

# Theology Matters

## Recovering the Ascension For the Transformation of the Church

By Gerrit Scott Dawson

“Listen,” says the voice of my friend no the other end of the phone. “This is the sound of my head falling to the desk.” There’s a thump through the line. “That’s how long you have to tell me about the ascension before I’m asleep.” No, it does not seem to be a scintillating doctrine. Though part of what the church has called *the rule of truth* from the beginning, the ascension of Jesus into heaven does not occupy the foremost part of our usual conversations about Christ. We may profess it on Sundays, yet forget it the rest of the week. The ascension is even left out of our recent Presbyterian documents, the 1983 “Brief Statement of Faith” as well as the Confession of 1967. We have such difficulty conceiving, or even believing, how the body of Jesus went to heaven that we may want the doctrine to remain in obscurity.

Yet, in a time when the church is fiercely debating the uniqueness of Jesus and our people are drowning in the flood of busy, demanding prosperity, the ascension is an absolutely crucial part of the gospel story to recover. Through the ascension we discover that the incarnation continues. Jesus remains united to our human nature.

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Thus, he cannot be spiritualized into a principle of life, or collapsed into one manifestation of a God who is known many ways. Moreover, the presence of our brother Jesus in heaven dramatically affects how we see our lives and place in the world today.

### The Story

The second article of the Apostles’ Creed is actually a narrative. In a highly condensed form, the Creed moves from the incarnation through the sojourn of Jesus Christ among us on earth to the anticipation of his return in judgment at the consummation of all things. Of the twelve verbs which follow the opening affirmation, nine are past tense, one is present and two are future. We affirm that we believe “... in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was:

- Conceived by the Holy Ghost
- Born of the Virgin Mary

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- Suffered under Pontius Pilate
- Was Crucified
- Dead (died)
- And Buried.
- He Descended into hell
- The third day he rose again from the dead.
- He ascended into heaven
- And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty
- From thence he shall come
- To judge the quick and the dead.”

We can see how important the last past tense verb is to the entire story. Dramatically, the narrative would be stuck in the past without the ascension. “The third day he rose again from the dead” and....what? If there had been no ascension, what would have happened to Jesus? Imagine if you were staging this drama. If Jesus’ new life does not continue, then he could have died again. In that case, however, death, not life, would have had the last word. The resurrection requires an ascension to be completed. There is no triumph over death if it is only of a temporary, Lazarus-like quality. Moreover, if Jesus lives but never left us, the age of the Spirit and the Church would not have begun. We would still be looking for him in the flesh, and that, obviously, is not the case.

But what kind of ascension occurred? Though we seldom think of it at all, we may have a vague notion that while Jesus rose up into the clouds before his disciples’ eyes, as recorded in Acts 1, when he got beyond their sight he slipped from the body, dissolving, as it were, into the spiritual realm. We may believe that he went up, but suspect that as soon as the audio-visual demonstration of his departure was completed, he dropped the body of flesh and went back to being the eternal Son of God. This spiritualizing is a more appealing idea than some sort of space travel to a distant heaven that is nonetheless part of the known universe.

Yet, enormous theological problems are raised by de-physicalizing Christ’s ascension. For instance, if it is the case that the Lord slipped out of the body, who, then, is sitting at the right hand of God? Is it Jesus, whose voice the disciples heard, whose touch they felt, with whom they sailed on the Sea of Galilee and shared the cup in the Upper Room? Or is it the eternal Son of God who once knew what it was like to be a man but is no longer bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh? And what effect would a bodiless Christ have on the future work affirmed in the Creed, his coming again and his judgment of the living and dead?

To put it bluntly, if Jesus did not go up as a man, he cannot come again as a man. The Judge would not be our Brother, not the one tempted in all ways as we are, not the man with the nail-scarred hands and the “rich wounds yet visible above.” He might be God in that case, but he would not be human. And we would be lost.

## A Continuing Incarnation

Our redemption depends on the reality that the eternal Son of God came to us as a man. If he did not come all the way down, then we are not all the way saved. But the incarnation is the news that Jesus became what we are, fully entering our lost and forsaken condition, taking up into himself our very humanity. God crossed the gap between us and himself. He forded both the breach in our communion created by sin, and the fissure gaping with our mortal frailty and decaying form. He came to get us. He came to live on our behalf the life of faithful response to the Father required of us but beyond our capacity. Such obedience led Jesus, in our name and in our flesh, even to endure the cross, the full consequence and penalty for human sin. Even in the moment of utter dereliction, he yet committed his spirit to the Father whose love he trusted though he could not feel it. Thus, Jesus our faithful Savior is the new Adam, the re-start of the entire human race. His obedience in life and in death founded our salvation.

Likewise, our salvation depends on his *continuing union* with us. If the Son of God came to us where we are, but then left us, if he went away and did not take us with him, we would still be lost. In fact, we could then begin a whole new series of books entitled *Left Behind*, but these would not have a hopeful ending! For any view of the ascension as the slipping away from the humanity is a sentence of condemnation. If the one who sits at the right hand of God is not still fully human as well as fully God, then we will never enter within the veil. If he dropped the hypostatic union with humanity, then he dropped us, and we are left forsaken on this side of the great divide.

Thankfully, an orthodox view of the ascension safeguards our understanding of Christ’s continuing incarnation. And reflecting on this reality can release a flood of joy in the church. For example, Frederick Farrar, in his 1895 book, *The Life of Christ as Represented in Art*, concluded that the main thought in the ascension “is that Christ has forever taken into the Godhead the form of the Manhood.” Then he appended this enigmatic but triumphant fragment of a poem:

‘Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for!  
 my flesh that I seek  
 In the Godhead! I seek and I find it!  
 Oh Saul, it shall be  
 A Face like my face that receives thee;  
 a Man like to me  
 Thou shalt love, and be loved by forever;  
 a Hand like this hand  
 Shall throw open the gate of new Life to thee!  
 See the Christ stand!<sup>1</sup>

“A Hand like this hand shall throw open the gate of new Life to thee!” The incarnation continues, and so we are included in the life of God. That is the essential meaning of the Ascension. We are not left alone. He has gone before us in a way we may follow through the Holy Spirit,

because the way is in his flesh, in his humanity. Jesus is himself that new and living way. The fully human one has gone within the veil in our name and even in our skin. United to him by the Spirit, to the one who remains united to us, we may follow where he has gone.

Now we follow spiritually, but at our deaths, we will follow in soul. Then on the day of his return, soul will be reunited with body. Thus we will be with him always, in his Father's house, in the place prepared for us since before the foundation of the earth, prepared in his sacrificial work, and still being prepared by his priestly work among us now. So, as Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly await a Savior, even Jesus Christ who by the power that enables him to bring all things under his control shall transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body" (Phil 3: 20-21). The ascension of the glorified body of Jesus has established the very identity of the Lord's pilgrim people on earth. We are on our way to a place and a condition like his. By Jesus' ascension, we may ascend to God.

To summarize, the Son of God did not come down in order to stay. Nor did he come to us in order to slum for thirty-three years before shedding our skin and returning to the splendor of heaven. The Lord Jesus Christ descended to us in order to gather us up and bring us with him to his Father in heaven. He went back still wearing our flesh, "the self-same body," declares Knox in the *Scot's Confession*, in which he had been born, lived, died and rose. In fact, the taking up of our humanity in himself is a reality which T. F. Torrance says "is a final reality enduring endlessly into eternity."<sup>2</sup> In no way, then, did the ascension signal simply a return to business as usual between God and humanity. Rather, the ascension of Christ is a vital hinge on which turns the work of the Mediator, the incarnate Son, our Redeemer in all his offices.

The ascension signals both end and beginning, completion and inauguration, in the person and work of Christ. Consider its relation to his three-fold office of prophet, priest and king. 1) The ascension is a turn in Christ's prophetic office. It marks the end of our hearing his human voice speak on earth. He is gone. Yet the ascension provides the necessary prelude to the sending of the Holy Spirit who brings Christ Jesus' voice to us. Because he has left us in the flesh, Jesus can through his Spirit lead us into all the truth of who he is and what he said. 2) The ascension signals the completion of Jesus' priestly act of atonement, the essence of which is seen in the cross, though it includes what Calvin calls "the whole course of his obedience"<sup>3</sup> from incarnation through sinless life, atoning sacrifice and resurrection triumph. The ascension is at the same time, though, the beginning of Jesus' priestly appearance on our behalf to bring the sacrifice of his life before the Father, and intercede for those he now calls his brothers. 3) The ascension completes the triumph on earth of Christ's resurrection

and the demonstration of his kingly glory. It is the crowning moment of his rising, even as it inaugurates his eternal reign as the God-human Lord, who is seated in power at the Father's right hand. Though the king is now removed from sight via the ascension, he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

That is the essence of the importance of the ascension to Christian faith and theology. Now let us consider four important corollaries of the ascension, reflecting particularly on the writings of the church fathers:

- 1) **The Ascension and Public Truth**
- 2) **The Ascension and the Divinity of Christ**
- 3) **The Ascension and the Humanity of Christ**
- 4) **Spiritual Ascension**

### 1) **The Ascension and the Public Truth of Jesus**

#### a) Truth About the Case

Perhaps one of the reasons for the neglect of the doctrine of the ascension is the fantastic nature of the event. The moment of resurrection occurred hidden from human sight. The disciples saw the risen Christ alive, after the dead man had gotten up. The ascension, however, occurred before many witnesses. Jesus rose into the sky until a cloud covered him and they saw him no more. Angels standing nearby told the disciples that he had been "taken into heaven" (Acts 1: 11), there to dwell until he would come back again in the same manner as his departure. This might make a great scene for special effects in a movie, but it more readily appears absurd to the modern imagination. We may more easily imagine a Monty Python sketch in which a cardboard cut-out of an icon of Jesus floats towards the top of the screen; one paper hand waves good-bye and a cartoon eye winks knowingly. After all, does anyone really think that heaven is a place "up there" to which we may travel if only we had the right kind of vehicle? No, the ascension is just too physical, too public, too apparent for our sensibilities.

This is by no means a modern development. From the beginning, there were those who doubted the resurrection of the flesh. Bodies just don't get up from the dead, and rationally minded people have always questioned the Christian claim. And, if there is no resurrection in the body, there is certainly no ascension in the body. Whether holding a hard-nosed Sadducee claim that this life as an ensouled body is all there is, or a Greek Gnostic belief that only the soul goes on, slipping at last from the prison of the body, many were offended by the preaching of the rising and ascending of Jesus. Any notion of the ancients as credulous unsophisticates who clung to absurdly literalistic cosmologies accounts neither for the Biblical witness nor the writings of the first five centuries. It was as hard to believe in the ascension in the flesh then as now.

The ascension, in all its glaring physicality, brings the Christian claims about Christ right into the open market of real events in space and time. We believe that the truth of Jesus Christ is what Lesslie Newbigin calls *public truth*, the truth about what is the case. Today, a false dichotomy between public and private truth is often drawn. The world of facts, of science and carpentry, accounting and clothes washing, comprises the realm of public truth. What is true can be known, articulated, measured and accepted by all reasonable people. The world of feelings, of religious belief, of values and opinions is placed in the arena of private truth. "These statements of faith may be true for me but I certainly would not impose them on your view of the world." But Christianity has always created upheaval by declaring that Jesus is the eternal Son of God come down to our world of dust and swiftly passing time, to the external, physical world where we actually live. He spoke in a human voice that could be heard by listeners. He healed the sick in the presence of witnesses. He was tried in a public court of law, such as it was, and crucified on the open hill where any could see. But more, this crucified Jesus rose from the dead and appeared, in the same flesh in which he had been executed, to many witnesses. We claim that this is public truth, a fact in the real world. We claim that he was taken up to heaven in that same body and that there were many who saw him depart.

For Newbigin, the resurrection is the central fact around which all other facts, and all other claims to truth, must be arranged. "Indeed, the simple truth is that the resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point"<sup>4</sup> The Christian rule of truth has always resisted any spiritualizing of the resurrection, and the account of the ascension dramatically rules out any thought of resurrection as only an interior spiritual event in the believing church. Jesus who rose in a body, ascended in the same body. This fact appears in history as a great stone, around which all other streams of thought break. One may build on the stone or break against it, but it will not go away.

#### b) The Nature of the Ascension

This is by no means a new discussion. Near 400 AD, Augustine (d. 430) commented on the nature of this ascended resurrection body and the limits on human inquiry about it:

But by a spiritual body is meant one which has been made subject to spirit in such wise that it is adapted to a heavenly habitation, all frailty and every earthly blemish having been changed and converted into heavenly purity and stability....But the question as to where and in what manner the Lord's body is in heaven, is one which it would be altogether over-curious and superfluous to prosecute. Only we must believe that it is in heaven. For it pertains not to our frailty to investigate the secret things of heaven, but it

does pertain to our faith to hold elevated and honorable sentiments on the subject of the dignity of the Lord's body.<sup>5</sup>

The ascended body of Jesus has been "adapted to a heavenly habitation," and so shall our bodies be. All "frailty and every earthly blemish" have been transformed. Christ Jesus the man is in heaven with God, still incarnate in a spiritual body, yet in a realm beyond our perception. To speculate further on the details of life in heaven would be "altogether over-curious and superfluous." It is enough to know that Christ Jesus is in heaven, still fully human and ever fully God.

While the patristic writers may not have shared our notions of cosmology, they generally refrained from speculations that extended beyond the simple, profound claims of the Biblical story. Thus, their conceptions of the universe never undermine the essential theological truths borne by spatial descriptions of "ascending" and "descending." T. F. Torrance notes that the incarnation represents a coming of God from *the place where God is to the place where humanity is*.<sup>6</sup> By *place*, however, Torrance means us to think relationally rather than spatially. He cautions us against a "receptacle" view of space as necessarily containing, or circumscribing, all of Christ. Rather, in a relational sense, God in Christ crosses the divide to enter our existence, our way of being. Then, through this union, Jesus returns, still bearing his humanity, to the place of relation described as the Father's right hand, the "place" of honor, glory, power and dominion.

Yet, because a body necessarily occupies space, the spatial distinction is not merely metaphor, but a reality. There is a place where the human Jesus is. There is a heaven in which spiritual bodies occupy space, a created realm in which creatures are, to the limits of their capacity, in the immediate presence of God. Of course, here we are beyond the limits of language, beyond the three-dimensional thinking of our world, beyond this writer's ability. What matters is that we hold together the reality that Jesus remains enfleshed, in a glorified, transformed body with the reality that "where" he is, in heaven, is a realm beyond our perceptions, beyond our understanding of space and time, yet in the presence of God who is as near as our next breath. So, while we recognize the limits of language, and the way words must point to realities beyond themselves, we summarize by saying that the ascension represents the departure of the incarnate Son of God back to the place where God is, taking human nature where it has never gone before.

The ascension in the flesh, then, demands that we continue to consider the uniqueness of Jesus. He alone has gone where no human has because he is the Son of God incarnate. This same ascended Lord will return to judge the world and establish the new heavens and the new earth. It is with Jesus that the human race has to do. He is the revelation of God to us. All other knowledge of

God is relativized by that appearance. God did it *this* way. God shows himself to be *this* way. We are not arrogant to insist on the uniqueness of our ascended Christ. The height of arrogance would be to suggest that this most glorious and eternally costly union of flesh with God is no more than one option for belief among many.

## 2) The Ascension and the Divinity of Christ

The ascension plays a key role in our understanding of the meaning of the incarnation and mighty acts of Christ Jesus. As we have seen, this story described in terms of spatial movement is a profoundly necessary stage in the enacting of our redemption. The ascension completes one act of Christ's work and begins another. Now with the departure of Jesus from their midst, his followers immediately began work on Christology. In response to the queries of those who saw the power of the Holy Spirit among them, they had to consider, "Who is this Jesus who has been with us? Who is he that came down to be where we are and has now poured out the Spirit?" These have been the vital questions in all of the attacks on the Church through the centuries, and especially in the years leading up to and surrounding the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The theologians summoned to the defense of the truth have had to battle Gnostic heresies denying the physicality of Christ as well as the Arian heresy placing Christ exclusively on the side of the creature. Moreover, they had to define the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ to defend against Nestorian confusion.

Two texts from John have historically played an important role in the link between the doctrine of the ascension and the person of Jesus Christ. Most often, the patristic writers used New Testament manuscripts closely followed by the KJV:

John 3: 13: And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

John 6: 62: What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?

Early in the third century, Novatian (d. 258) undertook a systematic exposition of the faith. He quoted from John 3: 13 in defining the person of the Redeemer. Then Novatian beautifully wove the imagery from Psalm 19 of the bridegroom coming from his chambers with the descent and ascension. The eternal Son of God came from the "ends of heaven" to find his bride, humanity, and united himself to her. He descends as the Son of God and assumes "the frailty of flesh," espousing it to himself. Then, he ascends as the Son of man, returning to his bride-chamber in heaven fully united to his beloved. We, feeble humans, now wear the Word of God as not only our bridal gown but as our eternal marriage gift.

In his next chapter, Novatian added John 6: 62 to further his reflection. Here he is concerned that some adoptionists might consider Christ Jesus to be a man only:

If Christ is only man, why does He say, "What if ye shall see the Son of man ascending thither where He was before?" "But He ascended into heaven, therefore He was there, in that He returned thither where He was before. But if He was sent from heaven by the Father, He certainly is not man only; for man, as we have said, could not come from heaven...It was not therefore man that thus came thence from heaven, but the Word of God; that is, God descended thence."<sup>7</sup>

Once again, the ascension illuminates the person and nature of Christ. Christ went up to heaven in our flesh. But Jesus said that the Son of man would be "ascending thither where He was before." There was not flesh in heaven before the incarnate Son ascended. Yet his coming to the Father was not a new trip; it was a return. Only God could have been with God. So, when we look upon Jesus, we are seeing "God descended thence," the fully human, fully divine one.

## 3) The Ascension and the Humanity of Christ

### a) A New Creation

Christ's ascending in our flesh to heaven implies a permanent union between his divinity and his humanity in one person. The ascension informs us not only that Jesus is God, but also that he is fully human and remains so. The incarnation continues. Again, we find that the Church Fathers included the ascension in their discussions of Christ's union with our humanity. The doctrine remained interwoven with the very heart of their theology. Because Christ has united himself to us forever, we partake of all that he is and all his benefits for us.

In his Bampton lectures from 1958, Professor J. G. Davies uncovered an ascension sermon by Basil (d. 379), the great Cappadocian father. In it, Basil recounted the whole recapitulation of humanity in Christ on the occasion of celebrating Christ's ascension:

God showed mercy upon the erring image in creation. What does He do therefore? He fashions again a second Adam, out of nature raising up a patron of nature; and borrowing earth from a Virgin, He gives shape to a new embryo according to a truer image in Himself. He fashions and it remains, and constructing a garment in the womb, as in a royal chamber, He clothes the image in order to veil the nudity of the image. For He displayed Him stronger than deceit and superior to sin; immortal even after death; a deliverer from the tombs who was in a tomb; and crowning Him with immortality, He brought Him back today to the heavens, bestowing a decoration upon the whole creation, i.e. the firstfruits of nature.<sup>8</sup>

The feast of the ascension marks the bringing of the new creation, the new humanity in Christ, back to the heavens. But his return did not mean the removal of Christ's presence from the earth as if the gift given in the incarnation were withdrawn. Rather, after Jesus ascended, the Father gave the Spirit to the Son who poured him out on the disciples. Peter described this act of Triune self-giving when he said, "Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear" (Acts 2: 33 *NIV*). So, in sending the Holy Spirit, Christ is "bestowing a decoration upon the whole creation." This second Adam came from a "new embryo," which "borrowed earth" from Mary but was yet by the Spirit a "truer image" of God than the first Adam. The Virgin's womb was "a royal chamber" in which the new Man dressed, clothing the nudity of the first, fallen humanity with his glory.

#### b) The Whole Christ

The same idea has also been developed using the metaphor of the Head and Body, and nowhere more strikingly than in Augustine. No one can ascend to heaven but the one who descended. No human being has come from heaven except the incarnate Son who has been and ever remains eternally with the Father and the Spirit. Thus, only he may ascend. So how do we ascend? By being united to him.

In a sermon based loosely on Matthew 22: 42, Augustine proceeded with incredibly clear, yet daring theological steps. He moved to a consideration of Paul's pressing on "for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3: 12). This led him to consider spiritual ascension, which in turn took him to a consideration of the oft cited ascension passage from John 3. From there he developed the concept of the whole Christ (*totus Christus*). Only as we are one with the one Christ can we ascend with him. The sermon demands extensive quotation:

We must journey on then....Run with the heart's affection, journey on with love, ascend by charity. Why seekest thou for the way? Cleave unto Christ, who by Descending and Ascending hath made Himself the Way. Dost thou wish to ascend? Hold fast to Him that ascendeth. For by thine own self thou canst not rise. "For no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven." If no one ascendeth but He that descended, that is, the Son of Man, our Lord Jesus, dost thou wish to ascend also? Be then a member of Him who Only hath ascended. For He the Head, with all the members, is but One Man. And since no one can ascend, but he who in His Body is made a member of Him; that is fulfilled, "that no man hath ascended, but He that descended."<sup>9</sup>

We desire the prize of heaven, communion with the Triune God. Our role involves cleaving unto Christ. If

we desire to ascend with him, we must "hold fast to him that ascendeth." But all our holding and cleaving means nothing without the union Christ Jesus has forged with us.

No one can ascend to heaven but the one who descended. No human being has come from heaven except the incarnate Son who has been and ever remains eternally with the Father and the Spirit. Thus, only he may ascend. So how do we ascend? By being united to him.

How do we understand this union? In terms of him who is the Head of his Body. By becoming what we are, he has united himself to us in the flesh. This union is so close as to be described in the Ephesian terms of the complete intimacy of marital oneness, though even that human image is but a shadow of the reality of Christ's oneness with the Father and his oneness with us. He is the Bridegroom and the Head. The only way to God is be part of the whole Christ, who is one Christ, one person in two natures thus bringing together in himself God and man.

#### c) The Ascension as a Pledge

A nuance on the ascension and the person of Christ deserves attention. Tertullian (d. 225), in his *On The Resurrection of the Flesh*, wrote:

...the last Adam, yet the primary Word—flesh and blood, yet purer than ours—.... "shall descend in like manner as He ascended into heaven" the same both in substance and form, as the angels affirmed, so as even to be recognized by those who pierced Him. Designated, as He is, "the Mediator between God and man," He keeps in His own self *the deposit of the flesh which has been committed to Him by both parties—the pledge and security of its entire perfection*. For as "He has given to us the earnest of the Spirit, " so has He received from us the earnest of the flesh, and has carried it with Him into heaven as a pledge of that complete entirety which is one day to be restored to it. Be not disquieted, O flesh and blood, with any care; in Christ you have acquired both heaven and the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup>

The ascension inaugurates a double pledge of the future in Christ. The first we recognize from earlier on as the deposit in *our* flesh of the Holy Spirit, who was received from the Father by the ascended Son and then poured out on his disciples (Acts 2: 33). But Tertullian recognized that as Christ went up still wearing our flesh, he holds *in himself* the pledge of the resurrection bodies and eternal life in which we will partake. Ascending in the glorified skin and bones of our nature, Jesus guarantees what we will become, having secured the inheritance which is "incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (I Peter 1: 4-5 *KJV*). Not only does he send the Spirit as a pledge in our hearts, he bears in himself the guarantee of what we will become in union with Christ.

Our Lord desires that where he is, we will be also. So to secure our arrival, he bound us to himself by uniting our nature to himself in one person. In the ascension, we see Christ wearing our flesh, and doing so as a diadem of honor and glory upon his head. He “took from us a pledge when He went,” knowing we could never make the pledge on our own. Now it is bound forever to him in his person.

#### 4) Spiritual Ascension

Our response to God’s grace is as linked to the ascension as the entire story of our redemption and union in Christ has been. The Fathers speak often of what we may call “spiritual ascension,” our role in ascending with Christ by willingly joining ourselves to him who has eternally joined himself to us. Though many of the patristic writers addressed spiritual ascension, once again Augustine is among the clearest.

In Book 4 of his *Confessions*, Augustine did not send us on a great spiritual quest to find a distant and hiding God. No, God has done the work of coming to us, and now “He is within the very heart.” But our hearts have wandered from God. So we are restless. We seek “a blessed life.” We want to be fulfilled. But how could we find life in a land of death, that is, among pursuits that lead us away from God, our true life and heart’s desire? Sounding remarkably 21<sup>st</sup> century, Augustine called his readers’ attention to their weariness from walking such “rugged paths,” working so hard at life but feeling only farther behind. Playing the natural rebellion of the human heart like a great fish on a line, he dared to say in effect “Seek what you seek; but it won’t be there where you’re looking. Go for it, this life you want. But what you want will not be there unless you are returning to God.”

Having exposed and heightened the longing in our souls, Augustine delivered the one true story, the theology that takes us home: “Our very life” came down to us. And he was not silent nor shy. He ran to us, and “thundering He called loudly to us to return.” All his acts, whether in word or deed, dying or rising were meant to call us back to himself. He even ascended, departing from our grasp that we might “return to our heart, and there find Him.” He left our sight so that he might come to our heart, to our innermost being. We ascend to where he is by descending. That means leaving off pride, refusing to attempt to be our own gods and make our own life, and instead humbling ourselves even as we open our hearts. We look within our hearts, not to see more of ourselves, but to find Christ and have our attention drawn away to him, lifting us by the Spirit into the invigorating life for which our weary souls have pined. Spiritual ascension is for Augustine a necessary act on our part based utterly on Christ’s acts on our behalf:

“O ye sons of men, how long so slow of heart? Even now, after the Life is descended to you, will ye not ascend and

live? But whither ascend ye, when ye are on high, and set your mouth against the heavens? Descend that ye may ascend, and ascend to God.”<sup>11</sup>

What George Herbert would say of Scripture twelve centuries later is true of Christ as well: “Heaven lies flat in thee/Subject to ev’ry mounter’s bended knee.” When we bend the knee of the heart to Christ, we ascend to heaven *with* and *in* Christ.

In another sermon concerning Christ’s person, Augustine added a very practical dimension to our ascending with Christ. Because Christ is not only in heaven in splendor with his Father, but is here “in His poor,” we are called to make a connection with Christ in heaven by ministering to Jesus in his poor on earth:

He then who could do so great things, was hungry, and athirst, was wearied, slept, was apprehended, beaten, crucified, slain. This is the way; walk by humility, that thou mayest come to eternity. *Christ-God is the Country whither we go; Christ-Man is the Way whereby we go.* To Him we go, by Him we go; why fear we lest we go astray? He departed not from the Father; and came to us...He has now risen again, and ascended into heaven, there He is, and sitteth at the right Hand of the Father: and *here He is needy in His poor*....He is at once above, and below; above in Himself, below in His; above with the Father, below in us....

Fear Christ above; recognize Him below. Have Christ above bestowing His bounty, recognize Him here in need. Here He is poor, there He is rich. That Christ is poor here, He tells us Himself for me, “I was an hungred, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was a stranger, I was in prison.” And to some He said, “Ye have ministered unto Me,” and to some He said, “Ye have not ministered unto Me.” ...So then Christ is rich and poor; as God, rich; as Man, poor. Yea rich too now as Very Man He hath ascended into heaven, sitteth at the right Hand of the Father; yet still He is poor and hungry here, thirsty, and naked.<sup>12</sup>

“Christ-God is the country whither we go.” The realization of the wonderful communion with his Father which he has opened to us is our goal. We get to that far country through his descent to us as man. Our union with Christ-man is strengthened when we love him by loving his poor. Because the Son of God walked among us in flesh he yet retains, he has established the worth of all flesh. Declaring himself to be fed and clothed when his disciples feed and clothe even the “least of these” (Matthew 25), Jesus founded the Christian ethic of love for the needy. Moreover, he articulated the link between loving action and spiritual ascent. They are to be inseparable.

The ascension, then, does not only encourage individual believers in their spiritual development. The doctrine

actually establishes a theological mandate for the ministry of compassion. Because Christ retains human flesh, he raises the value of every human person. Since he has departed, he commands that we serve him here through serving the least of his brothers and sisters on earth. The continuing incarnation of Jesus in heaven demands that we neither withdraw from the world Jesus loves and has bound to himself, nor that we meld indistinguishably into it, particularly inasmuch as the world sets itself up in feigned independence from God. Rather, we remain engaged in a loving struggle for the world's redemption.<sup>13</sup> We live here on earth with the hope of heaven, and more, with the values, the fellowship, and even the eternal of Christ in heaven operating through us. The body of Christ lives here by the vital energies of our ascended Head who is there in heaven for us.

Finally, centuries later, John Calvin, in his fourth sermon on the ascension, beautifully sums up this doctrine's immense practical application:

Thus, since He has gone up there, and is in heaven for us, let us note that we need not fear to be in this world. It is true that we are subject to so much misery that our condition is pitiable, but at that we need neither be astonished nor confine our attention to ourselves. Thus, we look to our Head Who is already in heaven, and say, "Although I am weak, there is Jesus Christ Who is powerful enough to make me stand upright. Although I am feeble, there is Jesus Christ who is my strength. Although I am full of miseries, Jesus Christ is in immortal glory and what He has will some time be given to me and I shall partake of all His benefits. Yes, the devil is called the prince of this world. But what of it? Jesus Christ holds him in check; for He is King of heaven and earth. There are devils above us in the air who make war against us. But what of it? Jesus Christ rules above, having entire control of the battle. Thus, we need not doubt that He gives us the victory. I am here subject to many changes, which may cause me to lose courage. But what of it? The Son of God is my Head, Who is exempt from all change. I must, then, take confidence in Him. This is how we must look at His Ascension, applying the benefit to ourselves."<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

The ascension is an absolutely critical part of the Nicene Faith and vital to the Christian spiritual life. The One who came down also went up. Christianity is based on the history of Jesus Christ in the world of space and time. The ascension in the flesh starkly asserts a new reality: a man, in his body, went to the place where God is, to heaven. This is not mythology, but reality and on it (in concert with the crucifixion and resurrection) everything turns. A part of the life of Christ himself, the ascension is, as Jesus is, a rock against which we may stumble and thus crash into unbelief or soupy "metaphorical" Christianity, or it is a foundation stone for a vital, vibrant

Christian life. Moreover, the ascension asserts the continuing incarnation of Christ which is the very basis for his union with us, the only way in which we can be saved from our sins, resurrected in body and taken to live with him in blessed communion eternally.

The ascension, then, offers the vision of our hope for the future. But still more, the ascension informs us in the present, for by it we see the relationship between the ascended Head and his Body, the firstfruits and his whole harvest. We live in him, now and forever. The ascension is a vital plank in the rule of faith, on which the weight of our sufferings and sojournings may securely rest.

<sup>1</sup> Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ as Represented in Art*, New York: Macmillan, 1895, p. 455.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *A Passion for Christ*, Lenoir: PLC Publications, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II. 16. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans and Sons, 1988, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *A Treatise on Faith and the Creed*, chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976, pp. 128-131.

<sup>7</sup> Novatian, *On the Trinity*, chapter 14.

<sup>8</sup> J. G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1958, p. 132. Davies translated from the *Patrologiae Graeco* (P.G.) 28.1091-1100.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament*, Sermon 41, sections 6-8.

<sup>10</sup> Tertullian, *On The Resurrection of the Flesh*, section 51, Emphasis mine.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.12.18-19.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Texts of the New Testament*, Sermon 73, section 3. Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> see Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999, pp. 72-81.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons*, Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1997, pp. 238-9.

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# Jesus Christ: Lord in History

By Andrew Purves

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Here is something marvelous: the Son of God descended from heaven in such a way that, without leaving heaven, he willed to be borne in the virgin's womb, to go about the earth, and to hang upon the cross; yet he continuously filled the world even as he had done from the beginning! (John Calvin, *Institutes*, 11,13,4.)<sup>1</sup>

What is the consequence of whether or not we take very seriously that in the incarnation God assumed human flesh? On October 17, 1944 my former teacher of theology in Edinburgh, Tom Torrance, was a stretcher-bearer following the British troops in a night attack on the small town of San Martino, in Italy. In an unpublished memoir, he writes:

When daylight filtered through, I came across a young soldier, Private Philips, scarcely twenty years old, lying mortally wounded on the ground, who clearly had not long to live. As I knelt down and bent over him, he said, 'Padre, is God really like Jesus?' I assured him that he was the only God that there is, the God who had come to us in Jesus, has shown his face to us, and poured out his love to us as our Saviour. As I prayed and commended him to the Lord Jesus, he passed away.

Torrance goes on to comment,

That incident left an indelible impression on me....I kept wondering afterwards what modern theology and the Churches had done to drive some kind of wedge between God and Jesus. There is no hidden God... no God behind the back of the Lord Jesus, but only the one Lord God who became incarnate in him.<sup>2</sup>

Truly, when we try to look into the face of God, it is the face of Jesus Christ revealed in the gospels that comes before us. And to see the face of our Lord is to see the face of the Father: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," we read of Jesus saying at John 14:9. So it is that a real problem arises in our understanding of Christian faith and life when a wedge is driven between the historical Jesus

and God. If Jesus is not God in the flesh, the effect is to shut God out of the world, making God mute, hidden, and inoperative with regard to our sin. It reduces Jesus to a teacher of ethics and spirituality because he is no longer Emmanuel. This means that God has not really come among us uniquely in Jesus Christ in a gracious incarnation and that God in Christ has not borne our sins on the cross and thus borne them away. This means, further, that Christ is not raised and ascended, and will not come again to gather all things unto himself. This means, finally, that God is not known in Christ truly as Father.

Preparing these reflections during the Christmas season, I find that I am drawn again to reflect on the inescapable physical historical reality of the gospel contained in the fact of the incarnation. That is, in the incarnation God entered history. Apart from a real incarnation in which God bears our flesh in Christ Jesus, Christianity ultimately has nothing to commend it; for otherwise God is not known and God does not save. Thus, according to T. F. Torrance:

Perhaps the most fundamental truth which we have to learn in the Christian Church, or rather relearn since we have suppressed it, is that the Incarnation was the coming of God to save us in the heart of our fallen and depraved humanity, where humanity is at its wickedest in its enmity and violence against the reconciling love of God.<sup>3</sup>

The unbounded, eternal God in love and grace entered into history as the man Jesus, becoming as we are, bounded within creation, while remaining the unbounded Lord of all; a child of and in history, while remaining the eternal Lord of history. "Eternity or time—do we have to choose between them?" asked H. R. Mackintosh, the beloved Edinburgh theologian of the first third of the century, and himself the teacher of Torrance. "What if Christ belongs to both at once!"<sup>4</sup> Following the lead of Mackintosh and Torrance, the major task of theology is in each generation to come to terms with the stubborn insistence on the part of the New Testament and the church throughout history that the Word of God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, entering into the frail and finite conditions of creaturliness for us and for our salvation, without ceasing to be what he ever was, is, and always will be: Lord of all. This is the miracle and the mystery

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that stands at the center of Christian faith. In more technical terms, it is the affirmation of what came to be known as the *extra Calvinisticum*, the teaching of Calvin that the God who walked on earth never left heaven.<sup>5</sup>

The special focus of this essay, however, is to insist that there is an empirical dimension to all knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. All knowledge of God is ultimately possible through and accountable to Jesus come in the flesh. This is the significance of Matthew 11:27, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” The reason is that in the gospel of Jesus Christ the life of God falls within the life of humankind, within our world and our history. To reflect, then, on the historicity of Jesus Christ—the same yesterday, today and forever—means that we must find a place for yesterday’s gospel, insisting on the historical truth and reality that the Word of God has become a personal physical event. Everything depends on the truth that God was in Christ in history, 2000 years ago in Palestine.

Now this means more than that Jesus, a godly man, once lived. Further, Christian faith rejects an adoptionist view that God blessed a godly man, making him Lord. The gospel is more radical than that. The doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ protects against that view. The gospel attests that in and as Jesus Christ, the eternal God, the Almighty Lord, who is beyond all time and space, in love and grace interposed himself into time and space to change for all time the sin-drenched situation and condition of those who live within the bounds of the created order. To put it differently, God made room for himself in our physical existence in such a way that, apart from the act of God becoming a man, Jesus would not have existed and God would not be savingly known. In which case, the fully human life of Jesus must be regarded as grounded in the act of the Word of God becoming flesh.

The Patristic doctrine of the anhypostasis asserts that Christ’s human nature has its reality only in union with God, having no independent existence apart from the incarnation. This is the real context out of which to interpret the theological significance of the doctrines of the conception by the Holy Spirit and the virginity of Mary. God took on the flesh of humankind in union with himself in such a way that Christ’s human nature has no independent existence apart from the incarnation. This divine accommodation to become as we are in Jesus Christ is the proper definition of grace. God stoops to save.

Two current views of history make this central Christian claim problematic. First, history today appears to be something in which there is little investment of value. “You’re history,” someone is told. With these words that person is dismissed, consigned to the recycle bin. History, by implication, is a category of non-being and disinterest because it has no bearing on present experience. It’s past

and gone, without worth or merit. What matters, presumably, is only the present experience. A personal illustration: my son, Brendan, went up to college last Fall to study...history. We were riding back from a soccer tournament during his last summer at home chatting about college and allied matters. As if the thought had suddenly struck him, he asked, “Dad, what will I do with a degree in history? I’ll be good for nothing. There aren’t many jobs in the employment section of the newspaper advertising for historians.”

The second and more sophisticated problem Christians face in speaking about God entering history is that history tends to be defined by those who see history and nature as a closed box with no possibility of God getting access. This is an old view, going back to Greek philosophy, that has found expression throughout the history of Christian theology, but which for us today is the legacy of the Enlightenment as it worked its way into Protestant liberal theology throughout the nineteenth century. The universe is cut into two separate halves, one spiritual and the other physical, and there is no intercommunication. Even our language suggests this when we refer to that which is natural and that which is supernatural.

History is defined naturally, as it were, in such a way that a God outside of nature has no place in the physical scheme of things. History is defined in terms that exclude the action of God in time and space; and so, incarnation, miracles and the resurrection have to be explained away as stories and myths; truths, no doubt, in some spiritual, poetic or moral sense, but with no basis in fact. Thus, the modern liberal view of history, and of what is possible in time and space, is defined specifically to exclude God as an active agent. A more secular view simply sees history and nature operating mechanistically on purely materialist terms, leaving no place at all for spiritual things, even outside of the box.

Rejecting these approaches towards history, the church defends the Christian gospel as inherently a gospel with a history: Jesus who is God lived, died and rose from the dead. This means that the incarnation is real, not apparent, that God came as the man Jesus, died as the man Jesus, was raised as the man Jesus, and ascended to the right hand of the Father as the man Jesus. Following Calvin, this does not mean that we can collapse the whole of God into the incarnation, but it does mean there is no Christianity without the history of God in incarnation and atonement, cross, resurrection and ascension, and that God is not to be found outside of the person of the Mediator. To deny that in Christ God became flesh is to deny that in Christ God bore our sins on the cross, to deny that in Christ God was raised on the third day, to deny also that in Christ our humanity ascended to the throne of grace—all of them acts of God in history, indeed, acts defining history. To deny the awkward, empirical historical nature of the gospel is to fatally undercut the foundation of Christianity. It becomes a truncated gospel. What would be left is a grand old myth, a story that helps

us to give some meaning to our miserable lives. But gone is the glorious and redeeming fact that the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

We all know the common sense test of truth: it looks like a duck, it smells like a duck, it waddles like a duck, it sounds like a duck. *Ergo*, it is a duck! Similarly, in the New Testament, in text after text, on page after page, in book after book, in epistle after epistle we find the assertions in one form or another that the Word became flesh; he died, he rose, he ascended. There really is a history to this! Someone once said, "If you want a picture of spiritual beggary, contemplate the mind of a person stripped of all its historical accumulations and sitting naked among the eternal truths of reason."<sup>6</sup> Christian faith confesses not a set of ideas, no matter how wonderful, but rather God come in the flesh, in history, in and as Jesus, son of Mary.

We only know God in Christ as the present and coming Lord because God has really come among us in the flesh of our humanity. We only know who God will be for us in the future because God has really come among us in the flesh as Mary's son. Now let me immediately stop to repeat the assertion: God has come among us in history, in the flesh of Jesus Christ, as Mary's son. Perhaps we can become so familiar with these words and ideas that it is hard to hear the gospel in such a way that the familiar becomes unfamiliar again. What the gospel is as today's gospel and tomorrow's gospel depends for its truth and reality on yesterday's gospel, namely, that in Jesus Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwelt bodily" (Colossians 2:9). We must understand this as not so much God in the man Jesus, but as God as the man Jesus, in history: this is the glorious claim of the gospel that stands modern views of history on their heads. It is precisely because we can and must say of God incarnate as Jesus, "You're history," that we can and must say also that Jesus is the present and coming Lord.

There is a 'yesterday' to the gospel that cannot and must not be explained away, demythologized, or denied. We can appreciate how extraordinary this is by thinking about the inner meaning of the word 'incarnation.' It is really quite a shocking word. The root of the word is the rather morally awkward word 'carnal.' Incarnation literally means that God became carnal. Now immediately let me say that carnal does not need to have the overtones of the selfish enjoyment of one's baser nature. But it does mean having to do with bodiliness, with an animal nature, or more generally with worldliness. Thus, John 1:14 could be translated theologically as "And the Word of God became carnal, thereby living among us in history, full of grace and truth." In Greek the text reads, "*ho logos sarx egeneto*"— '*sarx*' means flesh. The 'yesterday' of the incarnation means that God has really come among us in historical flesh, and the truth of and future for human existence has everything to do with that specific, historical act of God's flesh-bearing.

Sometimes in seminary teaching it is important to cut through all the big words and complex arguments and put the case clearly. Often I say to students that Jesus either is uniquely within the sphere of the Divine or he isn't. He, the man Jesus, is either God or not. There is no other option. If he is God, uniquely and savingly he is God with us in the flesh; and as God with us in the flesh, he is God for us. In which case John 14:6, "No one comes to the Father except through me," eliminates all other attempts to approach God. Thus, as H. R. Mackintosh noted in his lovely book, *The Person of Jesus Christ* (1912, and reissued in 2000), Jesus Christ is "the hinge and pivot of the universe, the Person on whom everything turned in the relation of God to man."<sup>7</sup>

If, on the other hand, Jesus is not God but just a great religious and moral teacher, then Christianity is just a grand idea but with no ultimate truth to it; and critics of orthodoxy are right, God has many faces and many names. This means that God in the flesh of Jesus has not entered into our plight, has not taken our sin upon himself in saving condescension and has not been raised to be the ground of hope. The inner core of the evangelical message of the gospel on which everything depends is that in and as Jesus Christ God has come among us, God has entered into our plight, God has shown us his true face, and God has done that which was necessary to bring us back to communion with himself. There is an historical actuality to the good news of the gospel that we must defend at all costs.

When a wedge is driven between Jesus and God, the consequence is the collapse of redemption into mythology and the fragmentation of meaning in all talk of God. This wedge driven between Jesus and the singular Lordship of Jesus Christ and all of the subsequent mythological inventions and symbolized re-imaginings that provoke our discussions today. Undercut the historical singularity of the incarnation and the atonement, deny the reality of the resurrection and the ascension, and we deliver a fatal blow to the gospel.

What is left if the incarnation is seen as apparent rather than real, metaphorical rather than actual? One result is the tendency today on the part of some people to distill the gospel into principles, into abstract moral concepts that begin to function on their own as the real content of faith. There is much talk of justice, inclusivity, diversity, hospitality, liberation, love and so on. These are all virtuous themes, and they derive from Jesus and the Christian message.

The problem arises when an abstract Christ-principle or visionary moral ideal is elevated as the real meaning of Christianity, replacing the historic person of Jesus Christ as Son of God and our actual union with Christ as the basis for the Christian life. While evangelical faith calls believers to a participation in God's life and mission by an exclusive attachment to Jesus Christ, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, there is a modernist tendency that calls for

an adherence to the teaching of Jesus only. This leads to a rejection of our union with Christ, which is the central doctrine of Christian practical theology, and its replacement with a Christianity of ethical behavior. Adherence to the teaching of Jesus is not wrong as such, but it represents a diminished, truncated, and ultimately fatal view of Christian faith, one that is very vulnerable to co-optation by various cultural agendas. Jesus is turned from savior into a moral philosopher.

In summary, Christian faith is not ultimately characterized by a passion for an ethical vision (although that is most decidedly included), but by a passion for a Person—the Person of Jesus Christ, who is himself the gospel because he is God with us and God for us. The Christian faith is not a religious abstraction repeating the teaching of Jesus in our own day; but, in the power of the Holy Spirit, a living relationship with him who is savior and Lord, and through him, a relationship with the Father. And what keeps this in place, what keeps it grounded in God’s reality, is the consistent New Testament emphasis on the concrete historical ‘yesterday’ of the gospel as an actual event concerning Jesus, who uniquely was God with us and for us, alone Lord.

What is at stake here is the belief that who we see God to be for us in Jesus Christ is who God is antecedently and eternally in himself. This was one of the great themes that was drilled into us by Tom Torrance as we sat in his Dogmatics classroom in New College, Edinburgh, and that is developed consistently in many of his books. That is, God is none other than who he is in Jesus (not reducible to Jesus, just as the Word of God is not reducible to Jesus, though this Word is Jesus) and never other than who he is toward us in Jesus. For the person of faith, who knows and loves God in Jesus Christ, there is no hidden God, or some aspect of God now unknown, that will confound us and of which we should live in terror. Thus confidence in revelation and assurance of salvation are appropriate only in the light of the reality of the incarnation as an actual event of God in history. For the person of unbelief, of course, who does not know Jesus Christ as Lord, the face of God is one of judgment and wrath. It is the face of God’s terrible holiness. This means that Jesus Christ alone, solely and uniquely, is the hinge and pivot on whom everything turns in the relationship between God and us, and us and God, and that we can trust him with this.

This is the heart of the evangelical message of the gospel: in Christ there is salvation and life; outside of Jesus Christ there is no salvation, only judgment where holiness does not express itself as love but as consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). This Lord Jesus is our savior, in whom God came in a blessed incarnation to bring many brothers and sisters to glory.

The gospel attests that the one person of the Son of God assumed human nature into himself, and thus into his

divine nature, in the concrete historical event that took place in Bethlehem of Judea around two thousand years ago. In this event our sins are forgiven. And in union with this Lord Jesus through the Holy Spirit we are restored to communion with the Father. Nowhere have I found the historicity of the gospel expressed more beautifully and simply than in the simple Scottish carol, “Christ in the manger.” It is sung to the lovely Scottish Gaelic tune, Bunessan, which is better known as the tune to which we sing “Morning has broken:”

Child in the manger,  
 Infant of Mary;  
 Outcast and stranger,  
 Lord of all!  
 Child who inherits  
 All our transgressions,  
 All our demerits  
 On him fall.

Once the most holy  
 Child of salvation  
 Gently and lowly  
 Lived below;  
 Now, as our glorious  
 Mighty Redeemer,  
 See him victorious  
 O’er each foe.

Prophets foretold him,  
 Infant of wonder;  
 Angels behold him  
 On his throne;  
 Worthy our Saviour  
 Of all their praises;  
 Happy for ever  
 Are his own.<sup>8</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup>. Edited by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).
  - <sup>2</sup>. Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1999), 74.
  - <sup>3</sup>. T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 48.
  - <sup>4</sup>. H. R. Mackintosh, *The Person of Jesus Christ*, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2000), 48.
  - <sup>5</sup>. See also Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. by Harold Knight (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 118-119.
  - <sup>6</sup>. Cited in H. R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology: From Schleiermacher to Barth* (London: Nisbet and Co. Ltd., 1937), 156.
  - <sup>7</sup>. Mackintosh, *The Person of Jesus Christ*, 10.
  - <sup>8</sup>. Mary Macdonald 1817 – c. 1890. Translated by Lachan Macbean 1853-1931. From *The Church Hymnary*, third edition, OUP, 1973.

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Many in the Church are disappointed by the failure of Amendment O. This is not the time, however, to allow discouragement to overwhelm us. The Church is being transformed. But, when transformation is taking place there are often forces working in both directions at the same time. The loss of Amendment O is a set-back but it is the first serious loss in a decade. We have seen many steps toward renewal including: the inclusion of the ordination standards into our Constitution, and the defeat of attempts to nullify it, a resolution condemning partial birth abortion, a mandate by the GA to rewrite the sexuality curriculum to bring it into conformance with biblical standards, and changes in national leadership.

We plan to be a witness at General Assembly. However, we need your help to do that. The cost to have a booth at GA is about \$2500. We will have copies of *Theology Matters* available for commissioners and observers on euthanasia as the GA moves toward a policy statement, on the centrality of Christ, abortion, sexuality and a host of other topics.

Change is slow and arduous work and there will be set-backs. This is a time to pray fervently and to work diligently for change. We need to stand firm, trusting that this is Christ's Church. He gave his life for a church that was covered with sin. The ministry of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry is to equip you to stand and witness with clarity and boldness in your congregation, at presbytery meetings and at General Assembly. The battle is winnable. We cannot win the battle, however, unless we are anchored with unswerving trust in Jesus Christ, covered with prayer, equipped with a knowledge of Presbyterian process and the issues, and filled with a spirit of courage and boldness.

When John Wesley was asked what he needed to "spread scriptural holiness throughout the land" he replied, "I need only a dozen people who hate nothing but sin and fear no one but God." Wesley's preaching and those few people lit a fire that spread throughout England and the world.

One of our upcoming issues of *Theology Matters* will deal with the various theologies being promoted by candidates for ministry. This issue will help Pastoral Nominating Committee discern the theology of candidates and how that theology compares to the Bible and the Confessions.

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## ***Our Purpose***

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM) is working to restore the strength and integrity of the Presbyterian Church(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping individual Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view.

PFFM is committed to the restoration, in the lives of individual Presbyterians and in the Church, of Reformed theology as taught in Scripture and expressed in the Confessions. To affirm the Christian faith is necessarily to reject all false ideologies. The First Commandment carries both a commitment to the One True Lord God and a rejection of false gods, "I am the Lord your God, ... You shall have no other gods before me." To commit to the Lord God and reality as he has defined it, without also rejecting false gods and their world view is to unite the worship of the living Lord with idols.

Therefore PFFM is committed to discussing the doctrines of Reformed Christian faith and their world view implications by contrasting them with the beliefs of false religions and their distorted world views. This is done primarily through PFFM's bi-monthly publication, *Theology Matters*. Today the primary attack on Christian faith is from the false religion of feminist ideology which includes New Age, pagan, neo-pagan and wiccan teachings.

PFFM is convinced that an obedient understanding of family and ministry can only grow out of a faith in Jesus Christ that is based on Scripture and the Confessions and is free of compromise with false ideologies.

## ***What We Believe***

1. We believe in the One living and true God who exists eternally in three persons -- the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We believe that "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."<sup>1</sup> We believe that God is our Creator, that he has revealed himself to us through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and that apart from this revelation we remain ignorant of his name, his nature, and his will.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that asserts that the creature has the right to name and define the Creator, or to determine how God should act in any time and place.

2. We believe that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh. We believe that he was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, performed miracles, suffered and died on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, is seated in glorious authority making intercession for his elect, and that he will return to judge sin and establish his eternal kingdom.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that denies either the human or divine natures of Christ, his atoning work, or his exalted Lordship.

3. "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that asserts that there are other "lords" to whom we owe allegiance.

4. We believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the inspired Word of God -- the unique, reliable, and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and his will for our lives. We believe that the Creeds and Confessions of the church, while subordinate to Christ and the Scriptures, are nevertheless authoritative standards.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that declares that the Bible is an ancient document inapplicable to modern life, that God continues to give new revelation apart from Scripture, or that the meaning of Scripture is at variance with the plain meaning of its words understood in their historic context. We also reject the false ideology that teaches that the plain meaning of the Creeds and Confessions, understood in their historic context, are without authority in the church.

5. We believe that from every generation and race, God has sovereignly called and redeemed a people for his own glory -- "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."<sup>3</sup> We believe that Jesus Christ is alive and present with this people by the indwelling and empowering Holy Spirit whose work it is to regenerate, give faith, justify, sanctify, and give assurance that we are, by grace, at the price of Christ's shed blood, the adopted sons and daughters of God.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that teaches that human beings have the capacity within themselves, by

virtue of their humanity alone, and apart from redemption, to become the sons and daughters of God.

6. We believe that as the people of God, we have been called and commanded to proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, to call men and women, boys and girls, to the obedience of faith, and in every generation to reclaim and reform the purity of the Church's witness.

Therefore, we reject the false ideology that denies the Church's call, in every generation, to challenge cultural distortions of the gospel and to witness to the uniqueness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and human beings.

1. The Shorter Catechism
2. The Theological Declaration of Barmen
3. 1 Peter 2:9

## Bible Study of the Book of Revelation

### Study 7: The Book of Revelation Chapters 10-11: An Interlude

by Rev. Mark Atkinson, The International Church of Warsaw, Poland

Many commentators see Chapters 10 and 11 as an interlude between the announcements of sixth and seventh trumpets. They see a parallel interlude between the breaking of sixth and seventh seals (Chapter 7). Certainly it is not unreasonable to see these shifts in the narrative in this way. However, an interlude is popularly understood to be the time in-between the main acts of a play. The difficulty is that in this sense the word *interlude* suggests a reduced importance. That is not how we should understand these two extended descriptions. In each sequence the seventh brings an ending, it is the final word. John's message is pastoral. As we move towards these final things, what can we be sure of? What can we count on? Before the breaking of the seventh seal, John's vision gives assurance that God's people are sealed and belong to him. Before the sounding of the final trumpet of warning to an impenitent world, John's vision is an assurance that God is sending his word and his witnesses out, that those who will hear might have opportunity to repent and turn to him in faith. It is not so much an interlude as a reaffirmation of God's continuing efforts to win a lost and rebellious world in the light of the inevitability of coming judgment.

John sees a mighty angel holding a scroll. He may be the same mighty angel we met in 5:2 who asked the question "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" This time the angel is holding a small scroll. John is instructed to take the scroll and eat it. He is told that it will be sweet in his mouth and bitter in his stomach. And so it proves. The imagery suggests that the messengers of God are to take his word and internalize it, make it their own, learn it, digest it. God's word is to become part of us the way food becomes part of us. At the same time, the message we learn is both sweet and bitter. Its sweetness is the message of the gospel. Its bitterness is the reality of suffering and rejection. As Jesus told his disciples in John 15:21 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you."

### The Two Witnesses

John is given the task of measuring the Temple (vs.11: 1 – 2). The Temple is the symbol of God's presence in the midst of his people. The act of measuring is a sign of God's care and knowledge. It is the equivalent to the sealing of the saints that was seen in chapter 7. God knows his own. In the midst of all that will unfold, God holds them fast. God's people are safe within his sanctuary. The outer court is excluded from John's task because those who are outside do not possess the assurance and comfort given to God's elect.

The image of the number three and one half is seen in vs. 2, 3, 9, and 11. In v. 2 the image is that of forty-two months, which is three and one half years. In v. 3 it is 1,266 days, which is also three and one half years. In each instance, as we have seen before in Revelation, this numeric image is not to be understood literally. Three and one half is half way to the number seven. Seven is the number of God's perfect purpose and activity in the world. We should understand the number three and one half as simply referring to the time in-between; the time between the already, and the not yet; the time in which we live. It is the time between Egypt and the Promised Land, the time between redemption and fulfillment.

In v. 3 God sends to the world two witnesses. Who are these two witnesses? We are not told explicitly. The witnesses preach and they are martyred; leading some to conclude that Peter and Paul are intended. Perhaps we should understand them generically as the witness of the Word and the witness of sacrifice. It is noteworthy that the English word **martyr** comes from the Greek word for **witness**. But then the imagery of v. 6 suggests clearly the ministries of Moses and Elijah. The solution is found in the parallel imagery of the two olive trees and two lampstands in v. 4. Olive trees produce oil. Lamps give light. Oil is for anointing. It symbolizes the power and work of the Holy Spirit. The lampstands, as we have seen (1:12-13; 2:5) are symbols of the church. The two witnesses then are the anointing (and transforming) power of the Spirit in the lives of Christ's followers and the public witness and testimony of the Church. It is important to note that the work of the witnesses occur before the last trumpet sounds.

In v. 7 the beast of Revelation makes his first appearance. He comes from the bottomless pit and he makes war upon the witnesses, destroying them in life, and humiliating them in death. Yet for all of his destructive wrath, his power is still circumscribed. He is permitted to assault the witnesses *when they have finished their testimony*. God's purposes are at work even in the destructive power of the beast. The imagery of vs. 11 – 13 is perplexing. The New King James Bible uses as the heading for these verses **The Witnesses Resurrected**. That statement is misleading. The martyrs spoken of in this passage are resuscitated, not resurrected. The seventh trumpet has not yet blown. The key is that the outcome of the martyr's sacrifice is that some people on the rebellious earth (v. 13) *gave glory to the God of heaven*.

### The Seventh Trumpet

The Seventh Trumpet represents a major turning point in the story of Revelation. This now is the end, though at this point in his vision John will only give us a glimpse. He will return to the end in greater detail later. This is also *the third<sup>1</sup> woe*, meaning the final, complete, totality of woe. But it is a woe only for an unrepentant world. It is joy for the church. We are back to the image of the throne of heaven, which we have seen earlier in chapters 4 and 5. Here again are the twenty-four elders (symbolizing

the people of God from the Old and New Covenants), doing what they were doing before, offering praise and glory and adoration to God. They praise God for what he has done and what he is about to do. In v. 15 there is an affirmation of transformation: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah." Note what the elders sing in v. 17, "We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were. What is missing is the usual affirmation that God *is, and was and is to come*. Now there is no need for that affirmation, for he has come and his glory has been revealed.

The vision of the seventh trumpet ends with John seeing the heavenly Temple open in heaven and the Ark of the Covenant revealed. Recall that in the earthly temple, the Ark of the Covenant remained hidden behind the veil in the Holiest of Holies. The thunder and lightning are reminiscent of the spectacular heavenly display when the Israelites were camped at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:16). God's presence, hidden behind the veil during the days of the Old Covenant, made available through the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ under the New Covenant, is now, at last, fully revealed and known. What was hidden is now to be seen. What was closed is now open. But at this point, John is giving us only a glimpse. In our next study we will be given a further revelation of the nature of the cosmic conflict that must be endured before the end finally comes.

<sup>1</sup> As used here, **third** should be understood as an intensification of the woe to be born, not a specific sequence of events.

#### Come Join Us Working for Renewal in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Join us in being a voice calling the Presbyterian Church(USA) and individual Presbyterians back to Reformed Christian faith rooted in Scripture and our Confessions while also rejecting false gods and their ideologies.

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