

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	33	Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Ephesians 1:18-23	
Date:	May 17, 2015 a.m.	

The Enthroned Lord Jesus Christ

18. Lord's Day

Question 49. Of what advantage to us is Christ's ascension into heaven?

Answer: First, that he is our advocate in the presence of his Father in heaven; (a) secondly, that we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that he, as the head, will also take up to himself, us, his members; (b) thirdly, that he sends us his Spirit as an earnest, (c) by whose power we "seek the things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God, and not things on earth." (d)

(a) 1 John 2:1 My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: Rom. 8:34 Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. (b) John 14:2 In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. John 17:24 Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world. John 20:17 Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Eph. 2:6 And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: (c) John 14:16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; John 16:7 Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. Acts 2:1 And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. Acts 2:2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. Acts 2:3 And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. Acts 2:4 And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts 2:33 Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. 2 Cor. 1:22 Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts. 2 Cor. 5:5 Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. (d) Col. 3:1 If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Philip. 3:14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

In dealing with the subject of Christ's heavenly session, we are, in the words of the late G.C. Berkouwer, "dealing with Christ's power, the power of his holy sacrifice by which our salvation is established in heavenly inviolability."¹ The Scripture uses a variety of expressions when describing Christ's session. Sometimes we read that Christ *sat down* at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven (Hebrews 1:3; 8:1). We read that the Father said to Him *sit Thou* on My right hand (Acts 2:34; Hebrews

1:13) or that the Father *set Him* there (Ephesians 1:20). The emphasis elsewhere falls on the act of taking the seat or on the condition of being seated (Matthew 26:64; Colossians 3:1). The place where Christ is seated is likewise richly described. He is on the right hand of the power of God (Matthew 26:64; Luke 22:69) or the right hand of the Majesty on High (Hebrews 1:3) or the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2). We read that Christ *is there* at God's right hand (Romans 8:34). The purpose of all this is to underscore the truth that after His death and resurrection, Christ ascended to the highest place beside God the Father Almighty (Philippians 2:9, 10). I am gravely concerned with the direction that Evangelicalism seems to be headed. There is afoot in Evangelical circles a rush to identify God's *present* activity in the world. This is especially the case among charismatics. "This is what God is doing!" and "This is how God is leading!" I am convinced that the attempts to name such things as God's doings are nothing more or less than attempts to sanction our own interests or activities (sometimes it is done as a way of getting people to respond financially to support what is without question declared to be a God-inspired ministry). Even well-meaning Christians can fall prey to this sort of sinful proclivity. Without realizing it they are detracting from the work of Christ. They shift the focus from what Christ has actually *done* to what we *assume* the Holy Spirit is now doing. David Wells has rightly warned, "Anything that does not arise from Christ's saving death as interpreted by Scripture, that does not promote Christ's glory as understood by the apostles' teaching, that does not bear the stamp of his grace as seen in obedience to his Word, love of his gospel, commitment to his church, and service of others cannot rightly be characterized as the work of God."² We cannot detach the work of the Spirit from that of Christ. When that happens then Christ's atoning work is overshadowed by a preoccupation with the power of the Spirit in the world today. As a result many Christian erroneously believe that spiritual strength and growth are to be had independently of the atonement, which is the only true basis and content of Christ's mediation.³ The heavenly session should continually remind us that Christ's work is at once efficacious and entirely complete. The Lamb who was slain on Calvary's cross is the One who now sits enthroned at the Father's right hand (Revelation 22:1, 3).

I. THE EXALTATION TO THE THRONE

Christ is now crowned with glory and honor (Hebrews 2:9). Hebrews 1:13 cites Psalm 110 where God Himself declares that there is One who will co-reign with Him. These words were never spoken of angels but find their fulfillment in the crucified and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. He who was rejected by men has been exalted by God (Acts 5:30).

- A. Mission Accomplished. He is seated. This speaks of His finished work. The language of Hebrews 10:13 explains, "every priest stands daily... offering repeatedly... But... Christ... sat down at the right hand of God."⁴
- B. Supreme Glory and Honor. Sitting at the right hand implies exaltation and blessedness. In Psalm 16:11 we are told that there is joy in God's presence and eternal pleasure at God's right hand (cf. Hebrews 12:2).
- C. Sovereign Rule. We are told in Exodus 15:6, "Your right hand, O LORD, was majestic in Power. Your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy." Christ is invested with majestic sovereignty. God seated him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given (Ephesians 1:20, 21).

II. THE EXECUTION OF HIS ROYAL OFFICES

It was John Calvin who first observed the three-fold offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King.

A. High Priest. He is the One who purges sin (Hebrews 1:3). He does this by making sacrifice (Hebrews 10:12). John Murray writes: “The definition of the office of high priest that he is ‘ordained for men in things pertaining to God’ (Hebrews 5:1), is brought to bear upon the continued high priestly activity of the Redeemer. His continued activity has a Godward reference as truly as did his finished priestly offering. This adds new richness to our conception of the relation he sustains to his people and enhances our understanding of the significance for us, as individual believers and as members of the body which is the church, of the activity which Christ in heaven continues to exercise in reference to God on behalf of those whom he has purchased with his blood.”⁵

B. Prophet. Christ sits on His throne as prophet. He has sent forth His Holy Spirit to instruct His people (Acts 2:33-34). “Christ remains active as prophet,” wrote Bavinck. “The preaching of the apostles, whether orally or in the writing of their letters, ties in with the instruction of Jesus, not with that which they received from Him before His death alone, but also with that which they received from Him during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension. We must not overlook this last named fact. It is only that which explains why the apostles stood in the conviction from the very beginning that Christ had not only died, but had been raised and was seated on the right hand of God as Lord and Christ, Prince and Savior, and the sinner’s whole salvation was contained in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.”⁶

CONCLUSION: “Christ successfully completed in all its fullness his propitiatory work on earth, and so could cry out: ‘It is finished!’ John Owen properly brings out in his *Commentary on Hebrews* that Christ’s session was not a continuation of the purging of our sins, but rather a consequence of this completed work. Owen noted that what remained for our great High Priest to do was to apply the benefits of his propitiation, as he intercedes for them.

“This completion of the atoning work is underlined by Christ’s sitting down, especially as we contrast it to how the Levitical high priests had to stand up in Tabernacle and Temple. In the Holy of Holies, there was the Ark of the Covenant, but no chair, for the priest must continue to stand as he sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat. The next year he would have to return, still standing, in order to repeat the ceremony, for it was not yet finished. It would take better than animal blood fully to remove sins (cf. Heb. 9:11-15)! But once the precious blood of Christ was poured out, and the offering accepted for all eternity by God, then our High Priest could sit down!

“On the basis of that fully accepted propitiatory atonement for sinners, Christ – still as our High Priest – who ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25), continues his priesthood through prayer on our behalf unto the end of time. Henry B. Swete explains it: ‘Heaven is not a place for sacrifice, and our Lord is no longer a sacrificing Priest: He has offered one sacrifice for sins for ever. But His Presence in the Holiest is a perpetual and effective presentation before God of the sacrifice once offered which is no less needful for our acceptance than the actual death upon the cross. He has indeed somewhat to offer in His heavenly priesthood, for He offers Himself as representing to God man reconciled, and as claiming for man the right of access to the Divine presence...’⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 226.

² D.F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 183.

³ F.D. Bruner in his classic work *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Eerdmans, 1970) says that any separation between the church’s experience of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit entails the gravest heresy (p. 245). “There is no other means for the full

gift of the Holy Spirit than the message of faith in Christ's finished work, either initially (Galatians 3:2) or continually (Galatians 3:5)" (p. 239).

⁴ "It is perfectly evident," says Louis Berkhof, "that it would be a mistake to infer from the fact that the Bible speaks of Christ's 'sitting' at the right hand of God, that the life to which the risen Lord ascended is a life of rest. It is and continues to be a life of constant activity. The statements of Scripture vary. Christ is not only represented as *sitting* at the right hand of God, but also simply as *being* at His right hand, Romans 8:34; 1 Peter 3:22, or as *standing* there, Acts 7:56, and even as *walking* in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 352.

⁵ *Collected Writings of John Murray I: The Claims of Truth* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p. 47.

⁶ H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine* (rpt. Baker, 1971), p. 377.

⁷ D.F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology II* (Mentor Books, 2014), p. 517.