



PROCLAIMING
the PERFECTIONS
of GOD

HOLY, HOLY,

*Thabiti Anyabwile, Alistair Begg, D.A. Carson,
Sinclair B. Ferguson, W. Robert Godfrey, Steven J. Lawson,
R.C. Sproul, R.C. Sproul Jr., Derek W.H. Thomas*

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“A HOLY NATION”:
THE CHURCH’S
HIGH CALLING

- D. A. Carson -

IN ADDITION TO AN INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY, each of us has a corporate identity. For example, I belong to the group made up of many hundreds who attended the 2009 Ligonier National Conference. We constitute a certain group. Doubtless many among those who attended the conference are Americans. They constitute another corporate identity. Some may be medical doctors, plumbers, or pastors. Some are identified by race, some by a particular ethnicity. Perhaps some belong to the “Fellowship of Motorbike Riders,” if there is such a group. These various corporate identities often overlap. Thus, it is quite possible that there is an American who attended the conference and who is also a motorbike rider and a doctor (but perhaps not simultaneously a plumber).

At a merely descriptive level, none of these corporate identities can

claim of any sort of precedence over the others. Some people might prefer to think of themselves as bikers first and Americans second, or the reverse. Some might prefer to think of themselves as medical doctors first and African Americans or European Americans second. That's perfectly acceptable. However, our corporate identity as Christians is transcendently important. It outstrips, relativizes, and reduces all other corporate identities.

This truth is hugely emphasized in both testaments. The New Testament does this nowhere more powerfully than in 1 Peter 2, where we read: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (vv. 9–10). It will be helpful to follow the flow of Peter's thought in three steps—our identity, our purpose, and then our foundation.

Our Identity as Christians

As he sketches the identity of Christians, Peter first asserts, "You are a chosen people." The word translated here as "people" is sometimes rendered "race." In fact, Peter's language actually makes a specific Old Testament reference, namely, to Isaiah 43:3–4: "I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give nations in exchange for you, and peoples in exchange for your life." A little further down in that same chapter, we read:

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give

drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise. Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. You have not brought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more. (vv. 19–25)

In this passage, God is addressing the people He will rescue from exile in Babylon. They have sinned and fallen into idolatry, but God says He will blot out their sins. They have not offered the appropriate, God-commanded, covenant-stipulated worship. But they remain His chosen people, and therefore He will blot out their transgressions that they may proclaim His praise. Peter picks up this clause in his epistle, as we shall see.

This truth, that the people of Israel are God's chosen, is grounded in the entire matrix of the Old Testament narrative. At the very beginning, Abraham did not volunteer to start a new race; God chose him. In the next generation, not everyone who was descended from Abraham was chosen; it was Isaac, not Ishmael or the packet of progeny from Keturah. In the generation after that, it was Jacob and not Esau. A choice principle was built into God's dealings with Abraham's family from the very beginning. The point is made clear at the national level in Deuteronomy 7 and 10, where God insists that He loves the Israelites not because they are mighty or powerful, or because they are wiser or holier than others, but simply because He set His affection on them. He loves them because He loves them. They are a chosen people, not a choice people.

Peter then applies this language directly to his Christian readers. *They* now constitute the locus of God's chosen people, he says.

People in the Roman Empire in Peter's day were much interested in

knowing the class, race, or group to which you belonged. For example, the Roman historian Suetonius, speaking of Christians, writes: “Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class.” He is writing in Latin, so he uses the word *genus*, which is the Latin equivalent of the Greek word for a race or a group. He goes on to say that the Christians are a *genus* “of men given to a new and mischievous superstition,” by which he was referring to the resurrection.

Peter says that believers are “a chosen people,” chosen by God from before the foundation of the world, chosen in space/time history, elected in Christ Jesus, and set out as different from all others. But we need to see what immediately precedes this expression. At the end of verse 8, Peter writes that others “stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.” Then comes verse 9: “But you are a chosen people. . . .” That’s the contrast. It transcends all merely sociological labels, and it identifies Christians as those who, by God’s choice and unlike others, obey the message: they submit to the gospel.

Apart from this distinctive, they are an incredibly diverse group. In the very first verse of this epistle, Peter establishes the diversity of his intended first readers: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God’s elect, strangers [i.e., exiles] scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.” He could have added today: “believers, elect of God, chosen from Vietnam, Kikuyu-speakers from Kenya, those who are gifted in Swahili, some North Americans, and the odd Canadian.” They are all there, chosen by God from before the foundation of the world, and for all their diversity, they constitute a separate genus. So Peter first asserts that you are a chosen people.

Second, Peter says, you are “a royal priesthood.” Here Peter reaches further back than Babylon. He reaches all the way back to Exodus 19, the chapter that immediately precedes the giving of the Ten Commandments. Here we read: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a

holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" (vv. 5–6). The setting, of course, is the exodus, when the Mosaic covenant constituted Israel as God's chosen people, His chosen nation. The crucial expression here could be read as referring to two entities (kingdom and priests) or to one (royal priests). In my judgment, it's the latter.

In the context of the Old Testament, the fact that all the Israelites are royal priests does not mean that there is not also a separate and special category of priests drawn from the tribe of Levi and descended from the line of Aaron. But in the New Testament, the Levitical Aaronic priests foreshadow one of two things. It might be Jesus Christ, our sovereign High Priest, who is the sole Mediator between God and man. This is one of the great themes of the epistle to the Hebrews, and it shows up again in the Pastoral Epistles (see especially 1 Tim. 2:5). There is one Mediator, one go-between, between God and human beings. Alternatively, the priests might foreshadow all believers, as here in 1 Peter. Where that is the case, we're thrown back on the language of Exodus 19.

Therefore, we are forced to ask a question. Since the Old Testament stipulates that there is a special class of priests and you can't volunteer for it—it is by God's sovereign designation of one tribe, that of Levi, and one family, that of Aaron—why does God picture all of His people as priests in Exodus 19?

When we think of priests, there are two lines of thought we should follow. On the one hand, functionally the Old Testament Levitical priests are mediators. They are mediators between a deity—in the pagan world, it could be any kind of deity—and human beings. Under God's self-disclosure, they are mediators who take God's instruction, God's covenantal stipulations, God's ceremonial absolutions, and God's sacrificial system to the people. They present the voice of God, including His demands and His ceremonies, to God's covenant people. Conversely, they take the concerns and the sins of God's people, including their own (for they are fallen men themselves), and bring them before the Lord, discharging the sins with the blood of the covenant, the blood of bulls and goats, shed

for the sins of the priest and of the people in the Most Holy Place on the ark of the covenant on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. They are mediators.

This theme is picked up in the New Testament when Paul talks about his evangelism in Romans 15. He says he is discharging his “priestly duty” (v. 16) when he evangelizes. In that sense, Christians are priests not because we have some peculiar clerical role within the church of God, but because, together with all the church of God, we mediate the grace of God to all who are outside. That is what evangelism, in part, is about. Likewise, we pray for those who are outside, that God might open their eyes, that the Spirit of God might convict them of their sin, and that they might repent, turn, and trust the living God. This is part of our priestly ministry. Every time you pray for others, you are engaging in this priestly service. Every time you talk about the gospel with an unconverted neighbor, you are exercising a priestly ministry of mediation.

This notion of “priesthood” has already appeared in 1 Peter. In 2:5, he writes that believers have been built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In Hebrews, it is particularly the spiritual sacrifice of praise that is in view (13:15).

All of this has to do with the priests’ function. But there is another element. Priests in ancient Israel were especially sanctified, particularly set aside for God. Yet there was a broader sense in which *all* Israelites were set aside for God, God’s “royal priests”: the focus is not so much on function as on privilege. Likewise, here in 1 Peter, the focus is not so much on the function of mediation as on the reality that all of God’s people are to pursue all the sanctification and all the consecration of those who enter as priests into the Most Holy Place, into God’s presence. In ancient Israel, under the old covenant, there was a sense in which the average Israelite might say: “Well, the priests have special ablutions to go through and undergo special examination, and only under certain circumstance can they take on the ephod. That’s not for me; that is for them alone.” God

help us when Christians today start saying, "Well, it's all right for the pastor to be holy, but I really don't have to be." All of us are God's priests. All of us have been set aside. All of us have access, now that the veil has been torn, into the very presence of the living God. To start introducing a double-tier standard of holiness or of consecration makes no sense this side of the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

This emphasis on the sheer privilege of being sanctified, of being set aside as God's special people, is introduced by Peter in his opening verses: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, exiles spread throughout Pontus, Galicia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance" (1:1–2). You are a royal priesthood, a priesthood that serves the King of the universe.

Third, Peter says you are "a holy nation." This idea also is grounded in Exodus 19. God says, "Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests *and a holy nation*" (Ex. 19:5b–6a, emphasis added). The contemporary notion of nation—the "nation-state" as we think of it in the Western world—is an eighteenth-century creation. The word translated "nation" here is the word that actually produces our English word *ethnicity*. You might render this: "you are a holy ethnicity" (although that sounds just a bit too narrowly racial for some of us).

I was brought up in French Canada. French Canadians would speak of "*la nation du Quebec*"—the nation of Quebec. But the word *nation* in French means something a little different from *nation* in English. In English, it is a geographical political entity. But in the ancient world, although there were geographical political entities, they tended to be regional empires or the like, and then under the regional empires there were tribes or ethnicities with various associations and self-identities. In French Canada, something of this old flavor is there. Although French Canadians know that nationally in the English sense they are Canadians, nevertheless, nationally in the French sense, they are French Canadians

and quite proud of it. To English ears, hearing French Canadians say that they belong to the nation of Quebec sounds like an insult to the rest of Canada, as if somehow they are distancing themselves from Canada. But that is not quite what most French Canadians mean. They are simply saying they belong to the ethnicity of francophone Canadians.

What kind of ethnicity do we belong to? What is our nation? Peter says “you are . . . a holy nation.” What does that mean?

The categories of systematic theology have long distinguished between the communicable attributes of God—that is, the attributes of God that He may share with non-God image-bearers like you and me—and the non-communicable attributes of God, that is, the attributes of God that He cannot share with image-bearers like us. Thus, there is no biblical passage that says “be omnipotent, for I am omnipotent.” Let’s face it, omnipotence is an incommunicable attribute of God. On the other hand, there are many passages that enjoin us to love. God is love, and love is a communicable attribute of God. It is one of His attributes that can be shared between Him and His non-God image-bearers.

Where does holiness fit into this? It is an extraordinary category. On the one hand, it is a communicable attribute. After all, God says, “Be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:44). That puts it on the communicable attribute side. But as you work through the uses of the word *holy* in the Bible, you discover that it has concentric rings of meaning. What exactly does it mean to be holy?

Some try to deal with the term in etymological categories. That is, they try to break it down into its components, as they perceive them. They note that *holy* means “separate” and they point out that God is utterly separate. But did the voices around the throne in Isaiah 6:3 really cry, “Separate, separate, separate is the LORD Almighty”? The word *holy* loses something when it is defined this way. Others want the term to have an overtone of morality. But did the voices around the throne really say, “Moral, moral, moral is the LORD Almighty”? No. At its core, in the tightest concentric circle, *holy* is almost an adjective for God. God is

God; God is holy, and even angels of the highest order cover their faces with their wings as they join in the paeans of praise of the heavenly hosts and cry, "You are God, You are God, You are God. Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty." I cannot get closer to the word than that.

Then, as you stretch out a little further, that which peculiarly belongs to this God is said to be holy. It may or may not be moral. For example, the shovel that takes the ash from the altar is said to be holy (Num. 4:14–15), but not because it is moral. A shovel is never moral. The shovel is holy because it is reserved exclusively for God's service and work. Anything else is common and therefore profane. So the shovel is said to be holy. The shovel is not itself God, but it belongs exclusively to God. Then, of course, if the belonging refers not to a shovel but to people, the manner in which we belong to God affects how we think, how we behave, what we say, and our relationships. For we have the potential to reflect something of the character of God in ways that shovels don't have. If we human beings are holy, inevitably a moral overtone creeps into the notion in a way it cannot do when that which is holy is a shovel.

This holiness of God's people is sometimes definitional. We are set apart for God, and thus we are sanctified, holy. We are holy by the very fact that we have been set apart by God (so Paul says of the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 1:2). If we are set apart by God and then do not live like it, we besmirch the holiness of God. We betray what we are. We contradict the very essence of what God has called us to be. Thus, sometimes this holiness is behavioral. If we are definitionally His, and the pleasure, privilege, and power of being His work out in our lives behaviorally, then we become holy at a kind of functional level, too.

To tell the truth, the word *holy* can actually extend in a concentric circle even farther out than this. In a handful of passages in the Old Testament, the term *holy men* is used to refer even to pagan priests—not because they are holy in the narrow concentric circle senses, but because they are operating in the domain of the sacred. They are not merely secularists. They are not merely tied to matter. Transparently, then, the range

of the holiness word-group is very broad, and the individual context holds the key to understanding each occurrence.

At its core, then, I am sorely tempted to say that holiness in an incommunicable attribute of God. I am not quite happy to say that. But it's very close. Only God is God; only God, in the ultimate sense, is holy. But the entailments of His holiness wash out in concentric waves. We are to belong to Him and be His holy nation, peculiarly His, such that God in His infinite mercy dares call us holy—a holy people, a holy ethnicity, a holy nation. Thus, holiness becomes a communicable attribute of God.

Inevitably, if this really is our self-identity and we understand it as such, we will experience conflicts with our other corporate identities, whether as Americans, females, whites, Chinese, or motorbike riders. There will be overlaps of blessing that come from common grace, but there will be conflicts. How we resolve them will turn largely on whether or not, in God's grace, these categories that form our identities are of great importance for us. For they should not, not ever, run competition with what it means to us to belong to this blood-bought holy ethnicity, God's holy nation.

Fourth, Peter writes, you are “a people belonging to God.” Again, this is grounded in Exodus 19. As we have seen, God says, “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5b–6a).

What does this mean? We must never think that we are a people belonging to God, God's possession, in some sense that disqualifies God from claiming possession of everyone and everything else, of every other nation and entity, of everything in the entire universe. There is a range of meaning in passages that speak of God's possessions. In one sense, God possesses everything He made, which is the point of the concessive clause (“Although the whole earth is mine”); in another sense, He has chosen Israel to be His special possession, peculiarly His people.

We find exactly the same kind of range of uses when it comes to the kingdom. In one sense, God's kingdom is God's dynamic reign. It is virtually co-extensive with what we mean when we refer to His sovereignty.

We are told by the psalmist, "His kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19). In that sense, you are in the kingdom whether you like it or not. You cannot escape from that kingdom. No nation, no ethnicity, can ever escape from this God. He made it all and He possesses it all. There is a sense in which the Iranian ethnicity is owned by God. The Kamba ethnicity, in eastern Africa, is owned by God. There is no ethnicity that is not owned by God: no nation, no people, no planet, no universe. Some scientists are talking about multiple universes. I've got enough on my hands trying to understand this one rather than multiplying endless theoretical ones, but however many there are, they are all owned by God.

Yet *kingdom* can have a variety of more restricted usages, including, for example, what Jesus says in John 3—only those who are born again from above belong to, can see, and can enter the kingdom of God. In that sense, the kingdom is that subset of all of God's sovereignty under which there is eternal life. You may or may not be in the kingdom in that sense.

Similarly, there is a range of referents in an expression such as "God's possession" or "a people belonging to God." Israel is God's unique special possession. This is a spectacular notion. It should instill in us awe, wonder, and a sense of privilege, especially when we perceive that this status is by His initiative, by His choice, by His doing. That language is picked up by the apostle Peter. He understands that what is said of God's covenant people under the terms of the old covenant is exactly what must be said of God's covenant people under the terms of the new. The church is God's special possession, a people belonging to God.

So what does Peter say to establish our corporate identity? He says, in effect, "You are a chosen people; a royal priesthood; a holy ethnicity—a holy nation; God's special possession."

I hope you now see that these categories are not discreet, hermetically sealed-off things that are added to one another. They overlap. In each case, there is an emphasis on God's initiative, on supreme God-centeredness, and on the built-in implication of incalculable privilege over against every other form of self-identity. We are God's people, sanctified by God,

chosen by God, loved by God. We are His priesthood, His nation, His people. This is our identity.

Our Purpose as Christians

Come back to 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, *that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*” (emphasis added). The language is drawn from Isaiah 43:20–21. There God says, “I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.” Peter follows the exact language of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. There it is recorded that the reason believers enjoy this corporate identity is to show “the praises [or “the excellencies”] of him who called you out of darkness”—either “praises” or “excellencies” is acceptable. It is either the praise itself or the ground for the praise (the excellencies of God); it makes very little difference in terms of the outcome. The point is that we have received all of these privileges in order that we may declare the praises or excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light. In other words, all of our special status, all of our corporate identity as the people of God, the church of the living God, is not to promote pride or a sense of intrinsic superiority, still less, God help us, one-upmanship with respect to other religions or other races. Rather, it is that we might declare the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light.

Two details in this line are crucial. First, there is the sheer God-centeredness of this purpose. I have been doing university missions off and on for about thirty-five years. About a dozen years ago, I started stumbling across a question from university undergraduates that I never received when I was a young man. This relatively recent question is put variously, but it generally runs something like this: “Amongst human

beings, anyone who wants to have all of the attention and garner all the praise, anyone who wants to be the focus of everyone's constant admiration, with everyone stroking that person and fawning all over him, would be thought of as massively egocentric. The God you are trying to push on us looks to me to be very egocentric. He keeps demanding that we praise Him all the time. For goodness sake, is He insecure? Isn't He, at very least, morally defective?"

What do you say to that? The reason I never heard that sort of question in the past, I suspect, is because until fairly recently most of the unconverted people I met in university missions had been brought up in the Judeo-Christian heritage, which held that there is a sovereign, transcendent God, and that He is unique and deserves special attention. But now things have changed. Thirty years ago, if I were dealing with an atheist, at least he or she was a "Christian atheist." That is, the God he or she disbelieved in was the Christian God, which is another way of saying that the categories were on my turf. But I can't assume that now.

So it's difficult to respond. Of course it's true to say something like this: "Yes, but God is so much more than we are. He's not just another human being, slightly 'souped-up.' He is God. He is the Creator. He is to be cherished and revered. He is our Maker and our Sovereign and our providential King and our Judge." All of that is true.

But there is more. It is one of the themes John Piper likes to preach about. It is this: Because we have been made by this God and for this God, because our very self-identity when we are right with God is to love Him supremely, to adore Him and to worship Him, it is a supreme act of love on His part to keep demanding it—because it is for our good. What conceivable good would it do for us if God were to say: "Don't give Me too much worship. I'm just One of you guys. Slightly ratchet it up maybe, but don't focus on Me too much." That might satisfy some idolater's notion of humility, but the humility that I see in this King of kings is on Golgotha. That He keeps directing attention to Himself is an act of supreme humility and grace, precisely because He stoops to remind us of

what we ought to recognize, and because it is for our good.

There is no insecurity in this God. After all, He is the God of aseity. He has no needs. In eternity past, the Father loved the Son, the Son loved the Father, and They were perfectly content. God is not demanding that we love Him so that we can meet the needs of His psychological profile this week. His focus on Himself is not only because He is God, but because, out of love, that is what we need. That is what we must see. That is the point to which our adoration must come. If it does not, we wallow in idolatry again and again and again.

But there is a second detail in this purpose clause of singing His excellencies. Not only is there the sheer God-centeredness of our purpose, there is the sense of sheer privilege in this purpose when we see what He has done. We are His chosen people, His royal priesthood, and so forth, so that we may declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light. Now we are tied into the Bible's storyline. We are the people who shook our puny fists in God's face in Eden. We are the people who rightly stand under the curse. We are alienated from God, without hope, to use Paul's language (Eph. 2:12). We are by nature objects of wrath (Eph. 2:3). We are in darkness without purity, cut off, but calling it freedom even though it spells death. But God has rescued us from this darkness and brought us into wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). What a privilege is ours to sing His praises.

Our Foundation as Christians

Peter continues, "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (2:10). The language is again tied to the Old Testament, this time to the prophet Hosea. I want to look at several verses in Hosea 1 and 2 that are very important if we are to understand Romans 9 and 1 Peter 2 on the grafting of Gentiles into God's covenant.

You will recall the burden of the prophet Hosea. He is commanded to

marry Gomer, who is a betrayer from the beginning, an adulteress. Hosea learns something of what God feels in Himself as the Almighty cuckold—the betrayed husband. We read the consequence of this in Hosea 1:6–7:

Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call her Lo-Ruhamah [which means "not loved"], for I will no longer show love to the house of Israel, that I should at all forgive them. Yet I will show love to the house of Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horseman, but by the LORD their God." After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. Then the LORD said, "Call him Lo-Ammi [which means "not my people"], for you are not my people, and I am not your God."

But at the end of chapter 2, this same God who has rejected them talks about how He will take this people back to the land. He says in verse 23: "I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God.'" In the context of Hosea, you cannot help but see that those who are declared by God not to be loved and not to be His people are all Israelites. Then, to those Israelites who have been, in effect, excommunicated, God in His mercy reaches out and says, "You are my people and I am your God."

Now we come to the way these verses are quoted both by Paul in Romans 9:25 and by Peter in 1 Peter 2. In both passages, Paul and Peter extend what Hosea said. They take God's clear reference to the Israelites, who were declared not to be God's people but then were declared to be God's people again, and extend it to Gentiles, who were not God's people and are now declared to be God's people. This, it has to be said, has made a lot of commentators very upset, because it seems to them that Paul and Peter are ripping the text out of its context.

But the point both Paul and Peter are making is in fact profound. The point is that once Israel has been judicially declared by God to be

“not my people,” they are indistinguishable from the pagans. They really are not His people. It is a judicial sentence. That is exactly Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–3:20. Romans 3:21 opens up one of the greatest atonement passages in all of Holy Writ. But in the two and a half chapters before that, Paul’s point is that Jew and Gentile alike are closed up under sin. We are all a damned breed. We are all lost. There is no hope for any of us. It doesn’t matter if we were under the Mosaic covenant or not. We are all sinners. That is the point.

Because Israel itself has become “not my people,” if God reaches down in His sovereign grace and reaches those who are not His people and says, “You are my people,” it doesn’t really matter whether He speaks this way to those who are ethnically Israelites or those who are ethnically anything else. They are all damned. They are all lost. They are all not His people. It is by God’s sovereign, gracious reaching out that He takes, saves, transforms, and makes those who were not His people into His people.

That’s what is going on here in 1 Peter 2. Peter writes, “Once you were not a people” (v. 10a). He does not distinguish; he does not write to the half of the church that is Gentile and say, “Once you Gentiles were not his people.” The whole lot, the whole mixed-race church, Jews and Gentiles, were all not God’s people. How can he say anything else? Paul likewise says that we were all by nature objects of wrath (Eph. 2:3); we were all lost, all justly condemned, all not His people.

Peter goes on, “But now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (v. 10b). At this juncture, we are called to remember once more the opening verses of the first chapter, which anticipate the contrast: “To God’s elect, *strangers [exiles]* scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, *who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood*” (vv. 1b–2a, emphasis added). Likewise, he writes in 1 Peter 2:24–25: “He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his

wounds you have been healed.' For 'you were like sheep going astray,' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." To put these contrasts in other words, we who had not received mercy have now received mercy.

Everything that we enjoy as God's chosen possession, as God's royal priesthood, as God's holy ethnicity has been secured by the cross, by the sprinkled blood. The forgiveness that gives us reconciliation to this living God is secured by the cross, because He bore our sins in His own body on the tree. The Holy Spirit, who has been poured out on us to bring us conviction of sin and sanctifying power, is secured by the cross. Once you were not a people; the cross made you a people. Once you had not received mercy; by the cross the mercy of God has been poured out on you.

So our identity, our purpose, and our foundation all are tied to the cross. Once our self-identity is established corporately in these terms, once we think of ourselves as "the church of the living God" in these terms, there is an end to racism. There is an end to nationalism. It's not that there is no place left for being thankful for a certain "natural" heritage, but everything is now relativized under the glory of belonging to the people of the eternal God. We are blood-bought, secured by an anchor in God's sovereign purposes from eternity past and given a prospect before us into eternity future, a resurrection existence in a new heaven and a new earth.

From darkness into light, from "no mercy" to mercy, from "not God's people" to "God's people." Such an identity is not established by banging a drum, declaring we are Christians, preaching unity as an end in itself, and singing "Kum Ba Yah." It is grounded in what God has done in Christ Jesus, and as a result, we become, so help us God, so God-obsessed, so Christ-obsessed, so cross-obsessed, so truth-of-the-gospel-obsessed that all of our diversities, all of our other corporate identities, however pleasurable, ephemeral, attractive, or interesting they may be, though in any other framework they may serve to push us apart, now become part of the spectrum that brings glory to our Creator and Redeemer—this holy diversity in the church of the living God.