

Hearts Upward:

Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives on the Ascension of Christ

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Introduction

The ascension of Christ is the fulcrum of redemptive history, the event that took Jesus from his finished work on earth to his present ministry in heaven. The ascension has also been proposed as the chiasmic center of Luke-Acts¹ and the “very heart” of the New Testament; yet, theologically and liturgically, it is widely ignored today.² Most churches observe Christmas and Easter while the Ascension “comes and goes without any notice.”³ One theologian writes, “In spite of the prominence of the Ascension of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, in early creeds, and in later Christian thought, many Christians are baffled by this basic Christian doctrine.”⁴ The church needs to recover a robust understanding and celebration of the ascension of Christ.

Because the festivals of the Christian Year form us, recovering an annual celebration of the Ascension will help the church in appropriating all of the spiritual benefits that flow from what Christ is doing for us right now at the right hand of the Father.⁵ In this paper, I will explore the ascension of Christ from biblical, historical, and theological perspectives. My hope is to inspire renewal in the life of the church regarding the present ministry of the ascended Jesus.

¹ Kenneth R. Wolfe, “The Chiasmic Structure of Luke-Acts and Some Implications for Worship,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 22, no. 2 (1980): 60-71. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000781017&site=ehost-live>.

² Brian Donne, *Christ Ascended: A Study in the Significance of the Ascension of Christ* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983), 58.

³ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 158.

⁴ Donne, *Christ Ascended*, 1.

⁵ Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 23.

Biblical Foundation

To lay a biblical foundation, I will explore three pericopes that address the following questions regarding Christ's ascension: Where did Jesus go? What is Jesus doing? What is our response? The answers that the texts reveal offer profound insights about our ascended Lord.

Psalm 24:7-10 (Where Did Jesus Go?)

Though either of Luke's accounts (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:1-11) would have been an obvious choice to begin a biblical exploration of the Ascension, I have chosen Psalm 24:7-10 instead for several of reasons. First, it has long been associated with the teaching and liturgy of the Ascension within the church.⁶ Second, I believe this text creates a compelling description of the ascension of Christ as it captures the event from the heavenly, rather than the earthly perspective. Third, it allows a prophetic interpretation of an Old Testament passage to elucidate and provide a different perspective on a New Testament narrative.

The book of Psalms is the hymnbook of the people of God and many consider it "the heart of the Old Testament."⁷ In terms of genre, Psalm 24 is considered one of the kingship psalms,⁸ a genre that can be further divided into two categories: those that describe the human king of Israel and those that declare God as king.⁹ Psalm 24 most likely recounts the event of

⁶ Peter Toon, *The Ascension of Our Lord* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 28.

⁷ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 211.

⁸ Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 224.

⁹ Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 34.

King David moving the ark from Kiriath-jearim to Mount Zion (2 Sam. 6; 1 Chron.13).¹⁰

However, the church has long associated this passage with Christ's triumph and ascension.¹¹

In his book *Christ in the Psalms*, Reardon describes how Psalm 24 celebrates Christ's entrance into heaven and the royal throne room.¹² He describes how the

King of Glory comes to the entrance of heaven with the blood of the conflict still fresh upon him (cf. Is. 63:1-6; Rev. 19:13), and a kind of dialogue takes place as the angels call for the opening of the portcullis at the approach of the returning Warrior: "Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of Glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."¹³

Reardon describes a heavenly ceremony in which the host of heaven offer a call and response, one group asking, "Who is the King of glory?" and the other group answering, "The Lord, strong and mighty." This interpretation of Psalm 24:7-10 is also affirmed by Toon, who states that "The early Church saw in these lines a picture of the ascent of Jesus, the King of Glory, into heaven as the mighty Victor over death, sin, Satan, and hell."¹⁴ The early church realized the prophetic and compelling nature of this psalm text as a window into the event of the ascension of Christ. Thus, to answer our first question (Where is Jesus?), Jesus entered heaven and returned to his Father. Luke gives us the account of his earthly departure; Psalm 24:7-10 provides a window into his heavenly arrival, into the "royal court" and to the right hand of God.

¹⁰ David Kidner, *An Introduction and Commentary: Psalms 1-72*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 113.

¹¹ Derek Thomas, *Taken Up into Heaven: The Ascension of Christ* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1996), 23.

¹² Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond: Conciliar Press, 2000), 45.

¹³ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 46.

¹⁴ Toon, *The Ascension of Our Lord*, 29.

There is certainly precedent for interpreting the Old Testament psalms as prophetic windows into New Testament realities. On the day of Pentecost, Peter stands up and offers apostolic commentary on Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 (Acts 2:25-36). Peter interprets Psalm 16 as being prophetic words of King David with regard to “the resurrection of the Messiah” (Acts 2:31) and Psalm 110 as prophetic words regarding the ascension of Christ (Acts 2:34-35).

Psalm 24:7-10, as the heavenly view of Jesus’ ascension and return to the Father, should capture our imagination and invite us to ponder the glory of that holy moment.

Hebrews 7:23-25 (What Is Jesus Doing?)

A second passage to examine is found in the letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians living, most likely, in Rome during the second half of the first century, probably around AD 80.¹⁵ Though many people have been suggested (Apollos, Paul, Barnabas, Priscilla), the author of the letter remains unknown.¹⁶

The message of Hebrews centers around two major themes, the word of God (revelation) and the work of Christ (redemption).¹⁷ According to Brown, “The word of God certainly dominates the opening and closing chapters (1-6 and 11-13), whilst the work of Christ is given priority of place in the four chapters (7-10) which comprise the highly important central section

¹⁵ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews: Christ Above All*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1982), 16-17.

¹⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 7-8.

¹⁷ Brown, *The Message of Hebrews*, 17.

of the letter.”¹⁸ The central section highlights the priestly role of Christ and is the context for the pericope we will examine, Hebrews 7:23-25.

The author of Hebrews describes how the former priests were “many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office” (Heb. 7:23).¹⁹ The death of a priest would have been a source of great pain for the people of God. Spurgeon describes how “it would seem like having to begin again when one went for the first time to the new priest: it would be a break in the continuity of one’s comfort.”²⁰ With the death of each priest, the community would have to mourn and become acquainted with new man of God. Significant and meaningful stories would have to be shared again and again with a seemingly endless cycle of priests.²¹

In contrast to the former priesthood, Christ’s priesthood is permanent for “Jesus lives forever” (Heb. 7:24). Unlike the endless succession of the Levitical priests, Jesus our Lord knows us intimately. As the psalmist describes, “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:13-14). Jesus, our Creator and Redeemer, has known us our whole life. Spurgeon writes, “Jesus reads my heart, and has always read it since it began to beat: He knows my griefs and has carried my sorrows from of old.”²² We can approach Jesus confident that he knows us better than anyone; he even knows us better than we know ourselves (1 John 3:20).

¹⁸ Brown, *The Message of Hebrews*, 17.

¹⁹ New Revised Standard Version

²⁰ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Treasury of the Bible, Volume VIII: Philemon to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 95.

²¹ Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 203.

²² Spurgeon, *The Treasury of the Bible*, 95.

Regarding the people of God, the author of Hebrews states that Jesus “always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). Though we are unable to see or comprehend this reality, Jesus is praying for and interceding on behalf of his people. He lives, not for himself, but for those who believe in him. In his commentary on this passage, Calvin writes, “What sort of pledge and how great is this love towards us! Christ liveth for us, not for himself...for it belongs to a priest to intercede for the people.”²³ Calvin understood the importance of the priesthood of Christ and the spiritual benefit this ministry brings to the believer.

Regarding the things for which Jesus is praying, one commentator states, “daily sustenance, remission of sin, and protection from the evil one.” Jesus provides for our daily needs and protects us in ways that remain unknown to us. Thus, to answer our second question (What is Jesus doing?), we can be comforted in knowing that, in his priestly role, Jesus is interceding and praying for his people from the heavenly realm.

Colossians 3:1-4 (What Is Our Response?)

A third pericope to explore is found in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Colossians was written by Paul, most likely from Rome around AD 60.²⁴ Paul wrote this letter from prison, and it is likely that Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were all written from the same location.²⁵

Regarding the occasion of the letter, the Colossian believers were recent converts who were

²³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), 175.

²⁴ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, eds., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 335.

²⁵ Carson, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 334.

tempted to relapse into their former, sinful way of life.²⁶ In light of these temptations, Paul urges the Colossians to persevere in their faith and not return to their former way of life.

The threat of spiritual relapse is the broad context for exploring Colossians 3:1-4. The more immediate context is Paul's warnings against false teachers and regulations that "refer to things that perish with use" (Col. 2:22). To counter these false teachings, Paul offers a word of encouragement. As we ask the final question regarding Christ's ascension (What is our response?), we will discover that the answer includes a heart that seeks the things that are above, a mind that is set on things that are above, and a life that is hidden in Christ.

In Colossians 3:1-4, Paul "exhorts the Colossians to meditation upon the heavenly life."²⁷ They are not to be consumed by earthly concerns. Seeking things above involves ongoing effort and a daily dependence upon the ascended Jesus.²⁸ Hendriksen refers to things above as "the spiritual values embedded in the heart of the exalted Mediator in glory."²⁹ Paul was admonishing the Colossians to seek "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love" (Col. 3:12, 14). Such spiritual values reveal the character of our ascended Lord who is seated at the right hand of God. Like the Colossians, we should pursue these qualities with vigilance.

Paul also encouraged the Colossians to set their "minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2). Paul is urging them to "ponder" and "yearn for" things that

²⁶ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1964), 17.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), 205.

²⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, 140.

²⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, 140.

are above.³⁰ The best way to overcome sinful behaviors and indulgences is not to dwell upon them at all.³¹ Setting our minds on things above is the first step in mortifying our sin; thus, Paul is calling the Colossians to ponder and yearn for the heavenly, ascended Christ. Setting our minds on and contemplating our ascended Lord has moral and ethical benefits. We lose the desire to indulge ourselves in all of the immoral behaviors of our former life, which Paul goes on to describe (Col. 3:5-10). Paul was urging the Colossians to fix their minds on the ascended Jesus to remind them of their true identity. His admonition applies to us today. Setting our minds on things above renews our identity in Christ and, thus, lessens our desire for earthly things.

Lastly, Paul describes our life as being “hidden in Christ” (Col. 3:3). Our life with Christ is hidden because it is a heavenly union. It cannot be seen or observed here on earth. Lucas writes,

This remarkable phrase means that the gift of salvation, like all other spiritual treasure, is located now in Christ...and is ours only *by faith*...Christians daily enjoy and experience this life in Christ, and its power is seen just in so far as they live under the rule of grace.³²

Our union with Christ, though hidden, is manifested in how we live and love on earth. Union with Christ is a common theme in Calvin’s writings. For Calvin, a life that is hidden with Christ “is out of danger...For what is to be more desired by us than this – that our life remain with the very fountain of life?”³³ For Calvin, we are most secure as we are hidden with Christ.

³⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, 141.

³¹ R.C. Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon: Fullness and Freedom*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 137.

³² Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, 138-139.

³³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 207.

In our union with Christ, the events of his life become a reality for us in which we participate.³⁴ We have union with Christ in his death, his resurrection, his ascension (hidden life), and in his future return.³⁵ Through this union, we take hold of “the life that really is life” (1 Tim. 6:19). Thus, to answer our third question regarding the ascension (What is our response?), we seek the things above and experience union with Christ as we are “hidden” with him until the day that we will see him face to face.

With a biblical foundation, I will now discuss the historical development of the festival of the Ascension. The insights we learn from history can inspire renewal in our current day.

Historical Development

The historical development of the festival of the Ascension was a complex and dynamic process, revealing periods of celebration and innovation as well as periods of neglect and stagnation. In this section, I will offer an overview of the festival of the Ascension throughout the major eras of church history and then focus on its celebration in Calvin’s Geneva.

The Festival of the Ascension throughout the Major Eras of Church History

Patristic (2nd-5th centuries)

Before the fourth century, the resurrection, the ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit were all celebrated during a period known as the Fifty Days. During this time, Easter

³⁴ George Barlow, *The Preacher’s Complete Homiletic Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and I-II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 438.

³⁵ Alexander Maclaren, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* (London: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1903), 258.

Sunday was “the first of fifty days of rejoicing in the resurrection, ascension, bestowal of the Spirit, and founding of the Church, understood not as separate episodes succeeding each other in time, but as different facets of one and the same mystery of Jesus’ exaltation as Lord.”³⁶ Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost were a joyful season, celebrating the fullness of Christ in the present.

In other accounts, we find that the Ascension was celebrated with Pentecost on the fiftieth day as one, combined festival.³⁷ Johnson suggests that the twofold significance of the fiftieth day may have come from an apocryphal book known as the *Doctrina Apostolorum*, which places the ascension and the coming of the Spirit on the fiftieth day.³⁸ Johnson writes,

Unlike the Acts, then, which places a ten-day interval between the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit, the *Doctrina* assigns both events to the fiftieth day, the conclusion of Pentecost, and, recalling Christ’s promise, presents the outpouring of the Spirit as the direct and immediate consequence of the Lord’s going to his Father.³⁹ Observing the ascent of the Lord to heaven and descent of the Spirit on the same day

brought these events into close relationship. By the end of the fourth century, however, most scholars agree that the Ascension became a separate celebration on the fortieth day.⁴⁰ Once Christianity became legalized, liturgical time became more concerned with the historical commemorations of past events; thus, celebrating events such as the ascension of Christ would

³⁶ Patrick Regan, “The Fifty Days and the Fiftieth Day,” in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 224.

³⁷ Robert E. Webber, “Resources for Ascension Day,” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 5, *The Services of the Christian Year*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1994), 413.

³⁸ Regan, “The Fifty Days and the Fiftieth Day,” 232-233.

³⁹ Regan, “The Fifty Days and the Fiftieth Day,” 233.

⁴⁰ J.G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2004), 192.

be recognized on the day in which it took place in history.⁴¹ In addition, the church needed a standardized canon of Scripture to combat false teaching.⁴² With the development of the canon of Scripture, festivals such as the Ascension were celebrated as independent observances influenced by the flow of the biblical narrative. Thus, bishops preached each year on Ascension Day. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, celebrated the Ascension on the fortieth day, declaring,

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 Saviour had ascended into heaven, His Nativity would have come to nothing...and His Passion would have borne no fruit for us, and His most holy Resurrection would have been useless.⁴³

Augustine championed the festival of the Ascension and preached on its power. In one of his sermons, he states, “Today we are celebrating the Lord’s ascension into heaven, in the flesh...Meanwhile, let us ascend with him in heart, being sure that we will also follow in the flesh.”⁴⁴ Augustine encouraged the people to ascend in spirit and to endure life on earth with a view toward heavenly realities. His sermons surely formed the people of Hippo year after year.

During the Patristic period, the Ascension evolved from an eschatological observance throughout the Fifty Days, to a unified observance with Pentecost on the fiftieth day, to a separate observance on the fortieth day by the end of the fourth century. Its themes were captured through the liturgies and sermons of bishops in the various liturgical centers of the day.

⁴¹ Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, 113.

⁴² Martin Connell, *Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year*, vol. 2, *Sunday, Lent, The Three Days, The Easter Season, Ordinary Time* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 171-172.

⁴³ Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, 170.

⁴⁴ Saint Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Part III, Vol. 7, *Sermons on Liturgical Seasons*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1993), 249.

Medieval (6th-16th centuries)

During the Medieval period, the festival of the Ascension maintained an historical emphasis on the fortieth day, following the chronology in Acts; and, doctrinally, it remained an important aspect of faith.⁴⁵ However, the festival no longer had a sense of eschatological joy, but settled into more of a passive remembrance. Connell writes,

Thus, the individual narratives – the resurrection at Easter, the ascension at the fortieth day, and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the fiftieth day – were maintained, as were the other Sundays of the season, but their connection to one another as narratives linked in a larger season of paschal joy for the church’s renewal was lost for the most part.⁴⁶

During the Medieval period, the Ascension was maintained as one of the important saving events in the life of Christ, but the vibrancy of the previous era was lost.

Byzantine/Eastern Orthodox (6th century-Present)

The Eastern Church has long celebrated the Ascension, as revealed by the sermons of early bishops such as Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom.⁴⁷ However, the Eastern Church not only recognizes the ascension through an annual festival, the weekly liturgy expresses an ascent to heaven. Bobrinskoy writes, “The liturgy re-creates for us the earthly life of the Word Incarnate and his ascension in glory.”⁴⁸ Worship has a heavenly dimension in the Orthodox faith.

⁴⁵ Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, 147.

⁴⁶ Connell, *Eternity Today*, 178.

⁴⁷ Boris Bobrinskoy, “Worship and the Ascension of Christ.” *Studia liturgica* 2, no. 2 (1963): 110. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000690365&site=ehost-live>.

⁴⁸ Bobrinskoy, “Worship and the Ascension of Christ,” 116.

Reformation (16th century)

During the sixteenth century, many of the Reformers abolished the festivals of the Christian Year. Luther, however, sought “to keep the major festivals of the historic year with the long established epistle and gospel lessons.”⁴⁹ Bucer was more radical in his reform. In his influential *Ground and Reason*, he wrote, “Since we have no reason to retain one feast and reject another... we shall be satisfied with the observance of Sunday alone.”⁵⁰ Many of the Reformers saw no benefit in recognizing the Ascension or any of the festivals of the Christian Year. Bucer’s view (and the Puritans’) has influenced churches within the Reformed tradition to this day.

Later Reformation (17th-19th centuries)

The rise of Methodism in eighteenth-century England through its founder, John Wesley, had a profound impact on the liturgical practice on churches in Europe and America.⁵¹ In response to the Anglican church, Wesley purged many of the festivals of the liturgical year, keeping Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Day, Ascension Day, Whit Sunday, and Trinity Sunday.⁵² Wesley kept the major festivals that remembered the saving events of Christ’s life and included collects as well as Epistle and Gospel readings for these services.⁵³

⁴⁹ James White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 127.

⁵⁰ Ottomar Frederick Cypris, *Martin Bucer’s Ground and Reason: A Commentary and Translation* (Yulee: Good Samaritan Books, 2016), 8.

⁵¹ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 145.

⁵² White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 162.

⁵³ James White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 38.

In addition, many of Charles Wesley's hymns were written to celebrate the festivals of the Christian Year.⁵⁴ The hymn, "Hail the Day that Sees Him Rise," was written for the festival of the Ascension.⁵⁵ John and Charles Wesley understood the value of celebrating the major festivals of the liturgical year and celebrated the Ascension with hymnody as well as prayers and Scripture readings appropriate for the day.⁵⁶

During the eighteenth century in Germany, the Lutheran tradition celebrated the festivals of the Christian Year, including Ascension Day. During his years as Thomascantor in Leipzig, Bach wrote at least four cantatas for the Ascension at St. Thomas Church.⁵⁷ Wilson-Dickson writes, "Bach put more of his creative energy into his cantatas than into any other form. During his lifetime he may have completed five year-cycles of cantatas, one cantata for each Sunday and holy day."⁵⁸ Some traditions in the Later Reformation period continued to celebrate the festivals of the liturgical year and crafted creative liturgies, hymns, and cantatas for these special services.

Other trends on the America frontier, however, created a more pragmatic calendar that included such remembrances as Mother's Day, homecoming Sunday, and the annual Christmas

⁵⁴ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 162.

⁵⁵ S T Kimbrough, Jr., *The Lyrical Theology of Charles Wesley* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 153.

⁵⁶ White, *Documents of Christian Worship*, 38.

⁵⁷ Charles Sanford Terry, *J.S. Bach Cantata Texts, Sacred and Secular* (London: Travis and Emery Music Bookshop, 2009), 261-271.

⁵⁸ Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music: From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel* (Batavia: Lion Publishing, 1992), 95.

pageant.⁵⁹ These more cultural celebrations replaced the traditional Christian calendar (including the Ascension) and “encapsulated much of what was important in church and family life.”⁶⁰

Modern (20th/21st centuries)

The Modern era witnessed a reduced interest in the festival of the Ascension. Toon cites the new paradigms in cosmology, skeptical forms of biblical criticism, and the rise of secularization as reasons behind much of the doubt and lack of interest in the Ascension.⁶¹ He notes that “there is a rich doctrine of the Ascension presupposed in modern liturgies used by Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Methodist congregations.”⁶² However, he laments that though there is a strong belief in the bodily ascension of Jesus, the doctrine of the ascension is not clearly taught and preached upon in worship, nor is it being written about within these denominations.⁶³

The historical development of the Ascension includes periods of liturgical innovation and seasons of liturgical stagnancy. In the cities and churches where the Ascension was faithfully celebrated, worshipers would have been formed in the present life and ministry of our ascended

⁵⁹ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 162-163.

⁶⁰ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 162.

⁶¹ Toon, *The Ascension of Our Lord*, 141.

⁶² Toon, *The Ascension of Our Lord*, 142.

⁶³ Toon, *The Ascension of Our Lord*, 142.

Lord through sermons, hymns, prayers, sacraments, and cantatas. In this final section, I will focus on the festival of the Ascension as it was celebrated during the 1540s in Calvin's Geneva.

The Festival of the Ascension in Calvin's Geneva (1541-1550)

Unlike Bucer and other Reformers, Calvin retained those festivals that remembered the major events of Christ's life.⁶⁴ According to Baird, "Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, and Whitsunday, were the five feasts of the Reformed Church" in Geneva.⁶⁵ Baird's research on Calvin led to worship renewal in American Presbyterianism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More recently, the work of Elsie Anne McKee has elucidated many of the intricacies surrounding the celebration of the Ascension in Geneva between 1541 and 1550. In this section, I will discuss the festival of the Ascension in Geneva and highlight how the doctrine of the ascension influenced the practice of the Lord's Supper and intercessory prayer.

Calvin was exiled from Geneva in 1538 and spent three years in Strasbourg under the pastoral mentorship of Bucer (1538-1541). When Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541, the Genevan government had instituted the observance of Ascension, Annunciation, Circumcision, and Christmas for the city.⁶⁶ Calvin agreed to this civil ordinance, but also sought reform.

While Calvin sought to reform the annual, weekday festivals in Geneva, he was also involved in establishing a weekday service, the day of prayer, that would become significant in

⁶⁴ Charles W. Baird, *The Presbyterian Liturgies: Historical Sketches* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 30.

⁶⁵ Baird, *The Presbyterian Liturgies*, 30-31.

⁶⁶ Elsie Anne McKee, *The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin's Geneva* (Geneva: Droz, 2016), 289-290.

the life and ministry of Geneva. McKee describes the situation in Geneva between 1541 and 1550 as one in which the special service status of the day of prayer was initially overshadowed by the observance of one of the four major weekday festivals during the year, including Ascension. By 1545, however, the situation began to change and the four festivals diminished in observance status as the Wednesday day of prayer service became more prominent.⁶⁷

As we explore the observance of the festival of the Ascension in Geneva, I will describe the following factors: the number of services held, the liturgy, the sermon content, the holiday status, the Lord's Supper, and intercessory prayer. Examining each of these factors will paint a picture of the observance of the Ascension in Geneva in the 1540s.

The Services, Liturgy, Sermon Content, and Holiday Status of the Ascension in Geneva

From 1541 until 1545, St. Pierre Cathedral held two services for the Ascension, one at dawn and one at 8:00am. The liturgy was mostly likely the same as the liturgy for Sunday.⁶⁸ Thus, during the 1540s, the liturgy for Ascension would have followed *The Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers*, which contained the following elements in this order: Votum (Ps. 124:8), Confession, Prayer of Forgiveness, Psalm, Prayer of Illumination, Scripture, Sermon, Prayer of Intercession, Lord's Prayer Paraphrase, Benediction.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Elsie Anne McKee, "Calvin's Creative Revision of Liturgical Time" in *Crossing Traditions: Essays on the Reformation and Intellectual History*, ed. Maria-Cristiana Pitassi, Daniela Solfaroli Camillocci, and Arthur Huiban (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2017), 40.

⁶⁸ McKee, *The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin's Geneva*, 292.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earney, eds., *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2018), 306.

Regarding the sermon content for the weekday festivals, it is highly probable that Calvin preached on a theme related to the day.⁷⁰ Thus, regarding the Ascension, Calvin most likely preached on an ascension-related text. In one of his ascension sermons from his series on the book of Acts, Calvin writes,

Our task is to explain what Luke says concerning the apostles, who saw our Lord ascend to heaven. It is not enough for us simply to know the story. We must note that what Luke describes here is one of the main articles of our faith. The articles of our faith are by no means unimportant: they are essential to salvation.⁷¹

Calvin's sermon reveals a respect for the bodily ascension of Christ and for the ascension as an article of our faith. It is likely that he preached on these themes on Ascension Day. Calvin also believed strongly in the priestly intercession of Christ, declaring in a sermon,

When we presume to pray to God, we will be rejected unless Jesus Christ is there on our behalf. And because he is there he is our Intercessor, who causes our prayers to reach God and who allows us to have them answered...And because Jesus Christ is now in heaven, we may be sure that he is there to intercede for us.⁷²

For Calvin, Christ is our true worship leader and Intercessor, the one who makes our worship acceptable. It is likely that he also preached on this theme for Ascension Day in Geneva.

The holiday status of the Ascension changed throughout the 1540s in Geneva. In the early 1540s, it would have been a full holiday.⁷³ By 1545, however, the city experienced growing tension as some returned to work after the 8:00am service, while some kept the full holiday.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ McKee, "Calvin's Creative Revision of Liturgical Time," 39.

⁷¹ John Calvin, *Crucified and Risen: Sermons on the Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ*, trans. Robert White (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2020), 157.

⁷² Calvin, *Crucified and Risen*, 162.

⁷³ McKee, "Calvin's Creative Revision of Liturgical Time," 41.

⁷⁴ McKee, "Calvin's Creative Revision of Liturgical Time," 41.

Calvin desired to resolve the confusion, but the government decided to abolish the weekday festivals, except Christmas. Thus, in 1550, the Ascension was no longer an official festival.

I will close our discussion on Calvin's Geneva by discussing the practice of the Lord's Supper and intercessory prayer. Both practices were informed by the doctrine of the ascension.

The Lord's Supper and Intercessory Prayer in Calvin's Geneva

One author describes how Calvin's doctrines of the ascension and of the Lord's Supper developed "in tandem" with one another.⁷⁵ A respect for the ascension led Calvin to conclude, "He is not here...for he sits there at the right hand of the Father."⁷⁶ Because Christ is located at the right hand of God, he cannot be in the elements of bread and wine; he is present through the Spirit. Thus, as part of his Lord's Supper liturgy, Calvin exhorted the people, saying,

Let us lift up our hearts and our spirits to where Jesus Christ is in the glory of his Father...So our souls will be inclined to be nourished and revived by his substance, when they are thus lifted above all earthly things to reach heaven and enter the kingdom of God where he dwells. Let us therefore be satisfied with having the bread and the wine as signs and proofs, seeking the truth spiritually, which is how the Word of God promises that we will find it.⁷⁷

Through sermons and the liturgy, the people of Geneva would not have understood the bread and wine to literally become the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation); rather, they would have believed that they were feeding on him by faith, being lifted to him through the

⁷⁵ Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation* (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004), 179.

⁷⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1394.

⁷⁷ John Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," in *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present*, ed. Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2018), 328.

Spirit. Calvin's view of the spiritual presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper has continued to shape the practice of Presbyterian and Reformed churches to this day.

In addition to informing his view of the Lord's Supper, the ascension developed Calvin's understanding of Christ's intercession and the prayers of the church. For Calvin, "true Christian worship and prayer is not something believers do in their own power; rather, it is something they do in union with their heavenly Priest."⁷⁸ The understanding of the intercession of Christ affected the practice of prayer in Geneva. Thus, in his *Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers*, Calvin begins his prayer of intercession by saying,

Almighty God, heavenly Father, you have promised to answer the requests that we bring you in the name of your beloved Son Jesus Christ our Lord (John 16:23); and we are also instructed by his teaching and that of his Apostles to gather in his name with the promise that he will be in our midst and be our Intercessor before you, that we might receive all things for which we agree on earth (Matt. 18:19-20).⁷⁹

Calvin's doctrine and liturgical practice merged. As the people of St. Pierre Cathedral lifted their hearts in intercessory prayer, they believed their ascended Lord was among them.

Theological Reflection

In this final section, I will offer theological reflection on the three questions raised earlier in our discussion: Where did Jesus go? What is Jesus doing? What is our response? I will examine the location of Christ at the right hand of God in heaven, the priestly intercession of Christ, and the way we seek the presence of our ascended Lord in worship.

⁷⁸ Peter Toon, "Historical Perspectives on the Doctrine of Christ's Ascension Part 3: The Significance of the Ascension for Believers," *Bibliotheca sacra* 141, no. 561 (1984): 23. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000937584&site=ehost-live>.

⁷⁹ Calvin, "Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers," 311.

The Location of Christ at the Right Hand of God in Heaven

In our discussion of Psalm 24:7-10, we considered the question, “Where did Jesus go?” In this section, I will elaborate on the location of Jesus and the nature of heaven. Without a robust doctrine of the ascension, we may envision Jesus as a kind of spirit in an ethereal realm. Interpreting Romans 8:34, Orr states that Christ “is pictured as a human being in an exalted position at the right hand of God.”⁸⁰ Theologians have wrestled over whether this phrase is meant to indicate Jesus’ authority (conceptual) or his physical location (spatial).⁸¹ I will explore the martyrdom of Stephen for help in our understanding.

Before Stephen is stoned to death, Luke tells us that Stephen “gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55). Stephen was able to see a vision of heaven that was specific and physical enough for him to discern Jesus as “standing at the right hand of God.” Prime writes, “This is the one occasion in the New Testament where it depicts the Lord Jesus as ‘standing’ at God’s right hand. Usually the symbolism is of His sitting, the picture of completion. Jesus’ standing expressed His readiness to receive Stephen’s soul into His presence and eternal safekeeping the moment he died.”⁸² It is hard to think of Jesus and “the right hand of God” in mere conceptual terms when we read of it in the context of Stephen’s martyrdom. Thus, the window into heaven from Acts 7:55-56 appears to describe Jesus’ real body expressing physical postures that communicate meaning to a soon-

⁸⁰ Peter Orr, *Exalted Above the Heavens: The Risen and Ascended Christ* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 129.

⁸¹ Orr, *Exalted Above the Heavens*, 129.

⁸² Derek Prime, *The Shout of a King: The Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Continuing Work Today* (Epsom: Day One Publications, 1999), 118.

to-be martyred follower of Christ. Having considered the phrase “the right hand of God,” we can now consider the nature of heaven. Thomas states that

it is a ‘place’ (John 14:3) which signals a real, literal location... When Jesus arose into the cloud above the Mount of Olives, the body was one which could be touched and handled. Jesus had underlined the point by eating fish with his disciples on a Galilean beach and saying to one of them that a ghost does not possess flesh and bones as he did. The ascension was clearly a signal that a corporeal body was being taken into heaven.⁸³

When we think of Jesus, we should not think of him as a ghostly presence in the clouds. He is in a real, glorified body in a real sphere called heaven where his position at the right hand of God appears to indicate both authority and location. As we conclude, however, we are careful not to deduce more than Scripture reveals, being content with the limits of our comprehension.

The Priestly Intercession of Christ

In our discussion of Hebrews 7:23-25, we considered the question, “What is Jesus doing?” In this section, I will probe further into Jesus’ continuous, priestly intercession.

As we ponder the themes for which Jesus may be praying over his people in heaven, we can first try to discern what he prayed for while he was on earth. When we examine Jesus’ high-priestly prayer in the upper room (John 17), we notice that he prayed for the disciples’ protection, joy, and sanctification; he prayed for future disciples (the church), that they would be one, that they would be with him, and that they would see his glory.⁸⁴ Thomas writes, “It is the burden of... Hebrews 7:25 that such a ministry continues in heaven.”⁸⁵ By faith, we believe that Jesus, our high priest, still prays for our protection, joy, sanctification, unity, and future glory.

⁸³ Thomas, *Taken Up into Heaven*, 10.

⁸⁴ Thomas, *Taken Up into Heaven*, 124-126.

⁸⁵ Thomas, *Taken Up into Heaven*, 127.

Furthermore, we need Christ's continuous, priestly intercession because we have an enemy who is ever against us, seeking to devour us (I Pet. 5:8). In Luke 22, Jesus informs Peter that Satan wanted to put the disciples through a severe trial, but Jesus prayed for his friend. Though we do not know the details of Jesus' interaction with Satan, we know that Jesus' prayer likely protected Peter from severe trial, possible destruction, and from turning away from the faith. Surely, such protection is what Jesus still prays for his people today from the throne in heaven. Regarding the need for Christ's continual intercession, Spurgeon writes,

We are never out of danger, and therefore...require the perpetual patronage of our protector...there is an enemy who is always alive and always full of malice...We do not know...how many arrows are caught upon the shield of our Lord's intercession.⁸⁶

Jesus, our high priest, ever lives to make intercession for us. Through his prayers, he provides for our needs, protects us from evil, and allows us to persevere in the faith. Though the devil is seeking to destroy us, Jesus ever lives to protect us.

Lastly, we will consider whether Jesus' intercessions are verbal or nonverbal. Though some scholars believe that Christ's presence in heaven "in itself constitutes intercession," others believe that Jesus' intercessions are "real and vocal" and are characterized by "the same qualities found in all prayer."⁸⁷ Orr believes the strongest argument for actual prayer is in the meaning of *entynchano*, the Greek word for "to make intercession," which usually means that one person is approaching another to communicate with words.⁸⁸ Thus, while we must be careful not to caricature Jesus in his posture of prayer, we can conclude that the manner in which he prays for us in heaven is representative of the way that he prayed for us on earth.

⁸⁶ Spurgeon, *The Treasury of the Bible*, 97.

⁸⁷ John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1969), 247.

⁸⁸ Orr, *Exalted Above the Heavens*, 194.

Seeking the Presence of Our Ascended Lord in Worship

The third question we have posed in our discussion of the ascension is, “What is our response?” In this final section, I propose that corporate worship is one way that we respond to our ascended Lord, a means of seeking “the things that are above” (Col. 3:1).

In the Eastern tradition, worship is a continuous ascent to closeness with God, an upward journey like that of Jesus.⁸⁹ From this perspective, as we gather in song and prayer, hear the Word, and commune at the table, we are intentionally seeking the realities of heaven. Moreover, “The liturgy is the eschatological sacrament... what is accomplished in time, on earth, is a manifestation of what is heavenly and eternal, and enables us to participate in those heavenly things.”⁹⁰ In worship, we experience union with Christ as we are “hidden” with him (Col. 3:3) and seated “with him in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6). In a mysterious way, as we gather in corporate worship, we join our Lord and the heavenly realities (Heb. 12:22-24). The Lord’s Supper is the culmination of this corporate ascent and communion. Calvin’s writes,

If we are lifted up to heaven with our eyes and minds, to seek Christ there in the glory of his Kingdom, as the symbols invite us to him in his wholeness, so under the symbol of bread we shall be fed by his body, under the symbol of wine we shall separately drink his blood, to enjoy him at last in his wholeness.⁹¹

Calvin believed we experience union with Christ through the Lord’s Supper, seeing a connection between our being lifted up to heaven and Christ’s ascent to heaven.⁹² Thus, the

⁸⁹ Bobrinskoy, “Worship and the Ascension of Christ,” 121.

⁹⁰ Bobrinskoy, “Worship and the Ascension of Christ,” 119.

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2, 1381.

⁹² Christopher B. Kaiser, “Climbing Jacob’s ladder: John Calvin and the early church on our eucharistic ascent to heaven,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56, no. 3 (2003): 254. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001397877&site=ehost-live>.

admonition to “seek the things that are above” (Col. 3:1) has had a profound influence on worship practice, shaping Calvin’s view of the Lord’s Supper and the opening words of eucharistic prayers, “Lift up your hearts” (*Sursum corda*).⁹³ Chrysostom interpreted *Sursum corda* as, “Hearts upward.”⁹⁴ We can learn from the Orthodox faith and from Calvin. Perhaps we have become too casual on Sunday, unaware of heavenly realities. Through worship, we respond to our ascended Lord and experience union with him as we seek the things that are above.

Summary

Christ lived more than thirty years on earth. He spent his last three years in public and private ministry. He has been ministering as our high priest in heaven for twenty centuries! The doctrine and festival of the Ascension need to be explored afresh in the church today. As we have examined, biblically and theologically, the ascension helps us understand where Jesus is, what he is doing, and how we are to respond. We know that Christ is at the right hand of God in heaven; thus, we can be comforted by his priestly intercession and seek the things that are above.

Understanding the historical development of the Ascension offers us an appreciation of practices throughout church history and a means of recovering some of those practices for the renewal of worship today. Regarding my own church and denomination (Presbyterian Church in America), my hope is that we would be inspired by the observance of the Ascension in Calvin’s Geneva, including his practice of the Lord’s Supper and intercessory prayer. Ultimately, my desire is that a revival of the Ascension would strengthen the church as we await Christ’s return. Until then, may the call of the *Sursum corda* sustain us and give us orientation: “Hearts upward.”

⁹³ Bobrinskoy, “Worship and the Ascension of Christ,” 118.

⁹⁴ Kaiser, “Climbing Jacob’s ladder,” 261.

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