

## **Living Stone, Cornerstone, Stumbling Stone**

**Timothy L. Carson | I Peter 2:4-8 | Nov 26 2017**

To live as a Christian is, among other things, to live within a story, a story of how the source of the universe continues to draw all things to itself, and how that is manifested in time and space through Jesus Christ. To that end we tell that story not only by reading scripture, interpreting and reflecting on it, but in the tradition of the church we tell it through a year-long recitation called the church year. In fact, that year-long dramatization begins all over again next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent. Today is the very last day of our year-long story, the final concluding chapter. This last Sunday of the year is always designated *Christ the King* - the reigning Christ.

Coincidentally, this is also the very last Sunday of our fall series *Wonder in Stone*. We have treaded many a stone to get to where we are now. And today we conclude with the highest, most mysterious, mystical, and exalted portrayal of Christ imaginable, truly befitting Christ the King.

In the span of just a few verses, the author of I Peter has created an art piece, an icon, a mural, a model of the loftiest heights to which we might aspire. And the panorama spread before us includes a very special house.

This house is unlike ordinary houses. This house has as its corner stone a stone that the builders initially rejected and tossed into the discard pile. But those with a special eye knew just how precious this rejected stone was and retrieved it from the rubble. It was so perfect that the rejected stone was cut and carved and set in place as the new cornerstone of the house.

All those who know just how precious this rejected stone is, this stone that became the living corner stone, have themselves become living stones of this spiritual house.

And here is the mystery: This house is absolutely portable, unlike human-made houses. Unlike the Jerusalem temple, constructed with actual stones, this spiritual house exists wherever and whenever

open souls see, love and believe in the living stone that was rejected by the world.

At the same time, this living stone that was once cast into the discard pile becomes a stumbling block for those who cannot see, do not love, and do not believe. For them, Jesus is a problem rather than a pathway, a dilemma rather than a diadem, an obstacle rather than an answer.

What sort of king is this? What kind of house is this? What strange cornerstone is this?

This living stone does not conform in any way to the categories of success and power in this world. His kingdom is not of this world's standards. His people are not those who seek power, but rather practice love. His temple is non-local and hovers wherever his Spirit is active and at work. This spiritual house of living stones *may* exist where churches have been built in his honor. Or it *may* be absent from those humanly made churches that abandon his message and the radical way where he leads us.

In the dramatic case of those churches that end up worshipping idols, false messiahs, wealth and power, it is easy to understand how they become empty houses with Christ nowhere to be found. But false turns are often very subtle and disguised.

Just think of how churches across the land react to the specter of violence. They understandably want to protect themselves from danger and risk. But for some of these churches their fear turns them into armed camps. They become something other than a spiritual house of living stones. Ironically, by attempting to protect themselves they become something other than the church of Jesus Christ. When all is said and done the chief cornerstone is no longer there, only rocks remaining in its place.

In many other ways Christians have made the long transition from being living stones to being a pile of rocks, living for the wrong thing, losing the spirit along the way. The lofty vision of I Peter has been lost to some model of church as a business, or church as empire, or church as club. When that happens, the real church vanishes.

This is important to consider on Christ the King Sunday. Because if we become loyal to something or someone else, if we sell out to the principalities and powers of our age, if we compromise the spirit of Jesus for instead the lowest spirit of our times the real church vanishes, leaving an empty shell in its place.

In this sense, I think, the judgment comes whenever Christ's body becomes an enterprise that worships something else. "Whenever two or three gather in my name," he said, "there I will be in the midst of them." But wherever two or three thousand gather in some other name, he is nowhere to be found.

And that's the message of the haunting hymn, *Built on the Rock*:

*Built on the Rock, the church shall stand  
even when steeples are falling ... Not in a temple  
made with hands God the Almighty is dwelling ... We  
are God's house of living stones,  
built for God's own habitation ... (Gruntwig, 1854)*

The question each one of us must answer in each moment is if we will be that habitation for the spirit or for something else. The question that every church must ask at every turn is whether they are a house of living stones with Christ as the chief cornerstone, or if they worship something else.

It is not enough for Christians or churches to "believe in Jesus." No, we must follow him. Faith is more than believing in abstractions; actually following is what turns what is believed into something real.

In our year-long study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer we have discovered how Bonhoeffer insisted that being a Christian is not just encountering an impossible ideal that drives us to dependence on grace. No, not that alone. Bonhoeffer insisted that the teachings found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount are actually *meant to be followed*. It's not enough to say you believe in Jesus without following Jesus.

I was at a church fund raiser onetime, a really fun social activity that had a purpose to it:

We were raising money for an important cause. The way we went about it was by a large trivial pursuit contest. Everyone was broken into groups around tables. It was really fun.

In the midst of that I had a person come up to me who never worships, never participates in any aspect of church like service or Christian education. And she said to me: “You know, if church was more like Trivial Pursuit I might come to church more often.” That’s a direct quote.

Many things come to mind in a moment like that, but chief among them was this, “Thank God we are *not* more like Trivial Pursuit. The Church is already *too much* like Trivial Pursuit.” Less Trivial Pursuit and more Sermon on the Mount.

“Built on the Rock, the church shall stand even when steeples are falling ...”

I have known humble cinder block church buildings in which the spiritual house of living stones worshipped.

And I have known elegant and inspiring church edifices that were only stone upon stone.

The question for us is something like this: Do we bring the real church to church with us? And do I bring heart-felt faith to my Christian life? Or are we just going through the motions? What do we bring to the game to make it more than Trivial Pursuit?

In the great mystery that I Peter describes for us he says that we need but come to the One who was rejected and yet became the chief corner stone. By coming to that One, he says, we become living stones and are fashioned into a spiritual house.

As we turn toward Advent and its great song of expectation, what will you bring to this joyous season? Who do you want to become? What are you more resolved than ever before to do? This is your next chance, one more time, to join with the chorus of the universe, sing with the angels, and magnify the Lord with Mary, as we become God’s house of living stones, ready for the Savior. Gloria in Excelsis Deo!