



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

4930 S. Hagadorn Rd., E. Lansing, MI 48823 - 517.351.6810

Lord's Day 18 - May 4, 2008

- 46 **Q.** *What do you mean by saying, "He ascended to heaven?"*
A. That Christ, while his disciples watched, was lifted up from the earth to heaven and will be there for our good until he comes again to judge the living and the dead.
- 47 **Q.** *But isn't Christ with us until the end of the world as he promised us?*
A. Christ is truly human and truly God. In his human nature Christ is not now on earth; but in his divinity, majesty, grace and Spirit he is not absent from us for a moment.
- 48 **Q.** *If his humanity is not present wherever his divinity is, then aren't the two natures of Christ separated from each other?*
A. Certainly not. Since divinity is not limited and is present everywhere, it is evident that Christ's divinity is surely beyond the bounds of the humanity he has taken on, but at the same time his divinity is in and remains personally united to his humanity.
- 49 **Q.** *How does Christ's ascension to heaven benefit us?*
A. First, he pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father. Second, we have our own flesh in heaven—a guarantee that Christ our head will take us, his members, to himself in heaven. Third, he sends his Spirit to us on earth as a further guarantee. By the Spirit's power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand.

Is there any part of Christ's life that we think about less than his ascension? Everyone knows about his birth—that's what Christmas is for. His death, burial, and resurrection are pretty well covered by Holy Week. But who cares that May 1 was Ascension Day? Most of us know the stories of his miracles—walking on water, calming the storm, water into wine, feeding the five thousand, etc.. We're familiar with his sermons and parables. We could talk about the people he healed, the demons he cast out, and the Jewish leaders he ticked off. We are well-versed in the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. But who thinks about his ascension? Of course, it's not that we are ignorant of the facts. We remember that Jesus floated into heaven or some weird thing like that, but it's not really the sort of thing we meditate on in the wee hours of the night or share with grandma before heart surgery. Ascension is simply the way Jesus checked out of planet earth—that's all there is to it.

But like every phrase in the Apostles Creed "He ascended to heaven" is confessed for a reason. As we'll

see in a moment, Christ's ascension benefits us in several ways. But before we turn to Question 49 we have this tricky business about the two natures of Christ.

In going through the children's catechism I've often asked my boys, "Where is God?" The answer they are supposed to give is "He is everywhere." But our oldest has also said, "God is in heaven" and sometimes, "God is in my heart." Well, it's hard to argue with those answers even if they aren't what the catechism is looking for. The question of where is God becomes even more confusing when we specifically ask "Where is Christ?" He's in heaven, right? That's the whole point of the ascension. But, on the other hand, I thought Jesus said he would be with us to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20). And doesn't Paul talk about "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27)? So where is Christ presently?

According to Q/A 47, Christ's human nature is not now on earth. Surely this is correct. We can't see Jesus face to face, go shake his hand, or hear him preach on a hillside. Jesus Christ, the God-Man (still fully God *and* fully man) is in heaven, sitting at the right hand of God

the Father. Contrary to the Lutheran idea of the “ubiquity” of the body of Christ (which is why Lutherans believe in a real physical presence in Communion), the Heidelberg Catechism teaches, rightly I believe, that Christ’s body, being a real human body with limitations of time and space, can only be in one place at one time—and that place is heaven.

The divine nature, however, is not limited to one location. This doesn’t mean Jesus is split in two with his humanity in heaven and his divinity flying around the planet incognito. The two natures are still joined and cannot be separated. The hypostatic union of the two natures resides in heaven. But how can Christ be everywhere then? The answer lies in the mystery of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), proceeding from the Father and the Son (John 15:26, Nicene Creed). So where the Spirit is, there the Son is also. The three persons of the Trinity experience fellowship among themselves in the dance (*perichoresis*) of mutual indwelling so that, though they are distinct persons, it can rightly be said that if you’ve seen the Son you’ve seen the Father, and if you have the Spirit you have the Son. By his Spirit, Christ is not absent from us for a moment, though, in one sense, he has gone to “live” in heaven.

So how does Christ’s ascension benefit us? In three ways. First, Christ’s ascension benefits us because we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1). Our Lord Jesus is in heaven pleading our case, so that whenever Satan accuses us in our conscience or dares to lay a charge against us before the Father, Jesus Christ, God’s own Son and our flawless advocate, stands ready to defend us and plead his own blood for our sakes. Likewise, he intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34). Think about that. Christ is your prayer partner in heaven. He is in heaven calling upon his Father to help you, bringing your supplications before God on account of his (Christ’s) finished work on the cross.

Second, Christ’s ascension benefits us because we now have our own flesh in heaven. Have you ever thought about how many bodies are in heaven right now? (Admittedly, it’s hard to get your mind around the question because we often think of heaven as some immaterial spiritual place, so how can material bodies be there? But somehow it works.) Presumably Enoch and Elijah are in heaven. They didn’t die (Gen. 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11-12), so I imagine they have bodies (but who really knows for sure). So at most, there are three bodies in heaven, and Jesus Christ is the only one we can be certain of. And clearly his human body in heaven means a lot more to us than the skin of Enoch and Elijah being there. Christ’s flesh in heaven is a guarantee that ours will be there too

someday. Our hope is not an eternity as disembodied souls, but real, resurrected, material human bodies in God’s presence forever. Christ’s body is the first one there, but not the last.

Third, Christ’s ascension benefits us because we get the Holy Spirit as result. As Jesus himself explained to his disciples, “it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). This was no knock on his own earthly ministry, but Jesus understood that as a man he was limited to one place at a time. But once he ascended to heaven, he could send another Helper (John 14:16) to give us power from on high and to be with us forever.

You may not think about the ascension again for quite some time, so meditate on this doctrine with me for two more minutes. Think about the implications of Christ’s ascension. The ascension means we are in heaven, right now. Through union with Christ we truly are not citizens of this world. We belong to the next age as much as, or more than, we belong to this one. When Colossians tells us to set our minds on things that are above (3:2), we can do so because our lives are hidden with Christ who dwells in glory above.

The ascension means that “asking Jesus into your heart” does not mean inviting a kind friend or comforting therapist into your life. It means—if we are using the non-biblical phrase in a biblical way—that we are expressing our desire to be one with the king of the universe. “Christ in you” must not cause us to forget that in another equally important sense, Christ is *not* with us. He is in heaven; he is our resurrected Lord reigning in the throne room of God. So being “in Christ” through the Holy Spirit is more than being buddies with a real cool guy. The Jesus who lives within our hearts (if I can use that phrase) is sitting exalted at the right hand of God the Father almighty and is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

Most staggering of all, the ascension means that God has granted all rule, power, authority, and dominion (Eph. 1:21-22) to a man! Maybe this is why Tolkien made such a point in *The Lord of the Rings* to emphasize that a man would sit on Gondor’s throne, and the race of men would reign once more. Jesus Christ is exercising dominion—more thoroughly and certainly more wisely than any mere man could—the dominion that man was made to have from the very beginning (Gen. 1:28). Because of Christ’s ascension we know that the incarnation continues, Christ’s humanity lives on in heaven, the Spirit lives in our hearts, and a fleshy, divine human being rules the universe.

~ Written by Kevin DeYoung