

The Ascension

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The Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven forty days after his resurrection is the most inexplicable event in the Bible. People who want to deny the resurrection can always find a reason to doubt the Gospel accounts, however improbable it may be. They also find it easy to dismiss the Virgin Birth as a legend. The Ascension is another matter. It may just be plausible to say that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were hallucinations experienced by emotionally worked-up disciples. What cannot be explained is why this period should have come to an end in this dramatic way. If the appearances were hallucinations, they would simply have ceased after a while. If the disciples were genuinely convinced of their reality and were trying to explain it, it is far more likely that they would have said that Jesus is still around somewhere, and that he might suddenly appear to any of us as he did in the Upper Room.

Theologians who concentrate on the "Easter event" and emphasize the post-Easter consciousness of the Church, that the Jesus the disciples had known on earth was now the exalted Christ, find the Ascension an inconvenient detail which they tend to ignore. For them Christ is exalted in the resurrection, even though the Bible never says this. In Scripture there are two moments of exaltation — the crucifixion and the ascension, but not the resurrection! The Bible stubbornly insists that there was an intermediate period between these two events which forbids us from speaking of Easter as if it was the final act in the drama of man's redemption.

The recognition of an intermediate period carries with it difficulties of its own, which conservative Christians have been slow to face. Why is it that the resurrection body of Christ was not the final word on the subject? Why did it still need the exaltation of the Ascension, and why was this further act delayed for forty days? Then too, what happened to the body when it ascended? Did it dissolve into spirit, or is it still present somewhere in heaven, or perhaps even in outer space? Would it not have been better if Jesus had stayed on earth in his resurrected state, to be a living witness to his saving work on the cross? Think how dramatic it would be if an evangelist could conjure up the Risen Christ as the ultimate visual aid in his presentation of the Gospel message! It is true that these

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questions are not often asked, but that is because the whole subject is one which Christians today generally prefer to ignore. Once we look at it closely, the problems come back to hit us in the face, and we find ourselves forced to look for a satisfactory answer.

When we turn to the Scriptures, we find that there is remarkably little to go on, at least at first sight. The Gospels say

Gerald Bray's discussion of the Transfiguration in EVANGEL 1:1 has brought us many compliments, and we present in this issue another fresh look at a key Biblical event: the Ascension of Christ.

virtually nothing about the Ascension, even though they include something of the post-resurrection appearances and teaching of Jesus. Only John goes further, and then it is not in the narrative of the final chapter, but in the discourses of chapters 14-16 where we get some inkling of what is to come. Jesus tells the disciples that he must go away, back to the Father, since only then will the Holy Spirit be able to come. But the manner of his departure is not specified, and we could not guess at an ascension from what John tells us.

The event is recorded in a single verse in Acts, and Luke leaves the impression, as do the other evangelists, that it is the Second Coming of Christ "in the same manner" which is his chief concern. Paul is the only apostle who seems to have taken the Ascension seriously as an event of theological significance in its own right, but even he does not fail to link it closely with Pentecost (Ephesians 4:8-10). The Book of Revelation assumes the Ascension as a prior event, and its message would have been impossible without it, but it cannot be said that John dwells on the subject as an event of significance in itself.

What are we to make of the apparent reluctance of Scripture to give the Ascension of Christ a place of central importance in its teaching? Clearly the event was closely linked with what went before and after, but are we right to assume from this that the Ascension is without any real importance of its own? Here we must be very careful. The early Church thought the Ascension important enough to include it in the creeds — "he ascended into heaven". The fact that it is not mentioned very frequently does not mean that it is of little importance. The same could equally well be said of other things, like the Fall of Man, yet the whole subsequent history of redemption depends on this single event! The Ascension may not be isolated from its context, but it has a significance which goes far beyond what is apparent on the surface and which gives it a right to claim our attention.

The Ascension of Christ is presented in Scripture as the culmination of Jesus' post-resurrection witness. The forty day period which this embraced is of great symbolic importance. Jesus spent forty days at the beginning of his ministry battling the temptations of Satan, and it is not surprising to find that he spends a similar period at the end of this earthly life consolidating his victory. Then too, we should not forget the forty years of testing which Israel endured before passing into the promised land. If heaven is the goal to which we aspire as Christians, then there may be some significance in this period of preparation for entry which recalls the Old Testament experience of the Jews. We cannot read too much into this, but there is reason to believe that the forty day period was a time of

testing and commitment for the disciples.

In particular, we must insist that it was during this period that the main lines of Jesus' pre-resurrection teaching became clear to the disciples. We cannot accept that they entered into a mature faith only in the wake of Pentecost, however important that event may have been. The sending of the Spirit brought power and conviction to the disciples, but not a new or deeper message. That had been given to them by Jesus before his Ascension, as had the command to evangelise and baptise the nations (Matthew 28:19-20). There is thus a very real sense in which the Ascension represents the culmination of Jesus' earthly teaching and the completion of his message.

At the same time, we must be careful not to misconstrue this. The Ascension may have signalled the completion of Jesus' message, but it certainly did not mean the end of his work. Indeed, it is even possible to argue that in one sense it marks the beginning of his work, at least as it affects us today. It is true of course, that Christ's great work of atonement was made and finished on the cross. It is also true that the resurrection meant that death had been defeated and eternal life given to those who believe. But in themselves, these events were not complete. The work which Christ accomplished was on our behalf, but it was not for our satisfaction. Jesus did not show his wounds to Thomas and the others as a mark of his triumph, but only to rebuke their unbelief.

The element of satisfaction and triumph can only be understood in relation to the Father, who had sent the Son into the world to work his mighty acts. Only when the Son returned with his victory to the Father could it be said that his task was truly over. Paul tells us this when he quotes Psalm 68 as an explanation of what happened in the Ascension. Jesus "led captivity captive", or "led a host of captives", implying that this had not been done before. The captives had been *taken* in that sin had been paid for and death had been destroyed, but they had not yet been *led away*.

This extra dimension is not simply a detail which we can afford to ignore. Failure on the part of the Church to reckon with it has meant that many Christians have heard of the forgiveness of sins, but have no idea of this vital truth. God does not merely forgive, but he puts away our sins, as far as the east is from the west. They are not destroyed in a way which would enable us to claim the grace of perfection; Christ is ever ready at the right hand of the Father to make intercession for us. But they are hidden away, in the depth of God's merciful love. We cannot contemplate them in a way which would lead us to despair. If as Christians we go looking for our sins, if we are tempted to dig them up and dwell on them in a spirit of morbid fascination, then we will find nothing and no-one but Christ. Our sins are hidden with him in God, and they will never again emerge to trouble us.

What an important truth this is, and how necessary it can be to calm anxiety and give believers assurance that they really have been forgiven! Christ does not present his wounds to us, as a reminder of the evil we have done, but to the *Father*, as a plea for mercy on our behalf. Jesus took his atonement into heaven in order to be our eternal mediator. The cross cannot be regarded as a historical event alone; it is a work of Christ which remains a present reality in the heavenly places. His blood remains the sacrifice for sins presented to God the Father in eternity. From this we can see the falsehood of all teaching about a repeated sacrifice in the mass. The idea that Christ's offering must be made "real" for us is certainly right, but it cannot be done in this way. It is not the heavenly sacrifice which comes down to earth in a kind of reincarnation (which is

what transubstantiation amounts to) but the earthly church which must rise to the heavenly places, where we are seated with Christ (Ephesians 2:6).

It was the achievement of Augustine (354-430) to have made it clear that in the Ascension the Body of Christ returned to the Father. Today we hear a great deal of this particular image, particularly in the context of Christian fellowship. Paul's analogy in I Corinthians 12 is pressed to the point where a complete ecclesiology has been built on these words. The ecumenical movement has tried to explain different denominations and theological positions as parts of the One Body, the visible Church. Each part is unlike the others, and unable to appreciate the whole Body on its own, but the ecumenical task is to rebuild the whole, so that each part receives its proper recognition and balance.

Evangelicals reject this ecclesiology because, like Augustine, we understand that the Body of Christ has *ascended* into heaven. It has become invisible, a spiritual reality which in the words of the Book of Common Prayer is a "mystical body... the blessed company of all faithful people". The disastrous doctrine of the visible Church as the Body of Christ is clearly refuted by his Ascension.

At the personal level, the Ascension is a guarantee that our manhood has been redeemed — "taken up into God", in the

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words of the Athanasian Creed. In a day and age when human life is cheap, when people regularly commit suicide because their lives no longer have any meaning, how important it is to remember that God has a purpose for our humanity which will not be fully realised until our resurrection bodies are united with his in heaven.

In this connection, Christians are apt to fall into one of two contrary errors. Either they reject life on earth, preferring only to wait for the end, or they try to achieve perfection here and now in a kind of social Utopia. In the light of the glorious ascension these tendencies are checked and put in perspective. The value of earthly things is most truly seen in the hope of eternal fulfilment. We who follow after Christ, look for the place which he has gone to prepare for us (John 14:2). Our eyes have been opened to the heavenly realities; the purpose of our life on earth is made clear. The Ascension of Christ is the bond between time and eternity, the guarantee that we have been saved and now enjoy fellowship with him in and for eternity.