

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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. . . AND IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER

In dealing with the subject of Christ's *heavenly session*,¹ we are, in the words of the late G. C. Berkouwer, "dealing with Christ's power, the power of his holy sacrifice by which our salvation is established in heavenly inviolability."² The Scripture uses a variety of expressions when describing Christ's session. Sometimes we read that Christ *sat down* at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven (Hebrews 1:3, 8:1). We read that the Father said to Him, *sit Thou* on My right hand (Acts 2:34; Hebrews 1:13) or that the Father *set Him* there (Ephesians 1:20). The emphasis elsewhere falls on the act of taking the seat or on the condition of being seated (Matthew 26:64; Colossians 3:1). The place where Christ is seated is likewise richly described. He is on the right hand of the power of God (Matthew 26:64; Luke 22:69) or the right hand of the Majesty on High (Hebrews 1:3) or the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2). We read that Christ *is there* at God's right hand (Romans 8:34). The purpose of all this is to underscore the truth that after His death and resurrection, Christ ascended to the highest place beside God the Father Almighty (Philippians 2:9, 10). I am gravely concerned with the direction that Evangelicalism seems to be headed. There is afoot in Evangelical circles a rush to identify God's *present* activity in the world. This is especially the case among charismatics. "This is what God is doing!" and "This is how God is leading!" I am convinced that the attempts to name such things as God's doings are nothing more or less than attempts to sanction our own interests or activities (sometimes it is done as a way of getting people to respond financially to support what is without question declared to be a God-inspired ministry). Even well-meaning Christians can fall prey to this sort of sinful proclivity. Without realizing it, they are detracting from the work of Christ. They shift the focus from what Christ has actually *done* to what we *assume* the Holy Spirit is now doing. David Wells has rightly warned, "Anything that does not arise from Christ's saving death as interpreted by Scripture, that does not promote Christ's glory as understood by the apostles' teaching, that does not bear the stamp of his grace as seen in obedience to his Word, love of his gospel, commitment to his church, and service of others cannot rightly be characterized as the work of God."³ We cannot detach the work of the Spirit from that of Christ. When that happens, then Christ's atoning work is overshadowed by a preoccupation with the power of the Spirit in the world today. As a result, many Christians erroneously believe that spiritual strength and growth are to be had independently of the atonement, which is the only true basis and content of Christ's mediation.⁴ The heavenly session should continually remind us that Christ's work is at once efficacious and entirely complete. The Lamb who was slain on Calvary's cross is the One who now sits enthroned at the Father's right hand (Revelation 22:1, 3).

- I. **THE EXALTATION TO THE THRONE.** Christ is now crowned with glory and honor (Hebrews 2:9). Hebrews 1:13 cites Psalm 110, where God Himself declares that there is One who will co-reign with Him. These words were never spoken of angels but find their fulfillment in the crucified and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. He who was rejected by men has been exalted by God (Acts 5:30).

- A. **Mission Accomplished.** He is seated. This speaks of His finished work. The language of Hebrews 10:13 explains, “every priest *stands* daily . . . offering repeatedly . . . But . . . Christ *sat down* at the right hand of God.” William Perkins, the great Puritan who we have cited frequently, noted, “For the meaning of the words, if we speak properly, God has neither right hand nor left. Neither can He be said to sit or stand, for God is not a body but a spirit. The words therefore contain a borrowed speech from earthly kings and potentates, whose manner and custom has been to place such persons at their right hands whom they purpose to advance to any special office or dignity.”⁵ Louis Berkhof adds, “It is perfectly evident that it would be a mistake to infer from the fact that the Bible speaks of Christ’s *sitting* at the right hand of God, that the life to which the risen Lord ascended is a life of rest. It is and continues to be a life of constant activity. The statements of Scripture vary. Christ is not only represented as *sitting* at the right hand of God, but also simply *as being* at His right hand, Romans 8:34; 1 Peter 3:22, or as *standing* there, Acts 7:56, and even as *walking* in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.”⁶
- B. **Supreme Glory and Honor.** Sitting at the right hand implies exaltation and blessedness. In Psalm 16:11 we are told that there is joy in God’s presence and eternal pleasure at God’s right hand (cf. Hebrews 12:2). “Whoever loves Christ in sincerity,” declared Herman Witsius, “cannot fail, on many accounts, to take pleasure in meditating on that unbounded glory, to which the Father has been pleased to exalt him.”⁷
- C. **Sovereign Rule.** We are told in Exodus 15:6, “Your right hand, O LORD, was majestic in Power. Your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy.” Christ is invested with majestic sovereignty. God 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 (Ephesians 1:20, 21). Vos comments, “The right hand is the seat of power. God has willed that for man it would be the instrument of the most natural and noble exercise of power. It is extended to command, holds the scepter for rulers, is a direct reflection in man of both the might and power that God possesses. Thus to sit at God’s right hand is for all things to be in the closest communion with His divine power and might. Whoever sits at someone’s right hand is connected with that of which the right hand is the symbol. Thus divine authority and divine power flow over, as it were, into Christ. For this significance of the right hand, one may compare passages like Isaiah 41:10, *I also support you with the right hand of my righteousness*, and 45:1, *Cyrus, whose right hand I hold*.”⁸

II. **THE EXECUTION OF HIS ROYAL OFFICES.** It was John Calvin who first observed the three-fold offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King.

- A. **High Priest.** He is the One who purges sin (Hebrews 1:3). He does this by making sacrifice (Hebrews 10:12). John Murray writes: “The definition of the office of high priest that he is *ordained for men in things pertaining to God* (Hebrews 5:1), is brought to bear upon the continued high priestly activity of the Redeemer. His continued activity has a Godward reference as truly as did his finished priestly offering. This adds new richness to our conception of the relation he sustains to his people and enhances our understanding of the significance for us, as individual believers and as members of the body which is the church, of the activity which Christ in heaven continues to exercise in reference to God on behalf of those whom he has purchased with his blood.”⁹
- B. **Prophet.** Christ sits on His throne as prophet. He has sent forth His Holy Spirit to instruct His people (Acts 2:33-34). “Christ remains active as prophet,” wrote Bavinck. “The preaching of the apostles, whether orally or in the writing of their letters, ties in with the instruction of Jesus, not with that which they received from Him before His death alone, but also with that which they received from Him during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension. We must not overlook this last-named fact. It is only that which explains why the apostles stood in the conviction from the very beginning that Christ had not only died, but had been raised and was seated on the right hand of God as Lord and Christ, Prince and Savior, and the sinner’s whole

salvation was contained in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

- C. **King.** The Lord Jesus reigns, and His reign extends throughout *His* creation and in every culture. He sits at the Father’s right hand as Prophet, Priest and King. He possesses all those abilities, all those royal and glorious endowments necessary as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As Berkower has written, “It is undeniable that the expectation of the Church is unique. This is because the message concerning Christ’s coming links the past with the future, as is shown in the doctrine of the *sessio*, which both refers back to the redemptive-historic past and points to the future. Scripture never depreciates the past when it deals with the future. In the Revelation of John the apocalyptic visions are replete with references to him who is the first begotten of the dead (Rev. 1:5) and who washed us from our sins in his own blood (Rev. 1:5). Christ is in the midst of the seven candlesticks as one like unto the Son of man (Rev. 1:13). He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah (5:5) who is worthy to open and to read the book of history, the Lamb who receives the adoration: “Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood” (5:9, KJV; cf. 5:8, 12, 13, 7:10, 14, 17; cf. also 11:8; 12:11; 13:8). The eschatological imagery is replete with holy memories of the past, and everything is presented in the light of that which took place – the battle which was crowned with victory (12:5, 7ff.; 17:14), the following of the Lamb (14:4), the testimony of Jesus Christ (12:17), the song of the Lamb (15:3), the faith of Jesus (14:12), the marriage of the Lamb (19:7), the bride of the Lamb (21:9), the apostles of the Lamb (21:14), and the Lamb’s book of life (21:27). Here the expectation of a glorious future is permanently safeguarded against the threat of a vague ahistoric longing for a better world. This expectation is deeply rooted in history and derives its strength from what became historic reality in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹¹ We read in Revelation 5:9 and 12 that the Lamb is *worthy* to receive adoration and praise. The grounds for this is His death and the blessings this has brought His people. He possesses power and wisdom to accomplish salvation. This echoes Isaiah 52:13 where we are told that the suffering Servant of the LORD “will act wisely.”

CONCLUSION: Christ reigns not only in His church by His Word and Spirit, He reigns in the world. It is true that all fallen human beings (and their cultures) are in rebellion against God’s anointed One (Psalm 2), but this does not prevent Him from ruling and carrying out His purposes. Christians are called into His service. Our vocation is to serve King Jesus in His church and in the world. I close by once again quoting Berkouwer, “Here we have the real touchstone of all Christian expectation. This expectation derives its content from the act of God in Jesus Christ and is, in the holy dynamics of God’s activity, its historic and final-historic consequence. The holy remembrance in the Lord’s supper (*ye proclaim the Lord’s death till he come*, 1 Cor. 11:26; *this do in remembrance of me*, Luke 22:19) is connected with the expectation of the marriage feast of the Lamb (Luke 22:16); and the admonition to remember that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead is connected with the testimony of the Lord from heaven: *These things saith the first and the last, who was dead, and lived again* (Rev. 2:8; cf. 1:17, 18).”¹²

ENDNOTES

¹“The Latin *sessio Christi*”, writes Richard Muller, refers to “*the sitting or act of sitting of Christ at the right hand of the Father (ad dextram Patris)*; apart from the basic agreement of Lutheran and Reformed that the *sessio Christi* is the highest exaltation of Christ as the God-man and that the expression, *sedet ad dextram Patris, he sits at the right hand of the Father*, is a figurative expression, the *sessio Christi* marks a point of fundamental Christological opposition between Lutheran and Reformed. The Lutherans emphasize the biblical usage of *right hand of God* as a figurative description of the exercise of divine power. Since the power of God is exercised everywhere, the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of God is an indication of Christ’s *ubiquitas* (q.v.) according to his human nature, which is the subject of the exaltation. The Reformed deny this communication of a divine attribute to Christ’s humanity and argue from the ascension of Christ *in coelis* that the heavenly session indicates the removal of Christ’s human nature from the earth. The figurative usage, *ad dextram Patris*, the Reformed interpret as the highest exaltation of Christ as God-man, as an indication that Christ in his humanity now participates in the divine majesty and rule, not as though the right hand of God indicates a place (*ubi*), but rather an honor conferred upon Christ. For the Reformed, however, the heavenly *sessio* indicates *ubietas*, or *whereness*, specifically, the location of Christ’s finite humanity in heaven.” Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1985), p. 281.

²G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 226.

³D. F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 183.

⁴F. D. Bruner in his classic work, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Eerdmans, 1970) says that any separation between the church’s experience of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit entails the gravest heresy (p. 245). “There is no other means for the full gift of the Holy Spirit than the message of faith in Christ’s finished work, either initially (Galatians 3:2) or continually (Galatians 3:5)” (p. 239).

⁵*The Works of William Perkins V* (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), p. 270.

⁶Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 352.

⁷Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertation On The Apostles’ Creed* (rpt. P&R, 1993), p. 237.

⁸Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics: Christology III* (Lexham Press, 2014), p. 236.

⁹*Collected Writings of John Murray I: The Claims of Truth* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p. 47.

¹⁰H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine* (rpt. Baker, 1971), p. 377.

¹¹G. C. Berkouwer, p. 247.

¹²*Ibid.*