

**THE IDENTITY, NATURE, AND MISSION  
OF GOD’S PEOPLE (1 Peter 2:4-10)  
Presented at the Michigan Christian College  
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When I was in the seventh grade, we lived in Flat Rock, Michigan. As was bound to happen, sooner or later, the opportunity came for me to attend a school dance. My parents and I discussed the matter. They did not believe that such an activity was appropriate for young men and women. So, I decided not to go to the dance. The honest truth is I didn’t really want to go as much as I didn’t want to be one of the few who didn’t go. In other words, I didn’t want to be “the odd man out,” the “peculiar person,” or—as my sons now tell me—“Dad, I don’t want to be a geek or a nerd or a dweeb.” I think you all know what I’m saying. It’s called peer pressure. I wanted to “go with the flow.” I wanted to fit-in, to be accepted as a part of the crowd.

It was bad enough that I wasn’t going to the dance. It was even worse that I had to try to tell my friends why I wasn’t going without sounding like a goof-ball. One night, I was involved in a heated discussion on the phone with Wayne Butler. Wayne Butler, Kevin Hart, and James Duff—I wanted these guys to like me. I wanted to be a part of this group. But they thought I was nuts. Anyway, as Wayne and I argued, and we were arguing about what the Bible had to say about dancing, I said, “Wayne, the Bible says, ‘Thou shalt not dance.’” After my telephone conversation, my father came to me. He had overheard some of my discussion with Wayne. He said, “I heard you say the Bible says, ‘Thou shalt not dance.’ Royce Jr., I’ve been looking for that verse for a long time. Would you please tell me where I can find it?” Well, as you well-know, there “ain’t” no such verse. Of course, Wayne, Kevin, and James didn’t know that. So, at least I won the argument. They still thought I was nuts, and I have had to live with the memory of knowing I convinced them that I was nuts by using false information.

I share this story with you to illustrate the tensions and temptations we Christians feel when we try to keep ourselves separate from the world. It’s hard enough to be different from the world, and what often makes matters even worse is that the world does not, indeed it cannot, understand why we are different.

The Epistle of 1 Peter begins with this greeting:

<sup>1</sup>Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to a chosen people, living as strangers in the diaspora of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup>who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

Some time around AD 63, the Apostle Peter wrote the letter we call First Peter. Peter, who was probably in Rome, sent this pastoral exhortation to Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor. These Christians were predominately Gentiles. Furthermore, they were “strangers” living in a hostile environment. To outsiders, the very name “Christian” was offensive (4:14, 16). Christians, therefore, should expect to endure persecution, social ostracism, and “name-calling.” Some of the most vulnerable Christians were the slaves of abusive masters and the wives of non-believing husbands. Peter wrote to encourage these Christians who, because of their faith, were “aliens” or “strangers” living in the world.

I sort of like the word “aliens” because I’m a big science fiction fan. Christians are aliens on the planet earth. This does not mean that we are grotesque monsters who have invaded earth. To me, Christians are a different *life-form* because we have a different *form of life*.

Quickly, let’s look at the structure of First Peter. 1:1-2 is the greeting. 1:3-2:10 is the doctrinal section. Here Peter expounds on the greatness of the Christian’s salvation and the consequent call to holiness of life. 2:11-5:11 is the ethical section. Here Peter discusses how to be holy in the midst of unbelievers. And 5:12-14 is the conclusion.

Our text, 2:4-10, is perhaps the pivotal text of the epistle. It is pivotal because of its location within the literary structure of the epistle and because of the nature of its content. On the one hand, these verses form the culmination of the preceding material which has affirmed the dignity, identity, and commonality of Christian believers. On the other hand, these verses establish the basis for the following exhortations for Christians to live holy lives in a hostile environment.<sup>1</sup>

At this point, I need to take a commercial break. Now here’s a word on behalf of the Old Testament. First Peter is as good an argument as there is against the claim sometimes heard that “Christians can do without the Old Testament; the New Testament is sufficient.”

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<sup>1</sup>P. J. Robinson, “Some Missiological Perspectives From 1 Peter 2:4-10,” *Missionalia* 17 (November 1989): 178; and J. H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 135.

The whole letter is soaked with Old Testament references and language, and it cannot be understood in any full sense without consulting the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> In our text, 2:4-10, Peter quotes from Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 8:14; Isaiah 43:20; Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 43:21; Psalm 34:12-16; and he alludes to Hosea 1:6, 9; 2:25.<sup>3</sup> That's approximately ten Old Testament references squeezed into seven New Testament verses.

Ok. It's time that we read our text. Please follow along with me in your Bibles. These verses are not easy to translate, and so you might notice some differences in the various English versions. Don't worry. From a practical point of view, the differences don't make that much difference. The translation I will be reading is my own.

<sup>4</sup>As you come to him, the living Stone—who was rejected by humans but who is choice and precious in God's eyes—<sup>5</sup>you yourselves, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house for holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup>For it stands in Scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone choice and precious,  
and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.”

<sup>7</sup>Therefore, this honor belongs to you who believe; but to those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the foundation of the corner,”

<sup>8</sup>and

“A stone for stumbling  
and a rock to trip over.”

They stumble—as they were destined to do—because they disobey the word.

<sup>9</sup>You, however, are a “chosen race,” the “King's priesthood,” a “holy nation,” “God's own people,” in order that you might proclaim the glorious deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

<sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

One thing is easy to see: Peter, the rock, likes to talk about stones. When Peter uses the “rock-stone” imagery, he is taking up a theme that recurs throughout Scripture. There is, for example, the stumbling-stone of Isaiah 8:14, the foundation-stone of Isaiah 28:16, the parental rock of Isaiah 51:1, the rejected but vindicated building-stone of Psalm 118:22, the supernatural stone of Daniel 2:34, and the burdensome stone of Zechariah 12:3. Furthermore, “Rock” or “Stone” as an Old Testament name for the God of Israel prepared the way for the Messianic understanding of many Old Testament “stone” texts.

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<sup>2</sup>N. Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, New International Biblical Commentary, vol. 16 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 6.

<sup>3</sup>P. H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 24.

In the New Testament, Jesus applied Psalm 118:22 to himself when he faced the hostility of the scribes and Pharisees. He said, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Mark 12:10; Matthew 21:42; Luke 20:17). No doubt mindful of his Lord’s use of the psalmist’s words, Peter repeated them when he stood before the Sanhedrin Council in Jerusalem (Acts 4:11). Paul (Romans 9:33) and Peter (1 Peter 2:4-8) both combined and used several Old Testament “stone” texts.<sup>4</sup>

I find it fascinating to recall from Matthew 16 that after Peter’s confession of Jesus, Jesus said, “You are Peter (Πέτρος), and on this rock (πέτρα) I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Peter’s name is used in conjunction with an explicit reference to a foundation-stone. Some time later, but just a few verses later, Jesus rebuked Peter saying, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-stone (σκάνδαλον) to me” (Matthew 16:23). It is not surprising, then, that in our text Peter presents the alternatives of receiving or rejecting Christ in terms of the stone imagery.<sup>5</sup> Peter himself had been on both sides of the rock, so to speak.

It can be nothing more than a guess, but when Peter describes Christians as “living stones” who are “being built into a spiritual house,” it is possible that he remembered John the Baptist’s preaching: “For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8).<sup>6</sup>

You have heard the expression, “Leave no stone unturned.” Well, I wouldn’t be surprised if some of you are ready for me to move on beyond this talk of rocks and stones. But before I do, I need to make two very important points. (1) Jesus as the foundation-stone emphasizes the Christian’s dependence on the work and strength of Jesus. As a Christian, I am totally dependent on Jesus Christ for my salvation. I can’t save myself. (2) Jesus as the cornerstone emphasizes the cohesion of Christians in the Body of Christ. It is Jesus Christ who holds us together. And when we forget him, our relationships with one another will crumble.

What I want to do now is examine three themes found in 1 Peter 2:4-10. From these themes, we will learn the identity, the nature, and the mission of God’s people. Our goal, from the perspective of striving to be God’s people, is to answer three questions: *Who* are we? *What* are we? *Why* are we?

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<sup>4</sup>N. Hillyer, “‘Rock-Stone’ Imagery in 1 Peter,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 22 (1971): 58-59; and Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, 63.

<sup>5</sup>C. F. D. Moule, “Some Reflections on the ‘Stone’ *Testimonia* in Relation to the Name Peter,” *New Testament Studies* 2 (1955-56): 56-58.

<sup>6</sup>Hillyer, “‘Rock-Stone’ Imagery in 1 Peter,” 74.

(1) Who are we? This question concerns our identity. The answer is: *we are the chosen*. It is probably not an overstatement to say that the central motif of our text is divine election. In fact, this theme of election or chosenness pervades the Letter of 1 Peter. Peter begins his letter saying, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to a chosen people” (ἐκλεκτοῖς – 1:1). In our text, the word “chosen” (ἐκλεκτόν) is used three times (2:4, 6, 9). Finally, Peter employs this term in the conclusion of his letter: “She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you (συνεκλεκτή), sends you her greetings” (5:13). The expression “a chosen people” is a frequent Old Testament expression. The classical formulation of the concept of election goes back to Deuteronomy. Notice especially Deuteronomy 7:6 (and I am reading a very literal translation): “For a holy people are you to Yahweh your God; in you chose (רָחַם) Yahweh your God to be to him a people of treasured possession out of all the peoples which are upon the surface of the earth.”<sup>7</sup> It is significant that the word “election” and “choice” (רָחַם) in the Old Testament, whenever it refers to Israel, is always in the active, never in the passive form. Properly speaking, Israel is never called “chosen.”<sup>8</sup> Israel was not so much the *object* of God’s choosing as she was the *subject* in his service based on his choosing.<sup>9</sup> In other words, when God chooses a person or a people, he chooses them for a purpose. He chooses them as his instrument to carry out his will. To be chosen by God means that you have a job to do. As the people of God, we may be chosen but we are not to be closed to outsiders.<sup>10</sup> Chosenness does not mean exclusiveness.

(2) What are we? This question concerns our nature. The answer is: *we are a community*. You will recall that I began our time together this morning with a story from my seventh-grade days. The story was about my desire to fit-in, to not be the outsider. As the people of God, we often need reminded that no one is asked to be an outsider alone, and no one is asked to be holy in isolation. In our text, Peter’s conception of the Christian life is through and through corporate/collective, not individualistic. As we keep on coming to Christ—in conversion, in worship, in sacrificial service—we are continually being built up into a spiritual house. We are not naturally “living stones,” but become such as we are

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<sup>7</sup>D. Patrick, “Election: Old Testament,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:434-41. Cf. the idiomatic translation of the TANAKH: “For you are a people consecrated to the LORD your God: of all the peoples on earth the LORD your God chose you to be His treasured people.”

<sup>8</sup>E. P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 91, fn. 3: “*Bāhûr*, the passive participle of *bāhar*, is not used of Israel, for it means ‘chosen’ in the sense of ‘choice’—soldiers in their prime, for example. The form *bāhir* is used to describe the chosen as the elect (Ps. 106:4; Is. 43:20-21).”

<sup>9</sup>J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 23.

<sup>10</sup>V. R. Steuernagel, “An Exiled Community as a Missionary Community: A Study based on 1 Peter 2:9, 10,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 10 (January 1986): 15.

joined to Christ in conversion and baptism. Furthermore, we are not individual stones scattered in a field or at a building site. Scattered stones do not constitute a building. Scattered Christians do not make a church. There are two points of application I want to make here. (a) It is by coming to Christ that people enter the church; it is not by entering the church that people are joined to Christ.<sup>11</sup> If Christ is not the foundation-stone upon which we build, and if Christ is not the cornerstone that binds us together, then we will eventually fall apart. (b) The other side of the coin is that when we come to Christ, we are built into a church. I like the words of C. E. B. Cranfield on this point:

The man who wants to follow Christ is willy-nilly committed to Christ's Church. To accept the Redeemer means also accepting the people whom he has redeemed. . . . Everywhere the Bible presupposes a people of God. That is every bit as true of the New Testament as of the Old. The Scriptures know nothing of an individual piety that is out of touch with the living body of God's people.<sup>12</sup>

This point, perhaps more than any other point I will make today, puts us at odds with our culture. According to George Gallup and Jim Castelli's *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's*, "while Americans value church membership and religious activity, they do not believe that formal institutional ties are necessary for faith."<sup>13</sup> "The vast majority of Americans believe it is possible to be a good Christian or Jew without going to church or synagogue."<sup>14</sup> In the book *Habits of the Heart*, based upon a five-year study of various American communities, the authors conclude that "Americans, largely confined to a vocabulary of individualism, have lost the language needed to make moral sense of their lives." It is hard to commit yourself to others if you believe that "in the end you're really alone, and you really have to answer to yourself."<sup>15</sup> We, the Churches of Christ, are not immune to the deadly American disease of individualism. Too often, our churches have become fields of scattered stones rather than buildings bound together in Christ. If you will pardon my playing with words, it is true that "the building is not the church." But it is also true that the church is to be a building—"a spiritual house for holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Do not miss the fact that the

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<sup>11</sup>R. H. Mounce, *A Living Hope: A Commentary on 1 and 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 26.

<sup>12</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude: Introduction and Commentary*, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM, 1960), 62-63.

<sup>13</sup>G. Gallup, Jr., and J. Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 90.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>15</sup>R. N. Bellah, R. Madsen, W. M. Sullivan, A. Swidler, and S. M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Perennial Library/Harper & Row, 1985). Quotes can be found on the back cover.

titles “chosen *race*,” “King’s *priesthood*,” “holy *nation*,” “God’s own *people*,” are all corporate in nature. We westerners tend to focus on individuals relating to God. Peter focuses on people becoming part of a new united community that is chosen by and that relates to God.

(3) Why are we? This question concerns our mission. The answer is: *we are to proclaim the glorious deeds of God*. For Peter, the overall picture of the people of God is that of a community in service and not of a community to be served. The “spiritual sacrifices” that we are to offer up to God would include such things as praise and thanksgiving (Hebrews 13:15-16) and practical loving service to one another (Romans 12:1; Ephesians 5:2; Philippians 4:18). In the context of our passage, life lived for God is the truly spiritual sacrifice. The whole self belongs to God and is to be given to him.<sup>16</sup> But let’s see if we can be more specific. It seems likely to me that—in our text—the “spiritual sacrifices” of verse 5 are defined by the purpose clause in verse 9: “in order that you might proclaim the glorious deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” This indicates that one of the means by which we offer up spiritual sacrifices to God is by proclaiming his glorious deeds. Now, there is considerable debate among scholars as to whether proclaiming the glorious deeds of God refers to proclamation in worship or proclamation in evangelism. I believe it refers to both. The primary meaning of sounding forth God’s praises would point to worship. At the same time, Peter lifts this concept from Isaiah 43 where it is found in the context of Israel as God’s Servant in bringing light to the Gentiles. All the praises of Israel were to be sounded forth in the hearing of the nations.<sup>17</sup> So then, the declaration of God’s “victorious achievements,” the announcing of his deeds of power and salvation, takes place in worship but must not be restricted to worship. The people of God must “publish abroad” the glorious deeds of the Almighty God and Savior. We are *in* the world, but not *of* the world, *for* the world. We live in this world, but we are not to be like this world, and we are here for the sake of this world. James Thompson, in his book *The Church in Exile: God’s Counter Culture in a Non-Christian World* published by Abilene Christian University, offers this penetrating and provoking observation:

... We have no records of organized evangelistic work in the ancient church, and yet the church grew remarkably in some areas. Celsus, one ancient pagan writer, complained that Christians aggressively proclaimed their faith in homes and at the work place. This conviction that they had been “called out of darkness into his marvelous light” mobilized Christians in their private lives, and it gave power to

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<sup>16</sup>E. Ferguson, “Spiritual Sacrifice in Early Christianity and its Environment,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.23.2 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1980), 1165.

<sup>17</sup>Clowney, *Message of 1 Peter*, 96, fn. 1.

Christian assemblies where the word of God was preached with passion and conviction.

Is evangelism possible in a culture which has turned committed Christians into “aliens and exiles?” The epistle of 1 Peter is a reminder that evangelism can take place in the worst of times *when Christians are convinced that they have been called out of darkness into his marvelous light*. I am convinced that what we need in order to have an effective evangelistic witness is not a message that has been trimmed to fit prevailing tastes. Evangelism does not grow out of our gaining a greater command of mass media, marketing technique, or the means of persuasion.

Why has evangelism fallen out of favor? Perhaps it has fallen out of favor because we are not certain what there is to say. In the absence of something to say, we spend our time echoing what others have said already.<sup>18</sup>

Yes indeed, 1 Peter is a reminder that evangelism can take place in the worst of times when we are convinced that we have been called out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Let’s summarize. *Who* are we? We are the chosen. *What* are we? We are a community. *Why* are we? We are to proclaim the glorious deeds of God.

How many of you like sports? I do. Imagine with me this scenario. It’s Sunday afternoon, after you have gone to church (of course), and you are with a bunch of guys on a football field. Now comes one of the worst things about the whole affair: the choosing of sides. First, you haggle for ten minutes about who will be the captains. Then you fuss a bit about who gets first pick. Then you pick teams. Finally, there are only two or maybe three guys left. What usually happens? The last guy never gets picked. He always gets put. Everyone else has been chosen by name. But the last guy is simply told where to go. I don’t like being last. I like to hear my name called. I like to feel wanted. I like to be picked. I hate being put. I like to feel important to the team. I like to keep score, because I like to win. I know who I am, what team I’m on, and what to do.

God doesn’t *put* people in the church; he *picks* them. He chooses them to be a part of a team for which he has a very definite purpose. The people of God are made up of those chosen by God to be a spiritual team for the purpose of proclaiming his glorious deeds. The people of God praise the God who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. And they praise God in the hearing of the world. If we forget *who* we are and *what* we are, we will soon forget *why* we are. If we forget *why* we are, we will soon be confused and fuss about *who* we are and *what* we are.

There’s one last point I want to make concerning our text. The last half of verse 8 reads, “They stumble—as they were destined to do—because they disobey the word.” This is not an easy sentence to understand. My translation makes it a bit easier, but it’s because I’ve already interpreted the verse. I understand Peter to be saying that the

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<sup>18</sup>J. Thompson, *The Church in Exile: God’s Counter Culture in a Non-Christian World* (Abilene: ACU, 1990), 50.

“stumbling” has been predetermined. The “disobeying” has not been predetermined. People stumble because they *won’t* believe, not because they *can’t*.<sup>19</sup> Peter’s meaning is that stumbling to disaster is the inevitable consequence of persistently refusing to obey Christ.<sup>20</sup>

What we all need to realize is that the Stone lies in the path of each and every single one of us. We can build on the Stone or we can trip over it. The Living Stone will either save us or it will crush us. *The Stone does not go away*. We cannot sidestep the Stone. And so, as you and I walk down the pathway of life and as we face decision after decision, we will find at each and every deciding point the Stone. If we will come to the Stone, we will find life. If we attempt to avoid the Stone, we will stumble. And if we continue to stumble, we will experience disaster. You and I have a choice to make. The Living Stone can be the Rock of our Salvation, or it can be the Tombstone that seals our Doom.

<sup>4</sup>As you come to him, the living Stone—who was rejected by humans but who is choice and precious in God’s eyes—<sup>5</sup>you yourselves, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house for holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup>For it stands in Scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone choice and precious,  
and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.”

<sup>7</sup>Therefore, this honor belongs to you who believe; but to those who do not believe,  
“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the foundation of the corner,”

<sup>8</sup>and

“A stone for stumbling  
and a rock to trip over.”

They stumble—as they were destined to do—because they disobey the word.

<sup>9</sup>You, however, are a “chosen race,” the “King’s priesthood,” a “holy nation,” “God’s own people,” in order that you might proclaim the glorious deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

<sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God’s people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

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<sup>19</sup>Mounce, *A Living Hope*, 27.

<sup>20</sup>Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, 64.

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