

The Church and Its Organisation as God's Temple

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[0:00] 1 Peter 2 at verse 4. And as you come to him, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious,! You yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

And so on down through the following verses. We have in recent weeks been looking at something of what the Bible has to say to us about the health of the church.

And we have looked at the way in which Paul speaks to Timothy in 2 Timothy to show to us something of the way in which the church is formed and the purpose of the church.

And the last time we looked at it, we saw from John chapter 15 the way in which the church is united to the person of Christ in that message of Jesus himself as showing the church as divine. And to continue to think of these things and to just to remind ourselves as we do go into this passage to the way in which we were looking at the importance of understanding our identity as the children of God.

[1:22] And understanding our identity within the church of Christ and understanding the role that we have within his church. And the more that we understand all of these things, the more we are prepared and equipped to be the healthy church that the New Testament speaks of.

When we read this letter of 1 Peter, we see that there is a significant change going on at this stage in the letter. Where he has begun by looking at the individual salvation of those who are born again, those who are elect, those who are chosen, those who have the hope of salvation in their hearts. There is an individualistic focus in the first part of the letter. As we move into this section, we see that there is more of a focus not on the individual, but on the church as a gathering of Christian people.

And that's a significant shift as he seeks to encourage those people who are struggling in their faith. And we want to bear that in mind as we go and look at this passage.

There is that shift. And it's an important one, not only for Peter's readers, but it's an important one for ourselves. Because we can become caught up in our individual salvation and be obsessed with only our individual salvation.

[2:49] And by being so obsessed, forgetting that we belong to the church, which is the gathering of the people of God. We understand a healthy church by understanding that we are a gathering of Christians who believe in the Lord Jesus, but who are a body of people that do so.

And bearing that in mind, I want to look at these verses and to think of the church and its organisation as God's temple.

And first of all, we want to notice the design. And we see the design in two particular ways. We see the design, first of all, in the way in which there is development in the ministry of the gospel and in the mission of Christ's church.

And we see that development probably for us in verse number four, as you come to him. It's a simple way of summarising what happens when we, as unbelievers, come to faith in the Lord Jesus and come to follow him.

And at the beginning of the letter, Peter has made it clear that those who do come to him are those who are called out of darkness. They are those who are called out of darkness.

[4:37] Peter has made it clear that those who are called out of darkness. And when we do come to the Lord Jesus, we are coming to a living stone.

And why would Peter use the image of a stone to speak of the Lord Jesus Christ? It is because he is connecting the message to the church and the message concerning the church to those people, connecting it with the Old Testament.

A great lesson for them and for us all that the Bible is a whole and we understand better what it says when we take it as a whole and when we see these connections. And so the stone is a stone in Psalm 118. The stone is a stone in Isaiah chapter 8. The stone is a stone in Isaiah chapter 28.

It is a stone that is chosen by God. As I read in this passage itself, it's precious in the eyes of God. It's a stone prepared by God.

[5 : 47] And we look at the history of the building of the Old Testament temple in the days of Solomon. And we see that there were quarried stones. They were prepared and dressed by the stone cutters and then brought and placed in their place in the temple.

And so it is true about the Lord Jesus himself. He is the stone that the builders rejected. But he is a stone prepared by God.

And the way in which God himself prepares and dresses the Lord Jesus in the sense of making him the perfect saviour that he is. He is the stone that the builders rejected and that God has chosen.

And that stone is a living stone. And the expectation of the church in the Old Testament was that the Messiah would come.

He would be the stone that fulfilled these prophecies. And he would be the living stone on the basis of his resurrection. So that Jesus, as the stone is rejected by the enemies of the church when he is crucified, is the Jesus who is the stone who is vindicated by God in the resurrection when he raises him up on the third day and when he ascends up into glory.

[7 : 14] He's a living stone. He is the life-giving stone. He breathed on the disciples in John 20 and he said, Receive the Holy Spirit. In Acts chapter 2, he is at God's right hand and he pours out the Holy Spirit upon the church.

He is the life-giving spirit. And when we think of God's design, we think of the unity of the design of God in the building of his church where our lives are derived from the one resurrection life of the one Messiah who is the living stone.

And as scattered people of God, Christians here this evening, our life is derived from the Lord Jesus in the glory of his resurrection and the glory of his sitting at God's right hand.

And because of that, there is necessarily a unity and a harmony that belongs to the very life of the church of Christ in the world.

Our life is derived from him by God's design and so there is that sense of unity. But the design takes us further than that because in God's design, there is a formation.

[8 : 33] And the formation is that we ourselves as living stones are being built up as a spiritual house. By coming to faith in the Lord Jesus, we are united to him and we become living stones with him.

And all of these living stones are not to be seen like stones scattered across the ground wherever we physically might live.

The stones are not scattered like that, although they are physically in God's eyes and in God's church. We are gathered together in a spiritual house.

The spiritual house that is spiritual because it is where God resides, it's where the presence of God is found, and it is where the people of God are to be found as one structure built together of all those who are Christians so that they are one in all of their activities.

They are one in the presence of God, around the presence of God. And in this other surprising image or metaphor, like a temple, that we are stones in that temple.

[10 : 00] And it's, of course, a temple that's full of the vibrancy of the life of Jesus himself through each individual stone, but a vibrancy that finds its fulfillment as all of these stones are bound together in the church of Christ to give her that sense of fullness based on the life of Jesus to which they are united and around which they are bound as those who have the Spirit of God in their hearts.

And so tonight, in God's design, we are God's temple. We are individuals, as far as we are individuals, stones, but we belong together because God's Spirit is in our hearts and God is building one church as one temple in the fulfillment of his purpose.

And as sure as there is a unity of design because we have the same life in Jesus, there is also the unity of God's design by the way in which structurally we are one.

So wherever we go, we are one temple. Wherever we go, we are one unit of people who have the presence of God. And we go to our homes this evening once this meeting is over in God's

providence and we will scatter.

But the reality and the fact of our oneness as the structural temple of God through which he is working does not change. And that's cause for our rejoicing that you and I belong together and that we are built up together in God's temple and that we are developed in our faith because of that wonderful union and relationship that God has established according to his design.

[12:05] So there is the design. We are God's temple. Secondly, there is a designation.

We're not simply in the building and have no calling or no designation. It's not a case of just placing us there and leaving us there. We have a designation and we have a calling.

And the calling is, not surprisingly, because we are talking about a spiritual house, a temple, we are talking about being a holy priesthood.

And at the very beginning, it's worth highlighting the fact that this is plural and not singular. He's not saying that we are holy priests, but that we are a holy priesthood.

One unit, the tribe of Levi, they were the priesthood. And so we, as the children of God, we are the priesthood. combined together in that sense of unity.

[13:14] And we know that the priesthood in the Old Testament had basically two functions. They were to be in the presence of God and they were to come from the presence of God to the people.

And so Peter is saying to them that they are to be that holy priesthood that have initially the first step of going into the presence of God, and receiving from God and coming from there to go out to the people.

The priesthood based upon God's structure of the church in the Old Testament that here and now it is applied to them and tonight applied to you and to me.

that there is a unity because of our designation and it means that we have a shared function in serving God. So whatever we're doing in the cells of God, we're doing it collectively as one.

We don't leave each other behind. It's the one body, the one structure, the one temple as one serving God, going into God and coming out from God and so fulfilling our function.

[14:33] We serve not as individuals, we serve as a temple, as a group, as a priesthood. And because of that designation, there is something that must be true of the character of those who are so designated.

And what must be true is that they must be a holy priesthood. In chapter 1 of this letter, Peter speaks about their conduct.

He speaks about their need to be holy and he reminds him that they are to be holy because God is holy. The words of God to his covenant people in the Old Testament and places like Leviticus chapter 11, you shall be holy because I am holy.

There is a necessity attached to their designation and the role as those who are serving God that they are to be holy. And holy not just in the sense of being set apart to the service of God and in their status as those who are in the priesthood, but holiness also in the sense of lifestyle.

And Peter speaks repeatedly about their conduct and how their conduct should be aligned with who they are as the children of God and aligned with the holiness of God which is the display of the character of God which we have summarized in his word.

[16:18] A holy priesthood. And tonight you and I as we serve God designated by him to be his priests, we do so as those who together in the unity of the designation that we live collectively a life together and serving God aligned with the word of God.

And that means there is no scattering, there is no dispersion, there is no departure from this is the way you are to walk in it.

It's the consistency of life, a life that is lived according to the word of God. And so in God's designation we have this beautiful picture of a healthy church that is one in its service, that is one in its holiness and that moves around serving God with that holy unity and harmony that makes it effective in the service of God.

And that's the challenge for all of us this evening. We may understand our designation and we need to, but we must not ignore the character required of those who are so designated to serve the Lord that you and I are faced with a challenge every day of aligning our lives with the word of God, of realigning our lives with the word of God, of going through that process of repentance and of restoration through God's forgiveness that keeps us living in commune with him.

That's the challenge. Serving together, wholly together, together, and therefore prepared and ready to be the people that God wants us to be, to be the healthy church that is healthy in all that the

church does.

[18:37] That brings me 30 to the direction. There is a service, but it is particular. And the direction for the service has a double focus.

And the first focus is that in the same way as the priests have a bi-directional ministry, so they go into God and they come out from God and go to the people.

And so the direction that Peter gives to this temple of people who are living and who are serving God is first of all that they have a ministry a service of worship.

It takes priority above everything else. And that's again what we read in version number five. You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Of course we're not required anymore to offer physical sacrifices. that belong to the Old Testament but nevertheless we as the children of God are here to offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God.

[20:00] And they are spiritual not in the sense of being mystical in any way. They are spiritual because we are indwelt by the Spirit of God individually. The church is indwelt by the Spirit of God collectively and from the life that the Spirit of God gives to us we offer spiritual holy spiritual sacrifices that arise from our relationship with God.

And I'm suggesting to you that the primary focus of that is the public worship of God. That this mobilized temple of God which is the church of Christ with people who are called to serve God and that they are mobilized first of all together in the unity of direction moving into the public worship of God.

And we know from the teaching of the Bible and we learn that from our own life's experience that that's where our strength is found. That as we go in, yes, to the presence of God privately and individually there is blessing and encouragement.

But there is greater blessing and greater encouragement when all of the people of God join together in the worship of God and in the harmony of the unity of that worship discover what it is to be the people of God, to be the church that God is building, to be the church that God has his hand upon and the church in whom dwells the very spirit of God.

And again, we are challenged by that sense of the importance of having that unity and the direction that we take in the worship of God, that we do so together, that we are encouraged to not to forget those who are around us, that we are encouraged to remember that this is what we should be doing together and that we are encouraged to support each other so that we don't fail in this marvelous movement of coming into the presence of God as a congregation of God's people to worship him in public.

[22:40] It's essential for our personal health. More importantly, it's essential for the health of the congregation, for the health of the church of Christ.

Christ. And I think it is fair to say that this is the priority. If we don't hear from God in the worship of God, we have nothing to say to the world.

If we don't hear from God, we can make it up as we go along, when we go out and speak to the world. we must, first of all, hear from God.

What is God saying about where we are, where we are as individuals, where we are as the mobile temple of God? What is God saying about us as to where we are and where our community is and where our town is, where those who are around us are?

We need to hear what God is saying to us. And because of that, our church should be filled with the people of God who long to hear from God.

[23:55] Our prayer meaning itself should be filled in the same way. Those who are longing to hear from God because of the sense of being called by God to serve God and to have something to say to the people who are not the people of God as yet.

It's a challenge. It's where we need to encourage one another as the writer to the Hebrews speaks of encouraging one another so that we do not fail to gather together as the people of God.

There is that direction where we move together in worship and let's ensure that we move in that way and that when we do worship we are yes individual voices and individual prayers and desires that collectively we are waiting to hear from God to speak to us personally to prepare us to speak to others so that we are strengthened and equipped.

The direction the priest goes first of all to God and then the direction of course that the priest also comes from God and goes to the world and that's what Peter refers to in verse number nine where it reminds them referring to the church in Exodus chapter 19 you are a chosen race a royal priesthood a holy nation a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light we have a message we have a proclamation God has told us what the message is he has informed us anew through the worship of his name what that message is he has reminded us who we are and who we are who we are and who have to go and tell that to those who are outside

God's church and outside the Christian community those who have not yet come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their saviour proclaim the excellencies the things that are not only superior but that are unique to God as the God who designed our salvation as the God who designed it around his son whom he sent into the world as the God who designed our salvation calling us from where we were in our darkness and bring us into his marvellous light connecting us with the man who is the light of the world so that we become the light of the world and so that because of all of these things concerning which we learn more and more about as we worship God concerning these things we are engaged in telling others the marvellous salvation that is ours we see more of it's marvellous worship we are excited more about it as we learn more about it and because of that process of our own development and enjoyment of our salvation so to those who are around us the healthy church there is

[27 : 34] God's design in order to ensure that the church works as it should there is the designation to remind us that we are here to serve God and there are these directions for public worship and for telling others for being the witnesses that God has called us to be and so we move from the public worship of God where we are united as one moving mobile body of Christians worshipping God we are mobilised in the same way to be the witnesses that God has called us to be and it's not as if I move from the worship of God where many are gathered and we're mobilised from there and the number diminishes as we go to witness to the world the healthy church is united together in the worship of God and in that oneness and unity and harmony moves together in the witness of the gospel to speak the gospel to the world around us that's what

Peter wanted them to understand about the church it's not just about their individual salvation it's about Christ's church and that's a message for ourselves from God's word this evening yes it's important that we are individually saved and we understand that but that's in God's eyes a means to an end there is a serving to be done there is a way in which we are to engage with God and to engage with the world and we trust and pray that God will bless to us these thoughts and enable us to be mobilised as one in worship and in witness and to be that effective people of God that makes an impact on the community around us may God bless these thoughts to us so we're going to conclude by saying to God's praise in Psalms 66 and sing

Psalms it's a psalm that speaks of the way in which we are to tell other people what God has done for us and we're going to sing at verse number 16 it's on page 84 if you're using the psalm book psalm 66 at verse 16 come all who fear our God I'll tell what he has done I cried out to him with my mouth his praise was on my tongue from verse 16 to the end of the psalm to God's praise praise for come all who fear our God I'll tell what he has done I cried unto him with my mouth his praise was on my tongue if

I had chelic sin the Lord would not have heard but surely when I pray to him God listen to my word forever God he prays who hears me from above he has not turned thou in my prayer or kept from me his love the grace of the

Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever more Amen Thank you.