

The Ascension of Christ: Reflections on Its Prominent Role in Scripture, the Festivals of the Christian Year, and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper **By Paxson Jeancake | 2014**

The following reflections have been brewing for nearly a decade. In 2005 I wrote a song called “King of Glory” that began my journey into and fascination with the doctrine and implications of the ascension of Christ. For years, either consciously or subconsciously, I think I was more familiar with either a *past* or *future* tense Jesus. What I mean is this: I was schooled in knowing a Jesus who was born of a virgin; who died on a cross; who rose again; and who would come back one day to usher in the new kingdom.

Surprisingly, however, when I stumbled across a clear articulation of the ascension for the first time, I realized how little I really understood or practiced regarding the *present* ministry of Jesus. For this is where the ascension leads us.

Relative to the other aspects of Jesus’ life – up to that point in my story – I either could not remember or actually never had:

heard a sermon
read a book
taken seminary notes
downloaded a podcast
planned a worship service
posted a blog
had a conversation
sang a song about... the ascension.

Ironically, throughout the history of the church, the ascension has held a prominent place in the biblical writings, the festivals of the liturgical year, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

According to Wolfe, the ascension is at the center of a “chiastic” organization of Luke’s two-volume work (Luke-Acts).¹ As a literary device, a chiasm is commonly utilized in ancient literature to emphasize, parallel, or contrast concepts or ideas. The chiastic structure is frequently used to emphasize the innermost concept and, thus, telegraph to the reader what is of primary importance to the author. That is, the reader should pay close attention to whatever is at the *center* of a chiasm. For Luke, the movement of his Gospel is *toward Jerusalem and the ascension*; and the movement of the Book of Acts is *outward from Jerusalem and the ascension* to Judea and Samaria, and eventually to Rome.

This outline and perspective on Luke-Acts is now so utterly clear to me that it’s hard for me to think of either book (Luke or Acts) separately anymore. Now I see them as one cohesive, chiastic unit. If Luke did in fact have this chiastic structure in mind when he wrote his two-volume work, and if he placed the ascension at the center of this chiasm, then obviously the ascension was of great importance to him.

¹ Kenneth R. Wolfe, “The Chiastic Structure of Luke-Acts,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* (Volume 22, Issue 2, 1980) 60-71.

During the 4th century the ascension was considered to be the “crown” of all the Christian festivals, playing a very prominent role in the church year like Christmas and Easter today. Regarding the festival of the ascension, Augustine described it in this way:

This is that festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished. For unless the Savior had ascended into heaven, His Nativity would have come to nothing... His Passion would have borne no fruit for us, and His most holy Resurrection would have been useless.²

For Augustine and the early church Fathers the ascension was clearly an important part of worship and the Christian year. Our situation is quite different today. Now, most evangelical churches only celebrate Christmas and Easter, leaving out Ascension Day and the Day of Pentecost. We have simply lost the dynamic of retelling the full story of the Gospel throughout the various festivals of the Christian year. Thus, our Christmas pageants, Passion dramas, Easter cantatas, and salvation sermons have developed our consciousness of the virgin-born, crucified, and resurrected Jesus, but we have forgotten the ascended Christ. We do not have what I describe as an “ascended Christ consciousness.” As a worship leader, part of my hope is that the doctrine and implications of the ascension will ignite the minds, the hearts and the creativity of those who plan worship services throughout the year.

I believe there was an ascended Christ consciousness during the time of the Reformation. Indeed, the ascension played a vital role in providing Calvin with the biblical and theological tools necessary to clearly articulate his position regarding Christ’s “spiritual presence” in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper.³

Though it’s hard for us to appreciate the full scope of it today, this was an issue of major controversy during the 16th century. I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say it was “the” issue which divided the various Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin), not to mention how all of the Reformed views departed from that of the Roman Catholic Church. I do not mention this to stir up further controversy, but I do believe the implications are very significant, historically and theologically. For those traditions that believe that Christ is *spiritually present* in the sacrament, it was a real and robust belief in the doctrine of the ascension that led to this position.

Standing on the shoulders of Augustine, Calvin’s clear and biblically-based belief in the ascended Jesus was the primary concept for refuting all of the other confusing and controversial interpretations regarding the statement:

This is my body.

When all of the historical bias and controversy is stripped away, only a robust doctrine of the ascension was needed for Calvin (quoting Augustine) to conclude:

² J.G. Davies, *He Ascended Into Heaven* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1958) 170.

³ I am preparing an article that will explore the role of the ascension in the mind of Calvin with greater scope, scholarship, and clarity than the brief comments made here.

He is not here... for he sits there at the right hand of the Father.⁴

With a firm faith in unseen realities, Calvin believed that Jesus is in a real place called heaven, and that we experience Christ's presence here on earth through the person and nature of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, regarding such words as "departing" and "ascending," Calvin believed that these words "do not signify giving the appearance of one ascending and departing, but actually doing what the words state."⁵

Calvin took literally the words of Jesus, who told the disciples that he had to leave, but that he would send another "Advocate," the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-21). Though, in one sense he is absent in body, he is actually *more present* with us through the Holy Spirit.

Interestingly, I think some of the tensions that were felt during the Reformation are some of the very tensions that we feel now. I think that our ascension muscles have become flabby. We need to exercise our faith more in the *present realities* of a still-incarnate, ascended Jesus. We need a strong, biblical view and understanding of the Holy Spirit. As it was during the height of controversy in the 16th century, a robust doctrine of the ascension will be helpful for us today in terms of teasing out what Scripture has to say and how we can understand the present ministry of Christ, the present advocacy of the Holy Spirit, and the present realm of heaven.

Content alone, however, is not enough. Though this article invites us to reflect and ponder the various facets of the ascension, it cannot sufficiently create an ascended Christ consciousness. ***We need to be fed through the combination of song, prayer and Scripture in personal and corporate worship settings so that the language of the ascension will begin to fill our hearts and flow from our lips.***

This kind of regular immersion can begin to influence our daily living, transform our prayer life, and deepen our walk with a still-incarnate, ascended Jesus. It is my fervent desire that we would be filled with the counsel, advocacy and indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, and that a more solid concept of and increased longing for heaven would influence the way we live and set our priorities here on earth.

With all of this in mind, I would simply like to express my agreement with J.G. Davis, a respected theologian and kindred spirit with regard to the ascension. In his book, *He Ascended into Heaven*, Davies shared his primary aim and passion regarding the ascension. His thoughts resonate with my own. He writes:

There are those who claim that the Cross is the heart of the Gospel; others that the Resurrection should occupy this position. It is not my intention to seek to displace either of these two by the Ascension, but to add the Ascension to them, so that this triad in unity is recognized as forming the heart of the Gospel.⁶

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960) 1393-1394.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1394.

⁶ Davies, *He Ascended Into Heaven*, p. 170.

My heart, too, is to see this “triad” (cross, resurrection, ascension) in unity as forming the heart of the Gospel. As you go about your day, consider the following statistics:

Jesus spent 33 years on earth.

He had 3 years of public ministry.

He has spent the last *two-thousand years* in continuous intercession!

This is the gospel of the ascension, God is *for us*.