

THE LIVING STONES

By David H. Roper

There is a great deal of misunderstanding about the nature of the church, particularly among students. As I talk to them, I find that they have two opinions: 1) they don't like church buildings, and 2) they don't like preachers. They don't like buildings because they don't like the idea of investing hundreds of thousands of dollars in ornate architecture when people are starving--often in the very community where churches are being erected. Their criticism is just. They don't like preachers because they feel they are exploitive and manipulative and that no one has the right to wield that much power over anyone. Their criticism may be just. And since students feel that buildings and preachers are the substance of the church, they despise the church. They don't picket or demonstrate against it; they just ignore it. They feel that if they have nothing to do with it, it will go away eventually. If buildings and preachers are the substance of the church, I think it ought to go away. As a matter of fact, we ought to be put it away. We ought to have a nice quiet interment and forget it. But the truth is, neither buildings nor preachers are the essence of the church.

Let's look at Peter's analysis of the church (which he outlines in his first letter)--what it is, what its foundation is, and what its function is. Peter is uniquely qualified to talk about the church. He was the author of the great confession which Jesus said was the foundation upon which he would build his church. He was unquestionably the leader of the first century church. Therefore, he was in on the ground floor. He saw it in its primitive state, as God intended it to be. But third, and most importantly, he was an inspired apostle, and therefore we must give heed to his words.

First, Peter's word on the *nature* of the church. Peter says that it is three things. It is a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, and a unique community. 1 Peter 2:5:

...like living stone be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

It is a *spiritual* house composed of living stones, i.e., it is something God is doing in the realm of the spirit. It is something immaterial. God is not building with matter, God is not building with bricks and mortar and plaster and steel; he is building with *living* stones, i.e., people. *You* are the church. *You* are the house of God. God does not live in houses made of stone; he lives in the hearts of people. This building is not God's house; this is not his sanctuary; you are his sanctuary. As a friend of mine says, "It's so good to see all you little sanctuaries out there this morning!" God is living in you.

God has not lived in a house since Ezekiel's day, when he abandoned the temple. And even then his temporary indwelling of a building was to be a picture of his ultimate intention to live in the hearts of men. Isaiah said:

Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house which you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord. But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word." (Isaiah 66:1, 2)

That is where God wants to dwell--in poor, contrite people whose hearts tremble when they hear God's word. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:16, "You are the temple of God, and the Holy Spirit dwells in you."

Now that means this auditorium is not God's house. This is simply a building where God's house meets. God is **working with living stones; he is working with you. And you can meet anywhere. You can meet in a home, as the**

early church did until the third century. The church can meet in a synagogue, as the early church frequently did. The church can meet in a park; it can meet under a bridge; it can meet in a tree; the church can meet in a bar. Because it is not the building that is holy. It is the people of God that are holy, and that is where God dwells.

Yet, we need to get this in perspective. Buildings are important. But buildings are mere tools; instruments for building the church of God, and we need to understand that clearly. You are God's house. The day may come when God will take our buildings away from us, as he has done in other places, but this will not, in any significant way, affect the church of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we are not only a spiritual house, but we are a *holy priesthood*. Priests are not a special class in the church; every one of you who acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord is a member of the priesthood. You have that right. The outstanding characteristic of a priest is that he is one who has direct access to God. In the Old Testament, on the Day of Atonement, the only person who had a right to go into God's presence in the Holy of Holies was the high priest. But the Scriptures are clear that, since Jesus Christ died and the veil was rent, thus opening up the access into the Holy of Holies to everyone, you and I, by right of our relationship to Jesus Christ, have the right to go into God's presence. We have the right of access. Paul, in Romans 5:1-2, says that is one of the results of justification. "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access into that grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

When I was a youngster, I used to go down to my father's office--usually to put the bite on him for some funds. He had one very formidable secretary outside his office. She was like Horatio at the bridge. No one got through that secretary to my father--except me. I could go right by her desk and barge unceremoniously into my father's office. I didn't even have to knock, because I was a son.

The Scriptures tell us that we are sons, and we are priests, and therefore we have the right of access to God. We do not need any other mediator. We don't need a priest, we don't need a pastor, we don't need a Bible teacher, we don't need anyone to reconcile us to God or to provide access into his presence. We have that access; all we have to do is act on it.

Are you taking advantage of that privilege? Are you studying the Word on your own? Or are you depending upon the Bible studies and teachers here? Are you personally drawing upon the resources of Jesus Christ? You have that right. When you have a need for wisdom or a need for power, when you're pressured, when you're in distress, whatever your need is, you can go directly into his presence and claim what is yours, because you are a priest. You don't need anyone to mediate for you. You need to count on no one but Jesus Christ. He has opened the way. The third thing Peter tells us is that we are a unique community. Verse 9:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...

I wish we had time to take each of these words and look at it in detail. All are taken from Old Testament figures used of the nation Israel. But here Peter applies them to the church. There is a common denominator in all these figures. It is that of community. These are all corporate figures. We are a race--with a common origin. We're a nation, we're a people, we're a priesthood, we are one, we're a unit.

The New Testament seldom refers to individual Christians. It almost always speaks of individuals in community, and the figures of speech bear this out. The Bible defines the church as a *body*, i.e., just as our human body has many members with diversity of function, yet our body is one--so it is with the church. The New Testament describes the church as a *bride*--not individual brides of Christ, not a harem, but the church as one--the bride of Christ. Paul describes the church as *one new man*. And John speaks of the church as a city in the book of Revelation--the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. All stress the fact that we are one. All distinctions break down. Differences of sex, station, age, make no difference. We are all one. It doesn't matter if we have long hair or short hair, if we wear shoes or don't, if we are a bank president or a pottery maker. We are all one in Jesus. Paul says we are neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave or free, but we are one in Christ.

That is something that the world is desperately looking for. That's what the hippies were looking for, but they couldn't find it. That's what men are looking for when they join a lodge or a country club. All of these ersatz communities are formed to satisfy the clamant need of the heart for community, for spiritual unity. But it is never there. It is only in the spiritual house that you have spiritual unity. It is only as Jesus Christ binds you together that oneness becomes real.

Peter also has some things to say about the *foundation* of the church, or the basis of membership in this body. It is very simple. In 1 Peter, verses 4-5a he says,

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious, and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house...

That is how we are built into that spiritual house: we *come* to the Lord. Note the verse just before this, "...for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." And as we come to him, our lives are being built as living stones. The word that is translated "come" is a present middle participle that could be translated like this: "coming repeatedly by yourself to him, you are being built up." You come to Christ initially because you need him as a Savior. You recognize that you're a sinner, that you can do nothing about your state, that you stand under God's indictment as a sinner, and you come to him and claim forgiveness.

That is the initial coming, but that's not the end; that's just the beginning. You keep on coming. You come back, and you come back again and again and again, because you have tasted that he is gracious. You discover that he is One who can deliver you from evil habits, or from terrible dark despair, or from emptiness, and so you keep coming back. And as you keep coming back, you are being built into the house, like a living stone. You notice that it says, "Come to him, to that living stone (i.e., Jesus)...and like living stones be yourselves built up," i.e., it is Christ's desire to make us like him. He is a living stone, and he wants you to be a living stone.

I'm glad he said living stones. Stones signify to me some good things: firmness, unchangeable character; but stones are also cold and hard. I don't need to be made more like a stone; I already have a heart of stone. What I need is to be made a *living* stone, with all of the good attributes of stone, with all its strength of character and yet with all of the warmth and vitality of a living stone. It is God's intent, as we come to Jesus Christ, that we be conformed to his unique character, and become living stones.

It is impossible to read this passage without remembering Jesus' words to Peter in the book of Matthew. I'm sure that Peter was recalling those words when he wrote this passage. Jesus was speaking to his disciples and asked the probing question, "Who do men say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." i.e., you are one in a line of great teachers. Then Jesus asked, "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You're the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter [the Greek word for Peter means "a loose rock"], and on this rock [he uses a different Greek word which means a solid, unmovable ledge] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matthew 16:13b-18)

Now the question is, who or what is the rock upon which Christ would build his church? The Roman Catholic Church has said that the rock was Peter, and it was upon Peter that the church was built. Protestants have said, No, it was on Peter's great affirmation that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, that the church was built. I think probably the truth lies somewhere in between. Or perhaps it encompasses both these ideas. The Lord was saying, "Peter, it is upon this rock--i.e., upon a man who makes the statement--'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,' that I will build my church." We begin as a loose pile of stone, but we come to Jesus, and he takes our life and begins to change it into the character of a solid rock. And it is upon that basis that the church is built.

So what comprises the membership of the church? People who have believed. Belief includes you; unbelief excludes you. That is the only basis for membership. It is not race; it is not background, or culture, or heritage, or

education; it is whether or not Jesus Christ is Lord. If he is, you're a member of his body. If he isn't, you are not a member of that body. Peter uses three Old Testament passages to document this. The first is found in verse 16, and comes from Isaiah 28:

Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame.

This passage originally applied to Israel. When Isaiah wrote these words the nation of Israel was being pressed by alien nations and they were tempted to place their trust in alliances with other nations. But Jehovah says, "No, if you will trust me, if you will *believe me*, then I will make you like a rock in Zion, which no one can move. You will be chosen; you will be precious." The New Testament writers picked up this figure and applied it to Jesus and said, "He who believes in him will not be put to shame."

The second quotation is from Psalm 118:

The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.

Again, this originally applied to Israel. The nation had been discounted by the other nations as an inconsequential power. But God said, "Israel, I'm going to make you a great nation. I'm going to establish you in your land; you'll become the head of the corner."

There is an interesting historical note given to us by one of the early church historians. When Solomon was building his temple, almost all of the work was prefabricated. They did not want the noise of the workmen to defile the temple site. So the stones were quarried and shaped in other places, then were dragged to the temple site and, like a jigsaw puzzle, they were put together. Well, as it happened, there was one stone that didn't fit. It had an odd shape and so it was laid aside. In the following months it became overgrown with weeds and forgotten. But then as they began to put the pieces together, they discovered that they couldn't build because there was a crucial piece missing. They realized that they had set aside the corner stone, so they went back and found it, dragged it to the temple site and put it in its proper place. The stone that had been rejected became the head of the corner. Jesus took these same words and applied them to himself in Matthew 21:42b "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes." He was the One who had been set aside by the nation of Israel, but he was the head of the corner, i.e., the One upon whom the church would be built.

The final quotation is from Isaiah 8:14b. Again, its primary application is to Israel.

A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall.

Jehovah is saying that if Israel would accept his Lordship, he would make them a sanctuary. If they didn't they would be destroyed. Now Peter applies all of these passages to Christ. Jesus is the line of demarcation. Our position, whether we are in the church or out of the church, is determined by what we think about Jesus Christ. There is a lot of thought given today to eradicating lines,. But there is one line we can never erase, and that is the line that Jesus Christ himself established. If we want to be part of his church, he must be Lord. If he is not, then we do not. We may have been baptized; our confirmation certificate may be in order; we may be on the roll of the church,. But if Jesus Christ is not Lord, we are not in his church. That is the foundation of the church.

Finally, the function of the church. The church is to do two things, Peter says.

...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)

First, we are to offer up spiritual sacrifices. That is what priests do. They offer sacrifices. The Jewish worship was filled with sacrifices. Not a day went by when offerings were not made in the temple. And most of them were bloody sacrifices. God's intent was to reveal that the sacrifice that pleases him is the sacrifice of a life. It began

with the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ; it continues with us as we believer/priests offer up our lives to Jesus Christ. It's to be a state of mind. We are constantly offering up everything. We offer up our bodies as living sacrifices. We are to offer up our homes, our families, our boyfriends, our girlfriends, our automobiles, our businesses. Everything is to be offered up to him. That is our responsibility as priests.

I saw a special on television once about the Celebes Islands, which described some Malay children who caught baby monkeys and sold them to tourists. They had a most clever way of catching these little monkeys. There is a gourd that grows in the islands that looks like an overgrown string bean. They tape one end so that it can't grow. while the other end enlarges. Then they cut off the little end and hollow the gourd, so that it looks like a narrow-necked vase. They put a few grains of rice in the bottom of the gourd, and hang it up in a tree. The monkeys stick their paws in the gourd and pick up the rice, but as long as they hold the rice they can't get their fist out. It's like a cork in reverse, But they won't let go of the rice. They become prisoners of their own greed. At any time they could let go and be free, but they won't let go. What a marvelous illustration of life before Christ! We all have our fist in the jug, and we won't let go. But then we come to Jesus Christ and he sets us free, because he teaches us that true life consists of giving up, of yielding up our rights, everything we are and have. That is our first function, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.

The second function of the church is to declare his deeds.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

We have been called out of darkness. We don't have to grope and guess any more. We know where we're going. We have been called into the light. Not because we are people who have it made, but, as someone has said, because we're people who can't make it. God called us to his light, and now he says we are to declare the deeds of the one who called us. We're to witness by life and by word the mighty works of God in our life.

That is a call to responsibility, not to comfort. It's true that it is a privilege to be called into a relationship with Jesus Christ; it's a privilege to be a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood and to be part of a unique community. But there is also a responsibility involved. We are called to *declare* his deeds. The Greek word literally means, to *speak forth* his deeds. Our witness is more than our presence; we're also to proclaim his deeds. We're to tell people what has happened to us. We are not to organize picket lines, to boycott businesses. nor conduct lie-ins; we're to proclaim the deeds of the one who called us from darkness into light. It is not that it is wrong for individual believers to be involved in social action, where you encounter a need in your neighborhood or your school or your business. But your primary responsibility is to declare the good news about Jesus Christ.

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