

The People of True Witness

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, we turn to our reading for this evening, which is in 1 Peter, chapter 1, page 1014. This is our fourth and final week in this section, asking the question, what is the church? And this is our final week. So we're reading 1 Peter, and from verse 22, page 1014. 1 Peter, chapter 1.
- And all its glory, like the flower of grass, the grass withers, and the flower falls. But the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you.
- So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.
- As you come to him, the 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.
- [1 : 5 7] For it stands in Scripture, behold, I am laying in Zion a cornerstone, chosen and precious. And whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.
- So the honour is for you who believe. But for those who do not believe, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence.
- They stumble because they disobeyed the word, as they were destined to do. But 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 marvellous light.
- 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.
- Amen. This is God's word to us this evening. May he bless it to us. Well, you take up your Bibles, and let's turn to the passage that we read earlier, 1 Peter 2.
- [3 : 2 4] 2, and we're looking particularly this evening just at chapter 2, verses 9 and 10. So two large chunks of two chapters this morning, two verses only this evening.
- That's maybe a relief to many of us. It is a relief to me, I can tell you. We've been asking this question, what is the church? What is the church of Jesus Christ?
- And we've discovered that according to Peter, it is not an institution he's speaking about. It's not an organization he's speaking about.
- It's not an architectural edifice that he's interested in. It's certainly not a club. It's not a hobby. None of these things. No, no, no. The church, according to Peter, is the true home of the people of true hope.
- That is the hope of resurrection life through Jesus Christ our Lord. It's the home of true life. He says in chapter 1, verse 23, that we are born into it by the imperishable seed of life, through God's living and abiding imperishable word.

- [4 : 41] That's how we're born, into this family of true life. Life now, life forever. And it's the family, he says in chapter 1, verse 22, a family of true love.
- We are born into this home of life for, he says, sincere brotherly love. And we're born to grow up into salvation as we grow together in genuine love.
- And that's how God is building his temple of true worship. That's the third image that we looked at in verses 4 to 8 of chapter 2. Christ, the living cornerstone, and he is building his people as living stones around him and dwelling in the midst of them.
- His people, his living church, his living temple where he dwells. And therefore, remember we saw last time that it follows from that, that the only way to God and the only worship of God at all that is true is through Jesus Christ.
- That's the way, and that is the only way, verse 5, to spiritual sacrifices that Peter says are acceptable to God. There is no other way.
- [5 : 58] So it hardly needs saying, does it, that so-called interfaith worship is not just wrong, it's actually impossible. It's no more possible than Elijah could have had interfaith worship with the prophets of Baal on the top of Mount Carmel.
- Outside the true church of Jesus Christ, there is no worship at all of God. There is no salvation, there is no fellowship with heaven. Only through Jesus Christ.
- But inside the church of Jesus Christ, for all who, as verse 4 puts it, who come to him, whoever you are, whatever you've been, wherever you've come from, inside the church of Jesus Christ is that wonderful declaration at the end of verse 5.
- Look at it. Acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. And therefore, able to truly worship God.
- And it doesn't matter if this church of living stones has a building or not. It doesn't matter where it meets. It doesn't matter what nationalities it comprises. The true church is a living one.
- [7 : 17] It's a temple of living worship. We must be confused what that worship looks like. Or how it's to be expressed. Because Peter is clear that a living temple whose worship is true worship upward to God, acceptable to God, will always be a church of witness outward to the world.
- You can't worship God upwards truly without witnessing to the world outwards truly. Those two things always join together. And the true church is a church of people who are being built together for that true and living praise.
- And therefore, it's a people who are being built together and bound together for that true and living proclamation. The true church, by its very definition, therefore, is a people of true and living witness.
- It's showing forth. It's proclaiming God's light to the whole wide world through the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's Peter's point in verses 9 and 10. It's that the temple of living worship is the people with a living witness to Christ.
- And where that is there, the church is there. And where that is not there, there is no church there. It doesn't matter whether there's a building called a church with a notice board saying, this is the church of such and such, might be full of people.
- [8 : 41] They might be dressed in all kinds of grand clothes, doing all sorts of things that look very churchy. But if there is no living witness to the world, to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is actually no church there at all, according to Peter.
- Nothing to do with size, nothing to do with those sorts of things. It's all to do with substance. And Jesus himself said, remember, that even where two or three are gathered in his name, notice, in his name, that he is there himself in the midst of his living church.

Because he makes his name dwell there still. Remember, we spoke about how in the Old Testament, God said to his people, you can't just worship me any old way you like, in any old place you like.

It's got to be in the place that I choose to make my name dwell there. To make God's name dwell there means that God is there. It's where he presences himself.

And where he presences himself among his people, there is the church. There is the ecclesia. That's the Greek word for church, where we get our word ecclesiastical. There is, it means the congregation, the gathering of God's people around him.

[9 : 52] And there is the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst. So when Paul's writing to the Corinthians, he speaks very similarly. I think it's chapter 3, isn't it?

1 Corinthians 3. He says, you, plural, speaking to the people, you are God's temple. And God's spirit dwells in you.

And that's why he goes on to say that he issues a strong warning to anyone who would dare to destroy God's temple. You destroy God's temple, his true people, God will destroy you.

Very severe warning to anyone who would make it their business to divide or to deceive or damage the true church of Jesus Christ, the people of God.

But you see how verses 9 and 10 here, Peter is focusing both on the privileges and on the purpose of being God's church.

[10 : 51] Let's read them again, these verses 9 and 10. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.

Privilege. And here's the purpose. That you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Privilege. Once you had not received mercy, but you have received mercy. Do you see, in the middle of that privilege is a very clear purpose.

Let's think first of the privilege. We are, he says, a people of worth to God. We are precious to God. Notice how just as in verses 4 to 8, all that language of God's temple is applied directly to the New Testament church, the people of God.

So also in verse 9 here, the language of Israel as God's household, as his specially chosen people, is also applied directly to the New Testament church.

[12 : 00] A chosen race, a royal priesthood, holy nation, and so on. Now he's not saying, he's not saying that the church in the New Testament replaces Israel in the Old Testament.

Sometimes we use that language. It's not that helpful, that language. It's a little bit inaccurate. What he's saying, as all the New Testament writers do say, is that the church of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment.

It is the consummation of Israel, of the destiny of God's people, who are now gathered from all the nations to be his true Israel of God.

Jews, yes, but also Gentiles from all different nationalities. All one now in Christ Jesus. Paul uses the language of Gentiles being engrafted in.

Engrafted in to the natural olive tree of Israel as wild branches. Romans 9 to 11 and so on. And so he can say now to this mixed group of Jews and Gentiles in Asia Minor that Peter's writing to, modern day Turkey.

[13 : 09] He can say to them, all of them, verse 9, you all are a chosen race. Well, they come from many races. But that's Old Testament language that comes from Moses' time.

And actually it's language that's quoted also in the prophets in Isaiah, particularly Isaiah 43. We're in the midst of the great servant songs about the servant of the Lord who would come, the Messiah.

God is promising that through him, and what he will do as the Messiah, all God's redeemed people would at last be renewed for their true calling.

As witnesses of God to the whole world, to declare his praises, to declare his excellencies to the world. It's the same passage that Jesus quotes in Acts chapter 1, verse 8, in the Great Commission.

Where he's saying to his followers, And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth. And the Holy Spirit will come for that very purpose, he says, that you will be my witnesses.

[14 : 13] And that's the privilege of the Church of Jesus Christ. We are a chosen race in fulfillment of all God's promises. And a royal priesthood.

Look, a holy nation, a people for his own possession. All of that is words that echo what God said to Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 19.

When the whole nation of Israel are called by God priests. Priests of God. That is set apart for obedience to God. To be lights to all the surrounding nations.

Lights in the world. All because they have the enormous privilege of being called God's own treasured possession. Think of your most treasured possession.

Well, that's what the Church is to God. Precious, beloved in his sight. That's the great privilege that we have as the Church of Jesus Christ.

[15 : 14] And don't miss verse 10. He's quoting there from the prophet Hosea. Remember where in Hosea chapter 1 is reminding the people forcefully that it's all about God's mercy.

And that's why he's quoting it here. Because he is not saying, we must never think, that the Church is precious to God and a treasured possession and so on. Because Christians somehow are superior to people of other religions or other cultures or other backgrounds or whatever.

Not saying that Christians are better people. It's very clear, isn't it, in verse 10. Of yourself, you're nothing. What is it all due to? It's all due solely to God's sheer mercy.

We're not God's people because of our actions. Our actions, what we were, what we were in ourselves and of ourselves, excluded us once we were not a people, he says.

But now we are because, but only because, we've received mercy. Hosea, from where these words come, Hosea the prophet was speaking originally about Israelites.

[16 : 29] And they had rejected God. They had rebelled against God. They had been disobedient to God. And so God says to them, who were once his people, I'm going to make you not a people anymore.

In other words, I'm going to make you just like the pagan Gentiles, the pagan nations. But now, Peter is saying, God's mercy makes all sinners, Jews and Gentiles alike, makes them into his chosen people, set apart by his spirit.

Set apart, as he says at the very beginning of the letter, in chapter 1, verse 2, for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ. Very Hebrews language, isn't it?

Exactly what we're looking at this morning. And every Christian believer, you see, every single person who has come to God through Jesus Christ in obedient faith, every single one shares this extraordinary privilege of being part of his chosen people.

God's true Israel, bound in an everlasting covenant with him, cleansed by his blood, set apart for his rule and for his service.

[17 : 40] And above all other things, we need to remember what Peter is saying here, that we are his people. We're a holy nation forever.

His holy nation. And that begs the question, of course, doesn't it? To whom and to what then do we, as human beings living in this world, Christian people, to whom do we owe our first allegiance?

When there's a clash of allegiances with earthly powers and with earthly nations even. Former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once very famously said, you can never be over-patriotic.

Well, that might be true, especially during the Six Nations Championship. Well, it's not going too well, is it, for us Scots at the moment. Never be over-patriotic. Well, maybe, but, for the Christian, our true country is not an earthly one, is it, according to Peter?

Our true nation is a heavenly one, according to what he's saying here. Actually, to refer to Baroness Thatcher, the hymn that she chose for her funeral does express that.

[18 : 55] I vow to thee, my country, all earthly things above. That's patriotism. But the last verse very clearly speaks about another country most dear to those that love her.

He's talking about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. I don't know if Mrs. Thatcher chose it for that reason. I hope she did. I hope she did understand where she truly belonged, in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

But if that other country, you see, if that home of God's holy nation is truly most dear to us, more than any earthly nation even, then that is going to mean, isn't it, that there will be clashes and conflicts in this life for us as Christian people, who live also in earthly countries and have earthly loyalties.

Because this world doesn't easily tolerate rival patriotism. It's all right, isn't it, if we keep our heavenly citizenship quiet.

If we keep our temple worship private. That's fine. But it's a very different matter if that becomes too public. No, no, no, says the world. We don't want that kind of Christianity intruding its views and its ways onto our society or onto our way of life.

[20 : 18] We don't want that kind of thing telling us that we need to be challenged by what we think is right and wrong for our lives. We won't have that. That's always been the case. Peter's readers in the first century faced that from the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire was very tolerant of religion. Tolerated any religion as long as it never rocked the boat of Rome.

But if it dared to threaten Rome, the Pax Romana, then it was ruthlessly opposed, ruthlessly suppressed.

That's what the early Christians discovered. And that's what the witnessing church, the true church of Jesus Christ, has experienced and has discovered all through the centuries. All through history.

And actually all through most of the world today. Sometimes it is very violent state-sponsored suppression.

[21 : 15] That is certainly true in many countries today. Sometimes it's less clear-cut and less state-sponsored, but it's very real from the people, from the populace. Sometimes it's not at that level of violent persecution, but it's still vehement scorn, real opposition.

Demands, as we're seeing more and more in our own culture. Demands to keep that kind of thing out of our schools, out of our public places, off the TV, off the radio.

Which is where evangelical Christianity, true evangelical Christianity, is almost completely kept out of in our modern world today. Isn't that right? It's certainly been kept out of the SEC hydro, where Franklin Graham, the evangelist, is not allowed to go and preach the Christian gospel in our city.

That's just another example of exactly that thing. A clash of loyalties. But you see, this temple that the world wants us to keep private, can't be kept private, according to Peter.

This people of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, that the world wants to keep silent, can't keep silent. Because Peter is absolutely clear, isn't he, that the privilege of God's people, the privilege of being a people of worth to God, implies and goes along with absolutely inseparably, but the purpose of being God's people.

[22 : 45] And that purpose is that we are a people of witness. Those who are precious to God, he says, are to be the proclaimers of God. We are chosen, Peter says, to be a priesthood.

And the great task of the priesthood is to do what? Well, look at verse 9. To proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

To proclaim the promises, the gospel of our great Redeemer God to this whole wide world. And a huge part of all the spiritual sacrifices that we offer to God through Jesus is the telling forth of the wonders of our Savior.

That's what he's saying to us. Proclaiming the gospel to the world is living worship. And the language that he uses here, by the way, is nearly all corporate language.

It's involving everyone in the church, all of us, sharing the glorious truth of the gospel. In all different ways, but the focus is particularly on the public telling forth of the wonders of God by his people.

[23 : 58] Especially when they're gathered as the ecclesia, as the congregation, as the assembly, the household of God. The proclaiming language that's used here is the language of corporate acclamation that you find so much in the Psalms.

It's exactly the language also that's used in Isaiah 43. That we already mentioned where God promises that in the latter days, in fulfillment of all his promises in the Messiah, that his people will be his true witnesses at last.

That they will declare his praises. Declare his excellencies. That's what happened, isn't it, on the day of Pentecost. All those who were among and who were around the gathered church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the congregation, the ecclesia of God there in Jerusalem.

All the people who gathered around him were part of it. They saw and they heard, in their own language, the praises of God being proclaimed. Because that is what God's true temple does.

His temple and his dwelling means his presence in power. And that's present when his people gather to tell forth his wonders. In words of preaching, in words of prayer, in words of gospel-filled song.

[25 : 20] All the proclamation of his people together. The church is a people of living witness. And that's what it means, Peter is saying, to be a royal priesthood.

Paul, when he's talking to the Romans, Romans chapter 15, verse 16, he talks about his priestly service. And when he's speaking about that, what he's talking about is his telling forth the wonders of God.

To outsiders, to Gentiles, to non-Christians. So that they'll be drawn in themselves. To become worshippers of God.

Those who offer themselves to God through Jesus. And what Peter's saying here is that the whole church is part of doing that. Not just apostles like Paul. That's why in 1 Corinthians 14, when Paul's writing to the church there in Corinth, he's telling them that he wants to be sure that their gatherings will be like that.

That they'll be clear. That they'll be full of the telling forth of God's wonders, of his gospel, in words that people can hear and understand. That outsiders can hear and understand. Not speaking in strange tongues that no one can understand.

[26 : 31] And he wants them to do that. He says so that outsiders, however ignorant they are, they will sense that God really is among you. They'll hear God speaking to them.

They'll encounter the living God themselves. And when that is going on, Paul says, people will come and they will bow down in worship to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because he is there, inhabiting the words, the praise of his people. Psalm 22, verse 3 says that the Lord himself inhabits, or some translations say is enthroned.

The Lord inhabits. The Lord is enthroned in the praises of his people as they proclaim his greatness together to the world. Now don't misunderstand me.

We are very committed to all kinds of individual evangelism, all kinds of one-to-one sharing of the gospel. And we're very much encouraging people to be bolder, to be confident in opening the Bible, in opening the Word of God, in reading with friends who are not Christians, with family, with other people.

[27 : 41] That's why we're promoting the Word one-to-one. It's a great tool for helping us to do that. And Richard Bergonham was speaking about that just this week. and telling us that it's a way of just beginning to introduce somebody to the life of the church, so that when they come to other gatherings of the church, they're much more used to what happens.

The Bible is opened and spoken about. But the Lord himself tells us, doesn't he, that there is something uniquely special when more than just one believer is gathered in his name.

Even when it's just two or three, he says, but when you're gathered in my name, that is a manifestation of my church, of my temple. And that's why he says, there am I in the midst.

And where God himself is in the midst, in the person of Christ, through the Spirit of Christ, there is his power. And Paul talks that way repeatedly through the first letter to the Corinthians.

He talks several times to them about saying, when you're assembled, when you're gathered together, when you come together as the church, he says, that is when you know the presence and the power of the Lord Jesus among you.

[28 : 53] And where the church is real, where it is a temple of true and living worship, because the people are people of real and living witness, when they're gathered to tell forth on their lips and in their lives the excellencies of the Redeemer, then he is there in the midst.

And he can be met, he can be found, he can be encountered. He can be come to known as a great and powerful Savior. God is in his temple.

He is dwelling there and showing forth his power. He really is. And whether that's a gathering of God's people on a Sunday in a large crowd like this, or whether it's as we were on Monday night, around tables, eating curry together, and then hearing a gospel message, or whether it's a small group, wherever it is, he's there.

And so if we want people to be able to find God, then the best thing we can possibly ever do is to bring them to his temple, where he is, to meet him, to bring him to gatherings of the church, to bring outsiders to the place where God inhabits the praises of his people.

Not in a stone building necessarily, but in the living stone building, wherever God's people are gathered, even two or three in his name, people will find the Lord when they're brought among the lives of people of witness.

[30 : 24] Because those are the people among whom God delights to dwell and make his dwelling place. And when they begin to experience the living church in any of its gatherings, in any of its activities.

But above all, I do think, on days like today, on the Lord's Day, when the whole church is gathered, when we're assembled in his name, and when we open his word, and we want to hear his voice, and we cherish it, and we honor it, and we respond to it in prayer and in praise.

That's what Paul's saying to the Corinthians about their meetings. And that's why he's saying to them, they're so powerful for outsiders when the word of the Lord is clearly spoken and understood.

Even if these people who have come in know absolutely nothing at all, have no knowledge, are ignorant. He is saying that God can and God will meet such people in the midst of his living church and call them to himself, call them to new life.

And that means that the best form of evangelism there is, is very simple. It's bringing people to the temple. It's bringing people to the dwelling place of God, where he is, among his people.

[31 : 41] Wherever those people are meeting, wherever they're gathering, in his name, God is there. He'll meet people there. And he'll draw them to himself. Whether it's in a home, whether it's under a tree, whether it's in a building like this, whether it's in a Christianity Explored meeting.

But especially, and above all, I think, just in the regular, normal gatherings of the Church of Jesus Christ, because that is where he delights to be in the midst of his people.

Friends, if that's true, we should be much more confident, shouldn't we, of bringing people, even people who know nothing at all, to gatherings of the people of God, when the Word of God is being spoken, when the praise of God is being told forth.

We need to encourage one another in that. We need to pray for opportunities to do that. Well, according to Peter, this is the real church, the authentic church.

It's the home of true life, the life that people long for, the life that people are searching for, but the life which can only be found among God's people.

[32 : 54] It's the family of true love, the love that so many in our world are seeking for and not finding, but is found and can be found among the people of Christ.

It's the temple of true worship, giving the identity, the meaning, the reality that we were made for and that our people of the world are searching for, but not finding, but can be found in the church of Jesus Christ.

Among the people of true witness, those who alone have the Word of life to be witnesses to the very ends of the earth. brothers and sisters sharing the love of a heavenly Father, priests who dwell with him, who share his life and who can therefore tell forth his praise and share his light with the world.

That's the church. It's a picture, isn't it, of humanity redeemed and restored and rejoicing in their true destinies, what we were speaking about this morning, through God's great mercy in Jesus Christ, his Son.

So, perhaps you're here this evening and that's all really quite new to you. Never thought about it before. And we ask you, are you part of that wonderful reality?

[34 : 18] That's the future. That's the life. It's the only real future in life for time, for the whole of eternity. Are you part of it?

Have you done what verse 4 here says, come to him, the living stone, Jesus Christ? Have you come to receive his mercy? Have you stopped disobeying him and his word and believed so that you won't be put to shame?

Do you really belong in that home of Jesus Christ forever? Maybe you hesitate. Maybe you wonder, well, how could I know I'd be welcome if I do come to him? You don't know me.

You don't know my heart. You don't know what I've done. You don't know what I'm like. How could I be sure that I could be one of those who's chosen in the Father's foreknowledge and redeemed by the blood of the Son, as Peter seems to be saying?

How can I know that I can be one of his chosen people? Well, I can tell you the answer to that with absolute confidence because Peter is perfectly clear here.

[35 : 24] Look at verse 4. If you come to him, he says. In verse 7, if you believe in him. That means the second half of verse 8, stopping disobeying him and obeying his voice.

If you come to him in that way, without doubt, he will honor you with a place in his church. Look at verse 7. And the honor is for you who believe. For you who believe.

Whoever you are. Because as verse 10 says, it's all about receiving his mercy. It's not what you can give to him.

It's what he will give to you, to everyone who will come to him. Peter knew that on the highest authority. He'd heard Jesus say it many times. Come to me and I will give you rest.

Come to me, said Jesus Christ. And I will never under any circumstances cast you out. Whoever comes to me, I will never cast out.

[36 : 35] So if you're wondering, don't wonder anymore. And don't let anything, and don't let anyone keep you out of your true home. The home that God made you for.

The home that Jesus Christ came to redeem you for. The church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, let's pray together, shall we?

Heavenly Father, we thank you that through our great Savior, you've opened the door of your heavenly home, the place of life eternal, the place of joy and love eternal, to all who come to you, every one of us, simply through your great mercy.

We marvel, Lord, at that mercy. We marvel at the invitation many of us here in this room have accepted and rejoiced in, many more whom we love, and love dearly, have yet to understand and yet to experience.

But we thank you, Lord, that you've given us this great commission to be your witnesses to the very ends of the earth, to proclaim the excellencies of whom we called us out of darkness and into light.

[37 : 52] and that you have sent us not on our own, but empowered by your own Holy Spirit and your own promise never to leave us or forsake us, but to be with us in power even to the end of the age.

So, Lord, give us the confidence, we pray, to believe your word that wherever we're gathered, even a few of us, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and to hear your word, to praise your name, to proclaim it, you're there in the midst and your heart of love is active and your voice is powerful to call people also out of darkness and into light.

But give us the confidence, Lord, we pray, to do all that we can to bring others to hear that glorious message and to receive the call of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

For we ask it in his name. Amen.