

“... to bring him glory.”

Introduction: What is church for?

What is church for? Where is it headed?

We said last time that the church needs to grow out and expand. But think about it ... that can't be all, can it? The church exists to grow a bigger church so that it can reach out and grow bigger and ... so what? What's it ultimately about?

Even growing up: the church exists to grow its members up, grow deeper relationships, each part serving the other. Yes, yes, well and good. But what's it all for? Just to help us all be the best we can be? It seems very human-centred if that's all it's for.

The ultimate purpose of the church, the ultimate reason that God is in the business of gathering a people, is to bring glory to God – to the Father, to the Son, to the Spirit.

1. A tale of two mountains

We began our week looking at the first “church” in the Bible: the gathering of the Israelites around God when he descended upon Mount Sinai.

We're going to finish by comparing that first “church” to the ultimate reality — church fulfilled, if you like — that we are going to enjoy together forever.

And to do this we're going to Hebrews 12.

Hebrews 12

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: “If

even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.”²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

Mount Sinai is not named here, but that is clearly what the author is talking about. He is referring to the old covenant that God made with Israel at the mountain.

He retells the Sinai story. But it’s interesting how tells it.

- God is not mentioned,
- the scary parts are emphasised,
- and the whole gathering around Sinai seems ambiguous. I mean what kind of encounter with God is it when the people ask not to hear God speak any more?

The author wants us Christians to realise how superior the new covenant is of which we are a part.

Hebrews 12

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

In contrast to Mount Sinai we have come to Mount Zion.

- Now: the earthly mount Zion was the hill in Jerusalem on which the Temple was built. So it was the place where Israelites went to meet with God and worship him.

But the author here is talking about something a bit different: the heavenly Jerusalem / a heavenly Mount Zion.

And look at the way he describes it! Wow! From now on when you think of “church” I want you to think of this!

- Not just the humble gatherings that each of us are a part of each weekend,
 - in old buildings with dodgy carpets,
 - singing that’s *mostly* in tune,

- the video that the tech guys can't get the sound to work on,
- and surrounded by saints who've begun to be perfected by Christ (but let's be honest: they've got a long way to go! ... and so do we.)
- It's easy to see the earthly church's current imperfections. But let us raise our gaze. Look with me at the heavenly church of which we are a part!

You have come to 'the city of the living God'

- We are where God is.
- This is his home, and he has gathered us to himself because he loves us.

'thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly'

- It is said that angels were present when God met with Israel at Sinai. Just like us, they too are gathered around God and it's a scene full of joy and celebration!

'to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven'

- This is a way of referring to all true believers from right across history. This is the universal church that we've been speaking about.
- Their names are written in heaven. They are citizens. They belong. And so do we.

'You have come to God, the Judge of all'

- This sounds scary. God is the Judge.
- But remember our names are written in heaven, and when we see what comes next it's clear that the outcome of any judgement for us will be positive.

'to the spirits of the righteous made perfect'

- These are those believers who have already died. Their spirits have gone to be with God, and they have been made perfect.
- Can you imagine? They have left their old life and the old sinful nature far behind. They are with God now for all eternity.

‘to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel’

- This is why we know any judgement will be positive in our case. We have put our trust in Jesus, our mediator, the one who gave his blood for us.
- The mention of Abel’s blood seems a little strange, but if you remember the story: Abel’s blood cried out for justice after Cain had murdered him. Jesus’ blood is quite different. It cries out not for justice (which would mean our going to hell), but for forgiveness.

Abel’s blood for vengeance

Pleaded to the skies

But the blood of Jesus

For our pardon cries

by Gesù

In short, the author wants us to see how wonderful the church is.

- It is not like Sinai where God was present but still distant.
- We are blessed by the blood of Christ so that God is present and we can truly approach him.
- The church is a place of joy and celebration! Not fear and dread.
- We have a sure and certain hope of being gathered around God for all eternity.

Praise God for these things!

Spiderman was told ‘with great power comes great responsibility’. And we might rephrase that as ‘with great promises come great responsibility’.

Hebrews 12

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ The words “once more” indicate the

removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our “God is a consuming fire.”

Do you see what the author is saying?

- Our new covenant experience is far better than the fear and dread of Sinai.
- But this doesn't mean that God is now a tame pussycat, or that the God of the NT is different to the God of the OT.
- No no. God doesn't change.

The reality is the grace we've received shouldn't lead us to be more lax / more blasé; no we need to be more careful.

The greater covenant with greater blessings means that we must listen and not refuse his words.

Sinai had an earthquake, but a bigger shaking is coming.

It's talking about the return of Christ and the final judgement. So we're looking to the future.

- The universal church is gathered around God now, already. And the spirits of believers who have left this world are with him now, already.
- But this is not the end. They're still waiting, with us, for the climax of the story.
- This creation will pass away and the new creation will come. And that new creation is our final destination, where we will see God face to face.

I can't wait!

Note the applications that are made.

v25, do not turn away from God.

Instead, v28, be thankful *and so* worship God. → That's interesting, isn't it? Thankfulness to God is the springboard / motivation for our worship of God.

But note also, v28, 'worship God acceptably with reverence and awe'. He's still the same God that was scary at Sinai. He is a consuming fire. A failure to listen now would be catastrophic.

2. Worshipping God

I've been telling you that the ultimate purpose of Church is to bring glory to God / to worship him. And here we are in v28: 'worship God acceptably' it says ... what do you think is meant by that?

- Does it mean we clap on 2 and 4, not 1 and 3?
- Does it mean that we include at least one old hymn in each church service?
- No. It means that we see every aspect of our lives as worship / as an opportunity to bring glory to God.

Worship, then, is not just something we do on Sundays, in our weekly gatherings.

Worship is the church's ultimate purpose: to bring God glory. And we as the church are to worship him on Sunday, ... and Monday, Tuesday, ... , all the days of our lives!

The author of Hebrews goes on in chapter 13 to flesh out some great examples of what this 'acceptable worship' will look like in practice.

- Here are many ways that we can bring God glory as members of his church.
- As you we go through them now, you might like to take note of 1 or 2 of them that you think are relevant for you. These could become "take home points" from Summit for you, to pray about and seek to make progress in.

a) Loving the church

First of all, love.

Hebrews 13

¹ Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. ³ Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Church is family, and we need to always love one another as brothers and sisters. As we've said, this means we need to gather with them regularly so we actually *know* them and can love them in ways they need.

This love is primarily for those within the church, whom we know. But there is also a time and place to love those unknown to us, strangers (v2). I think this is primarily thinking about hospitality to Christians whom we don't know.

Example this week. S***** is a Christian woman who's about to start studying at Monash this semester. The place she's going to stay isn't ready for 1 more week, so she was in limbo.

But J*****, who's here at Summit, has graciously allowed this "stranger" to stay in her room while she's up here in Rawson.

The idea that we might, somehow, be entertaining angels seems strange to us. But it happened in the life of Abraham (see Gen 18). Regardless, hospitality and generosity are markers of a healthy church.

Our love should never forget those of our number who are suffering persecution for the faith (v3).

- In Australia Christians are not sent to prison or routinely mistreated for following Jesus.
- But this may change in the coming years; we'll see.

The point is: we do not forget those who are suffering for being a Christian. We are a body, we are one. So when one suffers we all suffer together.

b) Fleeing idols

The next examples of practical worship are warnings against idolatry.

Hebrews 13

⁴ Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

*“Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you.”*

⁶ So we say with confidence,

*“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?”*

- True worship is always giving God the glory and making him #1 in our lives.
- Idolatry is the exact opposite: taking something else and worshipping it instead.

The author warns us of two of the most common idols that we can end up worshipping: sex and money.

If I had to guess the two biggest dangers that may cause some of us in this room to fall away from Christ, I would choose these two.

Sexual immorality, in whatever form it takes:

- It may be adultery, as mentioned here,
- More likely, at your age, it'd be ignoring God's commands by being sexually active with your boyfriend or girlfriend, when you're not prepared to make a public commitment to them in marriage,
- You may be struggling with same-sex attraction,
- Or the epidemic of our times that is pornography.

Any of these can damage ourselves, our loved ones, and shipwreck our faith.

You've had a workshop on pornography already this week, so I won't go into a whole host of suggestions right now. What I want to say, though, is this: take sexual immorality seriously.

- If you're struggling, as I have in my own life, you need to open up and tell someone you trust.
- Shame can prevent us doing this; but secrets like this are the vampires of our minds → it's only when you expose them to the sunlight that they begin to lose their power.

Talk to someone.

The *love of money* is the other big danger. It's impossible to be worshipping God if your heart is really chasing dollars.

It's likely that this will become more of a danger to you when you graduate and actually begin to earn some money! But the seeds can be planted even during your student years.

I remember speaking to a student at NTE one year. He spoke in lofty terms about his future plans. In particular he said to our small group on more than one occasion that he planned to make millions as soon as possible after graduating, so that he could then give \$100,000s to mission work to see the gospel go out.

After hearing this for about the 3rd time I took an opportunity to speak to him alone, and asked him how much he was giving to church right now. He said he wasn't giving anything yet because he didn't have much money now. But he assured me that once he had struck it rich he would give huge sums.

I challenged this, saying that the best indicator of future generosity is current generosity.

The antidote to worshipping money is contentment with what we have (v5).

- If we know in our heart of hearts that God is in control, and a loving Father who will give us what we need; then we will be able to be content.
- As v6 says, 'the Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid'.

If you've got Jesus you need not fear financial insecurity. You may not be rich; but you will have enough. So be content, and be generous with what you have.

c) Following our leaders

The next way to keep worshipping God in our churches relates to the leaders that God has put over us for our good.

Hebrews 13

⁷ Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

⁹ Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings ...

...

¹⁷ Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

We saw yesterday that every Christian has been given gifts, and yet God has placed human leaders over us to equip us so that we may all be using our gifts to serve the church.

Here we are told some important ways we are to relate to our leaders. And as we do these things we will be glorifying God.

- Remember your church leaders, v7, and the word of God that they spoke to you. This will protect us against strange teachings, v9.
- Also observe their way of life, and imitate them.
- The words they spoke and the life they lived, v8, are all based on Jesus Christ. So by following your leaders you are following Him as well.
- In v17 you will see that we ought to have confidence in our leaders and submit to their authority. The reality is that they will have to give an account to God for the way in which they watched over your spiritual health.

Since then they are trying their best to look after you, don't make their ministry a burden → make it a joy!

If you make their job of looking after you difficult it's not going to benefit you one bit! You're going to have a grumpy leader, and your experience of church will be negative as well.

Here are my top tips to burden your leaders and make their life miserable:

- i. Gather with your church only when you feel like it. Put yourself ahead of your brothers and sisters.
- ii. Share all the exciting things that you do on a Sunday via Facebook, but never get around to telling your friends that you (occasionally) go to church.
- iii. Come with an attitude of “what am I going to get out of this today?” rather than “who could I be of service to?”
- iv. Always assume someone else is giving generously, so that you don’t have to.
- v. Measure your commitment to your church by peripheral things like the style of music and how connected you feel; not by the gospel.
- vi. Lie to your pastor. Tell him “I’m fine, everything’s going OK”. Don’t tell anyone about your struggles until it’s all falling apart.

I think you get the point.

d) Counting the cost

We’ve already said that we need to remember those who are suffering for the faith. But actually every Christian needs to count the cost of following Christ.

Hebrews 13

¹¹ The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. ¹⁴ For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

Once again our example is the Lord Jesus himself.

Like a sacrifice burnt outside the camp, our Lord Jesus suffered outside the city.

- He was publicly shamed, condemned as a criminal, strung up in public, probably naked.
- It was a disgraceful way to die.

And this is the man we follow. We too, as Christians, will have our times when we the people of this world will want to shame us for following Jesus.

- “How can you believe a book that was written thousands of years ago?”
- “How can you follow a religion that turns you into a bigot?”
- “How can you be so unscientific and irrational?”

But we are not living for this world. We are living for the world to come. And so we are happy to suffer with Christ while we wait for the new creation that God is preparing for those who love him.

e) Praising God in word and deed

In v15-16 we come full circle: it’s all about praising God and giving him the glory.

Hebrews 13

¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Earlier this week, in 1 Peter 2, we saw that we are like priests offering sacrifices to God. And those sacrifices were declaring the praises of God = telling others about why he’s so wonderful.

It’s the same here in Hebrews.

Sharing the good news of Jesus with others is one wonderful way that we can praise God. We glorify him when we ‘openly profess his name’. Each one of us will have the opportunity to do this in the coming semester/trimester.

- Your campus may have particular events which you can be telling your friends about and inviting them to.
- But it’s also just in the little opportunities that come our way, isn’t it?

Many of us struggle to ‘openly profess his name’. We love Jesus in our hearts, but somehow get embarrassed or worried when it’s time to speak to our friends about him.

We need to be bolder than we are.

“Most Christians around the world fear the raised fist. But here in Australia you fear the raised eyebrow.”

Now, our words are important. No one can come to Christ without them.

But our actions are crucial as well. The grace that we have received from God should naturally flow out into generosity to those around us.

So let our churches be full of people who ‘do good, and share with others’.

This too brings glory to our heavenly Father.

Conclusion

Well there you have it.

I hope that as we come to the end of this week that your view of the church has been raised substantially.

Read Sam Allberry “Why bother with church?”
p7-9 (paragraph 2), and then p95 (middle highlighted sentence).

Or as we might say: ***The church is kind of a big deal.***

The church is *the* thing that God has been working on, across the whole of human history, to bring glory to his name! He is a God of relationships – Father, Son, Spirit – and that love has overflowed in creation, and redemption, and He is in the business of gathering and growing a new humanity around himself, for his own glory. ... Could church be more lofty? More special? More important? More amazing?

Open your eyes to see the wonder of the church!

- Here, with all of its “now but not yet” faults, is the new humanity that God is gathering.
- Here is the foretaste, currently warts and all, nevertheless a foretaste of heaven, what we will enjoy for forever and ever.

- Here is the one community on earth where you can go and meet with God *together*, and spur each other on *together*, so that each of you will go the distance *together* until our Lord Jesus returns.

Friends: hold your church in low esteem and__

- you rob God of his glory,
- you rob your fellow believers of your unique contribution,
- and you say hello to a Christian life that will limp along, and quite likely not go the distance.

But friends, hold your local church in high esteem and give yourself to her wholeheartedly and__

- you will bring God much glory,
- you will spur your sisters and brothers on, as they will you too,
- and you will say hello to a Christian life that – while not always easy – is healthy, and living, and vital, and growing, and will take you safely into eternity, and not only you but your sisters and brothers as well.

This is God's will for you: to go the distance as part of a band of brothers, a band of sisters too, bringing God glory and honour and praise as you do so.

May it be ever so.

Prayer

I'm going to pray for us in the words at the end of Hebrews 13:

Hebrews 13

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.