

Several years ago, at the Athenaeum downtown. I came across a vignette of Indianapolis history, talking about this part of the city, that part of the city. One section had several pictures of once-prominent Indianapolis churches, such as Roberts Park United Methodist Church and Sacred Heart Church. There are great buildings with magnificent histories and beautiful architecture. But the title to encapsulate the purpose and meaning and destiny of these sacred places was as mundane as could be. Here's all it said: "Places to gather."

Today, as we come to our text in God's Word, 1 Peter 2:4-10, the question I want you to think on is this: is that all the Church is, simply a place to gather, or is it more?

We're in a series called **Resilient Faith** and I wholeheartedly believe that if you want a resilient faith, you need to know the purpose and role of the Church. So, let's think with Peter. He gives us three considerations.

The Blueprint

"As you come to him, the living stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house..." (1 Peter 1:4-5).

What is the *blueprint* for Christ's Church? Let's focus on Jesus for a moment. Peter describes Jesus as a "living stone." He's a *living* stone because He's been raised from the dead! Peter is getting the "stone" terminology for Jesus from the Old Testament. We know this because in verses 6-8, Peter quotes directly from three Old Testament passages.

In verse 6, Peter quotes Isaiah 28:16: "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." Peter is quoting this to say that Jesus is the cornerstone that God has laid! That's the foundation of the Church. Christ. No other foundation. All other ground is sinking sand.

The second quotation occurs in the back half of verse 7, where Peter quotes Psalm 118:22: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Peter is saying there's a great irony: the religious leaders, who were supposed to be building God's house, didn't. Why? Because they rejected God's Son. However, the irony gets even deeper because in a way, the builders who rejected Christ played a role in building God's building. How? Because resurrection followed crucifixion! It's for this reason that scholar Edmund Clowney observes, "In their rejection of Christ, the builders, in spite of themselves, served to put God's Stone in place." In other words, by tearing Jesus down, the religious leaders were breaking ground on the building of God's house, the Church! Instead of trusting Christ, they crucified the Lord of Glory. But by crucifying the Lord of glory, they unwittingly participated in erecting God's building!

In verse 8, Peter quotes Isaiah 8:14. “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”

With these three quotations from the Old Testament, Peter is telling us two things about Jesus. First, Jesus is a stone you can build upon. Because He’s the *living stone* (i.e. resurrected), this is where our designation as *living stones* comes from. You and I are living stones insofar as we are built on Christ. We’ll find resurrection through Jesus’ resurrection! We are built on Christ, *the living stone*, insofar as we are those who “believe” (verse 7) and who see Christ as “precious” (verse 6). This is God’s blueprint! We aren’t *just* “a place to gather.” We’re a people saved by and built on Christ! We’re living stones on the Living Stone!

Second, Jesus is a stone you can stumble on. Peter doesn't leave this as abstract theology. He tells us exactly why people stumble: “They stumble because they disobey the message...” (1 Peter 2:8). What does it mean “to stumble” on Jesus? Two things: (1) it is to not believe in him, and (2) it is to not obey him. Disbelieving and disobeying the gospel isn't neutral—it's actively tripping over the very foundation God provided. Again, think of the religious leaders who, because of their unbelief, stumbled and fell. They had the blueprint wrong! By rejecting Jesus, they were rejecting God. This is the outcome for anyone who doesn't believe Christ and obey the gospel: stumbling and falling spiritually.

To help us feel the weight of this, picture a scenario far more immediate than this stone imagery. Imagine there’s a snowstorm. You’re on a mountain. There’s no cell reception. You can’t see very clearly. You’re cold and frustrated because you don’t know the way down. There’s a path going right and one going left. Only one leads to the lodge at the base of the mountain. Without the right path, you’ll freeze to death. Eventually, a ranger comes along looking for you. He provides all the right identification. He says to follow him, that he knows the way. What do you do? You have three options: you can follow him, you can reject him, or you can stay put.

This mirrors exactly what Peter describes. God has sent His Son—the living Stone, the only true path down the mountain—into our storm of sin and confusion. We face the same three choices: follow Him to life, reject Him and wander to destruction, or stay frozen in indecision (which is still rejection). Either way, apart from Him, we stumble and fall.

What is your life being built on? Is it on Christ or on something else? Are you a living stone or are you stumbling over Jesus? Think about that.

The Builder

Early last year, my wife and I were blessed to visit our mission partner TCM in Austria. We wound up staying some extra days in Vienna. While we were there, Ash and I got to visit several beautiful church buildings—St. Stephen’s, St. Peter’s, Votive Church, etc. You

can't help but applaud the ingenuity, the skill, and the mind of those who built these beautiful buildings.

There is one more building, however, that I want to share with you. On Sunday morning, Ash and I found ourselves in a unique space. We were in the basement of a house with fluorescent lighting and no natural sunlight, but surrounded with believers from Austria, Bulgaria, Moldova, and more, singing praise to God! We were at a worship service. We were singing praise to God. Tears welled up in my eyes! I couldn't get over the beauty of singing praise to God with people from all different parts of the world! "What is it," I thought, "that enables such a beautiful gathering of people?" And my mind went not to a *what* but to a *who*!

Maybe you know where I'm headed here with point #2. Peter instructs us to consider not just the blueprint of the Church, but also the *builder* of the Church.

Take a moment and look around this room. Early this morning, you got out of bed, put on some clothes, headed out the door, and drove here! You're people from different walks of life, with different stories, with different backgrounds. Some of you are financially well off, some of you are struggling. There's ethnic diversity in this room. There's educational diversity in this room. Some of you grew up with a mom and a dad. Some of you had one or neither. Some of you have kids, some of you don't. Some of you are good looking, and some of you...are ALL good looking! How is it that we, as disparate individuals, like individual atoms, have come together to form one whole, one molecule, that we call "the Church of Christ"?

Make no mistake about it: it is God who builds His Church. He's the Builder! Look at how this plays out in our passage: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—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 2:4-5). Note the passive voice in this passage—you are *being built* into a spiritual house. It's not something we build, it's something God builds.

There are two implications of this. First, we best not think it's we who build God's Church. Yes, we work, we plan, we preach, we pray, we do "Welcome to the Creek," we do neighbor bags, we do theology class. But *God* does the growing! As Paul says about his church work, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6).

The second implication is we best not think that we don't *need* God's Church. In her book *Strange Rites*, the religious scholar Tara Isabella Burton designates a term for an increasingly common category of person in our world, the "spiritual but not religious" types. She writes that SBNR people,

...reject authority, institution, creed, and moral universalism. They value intuition, personal feeling, and experiences. They demand to rewrite their own scripts about how the universe, and human beings, operate....[They] don't want to receive doctrine, to assent automatically to a creed. They want to choose...the spiritual path that feels more authentic, more meaningful, to them. They prioritize intuitional spirituality over institutional religion.

This is a common sentiment today. People will say, "I have a relationship with Jesus, but I don't go to church," "I don't trust the Church," or "I don't jive with church." They'll say, "It's too institutional, too rigid, too religious, too artificial, too dogmatic." But here's the deal: far more than simply "a place to gather," the Church is a *people that's been gathered* by the one true God! In other words, you can't have Christ without his Body! And the Church is Christ's Body!

As C.S. Lewis noted: "The New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion." Solo religion is like trying to drive a car with one wheel. You can't. As the church father Cyprian said, "He cannot have God for his Father who does not have the church for his Mother." You need the church as urgently as a starving baby needs his mother's milk. You cannot grow, you cannot be nourished without the Church. To be a living stone, you can't be a solo stone. That's not how this works!

God is building His Church. We have the blueprint (living stones on the Living Stone), and the builder (it's God who builds).

The Building

Let's talk about the Church, the Body, the *people* itself. With this I like to think about two questions:

1. What even *is* the Church? What do people say? A lot of times when people think of what the Church is they think "the people" or "6430 S. Franklin Road," etc.
2. What is the Church to do? Here's a list of some expectations people often have: coffee, parking, great worship, a place for kids, lyrics plus the Bible on screen, safe, clean, comfortable, cool stage design, lots of people, anonymity, community, sixty minutes max, comfy seats, leave feeling good with a little bit of conviction, greeted, cool website, ministries that fit my needs, etc.

I think it's safe to say that both of those are off base. So, what is the Church? What is it to do?

In 1 Peter 2:5, Peter writes, "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." Then in verses 9-10 we read this:

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. 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.

Did you catch all these identity markers? We are

- living stones,
- a spiritual house,
- a holy priesthood,
- a chosen people,
- a royal priesthood,
- a holy nation,
- God's special possession,
- and the people of God!

All those designations come from the Old Testament. It's what Israel used to be called. The temple was God's house; now we're God's spiritual house. Israel was God's chosen people, His holy nation, His special possession, His people. Now the Church is *all of that*.

And how about this: did you know you and I are priests to God, a royal priesthood? What does that mean? It means that, like the priests of the Old Testament, we have direct access to the presence of God, we offer sacrifices, and we are representatives between God and the world and the world and God!

This leads to question two, "What is the Church to do?" Peter gives two answers.

First, we are to offer "spiritual sacrifices." We do not offer animal sacrifices; Jesus' sacrifice ended those. But, rather, we're to follow Jesus' example and offer the Spirit-empowered sacrifices of our own lives. As Paul says, "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice..." (Romans 12:1). We're called and built by God, then that calling flows into being broken and given to the world.

What are some examples? Any time you give to the poor, that's a spiritual sacrifice. Any time you serve at church, that's a spiritual sacrifice. Any time you work hard at your job, that's a spiritual sacrifice. As Hebrews 13:16 says, "Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

Second, we are to "declare the praises of him" who called you. We are to worship our great God and declare His greatness and His saving wonders to all peoples.

That's our purpose: to offer sacrifices in the Spirit and to declare God's praises, His salvation!

I want to show you a cathedral. The town that built this cathedral (Ely, England) had a population of about 108 households, which amounted to about 400-500 people. By the time the cathedral was finished, the town had about 2,500 people. How could a place the size of a truck-stop township build something like this, which took over 300 years? You know how? Generation after generation, they came to be the kind of people God was calling them to be, to do what God was calling them to do!

The same can be true for us, for this Church. Many organizations have a vision statement, an articulation of their preferred future. We may have three-year plans or five-year plans, but I believe God has a bigger picture. He's got ten-year plans, fifty-year plans, 300-year plans as in Ely, England, for our Church. If we let Him, he could do something great *in* us and *through* us.

Some of us need to ask ourselves, "What is my life built on?" If it's not Christ, build it on him.

Some of us need to ask ourselves, "Am I allowing God to build me as a living stone with other living stones on the Living Stone, or am I simply attending?"

Some of us need to *stop* asking ourselves, "What am I getting out of church?" and start asking, "What kind of stone am I becoming?"

We're not just a "place to gather." We have God's blueprint, we know God's the builder, and we know we're God's building.