

EDITORIAL

I have recently been reading, once again, the account of the ascension of Jesus in Luke's writings (Luke 24 and Acts 1). These narratives, and the event they describe, fascinate me. Such a strange event – a human being going straight up into the air in apparent defiance of the laws of physics – and yet an event which Luke chooses to emphasise by recording it twice, once in each part of his two-volume work, so as to form a kind of narratological and theological 'hinge' holding the two parts together.

Yet the ascension has frequently been neglected in theological writing and in preaching in favour of much more 'important' matters: Christology, mission and evangelism, Christian community. There are papers on these themes in this Bulletin and we may well be inclined to think that we should indeed devote our attention to such central matters rather than be distracted by the seemingly bizarre event of the ascension.

Some reflection on the significance of the ascension, however, may help us to see that this astonishing event is, in fact, fundamentally important to each of the other matters we have mentioned. Let me illustrate this.

Firstly, the ascension points to the unique character of Jesus. For virtually every other human being in history, the end of their life on this earth is marked by their death. But this is not the case for Jesus because, following his death on a cross, God raised him from the dead. Thus, it is appropriate that, just as the entry of the Son of God into this world was marked, in the conception of Jesus by a virgin, by an amazing suspension of the physical laws which God himself put in place to govern human life, so the exit of the Son of God from this earthly sphere should also be marked by an astonishing event. Jesus' character is also highlighted by the presence of the cloud. Although Luke does not provide us with a detailed explanation of the event, I do not believe that Luke records the presence of the cloud in order to tell us that Jesus had reached a certain altitude, as if his journey to heaven was simply a matter of passing through the atmosphere and keeping on until morning. Though this may be a popular reading of the text, perhaps suggesting to a modern reader that heaven could be reached if we had a sufficiently powerful space rocket, it does not do justice to the biblical background. Readers of the narratives in Exodus which describe the pillar of cloud which led the people of Israel out of Egypt or the cloud on Mount Sinai will recognise that the cloud serves, paradoxically, both to reveal and to hide the presence of the divine. Alternatively, if Psalm 104 stands in the background then the cloud may point to the victorious authority of the ascended Jesus. And although Luke is the only NT author to provide an account of the event itself, there are numerous references

to Jesus' exaltation in key Christological passages, such as Philippians 2:5-11, at verse 9. So careful attention to the ascension narrative will encourage us towards a high Christology.

Secondly, the ascension is the necessary precondition for the sending of the Spirit of God upon all his people (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:5, 8; cf. John 16:7). Thus, without this event, we could not experience the gift of the Spirit which is described in Acts 2, where Peter draws upon the words of Joel to speak of the Spirit falling on all people regardless of age or gender (Acts 2:17-18). The sending of the Spirit is linked very closely in Acts 1:8 with the task of being 'Jesus' witnesses'. While there is more to the sending of the Spirit than simply empowering for witness, there is not less. Thus, we recognise in the ascension the event that opens up the possibility of Spirit-empowered community and evangelism.

Thirdly, the ascension points forward towards the parousia. 'This Jesus who has been taken up' (v. 11) will come back 'in the same way'. This is not only a reason for expectant hope, as we anticipate the full realisation of God's purposes for his people, but also an impetus to urgent missionary activity. The time available for mission is not unlimited. The question asked of the disciples could well be asked of the modern church: 'Why do you stand there looking into the sky?' There is a time for rapt theological reflection leading to adoration and worship; and there is a time for making disciples. It is unlikely that a church will be deeply committed to the latter task if it has not been led into the former by careful teaching and training in the Word of God. Yet a church which majors on the former activity, captivated for example by the wonder of the ascension, while the task of being witnesses is pushed to the side, has not truly understood the significance of the ascension at all.

May the Lord enable us to consider the narratives of the ascension of Jesus in such a way that they feed our minds and hearts... and fire our wills to action.

Let me take a moment to introduce to you a new member of the editorial team. Rev. Andrew Hayes is Minister of International Baptist Church in Aberdeen. I am grateful for Andrew's help and support in the editorial process and look forward to seeing more of the interests and competences which Andrew brings becoming evident in SBET.

Let me also express our grateful thanks to Mrs Alison Carter who has recently retired from her work at Rutherford House, but who has kindly agreed to continue to be involved in the editorial process in a freelance capacity. Alison has worked closely with me (Alistair Wilson) for most of my time as Editor and has carried out her task with patience, good humour and a careful eye. We are very glad to retain her services.

In this number

We are pleased to offer five articles for SBET readers to engage with in this number.

The first two articles come from papers delivered at the Annual Conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society 2007. I am delighted that the opening article comes from Professor David Wright, Professor Emeritus of Patristic and Reformed Christianity at the University of Edinburgh. For many years Professor Wright has devoted his scholarly skills to the church, not least in his commitment to SETS and the SBET. In this Finlayson Lecture for 2007, he addresses a theme of particular importance for the church: the 'Great Commission'.

The second article also had its origins in the 2007 SETS conference. In this paper, Rev. Peter Neilson, now serving as a Mission Consultant in Edinburgh, reflects on issues relating to the 'congregation' as a suitable expression of the church in the twenty-first century. The original character of the paper as a spoken presentation has been retained in this printed version.

In the third article, Dr Lynn Cohick of Wheaton College, IL, considers the question of 'Why Women Followed Jesus' by means of a comparison between the place of women in Pharisaism and 'the Jesus movement'.

The fourth article is by Dr Brian Talbot, Minister of Broughty Ferry Baptist Church, Dundee. Dr Talbot's paper reflects on the relationship between unity and uniformity in the experience of Scottish Baptists, particularly in the nineteenth century, and argues that attempts to impose uniformity have been unhelpful.

Finally, Dr Christopher Holmes encourages us to engage appreciatively but critically with the Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as expressed in his lectures on the subject given in 1933.

We are grateful to all of these authors for their writing and we trust that their presentations will stimulate SBET readers (whether in agreement or respectful disagreement) to think, discuss and act in ways which will glorify God and strengthen the church.

Alistair I. Wilson