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## Call and Response (1 Peter 2:1–10)

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We are now in the final week of our seven week series of ‘Call and Response’. We have heard from a number of different people from the Benedictus community on this theme. All, of course, have ended up here, for one reason or another. That means that each of you could equally have given testimony to what calls you have experienced, how you have responded, and how you have eventually ended up at Benedictus Contemplative Church. So here we are, a collection of individuals gathered from far and wide, but more than that – a church community. Does the church have its own call and vocation? Well, my simple answer is ‘yes’, but I will elaborate and at the end, draw together some threads from the last few weeks.

I am continually inspired by the vision of church found in the reading for tonight. 1 Peter 2 offers a radical vision of a new kind of community, as a new architecture of relations built up from the stone that was rejected. The implications of this are profound, and mostly we have failed to get the vision, let alone engage in the practice. Let me take you through some of the text so that we might better appreciate this call to be ‘God’s own people’.

The letter of 1 Peter concerns both the identity and the vocation of God’s people.<sup>1</sup> It is widely believed that this is a pastoral letter written to churches under persecution, and those circumstances sharpen the question of what the church is and what it is called to be. Its author, Peter, exhorts his readers to hold firm in the faith and to grow in holiness. He offers them inspiration and encouragement in their time of trouble. He argues that they have been given ‘new birth into a living hope’ (1:3) and urges them to grow into their inheritance. Christ’s death and resurrection have ransomed them from their old ways and brought them into new life, but this involves them in a transformation of identity and vocation. Peter’s metaphors of new birth (1:3, 23) and growth (1:15–16, 2:2) point towards holiness and loving one another ‘deeply from the heart’ (1:22). He understands salvation as something that we grow into (2:2), and this call to growth and transformation, what we usually call sanctification, is seen as a *corporate* activity. Our vocation as Christians is to grow to maturity together, and maturity here means holiness.<sup>2</sup>

Peter gives them (and us) some clues as to what holiness looks like. It is to exercise self-discipline, not to be conformed to the desires that they previously had, to purify their souls, be obedient to the truth, engage in mutual love, be born anew, and live from the imperishable seed which is the living and enduring word of God (1:13–14; 2:22–23). In

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<sup>1</sup> Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, p. 142; Joel B. Green, *1 Peter: The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Jobes, *1 Peter*, p. 142.

contrast to holiness, Peter describes what seems to be their current behavior. ‘Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander’ (2:1).

We get glimpses here of why holiness is a corporate activity – because holiness is relational. We grow into it in relation to and with others. It is a movement from our old ways into new desires and behaviours. Malice, for example, is relating to another with ill will; guile involves relating deviously; insincerity is relating inauthentically; envy is measuring oneself against another and wanting what he or she has; slander is a form of insulting another in order to bring them into disrepute. In contrast, holiness is a growth in love which honors and respects others in word and deed; it involves relating with good will, with honesty, authenticity, and without rivalry. On the broader social level, holiness has to do with justice and righteousness, relating in redeeming ways to those who suffer from unfair conditions and practices.

Peter then offers a view of church that conveys *how* we might be led into holiness by the very way we come together. He does so through a series of ‘stone’ metaphors around a building project and the *structure* of the building is the key.

In 2:4, Peter refers to Christ as a ‘living stone’, rejected by mortals but precious in God’s sight. He then refers to his readers as ‘like living stones’ since they belong to Christ. He urges them: ‘let yourselves be built into a spiritual house’. Note that the building is actually done by God, and we have to ‘let ourselves’ become part of it. In Kerry’s reflection 2 weeks ago, he spoke of letting go control of our lives and letting God be God in us. Here we have the corporate version of that theme: letting ourselves be built into a spiritual house.

I have to say that the metaphor of ‘living stones’ did not really do it for me, until this week, when I was standing in the National Museum in its exhibition: The History of the World in 100 Objects. There were some statues among the exhibits, some of which caught my eye as they seemed so dynamic, almost as if they were alive. Ah, I thought, ‘living stone’. And the difference between a block of stone and a statue that looks alive is the sculptor. So these verses may be read as ‘let yourselves be sculptured into living stones, and incorporated into God’s spiritual house’. Both we and the building are new creations.

So the building work has begun. What about its structure? In verse 7, Peter again speaks of the stone that was rejected, this time from Psalm 118:22:

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

Interestingly, this same text is quoted in the parable of the vineyard to refer to the owner’s son who was sent to the tenants but was rejected and killed. It alludes to the rejection and death of Jesus later in the gospels, and implies that his death is a matter of human violence (Mark 12:10–11; Matthew 21:42; Luke 20:17–18).<sup>3</sup> The point is brought home even more strongly in Peter’s speech to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem in Acts 4:9–11. He tells them that his power to heal came from ‘Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified’. He then refers

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<sup>3</sup> John H Elliott, *1 Peter: Anchor Bible Vol 37B*, New York: Doubleday, 2000 p. 410.

to Psalm 118:22 saying: 'This is the stone that was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner'.

In the letter of 1 Peter, this Psalm verse is then put alongside a verse from Isaiah 28:16:

[Therefore, says the Lord God]  
See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious;  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

The Isaiah text goes on to add, 'I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plummet' (28:17). The relationships in this new community are given their measure from the cornerstone. They are aligned by justice and righteousness, and they are built up from below.

Notice that this is a building in which no-one will be put to shame. Romans 10:11 also quotes this verse and goes on to say, 'for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him'. In other words, instead of our usual divisions that we put up between people, which cause shame and humiliation for those less valued, in this new architecture of relations *all* are honoured. There is the cornerstone then all the living stones as one, with no divisions or hierarchies.

For a persecuted and suffering church, this is good news. No matter how low their value or status in their context, they have a valued place in God's house. They are precious, not because they are special in relation to other people, but because they are aligned to the foundation stone, who is Christ, 'rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight' (2:4).

'Rejected by mortals' implies that there are two kinds of builders at work here.<sup>4</sup> First there are 'mortals', who build up human communities on the backs and bodies of victims, shoring up their identities over against others, rejecting and killing to maintain their order. Then there is God, who builds a community by aligning it *with* the rejected one, and through him, with all those whom Jesus identified with: the least esteemed, the outcast, ostracised and marginalised.

James Alison sees Jesus inhabiting the building built by mortals in order to subvert it from within. His rejection and death reveal to us the violence at the heart of our usual human ways of creating order. The new creation we are offered in God's spiritual house is differently structured. Rather than receiving our place and identities through competition and exclusion, in God's building project we receive our identities by being aligned to 'an entirely non-rivalrous, non-envious, non-grasping' foundation. Rather than clamouring to get to the top, and arguing about who is the greatest, in God's spiritual house we are drawn down, in humility, to rest ourselves on God's precious cornerstone. Alison sees this structure as itself gratuitous, the bearer of grace.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Joel B. Green, *1 Peter: The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2007, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, Crossroads: New York, 1998, pp. 168-169.

Last week we were challenged to let go our self-righteousness and certainty and instead live by faith. Tonight we see a corporate version of the same theme. We are called to give up being our own foundation, along with the self-righteousness and self-justification that entails, and instead be built up from Christ, receiving our identities from him, by grace.

The call for the Christian church is to become holy. Our response is to let ourselves be built into God's spiritual house, in which we grow from our old ways of being together into new life. In this way, we are called 'out of darkness and into [God's] marvelous light' (1 Peter 2: 9).