Invitation or Summons?

"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering." (Hebrews 12:22, ESV)

Every year when I was a boy, the churches of our denomination throughout Ohio gathered for a week of camp meetings. There were preaching services, prayer meetings, fellowship, and families from churches scattered across the state. We slept in rustic dormitories, usually two or three sets of bunk beds to a room.

And every morning at 5:30, Pastor Phillips made his rounds.

He was a tall, white-haired old minister with a booming voice. I knew him. He had eaten in our home, and I liked him very much.

At eight or ten years old, however, I was considerably less fond of him at 5:30 in the morning.

Through the stillness before dawn came that enormous voice:

"UP FOR PRAYER! EVERYBODY UP! IT'S TIME FOR PRAYER!"

Nobody had appointed him to do it. There was no denominational directive requiring Pastor Phillips to awaken the campground. Apparently, in his mind, it was time for prayer, and everybody needed to get out of bed.

It did not sound like an invitation.

Years later, the closest I came to reliving the experience was in basic military training. At five in the morning our drill sergeant would come through the barracks banging on a trash-can lid, wearing a big toothy smile, and ordering us out of bed.

Neither man left much uncertainty about whether we were expected to get up.

There is a difference between an invitation and a summons.

An invitation says, "You are welcome to come."

A summons says, "You are called to appear."

Perhaps we sometimes think of the call to worship on Sunday morning as an invitation. The church doors are open. Worship is available. Come if you would like.

But who is actually calling us to worship?

The minister may speak the words, but ultimately the call comes from God. The King is summoning His people into His presence.

And Scripture describes that presence in astonishing terms.

When the church gathers for worship, Hebrews tells us that we have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels in festal gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus.

We walk into an ordinary church building, but something extraordinary is taking place.

There are Sunday mornings when getting there is difficult. The bed is comfortable. We are tired. Sometimes we would simply rather be alone. There have been mornings when understanding the call to worship as a summons has gotten me out of bed.

Not because attending worship earns God's favor. It does not. Nor does illness, caregiving, physical inability, or providential necessity constitute refusal of God's call.

We come because we belong to Him.

And something interesting often happens. We get out of bed when we would rather remain there. We go to church when we would rather stay home. Then we walk through the doors, see brothers and sisters whom we love, hear the Word, pray, sing, receive the means of grace, and wonder why staying home had seemed so attractive.

Feelings sometimes catch up with obedience.

I can still hear Pastor Phillips across all these years.

"UP FOR PRAYER!"

His booming voice had no divine authority behind it.

But another voice does.

On the Lord's Day, the King calls His people.

It is not merely an invitation.

It is a summons.

Just a thought.

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