



THE ABSENCE OF THE ASCENSION

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Introduction

It is certainly right to place great emphasis on Christ's birth (Christmas), death (Good Friday), and resurrection (Easter), but to ignore or minimize what comes after these important events (the Ascension) has impoverished the church. The absence of the Ascension in our thought and practice has left us ill-equipped for our work in the world. We have failed to realize the implications of the Lordship of Christ, our empowerment for ministry and what Christ continues to do for us. All these things are wrapped up in the theology of the Ascension. In fact, the early disciples seemed to have grasped what we have missed. They were anticipating the future because of what Christ had done in the past. Jesus had taught them what to expect and they were beginning to see its realization. If Christians today were to apply the truths of Christ's Ascension to their everyday work life, they would experience incredible freedom and power to pursue excellence in all sectors of society – the arts and sciences, business, politics, and in every workplace. It all starts with understanding the importance of Christ's absence.

My Absence Better than My Presence

In the account of the Ascension in Luke 24:49-53, Jesus first tells the disciples to stay in the city in order to wait for the "promise of My Father"—Pentecost (vs. 49). Then after blessing them, He ascended to heaven (vs. 50-51). But notice the surprising, counter-intuitive response of the disciples. It says, "they returned to Jerusalem with great joy." It might make more sense if it said they returned with mourning and tears. Usually, when someone leaves on a long trip, there are tears. When soldiers go off to war, there are tears, and when they come back, there are hugs, kisses, and great joy. When my son recently went off to college for the first time, there were tears for this new stage of life and because he would not be back for a few months. There was a

hole in our family, a missing piece, an absence of the music, harmonies, films he produced and adventures he initiated. How much more would the disciples miss Jesus' presence?

So why were the disciples so joyful? My answer is that they had begun to grasp the meaning of Jesus' teaching in the upper room discourse in John 14-17. Particularly, note John 16:7-13. In verse 7-8, it says, "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸and He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness and judgment." Notice that stunning claim that "it is to your advantage that I go away." How could that possibly be true? Could Jesus' absence be better than His presence? Was it better that He go away than if He were to stay? Just think of how great it was for the disciples (and would be for us, if we had been there) to see Christ's miracles and hear His teaching from His own mouth. Imagine what it might have been like to be present at the raising of Lazarus, when Jesus said,

"Lazarus, come forth," and a man already dead four days came waddling out of the grave (John 11:43). Or imagine the feeding of the five thousand with two fish and five loaves of bread (Matt. 14:19), or His stilling the storm (Matt. 8:23f), or walking on the water (Matt. 14:22). What I would give to see those events! Or imagine hearing the Sermon on the Mount from His lips, noticing His facial expressions, seeing His eyes, hearing the tone of His voice. Wouldn't it be great to have lived in Jesus' day or have Him physically with us today? Why would we be better if He were to go away, rather than stay? Why is it better if He ascends to heaven rather than physically stay on earth?

Where, Who What

I believe it is because of where Christ was going, who He was going to send in His place, and what He was going to do when He got there. Grasping the where, who, and what will open our eyes to a new horizon. Where was Christ going? To the right hand of the Father to be crowned the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (this is sometimes called the "Session"). Who was He going to send in His place? The Holy Spirit was to be poured out at Pentecost. What was Jesus going to do when He got there? Well, I suppose we could discuss many things, but one in particular—to pray for us as the great High Priest. Let's discuss each of these and explore their relevance for our lives today.

Where

Christ was going away to be seated at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:33-34; Acts 5:31; Mark 16:19, Luke 22:69; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22). This means that He was being placed in the position of power and authority (the right hand). All authority is given to Him (Matt. 28:18). He is now the Lord of all. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this understanding for the early disciples and for us. Peter says on Pentecost, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). "Jesus is Lord," was their earliest confession. But because of the persecution of early believers, it was hard to say so. Paul says in 1 Cor. 12:3 that no one could say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. This perhaps means that you could not say, "Jesus is Lord," and mean it (without the Holy Spirit) or maybe that the cost of saying those words was so great that no one would do so without the help of the Spirit.

We do know that in the early church, the confession, "Jesus is Lord," was seen as a threat to Roman authority, exemplified in emperor worship. At one point, Christians were forced to say *Kaiser Kurios* ("Caesar is Lord") and put some incense on the altar, as an act of emperor worship and to curse Christ. It is not surprising that many Christians could not or would not do these things. Above all, they could not attribute ultimate Lordship to Caesar because they already had allegiance to Jesus as Lord. Thus they were persecuted, thrown to the lions, covered in pitch and set on fire as torches for Nero's gardens, covered with animal skins and attacked by dogs. To say, "Jesus is Lord," had radical implications for their lives.

The Lordship of Christ still has radical implications for us. Even though we may not be persecuted as many are throughout the world for their profession of faith, confessing Jesus as Lord deeply impacts our personal and public lives. Abraham Kuyper said that there is not one square inch that Christ does not say "mine." Similarly C.S Lewis wrote: "...there is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch, every split second is claimed by God and counter claimed by Satan." ¹

Among other things, this impacts the way we think and the way we work. Augustine used to argue that all truth is God's truth. Thus, we ought to learn everything we can about anything we can. Every particular truth leads us back to the God of Truth. Therefore, we need not fear exploring truth in any arena. B.B. Warfield said:

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, "Christianity and Culture," (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 33.

“We must not, then, as Christians assume an attitude of antagonism towards the truths of reason, or the truths of philosophy, or the truths of science, or the truths of history, or the truths of criticism. As children of the light, we must be careful to keep ourselves open to every ray of light....Let us, then, cultivate an attitude of courage as over against the investigations of the day. None should be more zealous in them than we. None should be more quick to discern truth in every field, more hospitable to receive it, more loyal to follow it whithersoever it leads. It is not for Christians to be lukewarm in regard to the investigations and discoveries of the time. Rather, the followers of the Truth indeed can have no safety in science or in philosophy, save in the arms of truth. It is for us, therefore, as Christians, to push investigation to the utmost; to be leaders in every science; to stand in the van of criticism; to be the first to catch in every field the voice of the Revealer of truth, who is also our Redeemer. The curse of the Church has been her apathy to truth, in which she has too often left to her enemies that study of nature and of history and philosophy, and even that investigation of her own peculiar treasures, the Scriptures of God, which should have been her chief concern She has nothing to fear from truth; but she has everything to fear, and she has already suffered nearly everything, from ignorance. All truth belongs to us as followers of Christ, the Truth; let us at length enter into our inheritance.”²

If we confess Jesus as Lord, then we will not fear investigating any area where truth may be discovered. As Warfield points out, we should be both fearless and zealous to pursue excellence in every field. This means every area of work, or every calling, is under the Lordship of Christ and must be pursued as unto Him. This pursuit of excellence is not only faithful to our Lord, a way to give Him glory, a way to develop the potential of our gifts and abilities, but also a way to be more effective witnesses to Christ.

C.S. Lewis argues that the difficulty in any kind of direct apologetics is that, at most, we can make people listen for a half hour or so. But when they go back to the world, away from our lecture, or put down our article, “They are plunged into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted.” He maintains that the best way to counter this reality is not more little books

² B.B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970-1973), 2:463-465.

on Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity latent. G.K. Chesterton says that, “Education is implication.” In other words, we remember, in most cases, not what is explicitly stated by our teachers, but what is implied in what is said. Students often pick up their relativism or pluralism not because they are argued into it, but because it is assumed everywhere in their education. Lewis says:

“Our Faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics, or Astronomy, we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian. The first step to the re-conversion of this country is a series, produced by Christians, which can beat the *Penguin* and the *Thinkers Library* on their own ground. Its Christianity would have to be latent, not explicit; and of course, its science perfectly honest. Science twisted in the interests of apologetics would be sin and folly.”³

To my knowledge, this task has never been attempted. There are plenty of books that give a distinctly Christian perspective on various disciplines. But not a series that attempts to write an excellent introduction to each field of study by an outstanding Christian author (with faith implicit or latent). When you add to this the reality that many intelligent, committed Christians respond to (for instance) political or economic issues of our nation with a less than enlightened understanding of the broader questions involved, it makes such a task even more imperative. It is this kind of discipleship for public life that the Institute for Faith, Work & Economics (IFWE) seeks to provide.

Who

Another reason for the joy of the disciples was who Christ was going to send in His place – namely, the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the Spirit was sent to be the Advocate (*Paracletos*) to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:7). Particularly, the Spirit was sent to convict “the world” concerning the sin of unbelief (vs. 9), provide a conviction of the

³ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, “Christian Apologetics,” (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994), 93.

winsome attractiveness of Christ when He was no longer present as a visual example of it (vs. 10), and to show that the problem of evil will have a culmination in the “ruler of this world” (Satan) being judged (vs. 11). Note that the conviction being discussed applies not just to individual people but to “the world” (vs. 8). In other words, there is a public dimension to the Holy Spirit work, as well as a private and personal one. When we confront the public issues of the day (from a Biblical perspective) it is good to know that we don’t have to rely on our own intelligence and power alone, but can appeal to the Spirit to be our prosecuting or defending Advocate. The work of the Spirit applies not only to evangelism and missions, but to other areas of culture. Christ empowers our gifts to be used in the church and the world. All too often, the evangelical church has focused on personal salvation, or at best, personal discipleship, but not on detailed, specific help for people as they do their work in the world through various professions. When was the last time you saw people commissioned, ordained, prayed for by laying on of hands for their work in the business world? Praying that they be Spirit-anointed for their task in business, politics, education, science, journalism, medicine, or the arts. William Diehl says in *Christianity and the Real Life*:

“I am now a manager for a major steel company. In the almost thirty years of my professional career, my church has never once suggested that there be any type of accounting of my on the job ministry to others. My church has never once offered to improve those skills which could make me a better lay minister, nor has it ever asked if I needed any kind of support in what I was doing. There has never been an inquiry in the types of ethical decisions I must face, or whether I seek to communicate my faith to my co-workers. I have never been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of a ministry in my career. In short, I must conclude that my church doesn’t really have the least interest in whether or how I minister in my daily work.”⁴

It’s as if the Ascension didn’t happen. It’s as if Christ was not Lord of all of life or the Spirit meant to empower us not merely in personal, but in public life, empowering gifts not just for evangelism, but for our work.

⁴ William Diehl, *Christianity and Real Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), v.

What

What does Christ as the ascended Lord continue to do? Among other things—pray for us. As the great High Priest, He “always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). Christ died for us, rose for us, reigns in power for us, and prays for us (Rom. 8:34). When Simon Peter fell into denying Christ, the assurance of his return to faith was, “I have prayed for you” (Luke 22:31-32). If Christ is praying for us, should we not be encouraged as we encounter difficulties in this world?

Conclusion

The absence of the Ascension from the thought and life of the church has meant a focus on what Christ has done for us in the past, but not on what He is doing for us in the present in personal and public life. He is the ascended Lord of all areas of thought and life. Are we making Him Lord of all areas of our lives? The Spirit has been sent to empower us in the church as well as in the world. Do we draw on His power in all areas of our lives? Jesus promises that the Father will “give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him” (Luke 11:13). Do we ask him for power elsewhere and in every task? Do we realize that the ascended Lord prays for us? If we embraced these truths, what might be the impact on our work life? These and many insights are lost when we ignore, minimize, or diminish the Ascension. What Christ has done in the past needs to be applied in the present. George MacLeod writes:

I simply argue that the cross be raised again
at the center of the market place
as well, as on the steeple of the church,
I am recovering the claim that
Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral
between two candles:
But on a cross between two thieves;
on the town garbage heap;
At a crossroads of politics so cosmopolitan
that they had to write His title
in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek...
At the kind of place where cynics talk smut,
and thieves curse and soldiers gamble.
Because that is where He died,

and that is what He died about.
And that is where Christ's men ought to be,
and what church people ought to be about.⁵

Although MacLeod doesn't articulate his message as the legacy of the Ascension, he does catch something of the need for engagement with the marketplace and with the difficult and sometimes dirty arenas of life we are called engage. When we understand the where, who, and what of the Ascension, we are equipped for transforming the spheres of our personal and public lives.

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⁵ George MacLeod, *Only One Way Left* (Glasgow: Iona Community, 1956), 38.