

Hebrews 12:18-29 | For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

Hebrews 12:18-29 | Worship

This year marks the sixth year of Redemption Church Denver and if all goes according to plan it is the year that we will join the Presbyterian Church in America. That means the beginning of this year is a good time to consider the church. Now it is not so often that we want to step back and consider the church, there is a sense in which the church is meant to be interacted with in a somewhat invisible fashion. If the church is working well, we'll be doing a lot of considering Jesus and loving one another.

But every once in a while, like you take off your glasses to check if there is a smudge on them, you must look at the thing you're looking through in order to see through it more completely. This first part of the year, we are going to take a moment to look at the church. Something you already know and are right now participating in, so that in our seeing the church more clearly we might be better suited to glorify Jesus in our participation in the church.

Last week we looked at the central focus of the church which we called the Gospel. This week, and for the middle part of this series, we are going to look at the things we do as a church. There are three of them. Worship, Nurture, and Mission. Then finally we'll look at the structure of the church to accomplish these ends.

Worship is the central function of the church. Worship is central because of who God is and who we are. As Edmund Clowney writes:

Neither worship nor religion can be defined apart from God, for worship is the response of the creature to the revealed glory of the creator.

Perhaps it feels a bit esoteric to describe the worship of God as the central function of the church. That means it's not service, evangelism, or care for the poor. Perhaps the focus of the church on worship could even feel impractical or ineffective. But worship must be central because if worship of God is not central, worship of something else will be. That's because you were made to worship. In fact you can think of it as God calls you to worship him because he made you to worship him. God in calling you to worship him and setting apart a people to worship him is calling people to their highest calling.

Now some of you might be expecting a move that goes something like this. All of life is worship! So of course our highest calling as a church is worship! Because that is kind of like saying everything is our highest calling and that sounds really deep and profound. But it's also absurd! Not every day is the sabbath. Not every person is your family. Not every problem is your job. Not every sentence is prayer. Not every speech is a sermon. Not every song is worship. Not all food is a sacrament. Paul of course writes in Romans 12.

Romans 12:1 | I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

So yes there is an understanding in the new testament as the whole of our lives being offerings of worship. But these implicit offerings of worship must include the explicit offering of worship to God. The not forsaking our assembly (He 10:24-25). The singing songs and hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19). The preaching of the word (2 Tim 4:2). When we do not neglect to participate in communion in remembrance of Jesus (1 Cor 11:25). If we neglect the commanded explicit worship of God with the gathered church, how is it that we could claim to participate in the implicit worship of God in the rest of our lives?

A cursory reading of the old testament shows us that God deeply cares about how he is worshipped. When we go through Exodus over the next several years you'll see that half of the book is instruction on worshipping God and building the place in which God will be worshipped. But much of this instruction and furniture was meant to serve as insulation between God and his people, layers of mediation so that the unholy people could approach the infinite and holy God. But since Christ has come, the insulation has been removed, and by Christ we gain immediate access to God in our worship. We can think God cares less about how we worship him or the centrality of our worship because there is less mediating structure, which can look like the worship itself. But this is to miss this point. Our worship of God in the New Covenant under Christ is not made less by its lack of levitical process, but far more. It is the thing itself that all that other stuff was only pointing too! How much more than does God care about our worship! And how much more intolerable would our neglect of it be! The writer of Hebrews makes this precise point in Hebrews 12 comparing the old covenant worship to what we're doing now.

1. Mount Sinai

Hebrews 12:18-20 | For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

Here the writer of Hebrews gives a description of the people of Israel, having recently been brought out of Egypt, at the mountain at which God will enter into covenant with them as the rescued nation. The Mountain was Sinai and the scene in Exodus 19 is shocking in its majesty and wonder. The mountain is covered in fire, with a storm and smoke pouring from the top of the mountain. The sound of a trumpet blasted with the sound of the voice of the Lord so majestic and awful the hearers begged for it to never happen again. They were told if even an animal touched the mountain from which God spoke it was to be stoned, such was the distance of God from them at his presence. Moses was the chief intercessor, the one given by God to go before his people to represent them before God and he himself trembled with fear at the presence of the Lord. So then what hope could the people themselves possibly have before this God!

That awful mountain is not the mountain to which we come this Lord's day morning. Its not a mountain that can be touched like Mt. Sinai, its not the sound of the voice of God its not the actual smoke and lightning. And so perhaps you think we come to something less meaningful and serious. We come to a better mountain. Mt. Zion.

2. Mount Zion

Hebrews 12:22-24 | But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Now to be sure Mt. Zion is a real mountain the highest elevation in the city of Jerusalem. But it has a higher meaning than this. It is the hope of the gathered people of God, the temple mount. The place where our worship is most true it is the city of God. The people who are corporately honoring that which is highest above them. But it can't be touched. It is the heavenly Jerusalem. This is the church, which is the people of God set apart in Christ by His spirit we join with the angelic chorus of praise. We are the assembly of the first born who is Jesus, the firstborn from the dead. We are enrolled in heaven. What a great phrase, enrolled in heaven. Not there yet but enrolled, your name is on the list. We are in the very presence of God. He is the judge of all. And the spirits of the righteous

have been made perfect. We can speak about that in past tense because the certainty of what Christ accomplished on our behalf at the cross.

We come to Jesus. The mediator of the new covenant. Not Moses, who trembled. Jesus who is God. His blood is sprinkled on the altar. Able's blood cried for vengeance, Christ's blood cries out for our forgiveness.

3. Acceptable Worship

Hebrews 12:25 | See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.

God has spoken. To refuse him is to not worship because worship is the response of the creature to God's self-revelation. The Israelites did not escape when they refused his warning from Mount Sinai and that generation did not enter the promised land. Your stakes are higher. If you deny him the worship due to him in response to his grace you will not escape hell.

Hebrews 12:26-27 | At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

God is the judge. And all that does not fit his judgement will be removed. Only his kingdom will not be shaken. This is why the central focus of our worship is the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord and savior. Christ is the Lord. All that is not in him will be shaken.

Hebrews 12:28-29 | Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

If our first principle is the gospel, then our primary action must be worship. If we have received an unshakeable kingdom in Christ we ought to praise him.

The world is vying for your worship. During COVID we were taught to worship safety and control. During this election year you'll be taught to worship political power. You may worship peace. Or validation. Or our body. Or your substance. Or money. None of those are bad. But they are terrible Gods. Worship the true God who saved you in Jesus, you'll find all those other things find their place beneath him. He cannot be shaken.

Worship with reverence and awe, he is a consuming fire.