

Jesus Christ, the True Cornerstone

[Acts 4:1-11](#)

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

Thirty-five years ago Dr. Edward Elson and President Dwight Eisenhower unveiled the cornerstone for this magnificent edifice. If you have never seen it, it's just outside the Court of Flags on the left. The full inscription reads, This stone was unveiled October fourteenth 1967 by Dwight David Eisenhower. Some of you were there that day. What a thrill it must have been to see these great walls rising and to anticipate the day when you could worship God within this beautiful sanctuary.

And there is something more significant than words on that stone. A cross is sculpted there, and that cross is etched not only in the cornerstone but in the consciousness of this congregation. Because the true cornerstone of National Presbyterian is neither prominent clergy nor distinguished statesmen but (to quote the Apostle Peter) Jesus Christ of Nazareth...crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus has become the cornerstone (Acts 4:10-11).

Before the invention of transits, those telescopic instruments used by surveyors, a contractor would cut a large stone at precise 90 degree angles and place it at one corner of a construction site to orient the building's width, length, and height. Peter makes a metaphor out of that stone, and I will do the same this morning. Let the width of the cornerstone orient our inward life, let the length determine our outward look, and let the height be the source of our upward light.

When it comes to their inward life, some churches orient themselves by custom. Their motto is "We have always done it that way." Well, thank God for custom. Custom, rightly used, fosters stability. But used wrongly it breeds sterility, for when churches block all progress in the name of custom, their motto becomes their epitaph. Or as some have put it, the seven last words of the church: "We've never done it that way before."

So let our inward life here at National be informed by custom, but let it be ruled by Jesus Christ. Jesus honored custom so long as it did not violate the justice and love of God. And if it did, Jesus, in obedience to the Scriptures, broke with custom to heal on the Sabbath, to eat with unwashed hands, and, most radical of all, to forgive sins.

I'm too new at National to know where custom and Christ may clash in this congregation. But I'm not too new to urge that every aspect of our inward life be measured against the church's true cornerstone, Jesus Christ. My friend Don Buteyn used to ask every organization in his church to come before the session annually to justify their existence. Was there something distinctively Christ-like about them? Or were they merely a warm, fuzzy fellowship of like-minded people? If the latter, if they were getting together just because they had always gotten together, the session would conduct what Don called "an ecclesiastical mercy-killing." Needless to say, the inward life of that church stayed aligned with Jesus Christ. Now, don't worry. I didn't bring an executioner's ax with me from Arizona. But isn't it worth pondering? Are we honoring Jesus Christ, or simply perpetuating the past?

And what about our outward look? What do we want our neighbors to see when they look at National Presbyterian? Some churches want to be seen for their status. And considering the many distinguished leaders who have worshiped here, it would be tempting to align ourselves with that outlook.

A Phoenix religion editor showed up incognito at Valley Presbyterian one Sunday, and then wrote a feature article about our church. She said that when she parked her rusty Chevrolet between a shiny Mercedes and a big Cadillac her first impression was of a religious country club where people came to show off their designer fashions. But after reading our bulletin she concluded that our outward look was pretty compassionate. Phoenix Habitat for Humanity had just had its organizational meeting in our

fellowship hall, and we were paying their director's salary. The teenagers were advertising their mission trip to Mexico. A couple of families were partnering with a homeless mother and her children. All this because what counted was not how many Cadillacs were out in the parking lot but how many Christians were out serving Christ in classrooms and family rooms, in offices and laboratories, in food banks and homeless shelters. We wanted, and National wants, our outward look to be measured not by status but by the Savior who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

Which brings me to the vertical angle on the church's cornerstone: what is the source of our upward light? There are many who look to themselves for that light, like the nurse in Robert Bellah's book, *Habits of the Heart*. Her name was Sheila and here's what she told Bellah, My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice. Well, Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, The man who represents himself in court has a fool for a client. And I tell you, the person who looks within for the upward light has a fool for a god. For how do I know that I, among the billions who have ever lived, that I alone have seen the light? No, the source of our upward light must be the Christ who claimed, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life (John 8:12). Every committee and board meeting in this church begins and ends with prayer, and those prayers are no empty form. They are an appeal to the living Christ to focus his light on our muddled minds and our murky planet so that we can discover and then do God's will in the world.

If you've read Patrick O'Brian's 19th century sea stories, you'll remember that Captain Jack Aubrey loves to take his young midshipmen by the scruff of the neck and insist that they master the sextant. Without a sextant to calculate latitude, a ship could miss its destination by hundreds of miles, or even run aground in the dark. So at twelve noon they point their sextants at the sun and bring the image down to the horizon. Then, by measuring the angle, they can determine their exact position on the otherwise trackless oceans.

Here at National we measure our ministry not with a sextant but a stone, and that stone has a name, Jesus Christ of Nazareth—crucified, whom God raised from the dead; this Jesus has become our cornerstone. Which means that in this time of transition you need not worry unduly about the progress of our construction here at National, for Jesus knows all the angles, and we are determined to keep our eyes fixed on him.