

The Resurrection and Post-Resurrection Narratives

Chapter 15: The Ascension of Christ

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So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God (Mk. 16:19).

And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen (Lk. 24:50-53).

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, “Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.” Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey (Ac. 1:9-12).

After a number of post-resurrection appearances where Jesus thoroughly establishes the reality of His bodily resurrection and instructs the apostles regarding their mission, our Lord is now ready to return to heaven. Therefore, He leads the apostles out of Jerusalem to a section on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives which belonged to Bethany (Lk. 24:50; Ac. 1:12). “It is noteworthy that both the agony and the ascension took place on the Mount of Olives; the places are located some distance apart but are still on the same ridge. Our humiliations and exaltations often lie close together. Jesus and the disciples had often walked over this piece of road during these past days—think of how they were walking it now!”¹

In this familiar place on a Sunday, forty days² after the resurrection (Ac. 1:3) in broad daylight, the eleven apostles will personally witness Christ’s physical-bodily ascent into heaven. Although they did not personally witness the resurrection but only the risen Lord after the event, the ascension occurs right before their eyes. This amazing event is the logical and spiritual outcome of the resurrection. “[T]he resurrection and ascension of Jesus represent one continuous movement and together constitute his exaltation.”³

Interestingly, as important as the ascension is, it is only briefly mentioned by Mark and receives only seven verses by Luke (three in the gospel and four in Acts). This shows us that the great focus of the gospels and gospel preaching was on the resurrection and that the ascension is both assumed and proved by the resurrection. Further, Matthew, Luke and John all anticipate this glorious event. Luke and Matthew both refer to Jesus being seated at God’s right hand at the trial

¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*, 1209.

² “The number forty has an illustrious history: the flood lasted forty days (Gen. 7:17); Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days (Exod. 24:18; 34:28); Israel wandered for forty years (Exod. 16:35), as Elijah did for forty days (1 Kgs. 19:8); Ezra’s dictation to restore the destroyed Scriptures took forty days (Ezra 14:23, 36, 42-45); Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness (Luke 4:2)” (John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 1225).

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1951, 52] 1990), 103.

before the Sanhedrin (Mt. 26:64; Lk. 22:69). In John's gospel the resurrected Lord warns Mary not to touch Him because He has not yet ascended (20:17a) and then says, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (20:17b).

As we examine the ascension narratives there are a number of important areas to consider. Note the gracious manner in which Jesus departed from His apostles. He did so with a blessing. "And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them" (Lk. 24:50). The raising of the hands to give a blessing is deeply rooted in Old Testament practice. After Aaron the high priest made an offering for the sins of the people he "lifted his hand toward the people, blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and peace offerings" (Lev. 9:22). After this great benediction (see Num. 6:24-27) Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting (Lev. 9:23). All this typified Christ who after His perfect sacrifice for sins, blessed the apostles and then ascended into heaven to be hidden from human sight while making intercession for His people. He went into heaven to keep applying the blessings of salvation that He had earned on the cross. In the Old Covenant administration, public blessings upon God's people were only the prerogative of prophets, priests or kings. "He blessed as one having authority, commanded the blessing he had purchased; he blessed them as Jacob blessed his sons. The apostles were now as representatives of the twelve tribes, so that in blessing them he blessed all his spiritual Israel, and put his Father's name upon them. He *blessed them* as Jacob blessed his sons, and Moses the tribes, at parting, to show that, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end."⁴

This blessing assured the apostles that our Lord was smiling upon them because they were forgiven of their sins and clothed with the righteousness of Christ. It also strengthened their faith in the Savior's continued blessing upon their gospel labors. The very essence of the gospel is that Jesus came into the world to bless sinners by removing the curse of the law and God's wrath against sin. To those who embrace the gospel, the Mediator is not a condemning judge, but a loving friend, faithful high priest and intercessor. Because of the Mediator's great work, believers do not live in continual fear and dread of God's fiery indignation against rebellion; but, rather, look to God as a loving Father who has adopted them into His family. The Redeemer's ministry to the apostles was one of continual blessings. Now that the Lord was departing these blessings would continue to flow through Christ's Spirit.

The Roman Catholic tradition of going to Mary as an intercessor because she is supposedly more merciful, approachable and loving than Jesus is completely refuted by this and many other passages of Scripture. There is no one who is more loving, compassionate, merciful, gracious, patient and tender than our Lord Jesus Christ. To compare the love of Mary and the saints to the love of the Savior is to compare a speck of dust to the whole universe and more. "To talk of the virgin Mary as being more compassionate than Christ is proof of miserable ignorance. To flee to the saints for comfort, when we may flee to Christ, is an act of mingled stupidity and blasphemy, and a robbery of Christ's crown. Gracious was our Lord Jesus while He lived among His weak disciples,—gracious in the very season of His agony on the cross,—gracious when He rose again and gathered His sheep around Him,—gracious in the manner of His departure from this world. It was a departure in the very act of blessing!"⁵ At God's right hand the Savior continues to bless. We have every reason not only to trust in the redemptive acts of Jesus, but also His person. His compassion toward sinners is beyond our finite human comprehension.

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:846.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:525.

Interestingly, passages which speak of Jesus' ascension speak of it as a great blessing to believers in two different ways. First, the Savior by His glorious victory has subdued all His and our enemies. The psalmist writes, "You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive" (Ps. 68:18). "Brethren, we were captives once—captives to tyrants, who wrought us woe, and would soon have wrought us death. We were captives to sin, captives to Satan, and therefore captives under spiritual death. We were captives under divers lusts and imaginations of our own hearts: captives to error, captives to deceit. But the Lord Jesus Christ has led captivity captive. There is our comfort."⁶ Do not forget that, apart from Christ and His glorious victory, all of us would still be under the power of death, the dominion of the devil, the guilt of sin and slavery to its power. Our lives were thoroughly characterized by bondage. But all these things have been vanquished by the Mediator. He crushed the head of the serpent, removed the sting of death and took away the dominion of sin. His ascension into heaven into the throne room of God before multitudes of adoring angels and the souls of departed saints was the victory ride of the conqueror—the King over all. As Paul says, "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2:15).

In our day when secular humanists, atheists, sodomites, feminists, papists and Mohammedans all seem to have the ascendancy and most churches act more interested in entertainment and gimmicks than the truth, we must keep the eye of our faith focused on Christ's great victory. Do not lose heart and be dismayed at the great rise of infidelity before us, for Jesus has already achieved the victory. By His bloody death, resurrection and ascension to the very throne of God He has secured the victory of the gospel, the victory of the faith once delivered to the saints and the victory of His church. "And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:22).

Remember, the Savior departed in the midst of a blessing. He did not withdraw in anger or indifference, but in a deep love for His church. He departed from His beloved disciples only because it was for their own good and ours. He departed to rule for our benefit. He departed to bestow gifts and blessings upon us. He departed to send His Spirit into the church to conquer our hearts of stone and give us hearts of love toward Him. What a magnificent blessing! Is there any greater blessing than being a temple of the Holy Spirit, having God as our Father and Jesus as our beloved Savior and friend? He blessed and parted and thus guaranteed that His blessing would become a wonderful reality for every one of us.

Second, the ascended Savior bestows gifts upon His people. Paul says, "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore, He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men'" (Eph. 4:7-8). The enthroned divine-human Mediator is sovereign in the distribution of His gifts. He poured the Spirit into His church and is personally responsible for our regeneration and baptism in the Holy Spirit. He also distributes all the various gifts to each and every believer. The Bible speaks of the Redeemer as ascending like a conqueror who is rich in spoils and given all power and authority by His victory. The original Hebrew says that the Messiah has "*received* gifts for men" (Ps. 68:18) while Paul's Greek says "our Lord *gave* gifts to men" (Eph. 4:8). While the Psalm emphasizes the Savior's reward for His redemptive obedience, Paul, speaking by the Spirit, emphasizes that Christ received his authority and gifts in order to give them to His church. Our Lord gave His own life for us and now He applies that salvation to us. He gave Himself in His passion and He continues to give as the ascended Priest-King. The salvific merit achieved by His redemptive work was not for Himself, but rather for us. With it He continues to bless the elect throughout history. The

⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Our Lord's Triumphant Ascension," 36:245.

Messiah is enriched by His triumphant work on Golgotha, and now the resurrected living Redeemer distributes the reward of His humiliation. “By his obedience and sufferings he conquered the prince of this world, he redeemed his people, and obtained the right to bestow upon them all needed good. He is exalted to give the Holy Ghost, and all his gifts and graces, to grant repentance and remission of sins.”⁷ “He receives the gift, but he only acts as the conduit-pipe, through which the grace of God flows to us. It pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell; and of his fullness have all we received.”⁸

This blessing of Christ, which is founded upon His redemptive work and bestowed throughout history from God’s right hand, completely *unites* our Lord’s atoning death with the *application* of that sacrifice by Jesus toward His own people. This teaching completely obliterates all Arminian concepts of the Savior’s sacrifice, which they argue is accomplished for all but only applied to some. What Christ earned by His sinless life and bloody death was not for Himself but for His sheep, for those given to Him by the Father (Jn. 10:29; 19:6ff). Therefore, to argue that Christ died for all men without exception, but only sovereignly bestows the gift of regeneration, Spirit baptism and repentance to some, is to limit Jesus’ authority and replace it with the authority of sovereign, autonomous man. The Savior conquers by the Holy Spirit because He has the power and authority to change hearts and make the unwilling—willing. “When Christ ascended he was not returning to heaven with empty hands. On the contrary, as a result of accomplished mediatorial work he returned *in triumph* to heaven, in the full possession of salvation for his people. These people were, so to speak, in his triumphant procession. They were captives in his train, chained as it were, to his chariot.... He received these captives in order to give them to the kingdom, for kingdom work.”⁹

Note the nature of Jesus’ ascension. In Luke it says, “...that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven” (24:51). Acts says, “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and in a cloud received Him out of their sight” (1:9). There are a number of things that merit our attention regarding these verses.

First, the ascension is a parting of the Mediator from His disciples. “The ascension differs radically from Jesus vanishing from the sight of the disciples at Emmaus (31) and similar happenings. There is an air of finality about it. It is the decisive close of one chapter and the beginning of another. It is the consummation of Christ’s earthly work; the indication to his followers that his mission is accomplished, his work among them comes to a decisive end. They can expect to see him in the old way no more.”¹⁰ During the forty days Jesus would appear and then disappear. There were many such appearances. Our Lord’s physical appearances would now cease. Aside from a few rare visions where Christ makes His spiritual presence known,¹¹ or communicates through a vision, there are no more physical appearances of the Redeemer after the ascension. The rather common assertion by Charismatic leaders that Jesus appeared in person and spoke with them are either gross delusions or outright lies.

Second, the passive construction of the verb *eperthe*, “He was taken up,” indicates that God the Father took Jesus back into heaven. In his gospel Luke uses the verb *anephereto* “was carried” which is also passive. In Acts 1:2, 11 and 1 Timothy 3:6 the verb *anelemphe* is used to

⁷ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1856] 1964), 151.

⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Our Lord’s Triumphant Ascension,” 36:247.

⁹ William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967, 68, 69), 2:291.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, 88), 375.

¹¹ In Ac. 9:3 Saul sees a light from heaven and hears a voice. In 2 Cor. 12:2-4 Paul speaks about being caught up to the third heaven. In Revelation, John has visions of the glorified Christ (1:12-17).

indicate that our Lord was “received up” by the Father. God the Father sent His only begotten Son into the world (Jn. 3:16) and then took Him back into heaven and received Him when His mission was accomplished. Both the planning and carrying out of redemption is an act of the triune God.

Third, both Luke and especially Acts emphasize the literal, physical nature of the ascension. In the gospel Jesus ascends in the midst of blessing the disciples. In Acts the focus is on the apostles as witnesses of this event. Our Lord was taken up “while they watched” (1:9), or literally “as they were looking.” “The present participle accents the fact that they were looking directly at Jesus.”¹² They “looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up” (1:10). Their whole attention was on the glorified Savior. Their eyes were focused on Him “with so much care and earnestness of mind that they could not be deceived. It is probable that he did not fly swiftly up, but moved upwards gently, for the further satisfaction of his disciples.”¹³

It is important that we do not spiritualize or allegorize this great event. The true, real humanity of Jesus with which He achieved our redemption is visibly, literally taken into heaven. The incarnation was genuine. The resurrection was real. The coming into the world to save sinners involved taking upon Himself a true human nature and this incarnation has permanent consequences. The glorified human nature of Christ with its real flesh, bones, blood and soul is exalted and seated with God forever. And this same Jesus will return physically to judge the world.

The account in Acts says “He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight” (Ac. 1:9). This means that the disciples could see Jesus ascend until He entered a cloud. This detail helps us understand the ascension. The Savior, in His real glorified physical body, literally ascended in the sky before His disciples. Heaven, however, or what Paul calls the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:2 (the first heaven is the atmosphere where clouds float about; the second heaven is outside the atmosphere and contains the stars) is not really a part of this universe, but is a completely different realm, a spiritual realm where God and the angels have their abode. Therefore, it is likely that when Jesus entered the cloud, He was immediately transported to the throne room of God. With the ascension it was important to convey the fact that Christ was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah’s ascent to God (Dan. 7:13; Ps. 68:18); and, that the Redeemer went into the very presence of God for us.

The sight of Jesus entering a cloud would remind the apostles of the many times in Scripture where a cloud is associated with God’s special presence. There was a thick cloud that settled over the tabernacle (Ex. 19:16; 40:34; 2 Chron. 5:13-14; 6:1) and the dark thundercloud that came to rest on Sinai (Ex. 19:16). There was also the bright cloud of Shekinah glory that overshadowed the Savior at His transfiguration (Mt. 17:5; Lk. 9:34). The cloud reminded the apostles that Christ was entering back into God’s special presence. In fact, He would sit as King on Jehovah’s holy throne. “Jesus as the ascended Lord is enveloped by the shekinah cloud, the visible manifestation of God’s presence, glory, and approval.”¹⁴ The cloud made our Lord’s transit from earth to heaven more distinctly visible and was an important theological statement about Christ. In these circumstances it is understandable that the disciples began worshipping the Savior as they watched this glorious sight.

The literal, physical nature of the ascension is important because the ascension teaches us about the nature of the second coming of Christ. “And while they looked steadfastly toward

¹² Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 3:11.

¹³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:8.

¹⁴ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1981), 9:258.

heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven’” (Ac. 1:10-11).

The two men dressed in white are angels of God sent to make an important announcement. These are perhaps the same two angels who appeared in white dazzling raiment who announced our Lord’s resurrection (Mt. 28:2-7; Lk. 24:4-7; Mk. 16:5-7; Jn. 20:12-13). The angels connect the glory of the ascension with the glory of the second coming. The same Christ who literally ascended will also literally descend at the second advent to judge the whole world. The second coming is connected to the resurrection and ascension because it is part of the Mediator’s vindication and reward for His redemptive obedience.

The angels tell the apostles that Jesus “will so come in like manner” as they saw Him go into heaven. The expression “in like manner” (*hon tropon*) “never indicates mere certainty or vague resemblance; but whenever it occurs in the New Testament, denotes identity of mode or manner”¹⁵ (cf. Mt. 23:37; Lk. 13:34; Ac. 7:28; 2 Tim. 3:8). Therefore, since the Savior departed in a real physical body; He shall return in a real physical body. He ascended visibly, He shall return or descend visibly. He went up into heaven. He shall return from heaven. When He returns, we will meet Christ in the clouds up in the air and return with Him (1 Th. 4:17).

Those who reject the literal bodily, physical nature of the ascension (such as full preterists, pantelists¹⁶ and modernists) can only do so by twisting the clear meaning of Scripture. The ascension, however, is placed alongside the Savior’s passion, resurrection and second coming as a fundamental doctrine of the gospel. To reject its literal nature is to become a heretic. “A day will come when Jesus shall return from heaven, in like manner as He went. He will not always abide within the holy of holies. He will come forth, like the Jewish high priest, to bless the people, to gather His saints together, and to restore all things. (Lev. ix. 23, Acts iii 21). For that day let us wait, and long, and pray. Christ dying on the cross for sinners,—Christ living in heaven to intercede,—Christ coming again in glory, are three great objects which ought to stand out prominently before the eyes of every true Christian.”¹⁷

¹⁵ J. A. Alexander, *Acts* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1963), 16.

¹⁶ Pantelism or full preterism is the idea that the second coming of Christ and everything associated with that coming in Scripture (the resurrection of the dead; the rapture; the universal judgment; and, the beginning of the final state) already took place in A. D. 70 when Jesus came in judgment upon Jerusalem. This position which is dangerous and heretical is refuted by the following considerations. (1) Our Lord explicitly taught that at the final judgment God will cast the damned, both *body* and soul into hell (read Mt. 10:28; Jn. 5:28-29; Rev. 20:13). This obviously did not occur in A. D. 70. (2) Jesus taught that non-Jewish pagans who had been dead for thousands of years would be involved in the day of judgment (see Mt. 10:15; 11:23-24, 42). Christ taught that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon, the people of ancient Nineveh and the queen who lived in Solomon’s day will all be judged together on the same day. This certainly did not occur in A. D. 70. (3) The final judgment will be universal (i.e. it will involve all men who ever lived including people alive now) and will be very public (Mt. 6:3-4; 6:6; 10:26; 12:36; 25:34, 41; Rom. 2:16). This contradicts the full preterist idea of a secret judgment. (4) Pantelism totally contradicts Rev. 20 which teaches that the final judgment is coterminous with Satan’s final defeat, judgment and casting into the lake of fire. Further, the symbolism of 1,000 years which indicates a very long period of time obviously could not be used to describe the forty year period between the Savior’s resurrection and A. D. 70. (5) The Bible teaches a real resurrection of people’s dead bodies. The fact that graveyards are full of dead people proves that the second coming has not occurred yet. (6) Acts 1:9-11 proves that the second coming involves a literal, bodily, physical coming and not a spiritual or metaphorical coming in judgment which is described in Matthew 24. Full preterism is a rejection of the clear teaching of Scripture and every church creed which discusses the second coming for the past 2000 years whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

¹⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:526.

The ascension also teaches us that Jesus, according to His human nature, lives in heaven and rules as King in this age. The Redeemer has gone into heaven as our forerunner, as the captain of our salvation (Heb. 2:10). By His redemptive obedience, He achieved salvation for us and thus goes before us to prepare our heavenly home (Jn. 14:2-3). When our Lord ascended His triumph over the world became ours. Therefore, God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

Consequently, as Christians, we must have a particular mindset. After Paul discusses the destruction of the wicked “who set their mind on earthly things,” he writes, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior” (Phil. 3:20). Since our King is in heaven, we are not to be preoccupied with the things of this world as though this world and its present system is all there is. “Paul tells the Philippians that they belong to a heavenly commonwealth, that is, their state and constitutive government is in heaven, and as citizens they are to reflect its life.”¹⁸ Christ’s present kingship in heaven is to determine our present existence as believers. This heavenly commonwealth with Jesus as supreme ruler is a present reality. We are heavenly citizens right now. This reality does mean that we should treat life as a great escape from this realm, but that everything in this life must be lived in terms of our allegiance to the heavenly King.

It is true that the earth belongs to Christ. And a time is coming in history when the angels will proclaim, “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ” (Rev. 11:15). But, in the meantime, this world lies in wickedness and no subject of Jesus can live in holiness without focusing on our union with the Savior in heaven; or without the blessed hope that our Lord will change our vile bodies and make them like His glorious body.

Further, the fact that our citizenship is with the Mediator in heaven teaches us that our allegiance to the Redeemer must always take the first place over our own nation and earthly citizenship. The vast majority of professing Christians have bought into the idea formulated primarily during the so-called enlightenment that the state must remain secular and neutral respecting all religions; that all religions must be treated exactly the same under the law; that no Christian church membership or creedal considerations whatsoever should be required to hold office, serve on juries, vote in elections or serve as judges. In other words, Christ’s universal sovereignty—His “all authority in heaven and on earth”—does not apply to civil governments, nation states, courts or the other centers of power in society. The idea behind the acceptance of this enlightenment rationalism is that the only way to avoid religious conflict in a nation or among nations is to leave religion in the church building or prayer closet, but make all the political and judicial institutions in society secular. Essentially, Christians in America have agreed to give secular humanism a monopoly on civil government and even the various educational systems. Most churches and professing Christians in the United States have explicitly repudiated the lordship of Christ as defined by Scripture and have instead adopted a surrender or at best an *attempted* political ceasefire with the secular humanists. In the process, the United States Constitution has been elevated above the word of God on political, judicial and educational areas of life.

The consequences of this abandonment of the lordship of Christ over the constitution and the state were not immediately apparent in that: a) the Christian worldview and ethic dominated the United States in its early days; and b) most states in the first generation of America had their own Christian and trinitarian requirement to hold office. Therefore, Christians were content with a position of supposed neutrality.

¹⁸ Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 461.

But the fact that Jesus Christ was not explicitly acknowledged as Lord over the nation and its laws in the original constitution has born poison fruit. The secular humanistic worldview is now so hostile to Christian faith and ethics that no political cease fires are possible. Science is completely dominated by Darwinism. Ethics now are purely arbitrary, situational and positivistic. Many things that were unthinkable only a few generations ago are now legal and even popular: abortion on demand, homosexual rights and even sodomite civil unions, legalization of adultery and sodomy, no-fault divorce, infanticide, killing the handicapped, experimentation on fetuses, etc. A small handful of Christians have begun to understand that compromise with secular humanists is impossible; that cease fires are a thing of the past; that if things continue Christians will be persecuted by the state. But, tragically, the vast majority of evangelicals who are attempting to be a salt and light against such ethical rot and darkness still believe the solution is a return to a more strict interpretation of the constitution. The result is that reforms are attempted without a direct appeal to the authority of Christ and the Bible and all attempts at ethical reform are based on “old-fashioned family values” or a vague notion of “natural law.” Tragically, most believers are attempting to win this battle without Christ; with both hands tied behind their backs. Is it any wonder that professing Christians keep losing ground in the so-called “culture wars”?

The only way that Christians are going to make long-term progress in the goal of a Christian America or a nation discipled for Christ is to do the following. First, the Lordship of Jesus as defined by Scripture must be explicitly acknowledged by professing Christians. This means an abandonment of the idea of neutrality in politics, judicial matters, education, and so on. There is no neutrality. The sooner believers realize this and stop attempting to make peace with secular humanists, the better. The various politically active groups on the secular left (homosexuals, feminists, abortionists, socialists, evolutionists) have understood for decades that strict Bible believing, consistent Christians are their greatest enemies. Professing Christians must set aside their worship of the American constitution. Constitutional democracy as practiced in modern America simply means that our laws will reflect not God’s infallible Word, but rather our degenerate culture. Man, not God, has become the source of law.

Second, believers must not rest until we have a Christian amendment to the constitution. In other words, there must be a change from right wing enlightenment thinking to an explicit acknowledgment of Christ as Lord over our nation. Given the present state of our nation, this obviously is a long term goal. Older Reformed theologians referred to this as the establishment principle. Our nation must in its constitution and laws recognize and establish biblical, Protestant, trinitarian, Reformed Christianity over this whole nation. This will indeed take a good deal of time. But, without long-term biblical goals, nothing will be accomplished except short term cease fires and compromises. We are not speaking of revolution, violence or coercion, but rather a slow, steady social transformation as professing Christians learn to apply the Word of God beyond the church to every area of life. If western civilization is to be rescued from the darkness of secular humanism and Darwinism, then churches must repent of their severe restriction of Christ’s authority and nations must become the Mediator’s bondservants. Churches must not rest until the U. S. constitution is restructured so that Christ is recognized as Lord and His law word is the final standard of all court appeals, not the whim of a few secular humanists on the Supreme Court.

Christians and churches today stand at the crossroads. They need to decide if they are going to keep supporting the secular humanism that rules our nation or attempt to make our nation explicitly Christian. The words of Elijah are appropriate for our current situation: “And

Elijah came unto all the people, and said, ‘How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him’” (1 Ki. 18:21). The people in America have been so well trained in pluralism, modern democracy and the idea that the crown rights of King Jesus only apply to the heart, or prayer closet or spiritual realm, that they automatically side with the humanists against the Bible in this debate. They speak of rule according to the Bible and Jesus Christ as dangerous, as a great loss of freedom; as a return to the dark ages; as a loss of liberty of conscience. But, there is no neutrality and rule under secular humanism will make the Middle Ages look like a picnic. Just consider the ten million killed in concentration camps under Hitler; or, the over thirty million murdered by Stalin; or, the forty plus million murdered by abortion.

Concerns about Christ’s Lordship over the state must of course always follow our own personal dedication to Jesus as Lord and our focus on personal obedience. As Paul says in Colossians 3:1-3, “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Paul wants us to focus our hearts on our union with Christ and focus on heaven so that we take our minds off the evil things and lusts of this world. As we live and function in this world, our thinking regarding our position in Christ in heaven must direct our concerns during this present evil age. “We must make heaven our scope and aim, seek the favour of God above, keep our communion with the upper world by faith, and hope, and holy love, and make it our constant care and business to secure our title to and qualifications for the heavenly bliss.”¹⁹ Our union with the Savior in His death, resurrection and ascension must change our whole manner of thinking and living. Although we live in a fallen world and must struggle with the flesh and the temptations of this world we must never forget that we are already part of the redeemed order. “May we take up our celestial burgess-rights, exercise our privileges and avocations as heavenly citizens, and live as though we are alive from the dead, who are raised up together and made partakers of his resurrection life.”²⁰

Finally, the apostles’ reaction to the ascension was one of worship, joy, and obedience. “And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen” (Lk. 24:52-53). There are a number of reasons why the disciples reacted the way they did.

First, the apostles were full of joy because they were relieved of all the doubts and fears by this amazing display of our Lord’s glory. They now fully understood the meaning and purpose of the Mediator’s humiliation. They now could see that the cross, the suffering, the sacrificial death led to exaltation beyond what they ever had imagined. They had been seeking an earthly king, but now they worshipped a King over kings who would sit on God’s throne in heaven. They were expecting an earthly Jewish kingdom and they could now see a universal, cosmic kingdom. Previously, they had seen Jesus as a Master, Prophet and Messiah and now they could see Him as the King of glory and Judge of the world. Their joy could not be contained, so they bowed before the Savior as the object of religious worship. Once again, the apostles acknowledge the fact that Jesus is God and must be worshipped, served and obeyed as God. “This is the first formal act of adoration [in Luke] which we ever read of the disciples paying to our Lord. Their knowledge of His Messiahship and divinity was now clear and distinct.”²¹ It is noteworthy that at His birth the Redeemer was honored by the angels and

¹⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:761.

²⁰ Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Ascension of Christ,” 17:172.

²¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:529.

shepherds (Lk. 2:8-20), while at His departure He is worshipped by the chief shepherds of the church. From beginning to the end, the gospels portray Christ as God of very God whom we must adore.

This narrative teaches us that the more we learn about Christ and trust Him, the greater our joy in life will be. A lack of knowledge and faith is the reason that many believers are lacking joy and have so little peace. The key to joy in the heart and peace in the life is to get to know Jesus Christ. When the Redeemer is truly known and trusted, a person's life will be characterized by joy. We rejoice in the Mediator's redemptive accomplishments. We praise God for His wonderful victory that, by grace, is our victory also. "Though still in the midst of their enemies, they *rejoiced*; though deprived of the personal presence of their Lord, they *rejoiced*; though they knew that in the world they would have much tribulation, they *rejoiced*. And why? Because they believed the promises. They knew that Jesus was gone to the Father to make intercession for them, and that He would return again to make them blessed."²²

When people turn the Christian faith into a habitual attitude of gloom and a sad, serious countenance, where joy and happiness are seen as a lack of piety and Christian maturity, they reveal a perverted understanding of sanctification. Sin leads to sorrow and depression; but, faith and obedience lead to joy. We, of course, do not rejoice in ourselves and pat ourselves on the back, but rejoice in the amazing person and work of Jesus Christ.

Second, the disciples were full of joy because they understood that His physical absence was only temporary and that His victorious ascension guaranteed the blessing of being reunited with their Savior. This was certainly part of John's thinking for in almost the last verse of the Bible he says, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 20:20). When the Redeemer comes again in the same manner as He departed (Ac. 1:12), He will say to every Christian, "Come you blessed of My Father" (Mt. 25:34). "Enter into the joy of your lord" (Mt. 25:21).

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²² Alfred Nevin, *A Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 699.