

The Implicit Challenge of the New Covenant

January 8, 2017

Hebrews 10:19-25

19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

HEBREWS 10:19–25

So—Come to Worship!

¹⁹ So then, my brothers and sisters, we have boldness to go into the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus. ²⁰ He has inaugurated a brand new, living path through the curtain (that is, his earthly body). ²¹ We have a high priest who is over God's house. ²² So let us therefore come to worship, with a true heart, in complete assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

²³ Let us hold on tightly to our confession of hope, without being diverted; the one who announced the message to us is trustworthy! ²⁴ Let us, as well, stir up one another's minds to energetic effort in love and good works. ²⁵ We mustn't do what some people have got into the habit of doing, neglecting to meet together. Instead, we must encourage one another, and all the more as you can see the great day coming closer.

I watched as my mother came in from shopping, carrying several bulging bags. She called me to help get the rest from the car. I couldn't think why she'd bought so much food, but I fetched and carried and unloaded as best I could. Then I remembered all the telephone calls the previous week. Normally she wouldn't make more than two or three calls a day, but there had been perhaps a dozen or two. Then, that evening, she enlisted my help again in tidying the main front rooms of the house, and in polishing a table here and some cutlery there. I was surprised, but didn't think more of it; I was no doubt living in my own small world, as children do.

But then, the following afternoon, the doorbell began to ring and one person after another came into the house. It was a party! All the shopping, phone calls and polishing had been getting things ready for a celebration. Friends and neighbours were invited. Everything was prepared. Now I saw where it had all been going.

Hebrews has now, if I can put it like this, done the shopping, made the telephone calls and polished the silver. At last the invitation goes out: come to the party! Verse 22 is the primary reason we've come all this way—collecting key passages from scripture, marshalling arguments here and there, calling up ideas and images familiar and unfamiliar, shaping and polishing the exposition of Jesus as God's son, the truly human one, the great **high priest**, the mediator of the new **covenant**. Now we see where it's all been going. 'Let's come to worship!' Verses 19–21 lay out, in summary form, everything we have seen so far: our boldness of access into God's presence through Jesus' blood, which takes us on a new, living path into the innermost shrine through the work of our high priest. The result of it all can hardly be anything but an invitation to draw near; and 'drawing near' is almost a technical term, in this context, for 'coming to worship'.

But not just any worship, and not in any old state of mind. Verse 22 continues by telling

us four things about the condition we should be in as a result of all that has been said.

First, we should have ‘a true heart’. This looks back to the promise in Jeremiah 31:33, quoted in verse 16 above and in 8:10, that God will place his laws in our hearts and write them in our minds. Something happens to people when the new covenant opens up to include them within it—something involving the heart. They become truly human beings, from the inside out. It starts with the heart and works its way into the rest of the personality, thinking, behaviour and all.

Second, we must have ‘complete assurance of **faith**’. Faith isn’t something you can just drum up like that by your own efforts. It’s what comes when you are looking hard at the object of faith, namely Jesus—or, if you like, God seen in the light of, and in the face of, Jesus. The whole letter has been about Jesus, and about who we are as a result of who he is and what he’s done. Thinking that through, and holding firmly on to it, produces the complete assurance Hebrews is talking about.

Third, and applying the first two points a bit deeper, we must have ‘our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience’. As we noted earlier, this was the great effect of the **sacrifice** of Jesus (9:14). Most people, most of the time, have something which hangs heavy on their hearts, something they’ve done or said which they wish they hadn’t, something which haunts them and makes them afraid of being found out. How wonderful to know that the sacrifice of Jesus, and the ‘sprinkled blood’ which results from it, has the power, as we accept it in faith and trust, to wash every stain from the conscience, so that we can come to God without any shadow falling across our relationship.

Fourth, the writer speaks of ‘our bodies being washed with pure water’. This is presumably a reference to **baptism** (see 6:2), seen as the sign of entry into God’s renewed people, though this letter never makes the point any more explicit than this.

So, then, we are to come to worship God—not just in private, though private worship and prayer is enormously important, but in public as well. The danger of people thinking they could be Christians all by themselves was, it seems, present in the early church just as today, and verse 25 warns against it. This may well not be due to people not realizing what a corporate thing Christianity was and is, nor yet because they were lazy or didn’t much like the other Christians in their locality, but because, when there was a threat of persecution (as will become clear later in this chapter) it’s much easier to escape notice if you avoid meeting together with other worshippers. Much safer just not to turn up.

There’s no place for that, declares Hebrews. Every Christian needs the encouragement of every other Christian. Everyone who comes through the door of the place of worship, whether it be a house in a back street or a great cathedral in a public square, is a real encouragement to everyone else who is there. This is part of the way, along with an actual word of encouragement when necessary, in which we can ‘stir one another up’ to work

hard at the central actions of Christian living, ‘love and good works’ (a deliberately broad phrase to cover all sorts of activities). And we need this encouragement all the more, as verse 25 concludes, as we believe that we are drawing closer to the great day when, with Jesus’ reappearance (9:28), God will complete his work of new creation (12:26–28).

In particular, then, our worship must be accompanied by a firm grip on ‘our confession of hope’, the hope that looks forward eagerly to what God is finally going to do for us, the hope that we ‘confess’ as part of our badge of identity. When questions about it arise in our minds, the answer is not to try to think up clever answers ourselves, but to trust in the one who has promised it to us, that is, the God we have learned to recognize in Jesus. He is utterly trustworthy—a theme we find echoed, like so much in this letter, in Paul (1 Corinthians 10:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:24; and other places).

The party is all prepared; the invitations have gone out; the silver is polished; the host stands waiting at the door. Are you ready to accept the invitation and come in?¹

19. *Having therefore, brethren, &c.* He states the conclusion or the sum of his previous doctrine, to which he then fitly subjoins a serious exhortation, and denounces a severe threatening on those who had renounced the grace of Christ. Now, the sum of what he had said is, that all the ceremonies by which an access under the Law was open to the sanctuary, have their real fulfilment in Christ, so that to him who has Christ, the use of them is superfluous and useless. To set this forth more fully, he allegorically describes the access which Christ has opened to us; for he compares heaven to the old sanctuary, and sets forth the things which have been spiritually accomplished in Christ in typical expressions. Allegories do indeed sometimes obscure rather than illustrate a subject; but when the Apostle transfers to Christ the ancient figures of the Law, there is no small elegance in what he says, and no small light is attained; and he did this, that we may recognise as now really exhibited in him whatever the Law shadowed forth. But as there is great weight almost in every word, so we must remember that there is here to be understood a contrast,—the truth or reality as seen in Christ, and the abolition of the ancient types.

He says first, that we have *boldness to enter into the holiest*. This privilege was never granted to the fathers under the Law, for the people were forbidden to enter the visible sanctuary, though the high priest bore the names of the tribes on his shoulders, and twelve stones as a memorial of them on his breast. But now the case is very different, for not only symbolically, but in reality an entrance into heaven is made open to us through the favour

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *Hebrews for Everyone* (pp. 114–117). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

of Christ, for he has made us a royal priesthood.¹

He adds, *by the blood of Jesus*, because the door of the sanctuary was not opened for the periodical entrance of the high priest, except through the intervention of blood. But he afterwards marks the difference between this blood and that of beasts; for the blood of beasts, as it soon turns to corruption, could not long retain its efficacy; but the blood of Christ, which is subject to no corruption, but flows ever as a pure stream, is sufficient for us even to the end of the world. It is no wonder that beasts slain in sacrifice had no power to quicken, as they were dead; but Christ who arose from the dead to bestow life on us, communicates his own life to us. It is a perpetual consecration of the way, because the blood of Christ is always in a manner distilling before the presence of the Father, in order to irrigate heaven and earth.

20. *Through the veil, &c.* As the veil covered the recesses of the sanctuary and yet afforded an entrance there, so the divinity, though hid in the flesh of Christ, yet leads us even into heaven; nor can any one find God except he to whom the man Christ becomes the door and the way. Thus we are reminded, that Christ's glory is not to be estimated according to the external appearance of his flesh; nor is his flesh to be despised, because it conceals as a veil the majesty of God, while it is also that which conducts us to the enjoyment of all the good things of God.

21. *And having a high priest, &c.* Whatever he has previously said of the abrogation of the ancient priesthood, it behoves us now to bear in mind, for Christ could not be a priest without having the former priests divested of their office, as it was another order. He then intimates that all those things which Christ had changed at his coming ought to be relinquished; and God has set him over his whole house for this end,—that every one who seeks a place in the Church, may submit to Christ and choose him, and no other, as his leader and ruler.¹

22. *Let us draw near with a true heart, &c.* As he shews that in Christ and his sacrifice there is nothing but what is spiritual or heavenly, so he would have what we bring on our part to correspond. The Jews formerly cleansed themselves by various washings to prepare themselves for the service of God. It is no wonder that the rites for cleansing were carnal, since the worship of God itself, involved in shadows, as yet partook in a manner of what was carnal. For the priest, being a mortal, was chosen from among sinners to perform for a time sacred things; he was, indeed, adorned with precious vestments, but yet they were those of this world, that he might stand in the presence of God; he only came near the ark of the covenant; and to sanctify his entrance, he borrowed for a sacrifice a brute animal either from the herd or the flock. But in Christ all these things are far superior; he himself is not only pure and innocent, but is also the fountain of all holiness and righteousness, and was constituted a priest by a heavenly oracle, not for the short period of a mortal life, but perpetually. To sanction his appointment an oath was interposed. He came forth adorned with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the highest perfection; he propitiated God by his own

blood, and reconciled him to men; he ascended up above all the heavens to appear before God as our Mediator.

Now, on our part, nothing is to be brought but what corresponds with all this, as there ought to be a mutual agreement or concord between the priest and the people. Away then with all the external washings of the flesh, and cease let the whole apparatus of ceremonies; for the Apostle sets a *true heart*, and the certainty of faith, and a cleansing from all vices, in opposition to these external rites. And hence we learn what must be the frame of our minds in order that we may enjoy the benefits conferred by Christ; for there is no coming to him without an upright or a true heart, and a sure faith, and a pure conscience.

Now, a *true* or sincere heart is opposed to a heart that is hypocritical and deceitful.¹ By the term *full assurance*, $\pi \lambda \eta \rho \omicron \phi \omicron \rho \acute{\iota} \alpha$, the Apostle points out the nature of faith, and at the same time reminds us, that the grace of Christ cannot be received except by those who possess a fixed and unhesitating conviction. The *sprinkling of the heart from an evil conscience* takes place, either when we are, by obtaining pardon, deemed pure before God, or when the heart, cleansed from all corrupt affections, is not stimulated by the goads of the flesh. I am disposed to include both these things.² What follows, *our bodies washed with pure water*, is generally understood of baptism; but it seems to me more probable that the Apostle alludes to the ancient ceremonies of the Law; and so by water he designates the Spirit of God, according to what is said by Ezekiel, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you." (Ezek. 36:25.) The meaning is, that we are made partakers of Christ, if we come to him, sanctified in body and soul; and yet that this sanctification is not what consists in a visible parade of ceremonies, but that it is from faith, pure conscience, and that cleanness of soul and body which flows from, and is effected by, the Spirit of God. So Paul exhorts the faithful to cleanse themselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, since they had been adopted by God as his children.¹ (2 Cor. 7:1.)

23. *Let us hold fast, &c.* As he exhorts here the Jews to persevere, he mentions hope rather than faith; for as hope is born of faith, so it is fed and sustained by it to the last. He requires also *profession* or confession, for it is not true faith except it shews itself before men. And he seems indirectly to touch the dissimulation of those who paid too much attention, in order to please their own nation, to the ceremonies of the Law. He therefore bids them not only to believe with the heart, but also to shew and to profess how much they honoured Christ.

But we ought carefully to notice the reason which he subjoins, *for he is faithful that promised*. For we hence first learn, that our faith rests on this foundation, that God is true, that is, true to his promise, which his word contains; for that we may believe, the voice or word of God must precede; but it is not every kind of word that is capable of producing faith; a promise alone is that on which faith recumbs. And so from this passage we may learn the mutual relation between the faith of men and the promise of God; for except God

promises, no one can believe.²

24. *And let us consider one another, &c.* I doubt not but that he addresses the Jews especially in this exhortation. It is well known how great was the arrogance of that nation; being the posterity of Abraham, they boasted that they alone, to the exclusion of all others, had been chosen by the Lord to inherit the covenant of eternal life. Inflated by such a privilege, they despised other nations, and wished to be thought as being alone in the Church of God; nay, they superciliously arrogated to themselves the name of being The Church. It was necessary for the Apostles to labour much to correct this pride; and this, in my judgment, is what the Apostle is doing here, in order that the Jews might not bear it ill that the Gentiles were associated with them and united as one body in the Church.

And first, indeed, he says, *Let us consider one another*; for God was then gathering a Church both from the Jews and from the Gentiles, between whom there had always been a great discord, so that their union was like the combination of fire and water. Hence the Jews recoiled from this, for they thought it a great indignity that the Gentiles should be made equal with them. To this goad of wicked emulation which pricked them, the Apostle sets up another in opposition to it, even that of *love*; for the word $\pi \alpha \rho \omicron \xi \upsilon \sigma \mu \omicron \varsigma$, which he uses, signifies the ardour of contention. Then that the Jews might not be inflamed with envy, and be led into contention, the Apostle exhorts them to a godly emulation, even to stimulate one another to love.¹

25. *Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, &c.* This confirms the view that has been given. The composition of the Greek word ought to be noticed; for $\epsilon \pi \iota$ signifies an addition; then $\epsilon \pi \iota \sigma \upsilon \nu \alpha \gamma \omega \gamma \eta$, assembling together, means a congregation increased by additions. The wall of partition having been pulled down, God was then gathering those as his children who had been aliens from the Church; so the Gentiles were a new and unwonted addition to the Church. This the Jews regarded as a reproach to them, so that many made a secession from the Church, thinking that such a mixture afforded them a just excuse; nor could they be easily induced to surrender their own right; and further, they considered the right of adoption as peculiar, and as belonging exclusively to themselves. The Apostle, therefore, warns them, lest this equality should provoke them to forsake the Church; and that he might not seem to warn them for no reason, he mentions that this neglect was common to many.¹

We now understand the design of the Apostle, and what was the necessity that constrained him to give this exhortation. We may at the same time gather from this passage a general doctrine:

It is an evil which prevails everywhere among mankind, that every one sets himself above others, and especially that those who seem in anything to excel cannot well endure their inferiors to be on an equality with themselves. And then there is so much morosity almost in all, that individuals would gladly make churches for themselves if they could; for they

find it so difficult to accommodate themselves to the ways and habits of others. The rich envy one another; and hardly one in a hundred can be found among the rich, who allows to the poor the name and rank of brethren. Unless similarity of habits or some allurements or advantages draw us together, it is very difficult even to maintain a continual concord among ourselves. Extremely needed, therefore, by us all is the admonition to be stimulated to love and not to envy, and not to separate from those whom God has joined to us, but to embrace with brotherly kindness all those who are united to us in faith. And surely it behoves us the more earnestly to cultivate unity, as the more eagerly watchful Satan is, either to tear us by any means from the Church, or stealthily to seduce us from it. And such would be the happy effect, were no one to please himself too much, and were all of us to preserve this one object, mutually to provoke one another to love, and to allow no emulation among ourselves, but that of doing *good works*. For doubtless the contempt of the brethren, moroseness, envy, immoderate estimate of ourselves, and other sinful impulses, clearly shew that our love is either very cold, or does not at all exist.

Having said, "Not forsaking the assembling together," he adds, *But exhorting* one another; by which he intimates that all the godly ought by all means possible to exert themselves in the work of gathering together the Church on every side; for we are called by the Lord on this condition, that every one should afterwards strive to lead others to the truth, to restore the wandering to the right way, to extend a helping hand to the fallen, to win over those who are without. But if we ought to bestow so much labour on those who are yet aliens to the flock of Christ, how much more diligence is required in exhorting the brethren whom God has already joined to us?

As the manner of some is, &c. It hence appears that the origin of all schisms was, that proud men, despising others, pleased themselves too much. But when we hear that there were faithless men even in the age of the Apostles, who departed from the Church, we ought to be less shocked and disturbed by similar instances of defection which we may see in the present day. It is indeed no light offence when men who had given some evidence of piety and professed the same faith with us, fall away from the living God; but as it is no new thing, we ought, as I have already said, to be less disturbed by such an event. But the Apostle introduced this clause to shew that he did not speak without a cause, but in order to apply a remedy to a disease that was making progress.

And so much the more, &c. Some think this passage to be of the same import with that of Paul, "It is time to awake out of sleep, for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." (Rom. 13:11.) But I rather think that reference is here made to the last coming of Christ, the expectation of which ought especially to rouse us to the practice of a holy life as well as to careful and diligent efforts in the work of gathering together the Church. For to what end did Christ come except to collect us all into one body from that dispersion in which we are now wandering? Therefore, the nearer his coming is, the more we ought to labour that the scattered may be assembled and united together, that there may be one fold

and one shepherd. (John 10:16.)

Were any one to ask, how could the Apostle say that those who were as yet afar off from the manifestation of Christ, saw the day near and just at hand? I would answer, that from the beginning of the kingdom of Christ the Church was so constituted that the faithful ought to have considered the Judge as coming soon; nor were they indeed deceived by a false notion, when they were prepared to receive Christ almost every moment; for such was the condition of the Church from the time the Gospel was promulgated, that the whole of that period might truly and properly be called the last. They then who have been dead many ages ago lived in the last days no less than we. Laughed at is our simplicity in this respect by the worldly-wise and scoffers, who deem as fabulous all that we believe respecting the resurrection of the flesh and the last judgment; but that our faith may not fail through their mockery, the Holy Spirit reminds us that a thousand years are before God as one day, (2 Peter 3:8;) so that whenever we think of the eternity of the celestial kingdom no time ought to appear long to us. And further, since Christ, after having completed all things necessary for our salvation, has ascended into heaven, it is but reasonable that we who are continually looking for his second manifestation should regard every day as though it were the last.¹

² Calvin, J., & Owen, J. (2010). *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (pp. 234–242). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.