

Who Are We In Christ?

1 Peter 2:4-10

Introduction: “Who are we?” This is a fundamental question of our worldview. Unfortunately, many in the West (Europe and North America) are suffering what can only be described as an “identity crisis” in answering that question, and Christians are not immune from this problem. With the coming of “Identity Politics” and what is called “Intersectionality,” perspectives that place our identity under the overarching categories of “the oppressor” and “the oppressed,” exactly who we are can become confusing, jaded and false. In there excellent book *Critical Dilemma*, Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer map out for us how the new religion of “Contemporary Critical Theory,” with its apostles of “Identity Politics” and “Intersectionality” tell us how we should view the world. The following chart is helpful.

Identity Marker	Type of Oppression	Oppressor Group	Oppressed Group
Race	Racism	Whites	People of Color
Class	Classism	The rich	The poor
Biological sex	Sexism	Men	Women
Sexuality	Heterosexism	Heterosexuals	Homosexuals

Gender identity	Cisgenderism	Cisgender people	Transgender people
Physical/mental ability	Abelism	The able-bodied	People with disabilities
Age	Ageism/Adultism	Adults	The elderly/children
Religion	Religious oppression	Christians	Non-Christians
Colonial status	Colonialism	Colonizers	Indigenous people
Skin color	Colorism	Light-skinned people	Dark-skinned people

Table 1. A few of the oppressor/oppressed groups that constitute the social binary, according to contemporary critical theory (p. 96).

Shenvi and Sawyer then go on to reveal the stark contrast that exist between a Christian Worldview and a Contemporary Critical Theory Worldview.

Worldview Question	Christianity	Contemporary Critical Theory
Who am I?	A creature made in God's image	A member of various social groups locked in a struggle for dominance
What is the fundamental human problem?	Sin	Oppression
How can that problem be solved?	Redemption through Jesus	Activism and solidarity
What is my primary moral duty?	Glorifying God	Dismantling unjust systems and structures
How do I know the truth?	Revelation and reason	Lived experience [think "my truth"]
Wat is the end goal of history?	The new heaven and earth	Social justice [equity]

Table 3. Worldview questions answered by Christianity versus contemporary critical theory (p. 282).

They then make a simple but decisive observation that is a death knell to Contemporary Critical Theory for the Christian. They write, “For Christians, our primary identity is vertical. We first relate to God as his creatures and only secondarily to our fellow image bearers through family, friends, communities, and society at large....According to contemporary critical theory, our primary identity is horizontal. We are part of various oppressed and oppressor groups locked in a struggle for dominance” (*Critical Dilemma*, 283).

Now, let's be clear. The idea of oppressor/oppressed was nothing new to the first century church. They lived with the boot of Rome on their neck. Slavery and sexism were the norms. Rich and poor was common place. There was no middle class. And the Church itself struggled for a time with the Jew/Gentile problem. That is why Paul would tell the Galatians, “There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, since you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). And, that is why Peter in 1 Peter 2:4-10 also points us to Christ for our identity, who we are in Him. Horizontal relationships exist and they are real. But, who we ultimately and truly are is found in God, it is found in Christ. He makes us one! He makes us family. He makes us “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession” (2:9). Peter will pile up the metaphors and images to explore the beauty of our identity in Christ. It is a glorious composite to be sure.

I. We are God's spiritual house

2:4-8

Peter writes, as all New Testament writers do, to men and women, Jews and Gentiles, free and slave, poor and rich, young and old, citizens of Rome and non-citizens of Rome. But none of these constitute their true identity. No, they are those who “have tasted that the Lord is good” (v. 4; Ps. 34:8). They are those who have been “born anew” (1:23), the saved (2:2). However, there is so much more to their identity in Christ. Peter begins to unfold this reality in imagery repeatedly drawn from the Old Testament.

1) We are living stones through Jesus 2:4-5

In salvation, we come to Jesus in repentance and faith. The one we come to is described here as “a living stone.” (v. 4). He is “living” because He is alive by virtue of His bodily resurrection (cf. 1:3, 11, 21). But, the opinion of lost humanity and the opinion of God concerning Christ, the living stone, is radically different. Alluding to Psalm 118:22, a prophecy psalm, He is “rejected by people.” The apostle John reminds us, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11). In contrast, he is “chosen and honored by God” (*ESV*, “in the sight of God chosen and precious”). You want God’s verdict concerning his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? See his resurrection, ascension and exaltation! See that the Father has “highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:9). Martin Luther comments, “[Peter] says in God’s eyes the stone is

elect, and an extremely precious stone; it is of great importance also that it takes away death, satisfies for sin, and rescues from hell, besides it freely gives us heaven” (*Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 87).

It is on the foundation of this “living stone,” the one “chosen and honored by God,” that we become “living stones” (v. 5). Schreiner is on target:

“Believers are “living stones” because of their faith in the resurrected Christ. Jesus’ resurrection life becomes theirs even while they live in the midst of a hostile world” (105). These “living stones,” God’s people, are not to remain scattered about with no organic connection to one another. They come together, constituting a “spiritual house” (v. 5). Believers around the world constitute the church, this spiritual house. It is spiritual because every stone and the house as a whole is indwelt by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19-20). Paul makes a similar argument in Ephesians 2:18-22 when he writes, “For through him we both [Jew and Gentile] have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then we are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you are also being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.” Every stone is unique and every stone is valuable,

and every stone has been chosen and placed in its particular location in Christ, the “chosen and honored cornerstone” of vv 6-7.

2) We are a holy priesthood 2:5

God’s spiritual house is still under construction. New stones are being added (missions and evangelism) and those living stones are growing (edification/discipleship). Peter changes or mixes his metaphors and tells us to what end the spiritual house, the temple of the Holy Spirit, is “being built.” The house is “to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (v. 5). Amazing! We are both house (temple) and priests. All of us. Every single one. This verse, in particular, is very important. It is foundational to the biblical doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers.” As believer priests we all have direct access to God through our one Mediator the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). And, concerning this important doctrine noted historian and theologian Timothy George writes, “The priesthood of all believers was a cardinal principle of the Reformation of the 16th century. It was used by the reformers to buttress an evangelical understanding of the church over against the clericalism and sacerdotalism [priests have spiritual powers as mediators between God and man] of medieval Catholicism.... The reformers talked...of the “priesthood of all believers” (plural). For them it was never a question of a lonely,

isolated seeker of truth, but rather of a band of faithful believers united in a common confession as a local, visible congregatio sanctorum.

The priesthood of believers is not a prerogative on which we can rest; it is a commission which sends us forth into the world to exercise a priestly ministry not for ourselves, but for others—"the outsiders," not instead of Christ, but for the sake of Christ and at His behest....

No one should deny the importance of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. It is a precious and irreducible part of our Reformation heritage and our Baptist legacy. But let no one trivialize its meaning by equating it with modern individualism or theological minimalism. It is a call to ministry and service; it is a barometer of the quality of our life together in the Body of Christ and of the coherence of our witness in the world for which Christ died." (*CTR*, Sp. 1989).

I love George's emphasis on ministry and service. That is exactly what Peter highlights when he says as "a holy priesthood," we are "to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." This language echoes both Romans 12:1-2 and Hebrews 13:15-16. It also raises, I believe, a connection with 1 Corinthians 10:31, "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." All that we do should

be that which we can offer to God as spiritual sacrifices he will find acceptable. Warren Wiersbe provides helpful and practical counsel when he writes, “In the Old Testament period, God’s people *had* a priesthood, but today, God’s people *are* a priesthood...our lives should be lived as though we were priests in a temple. It is indeed a privilege to serve as a priest” (*Be Hopeful*, 60).

3) We are an honored people through Jesus 2:6-8

Peter comes to his Old Testament scriptural basis for our status as living stones, a spiritual house and a holy priesthood. He cites Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22; and Isaiah 8:14. All three text are prophetic of the coming Messiah. All three make it clear that our union with Christ and our identity in Him is the basis of our blessings. All three emphasize Christ as the stone.

Peter references Isaiah 28:16, “For it stands in Scripture: See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and honored cornerstone, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame” (v. 6). “Zion,” Mt. Zion, is a synonym for Jerusalem where our Lord was crucified and resurrected. He is the “cornerstone” (cf. Eph. 2:20). Hiebert says, “It is the “cornerstone” that controls the lines of the building” (*I Peter*, 136). Vaughn and Lea write it is “the most important stone of the building...Christ is thus represented as “the

key to all human destiny and the touchstone of all endeavor; faith in him leads to honour, unbelief to disaster”” (quoting Beare, 47).

a) Some are saved by Christ the living stone

Peter tells us in verse 6, “the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.” They will stand in Him accepted at the judgment. He reinforces this promise in verse 7 and says, “So honor will come to you who believe.” Acceptance and honor before God are promises for all who trust in Christ and Christ alone. Calvin is right, “Christ is a precious stone in the sight of God; then he is such to the faithful. It is faith alone which reveals to us the value and excellency of Christ” (*1 Peter*, 70).

b) Some will stumble over Christ the cornerstone

Peter quotes in verse 7 his 2nd Old Testament text: Psalm 118:22. Jesus applied the text to Himself in Matthew 21:42. The stone was rejected by the Jewish leaders, Israel and the Romans. The religious leaders, in particular, thought they were building God’s temple, his house, protecting the nation in their rejection of Jesus (John 11:50-51). Oh, how wrong they were. He is the Cornerstone! The most important stone of all. Peter then quotes in verse 8 his 3rd text: Isaiah 8:14. Not only is Jesus the Cornerstone, he is “a stone” to stumble over and a rock to trip over” for

the unbelieving. Disbelieving and disobeying, they reject the stone (Christ) and God rejects them. “They stumble because they disobey the word” (human responsibility). “They were destined for this” (divine sovereignty). God decrees the tragic end of unbelief just as he decrees the glorious end of faith. All is under his control.

II. We are God’s spiritual people

2:9-10

Who are we in Christ? We are living stones, a spiritual house and a holy priesthood. And... there is more. Peter will add to these noting, “As God’s special people Christians are to minister as missionaries, proclaiming abroad the mighty acts of God” (Vaughn & Lea, 48). Peter continues to drink from the well of the Old Testament as he tells us more of who we are in Christ. Four specific images are presented. He draws from Exodus 19:5-6 and Isaiah 43:20-21.

1) We are a chosen race

2:9

We “are a chosen race.” This phrase draws from Isaiah 43:20. The words would be striking to Jew and Gentile alike who once had such hostility, hatred, animus towards one another. Christ tore down that wall and has made them one. (Eph. 2:11-22). John Piper is right, we are “chosen-from all

the races” (“Christian Identity and Christian Destiny,” 4.17.1994). We are one unique spiritual race in King Jesus.

2) We are a royal priesthood 2:9

In verse 5 we are called “a holy priesthood.” All believers are holy, set apart to God, for priestly service to Christ and to one another. Now Peter adds a complementary designation: “a royal priesthood.” Peter draws from Exodus 19:6. There it was applied to Israel. Peter applies it to the church. As a royal priesthood believers belong uniquely to a king. That king is Christ. Hendriksen makes a connection to Zechariah 6:13 and the promise of Messiah as both a priest and king. He writes, “Zechariah prophetically portrays the Messiah as the royal priest, Peter reveals that believers are priests in a royal priesthood” (*Peter and Jude*, 92). Holy priests! Kingly priests! What a double honor we have!

3) We are a holy nation 2:9

Peter again looks to Ex. 19:6 calling the church “a holy nation.” We are a particular, specific and united people dedicated and set apart for service. And, our service and loyalty and fidelity is not to an earthly leader. It is to a divine sovereign to whom we give absolute and total allegiance because we are blood bought (1:19). Karen Jobes does an excellent job in pointing out

the practical and dangerous situation this allegiance to Christ put Christians during its early days. She writes: “Just as the understanding of Christians as forming a new people brought potential alienation from popular society, the potential conflict of loyalties brought charges of treason and poor citizenship upon Christians of the Roman Empire. Jesus’ instruction to “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:17) presents the issue of deciding which is which. First-century Christians were often persecuted and executed not because they worshiped Jesus – in a polytheistic society, what is one more god? – but because of the higher claim of the gospel that only in Christ is the one true God to be worshiped. Because the prosperity and welfare of the empire were believed to depend on religious forces, the Christian’s exclusive allegiance to Jesus as God was naturally viewed as detrimental to the rest of society. From that perspective, Christians were bad citizens of the empire, and this made them subject to accusations of treason. The self-understanding of the early church as a holy nation is attested by the force brought against them by the Roman state. As Merrill (1924: 68) points out, “There finally came a time when it [the Roman Empire] must either fight or tamely acknowledge a super-power within its own borders.”

Under the modern ideology that separates church and state, it is perhaps easier today to separate what belongs to Caesar from what belongs to God. But to the extent that government formulates policy directly bearing on moral and ethical issues (e.g., abortion, war, the place of religious faith in the public forum), Christians still have to face the problems raised by holding dual citizenship – in the country of their residence and in the holy nation of God.” (*1 Peter*, BECNT, 162).

To be a part of this “holy nation” is truly an honor and privilege. And, it comes with inherent dangers and potentially great cost.

4) We are God’s people 2:9-10

The final descriptor of the four is “a people for his possession.” This draws from Exodus 19:5 (see also Deut. 4:20; 7:6), and also Isaiah 43:20-21. In some ways this phrase brings today the various emphasis of the previous three. The church is a different kind of people. Though all the earth and all peoples are God’s, the Church because of its blood bought, born again status is his special people, “a people for God’s own possession” (*NASB*). They are chosen, royal, holy and God’s unique possession. This amazing status, we now see, comes with both responsibilities and blessings.

a) We proclaim His praises 2:9

A holy, royal, and chosen people are called to be evangelists and missionaries. They are called to “proclaim the praises (*ESV*, “excellencies”) of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (cf. Col 1:13-14). God’s special people are to declare to their neighbors and the nations what their God has done for them through Christ. They are to proclaim the “excellencies” of the King who called them out of the darkness of sin and spiritual death into his marvelous light of forgiveness and the new birth. This light is wonderful because it is a light that gives life (see John 1:4-5). The language echoes the creation account of Genesis 1:3-5, and our new life in Christ. God effectually called us from darkness to light, from death to life, from Satan’s kingdom to God’s kingdom. This is a message we must herald to every tribe, tongue, people and nation. This gospel is too good to keep to ourselves. Black, Brown, Red, White are all invited to become a part of this chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation and people of God. The missionary impulse is self-evident.

b) We receive mercy

2:10

Peter closes this section drawing a contrast with who we were and who we are, what we did not have and what we now have:

<u>Who we were/did not have</u>	<u>Who we are/do have</u>
Not God's people	Are God's people
Had not received mercy	Have received mercy

The contrasts are again striking and call once more for our praises for the excellencies of our Savior and His salvation. Peter alludes to Hosea 2:23, showing this is a familiar pattern in how God relates to His people. Our status as God's people is not our doing. It is all of grace, all of mercy (cf. 1:3). And, it is universal. Jew and Gentile alike are recipients of the marvelous mercy of God. "No people" are now "new people."

Con. Jesus came to make us one. He came to make us family. He came to make us one spiritual house, one chosen race, one holy nation. Carl Trueman is right, "Jesus did not need to be a woman to save women, or tran to save trans, or disabled to save the disabled. He simply needed to be human" ("When identity politics consumes theology," World Opinions Online, 12-9-22). We do not need to create a false Christ in our own image. We need the Christ who died and rose again to conform us to His image. This is who we are in Christ! All of us!