How were these Christians, scattered refugees that they were to hold on to their faith, their identity, their sense of belonging without a building to unite them?

Peter's answer is radical and profound. He says that as Christians we are like living stones being built together into a spiritual house. In other words, the people are the building!

But what is a 'Living Stone'? Peter builds his argument on an idea from the Old Testament. The idea that the Messiah would be a cornerstone. For Peter before we say anything else about the church, we need to say that Jesus, **the living stone**, is the cornerstone.

The Living Stone - vs. 4,6-8

To help us see what it means to be a cornerstone, Peter quotes from three Old Testament passages.

Precious - vs. 6; Isa. 28:16a

He first quotes from Isaiah 28. The key idea about this stone is that it is precious!

He is precious to God. Because he was chosen by God.

1:20 tells us that Jesus was chosen before the Creation of the World to be our Saviour.

1:3 Peter describes God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's unique and precious Son.

But, because he is our Saviour, he is also precious to us.

1:18-19 reminds us that we were freed from our sin, through the precious blood of Christ. Our mercy, grace, forgiveness and living hope are only possible because of Jesus Christ. If we trust in him we will not be put to shame.

Who or what can have more value to us as Christians than Jesus? Surely, he is precious to us.

Rejected - vs. 7; Psalm 118:22

Yet, if Jesus is so precious to God and for those of us that are Christians precious to us, why do people reject Jesus today and why did they crucify Jesus 2,000 years ago.

The second quote Peter uses is from Psalm 118:22. It is a quote that Jesus used to help answer this question.

Jesus uses the quote as a conclusion to one of his parables. In it he pictures the Jewish leaders as tenants of a vineyard, whose owner is meant to represent God. Because the tenants don't like paying rent - they ignore, abuse, beat up and even kill the servants the owner sends to them to collect the rent. In the end the owner sends his son, but the tenants decide to kill him.

Jesus was predicting his crucifixion, but the parable shows that his crucifixion was not an anomaly, it was the natural pattern of the way the world relates to God. We live in a world that wants to reject God as its rightful owner and do our own thing.

That means people will continue to reject Jesus. But, God does not reject Jesus, he is precious to God. When people crucified Jesus, God raised him from the dead. And made him the chief cornerstone. The foundation of a new people, the church.

Confrontation - vs. 8; Isa. 8:14

The first quote shows that Jesus is precious to God and those who believe. The second quote shows us that we should not be surprised when people reject him. The last quote shows us that Jesus is a trip hazard.

Jesus is God's great confrontation to humanity. He says, you've turned away from me, I'm offering you a wonderful way back to me and life in my Son. But if you reject him, that's it you are doomed to fall!

For some people Jesus is the most precious means to the most wonderful salvation. For others their rejection of him simply confirms their destiny as hell.

- So how does all this help us to understand what it means to be the church?

Firstly, it shows us that Jesus is the cornerstone. Without him the building would not exist. He is the start of the church and the rest of the church finds its place in relation to him. When he loses his true place in the church, the church begins to crack up, crumble and fall. Jesus must be seen as the church's greatest treasure!

Secondly, it shows us that Jesus creates the most fundamental division in the world. We either trust in him or reject him and our eternal destiny becomes rooted and based in that.

The church grows out of that ultimate division. When we lose sight of that fundamental division and compromise our allegiance to Christ for the sake of pleasing the world, then again the church loses its identity and fails in its purpose.

So, what else does it mean to be church? What kind of 'Spiritual House' is it Peter is talking about in verse 5?

The Spiritual House

Rejected, but precious

Firstly, the church is rejected, but precious.
As living stones we are like the living stone.
Like Jesus we will be rejected by men, but we need to remember that we are precious to God.

That means we will at times feel like 'aliens and refugees' in the world as Peter says in verse 11. That can be tough. We all want to be accepted, we all want to belong. But, remember the world that rejects Jesus will fall, those who trust in Jesus will never be put to shame.

In fact, although we may be rejected by the world like Jesus, we need to remember that we are precious to God!

Look at how Peter describes the church in 2:9:

" a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God"

Doesn't that make you feel like you are part of something special. That you belong to something amazing.

Just take one phrase for now: *Royal Priesthood*.... In ancient societies, the most important people were the 'royals'! Even in our country today the 'royal family' have immense privilege and status.

And in any religious society the priesthood are the ones who have the privilege of coming closest to God, the status of representing God to the world.

Peter says that for the church this is not the status and privilege of just a few - this is the privilege and status of the whole people of God! You are precious to God!!

- The church in our society has lost much of the privilege and status it used to hold. The media loves to find bad news stories about the church and Christians to point out its failures and stay quiet about its successes. Many people picture the church to be simply a gathering of a few old ladies in a cold building singing dreary songs. Nothing prestigious about that!

But, as Christians we must see the church as God sees it. Even where it is a few old ladies gathered together, God sees it as the 'royal priesthood'!!

Scattered, but together

Secondly, the church is scattered, but together.

In the ancient world, temples were buildings that acted as a focus and a gathering point for the followers of a particular god. Even the Jews would travel from all over the world to worship in the temple in Jerusalem.

Yet, the Christians Peter was writing to had no focal place to go to. No building to unite in. In fact they were scattered as small groups over a vast area.

Yet, in the image Peter builds up building of living stones, built on Christ the cornerstone. These scattered people are brought together to be a glorious temple to God.

There is a fundamental unity to the people of God, even though we are scattered around the world.

One of the phrases Peter uses in verse 9 to describe the church is 'a chosen people'. Some Bibles translate it a 'chosen race'!

This description was first used by Isaiah to describe and encourage the Israelites who were scattered in Exile in Babylon. Although, they were scattered and no longer able to come together in the temple, they needed to remember that they were still God's chosen race and find a sense of unity and togetherness in that.

Peter radically applies this title not to the nation or race of the Jews, but to those from all nations and races who trust in Christ.

For Christians, this should completely undermine any sense of racism!

Although we live in a world where people are expressing their nationhood more strongly again - such as Trump's, 'Make America Great Again!' as Christians we remember that although we will want to be loyal to our own nation, our ultimate allegiance belongs not to our nation or race, but to being a part of God's people the church.

That means as a Christian I identify more closely with a Chinese Christian than I do with an English non-Christian. I may live 1,000s of miles from my Chinese brother or sister in Christ, but together we are living stones being built into a spiritual house with Christ as the cornerstone!

Set apart, but living for

Finally, as God's spiritual house we are set apart, but living for. We've seen that our attitude to Christ creates a fundamental division between us and the world. We are set apart from the world, we are called to be different to the world and yet we are not called to live apart from the world, rather we are called to live for the world.

Another description of the church in 2:9 is 'a Holy nation.' This comes from Exodus 19 and is part of God's vision for what he wanted the people of Israel to be. It comes as part of the introduction to the Ten Commandments, which follow in Exodus 20.

To be 'holy' means to be set apart for God. It is a calling to be different to the rest of the world, by following God's rules for life. To show the world by our lives what God calls a good life.

This is linked to another phrase that also comes from Exodus 19:

"A people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him..."

We are God's special people in the world to point the world to God. 2:11-12 give us two reasons to live good lives in obedience to God:

2:11 -vely: abstain from evil for your own sake

2:12 +vely: live good lives for the world's sake

If we want to make a difference in the world, we need to live differently from the world!

Although, Jesus brings a division to the world, that does not mean that the world is utterly wicked. Peter's vision in 2:12 is that the world, although it has rejected Jesus, can still

recognise what is good and that through the good lives of Christians, people will be brought themselves to trust in Jesus and become living stones, glorifying God on the last day!

Someone who became a Christian as a student told me that what made him take notice and be interested in christianity was noticing that the Christian students were different. They weren't getting drunk and sleeping around like many of the other students.

If we want to make a difference in the world, we need to live differently from the world!

We are set apart from the world, but we live for the world, that they too may come to discover Christ as their precious saviour!

What is church?

So, what is church? It is us, the living stones who have been brought to the great cornerstone, Jesus Christ.

We may be rejected by the world, but we are precious to God.

We may be scattered, but we are united together in Christ as one nation.

We may be set apart from the world, but we live for the world to bring them to Christ.