

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Acts 1:1-11		Gary L. W. Johnson
Date:	April 7, 2024 (a.m.)		

THE ASCENSION

Note how the kinds of expressions that Scripture everywhere employs for the ascension of Christ into heaven prove that this ascension was true and real. Mark 16:19 has “he was taken up into heaven;” Luke 24:51: “He was carried up into heaven;” Acts 1:9: “He was taken up on high,” and verse 11: “This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” And so also the apostle says in Heb. 9:12 that our high priest “entered into the most holy place once and for all.” But according to [the Ubiquitarians] he would have entered heaven more often, in fact whenever he (in their opinion) appeared on the earth and then disappeared again. And verse 24 states: “For Christ did not enter a sanctuary that was made with hands, which was only a copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself now to appear before his Father’s face on our behalf.” Indeed, in John 16:28 Christ testifies that he is not only “going to the Father, but that he is also leaving this world” – which can only be taken to mean a real change of place.¹ The Apostle Paul in 1 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 angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”² It seems fairly obvious to the unbiased reader that the New Testament strongly affirms the historical reality of Christ’s ascension. It is, therefore, nothing short of astounding to read these words of a well-known seminary professor: “The Apostolic Witness . . . in its earliest form, does not proclaim an Ascension into heaven . . . this event was not underlined as of special importance during the first Christian century.”³ Did the 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 word picture of the day? What is the real significance of 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 Eyewitnesses.** 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* up 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.”⁴
 - 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.** Robert Letham makes this important observation: “The reference to *the cloud receiving him* is more than a weather report. The language is reminiscent of the Son of

Man (Dan. 7:13-14), who comes *with the clouds of heaven* and to whom is given *dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him*. Jesus, in his ascension as the Son of Man, receives his kingdom, which shall embrace *the end of the earth* (Acts 1:8). The rest of Acts records how this process begins. Luke has, in his Gospel, explained the things *Jesus began to do and teach* (Acts 1:1); now his focus is on the things he continues to do and teach through his apostles, ending at Rome, the heart of the leading world power (Acts 28). Throughout Scripture *the clouds are associated with the glory of God*. In the transfiguration (Luke 9:34-35), a cloud overshadows the three disciples, who are struck with fear. From the cloud comes the voice saying, *This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!* The Father speaks, referring to his Son; the cloud that envelops Jesus is the glory of the Father, and in this context the apostles are to listen to Jesus. John writes of Jesus at his Parousia, his coming *with the clouds* (Rev. 1:7), in line with the angels' announcement that Jesus will return as he has gone – with the clouds (Acts 1:10-11). His return will be in glory. His disappearance, concealed by a cloud, is his passing into the presence of God.”⁵ 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.⁶ “At present it is 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.”⁷

- 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 (Heb. 4:14-16).
 - B. ***The Glorification of Christ’s Person.*** The ascension speaks of Jesus’s glorified humanity. New Testament understanding of the “Body of Christ” imagery as used to describe the church (Eph. 1:22, 23) and the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-29).⁸
 - 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.”⁹

NOTE: The Latin *session Christi*, writes Richard Muller, refers to *the sitting or act of sitting of Christ at the right hand of the Father (ad dextram Patris)*; apart from the basic agreement of Lutheran and Reformed that the *session Christi* is the highest exaltation of Christ as the God-man and that the expression, *sedet ad dextram Patris*, ‘he sits at the right hand of the Father,’ is a figurative expression, the *session Christi* marks as point of fundamental Christological opposition between Lutheran and Reformed. The Lutherans emphasize the biblical usage of *right hand of God* as a figurative description of the exercise of divine power. Since the power of God is exercised everywhere, the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of God is an indication of Christ’s *ubiquitas* (q.v.) according to his human nature, which is the subject of the exaltation. The Reformed deny this communication of a divine attribute to Christ’s

humanity and argue from the ascension of Christ *in coelis* that the heavenly session indicates the removal of Christ's human nature from the earth. The figurative usage, *ad dextram Patris*, the Reformed interpret as the highest exaltation of Christ as God-man, as an indication that Christ in his humanity now participates in the divine majesty and rule, not as though the right hand of God indicates a place (*ubi*), but rather an honor conferred upon Christ. For the Reformed, however, the heavenly *session* indicates *ubietas*, or *whereness*, specifically, the location of Christ's finite humanity in heaven."¹⁰

CONCLUSION: "Remember," said Warfield, "that you serve a living, not a dead Christ. You are to trust in His blood. In it alone have you 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 commandments to bring all peoples 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 Jesus. So will you be truly His disciples, and so will He be your Saviour – unto the uttermost."¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ *Synopsis of a Purer Theology: Disputations 1-31*, Vol. 1 (Davenant Press, 2023), p. 321.

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*, meaning to carry or bear away. In Acts 1:2, 11 and 1 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 (2 Kings 2:11). Doug Kelly helpfully explains that the "Two Greek verbs are generally used in these and other New Testament texts to express the ascension: (1) *anaphēro*, which indicates going up by one's own power (thus, in the active voice), and (2) *analambanō*, meaning to be taken up (thus, in the passive voice, *analambanomai*." "(1) *Anabainō* according to T. F. Torrance, is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *alah*, and has cultic significance: 'It is used regularly in the Pentateuch of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, with the sense of going up to or ascending to the Lord. It came to be a regular term for going up to the Temple, while within the Temple it was used for ascension into the Holy of Holies. At the same time the word was used for the offering of sacrifice, while the noun, *olah*, may be used as a technical term for the whole burnt offering. 'It is in this way, apparently, that the term *anabainō* is applied to the ascension of Jesus Christ with distinct theological import – cf. Acts 2:34; John 3:13; 6:62; 20:17; Eph. 4:8-10 . . . Used in these ways the term *ascension* is essentially concerned with the Royal Priesthood of the crucified, risen and ascended Christ, exercised from the right hand of divine power.' (2) *Analambanomia* usually bears the sense of *to be lifted up*. It is used in Mark 16:19; Acts 1:2; 1:22; 1 Tim. 3:16." Cf. *Systematic Theology II* (Mentor Books, 2014), p. 502.

³ O. Sydney Barr, *From the Apostles' Faith to the Apostles' Creed* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 142-143.

⁴ J. R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990), p. 48.

⁵ Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Crossway, 2019), p. 576.

⁶ "Only severe Bible criticism can lead on 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.

⁷ William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord* (rpt. Attic Press, 1977), p. 9.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1985), p. 281. Herman Bavinck writes: "Whether the 'right hand of God' describes a specific place in heaven cannot be said with certainty. Some have thought this because the throne of God is in any case thought of as being in heaven and because Christ as a human being is bound to a specific location. We must bear in mind, however, that in speaking of God's right hand, we are expressing ourselves, not incorrectly, but in a human manner and in imagery (1 Kings 2:19; Pss. 45:9; 110:1; Matt. 20:21). The Christian church has always been aware of this and has refrained from a further specification of the place of Christ's exaltation. Undoubtedly implied in Christ's seat at God's right hand, however, is that he has been exalted to the highest power, dignity, and honor conceivable and possible under that of God himself. Angels stand before God's face and cover their own faces (1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:2), and the priests stood daily serving in the tabernacle (Heb. 10:11), but the Son is seated at God's right hand. He has received a power that, though

not identical with omnipotence, encompasses all power in heaven and earth. He obtained a glory that is not identical with the glory of God but still far surpasses that of all creatures. And he received a dignity that prompts every knee in heaven, on earth, and under the earth to bow itself and every tongue to confess that he is Lord to the glory of God the Father. As it is, we do not yet see that all things are subject to him, but he has nevertheless been crowned with glory and honor and must reign as king 'until he has put all his enemies under his feet' (1 Cor. 15:25; Heb. 2:8-9). So then our comfort is that 'we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven' (Heb. 8:1). A Priest-King is seated on the throne of the universe and is still looking forward to his greatest exaltation when he comes again for judgment. (But this event will be treated later under the heading of the doctrine of the last things.)" Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* II (Baker, 2006), p. 446.

¹¹ B. B. Warfield, *The Saviour of the World* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 19991), p. 187.