

1 Peter 2:1-10 as a Text for Confessors

Colleagues,

Dr. Michael Hoy is your writer today, and for the next two weeks as well. Lots of you will recognize the name. Mike has been writing for Crossings for well over a decade. You'll see innumerable examples of his work under both the "Text Study" and "Newsletter" tabs of our [website](#). In recent years he has served as chief steward of Robert W. Bertram's theological legacy, bringing previously unpublished work to light from his papers, ushering two books (A Time for Confessing and The Divorce of Sex and Marriage) into posthumous publication, and assembling a definitive [bibliography](#) of Bertram's writings.

Mike serves these days as pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Decatur, Illinois. Last year he was invited to deliver a paper at the annual assembly of his ELCA synod, Central/Southern Illinois. He was lately gracious enough to share that with us so we could pass it along to all of you. It's a fairly hefty piece of work, so we'll do the passing in three segments, starting today with an extensive introduction.

Have you read enough of Bertram's work to recognize his style? If so you'll be quick to catch echoes of it in the work of his cherished student. Better still, you'll encounter some continued careful thinking around a few of Bob's key themes. Mike reminds us that nothing has happened in the nine years since Bob's death to detract from their urgency.

Peace and Joy, Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

“‘Like Living Stones’: Chips of the New Rock”
Confessional Reflections on 1 Peter 2:1-10 for
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Throughout this season of Easter, we have been treated to the marvelous epistle of 1 Peter. Just two weeks ago, our second reading was from 1 Peter 2:2-10. And for some reason, the lectionary writers chose not to include the ethical imperative of the first verse, “Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.” (NRSV)

To be sure, in the context of the first hearers of the Petrine community, this would have been an encouragement to stay on their path of non-conformity with their previous way of life. The first word of this text, “put aside” or “get rid of,” can mean in some senses “taking off” the old garments of our sinful nature, and taking on then the clothing of righteousness. Would that it were that easy as changing clothes!

[Note: The first word of chapter 2 is the word we have translated, “put aside,” or “get rid of.” And I find fascinating the diversity of the richness of the word here. In one context, it can mean quite literally, “taking off”—as in taking off some clothes—in this case, the old garments of our sinful nature; and it was used in this way in the book of Acts, where the people “took off” their outer garments and laid them “at the feet of a young man named Saul” in order to throw stones at Stephen (Acts 7:58). But in this context, it seems to have more of the meaning of what we see of its usage in Paul’s letter to the Romans, “Let us lay aside (apoqwmeqa) the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:12). And it finds a similar

expression in the first chapter of the book of James: “Therefore rid yourselves (apoqemenoi) of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome the implanted word that has the power to save your souls” (James 1:21).]

In his exposition of this text from 1 Peter 2, Luther perceived a struggle: “St. Peter says: Be armed in such a way that you guard against sins which still cling to you, and that you constantly fight against them. For our worst foes are in our bosom and in our flesh and blood. They wake, sleep, and live with us like an evil guest whom we have invited to our house and cannot get rid of.” [LW 30:47. Italics mine.]

This corresponds with how the Reformers understood the nature of the problem we are up against and from which Jesus the Christ came to save us. “Since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God.” [AC 2:1.] Hence, the removal of these rags of evil, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander, and whatever else there is in our sinful nature, requires radical surgery-getting to the root of our problem. As Luther says, our sinful nature “still clings to us.”

By contrast, the balance of our text in 1 Peter 2 speaks glowingly about the community of faith: Through their new birth as “newborn infants,” they progress to becoming a holy priesthood, a chosen race, a royal priesthood and holy nation, and living stones. All of this so that they may be witnesses—confessing witnesses—who proclaim that they are no longer in darkness, but in God’s marvelous light. They who had no hope as “no people” and those “without mercy” may proclaim that they are God’s people with God’s mercy.

How does one move from the old to the new, from the old radical roots in Adam to the new radical roots in Jesus the Christ?

The author of 1 Peter 2 suggests an answer that has baptismal overtones: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk" of the gospel. The phrase harks back to the baptismal reference in chapter 1, "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1:3) We start where we are founded in baptism, where our roots with Adam were drowned into death with Christ, and we rise again with Christ as new creatures.

But might the same also be said about our Lord's supper? Recently in a first communion class I was discussing the meaning of the phrase, "the forgiveness of sins." One young girl raised her hand and said, "I don't have any sins." Her mother, who was sitting nearby, chuckled. I wondered at this point whether it would be appropriate to suggest what Luther did, that one should beat one's hands against the breast to see if one is still flesh and blood. [LC 5:75.] But instead, I chose a more personal and penitential direction. I told her that as her pastor I knew better about myself. And that is why I value coming to this table of our Lord for his sacrament of forgiveness, to have cancelled and crossed out all the truth of all my sins, and to do so publicly, together with all my brothers and sisters who also come to Jesus' table. The sacrament is both mortifying and liberating at the same time. But as we go from this meal, we go with a promise that frees us to say—to say what?—well, maybe what you just said, "I don't have any sins." Those I have given to Jesus; and instead, I have what he in his body and blood came to give me—righteousness and life.

Sticking with this value of penance, this leads me to yet a third possible sacramental answer. Repentance and forgiveness, I would like to suggest, are not only at the roots of our own

practice of baptism and the Lord's supper, but as the Reformers themselves claimed, they are a third sacrament. [Apol. 13:4; LC 4:74.] Their deeper value, as I hope I will have us come to see, is that they bring healing amidst brothers and sisters, even when those brothers and sisters cannot seemingly come together otherwise. Robert Sanderson, the Bishop of Lincoln, England, in the early 1600s, was cross-examining the pride of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people," and then he goes on to list who those "other people" are, including the tax collector. Sanderson remarks on how this Pharisaical attitude still pervades today: "Am I any better than he? Of better mould than he? Or better tempered than he? Am I not a child of the same Adam, a vessel of the same clay, a chip of the same block, with him? Why then should I be high-minded, when I see him fallen before me? Why should I not rather fear, lest my foot slip, as well as his hath done?" [The Works of Robert Sanderson, D.D., Bishop of Lincoln, Volume 3 (Oxford University Press, 1854), 263. Available free online, Google Books. Robert Sanderson's sermon was in 1627.]

His expression, "chip of the same block," is an early precursor to our expression, "chips off the old block." When we confess our sins, we confess that we are, indeed, the same old "chips off the old block" with Adam; in hearing the absolution and forgiveness, even making again the sign of the cross, or sharing the words with brothers and sisters, "The peace of the Lord be with you," the same words that they share in return, we hear and embrace Jesus' gospel-ing proclamation upon us, that he, THE Living Stone, now makes of us his "living stones," or as I have suggested, "chips of the New Rock."

How we move then from the universal truth that in Adam we have all been part of a fallen humanity to the new truth which is also meant to be universal in Christ—this new birth, election,

and holy, promise-proclaiming priesthood—comes by way of the cross, penitentially, but with forgiveness.

Karen, my spouse, had just come back from St. Louis where her father is dying from cancer and is now at the time of his own final crossing in home hospice. I could see she was understandably restless and anxious with it all. We talked and prayed late into the evening, and then I made the sign of the cross upon her forehead. “You did the same thing for my dad, too,” she said. “Yes,” I responded, “it’s finally there—on his cross—where we can let all of this rest.”

We trust THE Living Stone who takes upon himself this decaying garment of our sins and makes them his through the cross, and gives to us instead the new clothing of his garment of righteousness and life, which, as Luther said, is “now completely yours through faith”—all other garments and evidence to the contrary. [LW 30:47]

[Note: The word used multiple times here for “believing” (pisteuw; even in its negative form in v. 7, apistew) bears direct resemblance to the noun “faith” (pistis). In fact, it was this faith that trusts Jesus the Christ, THE living Stone, that the Reformers made an impassioned appeal is the real “spiritual sacrifice” of which this text speaks. It is not the sacrifices of our works, or the kinds of weaker spiritual sacrifices of obligation that were demanded by the church in the sixteenth century, but the sacrifice of praise that comes from our faith that knows on which rock it really stands.]

And yet what did all this promise get Jesus the Christ as he lived and proclaimed the message of the gospel, as the very Living Stone and Foundation for the world? Rejection: “the very stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner.” (2:7) Such rejection is also part and parcel of the

living stones that follow after him: “those believing in him will not be put to shame.” (2:6) It implies that shame was something they experienced. Later, the author of 1 Peter will be more explicit about this: “They [your worldly critics and persecutors] are surprised that you no longer join them in their excesses of dissipation, and so they malign you.” (4:4)

[Note: The text of 1 Peter 2:7, from Psalm 118:22, reads, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” This text is used only four other times in the New Testament. Three of those occur in the Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, right after Jesus tells the story about the wicked tenants who despised the messengers sent on ahead by the landowner for his due, and then when the landowner sent his Son, they despised also him. (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17) Part of the risk for Jesus was in the very telling of the parable. The religious authorities of his time realized that he was speaking this parable “about them.” But fearing the people, they did not lay hands on him. The remaining place where this text is cited is right after Peter’s bold confession on trial before the Council for healing a lame man in the name of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Peter concludes his sermon there with these words: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” The Council, while rejecting their confession, also acknowledged “the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men.” (Acts 4:8-13) And in the passage that follows, it is this boldness that inspires the community of believers.]

Yet note the paradoxical blessing that comes despite the rejection. As when Jesus was persecuted and could hear the mocking sound from his critics, “good riddance,” he himself faithfully and lovingly stayed deeply connected with them on the cross, even for their very sake. When 1 Peter 2:1 says “rid

yourselves” of the evils, he does not encourage separation from the neighbors of this world, but rather encourages us by faith and through faithful loving to embrace our neighbors and their world. It is as Luther lifted up in his opening expository remarks about 1 Peter 2: “We have said often enough that a Christian life is composed of two parts: faith in God and love toward one’s neighbor.”

Both of these elements, faith and love, are testified to in our confessional writings, and as faith-confessors today we seek to stay in the world with our critics, risking in faith, and loving beyond barriers that would prohibit us.

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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