

Affirming the God-Given Identity of the Church 1 Peter 2:4-10

Essential meaning

Before Peter gets into the practical implications starting in 2:11-12, he expands of the call to holiness by talking about the nature of the church as a holy community. All the images refer to the church collectively. The text easily divides into three section: 2:4-5, 2:6-8, and 2:9-10

Church's Identity as Living Stones Being Built Into a Spiritual House – 2:4-5

Peter recasts OT images of a high priest entering the holy temple, with four differences:

- 1. We do not approach the altar. We approach Christ himself, who was rejected by humans but chosen and precious by God.**
 - The very nature of our worship carries an essence of “divine reversal,” i.e., we worship the one whom the world *rejects* but whom God *selects* (*chooses*) and makes *precious*.
 - When we worship God’s Christ (e.g., song “We place you on the highest place...”), we are accepting our rejected marginalized status in the world and placing ourselves at God’s disposal to *choose* us as his *precious* possession for his purposes.
 - “The election of both Jesus and believers identifies them as demarcated and dignified, elite and exalted in God’s sight. Yet it is important...to understand that being chosen by God and being precious to him does not exempt them from suffering. The Lord Jesus is the example for them: he was chosen (1:20) and precious to God, but rejected by many and killed as a sacrificial lamb (1:19).”¹

- 2. We do not come to the temple. We are ourselves the living stones God is using to build his temple.**²
 - God is building a temple, a “spiritual house” made of humans. This community is the replacement of the temple in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:21-22).

- 3. We do not go through priests. We are ourselves a royal priesthood.**

We are a “kingdom of priests” (Revelation 1:6), but the emphasis here is the *holiness* of our priestly identity, and our being *separated* for a special service of God to the world.

- 4. We do not present physical sacrifices. We offer spiritual sacrifices through the mediation of Jesus Christ**
 - The context of 1 Peter helps us understand the nature of the sacrifices: “Just as the house in v. 5 is ‘spiritual’ and not material, being made of living stones and not limestone, so the sacrifices are immaterial and consist in having a heart purified by the Holy Spirit through the word of God (1:22–23). Thus, the sacrifices are actions and attitudes performed by those cleansed people. Spiritual sacrifices might include those activities that Peter will address later on: the good conduct of Christian wives and husbands (3:1–7), the upright behavior of believers even in the face of abuse (3:9–16), and the discipline of controlling one’s lusts (4:2–4).”³

¹ Dennis R. Edwards, *1 Peter: The Story of God Bible Commentary, Volume 17* (Zondervan Academic), 88.

² A good case is made by some scholars that the best translation is not “you are *being built*,” but “*build yourselves*,” as the end of a string of imperatives in 1:13 – “set your hope full on the grace to be revealed,” 1:15 – “be holy in all you do,” 1:16 – “be holy because I am holy,” 1:17 – “live in reverent fear,” 1:22 – “show sincere love to each other,” and 1:22 – “crave pure spiritual milk.”

³ Dennis R. Edwards, *1 Peter*, 89.

- Hebrews also mentions praise and service: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” (Hebrews 13:15–16). Paul emphasizes the sacrifice of one’s entire person: “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” (Romans 12:1)

Church’s Identity in Christ, the Discarded Stone Whom Became the Cornerstone - 2:6-8

Peter uses three OT passages (Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 8:14) to expand on the theme of God *choosing* and placing high value on what the world *rejects*. In this case, he adds a theme of God’s *vindication*, “the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (2:7). The implication is “the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame” (2:7, ref. Isaiah 28:16). He also validates the choice of believing over rejecting Christ by comparing unbelief to builders who reject the stone they believe is worthless but is actually most important (2:7, ref. Psalm 118:22), and the rock that people step over or kick away actually makes them stumble and fall (2:8, ref. Isaiah 8:14). This means there are serious consequences to rejecting Jesus.

Church’s Calling to Offer Praise to God – 2:9-10

Over against those who have rejected Jesus, believers have accepted him and form a faithful community who become instruments to bring about God’s desire for the world. The message of the whole scripture is that God desires to be in a relationship with human beings who would replicate his love for the world. We do this as “we declare the praises of the one who called us out of darkness into this marvelous light.”

Four descriptions of the church’s special relationship with God (echoes Exodus 19.3-8):

- **A special possession among all peoples** – Compare Malachi 3:17, “treasured possession”
- **A kingdom of priests** – Notice the mix of metaphors. First, we are royal, pointing to rule. Second, we are priests who mediate between the people and God. We rule with Jesus and minister God’s grace to others.
- **A holy nation** – This transcends all earthly categories and affiliations. The mission of God’s people is transnational and universal.
- **A people of God who have received God’s mercy** – Compare Hosea 1:6-9 and 2:23, where God wishes to woo back his children who were Lo-Ruhamah (“not loved”) and Lo-Ammi (“not my people”) with his saying “You are my people” and their saying “You are my God.”

Points of application

Temptations for the culturally marginalized who once were culturally influential

- *Triumphant reclamation* – 1 Peter was written to politically powerless people who were asked to fulfill mission with no reasonable chance of success in transforming their culture. Their essential witness was to spread the gospel and live exemplary, godly lives. God works most powerfully through this faithful witness.
- *Insecure over-identification* – It is so easy to want to be well-liked. Alien-stranger status and social ridicule are difficult to endure. Yet we are commanded to be holy.
- *Cynical condemnation* – It is tempting to preach people to hell as if we enjoy it, and huddle into self-righteous enclaves who do more railing against the darkness than shining the light.
- *Protective preoccupation* – Faithful mission is exhausting, and it’s easier to cocoon into insular issues of church life than to address the lived experience of those we wish to reach.
- *Undisciplined distraction* – Faithful witness requires the spiritual work of intellectual rigor and moral discipline. Satan wins in both arenas when churches become slothful.

The consequence of rejecting Jesus

Peter asks us to find our identity in the *rejected* Jesus whom God *chose*. He also wants us to realize that there is an essential dissonance between the gospel and wordliness, and that difference should not be softened. We should function as God's people, priesthood, and nation to "declare his praises" trusting we "will never be put to shame" as we do.

There is no neutral position when it comes to him: either people will follow him and be built upon the Lord as the cornerstone, or else they will fall over him and come to ruin. As Calvin said many years ago, "there is no middle way between these two; we must either build on Him, or be dashed against Him." Such a message of "no middle way" is a difficult one to accept today—and sometimes a difficult one to preach. Jobes is on target regarding these verses: "Moreover, rejection of Christ is not an amoral decision; it is itself an instance of sin. This is a message that our religiously pluralistic society today finds just as offensive as did first-century polytheistic society."⁴

Priesthood of all believers

This term, though reflective of biblical teaching, is most often attributed to the leader of the Reformation Movement, Martin Luther, who challenged the authority of an abusive priesthood and made every believer equal to the priest saying, "the word *priest* should be as common as the word *Christian*." Since that time, the idea has been used to equalize the *laity* and the *clergy*, more specifically that each individual believer has as much authority as a minister. But equalization among believers and individual authority is not Peter's intent here, though there are legitimate implications. The emphasis is on the *whole church* being God's priesthood.

It is especially important to underscore the missional nature of this role. The church, collectively, is the new priestly order that has the mission to bring the sins of the world to the sacrifice of Jesus for their salvation and blessing.

The church's transcendence from earthly categories

Scot McKnight (writing in 1996) says expresses it well: "The purpose of the church has too frequently been cast in isolated, culturally conditioned categories. When the American church sees itself primarily in terms of the Republican or Democratic party, when the English church sees itself in terms of the culture created and formed at Oxbridge, when the European church sees itself in terms of the economy of a united Europe, or when the Korean church sees itself in terms of national recovery, then we are seeing a culturally conditioned definition of the church. The church gains its identity and its purposes from the Lord and Spirit who created it. That identity and those purposes have been spelled out in the pages of the Bible, and modern cultures or subcultures in which local or national churches abide can only be dialectically related to that Bible. Culture cannot define or determine the parameters of the church, nor can it define its mission. When this happens, the church loses its bearings, begins to wobble, and eventually falls into a state of lethargy and ineffectiveness."⁵

The church's desire to be appealing and well-liked

There is no inherent virtue in being unattractive to the surrounding culture. But there is also the danger of letting our insecurity rule to where we emphasize more of our sameness with the world than the difference of Spirit-led holiness, both in terms of lifestyle and purpose. Remember, we worship the one the world *rejected*.

Given the context of Peter's recipients, we have to ask how Christianity was actually able to spread. They were not able to use market-driven approaches in their hostile environment.

⁴ Dennis R. Edwards, *1 Peter*, 95.

⁵ Scot McKnight, *1 Peter – The NIV Application Commentary* (Zondervan, 1996), 116.

Contemporary methods of evangelism often begin with “holy accommodations” to appeal to the felt needs of potential converts or with some other direct presentation to audiences that, if not receptive, are largely polite and tolerant. These early Christians, however, had assumed their unique moral identity to the extent that the surrounding culture ridiculed, slandered, and sought to intimidate them (cf. 4:3-4). Their responsibility to evangelize was no less than ours, but it took place under conditions that were radically more difficult. How did Christianity spread under such unfavorable circumstances?

Certainly, early Christian assemblies had an impact on outsiders (1 Cor. 14:23), perhaps partially explaining how Peter’s recipients heard the gospel (1:23-25). The impact of individual Christians sharing their faith in the home and marketplace was also strong. Peter, however, strikes at something that is even more foundational in the early church’s evangelistic effectiveness – the distinctiveness of their lifestyle in contrast to the pagan society (2:11-12).

The surrounding culture consisted of people who were slaves to their passions, but the Christians had rejected this part of their past (1:14, 18; 4:3-4). They now submitted their passions to God. The effect of this was evangelistic. Outsiders took notice of the difference. (see 1 Pet. 2:15; 31; Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:15; Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12)

“The significant evangelistic strategy of 1 Peter included the power of dedicated lives to win over those who first scorned the strangeness of the alien lifestyle.

Did the strategy work? Historians list as one of the chief reasons for the triumph of Christianity the fact that Christians made high moral demands and had the power to live up to those demands. A clear alternative was offered to the decadent pagan society, and many chose the stern discipline of the Christian community over the paganism that demanded nothing.

What is the key to effective evangelism in an increasingly non-Christian culture? What could be more powerful and more compelling than communities which present an alternative lifestyle or counter culture to the prevailing norms? Imagine a community that is shaped by the gospel message of selflessness, a community where ambition, pride, and the hunger for power have no place. A community which finds joy in single-minded commitment to the faith would be powerful enough to win over many of the most cynical critics of Christianity, for no one could argue against the power of Christian lives.

A missionary in India went from village to village entertaining the people with films and magic tricks before he spoke to them about Christ. Once when he spoke of Christ, an elderly man, a Hindu, stood up and said.

Dear pastor, we have listened with interest, yes, with respect, to your words about Jesus Christ. We love Christ and honor him as the unique man and as God. We also like to read the Bible, when we have the time and are not too tired. But, pardon me for saying this, this does not make us want to become Christians. Don’t we know your parishioners? Don’t we know how they live? How much hostility and enmity, how much drunkenness and deceit there is among them? They live no better than we do.⁶

⁶ James Thompson, *The Church in Exile* (ACU Press, 1990), 52.