

## The Apostles' Creed: He ascended into heaven... (11)

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord*

*Who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell*

*The third day He rose again from the dead*

***He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty***

*He will come again to judge the living and the dead*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit*

*The holy catholic Church; the communion of saints*

*The forgiveness of sins*

*The resurrection of the body*

*And the life everlasting*

- The section before us in this study of the Creed deals with the rarely thought of, but vitally important, subject of the ascension of Jesus Christ. For whatever reason, our thoughts tend to gravitate back and forth from the first coming of Christ to the second coming of Christ, but we probably don't spend adequate time thinking about and relying upon the importance of His present work and reign from heaven. And yet, the present work of Christ at the right hand of the Father is as vital as any other part of His work of redemption.
- There is only one full account of the ascension of Christ in the New Testament (Acts 1:1-11), but it is mentioned or implied in numerous other passages (e.g. Psalm 110; Lk. 24:50-53; Acts 2:33-35; Eph. 1:19-22; Heb. 2:9; etc.).
- Interestingly, the doctrine of the ascension of Christ was actually a point of division during the Reformation, and is to this day one of the points of contention between Lutherans and the Reformed. In fact the Lutheran view of Christ's ascension is directly tied (if not driven by) their view of the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Lutherans believe that the body of Jesus "is in, with, and under", the elements, and therefore, while they remain bread and wine, they also—at the same time—become the actual body and blood of Christ (i.e. consubstantiation). How is this related to the ascension of Christ? Well, for Christ's body and blood to actually be present in the Lord's Supper, it has to be here on earth. Therefore, Lutherans believe that at Christ's ascension, His human nature took on divine attributes (e.g. omnipotence, omnipresence, etc.). In other words, His body did not technically change *locations*...it simply changed *condition*.<sup>1</sup> And, if it is the case that Christ is still bodily present in this world, then His body can be present in the Lord's Supper.
- In contrast to this position, the Reformed, have maintained what might be called a *real absence*. In other words, we believe that Jesus is bodily present in heaven, ruling and reigning from there, and when we commune with Him in the Lord's Supper, to use Calvin's terminology, we do not bring Him down, but rather, by faith, we are lifted up and spiritually commune with Him there. This emphasis on Christ being really and bodily in heaven can be seen in the Reformed Confessions:

*On the third day He arose from the dead, **with the same body** in which He suffered, **with which** also He ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of His Father, making intercession... (WCF 8:4)*

Heidelberg Catechism #47 **Q:** *Is not Christ then with us even to the end of the world, as he has promised? **A:** Christ is very man and very God; **with respect to his human nature, he is no more on earth**; but with respect to his Godhead, majesty, grace and spirit, he is at no time absent from us.*

Westminster Larger Catechism #55 **Q:** *How doth Christ make intercession? **A:** Christ maketh intercession, by his appearing **in our nature continually before the Father in heaven**, in the merit of his obedience and sacrifice on earth, declaring his will to have it applied to all believers; answering all accusations against them, and procuring*

<sup>1</sup> Cornelis Venema, *What We Believe*, p. 84

for them quiet of conscience, notwithstanding daily failings, access with boldness to the throne of grace, and acceptance of their persons and services.

So, in the Reformed doctrine of Christ's ascension we have the confirmation that Jesus took on our nature and became like us in all points, except without sin (Heb. 4:15-16). And the benefit of this is that He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses and since *He holds His priesthood permanently, because He continues forever. Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them* (Heb. 7:24-25).

- This then brings us to the ongoing work of Christ in heaven for us. Jesus, being our Great High Priest, not only offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins, but He also—as a priest—must continually intercede for us. As the Bible describes and defines it, the work of a priest is to offer sacrifices and to pray for those for whom the sacrifice was made. Thus, in what is called Jesus' High Priestly prayer, we hear Him saying (Jn. 17:9): *I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours.* This is entirely consistent with the great Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53:12 which articulates the two-parts of the priestly work of the Suffering Servant: *He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.*
- And therefore there is this consistent theme throughout the New Testament that tells of the sacrificial and intercessory work of Jesus for us:

*...we have an advocate with the Father; Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.* (1 Jn. 2:1-2)

*Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.* (Rom. 8:34)

- Therefore, we are entirely dependent upon the intercessory work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. It is a most shocking thing to consider, but our full and final salvation is dependent upon the constant praying of Christ for us (cf. Lk. 22:31-32). And yet this is a most comforting contemplation because we know that He can never fail.
- Not only does the ascension of Christ have much to do with His Priestly office, but it has much to do with His Kingly office as well. As the Creed states here, *Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.* To be seated at one's right hand means to occupy the place of privilege and authority. It is from this place of privilege and authority that Christ is presently ruling and reigning and bringing His enemies under His feet: *Now in putting everything in subjection to him, He left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor* (Heb. 2:8-9). In the words of our Shorter Catechism #26, *Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to Himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all His and our enemies.*
- And, His ascension has much to do with His office of Prophet as well. It was at the Great Commission, having been given the place of all authority in heaven and on earth, that Jesus sends forth the church to make disciples of all nations. And yet He spoke much of the fact that unless He went to heaven, the Holy Spirit wouldn't come (because it was He who would pour Him out). Thus the ascension of Christ ushered in the age of the Holy Spirit who is now making known the good news by which we are saved. Or, again, as our Shorter Catechism #25 states, *Christ executeth the office of prophet, in revealing to us, by His Word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.*
- Therefore, the ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father is a glorious doctrine that should give us great confidence in our salvation, our mission in this world as the Church, and in our hope for the future eradication of all of His and our enemies: *For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.* (1 Cor. 15:25).