

Introduction

Back in the early 2000s there was a reality TV show featuring comedians. I remember watching “Last Comic Standing” with my wife. There was a Vietnamese comedian named Dat Phan. He was the winner of that first season. There was one particular show that sticks with me, though we only heard one joke from Dat Phan’s entire set. He came out and after the initial applause said, “I know, I know...All you Asians out there are thinking, ‘Please be funny. Please be funny’”.

My first thought was, “Why would Asian folk want that any more than I want that?” I’m watching a show featuring comedians. Of course I want them to be funny! Nobody watches a comedy show hoping it won’t be funny! I then turned to my wife to make that very point only to discover she wasn’t *breathing*. She was laughing so hard it took a moment or two for her to be able to inhale enough air to respond.

I didn’t hear another word Dat Phan said. I was utterly confused! Somehow I had missed the joke. When she was finally coherent I asked her what was so funny. She said, “That’s exactly what I was thinking!” I was even more confused. I wanted the comedian to be funny as well, but I wasn’t thinking, “Please be funny...please be funny”. Do Asians inherently want comedians to be funny? So I said it out loud: “I want him to be funny, too!” She gently replied, “Yes, but if he’s not funny, then *I* am not funny”.

My confusion skyrocketed. I thought that was utterly absurd! Why would a bad comedian mean she wasn’t funny? If some white comedian weren’t funny then I would just think he was bad at being a comic. Why would it reflect on me in *any way*?! Then it hit me. Because my wife is in the minority in this country, she identifies with an Asian comedian in a way that I, being in the majority, never identify with someone just because he looks like me.

If I see a white criminal on the news, he doesn’t reflect on me. If I take my car to a white mechanic and he does a great job repairing my car, I don’t think, “That’s right...*represent*”. What I realized that day was the importance of representation, of identity with a community. Even though my wife had never met Dat Phan and even though she is Korean while he is Vietnamese, she nevertheless felt a connection to him. He would understand what she felt when a stranger hurled certain epithets at her while we walked into a store. More recently, he would understand her fears these past few years when she sees reports on the news of Asians randomly and violently attacked.

It’s natural to feel a sense of community with others, especially when you are in the minority. It’s harder in our culture as our culture is that of “rugged individualism”. We tend to think of the world from a single, solitary perspective, rather than that of a community. It’s the you-do-you-boo mentality. Your life, your thoughts, your decisions don’t really affect me—unless you act on them and try to force me to do something. Then we got a problem.

There is a reason God created us to need community. There is a reason none of us is saved in isolation. There is a reason God saves us and places us into his church, his community of

believers. It's because representation matters, and not in the way you might think. We're in 1 Peter 2, verses 9–10.

1 Pet 2:9 But 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 marvelous light. ¹⁰ 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 Peter 2:9–10

A Chosen Race

In verse 9 Peter continues his thought with a contrast. In verse 8 he writes of those who have rejected Jesus. God made him the cornerstone but those who refuse to trust him find him not a cornerstone but a “stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense”. As we saw a couple weeks ago Paul indicates Christians are the aroma of Christ. To those who believe, it is the aroma of life, but to those who do not believe, it is the stench of death. The aroma is the same either way. So Jesus is the same stone. For those who believe, he is the cornerstone, the foundation of all God is doing in this world. For those who do not believe, he is a stone of stumbling—unbelievers stub the toe of their lives on him.

In contrast to this, he tells his readers they are a chosen race. The word “chosen” is the same word he used at the very beginning of this letter. There he tells them they are *elect* exiles—chosen exiles. They were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. Here he says they *as a race* are chosen.

That's very interesting. The word translated “race” refers to a group of people who have a common descent. It's the Greek word *γένος*. The Jewish people were a *γένος*. They descended from Abraham. The Midianites were a *γένος*; they descended from Midian. That is, they shared a common ancestor. This is the usual meaning of a *γένος*. Peter tells these believers in Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia they descend from a common ancestor. Except they don't.

We have no idea what their ethnicity was. Remember that in the year AD 41, the emperor Claudius began a thirteen-year program of settling this area of the empire. Geographically it was about the size of Texas—a fairly large area. It was not densely populated, which is why Claudius sought to increase its population. Many of these believers had been moved there by the empire. This is why Peter calls them “elect exiles of *the Dispersion*—they had been dispersed from the land of their birth to this new part of the empire.

Not only were they not descended from Abraham and therefore not part of ethnic Israel, they were largely not related to each other! Yet Peter says they are a chosen *race*—a *γένος*. They descend from a common ancestor. As Peter said in the beginning of this letter, God the Father has caused them to be born again with the result being an inheritance. They are born into God's family. Therefore they are a *γένος*—a chosen race.

They have nothing else in common. Their mother tongues may be different. Being in the empire meant they would speak Greek, but it's doubtful that Greek was their native language. Their cultures would be different. How they dress and wear their hair and the foods they eat and the music they enjoy would all be so very different. Their choices in

entertainment would be different. Even within a particular region there would be great differences, let alone from region to region. Still, Peter says they are a chosen race, a people with a common descent.

Being children of God does not erase their ethnic differences. They still wear their hair differently and still eat different foods. How they speak in their homes may well be very different from how they speak to their neighbors. Being children of God puts these differences in their proper place, and that place is not primary. They are united together in their common confession that Jesus is Lord.

A Royal Priesthood

Peter says they are a royal priesthood. This is a high calling! They're not simply royal, but a royal *priesthood*. They're not simply a priesthood, but a *royal* priesthood! Being the sons and daughters of the King of kings means they are, in fact, royalty, and will receive an inheritance befitting sons and daughters of the King. We looked at that inheritance in chapter 1.

They're also a priesthood. Earlier in chapter 2 he tells them God is building them up as a spiritual house—his temple!—*to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*. These sacrifices are offered in three ways. First, our bodies are presented to him. Second, our resources are given to him. Third, our affections are set on him and him alone; we love what God loves and we hate what God hates. Our manner of living is the spiritual sacrifice we offer to God as his holy priests. Being *royal* priests means we offer them as his offspring, as those closest to him.

Peter is pointing them to purpose here. While they were “of the Dispersion”—scattered from everything they had known and loved and relocated to a new land—their lives had meaning and purpose, right where they were. They were not there haphazardly. God was at work through them and it was for this purpose they were “ordained”—set apart as a royal priesthood.

Being a royal priesthood comes with responsibilities. Namely, a priest must maintain his—or her—holiness. In the old covenant given at Mount Sinai, priests had to maintain their holiness. This wasn't a suggestion or even a strong recommendation—it was required.

This holiness governed every area of their lives. They had ritual purity to keep, which means there were specific things they had to do—and not do. There was also a physical holiness they had to keep, which had to do with their behavior and sobriety and even their clothing. The closer a priest would be to God's presence the more holiness was required. They could not approach God casually. They could not treat sin trivially. They could not ignore purity. When Peter tells his readers they are a royal priesthood, all these things are still true!

The difference, of course, is God has caused them to be born again and God is guarding them through faith. God is actively working in them, for Christ is the one who grants his people direct, immediate access to God. As the author of Hebrews put it, whereas the old covenant priests had to go through elaborate rituals in order to enter into the presence of God, when Christ came he entered into the holy places, but not by the blood of bulls and goats and such, but by his own blood. When Jesus came to this world he declared he had come to do the will of God. Then Hebrews says,

Heb 10:10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

Hebrews 10:10–12

You sit down when the work is finished. The priests never sat; they stood daily for their work could never be finished. Then Jesus came. When he offered himself, he sat down because the work was finished. His people were *sanctified*—made holy. We are now a royal priesthood. This royal priesthood has been forever cleansed by the blood of Jesus and so we enter into God’s presence in Christ.

A Holy Nation

Peter continues. He says they are chosen race, and they are a royal priesthood. Further, they are a holy *nation*. This is similar to being a chosen race. A “race” is a group of people united by a common ancestor. Here he says they are a holy nation. The word for nation is the word from which we get “ethnic” or “ethnicity”—people united by culture and common traditions. Except they weren’t—at least not in the way we normally think.

Peter does not mean they rejected their cultures and traditions—those they were born into. He means they have received new cultural expressions and traditions that are greater than those into which they were born. They were diverse and remained a diverse people, yet now in Christ they worship the Lord Jesus and their affections are set on him and his kingdom. Together they assemble regularly to worship him, to sing praise to him, to hear from his word, to pray together, to demonstrate their unity in Christ, to celebrate the body and blood of the Lord in communion. In short, these things made them a new people group—a new nation, a new *ethnicity*.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote about the hostility that existed between Jews and the nations—*Gentiles*. The Ephesians were not Jews, which means they were not included in the covenant God had given Israel at Mount Sinai. This alienated them from the people of God.

Eph 2:11 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Ephesians 2:11–16

God has created for himself a new people—a new nation of people who are not united by ethnicity or culture or language. They are united by the blood of Christ in their common confession that Jesus is Lord. This is a greater unity than cultural expression. Being around people who like the same music and same style of clothing and same food preferences, etc., is not the same as unity. That's just similarity. Unity is seen in working together for a common cause in the midst of diversity and difference.

If you only hang around people who are just like you, you are not unified with them. You're simply just like them. God in Christ is doing something more incredible and more profound: he is uniting together people who may have nothing else in common save for faith in Jesus! In this diversity true unity can be found.

Peter adds to this idea of being a holy nation: they are “a people for his own possession”. This holy nation is made up of *his people*. This is a reference to Exodus 19 where God makes a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai.

Ex 19:5 “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;
6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

Exodus 19:5–6

A treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. Sound familiar? Peter transfers this language to the church, for in Christ this covenant finds its ultimate fulfillment. This is why Paul says in 2 Corinthians, all the promises of God find their Yes in Jesus. He is the fulfillment of this, therefore all who are in Christ are that treasured possession, that kingdom of priests, that holy nation. I find it quite interesting who was actually assembled at Mount Sinai. It was the people of Israel—ethnic descendants of Abraham—and we tend to think this meant only direct, physical descendants of Abraham, but that is not what Scripture says!

Ex 12:37 And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. ³⁸ A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.

Exodus 12:37–38

At Mount Sinai God made a covenant with the people he led out of Egypt, and this group of people included a mixed multitude. People from all over the world traveled to Egypt. Egypt was a superpower, and its economy was part of a vast, global economy. Many of these people left Egypt in the exodus and joined with the people of Israel.

We know that Caleb was a Canaanite, yet he was one of the twelve spies sent to spy out the promised land and he represented the tribe of Judah. Moses' wife was an African woman. His brother Aaron, Israel's first high priest, had a son who also married an African woman and they named their son Phinehas—which means “Black”. Phinehas would become Israel's third high priest. From the beginning God's people have been diverse, though by the first century this seems to have been largely forgotten—or ignored.

A Mission

This new people for his own possession, God's chosen race descended from a common ancestor—himself, God's royal priesthood, God's holy nation, God's people for his own possession, are God's people for a purpose. God has claimed them for his mission. In verse 9 he says this purpose is “that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”.

Think of what this means! Last week we saw what it means to be made in the image of God: we represent God. We act on God's behalf. This makes murder and slavery and theft and gossip especially evil because it communicates God himself is like this—and he's not! We're now also in the image of Adam. We participate in his rebellion in the garden every time we kill and enslave and steal and gossip.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that through faith we bear the image of Christ. We represent Christ. The one who is King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who sits at the right hand of God, the very one who enables us to enter into the most holy place by his precious blood given as propitiation for our sins, has called us to represent him by serving as a royal priesthood to the entire world!

Remember Peter's purpose in this letter. He's writing them to encourage them to endure faithfully, to remain faithfully present in Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia, to not withdraw from the world though the world was turning against them. They were losing business because people didn't want anything to do with them. They were losing friends because people were speaking evil against them, accusing them of being evil. Karen Jobes is helpful.

The very goals of Peter's letter—that believers form internal bonds within the Christian community and repudiate certain attitudes and practices of their society—also gave rise to the charge that Christians were antisocial. ... Christians were perceived to repudiate pleasures (e.g., the theater, the races, the gladiatorial combats), break home and family ties, ruin business, abandon pagan religious ritual, and avoid civic duties. This very concept of the new race caused much of the popular opposition to Christianity in the first few centuries.

Karen Jobes, BECNT

Because these followers of Jesus would not participate in the sinful practices of the world around them, they were losing friends and business. They were suffering. Peter is saying to hang in there, to remain faithful. What the world thought of them was largely irrelevant in light of what God had to say about them. They were to continue proclaiming the excellencies of him who called them out of darkness and into his marvelous light. In Colossians Paul says God “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son”.

God has called us out of the darkness of sin and death and has placed us into his marvelous light—the kingdom of his beloved Son. The mission is to proclaim how great God is to a world that does not yet know how great he is.

Remember how Peter began this letter. He started with a doxology, a word of praise that frames everything else he writes: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”.

The word translated “blessed” is the Greek word we get “eulogy” from. At a funeral you eulogize the deceased by speaking well of her, by telling others what a wonderful woman she had been. This is what it means to say “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. God is worthy of all praise and honor and glory.

When we worship him, we proclaim his excellencies, the things that make him worthy. For Peter this worship is the basis for everything. It is the basis for holiness in this life. It is the basis for their endurance despite the world’s hostility. Here we see it is the very means for them to remain faithfully present in a foreign land. They accomplish the mission of God through *worship*.

As a royal priesthood they offer to God spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Christ. As we saw a couple weeks ago these sacrifices are our bodies, our resources, and our affections. How we live our lives is an act of worship. How we spend our resources, whether our time or money or possessions, is an act of worship. Where we place our affections is an act of worship. When we worship God in these ways we are proclaiming the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light. As Hebrews puts it, our very lives become a sacrifice of praise to God.

As we’ll see later in this letter, it is only after our lives proclaim his excellencies that our words will have any effect. The world doesn’t care what we say until the world sees we actually believe it as demonstrated by living out our faith.

A New Identity

We can live it out because of this new identity that is ours in Christ. He says in verse 10, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people”. I love how Indian scholar Chris Gnanakan describes it.

Peter summarises their change of status like this: *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God*. God has extended his *mercy* to all and welcomes all believers as his people. In South Asia, we understand what it is to be “not a people”, for we are familiar with the plight of Dalits and outcastes—crushed, despised, denied rights and exploited. Christians in South Asia must remember that all believers—without exception—are honoured in God’s sight.

Chris Gnanakan, South Asia Bible Commentary

In India’s caste system, the Dalits are treated with disdain and hatred, as if they were barely human. Think of what it means, then, to be told you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession! This is why the church of Jesus Christ has no class rankings. We don’t separate by skin color or by economic status or by education. Andreas of Caesarea addressed this in the sixth century.

When people from different races and nations are called to abandon all their differences and to take on one mind, drawing near to him by one faith and one teaching, by which the soul and the heart become one, they are one holy people.

Andreas of Caesarea, Catena

This is why John saw in his vision in Revelation “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb”. He sees them crying out *together* in worship. This *mixed multitude* has been God’s plan from the beginning.

Despite their nation of origin, and despite the tribe and people they were born into, and despite the language their mothers sang to them in, this *mixed multitude* are in the very presence of God doing exactly what they were given to do: they were proclaiming the excellencies of him who called them out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

They could do this because God has given them a new identity, one that does not erase who they are but rather expands who they are. A Dalit in India who believes in Jesus is part of that chosen race, that royal priesthood, that holy nation, that people for God’s own possession despite what others in India believe. In the church being a Dalit is no barrier to Christian community and Christian fellowship.

This new identity changes everything, while not eliminating cultural and ethnic distinctions that are very real. This is why the communion table is *essential* to what it means to be Christ’s church. As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 10, each week we come together to participate in the body and blood of our Lord, while very real differences between us exist.

If you’re black and you’re a baptized follower of Jesus, you’re invited to participate with us. If you’re white and you’re a baptized follower of Jesus, you’re invited to participate with us. If you’re Asian or Hispanic and you’re a baptized follower of Jesus, you’re invited to participate with us. If you’re rich or you’re poor, you’re invited to the table. If you have letters behind your name or you barely graduated high school, you’re invited. If you’re a Democrat or a Republican, and you’re a baptized follower of Jesus, come to the table with us!

If you are in Christ, you have a new identity, one that is secure in who Christ is, regardless of any category the world places you in—or that you place yourself in. If you are in Christ, you are part of that chosen race, that royal priesthood, that holy nation. You’re part of that people for God’s own possession!

Recognize the change that has taken place! Peter says once you were not part of that people. No one is physically born into the family of God. God has no grandchildren. Everyone in Christ has been caused to born again into God’s family and are being guarded through faith by God’s power. In Christ, now you are God’s people. There was a time, Peter says, that you had not received mercy, but now in Christ you have received mercy. A large part of that mercy is you now belong to God and therefore to his people.

This is what defines you. If your identity is firmly rooted in the Lord Jesus, then when someone criticizes your political party, you’re not filled with anger and rage. Your political party is not what defines you! Your identity is in Christ. When someone criticizes you or merely fails to acknowledge you in some way for something you have done, this doesn’t crush you. Human acknowledgment is not what defines you. Your identity is in Christ. When your children are acting like children and you fear others are judging you in Meijer, this ought not bring you grief for your parenting is not what defines you. Your identity is in Christ.

If you get the promotion, that promotion should not be the thing that gives you the greatest joy for your job title is not what defines you. Your identity is in Christ. If your boss blames you for someone else’s mistake or your car breaks down or the washing machine stops working *again*, this does not define you, for your identity is in Christ.

Application

Here's what this means for us, New City. You and I are, in Christ, a new creation. Our fundamental identity has changed. God has granted to us in Christ an incredible position, that of being his children. This new identity results in worship. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! This is why Peter roots our holiness in worship. This is why Peter roots our service to the Lord in worship.

This new identity we have received is *corporate*. God created us with the need for community. We want to be around those who are like us, only in the church, those who are like us aren't those who may look like us or listen to the same music or dress the same. The community God places us into are like us in a far more profound way: they, too, confess Jesus is Lord.

Our new identity in Christ is not a personal identity, as if we change our names or begin a new style of dress. It is a change of corporate identity. Once we did not belong; now we belong. Once we were not part of the people of God; now we are the people of God. Peter Davids writes,

The emphasis throughout is collective: the church as a corporate unity is the people, priesthood, nation, etc., rather than each Christian being such. This emphasis is typical of the NT in contrast to our far more individualistic concern in the present. The West tends to focus on individuals relating to God, while Peter (and the rest of the NT; e.g., Paul's body-of-Christ language) was more conscious of people's becoming part of a new corporate entity that is chosen by and that relates to God.

Peter H. Davids, NICNT

This new identity transforms us into people who worship the one true God. As John Piper famously declared, "Missions exists because worship doesn't". The fundamental problem in the world is people do not worship the God who created them. God is creating for himself a people and the distinguishing feature of these people is they worship him. This is why Peter roots everything, from the pursuit of holiness to accomplishing the mission of God, in *worship*.

As I said in the beginning, representation matters. We are a royal priesthood. Priests work on behalf of God by serving others. We are that representation. Your life and my life ought to show others what their lives would look like if they were also followers of Jesus. God creates communities of his people to be faithfully present in the world. This faithful presence begins and ends with worship.

The reason my wife identified so strongly with the Asian comedian is not because she loves comedy or good jokes but because she strongly felt part of a people group. She felt a belonging. For those of us in Christ—elect exiles—we also deeply feel that connection to Christ and therefore also to each other. We belong! There are not many places where most of us feel like we belong. Many of us frequently sense that we are outsiders whether it is because of race, education, income, sex, religion, our personal quirks and oddities, etc.

Understanding Peter's message here frees us from that belief, that we don't belong. It empowers us to enjoy our differences within the *family* of God. Today we welcomed eight

new individuals into our corporate identity as the people of God here at New City. Today, in essence, we said you belong to us and we belong to you!

This faithful presence in a world that does not worship Jesus impacts the world by showing others what they would look like if they belonged to God. Cultures wouldn't change, though they would eliminate sinful tendencies and practices. This faithful presence lets others know that God has not left them alone to face a life in a broken world. God is present with them through his body, the church.

Life in Christ and the mission of God in this world are inextricably linked. They begin and end with worship, for the Lord Jesus is worthy. He is so very worthy of our worship. He has chosen to work through our worship to transform us, to enable us to endure, to accomplish his purposes with us. Our right response to the goodness of God in Christ through his Spirit is worship. Through worship we belong.