

THE MYSTERY OF THE ASCENSION

Ted Schroder, May 9, 2010

St. Luke told the story of the Ascension of Jesus twice. At the end of his gospel he wrote: “When Jesus had led the disciples out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.” (Luke 24:50,51) At the beginning of Acts, Jesus said: “‘You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” (Acts 1:8,9)

We affirm in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creed that “he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” Jesus himself alluded to his ascension when he answered the disciples when they were complaining that his teaching was hard to accept, “Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing.” (John 6:60-63)

What about this? The ascension can’t be a sort of vertical take-off into outer space; or a disappearance in which Jesus changed his physical presence for a spiritual one so that he could be everywhere at the same time. What does it mean that he was taken up into heaven, and what does that mean for us today?

Where *is* heaven? We talk about 3-D technology, but what about 4-D: length, breadth, depth and height? Being three-dimensional, we are only able to see the world with our eyes in two dimensions. A four-dimensional being would be able to see the world in three dimensions. For example, it would be able to see all six sides of an opaque box simultaneously, and in fact, what is inside the box at the same time, just as we can see the interior of a square on a piece of paper. It would be able to see all points in 3-dimensional space simultaneously, including the inner structure of solid objects and things obscured from our three-dimensional viewpoint. Just as we can see more with X-Rays, MRI’s, CAT-scans, night-vision goggles and heat-sensors, so the Ascension enables us to catch a glimpse of heaven beyond earth. St. John wrote about how, in a vision, “I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven.” (Revelation 4:1) He saw the throne room of heaven.

We are spiritually empowered by faith to “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.” (Ephesians 3:18,19) We are talking about a reality that surpasses human knowledge.

“Basically, heaven and earth in biblical cosmology are not two different locations within the same continuum of space or matter. They are two different dimensions of God’s good creation. And the point about heaven is twofold. First, heaven relates to earth tangentially so that the one who is in heaven can be present simultaneously anywhere and everywhere on earth: the ascension therefore means that *Jesus is available, accessible*, without people having to travel to a particular spot on earth to find him. Second, *heaven is, as it were, the control room for earth*; it is the CEO’s office, the place from which instructions are given. ‘All authority is given to me,’ said Jesus..., ‘in heaven and on earth.’” (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 111)

St. Paul wrote about how God raised Christ from the dead “and 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, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed

all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” (Ephesians 1:20-23, NIV)

“God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies and governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but *forever*. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything.” (Ephesians 1:20,21 *The Message*)

This enthronement of Christ at the Ascension describes one aspect of the nature of the Holy Trinity. We can say reverently and cautiously that it is like the Father is the Chairman of the Board that runs creation, the Son is the CEO, and the Holy Spirit is the COO. Jesus remains truly human, and takes our humanity into heaven, and is present through the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the church – through the preaching of His Word and the administration of the sacraments. These are the means through which Jesus is present. If this is true, then there is already a human being at the helm of the world, and he is interceding for us as we seek to do “his will on earth as it is in heaven.”

Jesus in his risen, ascended state is more solidly embodied than we are. He is not “up there” spatially but “up there” in terms of his importance, having being moved up to his present position of authority. For “when the Bible speaks of heaven and earth it is not talking about two localities related to each other within the same space-time continuum or about a nonphysical world contrasted with a physical one but about two different *kinds* of what we call space, two different kinds of what we call matter., and also quite possibly...two different kinds of what we call time.” (Wright, op.cit.115) We need to think in terms of parallel worlds, spaces, and times rather than the rationalistic closed-system universe. Heaven and earth relate and interlock.

“Some church buildings do their best to indicate the interrelationship of heaven and earth. The Eastern Orthodox churches do it by envisaging heaven as the inner sanctuary, the space around the altar, and earth as the part of the building outside that space. The two are separated by the iconostasis, upon which are portrayed the saints, whose presence in heaven is not far from the worshippers on earth.

Western cathedrals and abbeys often did a similar thing through soaring Gothic architecture, giving us at floor level a sense of belonging within...great spaces of light and beauty, into which, significantly, only our music can penetrate.....What we are encouraged to grasp precisely through the ascension itself is that God’s space and ours – heaven and earth, in other words – are, though very different, not far way from one another... God’s space and ours interlock and intersect in a whole variety of ways even while they retain, for the moment at least, their separate and distinct identities and roles. One day... they will be joined in a quite new way, open and visible to one another, married together forever...Jesus is in heaven, ruling the whole world, and he will one day return to make that rule complete.” (Wright, op.cit.116)

Because of this we can perceive of life in these two different dimensions: heaven and earth. There is more to reality than meets the eye. Jesus, as Lord of all and our Savior, is available to us, accessible to us anywhere and everywhere. He is in charge of running the universe, and we can trust in him. He has the final word on everything. Therefore all will be well, even when the night is darkest and the future hopeless. “I am with you, always...” (Matthew 28:20)

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