

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages	Pastor/Teacher
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Text:	Luke 24:33-53; Acts 1:1-11	
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The Ascension

Bart Ehrman has quickly become the most outspoken critic of Biblical Christianity. A graduate of Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, Ehrman claims he was once a die-hard evangelical. He went on to earn a Ph.D. from Princeton Seminary majoring in New Testament where he studied of the renown Evangelical New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger – but Ehrman soon after came to abhor anything resembling Evangelicalism. He has written over twenty books denouncing every aspect of Evangelical theology. He has been featured in *Time* magazine and made regular appearances on TV programs like *Dateline NBC*, *NPR* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. His most recent book, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (Harper Collins, 2014) in which, among other things he declares that Jesus' tomb was empty because Jesus was *never* buried in the first place – his body was left hanging on the cross to rot and be eaten by scavengers (p. 160-61). Since Jesus never rose from the grave his followers like Peter, John, Mary and Paul and *all* the other witnesses only hallucinated seeing him because of their fixation and state of bereavement (p. 192).¹

Recently, what with the popularity of *The DaVinci Code*, *The Gospel of Judas* and other books that echo the ancient heretical voice of Gnosticism, I was somewhat stunned to read that N.T. Wright (who has gone on record criticizing this kind of stuff) says there are *many* fine Christians who do *not* believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. The good bishop, who, as it turns out, also denies inerrancy, as well as the Reformation's understanding of *Sola Fide* is nonetheless considered one of the heroes of much of today's evangelicalism for his opposition to the kind of radical NT scholarship advanced by the notorious *Jesus Seminar* (from which so much of this recent nonsense i.e. *The DaVinci Code*, has taken it's cue).

The New Testament makes a number of direct references to Christ's ascension. Here are some of them: "And the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). "And He led them out as far as to Bethany: and lifting up His hands, He blessed them. And it came to pass, whilst He blessed them, that He departed from them, and was carried up to heaven" (Luke 24:50, 51). "And no man hath ascended into heaven, but He that descended from heaven, The Son of man, who is in heaven" (John 3:13). "And when He had said these things, while they looked on, He was raised up: and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And whilst they were beholding Him going up to heaven, behold, two men stood by them, in white garments" (Acts 1:9, 10). "Wherefore He saith: Ascending on high, He led captivity captive: He gave gifts to men" (Ephesians 4:8). "Having, therefore, a great high priest who hath penetrated the heavens, Jesus the Son of God: let us hold fast our confession" (Hebrews 4:14, cf. also 1:13; 6:20; 8:1; 9:12, 24; 10:12; 12:2; 13:20). The Apostle Paul in I Timothy 3:16 declares, "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by the angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."²

Did the resurrection and ascension really happen? Is the language of the New Testament to be understood as merely symbolic and poetic? Was this simply a way of expressing the world picture of the day? What is the real significance of the ascension?

I. THE ASCENSION: ITS TRUE CHARACTER

There are a number of responses that can be given to those who would seek to discredit the reality of a physical ascension.

- A. The Eyewitness. Luke repeatedly underscores the fact that eyewitnesses were present. “ ‘He was taken up *before their very eyes*, and a cloud hid Him *from their sight*. They were *looking intently* into the sky as He was going...’ The two angels then said to them, ‘Why do you stand here *looking* into the sky? This same Jesus...will come back in the same way you have *seen Him go* into heaven.’ Five times in this extremely brief account it is stressed that the ascension took place visibly. Luke has not piled up these phrases for nothing. He has much to say in his two-volume work about the importance for the verification of the gospel of the apostolic eyewitnesses. And here he plainly includes the ascension of Jesus within the range of historical truths to which the eyewitnesses could (and did) testify.”³
- B. The Narrative. Luke’s account is told with simplicity and sobriety. There are none of the extravagances that are so often associated with the apocryphal gospels and legend literature. There is no evidence of poetry or symbolism in Luke’s language. On the contrary, the narrative reads like history.
- C. The Transition. If Jesus did not ascend into heaven, what happened to Him? Why the cessation of the post-resurrection appearances? A great deal must be read into the New Testament documents in order to dismiss the ascension.⁴ “At present it is good enough to say that, so far as the direct evidence of the men of our Lord’s generation on any point can satisfy us, the witnesses to His Ascension could have had no better opportunities than they enjoyed, could not have been more capable of profiting by them, could not have spoken more clearly than they have done, and could, by neither word nor deed, have given more conclusive evidence as to their own convictions. So far as evidence handed down from a remote past can carry conviction with it, that evidence is here.”⁵

II. THE ASCENSION: ITS IMPORTANCE

The doctrine of Christ’s ascension cannot be separated from His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. These are all essential to His work as Redeemer.

- A. The Culmination of Christ’s Work. Our Lord’s death and resurrection would not have their full effect until Jesus ascended to the Father as the great High Priest of His people (Hebrews 4:14-16).
- B. The Glorification of Christ’s Person. The ascension speaks of Jesus’ glorified humanity. The physical body of Christ is now enthroned in heaven. This has a significant bearing on the New Testament understanding of the “Body of Christ” imagery as used to describe the church (Ephesians 1:22, 23) and the Lord’s Supper (I Corinthians 11:23-29).⁶
- C. The Heavenly Session of Christ the King. The Lord Jesus Christ does now reign. His work on behalf of His Church continues. “His victorious triumph assures us of the efficacy of His work of mediation, and is particularly important for our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. When the doctrine of heavenly session is eclipsed, the work of the spirit can be detached from that of Christ, either by too high a doctrine of the visible church, or by a spirituality which virtually ignores the work of Christ altogether, or regards it as only the beginning of the church’s life.”⁷

CONCLUSION: “Remember,” said Warfield, “that you serve a living, not a dead Christ. You are to trust in His blood. In it alone, you have life. But you are to remember that He was not broken by death, but broke death; and having purchased you to Himself by His blood, now rules over your souls from His heavenly throne. He is your master whom you are to obey. He has given you a commandment to bring all the peoples of the world to the knowledge of Him. And he has promised to be with you, even to the

end of the world. Live with Him. Keep fast hold upon Him; be in complete touch with Him. Let your hearts dwell with Him in the heavenly places, that the arm of His strength may be with you in your earthly toil. Let this be that by which all men know you: that in good report and in bad, in life and in death, in the great and in the small affairs of life—in everything you do down to the minutest acts of your everyday affairs—you are the servants of the Lord Christ. So will you be truly His disciples, and so will He be your Savior—unto the uttermost.”⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ A devastating critique of Ehrman’s book has just been released. A group of five New Testament scholars comprised of Michael Bird, Craig Evans, Simon Gathercole, Charles Hill and Chris Tilling have written *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus’ Divine Nature: A Response to Bart D. Ehrman* (Zondervan, 2014). In addition to this Mike Kruger (who many of you will remember served on our pastoral staff back in the 1990’s), professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC has addressed the writing of Ehrman on his blog *Canon Fodder* <http://michaelkruger.com/talking-bart-ehrman-tonight-with-greg-koukl-on-stand-to-reason>.

² In Acts 1:9 the phrase “he was taken up” is from the Greek verb EPAIRŌ meaning to lift up. In Luke 24:51 “he was taken up” is a different word; ANAPHERŌ means to carry or bear away. In Acts 1:2,11 and I Timothy 3:16, “was received up is from ANALAMBANŌ which means to lift up on high. The same verb is used in the Septuagint of Elijah’s translation to heaven (II Kings 2:11).

³ J. R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990), p. 48.

⁴ “Only severe Bible criticism can lead one to a denial of the ascension and even to its complete elimination from the original apostolic Kerygma.” G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 206.

⁵ William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord* (rpt. Attic Press, 1977), p. 9.

⁶ The Protestant Reformers were insistent that the phrase “body of Christ,” when used in reference to the Lord’s Supper, could not be understood in a physical sense (as taught by the doctrine of transubstantiation) but only in a spiritual sense. Cf. G.L. Bray, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. S.B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (IVP, 1988), p. 47.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ B.B. Warfield, *The Savior of the World* (rpt. Mack, 1972), p. 125.