



The Forgotten Holiday

When you think of the most important days of the year, what comes to mind? For most Christians, the most important days of the year are Christmas and Easter. Yet, in times past, Christians would not have answered only with Christmas and Easter, but also with Christ's ascension into heaven. In fact, the Ascension is an ecumenical feast that is celebrated throughout the Christian Church. While some church bodies may have special days, saints' days, or commemorations on their calendar that are not found in others, the Ascension is celebrated throughout the Church on earth along with the Passion, Easter, and Pentecost. Christ's resurrection from the dead, descent into hell, and ascension into heaven are His exaltation, His glorious triumph over sin, death, and the devil.

The importance of Christ's ascension into heaven is the reason it is celebrated in the Church. The emphasis on the Ascension in the Church Year was so great, particularly in the 16th century, that it became a secular holiday and

Every time we say the Apostles' or Nicene Creed, we confess, 'He ascended into heaven.' Apart from this brief mention, few Christians today give the Ascension much thought.

remains so in many European nations, e.g., Germany, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, and the Nordic countries.

Ascension Day for Christians sometimes has been seen as a bittersweet moment. On the one hand, Jesus received all authority in heaven and on earth, which shows that He has saved us from sin and death. On the other hand, the Ascension marks the time when the "Bridegroom is

taken away" (Mark 2:20 ESV). For this reason, in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Ascension was marked with a fast that would be broken on Pentecost.

The tension between rejoicing over Christ's victory over sin, death, and the devil and a sense of loss because the "Bridegroom is taken away" resulted in one of the greatest controversies in church history—the controversy over Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. Consequently, the dispute over how to understand the ascension of Christ contributed to why Ascension Day became an important church (and secular) holiday.

Some Background

When you think of Christ's ascension into heaven, what sort of image comes to mind? Do you imagine Jesus lifting off like a rocket ship, becoming smaller and smaller as He travels higher and higher into the sky? Do you imagine Jesus taking off like Superman? Mark 16:19 does not provide us with a detailed description about how the Ascension appeared. The text simply says He "was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." Luke 24:51 reports that Jesus "was carried up into heaven." Acts 1:9 gives the most descriptive account of Jesus' ascension: "He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight." Note that the verbs describing His ascension in these accounts are passive, that is, something outside of Jesus is acting on Him. The Father is taking, elevating, and receiving Jesus to His right hand, because Jesus has received all power and authority.

The fact that Jesus was taken from their sight by a cloud is significant, for the cloud indicates the presence of the Lord God. In the Old Testament, when the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, the Lord led them with

a "cloud by day" and a "pillar of fire by night" (Ex. 13:21–22 and elsewhere). In Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the Lord descended upon His tabernacle in a cloud, and He filled His temple in Jerusalem with a cloud. At Jesus' transfiguration, "a bright cloud overshadowed them" (Matt. 17:5). All of these cloud references indicate the presence of God. Thus, at Jesus' ascension, He is taken from the disciples' sight when He enters into the presence of the Lord God, rightfully to sit on His throne.

The story does not end here. While the Christian Church universally confesses that Jesus ascended into heaven, confusion, misunderstanding, and even divisions have arisen over what Jesus' ascension means for the Church here on earth. Some Christians understand the Ascension as a sad day, a day that marks the day "the Bridegroom [was] taken away," a day that reminds them that He is not present with His people in a physical, or bodily, way. As the Creed confesses, Jesus ascended into heaven and remains there until He comes to "judge the living and the dead."

Throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation, the fact that Jesus ascended to sit at the right hand of God and that He will return in glory on the Last Day was understood to mean that Jesus' body was located (literally and physically) in heaven, more or less inaccessible to Christians on earth. Therefore, the Church on earth had access to Jesus primarily through, or only through, His Spirit.

A Connection

Jesus' bodily ascension into heaven and the Words of Institution, "Take eat; this is My body," created an apparent contradiction in some people's minds. Until the 16th century, the majority of the Christian church simply believed Christ's words, namely, that He ascended into heaven and still provided His body and blood for Christians to eat and drink in Holy Communion. The explanation of *how* He accomplished this was not in the forefront of most people's minds.

However, as early as the 13th century, an attempt to explain this apparent contradiction arose in the Western (Roman) church. The teaching, called *transubstantiation*, held that the bread and wine on the altar was converted, or changed, into the body and blood of Christ. According to the way medieval scientists understood physics, a conversion of one substance into another did not result in movement; therefore, Christ could remain in heaven and His body could also be present (through transubstantiation) on the altar in church.

To many modern people, such an explanation does not make sense. Our difficulty in making sense of this argument does not involve the intelligence of people but rather a different understanding of the physical world. By the 16th century, peoples' understanding of the physical world had changed to align more with our present day than with the Middle Ages and Antiquity.

A Controversy

After Martin Luther posted the Ninety-five Theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, a controversy arose over the Lord's Supper. Rome continued to teach what it had since the 13th century: transubstantiation—that the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ without the movement of Christ's body from heaven to earth. Lutherans, while rejecting transubstantiation as a theory to explain how Christ could be simultaneously in heaven at the right hand of the Father and on the altar in the Lord's Supper, never denied that Christ gave His body and blood to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. Lutherans simply confessed what Jesus said in His words. However, another group, which became known as the Reformed (today, generally comprising Christian denominations that are not Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Lutheran), not only rejected transubstantiation as a theory but also rejected the idea that Christ gives His body and blood to eat and to drink in the Lord's Supper. Led



Lutherans? Reformed? A Thumbnail History

From the early days of the Church, there have been external divisions caused by sin, personalities, differences in practice, and most significantly, doctrine. In a Web-exclusive sidebar, Dr. Collver provides a thumbnail history of how today we find a multiplicity of denominations and church bodies, including Lutheran and Reformed. To read Dr. Collver's brief overview, visit lcms.org/witness and click on the link for this story.

by Huldreich Zwingli, John Calvin, and others, these Christians argued that the only way the Church can access Jesus is through His Spirit. This might explain why Protestant Christians, i.e., Reformed, in general, focus so much more on the presence of the Holy Spirit in worship, especially in their music, than on the presence of Jesus.

So, while these Christians would confess that Jesus is “spiritually” present in the Lord’s Supper, they would deny that Jesus gives His true body and true blood in His Supper. That is, they would deny that the very body and blood that was born of the Virgin

place in heaven, located directionally to the right of the heavenly Father’s throne? Or, as Luther and the Lutheran Confessions teach, is the right hand of God equated with what Jesus said in Matt. 28:18: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me”? When the right hand of God is understood as “all authority in heaven and on earth,” and understood in a way that does not contradict Christ’s Words of Institution, “This is My body . . . This is My blood,” Christ’s ascension into heaven causes no problem with the Lord’s Supper. In fact, this understanding is the only one that allows

preaching during the 17th and 18th centuries—for both the Lutherans and the Reformed. The Reformed Church used Ascension Day to prove why the Lutheran teaching on the Lord’s Supper was incorrect. On the other hand, the Lutheran Church celebrated the Ascension to emphasize that Christ’s ascension to the right hand of the Father gave Him the power and authority to deliver exactly what He has promised—His body and His blood given for you and me to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins.

His ascension into heaven marks not the distance of Christ from people but rather His nearness to us. While Christ may not be visible to us in His body, as He was to His disciples during His three-year ministry on earth, He is visible to us in the Sacraments, where He hides Himself behind the bread and the wine, but giving to us, as His words promise, His very body and blood. In the Lord’s Supper, Christ gives to us the very same body that ascended into heaven and now “sits at the right hand of the Father,” i.e., has all the authority in heaven and on earth. He gives us His body and His blood to strengthen our faith and to preserve us until He returns in glory, when all will see Him face to face.

This Ascension Day, recall what Jesus accomplished for you. When He ascended into heaven, He received all authority in heaven and on earth so that He can draw near to you and deliver to you what He has promised. Recall how His ascension means that Jesus is not far from you, but so close that He puts His very body and blood into your mouth for the forgiveness of your sins. In the Lord’s Supper, Jesus draws closer to you than He was to the Virgin Mary when He dwelled in her womb. His ascension means He can do exactly what He promises. Indeed, the ascension of Christ into heaven marks one of the most important holidays in the church year.

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The ultimate point in this discussion centers on how a person understands ‘the right hand of God.’ Is the right hand of God a physical place in heaven, located directionally to the right of the heavenly Father’s throne? Or, as Luther and the Lutheran Confessions teach, is the right hand of God equated with what Jesus said in Matt. 28:18: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me’?



Mary, suffered on the cross, rose on the third day, and ascended into heaven is present in the Lord’s Supper to eat and to drink. Reformed Christians reasoned that since Jesus’ body is in heaven it cannot be on the altar to eat and to drink. Zwingli put it this way: “But if Christ is seated there, He cannot be here.” The lynchpin of their argument was Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of God, which is seen as creating a separation between Jesus and His Church on earth.

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Jesus’ words to deliver what He says and promises, that is, that He has the power and authority to deliver what He has promised to give us, namely, His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. A Christ who does not give His body and His blood to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins, Christ who remains in heaven separated from His people, is a Christ who is not there for us. If Christ is not there for us, He does us little good.

Taking Center Stage

As a result of the controversy over the Lord’s Supper, Christ’s ascension into heaven took center stage in