

**That to which you have come:
“...THE ...CHURCH OF THE FIRSTBORN...”**

Heb.12:18-24

Ed Dye

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Our text, with emphasis on vv.22,23, says, “For ye are not come unto...but ye are come unto...the ... church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven...”
 - a. Assuming the “church of the firstborn” refers to:
 - (1) The church of the “firstborn ones”, the church of Christ on earth.
 - (2) The disciples of Christ, or God’s children in the N.T. age.
 - (3) The whole body of baptized believers.
 - b. And taking note of the fact that the epistle is written to certain Jewish converts to Christianity who were then living in Palestine, or to those making up the body of the Christ, the church belonging to Christ in Palestine, it raises the question in my mind: How can the church be said to be “come unto the church”?
 - c. The answer is to be found in the purpose for which the epistle was written and in what the author was trying to get them to understand, and as a consequence to prevent its stated purpose, and in how he argued his case before them.

II. DISCUSSION

A. WHY THE EPISTLE WAS WRITTEN

1. Early on their faith was strong enabling them to suffer persecution and endure it joyfully, Ch.10:32-34.
2. But by the time this epistle was written they had experienced a change in attitude and were in danger of apostasy. Evidenced as follows:
 - a. They were now neglectful, 2:3.
 - b. Dull of hearing, 5:11.
 - c. Still spiritually immature long after they should have grown to spiritual maturity, 5:12,13.
 - d. Failing to exercise their senses to discern both good and evil, 5:14.
 - e. Sluggish, 6:12.
 - f. In need of being taught the first principles of God’s word,5:12
 - g. Forsaking the assembling of themselves together, 10:25.
 - h. They were in danger of unbelief in departing (falling away) from the living God, 3:12.
 - i. Drifting, 2:1.
 - j. Casting away their confidence, 10:35.

- k. Being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, 3:13.
 - l. Being led astray by false teaching, 13:9.
 - m. Returning to the Jewish sacrificial system, 10:26-31.
 - n. Failing to obtain the grace of God, 12:15.
 - o. Missing the eternal rest, 3:12-4:3.
 - p. Some perhaps had already gone into complete and irreversible apostasy, 6:1-11; 10:26-31,39.
3. Thus, it was written to try to strengthen their faith and prevent their apostasy, their reverting to that which they had left behind when they were converted to Christ.

B. THE THEME OF THE EPISTLE: THE IMMINENT DANGER OF APOSTASY.

- 1. Key references, 2:1-4; 3:12-19; 4:1-3; 6:1-8; 10:25-39; 12:1-29.
- 2. The theme is developed by showing the superiority of Christ, the New Covenant, and Christianity, to which they had been converted, over Moses, the Old Testament, and the Jewish system, which they had left behind, but to which they were in danger of reverting.
- 3. Thus offering a series of scriptural reasons why they should remain faithful to Jesus and the N.T. system.

C. HOW THE AUTHOR DEVELOPED OR ARGUED HIS CASE IN VIEW OF THEIR NEED. HE REMINDS THEM AGAIN AND AGAIN OF THINGS THEY ALREADY KNEW BUT WHERE EITHER FORGETTING, IGNORING OR NEGLECTING.

- 1. Ch.1 – Jesus Christ, God’s Only Begotten Son, the heir of all things, and who sits at God own right hand, is his official spokesman in this dispensation, who being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.
- 2. Ch.2 – Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is also a man, the Son of man, the fleshly seed of Abraham, that in all things he might be made like unto his brethren, that through physical death he might destroy the devil who had the power of death, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people; thus he was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man, in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise to bless all nations.
- 3. Ch.3 – Jesus Christ is “the Apostle and High Priest of our profession” and is superior to Moses, the great Lawgiver of the O.T., “inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honor than the house. For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. And Moses verily

was faithful in all his house **as a servant**, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; but Christ **as a Son** over his own house, whose house **are we**, if we hold fast our confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end,” vv.1-6.

4. Ch.4 – A rest remains for the people of God, through Jesus as their great high priest, who labor in faith, hold fast their profession, and come boldly to the throne of grace for mercy and help in time of need.
5. Ch.5 – Jesus Christ is a priest called of God, called of God an high priest, who is a priest forever after the order of Melchisedec, who is the author of eternal salvation unto all them who obey him. Cf. Mt.17:5; Ac.3:22,23; Heb.5:8,9.
6. Ch.6 – The danger of apostasy is emphasized with the assurance of the immutability of God’s promise of salvation through Jesus Christ our high priest in fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise to bless all nations.
7. Ch.7 – Perfection was not by the Levitical priesthood of the law of Moses, which necessitated a change in the priesthood from the order of Aaron to the order of Melchisedec, of which Jesus was made a priest forever, which made of necessity a change also in the law, because under the law priests could come only from the tribe of Levi, and Jesus was of the tribe of Juda.
Since Jesus is a priest forever and has an unchangeable priesthood, he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come to God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. Cf. Rom.5:9,10; 8:34.
8. Ch.8 – Jesus both obtained a more excellent ministry than those of the law of Moses, and is the Mediator of a better covenant established upon better promises than the first covenant, the covenant made at Mt. Sinai with the Jews. The establishment of this better covenant was prophesied by Jer.31:31-34.
9. Ch.9 – Under the Law of Moses, the priestly functions in the first tabernacle, and the high priest’s offerings in the second, the most holy place of the tabernacle, simply signified “that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing,” (v.8). But Christ, of the N.T., an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, entered in once into the holy place by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption for us; once he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself; he was once offered to bear the sins of many; he offered himself to purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God; for this cause he became the mediator of the N.T., that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the

promise of eternal inheritance; he shall appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

10. Ch.10 – The sacrifices of the law of Moses – animal sacrifices – could not take away sins (except in a relative sense), but the blood of Jesus Christ can and does (in the absolute sense). By his one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified. He took away the first, that he may establish the second. We now have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh. Thus they are urged to draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, to hold fast the profession of our faith (hope) without wavering; warning against drawing back to perdition.
11. Ch.11 – They are encouraged by a long list of O.T. faithful who looked for that city which hath foundation, whose builder and maker is God, all of whom died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, were persuaded of them, embraced them, and confessed they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth; these all remained faithful in spite of great persecution.
12. Ch.12 is a chapter which first encourages and admonishes to faithfulness in face of affliction and the danger of failing of the grace of God, vv.1-17.
 - a. Why believers should endure, vv.1-4.
 - (1) The example of those gone before, v.1.
 - (2) The example of Jesus Christ, the Author (Captain) and finisher (perfecter) of the faith, and his suffering for sin compared to our light suffering, vv.2-4.
 - b. Why believers experience hardship (There is purpose in their suffering), vv.5-11.
 - (1) It is chastening or discipline of God, vv.5-7.
 - (2) Because God loves them, v.6.
 - (3) Because they are God's children, not bastards, vv.7,8.
 - (4) To learn subjection to the Father, v.9.
 - (5) In order to "live," v.9.
 - (6) For their "profit" or "good," v.10.
 - (7) To be partakers of God's holiness, v.10.
 - (8) To produce the peaceable (peaceful) fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby, even though it is often painful, v.11.
 - (9) Because of persecution by evil men, v.4.
 - c. The admonition to faithfulness then follows in vv.12-14.

- (1) “Wherefore” or “Therefore,” which means since the discipline or chastening of the Lord and is even painful, believers should react in faith to make it beneficial, v.12.
 - (2) Figurative part of the admonition, vv.12,13.
 - (a) “Lift up the hand that hang down (drooping hands),” v.12a.
 - (b) “And the feeble knees (strength or steady you weak or trembling knees),” v.12b.
 - (c) “And make straight paths for your feet,” v.13a.
 - (3) Literal part of the admonition, v.14.
 - (a) “Follow (strive for) peace with all men,” v.14a.
 - (b) Qualified by “and holiness,” v.14b.
 - (c) Why? “Without which no man shall see the Lord,” 14c.
 - d. Why this admonition was given, vv.15-17.
 - (1) “Lest any man fail of the grace of God,” v.15a.
 - (2) “Lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled,” v.15b.
 - (c) “Lest there be any fornicator (sexually immoral),” v.16a.
 - (d) “Or profane person (irreligious person),” v.16b.
13. Ch.12 then adds an all important final reminder of what they have come to in Jesus Christ and the New Covenant as opposed to what they had left behind in the old Jewish system to which they were in danger of reverting, vv.18-24.

D. THAT TO WHICH YE ARE COME: NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE, A CONTRAST BETWEEN THAT WHICH WAS DONE AWAY, NAILED TO THE CROSS, AND THAT WHICH REMAINS, WHICH CANNOT BE MOVED.

1. Negative: “For ye are not come unto...” vv.18-21.
 - a. “The mount that might be touched,” v.18a.
 - (1) To Mt. Sinai at the giving of the law of Moses to the Jews, Exo.19,20; Deut.5.
 - (2) To what is earthly, material or tangible.
 - b. “The mount that burned with fire,” or a “blazing fire,” v.18b.
 - (1) The Lord descended upon the mountain in a fire, Exo.19:18;
 - c. “Nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest,” v.18c.
 - (1) Cf. Exo.19:16a: “thunder, and lightings, and a thick cloud upon the mount.”
 - (2) Instead of “tempest,” NIV has “storm,” NEB has “whirlwind”
 - d. “And the sound of a trumpet,” v.19a. Cf. Exo.19:16b,19a.
 - e. “And the voice of words,” v.19b.

- (1) “Which voice they that heard entreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more,” v.19c.
 - (2) “For they could not endure that which was commanded,” v.20
 - f. “And so terrible (terrifying) was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake” (“I tremble with fear”), v.21.
 - g. Lenski: “You have **not** come” – to what is here described = to remain with this as the final thing.” (a completing, a perfecting, a fulfillment, accomplishment, or the event which verifies a promise).
 - (1) The law made nothing perfect or complete, Heb.7:9.
 - (2) With this perfect tense the writer says: “You have not come to Sinai as the destination where you are to remain.
 - (3) As he taught in Gal.3, the Abrahamic promise to bless all nations in the seed of Abraham could not be fulfilled by the law, for the inheritance was not to be of the law because God gave it to Abraham by promise through his seed, which is Jesus Christ.
- 2. Positive: “But ye **are** come unto...,” vv.22-24.
 - a. “Mount Sion,” v.22a.
 - (1) Cf. Isa.2:2-4: “In the last days...out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”
 - (2) They are reminded they are no longer to be connected with or to be part of the law that came from Sinai, but with the one which came from Zion.
 - b. “And unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,” v.22a
 - (1) The city for which Abraham looked, Heb.11:10.
 - (2) The law made no provision for them to enter this city, Heb.9:8-10.
 - (3) That could come only through Christ, Heb.9:11-28.
 - c. “And to an innumerable hosts, to the general assembly of the angels,” or “to myriads of angels in festal assembly,” vv.22b,23a.
 - d. “And church of the firstborn,” v.23b. (More later)
 - e. “And to God the Judge of all,” v.23c.
 - (1) He will judge all through Jesus Christ, Jno.5:22,27.
 - f. “And to the spirits of just men made perfect,” v.23d.
 - (1) To the faithful who “died in faith”.
 - g. “And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and the blood of sprinkling (sprinkled blood), that speaketh better things than that of Abel,” v.24. Cf. Heb.9:15-17; 11:4.
 - h. “But ye **are** come unto,” v.22

- (1) While the law of Moses, the former things which you left behind “made nothing perfect” (Heb.9:17), “the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God,” (Heb.9:17b).
- (2) To this “ye **are** come”.
- (3) By use of the same perfect tense as in v.18, where he said “you have **not** come,” by contrast he now says, “But ye **are** come,” i.e., **are still there ever to remain** to mount Zion.
 - (a) When Israel came to Sinai, Israel had reached only a way station.
 - (b) Sinai was not to be the completion of the testament and the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham.
 - (c) The completion, the fulfillment, is Mount Zion and all that goes with Mount Zion.
- (4) His readers have come to the actual fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham through his seed Jesus Christ in the new covenant by means of their faith and obedience to the gospel of Christ.
- (5) Vv.18-24 must be read in the light of this history. This is how believers, those in the church can be said to have come unto the church. (Still assuming this is referring to the church)
- (6) Believing this, standing fast in this, they would avoid taking a fatal step back to a system that was temporary, provisional, and meant to lead them to Jesus for redemption from sin.

E. TO WHOM DOES “THE CHURCH OF THE FIRSTBORN” REFER?

1. Negatively.
 - a. Not to Jesus, though he is called “the firstborn of every creature” (Col.1:15), and “the firstborn from the dead” (Col.1:18), and “the first begotten of the dead” (Rev.1:5).
 - b. Not to the angels, for they are mentioned separately in v.22.
 - c. Not to “the spirits of just men made perfect”, v.23.
2. Proof positive.
 - a. Both the context and definition of terms say it refers to the born again believers, the body of baptized believers, the new creatures in Christ, the heirs of God and joint of Christ, or the church.
 - b. Robert C. Welch, Commentary on Hebrews, p.211, commenting on “firstborn” in Heb.12:23: “The plural of the word in the Hebrew passage is determined by the words following it. ‘Who are enrolled in heaven,’ tells who the church of the firstborn are. ‘Are’ is plural number. From the original as well as from the context we can see the

passage is saying that it is the church made up of the firstborn ones.” Ibid: “...the word **church** is a collective noun and the word **firstborn** tells us the kind of people which make up the church.” (The notes in the following two points are mainly from the same source, p.212)

- c. The historical significance of the term “**firstborn**” will help us understand its significance in our text.
 - (1) It historically signifies there are certain ones who have a special place in God’s direction and blessings.
 - (2) Under the O.T. the firstfruits of the harvest were to be offered to God in order for the rest of the harvest to be accepted of him.
 - (3) The firstling of every female animal was to be offered to God in order for the rest of the offspring to be acceptable.
 - (4) The firstborn male child belonged to God for his special service.
 - (5) Later God substituted the tribe of Levi for this special relationship, Num.3:44,45.
 - (6) Therefore, when Jesus is declared to be the firstborn from the dead it is an assurance to us that we too will be raised, and not necessarily that Jesus is the first ever to be raised, 1Cor.15:20-23.
- d. Thus, in its spiritual application, it’s easy to see the significance of “**firstborn**” in our text – that it is of rank or privilege or special place or blessing, not precedence in time.
 - (1) All who have been begotten by the gospel, baptized into Christ, and added to the church, hold this special relationship with God that was held by the firstling of the flock, by the firstborn male child and the acceptable substitute made by God in the tribe of Levi for his special service, and by the firstfruits of the harvest.
 - (2) In fact, the term to describe all of these things which especially were to be given to God is the general term “**firstfruits.**”
 - (3) It has its spiritual application to all those who become his children by being born again, by obedience to the gospel, the word of truth: “Of his who will beget he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures,” Jas.1:18.

- (4) These “firstfruits of his creatures” are the “firstborn one” of Heb.12:23 who make up the church. Thus they are not **ordinary, or common**, they are his **own possession**, with special privileges and blessings.
- (a) They are “chosen of God, and precious,” 1Pet.2:4.
 - (b) They are “a peculiar people” (i.e., a people of his own possession; a people claimed by God as his own; his people as no others are), 1Pet.2:9.
 - (c) They are “God’s elect, holy and beloved,” Col.3:12.
 - (d) They are “called the sons of God,” with God’s love bestowed upon them as upon no other people, 1Jno.3:1.
 - (e) These “firstborn ones...are enrolled in heaven,” Heb.12:23. Cf. Lk.10:20.
 - (f) Their “names are in the book of life,” Phil.4:3; Cf. Rev.21:27.
 - (g) If we stand born of God and by faith overcome the world, the Lord “will not blot out his name out of the book of life,” 1Jno.5:4,5; Rev.3:5.
 - (h) The moment one is pronounced righteous by God (i.e., justified), his name stands recorded in heaven.

III. CONCLUSION

1. Heb.12:25-29 contain a final admonition to hear and heed the one who speaks from heaven.
2. In view of the preceding what are we commanded to do? V.25a.
3. Why:
 - a. It is impossible to escape his wrath if we refuse, v.25b.
 - b. By the power of his word he will remove (or change) the present world system, whereas the earth quaked at Sinai, at the end, he will shake both earth and heaven, vv.26,27.
4. A two-fold admonition based on the previous statements follows in vv.28,29.
 - a. Let us be grateful for having received God’s unmovable kingdom, v.28a.
 - b. Let us offer to God acceptable worship, vv.28b,29.
 - (1) How? “With reverence and godly fear,” v.28b.
 - (2) Why: “For our Lord is a consuming fire,” v.29: Cf. 10:27,31