

The Church: Gospel People
1 Peter 2:4-12

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It's a joy for me to be here today with you all. I'm here by myself - my wife Jodi is the Children's Ministry Director at our church in Hastings, so she's on duty this morning at home. We have two sons, Jonah and Parker, who are already 21 and 19, and they're a part of their own churches in the Twin Cities.

Since 2008 we've served with ReachGlobal, and until last year I was the City Team Leader for Budapest. While we were there I had the joy of leading a team of up to 12 missionaries who were involved in disciple making and church multiplication in a number of unique contexts, some in particular geographic areas of the city, and others in affinity groups, for instance the professional artist community or in sports. Jodi was a part of the team with me, but she also had a significant role at the International Christian School in Budapest, for a time she coordinated discipleship and the weekly chapel meetings for the younger grades, then she taught music, and finally she was a part of the school administration.

One of our biggest joys from our years in Budapest was the opportunity to be a part establishing churches in the city. We spent our first few years focusing on helping an already established church become a more healthy community, and then in our later years we were a part of a team that planted a church, which is now led by a team of Hungarians, and although it is still quite a small community comparatively, God is causing it to become a really healthy one.

We raised our sons in Budapest, they were small when we arrived in 2010 and both of them graduated from high school in Budapest. Now they're both students at the University of Northwestern-St. Paul.

Jodi and I both have new roles with ReachGlobal; Jodi is now a part of the member care team, which is focused on providing pastoral care and resources for flourishing and being fruitful to our staff on the mission field, and Jodi is specifically involved on that team as the Family Ministry Specialist. So she helps parents and kids with things like school and education on the mission field, and parenting, and helping prepare children for being "third culture kids".

And I am now serving as Director of Training for ReachGlobal, which means that I am responsible for the process that prepares our missionaries for their ministry, whether that be overseas or somewhere here in

the US, and also for the ongoing opportunities for learning and growth for all of our staff. And that is about 550 people in more than 40 locations globally.

Since our beginnings the International mission of the EFCA, which is today known as ReachGlobal, has been committed to establishing communities of believers all around the world – to planting churches. This was one of my primary areas of focus as a missionary in Hungary, and now as the director of training, I’m working to ensure that the gospel workers who are sent out by ReachGlobal are equipped to see the particular way God has prepared them to be a part of that work, too.

I say all that in order to demonstrate that I’m really thrilled to be here today talking about Article 7 of our statement of faith. Because I love to talk about the church!

Article 7: The Church

We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.

There are many passages we could turn to to deepen our understand of God’s design for the church. One of my favorites is 1 Peter 2. I really appreciate how Peter brings together a discussion about the FORM - or the structure - of the church, and the FUNCTION - the purpose of the church.

You are most likely aware that in our usage in English, the word “church” can be used in multiples ways. People often times refer to the building in which a church meets as the church. We refer to the group of people, who gather locally, as the church body, the church family. We refer to denominations, or associations of churches, like the EFCA, as a church. We refer to the global community of followers of Jesus as the church, the universal church. And sometimes we even refer to our worship gatherings, like 9:00am on a Sunday morning, as “church”.

Those multiple uses can be confusing to us, we can easily lose sight of the significance of any one of those referents - a congregation, a structure, a worship gathering, a denomination, the global community of saints throughout all of time, by the same word.

When I moved to Hungary, I learned the Hungarian language, and I was fascinated to learn that there were four words that replaced the one word CHURCH in English. A word for a church building. A word for a church congregation. A word for a church service. A word for a church denomination. And in my view, an opportunity to have a better understanding - less confusion - about what IS the church.

Let's pray.

God, we're grateful to be in this place today, to be gathered together with our brothers and sisters. We're grateful for the opportunity to worship you, to praise Your name. And we're grateful as well for the opportunity to study your word. Your word is living and active. It has the power to penetrate into the deepest parts of our lives. To speak to the exact situations we find ourselves in at this very moment. God, would you please speak to us again today, as you have done so faithfully so many times. We long to hear from you. We're ready to hear from you. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

LITERARY CONTEXT

To begin with, I want to say just a word about the broader context at work in this passage. We want to keep in mind that 1 Peter, which is the one of the last BOOKS in our Bible, started out as a personal LETTER which was written to a particular group of people, in a particular place, at a particular time, who were in the midst of a particular reality. And so very much like would be the case for you or for me, if we were to sit down and jot out a letter or hammer out an email to some friends or associates who were going through some sort of a hard time, there's a real personal nature to all of the letters, or epistles, which are in our Bible. Starting with Romans and going all the way to Jude, each one of these books began as letters.

So if you're sitting down to read your Bible and you flip open, let's say, to 1 Peter, and decide to read there. In a way, this is just a bit similar to opening someone's mail. You don't naturally or immediately know the context that's going on that has made it necessary for the letter to be written, what's going on with the recipients, what's going on with the sender.

Now God intended that these letters have a broader purpose, as a part of scripture, than a letter exchanged between a sender and recipients. He absolutely intends for us to be among the recipients of the letters as well, remembering of course that all of scripture is God's breath, that it is living and powerful, that it is useful for us. And so while opening someone else's mail is not recommended - in fact, I think it's

probably a crime - reading the letters here in our Bibles is absolutely recommended. But it's also a good idea for us to take just a moment to orient ourselves to the situation that was happening on the ground when the letter was sent.

This letter was written to people who were followers of Jesus in a time and a place where it was difficult to be Christian. Peter addresses his letter to Christians who were scattered around what we know today as modern Turkey. They were most likely gentile Christians - not followers of Jesus who were born as Jewish people and now recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah. But instead people who were originally pagans, coming from the polytheistic world of the Roman Empire, and now in the 50 or so years since the resurrection, have become followers of Jesus. And throughout this letter Peter discusses issues related to the challenge that these Christians were facing as followers of Jesus, worshippers of the one true God, in the midst of a Roman society and culture that recognized and worshipped many gods.

The theme of exile comes up frequently, and there are subtle references to the old story of the Israelites being taken into exile in Babylon following the destruction of the temple. They are people who are located in a time and place where its deeply countercultural, and extremely difficult, to be a Christian. These are people who are longing for something better. So as we look at this letter today to explore God's design for the church, let's keep that context in mind.

THE FORM OF THE CHURCH
Christ As Cornerstone - vv. 4-7

⁴As you come to him, the living Stone —rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—
⁵you 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. ⁶For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”

⁷Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”

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Peter wants us to see here that Jesus Christ is the foundation of all of God's redemptive work in the world. And he's also weaving together a strong of passages from the Old Testament that were widely

recognized as referring to the Messiah, the Anointed One. Jesus is the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies. He is the Messiah, the Anointed one, the Christ.

He describes Jesus as both the the LIVING STONE (v4) and the CORNERSTONE (v6, 7)

The “stone that the builders rejected” is a quotation from Psalm 118:4. In Peter’s sermon in Acts 4, he had once before associated Jesus with this passage, declaring that Jesus Christ is the living stone who was rejected by human builders. And in that sermon, Peter announced that there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ. This JESUS, who had just been crucified and then rose again to new life, is the stone that the builders rejected. And HE is the only pathway to salvation.

Peter had heard Jesus make that same claim of himself, quoting Psalm 118:4, and announcing that he himself is that stone. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this statement. The living Jesus is the rejected stone. The living stone is the rejected stone.

“I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone” is a quotation if Isaiah 28:6. In the original text of this passage, the stone is referred to as an “IT”. But Peter goes on to use the pronoun “HE” to refer to that stone. Peter viewed the stone as person. And already by the time that the Greek translation of the Old Testament was being written, hundreds of years before the birth of Christ,, the pronoun “HE” was used in this passage. So already even before Jesus was born, Jewish people were expecting a human cornerstone for God’s kingdom. And Peter says, that one that was crucified, was rejected (but who rose again!), HE is the cornerstone. The community of the people of God - the Church - is built on him.

We think of a cornerstone as the primary stone at the corner of a foundation of structure. The stone that anchors together the whole structure. In our day today, we might think of a cornerstone as something more ornamental or commemorative, like the stone which has the year of the building’s construction It’s interesting to note that word we have here in English, “cornerstone”, is actually “headstone” in Greek. Think keystone, like the stone at the top of an archway that keeps the whole structure in place. As the stones work up from one side and the other, its the keystone that keeps it all together. Whichever it is, the significance is the same. Jesus Christ is the living stone who serves as the foundation for the church, as the keystone who holds the whole structure in balance.

Or as our Statement of Faith says, *we are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head.*

A Structure of Living Stones v. 4-5

⁴As you come to him, the living Stone —rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—
⁵you 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.

Now Peter extends the construction metaphor to say that we all, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house. It's quote important for us to note that Peter emphasizes the fact that we are being built TOGETHER into a spiritual house. This really calls into question what I think can be a real challenge for Christians, to think of our faith in an individualized, "me and Jesus" kind of paradigm.

If this were what Peter had in mind, he could have said, you are being made into a collection of construction materials. Like, when you drive by a job site, and see a pallet of bricks, and a bundle of 2x4s, and some bundles of shingles. Individual elements, unique identity.

But that's not what we see here. There is a collective, corporate image Peter is working with.

Nor is Peter telling us that we are EACH ONE being built into a spiritual house. Like a handful of little green Monopoly houses, filling the game board, filling the streets of our town. No, this is a collective, corporate image.

Many stones, ONE HOUSE.

But what's more, the word Peter uses for house isn't only indicative of a structure, like a house building, but rather it's the word for HOUSEHOLD. The people that make up a family, an extended family. The word is Oikos, and it's one that is filled with significance that I think is lost on us today. In its broadest sense, it refers to the entire network of relationships that make up a family. So Peter wants us to get a clear understanding of an interdependent, relational fabric, people who are woven together into a structure that is stable, solid, strong.

Well, we've seen how Peter describes the FORM of the church: a structure where Jesus Christ, the Messiah, serves as the living foundation stone and the capstone, supporting the structure and locking it all into place. And a structure built out of many living stones, representing every true follower of Jesus throughout all time, interlocked into one structure.

Now let's turn our attention to the FUNCTION of the church:

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once 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.

I'd like for us to see three dimensions of the function of the church: INWARD, UPWARD, and OUTWARD. I'll have just a few things to say about the inward and upward dimensions, then I'll take a little more time on the outward dimension.

The INWARD dimension of the function of the church speaks to the way in which we cultivate community with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

When Peter describes the church as a chosen people or a chosen race, he has in view a people who share a common lineage, common bloodline. The idea of being the people of God was much very much about sharing a common bloodline, those who are descended from Abraham. But keeping in mind that Peter was writing to gentile followers of Jesus, is an evidence that Christ's blood has formed us into a people who share a supernatural bloodline. And that supernatural bloodline creates in us a shared family resemblance. As our Statement of Faith says, that family that extends across all periods of history and all points on the globe, is made up of all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone.

But there as we've said there is a local dimension to the church as well, and when we think locally, we're really able to begin seeing one another as family.

We see brothers and sisters who are in need of encouragement. We see widows and orphans and others with material needs. We see children who need to learn Biblical truth and marriages that need to be strengthened. We see God's people with a remarkable opportunity to live together in community. And when the church looks in and sees itself in this way, it responds by meeting together regularly, by caring for one another generously, by growing roots deeply.

The UPWARD DIMENSION of the church speaks to our relationship with God. Peter then refers to God's people as royal priests. The role of a priest was to serve as the intermediary between God and humans, representing God to people, and people to God. The priest had the responsibility to offer sacrifices on behalf of all the people. Jesus is our Great High Priest, as Hebrews 4:14 tells us. And as

those who are in Christ, we have priestly role serving under our Great High Priest. That's why Peter can say that we all are a priesthood. At one point in church history, the role of priest was limited just to the professional clergy. But during the Reformation, a renewed understanding of the biblical notion of the priesthood of all believers was rediscovered.

St. Augustin was one of the very early leaders of the Christian church. He lived from 354 to 430. He is often called one of the church fathers. Augustin said these words: "A Christian should be a hallelujah from head to toe." What a wonderful expression! What a great picture! But how often is this true in my life, or in yours? That every bone in my body, every cell, from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet, is crying out a "hallelujah" of praise.

The UPWARD dimension of the church is about praising God because of who He is and what He has done for us through His son Jesus. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 12:1 that because of God's great mercy, we should offer all of ourselves to God as an act of worship.

Of course there are many aspects of the worship of the church, and of the believer. And our statement of faith highlights two practices which are a regular part of the life of the church: the Lord's Supper, when we remember the body and blood of Christ which was broken and poured out for our salvation, and baptism, which is the public declaration a person makes upon becoming a follower of Jesus, the process of going under the water and emerging for the water demonstrating our identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

Then finally we come the OUTWARD dimension of the function of the church. Peter says that as God's special possession, we are to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. The outward dimension of the function of the church is one of proclamation. Of witness. Of sharing the good news about the change God has brought into our lives as we came to know Jesus.

There was a fairly influential book that was published a number of years ago that considers the various ways in which Christians relate to the world around them. The author describes three positions that we might take, which I think do a pretty good job of charting the landscape, so to speak.

On the one hand, we as Christians might take a "defensive against" posture to the world. What this means is that, as we recognize that the world around us has rejected, is rejecting, the true King, we would move into defense mode. We look for every way possible to retain the distinctiveness of a Christian way of

living - and more broadly, to maintain a Christian society - in a world that seems to be very very quickly going in a radically different direction. We're always ready to defend the truths that we hold so dear, to see them protected. The author describes Christians who take this posture as "offering the gospel in one hand and having the other hand clenched in a fist, ready to fight if necessary to retain the moral high ground."

Another approach that certain groups of Christians take is the "relevance to" posture. This category of Christians is interested in finding ways to present the Christian faith, to present the life of following Jesus, in a way that has relevance to the world. If the first paradigm is concerned with maintaining the distinctiveness of the Christian life, this paradigm is keen to find ways to connect Christianity to whatever are the pressing issues of the day. There is a sincere conviction among people of this posture that the message of Jesus is relevant to the people in our world today. And a lot of attention and energy and resource is devoted to packaging, presenting, marketing, that message, so that it "lands" for people in a way that they can relate to. But one problem that comes to mind for me with this model is that the message "Jesus as Lord", which we could restate by saying, "There IS a king who should be on the throne of your life and it is NOT YOU" is a message that is never going to be entirely relevant or "land well".

And then one final position this author describes is the "purity from" posture. In some ways, this posture is similar to the first one, the defensive against. But rather than being ready to defend the distinctiveness of Christian faith and doctrine in a world that is becoming ever-more secular, the "purity from" posture is more likely to conclude that things have already gotten too bad, sort of "beyond redemption." Christians who adopt the "purity from" posture might tend to retreat into their own faith communities, rather than make it a priority to engage with the world. And they would do this in order to protect themselves from all the garbage that is happening in the world, to "remain pure". But a problem that comes to mind for me with this model is what we are to do with the teaching of Jesus that we are to be in the world, but not of the world.

In addition to these three paradigms, the author describes a better approach, which he calls "faithful presence". This is when followers maintain a sense of intentionality about being both present in the world, and maintaining their distinctiveness as the people of God. Jesus describes faithful presence in Matthew 5:13-16:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

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One of my favorite theologians, a former missionary to India, is Lesslie Newbigin. He had a lot to say about the relationship between a community of God’s people (a church) and the world.] God has used Lesslie Newbigin so much in my life, how I understand the gospel, how I understand mission, how I understand the church. Newbigin said that the church is a signpost, an instrument, and a foretaste of God’s coming kingdom.

As a signpost, it directs spiritual seekers to the kingdom of God. As an instrument, it is available and willing to be used in God’s hands as He works in the world. And as a foretaste, it provides to the world TODAY a living, breathing example of the FUTURE kingdom of God, when He will finally establish His rule and reign and set right all that is wrong with the world.

And this is what God has in mind for the church. In its form, it is built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. An interdependent community, built of living stones. And in its function, a chosen people that looks inward towards one another and grows together in community. A royal priesthood that looks upward in praise and worship. And a holy nation called to a ministry of faithful presence, proclaiming the good news that God, in Christ, has made a way for sinful rebellious people to be brought from a life of darkness into God’s glorious light.