

**CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER**

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Nicene Creed</b>		Pastor/Teacher
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**. . . AND ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN**

Petrus Van Mastricht (1630-1706), one of the great Reformed theologians, declared that the ascension of Christ, “with respect to its denomination, is designated in different ways in the sacred page: *he was taken up* (Acts 1:9); *when he had ascended* (Eph. 4:8); *made higher than the heavens* (Heb. 7:26); *he entered into the sanctuary* (Heb. 9:12); *I go to the Father*; *to my Father’s house* (John 14:2); *I go away* (John 16:7); *I leave the world, and go to the Father* (John 16:28). With respect to its substance, it is nothing other than the second degree of exaltation, whereby having left the earth with respect to his body, he passed locally into heaven.”<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament makes a number of direct references to Christ’s ascension. Here are some of them: “And the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19). “And he led them out as far as to Bethania: and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. And it came to pass, whilst he blessed them, that he departed from them, and was carried up to heaven” (Luke 24:50, 51). “And no man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended from heaven, the Son of man, who is in heaven” (John 3:13). “And when he had said these things, while they looked on, he was raised up: and a cloud received him out of their sight. And whilst they were beholding him going up to heaven, behold, two men stood by them, in white garments” (Acts 1:9, 10). “Wherefore he saith: Ascending on high, he led captivity captive: he gave gifts to men” (Ephesians 4:8). “Having, therefore, a great high priest who hath penetrated the heavens, Jesus the Son of God; let us hold fast our confession” (Hebrews 4:14, cf. also 1:3; 6:20; 8:1; 9:12, 24; 10:12; 12:2; 13:20). The Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3:16 declares, “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”<sup>2</sup> It seems fairly obvious to the unbiased reader that the New Testament strongly affirms the historical reality of Christ’s ascension. It is, therefore, nothing short of astounding to read these words of a well-known theology professor: “The Apostolic Witness . . . in its earliest form does not proclaim an Ascension into heaven . . . this event was not underlined as of special importance during the first Christian century.”<sup>3</sup> A much better assessment is that of the noted Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, “while the reports about the event itself are few, the New Testament is rich in indirect testimonies. Jesus himself predicted it (Matt. 26:64) and repeatedly alluded to it (John 6:62; 13:3, 33; 14:28; 16:5, 10, 17, 28; 17:24). Peter, in his public ministry in Jerusalem, mentions it over and over (Acts 2:33-34; 3:21; 5:31; cf. 1 Pet. 3:21). Stephen saw the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). Paul refers to it repeatedly (Acts 13:30-37); Eph. 4:8-10; Phil. 1:23; 2:9; 3:20; Col. 3:1; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:14-16; 1 Tim. 3:16). It occurs time and again in the Letter to the Hebrews (2:9; 4:14; 6:19-20; 7:26; 9:24; 10:12-13; 12:2) and similarly in John’s Revelation (1:13; 5:6; 14:14; 19:11-16; 22:1). There can therefore be no doubt that the ascension, as much as the resurrection, was a constituent of the faith of the church from the beginning. For that matter, just as the ascension becomes absurd to those who deny the resurrection, so it is natural and self-evident to those who with the whole church and on the basis of the apostolic witness believe in Jesus’ resurrection. That is why the ascension as such, as an event on the fortieth day after the resurrection, is so rarely put in the foreground in the New Testament and so tightly linked to the resurrection.”<sup>4</sup>

- I. **THE ASCENSION: ITS TRUE CHARACTER.** There are a number of responses that can be given to those who would seek to discredit the reality of a physical ascension.
- A. **The Eyewitnesses.** Luke repeatedly underscores the fact that eyewitnesses were present. “He was taken up *before their very eyes*, and a cloud hid him *from their sight*. They were *looking intently* up into the sky as he was going.” The two angels then said to them, “Why do you stand here *looking* into the sky? This same Jesus . . . will come back in the same way you have *seen him go* into heaven.” Five times in this extremely brief account it is stressed that the ascension took place visibly. Luke has not piled up these phrases for nothing. He has much to say in his two-volume work about the importance for the verification of the gospel of the apostolic eyewitnesses. And here he plainly includes the ascension of Jesus within the range of historical truths to which the eyewitnesses could (and did) testify.”<sup>5</sup>
- B. **The Narrative.** Luke’s account is told with simplicity and sobriety. There are none of the extravagances that are so often associated with the apocryphal gospels and legend literature. There is no evidence of poetry or symbolism in Luke’s language. On the contrary, the narrative reads like history.
- C. **The Transition.** If Jesus did not ascend into heaven, what happened to Him? Why the cessation of the post-resurrection appearances? A great deal must be read into the New Testament documents in order to dismiss the ascension.<sup>6</sup> “At present it is enough to say that, so far as the direct evidence of the men of our Lord’s generation on any point can satisfy us, the witnesses to His Ascension could have had no better opportunities than they enjoyed, could not have been more capable of profiting by them, could not have spoken more clearly than they have done, and could, by neither word nor deed, have given more conclusive evidence as to their own convictions. So far as evidence handed down from a remote past can carry conviction with it, that evidence is here.”<sup>7</sup>
- II. **THE ASCENSION: ITS SIGNIFICANCE & IMPORTANCE.** Vos says it has a threefold significance:
- a. **Declarative.** Heaven is the place of God’s holy dwelling, where He reveals his glory more than elsewhere, while the earth is only a footstool for His feet. That Christ, after having completed His work as Mediator, went to heaven showed first of all that His work as Mediator concerned God, was a sacrifice brought to Him, which must be presented to Him. Further, if entrance into heaven was granted to Christ, then this was all the more a declaration of God that His work was complete and acceptable. Man is driven from the blessedness of God by sin, which was symbolized by his expulsion from the earthly paradise. Had he retained the favor of God, he would have been transferred into heavenly regions. Now that he has lost the right to appear there and hell draws him below with the bonds of darkness, the thought of a future salvation involuntarily takes this form: *When will I, a sinful creature, again appear before God in Zion?* So it was necessary that the great High Priest, who alone can appear before God, also actually enter heaven and so as the Head of the redeemed come before God as righteous. Finally, the ascension of the Mediator was the strongest possible expression of the depiction that His work is not limited to Israel but has a wider scope and significance. By not establishing His royal throne in the earthly Jerusalem but exalting that throne far above it to a height for which earthly boundaries are no longer visible, Christ showed that he was anointed over a spiritual Israel. His royal city is the Jerusalem that is above, the free, the mother of us all [Gal. 4:26], in which Philistine, Tyrian, Moor are born. Had the Mediator remained on earth, Jewish messianic expectations would have come true. But now His Kingdom is not of this world (Eph. 4:9-10).
- b. **Exemplary.** The ascension of Christ is prophetic for the ascension of all the redeemed. They are seated with Christ in heaven (Eph. 2:6). He prays and petitions that where He Himself is,

they who are given to Him by the Father may also be. According to Hebrews 2:6-9, in Christ is fulfilled the prophecy that the psalmist had expressed concerning man.

- c. **Instrumental.** He has entered heaven to prepare a place there for the members of His body. They all will come there not only *as* He is there, but also *because* He is there. The Head draws the members after Himself, for the body is the fullness of Him who fills all in all [Eph. 1:23]. And because the Head is there, both in body and soul, the members have the assurance that their flesh too, which they must put off here, is not lost and will not become identified with the earth, but that it again will sprout and, like the plant that grows upward, will seek heaven.<sup>8</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Theodorus Vandergroe (1705-1784), in his highly-regarded exposition of The Heidelberg Catechism, states: “Christ ascended into heaven by the power and operation of His Father. The Holy Scriptures teach regarding Christ that He was passively taken up into the heavens (Acts 1:9). Paul affirms this regarding the Lord Jesus in 1 Timothy 3:16, saying that He was . . . *received up into glory*, and Peter plainly declares that Christ was *by the right hand of God exalted* (Acts 2:33). All these passages affirm plainly that the Lord Jesus, by the power and operation of His Father, was taken from this earth into heaven. The Father received Him back into His glory after having sent Him to this earth only shortly before to accomplish and to execute the work of saving and redeeming the elect. And as the Father did prior to Christ’s resurrection from the dead, so He acted again as a righteous judge who justified His Son before the entire world by taking Him into heaven as the surety and head of His elect. Thereby He declared that Christ had fully suffered and accomplished all things on behalf of His elect, believing people. By so doing, Christ completely satisfied the claims of His holy justice, and therefore the Father could no longer require anything more from His Son. Consequently, His Son, the Lord Jesus, is now a complete surety and savior of all His elect, whom He had secured as His property by His blood. Having become their Lord in the fullest sense of the word, He also was given the power to unite them all to Himself by faith and to deliver and save them eternally. Peter testifies of this, saying, *God hath made that same Jesus* [by His resurrection from the dead and by His ascension into heaven], *whom ye has crucified, both Lord and Christ* (Acts 2:36).”<sup>9</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> P. Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology: IV* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2023), p. 539.

<sup>2</sup> In Acts 1:9 the phrase “he was taken up” is from the Greek verb *epairō*, meaning to lift up. In Luke 24:51 “he was taken up” is a different word: *anapherō*, which means to carry or bear away. In Acts 1:2, 11 and 1 Timothy 3:16, “was received up” is from *analambanō*, which means to lift up on high. The same verb is used in the Septuagint of Elijah’s translation to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). Doug Kelly helpfully explains that the “Two Greek verbs are generally used in these and other New Testament texts to express the ascension: (1) *anaphēro*, which indicates going up by one’s own power (thus, in the active voice), and (2) *analambanō*, meaning to be taken up (thus, in the passive voice, *analambanomai*).

“(1), *anabainō*, according to T. F. Torrance, is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *alah*, and has cultic significance: ‘It is used regularly in the Pentateuch of Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai, with the sense of going up to or ascending to the Lord. It came to be a regular term for going up to the Temple, while within the Temple it was used for ascension into the Holy of Holies. At the same time the word was used for the offering of sacrifice, while the noun, *olah*, may be used as a technical term for the whole burnt offering. It is in this way, apparently, that the term *anabainō* is applied to the ascension of Jesus Christ with distinct theological import – cf. Acts 2:34; John 3:13; 6:62; 20:17; Eph. 4:8-10 . . . Used in these ways the term *ascension* is essentially concerned with the Royal Priesthood of the crucified, risen and ascended Christ, exercised from the right hand of divine power.’

“(2) *analambanomai* usually bears the sense of *to be lifted up*. It is used in Mark 16:19; Acts 1:2; 1:22; 1 Tim. 3:16.” Cf. *Systematic Theology II* (Mentor Books, 2014), p. 502.

<sup>3</sup> O. Sydney Barr, *From the Apostles’ Faith to the Apostles’ Creed* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 142-143.

<sup>4</sup> H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation In Christ III* (Baker Academic, 2006), p. 445.

<sup>5</sup> J. R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990), p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> “Only severe Bible criticism can lead on to a denial of the ascension and even to its complete elimination from the original apostolic Kerygma.” G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 206.

<sup>7</sup> William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord* (rpt. Attic Press, 1977), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics: Christology III* (Lexham Press, 2014), p. 232.

<sup>9</sup> T. Vandergrow, *The Christian’s Only Comfort in Life and Death: An Exposition of The Heidelberg Catechism I* (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), p. 364.