

**1 Peter 2:4-8**  
**(Psalm 118:19-24; Matthew 16:13-19, 24-26)**  
**“What Is the Church?”**

## **Introduction**

When I say “church,” what first comes to your mind? We talk about “going to church,” by which we usually mean going to a particular building on a particular corner at a particular time. Those of us who enjoy great buildings may think of majestic Gothic structures or graceful city churches with their soaring spires encouraging us to lift up our gaze toward heaven. We may have our hearts stirred and our minds encouraged toward the contemplation of spiritual things by the physical testimony to the faith of those who have followed Christ before us, whether buildings or organizations or institutions.

But the New Testament knew nothing of these things. The first Christians did not have the luxury of building houses of worship. They certainly knew the majesty of the Temple in Jerusalem, as well as the simplicity of the early synagogues. They were familiar with pagan temples. But they worshiped in homes or in buildings built for other purposes, and knew that the church they were building was not a thing that could be measured by human means, because they were building something not merely for time but for eternity. They did not think of the church as a place but as people. They were in blood-earnest, and knew that identifying with the church might cost them their families, their friends, their jobs, or even their lives. Yet the church grew like wildfire and turned the ancient world upside down.

In spite of all the published accounts of church growth in America, seen in the continued building of very large church buildings and the presence of media empire congregations, the percentage of Americans who attend worship on any given Sunday has significantly declined over the past two decades. Perhaps the major reason is that we Americans are increasingly consumers rather than producers. Our culture encourages us to work in order to consume, and our voracious appetites dominate our world-view and even our concept of “church.”

Isn't it curious that the church is declining in the places where Christians are free to worship and serve the Lord, and at the same time growing and flourishing in many places where Christians are under pressure and even under persecution for following Christ? Is it not because being a Christian requires a cost – not only the cost that Christ paid for us in taking up his cross – but also the cross that Jesus told us to take up daily if we would be his disciples?

Imagine what would happen here in Knoxville if the many “churches” decided to *be* the church of Jesus Christ in blood-earnest, not the church as defined by the gurus of church growth: namely, as a sort of spiritual Wal-Mart that dispenses various products to a spoiled group of spiritual consumers, but rather a community of

people willing to embrace the picture of Christ's church as described by Peter in this letter: a people sent by God on mission to our neighborhoods, our schools, our places of work. Twenty-one years ago – on the first Sunday that we worshiped in this renovated and enlarged sanctuary – I spoke from this morning's text. I asked whether – in a world of need where people starve to death and others die without the gospel of Christ – we had any right to celebrate spending millions of dollars on ourselves. We might ask the same question of our beautiful new student center. My answer then and now was this:

Surely this will have been a waste *unless* this building with its beauty and comfort creates a space in which something happens that transcends time and place. That "something" for which this building was built and to which we dedicate it and ourselves is pictured quite simply in these two images Peter uses to describe Christ's church: "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" (2:4-5). In other words, in this building we are to be doing at least two things: building the Lord's true house and learning to live in that house.

Look with me this morning at these two challenges.

## **Body**

### **1. The church is a spiritual house built with living stones.**

This building will one day fall down or burn or be destroyed by the wrecker's ball. But if we build wisely and well, as Christ would have us build, then the spiritual house that we build will outlive the mountains that surround this lovely river valley. The question is, how do we build the Lord's true house? Peter answers the question in two ways:

*First, we must come to the living stone: Why?* Because everything depends upon this. Christ alone holds the building together. He is the promised "cornerstone chosen and precious." In fact, one's eternal destiny is contingent on this one thing: have you come to him in faith, or have you stumbled over him, finding the gospel offensive to your pride, your dignity, your sense of self-worth. If so, if you have rejected the cornerstone, everything you build is doomed to pass away, and you at last will join your work in passing from memory, from meaning and from any hope of lasting significance and everlasting life.

How do I know whether or not I have really come to him in faith? To those who believe, this stone is precious. Even as Christ is chosen and precious to

God, so too he is loved by his people who do not merely believe the truth about him, but who have gratefully entrusted themselves to him.

*Second, we must become living stones:* Peter, whom Jesus named “the Rock,” tells us here that we, too, are made like our Lord Jesus: living stones to be fitted into this great thing that God is building through us for his glory and for the salvation of the world. This picture is meant to remind us that *we are the church of Jesus Christ!* Just as Paul calls us “Christ’s body” so Peter tells us that, like Jesus, the “living stone,” we too are to become living stones.

Buildings thoughtfully constructed and dedicated to the worship of God and the equipping of his people for ministry are all fine and good, but they are not the church. Magnificent cathedrals sit empty all across Europe and in many American cities because the living church is gone from the place. We must never mistake the buildings and grounds for the living thing. If ever this building becomes an idol to this congregation so that we could more faithfully serve Christ in rented buildings, we should be ready happily to walk away from all this.

Now Peter moves to a second picture that reminds us of the limitation of depicting the church as a building, even a living building made of living stones. A building is useful only to the degree that it serves the purpose for which it was built. What matters is not the building, but what goes on inside the building. So Peter changes the picture to focus on the people who inhabit the building.

## **2. The church is a spiritual house inhabited by holy priests.**

The picture he chooses is arresting: he calls us “a holy priesthood.” In the verses that follow, Peter will unpack this picture more fully, but in the verses we read this morning, we are reminded of what is the essence of our priesthood: we are called “to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2:5). What are these “spiritual sacrifices” we are to offer to God through Christ? Peter is underscoring two things: we are to offer God the kind of worship he is seeking, and we are to offer the world around us the kind of loving community it is seeking – a community whose quality of life will vindicate the gospel of Christ. Peter will say in the middle of this chapter that when we live this way, even those who try to speak against the church end up glorifying God for what they have seen and tasted of his steadfast love through the lives of the Christians they encounter in the neighborhood and marketplace (see 2:12).

*First, consider our worship:* When you come to this room on Sunday morning, do you come with a gift of song, a gift of thanksgiving, a gift of your time and money, a gift that has cost you something and that you are eager to give to

the Lord because you have tasted and seen his goodness at work in and through you again this past week? The Psalmist tells us that it is our sacrifice of thanksgiving that glorifies God and prepares the way for his salvation (Psalm 50:23). Do you give yourself in the early morning, in the midst of the day and in the night time in the sacrifice of intercession for others, both those you love and the world around you? Do you pray for the advance of Christ's kingdom beginning in your own family and neighborhood? Do you pray for Christ's peace where there is war, for Christ's mercy where there is violence, for bread for the hungry, water for the thirsty, freedom for prisoners, healing for the broken? Do you know anything of these things, or is this a language foreign to you?

We are a holy priesthood, and if we forbear doing the work to which we called, who will pray for Christ's church, who will glorify God in song, who will give to bring healing and wholeness to our community and to the nations?

*Second, consider our witness:* Are we seeking to answer our own prayers whenever and wherever possible? Do the members of our families see Christ's love in us, so that even those who may be in rebellion against him find him attractive and lovely because of what they see of him in us? Do our neighbors know that we are believers in Jesus Christ, and if they do, does that attract them to Christ or give them cause to attack the gospel? Do those who work with us want to know Christ because of what they see of him in us, or are they repelled from him because of us?

Here are two very different types of people who claim to be Christian: The one says, "I like that preacher; let's go hear him again." Or, "I like that music; let's go back there." Or, "That church has lots of fun things going on; let's go there." The other says, "That seems like a place where we can really worship the Lord in spirit and truth, where we can be part of a community of believers who are seeking to grow in the knowledge of Christ, where we can get equipped to serve Christ in our neighborhood, school, and workplace, where we can be a part of what God is doing all around the world." The one is thinking like a spiritual consumer, the other like a disciple of Jesus Christ. The first will have no eternal impact, while the second will be a living stone, serving in the spiritual building as a holy priest through Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

I simply ask you, which are you? Are you a consumer, a spiritual dilettante, or a disciple of Jesus Christ? Have you yet come to him, the living stone, rejected by the people of this world, but chosen and precious to God? Why go on living for nothing. Come to him now without delay. He will make all things new, and give you a life to live and work to do that will last unto eternity.

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