

Hebrews 12:18-29 The Church of the Firstborn  
August 24, 2025

To be what used to be called, “a broken record,” we must begin our time of reflection and proclamation with an oft-repeated notion that, “times have changed.” Change is so common that it has been referred to as the only constant, which quotes a Greek philosopher named Heraclitus from about 500 B.C. in Ephesus of all places, about the same time the Persians allowed the Israelites to return from exile in Babylonia, who said, “The only constant is change.”

The idea, of course, that change is always happening can be countered by the idea that things also remain the same, which is based on a quote from a French writer name Jean-Baptiste (that’s right, he was named after John the Baptist) Alphonse Karr, in 1849, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” A sentiment that is also reflected in the 1st chapter of Ecclesiastes, “there is nothing new under the sun.”

For instance, even though governments and forms of governments change, the dynamics of power and its corruptions remain. And for all the advancements in technology and knowledge, *human nature* has not changed.

One of the changes of the last two or three hundred years or so involves the way countries choose their leaders. Previously, and for at least about the last ten-thousand years, leaders were chosen by inheritance, primarily by the right of male primogeniture. The

firstborn son of the king, would become the king, and this principle filtered its way down to all levels of society.

Nowadays it is not so pervasive. Leaders rise up through the ranks and are chosen by a combination of merit and a mysterious process that sometimes defies explanation. This dynamic is true in other venues of the world’s life as well.

Even though in the bible the right of the firstborn received rough treatment, it still held sway. I have mentioned this previously, to be a broken record again; Isaac and Jacob were both second sons; Judah was the fourth, and Joseph was the eleventh; David was an eighth son and Solomon was maybe seventh?

Yet when it comes to Jesus, we are introduced to the idea that he was not only God’s first, but only-begotten Son. It is hard to fit Jesus into an egalitarian model because in bible times such a thing did not exist. He is presented according to the political patterns of his day. Even Jesus was critical of those patterns.

In the Gospel of Mark, when James and John asked to sit on his right and left in glory, Jesus uses the opportunity as a teaching moment, not to explain why inheritance should be abandoned, but how it should be applied. He tells them;

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials

exercise authority over them (this form of, 'leadership,' is also a pretty good description of the way Solomon and the Israelite kings operated).

Not so with you! Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant; and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The whole idea of the dedication of the firstborn sons is defied by what actually happened. They were meant to be dedicated to God's service, liberating everyone else to peaceful and fulfilling lives. But human nature, being what it is, turned them into kings that everyone *e/se* served. It got flipped on its head.

All of this makes the discussion in Hebrews more interesting and challenging. For in it we see the idea of Jesus as God's firstborn flipped back from its head to its feet. Jesus came to die a sacrifice, once and for all time and for all people. In the great roll call we see the depictions of our ancestors in the faith searching for a better country not governed by the pursuit of power but by the reality of service and sacrifice.

And then we are given the punchline. Biblical punchlines are sometimes subtle, and can go unnoticed, as is this one. It is an almost whimsical proclamation that must either be dismissed as absurd or accepted as a divine mandate. We read;

"Now *you are the gathering of the firstborn sons.*" Or put another way, "*you are the church of the first born,*" not to exercise power but to serve and sacrifice, an idea reminiscent of Romans 12, where Paul instructed that our bodies should be offered as living sacrifices. At first it sounds like we are kings, including the girls, except that it can only be thought of by the definition Jesus has given it. Let us accept it as a mandate.

It must be conceded from the start that the church in its messiness is a part of the world's life, which for us is the world of presidents and prime ministers, of dictatorships and democracies, rather than monarchies with kings and princes.

It is the modern industrial world of science and technology. The world of consumerism and mobility and global trade. It is the world of electricity; of rock n' roll and hip hop and techno music. It is the age of binary code; the cloud and crypto currency, online games and gaming and artificial intelligence. It is the world of the bomb and the holocaust.

In all its exotic diversity, the cultural life of the bible is almost unrecognizable, or should I say, the contemporary culture would be unrecognizable to the people of antiquity. Each of us is a product both of the world in which we have lived and that has shaped us, as well as the history that we have inherited. Yet by faith we are a part of the church of the firstborn, co-heirs with Christ.

The contradictions can be staggering, earth-shaking. We sit before the mediator of a *New Covenant*, and are given several admonitions;

“See to it that you do not refuse Him who speaks . . . Once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens . . . The words, ‘once more,’ indicate the removing of what *can* be shaken, that is, *created things*, so that what cannot be shaken may remain.”

We live in the struggle between life in our world, which is not eternal, laboring and heavy-laden, passing away; and life in the heavenly kingdom, which *is* eternal, filled with justice and meaning, joy and peace.

Here at the end of this chapter we are given some more words that help characterize the life of the church of the firstborn in the modern world; “. . . let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.” Reverence and awe bespeak humility.

The proper approach to life is thankfulness and humility in service and sacrifice. This is not the world’s way, but it is the way of Jesus. Let me clarify by borrowing from next week’s epistle text, which comes from Hebrews 13, and in which we are admonished;

“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess His name. And do not forget to do good and share with others, for with such sacrifices, *God is pleased.*”

Times *have* changed, but not in the most important ways. As long as God wills it, we live in this imperfect world. We have been invited, however, into the congregation of the firstborn, an idea that has lost some meaning *because* times have changed, but we still know what it means.

That we struggle against a world value system that compels us to be selfish, to think first of our own well-being and to take care of ourselves because it is believed that no one else will.

Yet we are compelled to count others *better* than ourselves, and look to the needs of others as well as our own, and to have the mind of Christ, God’s only begotten Son, who;

“being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in human likeness:

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the *cross*.

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and *things in earth*, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”