

Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 2, Number 1 • Winter 1993

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Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:25-29).

Introduction

During Christianity’s second century, a notable heretic by the name of Marcion came to power in Asia Minor, and though he was excommunicated early on, his destructive teaching lingered for nearly two centuries. Marcion taught the total incompatibility of the Old and New Testaments. He believed that there was a radical discontinuity between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament—between the creator and the Father of Jesus. So Marcion created a new Bible for his followers which had no Old Testament, and a severely hacked up New Testament which consisted of only one Gospel (an edited version of Luke), and ten select and edited Pauline Epistles which excluded the Pastorals. His views were spelled out in his book *Antitheses*, which set forth the alleged contradictions between the Testaments. Tertullian, in his famous *Against Marcion*, wrote a five-volume refutation.

But Marcionism never completely died out, and in the nineteenth century, especially, with the rise of liberalism it underwent a revival among those who wished to separate what they considered to be the crude and primitive of the

Old Testament from the New. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century father of liberalism, said that the Old Testament has a place in the Christian heritage only by virtue of its connections with Christianity. He felt that it should be no more than an appendix of historical interest. Adolf Harnack argued that the Reformers should have dropped it from the canon of authoritative writings. Likewise, there are thousands today who have rejected the Old Testament either formally or in practice.

The error of this kind of approach was pointed out by a fellow liberal, Albert Schweitzer, who demonstrated that such thinking amounts to choosing aspects of God which fit one's man-made theology. Men project their own thoughts about God back to God and create a god of their own thinking. And, of course, anyone who is in touch with modern culture knows that this kind of reasoning, Marcionism, is alive and well.

So what does this have to do with us who hold both Testaments to be the inerrant, infallible Word of God? Very much! Because Marcionism is subtly alive in the evangelical enterprise in its understanding of God. Of course, it is true that the New Testament gives us a fuller revelation of God, and that we do not live under the Old Testament. Nevertheless the God we worship is still the same God. But, sadly, many Christians today are so ignorant of their Bibles, especially the Old Testament, that they have a tragically sentimentalized idea of God—which amounts to little more than a deity who died to meet their needs. The result is the incredible paradox of evangelicals who “know Jesus” but who don't know who God is—unwitting Marcionites!

The remedy for this travesty is the Bible, specifically the Old Covenant's Sinai and the New Covenant's Zion—each of which present a vision, an aesthetic, for understanding God.¹

From Mt. Sinai we learn from Moses' mouth that God is a

consuming fire—“Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God. . . For the LORD your God is a consuming fire” (Deut. 4:23-24). The vision is stupendous: a mountain-top blazing with “fire to the very heavens” (Deut. 4:11)—cloaked with a deep darkness—lightning illuminating golden arteries in the clouds, celestial rams' horns overlaying the thunder with mournful elephantine blasts—the ground shaking, undulating as God's voice intones the Ten Commandments. God is transcendently “other,” perfectly good and holy. He radiates wrath and judgment against sin. God cannot be approached.

This is the vision for the heart of every believer—“God is a consuming fire.” It is the corrective so needed in today's church which has shamefully trivialized worship, turning it into a self-assured farce. Here God's divine intention in creating Sinai is obvious because, as we say “a picture is worth a thousand words,” and pictures are easier for us humans to remember than words. Flaming Mt. Sinai is God!

Of course, the other mountain, Mt. Zion of the New Testament, completes the picture. There we see God's love, as God the Son becomes sin for us, taking all of His people's transgressions on Himself so that He “became sin” (2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Gal. 3:10-11)—writhing under its load like an impaled serpent (cf. Num. 21:4-8). There on the cross we see God the Son dying for our sins and extending forgiveness to all who will believe in Him, trusting His work alone for salvation. What a vision we are bequeathed from Calvary: God, with his arms nailed wide as if to embrace the whole of those who will come, His blood covering the earth speaking a better word than the blood of Abel—the consuming love of God. Mt. Zion, crowned by Golgotha is God!

Brothers and sisters, both mountains are God—Sinai and Zion are God! Neither can be separated from the other. God is not the God of one hill, but both. Both visions must be held in blessed tension within our souls—consuming fire and

consuming love. This will save us from the damning delusion of Marcion!

It is this great twin-peaked God to whom we come as we marathon onward to “Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God” (Heb.12:22). The massive dual revelation of the mountains is meant to shape our pilgrimage. And the question we must ask is, how then are we to march? What “oughtnesses” do the mountains bring? There are two: obedience and worship.

Obedience

Effectual Word. We ought to obey because God’s Word is unstoppably effectual—“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?” (v. 25).

This is what is called in logic an a fortiori argument, an argument which argues that what is true in the lesser case will be even more true in the greater. In the lesser case, God’s earthly warning at Sinai first suffered subtle refusal by the Israelites when they “begged that no further word be spoken to them” (v. 19, cf. Ex. 20:19)—though their refusal there at Sinai was more from fear than outright rejection of God. However in the years that followed, they explicitly refused God’s Word by their repeated disobediences during the four decades of wandering in the wilderness. So grievous was their disobedience that Numbers 14:29 records that God pronounced judgment that everyone who was 20 and older would die in the desert. And, indeed, none did escape except faithful Caleb and Joshua. A million plus corpses littered the desert.

Now, if such was the inexorable penalty for disobeying God’s earthly message, how much more so will it be in the greater instance of disobeying His heavenly message of grace through His Son? (cf. 1:2). Surely no one will escape!

This, of course, has been the preacher’s message all along. In Hebrews 2:3a he has warned, “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?”

Later in 10:28-29 he said much the same thing, emphasizing greater punishment.

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?

The message is so clear, we had better obey God’s Word because His threat that no one will escape who disobeys is ineluctably effectual. It is a “done deal.” No person will escape who refuses the gospel! God is a relentless “consuming fire.”

Final Word. If this is not sufficient reason to obey the God of the two mountains, there is another, and that is that His Word is final, as the preacher goes on to explain:

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.” The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain (vv. 26-27).

The initial historical event where God’s voice shook the earth was at Sinai when he verbally spelled out the Ten Commandments with a thunderous voice. Imagine how terrifying it was to have the ground under one’s feet tremble in response to God’s audible word. What a homiletical device! No sleepers in the congregation at Sinai!

But there is an infinitely greater shaking coming, an

eschatological cosmic shaking of the whole universe, which will itself be triggered by God's Word. Here the preacher has quoted God's promise from Haggai 2:6; "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens" (v. 26b)—indicating that every created thing will be shaken to utter disintegration. This is in accord with what the Scriptures teach us about the power of God's Word. Genesis says that He created everything by His Word as He spoke the universe into existence. Therefore, one "little word" from Him can and will fell creation!

The Psalmist tells us that creation is transitory. "In the beginning You laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain; they will all wear out like a garment" (Ps. 102:25-26; cf. Heb. 1:10-12). Isaiah says of the future, "Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of His burning anger" (13:13). And Peter identifies it with the day of the Lord: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (2 Peter 3:10). Think of it—all one hundred thousand million galaxies—each containing at least that many stars—each galaxy one hundred light years across—will hear the Word and shake out of existence! Just a little word from God, and it is done.

The reason for this is clearly spelled out, "So that what cannot be shaken may remain" (v. 27b). The people of God, as a part of the order of things which are unshakable, will survive. But everything else in the universe will be shaken and therefore purged; everything that is wrong will be eradicated. No sin, no imperfection will remain. Then, there will be a blessed reconstitution of a new heaven and a new earth—"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Rev. 21:1).

To those who are obedient this is good news. And the preacher means it to be a powerful encouragement to the beleaguered little church to which he writes, where some might feel like their lives are being shaken to pieces by Rome. "Stand firm midst the Roman tremors," he seems to be saying, "because the ultimate shaking is coming when Rome, and indeed the entire present evil order, will shake to oblivion. And you, as part of the new order, will survive. Take heart!" On the other hand, to those who are ignoring God's Word and drifting further away—it was a disquieting revelation and challenge to obedience.

But to all, including us, there is a mighty call to obey God's Word, because it is effectual and final. No Israelite who disobeyed God's earthly Word survived the desert, and how much more will be the case with those who disobey the heavenly Word through Christ. God's Word is effectual; it never fails. And God's Word is final. It started the universe, and it will stop it! So the command to all us pilgrims in verse 25 comes with such force, "See to it that you do not refuse Him who speaks."

Are you refusing God? Has He been speaking to you, but have you been ignoring His Word? What folly! His Word is effectual, and it is final.

Worship

After obedience, the other great "ought" which comes from the two mountains concerns worship:

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

Charles Colson, in his book *Kingdoms in Conflict*, relates that:

In 1896, the . . . planners of St. John the Divine in New York City envisioned a great Episcopal cathedral that would bring glory to God. Nearly a century later, though the immense structure is still under construction, it is in use—in a way that its planners might well have regarded with dismay. St. John's Thanksgiving service has featured Japanese Shinto priests; Muslim Sufis perform biannually; Lenten services have focused on the ecological "passion of the earth." . . . St. John the Divine has ceased to be a house of the one God of the Scriptures, and has become instead a house of many gods. Novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., wrote for the cathedral's centennial brochure that "the Cathedral is to this atheist . . . a suitable monument to persons of all ages and classes. I go there often to be refreshed by a sense of nonsectarian community which has the best interest of the whole planet at heart."

Dean James Morton has encountered opposition, but he defends it by saying:

This cathedral is a place for people like me who feel constricted by the notion of excluding others. What happens here—the Sufi dances, the Buddhist prayers—are serious spiritual experiences. We make God a Minnie Mouse in stature when we say these experiences profane a Christian church.²

The Scriptures, however, would argue that it is Dean Morton who has made the great God of Sinai and Zion into a mousey deity whose only "virtue" is sub-biblical toleration. It is difficult to conceive how much farther one could depart from the awesome God of Scriptures—who is a God who tolerates no other gods before Him, forbids idolatry, and demands the holiness of His people. Instead of giving his people a golden calf, the cathedral Dean has given them a

Mickey-Moused reflection of popular culture—a profoundly vapid idolatry.

Note our text well! It says that "[Our] God is [not was!] a consuming fire." The God of Zion is the same God as the God of Sinai. God has not changed. To some of us, the great religious traditions' troubles may seem far removed. But the truth is, similar problems are common in the more independent, evangelical traditions.

One Sunday morning a friend of mine visited a church where, to his amazement, the worship prelude was the theme song from the Paul Newman/Robert Redford movie *"The Sting,"* titled (significantly, I think) "The Entertainer." The congregation was preparing for divine worship while cinematic images of Paul Newman and Robert Redford in 1920s garb hovered in their consciousness!

And that was just the prelude, for what followed was an off-the-wall service that made no attempt at worship, the "high point" being the announcements when the pastor (inspired no doubt by the rousing prelude) stood unbeknownst behind the unfortunate person doing announcements making "horns" behind his head with his forked fingers and mugging Bozo-like for the congregation. This buffoonery took place in a self-proclaimed "Bible-believing church" which ostensibly worships the holy Triune God of the Bible.

But what was in the pastor's and peoples' minds? What did they really think of God? How could anyone do such things and understand who God is? The answer is, they were modern evangelical Marcionites whose ignorance of Holy Scripture had so edited God that divine worship had become man-centered vaudeville—and poor slap-stick at that!

Don't misunderstand. Christians ought to laugh, they ought to have the best sense of humor on this planet. And Christians ought to enjoy life. But they must know and

understand that God remains a “consuming fire” and that acceptable worship takes place when there is authentic “reverence and awe.” This is God’s Word! When we come to worship we must keep both mountains in view: the approachable Zion with its consuming love, and the unapproachable Sinai with its consuming fire—and then come in reverent boldness.

Conclusion

Reverent worship understands both God’s love and His holiness. This is what I desire for myself and my church. And everything depends on how we see God. If we see him scripturally we will make Sunday mornings an occasion for awe and reverence—and there will be times when we are overwhelmed with the numinous as our souls are engaged by God. My heart’s desire for young people raised in my church from, say, birth to twenty is that: they be regenerated; that they have a radical biblical vision of God, a sense of his holiness and transcendence; and that this will inform all of life: their worship, their sense of mission and evangelism, their stewardship, their affirmation and delight in creation, their relationships, their sexual ethics—everything!

And, yes, lastly, my heart’s desire is that we members of the unshakable kingdom worship with thankful hearts. Our pulses should race with thanksgiving—“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15). Whatever we do or wherever we go we must be “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:20).

Fellow pilgrims, it is so easy to succumb to focusing on one mountain at the expense of the other. But theological balance is the key. Our God is both unapproachable and approachable.

The twin peaks of our spiritual life demand two things as we march to Zion and worship. Let us obey His Word

implicitly, for it is effectual—it never fails; and it is final—it will shake the whole universe. Let us worship Him with reverence and awe and thanksgiving!

End Notes

- 1 Aesthetic in the original Greek idea of *aisthetikos*—sense perception.
- 2 Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Morrow/Zondervan, 1987), p. 22.

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