



THE
G L O R Y
O F T H E
A S C E N S I O N

CELEBRATING
A DOCTRINE FOR THE
LIFE OF THE CHURCH

W. ROSS HASTINGS



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.



InterVarsity Press

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I

WHY THE ASCENSION MATTERS FOR EVERYBODY AND EVERYTHING

Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ.

Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.

When Thou tookest upon Thee to deliver [humanity],

Thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb.

When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death,

Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

Thou sittest, at the right hand of God, in the glory of the Father.

“TE DEUM LAUDAMUS,” BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

IN THIS INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER, I will set the context for this study of the ascension first by creating the need for the study, given the relative infrequency of reference to ascension in the academy and the pulpit, and then by introducing the significance of the doctrine by indicating the major themes of this study, but especially by emphasizing the constructive nature of the study around the primary theme of the glory of the ascension.

RECOVERING FROM THE ECLIPSE

What could motivate a theologian to write about the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ? One could be energized by the paucity of writing on this theme in the theological academy and the infrequency of



sermons preached on it in the church, to the impoverishment of both. Compared to the atonement or the resurrection of Jesus, the ascension is a much-neglected topic in the church's life. One aspect of this is that the contemporary Christian may be unable to articulate why the ascension matters to their devotional life.

By contrast, when the writer of Hebrews begins an epistle that has as one of its primary themes the believer's access into the presence of God, he does so with a summary (Heb 1:1-3) of the great themes of the gospel of Christ that includes a phrase about the ascension. That phrase is, "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb 1:3). There is no mention of the resurrection, though it is implied, whereas this ascension phrase is one of the main clauses, indeed, the climactic clause. The writer wants to stress the ascension in this up-front, cryptic, yet majestic summary of the being and actions of the Son-Priest that are the subject of this epistle. This is fitting, for it is not an exaggeration to say that the ascension is central to that subject matter, central to an understanding of the identity and saving work of Jesus.

This great passage conveys the multifaceted glory of the Son who is the ultimate *Prophet*, the revelation of who God is ("In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us *in Son*," Heb 1:2 NIV, adapted to reflect literal translation); the *King* of the cosmos ("heir of all things," Heb 1:2; "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven," Heb 1:3); and—crucially for our access to God and communion with him—the great *High Priest* ("After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down," Heb 1:3). In my reflection on these verses, I have always thought that these introductory sentences have a chiasmic (a-b-c-c-b-a) structure (see chapter five). Crucially, the first statement, which concerns the intended reign of Christ over the whole creation ("heir of all things"), is answered in the final clause by "when he had by himself purged our sins, *he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*" (KJV). This

writer alludes to the resurrection only obliquely (see Heb 7:16, “the power of an indestructible life”). Christ’s once-for-all sacrificial and victorious atonement is a central and vital theme in the mission of the King-Priest in Hebrews. But here and in many other passages in the epistle, the ascension is depicted as central and crucial in the salvation history of Jesus. In this text, the ascension is both the sign that his atoning work is finished and the sign that something is *not finished* and has only just begun.

In Hebrews 10, the Father tells the ascended Son to sit on his throne *until* his enemies are made his footstool (Heb 10:13). His kingship is a present reality in heaven, but it is being effected gradually on earth by the Spirit and through his church on mission. It will be revealed, climactically, when he returns at the parousia (second coming). Similarly, throughout the epistle it becomes clear that in addition to his finished atoning work, there is an unfinished work of priesthood that Jesus fulfills, interceding in heaven for his church and its members on earth. Jesus uniquely combines the office of king and priest under an order that Melchizedek prefigures in the Old Testament (Gen 14:18; see Heb 5:10; 6:20; 7:1-17). As king and priest, he does ongoing salvific work as he guides the cosmos and shepherds his people.

Why is the ascension important? We may say that Christ’s *atonement* was completed on earth by his death and resurrection but that it was accepted and celebrated by the Father *when he ascended*. He presented his humanity, his offering of himself, and his work on behalf of humanity when he ascended on high. The words “sat down” signal completion. There were no seats in the Hebrew tabernacle or temple simply because the atonement achieved by animal sacrifices was never complete. Those sacrifices only prefigured the work of the Lamb that was to come.¹ The seat in the heavenly sanctuary is a throne, and his sitting on that throne is a signal of coronation and

¹See, e.g., C. H. Spurgeon, “The Only Atoning Priest” (sermon, February 4, 1872), www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-only-atoning-priest/#flipbook/.

completion, resulting from a victory won over sin, Satan, and death (Heb 2:14-15).

However, although the *atonement* was completed when Jesus sat down, the church's *salvation* was not yet completed and will not be until the consummation of all things. The writer reflects this when he states, "Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely [right on to the end] those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb 7:24-25). That is, in Pauline terms, the church that Christ purchased once and for all ("Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her," Eph 5:25) is still in need of perseverance and of purification ("to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word," Eph 5:26), again and again, until Jesus comes.

Another way to say this is that the enacting of atonement, *objectively* speaking, was finished when he ascended and sat down. However, *subjectively* speaking, the application of the atonement would constantly be needed throughout the church's corporate life and all through the personal life of each believer. In this vein, Calvin speaks of Christ's death as an intercession and insists that his heavenly intercession is not a repetition of the atonement but a reflection and representation of his death.² The significance of the ascension, therefore, was that it signaled the beginning of Christ's intercessory work in heaven, enabling us to worship and pray. His priesthood is how we, his people, are priests (Heb 8:1; see Heb 9:14). His offering and ongoing priestly intercession also enable us to be holy and become holy (Heb 10:10, 14). He gives longevity and resilience to every true believer, bringing them all the way to glorification.

In a nutshell, the believer's devotional life is possible only because Christ ascended for us after having lived and died for us. That is how important the ascension is. Through it, we now have access as priests to God (Heb 9:14) in the one great High Priest (Heb 8:1-3) through

²See John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.2.

the blood he shed and the body he offered up to the Father (Heb 10:19). We have access because when he ascended, he offered up his humanity for us, a humanity he had freely taken up in his incarnation. By the hypostatic union, he who was one with God (*homoousion*—a Nicene conviction) became one with humanity (*homoousion*—a Chalcedonian reality). Thus, he acted representatively for humanity in his life, death, resurrection, and *ascension*. However, having access into God's presence through the finished work of atonement is not the same as accessing that access. That requires his ongoing, unfinished work as our Priest.

One great theme of the ascension is that, in Christ, we are already seated in the heavenlies (Eph 2:6). Hebrews, which will be a primary source for our consideration of the doctrine of the ascension, provides insight into what that means, as already noted. It does so more than the rest of the New Testament put together. It does so by describing the intercessory priesthood of Christ that engraces and enables our access and communion with God. It does so by describing his communication of comfort and strength to his people (Heb 4:14, "Jesus," who is also "the Son of God"). It clarifies that we can pray only because he intercedes in his ongoing work as the High Priest for us.

One of the key exhortational (i.e., hortatory) hinge passages in Hebrews (Heb 10:19-23) makes it clear that we have confident access into the heavenly presence of God, a confidence grounded in the blood and body of Jesus, what he did, and facilitated by who he is in his high priesthood there. The grounding of our access is clear, but the exhortations motivated by the completed work of Christ and his ongoing representative presence in the heavenly tabernacle are nevertheless emphatic and reveal what his unfinished work is. The hortatory phrase is in italics:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great

priest over the house of God, *let us draw near to God* with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb 10:19-22)

Here we see the distinction between the finished and unfinished work of the Priest. A way into the heavenly sanctuary (“through the curtain”) has been opened as a *fait accompli*. On the other hand, however, we note the grace-enabled responses that are exhorted. The first is the invitation to “draw near,” which presumably means “come into the presence of God through prayer.” Paul might say it this way: since you are seated in the heavenlies in Christ (Eph 2:6), then live there, live the life of prayer (Eph 3:14-21). Access your access. The writer of Hebrews says it similarly but distinctively, with specific instructions on how we are to pray. Our prayers are facilitated by Christ, by divine grace, but we are active in this praying, not passive. We pray in participation with his praying, but we pray nevertheless.

And two stipulations guide us in how we pray: first, we pray on our part with “a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings,” and second, because we can never measure up fully to that first stipulation, we pray always in a way that includes confession: “having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” This infers the ongoing work of the ascended Christ *applying* the accomplished atonement—not for our justification, which is a *fait accompli* for humanity in Christ—but for daily cleansing from the defilement of sin; for relational restoration to the Father, not forensic acquittal, which the Son has once for all enacted. Hebrews 10:12 makes this abundantly clear: “But when this priest had offered *for all time one sacrifice for sins*, he sat down at the right hand of God.”

So we may say that God’s yes over humanity in Christ and creation has been declared due to his life, death, and resurrection for us. That yes might be considered to have been given visible expression in the

ascension. However, as justified people, we are not yet holy in ourselves, and our sins must be forgiven and our lives continually cleansed. Upon our confession, Christ sprinkles our fallen, wayward, and broken hearts, cleanses our consciences, and washes our whole beings, making our hearts fit for his presence. This aligns with what John says in 1 John 1:9. Confessing Christians (is there another kind?) are not just forgiven of specific confessed sins but are also being cleansed, in general, from “all unrighteousness.”

This speaks to the lack of emphasis in our churches and our preaching on occupying heaven (Col 3:1-2) in order to bring heaven to earth in our embodied experience. Being heavenly minded in order to be useful on earth is the ideal to which we are called. For the writer of Hebrews, that is where we are meant to reside. Paul is no different. In Colossians 3:1-2, Paul exhorts, “Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” Why does the ascension matter? Because it invites us to focus on heaven. Because that is where Christ is, and Paul adds, “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). This is our deepest reality as the people of God. Our identity and our place, our home, if you like, is in Christ, in the triune God. Whereas earthiness is a big theme in contemporary theology, heavenly orientation *in* our earthiness is good in Paul’s mind. This is our spiritual privilege as the people who are in Christ, hidden in him: to be in his presence in heaven by prayer, through the Eucharist, and in every waking moment. Of course, this may sound like the Gnosticism that Irenaeus, the great church father, countered at great cost. But it is not Gnosticism. Living a life of prayer and practicing the presence of Christ is intended to facilitate living on earth in earthly ways that define what it means to be human. It is also not Gnosticism, or even Platonism, to argue that our spiritual access and exercise in the heavenlies now anticipates the second coming, when as resurrected believers we will ascend as whole human persons to be

permanently in God's presence in heaven, with a view to a return to earth as fully human persons defined as fully human by the one human who is the prototypical and perfect human for all humanity, the last Adam, who recapitulates the first Adam.

Paul anticipates this in the next verse of Colossians 3: "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in *glory*" (Col 3:4). Note that the glory of the people of God will be a reflection of the iridescent radiance of the Son. They will have experienced the beatific vision. They will have seen his face and become like him (1 Jn 3:2). They will be displayed in the derived glory of the intrinsically glorious Son. Their glorification will then be completed. And they will be complete with body, soul, and spirit intact as heavenly humans on earth. This is what the ascension anticipates, for it is an ascension of a man, *the* man, into heaven for humanity. The correspondence between the ascension and the second coming is communicated clearly at his ascension when the angels say, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). As he has ascended into heaven as a fully human and fully divine person, he will return as a fully human and fully divine person. As further revelation unfolded, it became clear that his people, with whom he entered into union by the incarnation and who appropriate that union by the work of the Spirit in regeneration and incorporation, would also be with him forever in the full possession of their humanity. Theosis, properly understood, is the transformation of humans to become like Christ. It does not have as its aim our dehumanization or our being "Godded with God." Instead, it teaches that we become fully human, glorified humans, and appear "with him in glory" (Col 3:4).

The notion that heaven is not our final destination, popularized by some by overemphasizing the kingdom's horizontal nature, seems to need some correction. We occupy heaven in our prayers now. We will

ascend to heaven one day in a manner that corresponds to and is anticipated in Jesus' ascension. Of course, I agree that heaven will come to earth (Rev 21:2), and I believe in an earthly new creation. However, to eliminate heaven is unfortunate. Heaven on earth will be heaven still. The truth is that one day, in a manner anticipated by Hebrews and even by the fact that there is already a true Man in heaven, heaven and earth will give way to the end of dualism, and heaven and earth will be one. And as such, it will be heaven where the Lamb is the center and the light. This is already anticipated in the ascension of a man into heaven. All will be sacred space then because it is already that for Jesus. There is a new cosmology to be discovered in the ascension of Jesus.

Even Hebrews 1:3, in its cryptic way of expressing the death and ascension of Jesus, seems to anticipate this: "When he had by himself purged our sins . . ." (KJV). *Where did that happen?* On earth? At the cross, as Jesus offered himself without spot to God, shed his blood, and accomplished our purgation and reconciliation? Yes, but the very next phrase says, "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." *Where did that happen?* Certainly, this phrase is meant to be cryptic. It omits any reference to the resurrection and the forty days. But it seems that the writer wants us to see that as Jesus is purging our sins, he is doing so in the presence of God in heaven, even while he is on earth. Or, putting it another way, since he is himself God, it is within his own being that he is accomplishing our atonement, and therefore, though on earth he is hanging on a tree, he is necessarily also in the presence of God in heaven as he does so. That is why he can purge our sin on a hill outside Jerusalem and then sit down on a throne in heaven—he has not left heaven even as he is on the cross for us. When he said that he was perpetually in the Father and the Father in him in John 10:38, that did not cease to be true on the cross.

WHY THE ASCENSION MATTERS FOR THEOLOGY: CONSTRUCTIVE RETRIEVAL

On the academic side, there has also been an eclipse of the ascension, which merits an emphasis in our time. It has been neglected especially since the era of the church fathers, though it is somewhat sparsely spoken of even in their writings. Although there are sections devoted to the ascension in more recent systematic theologies, few significant works dedicated to this theme have been written in the last century.³ Two authors have written works that I would consider seminal studies. The first is J. G. Davies in a book arising from his 1958 Bampton Lectures at Oxford University, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine*.⁴ It is an exemplary model for how the discipline of the history of doctrine should be carried out in that it begins with the biblical account and canonical assertions of both the Old and New Testaments and then moves to consideration of the tradition as it is expressed in the ante-Nicene fathers—in particular those active in the writing of the conciliar creeds—and on to the Greek and Latin writers.

Two books written by Douglas Farrow of McGill University are also seminal: *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology*, which traces the doctrine from the Scriptures, the Fathers, the eucharistic liturgy, the Reformers, and on into modern theology; and *Ascension Theology*, which again begins with locating the doctrine in its biblical context, then moves on to consider the implications of the ascension of Christ in the flesh as expounded especially in the work of Irenaeus and the

³See sections for example in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London: T&T Clark, 2009), IV/1-4; Thomas F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955); Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976); Torrance, “The Ascension of Jesus Christ,” in *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

⁴John G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine*, Bampton Lectures (London: Lutterworth, 1958).

later tradition.⁵ Farrow focuses on what he considers to be the two key theological issues of the ascension: the identity of the risen Christ and the church. Within his ecclesiology, the sacrament of the Eucharist is a major focus, mirroring the presence-absence tension of the ascended Christ, who is absent from us and yet present to us by the Spirit. He also engages the topic of atonement, especially as relates to its ongoing application to the cleansing of heavenly things and what this means for the earthly worship of the church.

In a further chapter in a book that expounds the Nicene Creed (which curiously does not devote a chapter dedicated to the ascension clause of the creed), Farrow highlights the neglect of this doctrine.⁶ He refers to “a long history of assault” on the particulars of the four christological clauses in the creed that follow the resurrection clause, the first of which is “He ascended into heaven.” The ascension as a distinct event in the story of Jesus, “we are frequently told,” is a “Lukan invention” (as in Davies’s thought) and best considered to be merely “an aspect of the resurrection,” says Farrow.⁷ Poignantly, he asks

whether the first of the four clauses now before us is not, in fact, the very point in the creed at which we are confronted not with a theological revolution such as that connected to *ex nihilo* or to the *homoousion* or to the doctrine of the resurrection, but rather with a failure of the revolutionary spirit of Christian theology; that is, with a lapse back into a speculative, fanciful cosmology, and so into mythological godtalk.⁸

⁵Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

⁶Douglas Farrow, “Confessing Christ Coming,” in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 133-48.

⁷Farrow, “Confessing Christ Coming,” 135. Davies suggests that Luke did not write his account of the ascension in Acts 1 with strictly historical intent but rather with a view to fitting the story with the Old Testament forty-day typology associated with Elijah’s ascent, for example. Davies insists that Jesus ascended on the first Sunday evening after he rose again and that all the rest of the appearances were visitations of the ascended Christ from heaven. See Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, 17, 18, 56-58.

⁸Farrow, “Confessing Christ Coming,” 135-36.

Farrow convincingly demonstrates the surprising influence that the doctrine of the ascension has had within Christian and Western thought. He also addresses difficult questions regarding it that others have shied away from. His systematic treatments of the ascension are seminal, and though this treatment will show a significant commonality of interest, my emphases may be slightly different on some key points. Further shorter monographs and some significant journal articles have been written to bring the ascension into greater spotlight in the academy.⁹ Davies and Farrow are exceptional for their systematic, constructive retrieval of the writings of the Fathers, the Scholastics, and the Reformers.

The doctrine of the ascension has been a minor one in modern theology due to several factors. Cambridge theologian David Fergusson outlines three of these, and all three have to do with cosmology. The first was “the assimilation of earlier accounts of the ascension to a Ptolemaic worldview,” which “led to some skepticism in a post-Copernican age.” The second explicitly relates to how we think about heaven: “The heaven of Scripture could no longer be understood as spatially related to this world by virtue of its position at the outer reaches of the cosmos.” Third, this “generated a problem for any notion of the body of Jesus going somewhere along a spatial trajectory at a time subsequent to the resurrection.”¹⁰ These challenges exacerbated a tendency of historical criticism to conflate resurrection,

⁹Peter Atkins, *Ascension Now: Implications of Christ's Ascension for Today's Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Gerald O'Collins, *Jesus Our Priest: A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Johanna Kramer, *Between Earth and Heaven: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, Manchester Medieval Literature and Culture (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Patrick Schreiner, *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020). The work of T. F. Torrance in *Royal Priesthood* and *Atonement* has been a significant influence in most recent work on the ascension.

¹⁰David Fergusson, “The Ascension of Christ: Its Significance in the Theology of T. F. Torrance,” *Participatio* 3 (2012): 92. See also Fergusson, “He Ascended into Heaven: The Ascension and Agency of Christ in the Theology of T. F. Torrance,” in *What Is Jesus Doing? God's Activity in the Life and Work of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 27-46.

ascension, and exaltation, except in the case of Luke–Acts, “with its more stylised forty-day interval between the two events.”¹¹

In response to these challenges and in agreement with Fergusson, rather than assigning the doctrine to the Bultmannian category of myth, I adopt a constructive approach here as the appropriate way forward. This has already been championed by Karl Barth, Robert Jenson, and Douglas Farrow. I resonate fully with Fergusson’s assertion that even though in the study of the ascension we are “at the very limits of human speech and knowledge,” that “substantive claims about the identity of the risen Christ in relation to God and the church are at stake in the creedal affirmation that ‘he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.’” That there is a declaration of the ascension in the creed says something about its importance, to be sure. But Fergusson asserts further that the ascension “is vital to the shape of Christian faith and the role of Christ as an active subject in the life of the church and the world.”¹²

Any attempt to dismiss either the *distinctiveness* or the unique significance of the ascension of Jesus needs to take into account, for one thing, that the most-quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament is Psalm 110:1, “The LORD says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” It is quoted twenty-three times.¹³ Why is this verse, which speaks distinctively of the session of Jesus at his ascension, so important for New Testament theology? Contrary to the opinion that the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God are conflated, this verse highlights precisely the important distinction to be made between these two events. Though associated, they are not one event but two. A strong vindication of the distinct importance of the ascension lies

¹¹Fergusson, “Ascension of Christ,” 92–93.

¹²Fergusson, “Ascension of Christ,” 93.

¹³David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 44.

in the fact that by it the Son of David, who is also the Son of God, was enthroned as King.

The importance of the ascension in the biblical story is further emphasized by the fact that Psalm 110:4 (“The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek’”) is a, if not *the*, key Old Testament text that is expounded to explain the priesthood of Jesus in the epistle to the Hebrews, especially in its ongoing, eternal aspect, and especially as that priestly office is united to his kingship. This psalm reveals that the ascended King (Ps 110:1), David’s son who is David’s “Lord” (see Mt 22:41-45), is also a “priest” (Ps 110:4). This combination of offices was a possibility only because Jesus operates within the order of “Melchizedek,” who was “king of Salem” and yet “priest of God Most High” (Gen 14:18-20). Jesus is not just priest, in the estimation of the writer of Hebrews; he is the *great* High Priest (Heb 4:14), the Priest of all priests. Though his priestly work, as expounded in Hebrews, included his sacrificial work while he was on earth (see, e.g., Heb 8:3; 9:11-14, 26; 10:10-14, 19-20), the primary intent of Psalm 110:4 (“a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek”), taken alongside Psalm 110:1, is to portray it as a *kingly* priesthood. This is evident in the hinge passages of Hebrews.

For example, in Hebrews 8:1, the writer says, “We do have such a high priest, *who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.*” Moreover, in Hebrews 10:21, after referencing the body and blood of Christ, by which he accomplished atonement, the writer says, “And since we have a great priest *over* the house of God . . .” These references to the priesthood of Christ emphasize his ascension into heaven and his ongoing work there as a *Priest* who is King. They major on his ongoing intercessory work, the atoning work having been completed on earth. His session at the Father’s right hand rewards and honors the atoning work. But his humiliation, death, and resurrection appearances were over. There had been a decisive transition from the Son of God who had been “crucified in weakness” (2 Cor 13:4) to the

Son of God “in power” (Rom 1:4). His installation and enthronement as King-Priest happened by way of the ascension.

The apostle Paul also expresses the clear distinction between the resurrection and ascension, and the glorious universal exaltation of the Son as a consequence of the death and resurrection events, in Ephesians 1:19-21: “That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he *raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand* in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”

Theologian Stephen Seamands eloquently puts it this way: “Proclaiming the ascension is therefore crucial in fully and properly exalting Christ. For Jesus is *not only risen but reigning*. Not only alive but sovereign, not only central but supreme.” Summing up the extensive work of Doug Farrow on the ascension, Seamands adds: “Whenever we fail to proclaim the ascended Christ, enthroned and exalted, something else—our personal agendas, the world’s agendas, the church’s agendas—moves in to fill the vacuum. Mark it down: when we fail to exalt and enthrone Jesus, something or someone else inevitably assumes the throne.”¹⁴ Categorically, then, the ascension is not an appendage to the resurrection, as if they were one event. In one of the most significant treatments of the ascension in the twentieth century, that of T. F. Torrance, the resurrection and the ascension are treated in this way, as closely related yet distinct events.¹⁵ On the one hand, Torrance describes them as inseparable: “the fusion of resurrection with the ascension in one indivisible exaltation.”¹⁶ On the other hand, he emphasizes their distinctness within that inseparability,

¹⁴Stephen A. Seamands, *Give Them Christ: Preaching His Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Return* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 141, emphasis added.

¹⁵David Fergusson pays tribute to T. F. Torrance’s theology of the ascension as “one of the richest treatments of the subject in modern theology” (“Ascension of Christ,” 94). Torrance’s treatment is found in Torrance, *Atonement*, chap. 9, and in Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, chaps. 5-6.

¹⁶Fergusson, “Ascension of Christ,” 94.

citing Karl Barth: “The resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ are two distinct, but inseparable moments in one and the same event. The resurrection is to be understood, as the *terminus a quo*, its beginning, and the ascension as its *terminus ad quem*, its end.”¹⁷

The ascension is therefore crucial for understanding the whole history of Jesus Christ, and in particular its relation to the incarnation is important. It must not be taken out of the context of the history of Jesus Christ—the whole movement of the incarnation onward, with all of its saving significance. In light of the flow of the epistle to the Hebrews, T. F. Torrance notes, “The ascension must be understood in a correlation with the incarnation, as the *anabasis* (ascent) of the Son of God corresponding to his *katabasis* (descent).”¹⁸ This, he notes, was also Irenaeus’s favorite theme.

The distinction between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus is also seen in Paul’s description of the effects of each event in the believer’s life. In participation with Christ risen, yes, we are “made alive,” but in Christ ascended, we are also “raised up” and “seated” in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:6). Furthermore, a resurrection without the ascension would mean that there is, on God’s part, no acceptance and celebration of the atonement, no enthronement of King Jesus, no outpouring of the Spirit, and on Christ’s part, no entry into high priesthood for us, no mediation of our prayers in his prayers, no empathy in our sufferings, no presence in the Eucharist (however one may understand that), and no second coming that corresponds to how he ascended (Acts 1:11).

Above all, there would be no revelation of the glory of Christ in heaven (1 Tim 3:16, he “was taken up in glory”), or when he returns (Mk 13:26, “people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with

¹⁷Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 150. Torrance’s account has much in common with the treatment of Karl Barth, but it differs significantly with respect to Barth’s view of the church, the sacraments, and ministry, “all of which are crucially related to his account of the ascension” (Fergusson, “Ascension of Christ,” 94).

¹⁸Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 123.

great power and glory”), no glory in the church in union with him (Eph 3:21, “to him be glory in the church”), and no being caught up in glory in union with him in the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:16-17). Glory is the key concept of the ascension.

THE GLORY THEME OF THE ASCENSION: OVERCOMING THE ECLIPSE

Making a further contribution to the recovery of this doctrine, especially in constructive patristic retrieval, and engaging in the minor points of disagreement with the authors above is appealing, to be sure. However, I am not drawn primarily by this need but rather by the wonder of the subject material. The primary motivating purpose of this study is to describe the sheer glory of the ascension and of the ascended Lord so that readers may be wooed into worship and find themselves entering into their life in the ascended Son. My aim is to be evangelical and not legal in approach. To scold the church for its lack of emphasis and knowledge of the ascension is legal and ultimately unproductive. To paint a picture in words of the Son of God in his glory, and in light of the added glory of his salvific accomplishments, so that the people of God may contemplate and fall afresh in adoring love with him—this is my goal. This is, in other words, an invitation to adopt the posture of gazing at glory as the disciples did when they were transfixed as they saw him go up (Acts 1:10). It is in keeping with Paul’s cryptic, precreedal summation of the ascension in 1 Timothy 3:16: he “was taken up in glory.” Of course, in adopting this contemplative approach, we will find another way of saying how crucial the doctrine of the ascension is for all doctrines.

One theologian known for his theology of beauty, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), once commented that the relations of an object define its beauty, that is, by its being in relation. This was part of his attempt at a philosophical proof of the triune being of God. God



could not be beautiful if he were merely one, he argued. Using an aesthetical argument, he stated, “One alone cannot be beautiful.”¹⁹ For Edwards, beauty, as defined by the Trinity, was a product of the consent within the three persons of the one God, of the interpenetrative relation of the persons to one another, each being in the other without loss of the identity of each, each interanimating the other in perfect harmony. Robert Jenson sums up his study of Edwards in *America’s Theologian* in this manner: “As we have had occasion to note in almost every chapter, the very template of his vision is that God as Triunity is ‘the supreme Harmony of all.’ . . . Indeed, he did not merely maintain trinitarianism; he renewed it.”²⁰

Whether one is convinced of Edwards’s philosophical argument as proof of the Trinity or not (it is, after all, an a priori argument, as opposed to the more convincing a posteriori evidence for the Trinity gained from the historical revelation of the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit), the essential reality that beauty is defined by the relations of an object to other objects is a fair one. What does this have to do with the ascension? I want to argue throughout this book that the act of the ascension and the person of the Lord who ascended, and all the consequences of that ascension, are beautiful and worthy of the study of the church and its theologians *precisely because of its relations*.

The ascension is beautiful because by it Jesus reveals his glory. As he ascends, he displays the body of glory—glimpsed on the Mount of Transfiguration and in resurrection appearances—which Davies calls a “heavenly body, of shining ethereal substance,” fitting for the divine,

¹⁹Edwards states, “But in a being that is absolutely without any plurality, there cannot be excellence, for there can be no such thing as consent or agreement” (*WJE* 6:363). He also writes, “One alone without any reference to any more cannot be excellent; for, in such case, there can be no manner of relation no way, and therefore no such thing as consent.” See Edwards, *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from His Private Notebooks* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1955), 26; cf. “Miscellany 117” (*WJE* 13:283).

²⁰Robert W. Jenson, *America’s Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 91.

heavenly realm.²¹ This sight will be replicated on the great resurrection day when bodies “sown in dishonor” will be “raised in glory” (1 Cor 15:43). In a similar vein, Laura Cerbus in a recent article argues that beauty has been neglected in the pursuit of the good in modernity. She presents a compelling argument that despite the Copernican challenges of the ascension, the beauty of the ascended Christ is the antidote for this. She states, “The abuse of beauty can be resisted not by spiritualising beauty, but by ordering physical beauty to its eschatological end. This end is most clearly seen in the ascended Christ, with his beautiful body that is human, wounded and hidden.”²²

The ascension is beautiful because of its relation to the incarnation. That is, there is a symmetry of glory hidden and then glory revealed in the history of Jesus Christ. His glory was veiled at the incarnation, but there is an answering epiphanic restoration of glory as he ascends to the Father. In the words of Torrance, “The ascension is the obverse of the incarnation and marks its fulfilment.”²³ The ascension is beautiful mostly because it forever established the *identity* of the one who, as anticipated in Psalm 24, is the “King of glory,” before whom the gates of heaven must lift their heads and the ancient doors welcome him in. This is but one example of how the ascension is prefigured in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New, giving evidence of harmonious relations between the two Testaments in Holy Scripture.

The ascension is beautiful also in that it is the climactic, celebrated outcome of an atonement that was fully accomplished and yet the beginning of the application of the atonement forever to the people of God in union with Christ. It is beautiful because of the symmetry of a humanity created and fallen in the first Adam with a humanity

²¹Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, 59, here referencing G. H. Boobyer, *St. Mark and the Transfiguration Story* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1942), 23.

²²Laura Cerbus, “The Beauty of the Body and the Ascension: A Reclamation and Subversion of Physical Beauty,” *SJT* 77 (2024): 1.

²³Torrance, *Atonement*, x.

recapitulated, recreated, and glorified in the ascension of the last Adam. The ascension reflects a relation between the Son and his people, with whom he became one in the incarnation—his people who have died and risen with him and, more than that, are now seated with him in his ascended place in the heavenlies (Eph 2:6). Inherent in the ascension, therefore, are the great realities of the gospel that the Son became one with humanity in order that humanity in Christ might become one with him by the Spirit's work of regeneration, adoption, and embodiment into the church so that they might be justified, sanctified, and glorified—that is, deified—in Christ.

The ascension is beautiful in that it causes us to understand that the whole redemptive story of humanity is contained in the *person* of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Thus, the ascension signals a soteriology in proper relation to ontology. In other words, it tells us that the work of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from his person—they are in proper relation. Underlying this is perhaps the greatest mystery of the ascension, carried over from the incarnation—the presence of a man in the Godhead. Here two great realities of relation come together: first, the relations in the Godhead itself between the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, described by the term *homoousion*, and, second, the relations within the Second Person of the Trinity, also expressed in the word *homoousion*, indicating the union of the two natures of Christ, that is, his deity and his humanity. Even though all through his life here on earth the Son, as a divine-human person, already and always lived in perfect communion with—indeed, *in*—his Father (Jn 5:16-19; 10:38), there is something distinct, something beautiful yet almost jarring, about his presence as a man in the Godhead in heaven, in the harmony that always characterizes the relations of the Trinity, a harmony unthreatened, even enhanced, by the presence within it of a man. Humanity in God—indeed, the humanity of God—is a remarkable relation. As in the incarnation and onward to the ascension, it is an unconfused

union, as the Chalcedonic definition expresses it. God and humanity cannot be mixed, but they are in union, in relation. This is gospel, good news, for sure.

Given that the flesh the Son took on at his incarnation entails his coming into union not just with humanity but with creation, that incarnation (and its perpetual extension into his ascension and post-ascension being) signals a very significant relation between God and his creation. This has repercussions for the relationship between the disciplines that describe God and creation in the human pursuit of knowledge: theology and science. Instead of a conflict model, a coinherent model of theology and science is possible.²⁴ The ascension of the Man, the last Adam, who represents and recapitulates humanity as the head of creation, is a paradigm for the intended relation between humanity and creation, one intended to be respectful and harmonious. The beauty of humanity in and with creation, in harmony, is indeed idyllic and attractive.

The identity of that glorious ascended person is also expressed in the interrelatedness of his three main offices: prophet, priest, and king. The union of his priesthood and kingship lies in an order created by a mysterious figure of the Old Testament, Melchizedek, a king-priest. The ascension is beautiful also in that it anticipates the day Christ will descend, reflecting a certain other symmetry, that is, at the parousia. As Farrow indicates, Gregory Nazianzen long ago understood that “the logic of the ascension, must respond to the logic of the *parousia*.”²⁵ And as already noted, the church “will appear with him in glory” (Col 3:4). This relation will be further developed in due course.

Between these cataclysmic events, the parousia has been put on hold. The ascension has created “a pause in the *parousia*, creating time for the gospel before the final coming of Jesus.”²⁶ As the missional

²⁴As I have contended in W. Ross Hastings, *Echoes of Coinherence: Trinitarian Theology and Science Together* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).

²⁵Farrow, “Confessing Christ Coming,” 137.

²⁶Torrance, *Atonement*, x.

people of God continue to live and witness here on earth, there is a heaven-to-earth relation between them and their great High Priest in heaven. He intercedes and prays for them, imparting his sympathy, strength, and security until they finish their course. The ascension signals a relation between two realities related to the kingdom of God: the accession of a King who is exalted over all and seated at the right hand of God in heaven, and, on the other hand, an eschatological reserve on earth such that the King's enemies are only gradually being subdued. The kingdom on earth that has come but is not yet fully come influences the "already but not yet" attitude of the people of God, which causes them to avoid triumphalism on the one hand and defeatism on the other.

In sum, with this doxological focus in mind, I hope to emphasize the importance of the ascension and celebrate it in light of what it reveals

- about the *person* and exalted *glory* of the ascended Christ himself and his offices;
- about the nature of *humanity* and its glory in light of his glorified and perpetual humanity—"the glory of God" that "is the living man" envisaged by Irenaeus;
- about the celebrated glory of the finished *atonement* (Heb 1:3; 8:1; 9:26, 28; 10:12; 12:2) and its unfinished application (Heb 7:11-28; 9:24) in the person of Jesus;
- about the glory of the *church*, its sacraments, its preaching, and its mission;
- about its importance for the *Christian life* (Heb 10:19-25) as a participation in his glory (Eph 2:6), and the engrafted nature of the prayers of the people of God in the intercession of their great High Priest, and their comfort in suffering (Heb 2:17-18; 4:14-16);
- about its significance for *the kingdom of God* in the present age (*eschatological reserve*), in which the Spirit is at work on earth

in union with the Son, and for its future glorious manifestation (*eschatological* fulfillment) when he comes again in glory (“the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the *glory* of the LORD as the waters cover the sea,” Hab 2:14); and

- about its *cosmological* significance, spelling the death of all dualisms, urging integration of theology and science and the arts, challenging the rampant neo-gnosticism that governs the ethics of our time.²⁷

THE GLORY THEME OF THE ASCENSION: ITS VARIOUS FACETS

This book builds on the hard exegetical and theological work that has been done on the ascension and the epistle to the Hebrews. However, after perusing what has been written, I have concluded that *glory* is the appropriate window through which to view the ascension. This book’s essence is the doxological contemplation of the *doxa* of Christ, a glory that is intrinsic, accrued, and shared with humanity and creation, leading to practicing an ascension lifestyle and many pastoral applications.

Although this book is unapologetically scholarly, I sincerely hope that its contents will filter down from pastor-scholars and academics into the life of the church and the lives of its people. I have one major intent in this book: to focus on and exalt the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ in his ascension, and therefore that of the triune God. I want to exalt Christ’s intrinsic or *essential* glory as God of very God, to exalt his essential glory as the Son of God who is also man and has taken our humanity into the Godhead, and to exalt the ascended Christ also for his *accrued* glory, the glory he acquired by virtue of what he has accomplished by his incarnation, vicarious life, death, and resurrection. If the notion that glory may be added to an already fully glorious God seems strange, we must not forget that the meaning of glory is the

²⁷Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.10.7 (ANF 1:490).

revelatory luminosity of inward excellence, the iridescence that shines out from all that God does in his acts. It is the reverberation of the totality of his communicable attributes, the loveliness of all his virtues in perfect harmony, as seen and praised by humans and angels. God cannot but reveal his glory in all he does.

As he approached the whole paschal event, which includes the ascension, Jesus prayed that glory would emanate from it and that he and his Father would receive glory. In John 12:23, Jesus states, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," and in John 12:28, in response to his prayer, "Father, glorify your name!" John records that "a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.'" This provides some evidence that glory can be accrued to God.

Indeed, the ultimate end for which God created and redeemed the cosmos is the revelation of his glory. This Johannine text would seem to suggest that Jesus and the Father were glorified at the cross, and this is absolutely true. In the act by which Jesus atoned for the sin of humanity and cleansed it (*Christus vicarius*), the act by which he won the victory over Satan (*Christus Victor*), God's love, justice, and righteousness were revealed unprecedentedly. However, the full and climactic manifestation of God's glory in the whole history of Jesus is surely expressed in the ascension. This is why the ascension is vital. At his ascension, the glory he had with the Father before his incarnation was restored (Jn 17:3). By this event, the Son as *human* was "taken up" into the Father's presence, but the Son who is also fully God ascended in his own right. Christ's accomplished atonement, enacted in his humanity, is celebrated at the right hand of God, where he offers up that humanity to the Father. In the Father's presence, the atonement as accomplished in Christ's person is celebrated, and its completion is expressed by the session of the Son at the Father's right hand, as I have already affirmed. In the Father's presence, the Son is crowned King, the Son of Man (Dan 7), and Messiah. In the Father's presence, Jesus takes up the glory of priesthood and kingship in accordance

with the order of Melchizedek. In a nutshell, glory does not add new attributes to God. It is simply the revelation of those attributes to creatures such as humans and angels.

In addition to his essential and accrued glory, our purpose is to exult in the *shared* glory of the ascended Christ for humanity. In union with the ascended Christ, the church finds itself becoming the expression of his glory. There we may find his corporate glory “in the church” that Paul refers to in Ephesians 3:21 (“to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations”). This is a consequence of the ascension because by it Jesus brought humanity into the presence of God so that the church now shares in the glory of Christ through its relational union in Christ with God. Its glory is a derived one. It is imparted to us by Christ. But this is also true for each person in the church. In contemplating the Lord’s glory, each of us is being changed from “one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18 ESV). This transformation in glory is a consequence of the two hands of the Trinity, as Irenaeus called the Son and the Spirit.²⁸ We contemplate the Son who has ascended in glory, and as we do so, we are the subject of the internal work of the “Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18), the one who came down because the Son went up.

There are two aspects to this shared glory with respect to timing, one present and one future. Already in the now, we enter into the glory of being seated in the heavenly places with Christ and are able to pray as priests in the Priest, in unhindered fashion, engraced and enabled in our prayers by the Spirit’s intercession on earth and the Son’s intercession in heaven. Christ has brought “many sons and daughters to glory,” as the writer of Hebrews says (Heb 2:10). When the Son ascended, the church ascended in him, spiritually speaking. However, if that was all, we would be guilty of the Gnosticism that church fathers such as Irenaeus sought to counter. At the fullness of the eschaton, we must enter heaven at the consummation in the

²⁸Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1 (ANF 1:530).

totality of our human personhood. Platonic dualism does not prevail but Judeo-Christian holism. This full realization of our glorification awaits the parousia, that further symmetry in the history of Jesus—he ascended and he will descend—he “will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11) in order that we might ascend. Then, the called and justified will also, as Paul anticipates, be “glorified” with and in Christ (Rom 8:30). How this will happen is the beatifying vision, as John indicates in 1 John 3:2—“we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

After a discussion of methodology in chapter two, in chapters three through seven the focus will be on what the ascension says about *the glory of the person and work of Christ*: the glory of his essential deity in chapter three, and in chapter four, the glory associated with the bookends of Christ’s ministry on earth, that which was concealed at the incarnation and then revealed in heaven at his ascension. In chapter five, I will also consider the glory of his threefold office as prophet, priest, and king. In this chapter I will focus especially on the grace and glory of his kingly priesthood, with an emphasis first on his punctiliar session, by which his kingly coronation is enacted and his sacrifice as Priest accepted. Second, I will emphasize his continuing *intercession* for his church.

There is an aspect of the glory of the ascension that transcends our full understanding, matters relating to Christology of the incarnation and ascension of Jesus, which cannot be covered in detail here. This includes issues such as how the divine-human person of the Son in the incarnation—and the continuance of that divine-human person in his ascension and session—relates to his eternal, unchanging being as the eternal Son, that is, the unchanging nature of God.²⁹ What the

²⁹For a nuanced discussion of this issue, see the work of Bruce L. McCormack, “The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of Atonement,” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 346–66; also Maximus, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 28 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 7.22; Jordan D. Wood, *The*

ascension means for the personhood of Christ within the Trinity, and for divine and human personhood, is also a matter for further development. Personhood in the divine being is not univocal with human personhood, but the presence of the divine-human person of the Son eternally in the Godhead suggests a bridge between divine and human personhood.³⁰

Discussion of the relation between the Son's divine and human natures, and to what extent they communicate with each other (*communicatio idiomatum*), will be deferred until chapter ten, when I give consideration to the significance of this relation for the nature and the glory dynamics of the Eucharist. I will consider his glory expressed in the sending of the Holy Spirit and the coinherent work of the Son and the Spirit in the sanctification of his people in chapter nine, "The Glory of the Heavenly Application of the Atonement." His glory in the kingdom and the church, and his glory revealed on earth and the whole cosmos at his parousia, will be considered in later chapters on inaugurated eschatology (which will include a section on pneumatology), on ecclesiology (which will also contain a section on pneumatology), and on future eschatology (chapters ten and eleven). The glory of the one who participated in humanity as the incarnate one and who now represents that humanity as the ascended one—the glory he shares with humanity in general, and the glory he shares in his union with redeemed humanity in the church and every believer, as a result of our participation with Christ, or union with Christ, by the Spirit—will be the focus in corresponding chapters on anthropology (chapter seven), soteriology (chapters eight and nine), and ecclesiology

Whole Mystery of Christ: Creation as Incarnation in Maximus Confessor (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

³⁰It should be noted that a Christian trinitarian metaphysics affirms the *person* as fundamental and *real*. Together, these discoveries give human persons real, foundational existence, as well as imbue said persons with a real power of (in some sense) self-determination, since their hypostases are grounded in the personal hypostases of trinitarian ultimate reality. See Catherine Pickstock, "Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance," in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, ed. Simon Oliver and John Milbank (London: Routledge, 2009), 132, for an explanation of why human freedom is preserved in classical metaphysics.

(chapter ten). The nature of the humanity of Christ, its continuities and discontinuities before and after the resurrection, and therefore in the ascension and session of Jesus, and what this means for our redeemed humanity at the parousia will be discussed in chapter eleven. Matters of cosmology relating to the shared glory of the ascended, cosmic Christ and the glory of heaven will bring the book to a close in chapters twelve and thirteen.

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