

We Are

1 Peter 2:2-10

Introduction

In February Karen and I took a relaxing vacation on the Florida Gulf Coast. Our afternoons were spent lounging on the beach, soaking up the warmth and sunshine that wasn't available in Ohio at that time.

Because I am fair-skinned I carefully applied my sunscreen every day. My arms, my legs, my face all received ample applications. I did not, however, put sunscreen on the top of my head. Instead I wore a hat. Specifically I wore my white Ohio State hat. It is my favorite hat.

Every day, almost without fail, people would see my hat and yell out to me "O-H." And, of course, I would respond with a heart "I-O." No other school comes close to garnering that same kind of response.

Well, maybe there is one that comes close. My friends at Penn State University might argue that they get the same response when someone yells out "WE ARE!" In case you don't know, the appropriate response when you hear those words is "PENN STATE."

Today, though, I want to teach you three different responses. I'm not trying to undermine the Penn State battle cry, but as I was studying the passage from 1 Peter those words kept echoing in my mind. No matter what university has your allegiance, and even if none of them do, as followers of Jesus Christ we have an identity that we can confidently proclaim.

Peter tells us that:

#1: WE ARE THE CHURCH

We read these words in verse 5:

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house ... (1 Peter 2:5)

We remember the Apostle Peter for his uncanny ability to put his foot into his mouth over and over again. But there was one occasion when his response was atypical. In that moment the words that came out of his mouth were not embarrassing. They were profound. You might remember it. Jesus had just asked His disciples to declare what they believed about Him. Peter answered for the other eleven:

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Matthew 16:16)

Once everyone got over the shock of hearing those profound words, Jesus responded with words of affirmation, and then He added:

I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (Matthew 16:18)

All who profess faith in Jesus Christ are part of that church that is being built. Peter – the originator of the profession – here writes that you and I become “living stones” in that church that has been under construction for the past 2000 years. Listen to what one of my favorite commentators writes:

Each time someone trusts Christ, another stone is quarried out of the pit of sin and cemented by God's grace into His building.

I am a rock. You are a rock. And together we are being built into the church of Jesus Christ. All who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ – all of us – we are the church!

It is worth noting here that Peter's letter was written to churches in five different geographic locations, but they were all the same church. They were all professing faith in the same Jesus. Peter did not say “You believers in Galatia, we'll call you church A, and those in Pontus can be a different church – church B.” No, they were all together as one church. To all of them in their various geographic locations, he announced they were being built in “a spiritual house.” Singular.

In recent days I've told several of you about how that truth has spoken to me over the years. My father is also a pastor. He entered ministry as a second career and began serving his first church in 1971 at the age of 36. I began serving my first church eight years later, at the ripe old age of 21. Dad served 45 years before he retired. I am almost to the end of my 41st year. In all those years the two of us have been in the same worship service only a handful of times. And yet every Sunday as he stood behind his pulpit and I stood behind mine, we were both proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus in the same church. Different cities. Different worship styles. Different denominations. But it is the same church.

The church is not a physical building. It is not a denomination. It is not a theological persuasion. The church is and always will be the people who turn to Jesus confessing their sins and receiving His forgiveness. WE ARE ... THE CHURCH!

#2: WE ARE A HOLY PRIESTHOOD

This point is so important Peter addresses it twice in these 10 verses. Verse 5 declares:

You 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. (1 Peter 2:5)

And again in verse 9, Peter writes:

But 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. (1 Peter 2:9)

In the Old Testament the people of God HAD priests; today, the people of God ARE priests. Each and every one of us has the wonderful privilege of coming into the presence of God on our own. We don't have to go to or through a priest in order to have access to God. That is a foundational truth for every Protestant Christian.

But that privilege comes with responsibility. Peter says that, as priests, we have two important duties that we are obligated to perform.

First, we are to offer “*spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God*” (v. 5).

- An Old Testament priest would never enter God's presence without bringing a sacrifice: a lamb, doves, grains – whatever was appropriate for the occasion.
 - Those are physical sacrifices. Now we bring “spiritual” sacrifices. What does that look like? Look in the mirror. It looks a lot like you. In fact, it looks exactly like you.

Writing to the Romans, the Apostle Paul encouraged his readers to:

Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. (Romans 12:1)

We take all of who we are and we offer it to God.

Lord, here is life, my talents, my checkbook, my schedule, my priorities, my will. I give it all to You.

That sounds hard, you might say! No kidding! That's why it is called a “sacrifice.”

Second, as priests, we are to “*declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*” (1 Peter 2:9).

- Priests tell the story of Jesus. They declare His praises. They talk about how Jesus brings people out of the dark places of their lives into the bright light of Jesus.

The job of the priest sounds a bit overwhelming, but as you think about it, it ought to instead be “awe inspiring.” That's Peter's intent. What you should hear is that God changed your life, and now you get to help others meet that same God who can change their lives too. What a privilege! And all because WE ARE ... A HOLY PRIESTHOOD.

#3: WE ARE THE PEOPLE OF GOD

That's our identity as seen in verse 10:

Once 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. (1 Peter 2:10)

Thousands of years before Jesus was born, God spoke to a man named Abram. He would later change his name to Abraham, but when God first spoke he was known as Abram. God told Abram that through him, there would be a great nation – a people who would become known as the people of God. And because of them all the people in the world would be able to recognize God because they would see Him in His people.

Before Jesus that nation was the people of Israel – the Jews. Because of Jesus, that nation now includes all of us. Once we were not, now we are. And why?

Because of God's mercy, found in the cross of Jesus Christ.

The people of God are not merely to mark time, waiting for God to step in and set right all that is wrong. Rather, they are to model the new heaven and new earth, and by so doing awaken longings for what God will someday bring to pass. (Phillip Yancy)

Our Scripture lessons these past few weeks have been about the rapid growth of the church. 3,000 added, 5,000 added, the Lord added daily those who were being saved. While it is true, the gospel message was being proclaimed with a newly found power, it is also true that those earliest Christians lived differently than the non-Christians. They genuinely loved and cared for each other. They made sure everyone's needs were met. They enjoyed each other's company. It was contagious. The non-Christian world looked at them and said "I want to be a part of that."

In your free time today, Google the story of Tony Campolo throwing a birthday party for a prostitute at 3:30 in the morning. It's a great story. I don't have time to tell the whole story but the ending is a classic and fits this point perfectly. After the party, the owner of the diner – a man named Harry – discovers that Tony is a preacher. I'll Tony tell the story from here:

Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

And Tony concludes:

Wouldn't we all?

When the people of God live as the people of God, there is a magnetic quality about them. The unchurched world wants to be a part of something like that, because we all want to be a part of something like that. And it can only be found among people like us. You see, WE ARE ... THE PEOPLE OF GOD.

APPLICATION

You may not know the name "Ted Giannoulos" but for the past 45 years he has been the man inside the costume of the famous San Diego Chicken.

He originated the character as a college student. Now in his mid-60s Ted talks about how being the Chicken has been his life and his whole identity. His face is never photographed unless he is in costume.

- No one knows the real Ted.
- He has no family.
- At first, he loved his alter ego. "I discovered an untapped personality in that suit," he said. "It was like, now I have freedom. Now I'm no longer Ted."
- He also confesses "I have plenty of Chicken stories. I'm afraid I don't have any Ted stories."

Many people live their lives being people that God never intended them to be. They have lost themselves seeking an identity they think is important:

- Top salesman
- World's greatest mom or dad
- Smartest person in the room
- Owner of the nicest house, the coolest car, the latest Apple gadget

But God calls each of us to find our identity in Him, in a personal, life-giving relationship with Him. There we find out who we were created to be, who we really are. WE ARE ...

- THE CHURCH
- A HOLY PRIESTHOOD
- THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Amen.