

“WHY CHRIST’S ASCENSION MATTERS”

For the next two Lord’s Days, we will be interrupting the study that we have recently begun on the Gospel of Mark so that we can turn our attention to two important events in the history of redemption. Today, our focus is upon the ascension of the resurrected Christ back into heaven; next week, we will consider the coming of the Spirit upon the church at Pentecost. In churches that follow a liturgical calendar, Christ’s ascension is celebrated on the fortieth day after Easter, which was this past Thursday, or on the Sunday that follows that Thursday. Christ’s ascension is celebrated forty days after Easter because our risen Lord appeared to his disciples for a period of forty days before being taken up into heaven.

Now, as you may or may not be aware, the subject of church holidays is a matter of internal debate within the Reformed community, and even within our own denomination. Reformed Christians are not united in the belief that the church should celebrate even Christmas, let alone any other church holidays. Some argue, as many of the Puritans argued, that there is no biblical warrant for instituting special days in remembrance of Christ’s saving work. Some would even contend that churches that celebrate such holidays are worshipping according to manmade devices, rather than by the instruction given in the Word of God.

This is a charge that we cannot lightly dismiss. We do want our worship to be in accord with what God has revealed in his Word. So what are we to make of this? Is there biblical support for New Testament church holidays? Well, it is certainly true that the Bible nowhere explicitly institutes annual holidays for the New Testament church. There is no verse that declares that Christmas is to be celebrated on December 25. There is no verse that says that Easter should be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after March 21, with Ascension Day and Pentecost celebrated on the fortieth and fiftieth days, respectively, after Easter. On this we all agree.

However, the Bible's overall teaching about the importance of remembering God's great acts of redemption indicates that it is right for the church to use special holidays to remember what Christ accomplished for us. The New Testament does not explicitly institute the celebration of Christmas or other holidays, but the Bible certainly teaches the importance of remembering the key events in salvation history with special feast days. If the exodus from Egypt warranted an annual feast in the life of Israel, how much more does the deliverance secured by Jesus Christ, the true Passover lamb, warrant special feasts in the life of the church?

This was the position of most of the continental Reformers, including John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger, who believed that the church is free to celebrate special days of thanksgiving. They argued in favor of keeping a simplified church calendar composed of

what have come to be known as the “five evangelical feast days”: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. (see Terry Johnson, *Leading in Worship*, 104; Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That is Reformed According to Scripture*, 36) They believed that it was biblical for the church to have these holy days, even though they were opposed to the abuses that had crept into the medieval church, such as the elaborate calendar of the saints. They found no biblical warrant for celebrating the lives of great saints with religious holidays, and thus they did away with that aspect of the church calendar. The only religious holidays supported by Scripture are those which celebrate the outworking of God’s plan of salvation within history. And that is precisely what the five evangelical feast days celebrate.

Now, let us turn our attention to Christ’s ascension into heaven. Why is the ascension important? Why did the Reformers believe that the ascension should be remembered, alongside Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection, with a special holiday every year? They did so because, in the words of Louis Berkhof, Christ’s ascension is the necessary complement and completion of his resurrection (*Systematic Theology*, 350). Christ’s ascension was his day of coronation. It was the beginning of his heavenly reign, as well as the beginning of his heavenly ministry of intercession as our mediator with God. Of course, Jesus has always been the King of kings and the Lord of lords, but something new happened on the day of his ascension. It was the first time Jesus sat in his position of

authority at the Father's right hand as the glorified God-man. It was the first time Christ sat on his throne as both God and man. As we sang earlier,

Christ, by a road before untrod,

Ascendeth to the throne of God.

It was indeed a road before untrod. Christ's ascension marked the first time that perfected humanity was given the right to rule over all creation on God's behalf. It was the true fulfillment of what is written about man in Psalm 8:

“[W]hat is man that you are mindful of him,

and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings

and crowned him with glory and honor.

You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;

you have put all things under his feet”

At his ascension, Jesus fulfilled the role that God intended for mankind from the very beginning: to rule the world as the creature made in God's own image. Jesus perfects our human nature by uniting it to his divine nature, making himself the ultimate divine image-bearer and the perfect ruler over all the earth. And we, through our union with

him, are being renewed in God's image and made fit to rule with Christ in his kingdom.

And that really is what Jesus promises us. We will reign with him. What a glorious thought! Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, has forever taken our humanity upon himself so that we might share in his glorious reign for all eternity! Christ's ascension marks the perfecting of our humanity.

Another reason why the ascension of Christ is so important is because of its close connection with his role as our mediator with God. Christ's work as our mediator did not end with his death. It continues forever. His mediating work can be summed up, as it is in our Westminster Confession of Faith, by referring to his threefold office as prophet, priest, and king. Consider how Jesus continues to fulfill these offices in his ascended position at God's right hand.

First, Jesus continues to mediate his saving benefits to us as a prophet. Jesus is the supreme prophet of God because he is the Word of God made flesh. But how does he continue his prophetic ministry now that he has returned to heaven? How does he speak for God from his throne in glory? He does it through his Holy Spirit, who speaks to us through the Word of God. This is what Jesus told his disciples when he was preparing them for his departure from this world. In John 16, he said,

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:12-15)

This is why Jesus told his disciples that it was for their own good that he was going away. During his earthly ministry, Jesus’ prophetic work was limited by his physicality. He could only be in one place at a time. But now, after he has ascended back to heaven, Jesus speaks his prophetic word all over the world, as the Holy Spirit speaks through the proclamation of God’s Word.

The ascended Christ also continues to mediate his saving benefits to us as a priest. The priests of the Old Testament were only able to make intercession for God’s people by ministering in the earthly sanctuary, which was a shadowy representation of the true, heavenly sanctuary. But Jesus has entered into the real sanctuary, the real Holy of Holies, where he makes intercession for us by the blood of his atoning death. As he sits at God’s right hand, he continues to apply the benefits of his death to us; he continues to make his saving work effective in our lives. He intercedes for you and for me, asking God to

accept us, to preserve us, to receive our worship, to hear our prayers, all on the basis of his perfect sacrifice on our behalf. And we can be sure that God accepts Jesus' priestly intercession, because God has seated him in the place of highest honor: at his right hand.

And the ascended Christ continues to mediate his saving benefits to us as a king. His kingly rule over us begins with his work of subduing us to himself. We were created to live under Christ's dominion, but in our sin we have all become rebels against him. He has every right to crush us for our treason. Yet he graciously reclaims us as his subjects by wooing us back to himself. As Walter Chantry observes:

“What power is being exercised by the Son of God from the right hand of the Father in our day! Power that can make a hateful, stubborn sinner into a loving, volunteer servant is magnificent. His might accomplishes such fundamental transformation of character so gently that sinners come most freely, having been made willing by his grace...It is the most remarkable power in all the world for its irresistible force and its beautiful and kind results.” (*Praises for the King of Kings*, 68-9)

From his heavenly throne, Jesus is bringing his people into his kingdom. He has subdued you and I to his rule. He has brought us, rebels though we are, into his kingdom. He is

your rightful king; a king who is to be honored, adored, revered, professed and obeyed; a king who is worthy of all your love, all your devotion, and all your service.

One other reason why the ascension is important is because it assures us that Christ has overcome everything opposed to his rule. He is subduing his enemies under his feet. He has overcome everything that stands against us as we live as his pilgrim people in this world. He has overcome the world. He has conquered sin and sickness and death. He has crushed the serpent's head. This gives us great confidence as we live the life of faith. Here again is Walter Chantry:

“Such certainty produces calm in the face of current affairs, patience with the events of one's own life, satisfaction with the Lord's management of all things, expectancy that a glorious future is coming, confidence in the One who sits upon the throne.” (49)

From God's right hand, Jesus is managing everything in heaven and earth. He is directing all things for the good of his church.

This is the clear teaching of Scripture. Yet we live in a world in which Christ's enemies flourish; a world in which his kingdom often seems weak, insignificant, and compromised. How are we to reconcile this with the reality of Christ's ascension and

present reign? By remembering what happened at the ascension. In Luke's other account of Christ's ascension, in the first chapter of Acts, he says that Jesus "was lifted up and a cloud took him out of [his disciple's] sight" (Acts 1:9) He was removed from their sight. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he went back into the realm of the spirit, the realm of heavenly reality, a reality that is veiled to human sight. Jesus is presently in heaven. He will one day return, as the angels assured the disciples, and on that day every eye will see him in all of his glory. But until then, his reign is hidden. It is invisible. But this does not mean that it is imaginary. So many people, even professing Christians, conduct their lives as if Christ's reign were somehow less real, less important, less satisfying, less interesting, than the world around them. In John Owen's words, "men walk and talk, as if the world were all, when comparatively it is nothing." (*The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, ix) There is a vast difference between the invisible and the imaginary. Wind is invisible, but it is certainly not imaginary. And so it is with the present reign of Jesus Christ. We cannot see it, but it is more real than anything else in the world. Those who make the mistake of thinking that Jesus' universal Kingship is somehow less than real simply because it is presently unseen are in for a terrible shock on the day of judgment.

So here are three reasons why Christ's ascension matters: the ascension marks the perfecting of our humanity; the ascension is integral to Christ's role as our mediator with God; and the ascension assures us of Christ's victory over all of his enemies. This

explains the response of the disciples when their beloved Lord left them and returned to his throne in heaven. They did not mope and hang their heads and fall into despair. They worshipped and adored Christ; they rejoiced; they blessed God. Why? Because they knew what the ascension meant. They knew that Jesus had just been crowned as the glorified Son of God in human flesh. They believed that Jesus was seated at God's right hand as their mediator. They trusted that Jesus would bring all people under subjection to his reign. The disciples were able to rejoice at Christ's ascension because their hearts had ascended into heaven with him. May the same be true of us.

Lord, beyond our mortal sight,

Raise our hearts to reach thy height;

There thy face unclouded see,

Find our heav'n of heavens in thee!

(“Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise”)