

1 PETER 2:9, 10

A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

“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.”¹

For a period that proved far too brief, I was privileged to sit under the ministry of W. A. Criswell. During one memorable sermon, Dr. Criswell related an incident that occurred during a visit to the former Soviet Union. He had requested and received permission to visit the only Baptist Church in a major Russian city. In that “worker’s paradise,” the government permitted him to visit the church. However, they imposed strict conditions, including the provision that he could not inform the congregation that he was coming. Also, he had to be accompanied at all times by an Intourist guide. The guide, an apparatchik of the Communist Party chosen because of party loyalty, would always be near Criswell; she would spy on behalf of the government, remaining close enough to overhear every conversation and to observe every action.

Dr. Criswell and the guide travelled by automobile to a poorer section of the city. At the head of an unmarked, dead-end street, they got out of the car and began to walk toward the end of the street. There, at the end of the street, a large crowd of people was gathered in front of a nondescript building. Somehow, in a way that defies those who imagine they can control freedom, these saints had heard that a preacher from America was visiting; and they had gathered, awaiting his arrival before starting the service of worship—everyone wanted to see this man who had not forgotten them.

As Criswell and the Intourist guide walked toward the crowd, she began to speak. She derided the believers gathered at the end of the street. “Look at them—slugs and drones. They are parasites, draining the resources of our glorious workers.” She caustically defamed the Christians gathered to greet the preacher from America.

Criswell had at first been silent as she continually berated the Christians; however, he at last spoke. “Don’t say that. These are my people; these are the people of God. Though you speak ill of them and though they have nothing in this world, they are destined to inherit Heaven, and they shall reign with Christ. Do not speak ill of them.”

Doctor Criswell was right. Though Christians are despised by the world at this time, they are nevertheless the people of God. We Christians are an elect people, chosen by the True and Living God for His holy purpose. We are His treasured possession; and though the world does not recognise who we are, God has showered His love on us, showing us great mercy and exceptional kindness.

The grace and mercy that He has showered on us gives evidence of His love. Though we are in the world, we are not of the world; and we have a great responsibility that is entrusted to us because we are His people. Join me, then, in study of Peter’s revelation of who we are and what we are responsible to do.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

▲ DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY — “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.” We are a *chosen race*. Christians have a distinctive identity. Our identity is thoroughly integrated with the Risen Son of God. Our purpose is clearly stated in the text for the message this day. As Christians, we are in Christ; having said this, it is doubtful that any of us fully understand all that this means. Nevertheless, we know that in Christ we have been set apart to God’s holy service as priests even as we enjoy God’s call to reign with Him as co-regents.

Understand that it is Christians—Christians who were even then paying a dreadful cost for being known as followers of the Risen Son of God—to whom Peter was writing. The recipients of the letter are identified as “elect exiles of the dispersion” [1 PETER 1:1]. To ensure that these elect exiles understood that they were not merely scattered by some form of perverse serendipity, Peter continues by reminding them that their election was “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with His blood” [1 PETER 1:2].

Perhaps you and I have not been openly persecuted because of our Faith, and obviously, we have not been dispersed throughout the earth because we are Christians, but it is nonetheless true that we are not of this world. Though we are in the world, our citizenship is in Heaven, and we always live under the threat of imminent assault from the world. Consequently, the words that Peter wrote certainly apply potentially to us; and these words assuredly apply to fellow saints today who live in Iraq, in Iran, in Pakistan, and in Viet Nam, who even now are paying a demanding price for being Christians.

When Peter says that we are “a chosen race,” he uses the same word that is translated “elect” in the opening verse of the Book. We are an elect people; we have been chosen by God for His divine purpose. I suspect that whenever we hear that we are “a chosen race,” most of us think of the privilege that accrues to us because God chose us. However, I want you to think now of the fact that we are chosen to serve. In other words, we have been chosen to represent God in the midst of a fallen and wicked world.

I recall visiting a church in Washington State on one occasion. The pastor recognised me, and asked that I tell of my ministry in the Lower Mainland—an assignment that I was pleased to accept. I told how that one quarter of the population in British Columbia profess themselves atheists or agnostics. I related studies conducted in the Lower Mainland revealing that no more than a few percent of the population were in a religious service on any given weekend. I also stated the estimate that perhaps as many of 5,000 people, out of a population of almost 800,000, would be in an evangelical service of worship in the city of Vancouver on any given weekend. I said that Vancouver was an evangelist’s paradise; everywhere you threw a tract you would hit a sinner.

At the conclusion of the service, a couple approached me. It was obvious by their approach that they wished to speak with me. They informed me that they lived in the Lower Mainland. Travelling through Washington State that morning, they also happened to visit the church where I spoke. They insisted that I should not have said what I said. They complained, “You make us sound like ‘heathens.’ We aren’t that bad.”

Their response reveals a problem for modern Christians. We are so thoroughly identified with the world about us that we no longer see ourselves as Christians first. We are more concerned with avoiding conflict than we are with our relationship with God. We don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings and so we fail to be divine ambassadors.

Nevertheless, we Christians have been chosen as God's ambassadors, charged to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light." Our position is not simply that of redeemed individuals, though we are indeed delivered from condemnation; we are declared heirs of Heaven and co-heirs with Jesus Christ. I would never depreciate the privilege that we enjoy because of His grace. However, I must emphasise that privilege always confers responsibility. Our enjoyment is not God's primary concern; rather, His righteous desire is the glory that accrues to Him through bringing many souls to life.

Christians are designated a *royal priesthood*. Each Christian is a priest, appointed by God, serving to petition Him for those individuals living in the world, and serving as Christ's representative in the world. We are called by God and appointed by Him to stand between Him and fallen man. It is God's will that each Christian endeavour to bring the lost to faith in the Son of God. We do this through praying for their salvation and testifying to the grace of God. The condition of those whom we love—family members and loved ones—*must* move us with compassion so that we tell them of the life that will free them from condemnation, giving them a place within the Family of God. The sentence of death that hangs over the life of those with whom we work *must* impel us to seek their salvation, just as the certainty of condemnation for our neighbours without Christ *must* impel us to seek mercy and life for each one.

Christ Jesus, the Son of David, has been appointed to rule from David's throne. We who are the redeemed of God have received a promise that we shall reign with Him. As His people, we share a common heritage, which is the life He gives and the presence of the Spirit of God within us and among us. Thus, we are designated a *holy nation*. What we are is not always accurately reflected through what we do. Nevertheless, we are a holy nation—our citizenship is in Heaven; and therefore we should be a holy people.

Christians are identified as a *holy nation*. To say that we are holy, to say that we should live holy lives, sometimes embarrasses us, since the statement is seen as clichéd, hackneyed, trite. In part, this is because the English tongue is dynamic and language itself tends to be fluid, the meaning changing with time; and in part, the clichéd nuance of calling for holiness is because our words are stolen and redefined by a world hostile to the righteousness of Christ the Lord. I remind you of a truth that you know quite well—we are set apart for God's purposes. Thus, we are separated from sin and separated to serve the Lord. To be holy is nothing more, and nothing less, than living as one who is conscious of having been separated from evil and thus separated to God.

Peter also declares that we are a *people for His own possession*. I suspect that the designation does not resonate with us as it should, and that is a shame. The concept is that we are so intimately identified as belonging to God that we are forever known as His. However, there is an aspect of this designation that is not immediately apparent until we have more carefully studied the use of the underlying Greek phrase, *eis peripoiésin*.

The manner in which the term is used in **1 THESSALONIANS 5:9**, **2 THESSALONIANS 2:14**, and **HEBREWS 10:39** ensures that Peter intended this to be an eschatological term. It is apparent that Peter recognises that Christians already belong to God as a unique possession [e.g. **1 PETER 2:10**]. What is lacking is a complete and final vindication against unbelievers and those who are disobedient. Therefore, a more accurate translation would likely be that we are "a people destined for vindication."²

² J. Ramsey Michaels, **Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Peter** (Word, Waco, TX 2002) 109

Taken together, the designations advanced in this NINTH VERSE recall EXODUS 19:5, 6. “If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples... and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” It is as though God is declaring that we Christians have now inherited the promises that were first delivered to Israel. We share in the divine inheritance with them.

God has chosen Christians to be His people, established us as a royal priesthood, appointed us as a holy nation to be vindicated before men and angels. The privileges that once belonged exclusively to Israel now belong to us as Christians. We have not replaced Israel, but the promises first delivered to Israel are now being fulfilled in us. In Christ, both Jew and Gentile are now the new people of God.

A DISTINCTIVE RESPONSIBILITY — Christians must “proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvellous light.” Almost all of us Christians in greater or lesser degree experience a sense of pride the disposes us to grave danger. Unthinkingly, we tend to imagine that we are deserving of God’s grace. But grace would not be grace if it was deserved. God saved us to serve; He did not squander His grace on us so we could consume it on our own pleasures. God declares of His ancient people Israel, that He formed them for Himself that they might declare His praise [ISAIAH 43:21].

In this world, churches have three great responsibilities. *We are to worship God*, a task that will continue throughout all eternity. *We are to build one another*, a responsibility that will continue until we are all made complete in Christ the Lord. And, *we are to turn others from darkness to light* through telling them what God has done for us. This latter task is urgent since there is no possibility of evangelism beyond the grave and since the result of decisions for or against the Lord in this life is fixed for eternity.

Did you ever wonder what our purpose as a church might be? As a congregation, I can declare on the authority of God’s Holy Word that our purpose as a congregation is to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.” There is more to this than perhaps meets the eye. Indeed, we are responsible to declare God’s praises. As a church, we should be recognised for joyful praises to God—praise of who He is and praise for all He has done for us. Proclaiming His excellencies entails both worship and fellowship as we build one another in the Faith; and proclaiming His excellencies of necessity demands that we evangelise. A church that worships while neglecting the other tasks moves toward exuberant, self-centred chaos. Edification that neglects the other responsibilities devolves into ritualism. Evangelism without either true worship or mutual strengthening tends toward unfeeling and uncaring ritual.

Godly Christians seek lively worship. We don’t always understand how important worship is for Christian growth. Worship fulfils our purpose in the world; and worship will be our eternal occupation. Worship is sometimes ill defined in our minds, and as result, we offer at best what can be described as incomplete worship.

To worship God is to stand in awe of Him. The author of the Hebrew letter urges us to “offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” [HEBREWS 12:28]. The Psalmist testified that he stood in awe of God’s words [PSALM 119:161], urging all who fear the Lord to stand in awe of Him [PSALM 22:23]. It is difficult to believe that contemporary worship encourages awe of the Lord. How desperately we need to receive the encouragement of the Word to stand in awe of the Lord [PSALM 33:8]. Saints of God, we will not truly worship until we know the awe of the Lord.

To worship God is to be utterly fascinated with Him. Who of us can accurately and truly recount the glories of the Lord? He is God, infinite in majesty and power; we cannot begin to know Him fully in all His glory and power. Until we have been changed into His likeness, we will always be hindered by the human condition that can only see in part—in incomplete fashion. However, when we truly worship the Lord we will find that we are fascinated with who He is and with all that He has accomplished on our behalf. Indeed, we will rejoice in His goodness, but we will always find ourselves fascinated by His power and His majesty and His glory.

To worship God is to marvel at His goodness and His mercy. There is an element of wonder and marvel whenever we worship since we know who we are and we know what we have become in Christ. We know that we are sinners, deserving neither mercy nor grace. Nevertheless, in mercy, God has shown us grace, giving us life in His beloved Son. When we worship, we cannot help but marvel at what God has done for us.

To worship God is to adore Him as the gracious Saviour. In speaking of what God has done for us, we acknowledge His power. For that reason I dearly love the hymns that grew out of the Moody-Sankey revivals of the latter part of the nineteenth century.

“Man of Sorrows!” what a name, For the Son of God who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim, Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God, Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.
This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Saviour all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Saviour all the day long.

Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it!
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb;
Redeemed through His infinite mercy,
His child, and forever I am.

I will sing of my Redeemer, And His wondrous love to me;
On the cruel cross He suffered, From the curse to set me free.

Because we have been “called out of darkness into His marvellous light,” our concern is that all who share this Faith grow in the grace and knowledge of our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. We do not merely perform rituals in the church, but we call all who accept the burden of open proclamation of faith in the Living Son of God to unite, investing their various gifts in one another within the Body so that together we might be strengthened. We are convinced that Christianity is a corporate responsibility and not merely a lonely walk through this hostile world for a solitary individual. We urge all who will fulfil the mandate of Peter’s call to unite with a congregation and there serve.

A peculiar strain of heresy has infiltrated the churches of our Lord in the past several decades. Baptists, in particular, have been seriously weakened through the insidious insinuation of this errant heterodoxy. This novel doctrine stresses individualism at the expense of community, resulting in congregations that offer performances instead of worship, and substituting relationship for fellowship. This new dogma creates, not strong saints seeking to strengthen one other, but self-centred dilettantes who seek transient relationships solely for what they can get out of the momentary liaison.

When you became a Christian, you received from the Spirit of God a gift or gifts. Those gifts were entrusted to you for the benefit of the church where the Lord placed you. The Word calls us to accept the responsibility of building one another in the Faith. However, this strange dogma that now saps our spiritual vitality and makes us unable to withstand the enemy teaches that attendance at a church is optional and solely for our personal benefit. It substitutes self-esteem for personal responsibility. It calculates the entertainment value of a service instead of appraising the opportunity to fulfil the command of Christ to build one another in the Faith. It worships worship instead of exalting the Saviour; endeavours to make us feel good about ourselves instead of building others; and is content with religious feelings instead of transformed lives.

Proclaiming God's praise, Christians are especially to glorify Him for calling us "out of darkness and into His marvellous light." The language recalls **2 CORINTHIANS 4:6**, where salvation is compared to God's new creation as God speaks, calling light to shine out of the darkness and to shine in our hearts to "give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Peter also approximates the language of **GENESIS 1** where God speaks the Word and light comes into being. God's Word creates light, and God's call creates faith. Though they once walked in darkness, those who are saved now walk in glorious light; they need no longer fear they will stumble.

Throughout the Word of God, salvation is compared to passing from darkness to light. Paul, recounting his conversion says that God sent him to the Gentiles to "open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" [**ACTS 26:18**]. The Ephesian letter reminds Christians that at one time, they were "darkness," but now they are "light in the Lord" [**EPHESIANS 5:8**]. Concerning the judgement of the Lord, Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christians that they are "not in darkness." The Apostle also identifies them as "children of the light," and as "belonging to the day" [**1 THESSALONIANS 5:4, 5, 8**].

God's call is effective. When He spoke into the darkness, light came into being. Likewise, when He spoke into our heart, faith came into being and we were turned to the light. We neither initiated nor controlled God's call to salvation, but rather He called us and we responded. He caused us to be "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Now, "by God's power we are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" [**1 PETER 1:5**].

The Psalmist commands, "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so" [**PSALM 107:2**]. If you fail to tell others of the salvation you have received, you are failing to fulfil the mandate of this apostolic injunction to proclaim His excellencies. Each Christian is to live a holy life, which serves as the foundation for a powerful testimony of His grace. Peter will urge believers to "always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess" [**1 PETER 3:15**].³

³ **NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

Evangelism—inviting others to faith in the Living Son of God—is assuredly at the heart of proclaiming the excellencies of God who called us out of darkness and into His marvellous light. This is our call, both individually and corporately. As Christians, each of us has received the command to “make disciples of all nations” [MATTHEW 28:19]. Corporately, as a congregation, we must insist that each service and every activity promoted by the church, must not fail to seek the salvation of lost men and women. Anything less than aggressive evangelism dishonours Christ who has redeemed us.

▲ DISTINCTIVE RELATIONSHIP — “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.” We Christians have a distinctive identity; we have also received a distinctive responsibility. We who are the saints of God likewise enjoy a distinctive relationship unlike any other relationship experienced in this world. In order to make this point, Peter alludes to Hosea’s words, recorded in HOSEA 2:23. This is a promise that Paul also appropriates in ROMANS 9:25, 26. There, the Apostle to the Gentiles quotes God as promising,

“Those who were not my people, I will call ‘my people,’
And her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’
And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’
There they will be called ‘sons of the Living God.’”

Though we cannot say that we deserve inclusion among God’s people, we nevertheless enjoy a most intimate relationship. We are children of God and sons of God. We do enjoy access to the Father, but we also have an inheritance with Him. There is one point in this knowledge that needs to be fully understood. Earlier, I cautioned against emphasising personal strengthening at the expense of mutual edification. I want to return to that thought by noting the communal nature of Peter’s words.

The Christians to whom Peter wrote “did not think first of themselves and then of the group to which they belonged (family, church, synagogue, nation); instead, they thought first through the eyes of others and how a given fact could be processed by the group.”⁴ When we read the text, we tend to think of the value of his words for individual piety, and only rarely do we seek the corporate understanding of his words. Consequently, we cannot experience the church as God intended and as Peter understood it—a community instead of a collection of individuals. Instead of seeing ourselves as members of the Family of God, we see ourselves as individual Christians.

Our concept of the church is culturally conditioned. Again, quoting McKnight, “The church gains its identity and its purposes from the Lord and Spirit who created it. That identity and those purposes have been spelled out in the pages of the Bible, and modern cultures or subcultures in which local or national churches abide can only be dialectically related to that Bible. Culture cannot define or determine the parameters of the church, nor can it define its mission. When this happens, the church loses its bearings, begins to wobble, and eventually falls into a state of lethargy and ineffectiveness.”⁵

⁴ Scott McKnight, **NIV Application Commentary: 1 Peter** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1996) 115

⁵ McKnight, op. cit., 117

I have highlighted this issue because we need to be reminded that though we are in the world, we are not of the world. The culture in which we live must not be permitted to determine the mission of the church. Though we are undoubtedly influenced by the world in which we live, we must strengthen one another, understanding that it is as a community of faith that we will fulfil the injunctions to be holy and to glorify the Living God. Though I would never speak against private devotions and individual effort to become strong in the Faith, I insist that it is only together that we can fully please the Son of God through corporate worship, through investing the gifts God has entrusted to us to build one another up, and to turn many to righteousness.

Our relationship to God is not solely an individual connection, but it is a corporate bond. As Christians, we share in the inheritance of the saints and we share in the life of all other believers. As members of this congregation, each of us share in a most intimate fashion the life of the Spirit with our brothers and sisters as together we evangelise, as together we build one another in this most Holy Faith, and as together we praise and worship the Son of God. Certainly, we welcome others who choose to worship with us, but we are always clear in reminding those joining our worship of the responsibility to unite openly with God's people so that they can share fully in every aspect of the Faith.

Those who aver faith in the Son of God but have no particular allegiance to a Body of believers fail to understand the clear teaching of the Word and the intent of the Master. "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" [EPHESIANS 5:25]. The church that Christ loved was not a phantom, but the visible expression of His very Person. It would have been unthinkable that a Christian in the apostolic era would have been encouraged to believe, to be baptised and identify as a Christian, without the vital relationship and accountability to the congregation where they would serve.

I am unhesitating in presenting the life that is in Christ to those who may be outside the Faith. If you have yet to be born from above, I urge you to make this the day in which you begin truly to live. Let this be the day in which your sins are forgiven and in which you enter into life. Let this be the day you discover the excellencies of Him who now calls you out of the darkness and into His marvellous light.

If you will be saved you must know that Christ loved you and gave Himself for you. He died in your place and you are now called to live for Him. The Word of God declares that "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." That passage continues by reminding each of us that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Become a child of the Living God. Believe this message of life and be saved. Come, join us in this life in which we have been united as the Body of Christ. Come, walk with us as together we "proclaim the excellencies of Him who called [us] out of darkness and into His marvellous light." Amen.