

Christ the Cornerstone

My research for last week's Lord's Table talk took me deep enough that I thought it might make an interesting bulletin article, allowing us to delve into the meaning of "cornerstone"; something I wouldn't have time to cover during the talk itself.

Peter says in 1 Peter 2:4–5, Coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Peter compares the church to a temple built of stones. Remember, although we sometimes speak accommodatively of "going to church" or "meeting down at church," Biblically speaking the church is never the building. The church is always the people (Eph. 1:22-23, Rom. 16:5). If the meeting house burned down today, the church would continue worshiping and working in Lake Wales, in someone's house, or under our pretty oak trees.

Here in 1 Peter 2, metaphorically, we individual Christians are "living stones" that are joined and mortared together into a holy building that brings glory to God.

In the Old Testament, God dwelt in a physical temple, first the tabernacle, and then Solomon's temple in Jerusalem (Exodus 25:8, 40:34, 1 Kings 8:1–11). Now, in the New Testament, God dwells in the spiritual temple that is His church (1 Cor. 3:16, 2 Cor. 6:16). Isn't that an amazing truth! You and I, as individual Christians, are a part of God's own temple, His dwelling place upon the earth. What a privileges we enjoy; what responsibilities we have!

To prove that this spiritual building project has always been God's intention, Peter quotes three different Old Testament passages. He continues in 1 Peter 2:6–8,

For this is contained in Scripture:

"BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone,

AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."

This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve,

"THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED,

THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,"

and,

“A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”;

for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed. Interestingly, the NIV introduced a minor controversy here as to exactly what kind of stone Peter means.

The first quotation is from Isaiah 28. The Greek word in the New Testament, as well as the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament (the very translation Peter was likely following) is *akrogôniaios*. It is made up of two common Greek roots. Most reference works, including Ralph Earle’s *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, and W. E. Vine’s *Dictionary of New Testament Words*, agree that “cornerstone” is the best English translation. *Gônia* means “angle” or “corner.” It is used to describe the four corners of the earth (Rev. 7:1) or a street corner (Matt. 6:5). *Akron* means “highest” or “extreme”; in Mark 13:27, the “farthest end” of the heavens is *akron*, as is the “tip” of the finger in Luke 16:24. Thus the two roots combine to give the sense of “most extreme corner,” that is, the outermost corner of a building. Though the NASB feels compelled to italicize the word “stone,” to point out that it is supplied by the translators, *akrogôniaios* is clearly the idea of a corner-stone because the first part of the sentence says, “I lay in Zion a choice stone [Gk., *lithos*], a precious corner.”

On the other hand, the KJV goes a little too far by translating “chief cornerstone.” There is no such thing—any building has only one cornerstone, which is already the chief by virtue of being the cornerstone. But I’m probably being nitpicky.

So what’s the point? Peter’s quotation, and the next two from Psalm 118 and Isaiah 8, indicate that God sent His Son to establish this new building project, a spiritual temple. The builders, that is, the Jewish authorities (Acts 4:11), rejected Him as unfit to establish a household for God, casting Him away from the building site. But God overruled the builders, selected this Stone anyway, and used him as the very cornerstone of His building.

The cornerstone is the most significant stone of any structure. It is always put down first. It governs all the angles and lines of the rest of the building. All the other stones are squared and fitted according to it. All the other stones depend upon it for a foundation. Even today, the cornerstone is laid with a special ceremony, and is often inscribed with the date of establishment and the name of the builder or owner.

Christ as cornerstone has important implications for His place in our religion. Jesus is the first stone God laid in His church. Just as we are all parts of His body and He is the head, likewise we are all stones in His temple and He is the cornerstone. “Coming to Him as a living stone,” we find our place in the church by being measured true to His lines. He is the foundation stone that holds us all together (Eph. 2:20, 1 Cor. 3:10–15). Reject Him, and He remains a stone, but a stone over which people stumble and lose heaven (Rom. 9:32–33, 1 Cor. 1:23). Like pottery striking rock, or a glass landing on a tile floor, their stumbling does the Stone no damage, but

shatters them to dust (Matt. 21:42–44). Everyone in the church must be established on Him, and line up with Him. Take Him away, and the whole building collapses.

So, finally we come to the minor controversy. In verse 7, a slightly different Greek word is used. All translations stick with the cornerstone metaphor, but the NIV gives, “the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.”

The idea of a capstone is either the final decorative peak placed at the tip of a pyramid, or the top stone in an arch or dome, what we often call a keystone. Yes, this would be a stone of prominence and importance, and would be at the tippy-top of the building. And, according to Max Schwartz’s *Machines, Buildings, and Weaponry of Biblical Times*, p. 40, keystones and capstones were both in use in ancient times.

But, it’s not the idea here, and while it probably makes little difference, you can safely reject the NIV’s translation. The Greek is *kephalên gônias*. The Greek word *kephalê* means head, chief, top, furthest point, extremity, etc. If *kephalên* modified the word “stone,” the NIV might be onto something. But *kephalên* modifies the word “corner.” So, “most important corner” is a literal translation. The best English translation is probably simply “cornerstone.”

There really isn’t much controversy anymore. Wayne Grudem, whose commentary on 1 Peter is based on the NIV, agrees, saying, “there is no necessity to see a mixing or changing of metaphors in Peter’s phrase; ...the translation ‘capstone’ is certainly not required here” (Tyndale NT Commentaries, 1 Peter, p. 105). And while the cornerstone / foundation metaphor is found many other places in Scripture, the keystone metaphor is not.

—John Guzzetta