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2004

# He Ascended into Heaven and Is Seated at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty

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### Recommended Citation

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### Published Citation

Malcolm, Lois. "He Ascended into Heaven and Is Seated at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty." In *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*, edited by Roger Van Harn, 161–72. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004.

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## He Ascended into Heaven and Is Seated at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty

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*Ascendit ad coelos, sedet ad dexteram dei patris omnipotentis*

LOIS MALCOLM

The doctrine of ascension has not received much attention in the history of Christian theology, but its importance must not be underestimated.<sup>1</sup> Between the resurrection and the final parousia, it depicts how the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead and now reigns at the right hand of God, filling all in all with his fullness. It also depicts how Jesus promises to send the Spirit after he ascends to empower his disciples in their witness to “all nations.” In this witness Christians make the eschatological claim that the ascended humanity of this crucified Messiah discloses not only who God truly is but who we as human beings truly are. What is most poignant about this claim is that it affirms — in the face of historical evidence that often appears to contradict it — that ultimate reality is defined not by egoistic grasping and exploitation but by the wisdom and power — the kenotic abundance — that inheres in this Lord’s crucified humanity.

1. For comprehensive historical and theological studies of the ascension, see Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), and J. G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven* (London: Lutterworth, 1958). Among short articles, see Joseph Ratzinger, “Ascension of Christ,” in *Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner (London: Burns and Oates, 1975); J. M. Robinson, “Ascension,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1962); and Rowan Williams, “Ascension of Christ,” in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1983).

## A Biblical Context

Although the NT interpretation of Jesus' ascension has roots in Jewish interest in the ascent of OT figures (especially Enoch, Gen. 5:24, and Elijah, 2 Kings 2:1-12),<sup>2</sup> the most important theological context for interpreting Jesus' ascent is the way the motif of ascent/descent is used to depict the Hebrew understanding of how God promises blessing and judgment to a people in actual historical events.<sup>3</sup> Adam and Eve are commanded to descend from the mountain-garden Eden after their sin. The Tower of Babel, as a false attempt to ascend to the heavens, is destroyed. Noah and his family are saved by ascending Mount Ararat after the great flood. Moses ascends Mount Sinai to receive the instructions for the holy tabernacle in which the high priest was to ascend for the people. The tabernacle, in turn, with its holy of holies, is lifted up on Mount Zion where it is aligned with David's throne. And finally, significant for the image of Jesus' ascent is the way the glory of the Lord takes the form of a cloud as it follows the tabernacle from Sinai to Zion.

Two additional motifs emerged after the exile in Babylon, when hope for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy was transferred to an eschatological future. On the one hand, he is the apocalyptic "Son of Man" who sits at God's right hand restoring the Davidic reign of justice and peace (drawing especially on Ps. 110:1, but also on Pss. 2 and 8) in an everlasting dominion that includes all peoples, nations, and languages (Dan. 7:13-14). On the other hand, he is the "Suffering Servant" (e.g., Isa. 52:13-53:12) and righteous sufferer (e.g., Ps. 22) whose sacrificial death undoes the priestly sacrificial system, making him the eternal high priest who opens up a "new and living way" through the "curtain" of his flesh (Heb. 10:19).

Although Matthew's depiction of Jesus' final appearance in Galilee contains the theme of the ascension, that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18), and Matthew and Mark do speak of the "Son of Man" coming in the clouds (Matt. 16:27; 24:30; 26:64; Mark 8:38; 13:26), Luke is the only Gospel with an actual depiction of the ascension. (There is an ascension scene in the longer ending of Mark [16:9-21], but biblical scholarship has concluded that it is a later insertion.)

Drawing on the Son of Man motif, Luke depicts the ascension as occurring after two incidents. First, Jesus meets with two disciples who are on their way to the village Emmaus, talking with each other about Jesus' crucifixion

2. See Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993).

3. See Farrow, pp. 26-29 and 278.

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(Luke 24:13-49). While they are talking, Jesus appears and walks with them — but they do not recognize him. He listens to their disappointment about his failure to be the leader who would restore Israel and then discloses who he is by interpreting the scriptures. They then urge him to stay with them. He does, and while eating with them he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. As he does this, their eyes are “opened” and they recognize him. Then Jesus vanishes, and they recall their experience with him on the road to Emmaus and observe that their hearts “burned within” when he “opened the scriptures” (v. 32).

The second incident occurs when Jesus appears again to all the disciples. They think he is a ghost, but he has them touch his hands and feet and even eats a piece of broiled fish in their presence. Again he “opens their minds” to understand what had happened to him by interpreting scriptures, that the Messiah was to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and the forgiveness of sins were to be proclaimed in his name to all people, beginning in Jerusalem. He then tells them that he will send what his Father has promised (which, we find out in Acts, is the Holy Spirit); they are to stay in Jerusalem until they have been “clothed with power from on high” (24:49).

He then takes his disciples out to Bethany, lifts up his hands, blesses them, and while blessing them withdraws and is carried into heaven (24:50-51).

The other NT book with an ascension scene is Acts. Its account differs from that in Luke’s Gospel in significant ways, although it makes similar theological points. Occurring after forty days of Jesus’ appearing to his disciples and speaking to them about the kingdom of God, it comes right after Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to “the ends of the earth.” As he says this, he is lifted up and a cloud takes him out of their sight. Two men in white robes appear and tell the disciples that Jesus has been taken up into heaven and will return in the same way that he left.

In the same way that Luke in the Gospel and in Acts portrays the “ascension” as the pivot around which the Spirit’s activity shifts from Jesus’ life and ministry to that of the early Christian communities, so Paul relates the exaltation of Jesus to the new age of the Spirit ushered in by his incarnation, crucifixion, and exaltation. In the famous hymn of Philippians 2:6-11, Christ Jesus is the one who, though in the “form of God,” did not regard his “equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself,” taking the form of a slave and humbling himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. Now exalted, he has been given by God the name above every name. His humiliation and exaltation are the basis for Paul’s exhortation for sharing in the life

of the Spirit (2:1) by having “the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus” (2:5). Here again the exaltation of Christ signals the shift in the Spirit’s activity from the person and ministry of Jesus to the life of the church.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Christ’s exaltation subjects both history and cosmos to the risen Lord. He will, at the end, destroy every authority and power and God will “put all things in subjection under his feet” (vv. 24-28; see Pss. 8:6 and 110:1). In Romans 8:34 this Christ Jesus is the one who died, was raised, and “is at the right hand of God,” interceding for us. Because of this, nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus — not death/life, angels/rulers/powers, things present/things to come, height/depth, or anything else in all creation (8:38-39).

Colossians and Ephesians stress the way Christ has not only been raised from the dead but is seated at God’s “right hand in the heavenly places” and placed above all rule, authority, power, and dominion — above every name. God has “put all things under his feet” and has made him the “head over all things for the church” — indeed, the “fullness” of God, which “fills all in all,” now fills him and the church, which is his “body” (Eph. 1:20-23; cf. Col. 1:18b-20). Those who are baptized have been raised with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6; see also Col. 2:12; 3:1).<sup>4</sup> For this reason they too “set their mind on things that are above” where their life is “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:2-3). They put to death, strip themselves of, and get rid of such things as “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language” (3:8), and instead “clothe themselves” with “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (3:12). They have been renewed in the image of their Creator, and distinctions among them between Greek/Jew, barbarians/nonbarbarians, and slave/free no longer hold (3:11; cf. Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13).

John’s depiction of the exaltation centers on reference to the motif of the “descending and ascending Son of Man.” In 1:51 Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see “heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (cf. Gen. 28:12). In 3:13, after telling Nicodemus that “no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man,” Jesus compares the Son of Man being “lifted up” to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness (Num. 21:9). As elsewhere in John (8:28; 12:32-34; cf. Isa. 52:13), “lifted up” refers both to Jesus’ glorification and his crucifixion. Finally, the ascending of the Son of Man is mentioned in 6:61-63 in Jesus’ discourse on the “bread of life” where Jesus relates his words to the “Spirit that gives life.”

4. Although in the undisputedly Pauline letters, Paul speaks of the believer’s resurrection as occurring in the future (Rom. 6:5; 1 Cor. 15:21-23; Phil. 3:10-11).

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Although John does not have an explicit account of the ascension like those found in Luke and Acts, he does have Jesus speak about going away or departing to his Father. Although Jesus' glorification begins with the cross, it will not be complete until his return to his Father (7:39; 12:16, 23; 13:31, 32; 17:5). After he returns to the Father, those who believe in him will do greater works than he has done. Indeed, he will do whatever is asked in his name. He will send an Advocate, the "Spirit of truth," whom the world cannot receive, see, or know, but who will "abide" and "be in" Jesus' followers, teaching them everything and reminding them of what Jesus said to them. This Advocate will convict them of "sin, righteousness, and judgment"; guide them into all truth; and speak not his own words but the truth revealed in Jesus (John 14-16).

Finally, there is the dramatic scene in John 20:17 where Mary Magdalene weeps beside the empty tomb and mistakes Jesus, who appears standing beside her, for a gardener. She recognizes him when he calls her by name, but when she tries to touch him he admonishes her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father," and tells her to announce to the disciples that he will ascend to "my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." He then appears to the disciples and, after breathing on them and saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit," gives them authority to forgive and retain sins (vv. 19-23).

In Hebrews Jesus is the "purification for sins" as sacrifice and high priest who now sits down "at the right hand of the Majesty on high" and, having a name superior to that of the angels, waits "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet" (1:1-4; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; cf. Ps. 110:1). He has entered a very different kind of sanctuary not made by human hands where he appears in God's presence on our behalf (Heb. 9:24; see also 4:14; 8:1-2; 9:11-12). His sacrifice is precisely that of becoming like us, his brothers and sisters, "in every respect," being tested by what they suffered so that he could make a "sacrifice of atonement" for their sins and thereby destroy not only death (which in the NT is the consequence of sin), but the one with the power of death, the devil (2:14-18; 4:14-16). Because he was tested "in every respect" — but without sin — we can have the confidence to approach his throne and receive mercy and grace in time of need; he is able to sympathize with our weakness (4:14-16). His sacrifice undoes the sacrificial system based on the blood of goats and calves. Like the Hebrew prophets who criticized the sacrificial system, the writer of Hebrews stresses how Christ's sacrifice "purifies our conscience from dead works to worship the living God" by opening a "new and living way" through the "curtain" of his flesh (9:11-14; see Ps. 50:13; Isa. 1:11). We can therefore approach his sanctuary in the presence of God with full assurance of faith, hold fast without wavering to our confession of hope, and attend to

how we might best “provoke one another to love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:19-25).

Among the other texts on the ascension in the NT, 1 Timothy 3:16 contains a reference to Christ Jesus being “taken up in glory” in a hymn fragment on the “mystery of our religion.” In turn, 1 Peter contains a reference to it in a larger section on suffering for doing what is right. Unlike Jewish and Greek heroes who suffer for the law or worthy persons, Christ suffered *for sins* (2:21; cf. 2 Macc. 6:28; see also Rom. 5:7-8). His death prefigures the baptism that saves — not merely “as the removal of dirt from the body,” but “as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him” (1 Pet. 3:18-22).

Finally, in Revelation the ascension is identified with the heavenly enthronement of the resurrected Christ, but this enthronement is one that he shares with those who “conquer.” To those who “hear my voice and open the door,” he says, “I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” Indeed, Jesus declares, “I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (3:20-22; cf. Ps. 110:1).

### A Brief History of the Doctrine

Belief in the ascension, as articulated in the Apostles’ Creed — *ascendit ad coelos, sedet ad dexteram dei patris omnipotentis* (he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty) — soon became normative for the theology of the Western churches. By the fourth century it was celebrated in liturgy. Most of what is written about it in the first few centuries of Christianity, however, comes in passing references — a reference to it in the *Epistle to Barnabas* and Melito of Sardis’s paschal homily, and more numerous references in Justin Martyr’s *Apology* and *Dialogue*, and in more than one of Tertullian’s writings. It is a theme in the sermons of John Chrysostom, who speaks of Christ’s glorification as the firstfruits of a deified humanity.

Nonetheless, by the second century Irenaeus of Lyons gave it a central role in his doctrine of recapitulation, which describes how Christ restores the image and likeness of God that was destroyed by Adam’s fall, a restoration that reaches its completion when Christ is “ascended on high.” According to Irenaeus, Christ is the second Adam who “recapitulates” (“repeats” and “sums up”) what the first Adam experienced and was tempted by, but who does so in a fashion that reverses the consequences of the first Adam’s disobedience. If one was disobedient by grasping for godlike power, leading to sin

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and death for all, the other was obedient by emptying his deity for the sake of human beings, leading to righteousness and life for all (*Against the Heresies*).

After Irenaeus, two influential interpretations of the ascension were offered by Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254) and Augustine (354–430). Origen is best known for his controversial contention that Jesus' ascension was an "ascension of the mind rather than the body" (*On Prayer* 23.2). Further, he argued that Jesus' admonition to Mary Magdalene not to "touch him" should be interpreted mystically and not literally (*Commentary on Saint John*). By contrast Augustine argued for the bodily ascension of Christ, relating it, following Ephesians, to a doctrine of the "whole Christ" (*totus Christus*) consisting of Head and members which stressed the way the latter (the church) participated in the former's (Christ's) ascension by an intrinsic "bodily" unity between them.<sup>5</sup>

On the whole, however, most patristic and medieval writers were interested in describing how the ascended Christ perfected — or, better, glorified — the whole person (body and soul) in the humanity of the ascended Lord. This theme is depicted in the matins on Ascension Day (*Aeterne Rex*) probably originating from the fifth century: *Peccat caro, mundat caro, Regnat Deus Dei caro* (flesh hath purged what flesh had stained, and God, the Flesh of God, hath reigned). Athanasius (290–373) played an important role in defining this theology. He contended that Christ's "exaltation" pertained to his humanity and not his "essence" as the Word, since the Word was already equal with God (John 5:18). Because Christ, who bore our flesh, has now entered heaven and opened it for us, appearing in God's presence as our advocate, we too are exalted in him (*Apology against the Arians*; cf. Heb. 6:20; 9:24). This theme was further developed in Leontius of Byzantium's (d. 543) doctrine of the *enhypostasia*, which argued, further refining Cyril of Alexandria's views (378–444), that the human element in the incarnation entailed the assumption of all humanity in the second person of the Trinity. Later it was influential in the Eastern theology in the writings of Maximus Confessor (580–662) and John of Damascus (676–749?).

The Reformers shifted attention to the Lord's Supper.<sup>6</sup> In his argument against Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther argued for the "real presence" of Christ in the Lord's Supper, buttressing his claim with an understanding of the ubiquitous omnipresence of his humanity.<sup>7</sup> Later Lutheran orthodoxy would argue that Christ's glorified body is neither "everywhere" (*ubique*) nor "no-

5. See William Marreeve, *The Ascension of Christ in the Works of St. Augustine* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1967).

6. James Benjamin Wagner, *Ascendit ad Coelos: The Doctrine of the Ascension in the Reformed and Lutheran Theology of the Period of Orthodoxy* (Winterthur: Keller, 1964).

7. Luther, *Luther's Works*, Weimarer Ausgabe (edition) (1527), 23:133.



where” (*nullibi*) but free from all external circumscription, and that the Son of God could will to be present bodily in his humanity whenever and wherever he will. By contrast, John Calvin argued that Christ had ascended to God’s throne as a localized bodily presence and had a spiritual, not bodily, presence in the church and sacrament.<sup>8</sup> He also stressed Christ’s work, not merely his person, as prophet, priest, and king, and emphasized how the Holy Spirit raises the believer to be with Christ in the heavenly realm in holy communion and in the life of sanctification.

Liberal theologians in the nineteenth century criticized the Reformation debates over the Lord’s Supper for being overly mythological. Most “lives of Jesus” written in that century rejected belief in the ascension because it relied on an outmoded cosmology. Friedrich Schleiermacher did so in *The Christian Faith* ([1830] 2.99), as did Adolf von Harnack in “The Apostles’ Creed” (1892). In the twentieth century Karl Barth revitalized the doctrine — although he rejected visualizing it as a literal event, like going up in a balloon. He argued that Jesus Christ’s risen humanity within the inner trinitarian life of God and the assumption of all human flesh within that humanity is, as an eschatological repetition and expectation of Christ’s resurrection, the condition for the possibility of our knowledge of God in time (*Church Dogmatics* [1955] IV/2).

Most notable since Barth are the following. T. F. Torrance argued for a way of thinking about the ascension within a contemporary scientific worldview.<sup>9</sup> By way of a retrieval of Irenaeus’s understanding of “recapitulation,” Gustaf Wingren sought to relate the ascension to the church’s mission of preaching and sacraments and the vocation of the baptized in the world.<sup>10</sup> In very different ways — as a Roman Catholic and a Reformed theologian, respectively — Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jürgen Moltmann have written vividly about humanity’s eschatological participation in Christ’s crucified and raised humanity within the trinitarian life of God.<sup>11</sup>

8. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), 4.17.12.

9. See T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

10. See Gustaf Wingren, *Gospel and Church*, trans. Ross MacKenzie (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964).

11. See, e.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (Ignatius, 2000) and Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

### What Does the Ascension Mean for Us Today?

What does ascension mean? What difference does it make for how we perceive and respond to life? First, it has to do with Jesus' departure not as the Messiah his disciples had anticipated but as one who comes and goes as he wills, and as one who keeps them from recognizing him and only opens their eyes to his identity in the breaking of bread (Luke 24). Even Mary Magdalene is told not to hold on to him but to announce his resurrection to the other disciples (John 20:11-18).

Second, it has to do with his sending the Holy Spirit to empower his disciples' missionary vocation to "all nations." In John Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on the disciples, giving them the power to forgive and retain sins (20:22-23). In Matthew Jesus tells the disciples to baptize and teach, and make disciples of "all nations" (28:18-20). Most importantly, Luke depicts how the same Spirit active in Jesus' ministry is now poured out on "all flesh." This Spirit empowers Jesus' disciples to carry their witness to all that come in his name — repentance, forgiveness, baptism, and experience of the Spirit. As they do this — from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the "ends of the earth" — radical Spirit-led transformations cause the disciples to rethink what it means to be Christian as the new Gentile converts are brought into their initially Jewish-Christian community.

Given Jesus' promise before his ascent, it is not insignificant that the rest of the book of Acts is organized around the movement of the Spirit's activity from Jerusalem (2:14-8:13) to Judea and Samaria (8:26-40) and finally to the "ends of the earth" (9:1-28:14). Even in Jerusalem the Spirit falls upon the disciples, enabling the Jews from the diaspora to hear them speak in their own native languages. Occurring on the Jewish festival of Pentecost, this event appears to overturn the human attempt to "ascend" to heavens with the Tower of Babel and its one language and culture. In his speech after this event, Peter quotes the Septuagint version of the apocalyptic vision in Joel 2:28-32, where "in the last days" God pours out his Spirit on all flesh — sons/daughters, young/old, male/female slaves (Acts 2:14-21). All that occurred in Jesus' proclamation of God's reign — bringing good news to the poor, releasing captives, giving sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed — is now identified with the church's preaching about Jesus (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isa. 61:1-11). In addition to its teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer, the early Christian community is characterized by "signs and wonders," sharing "all things in common," distributing to all as any has need, and "eating with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:37-46; 4:32-37; 6:1-6).

What is most important, however, for understanding precisely who this

exalted Lord is, and what the Spirit and mission he commissions are about, is related to what his disciples found most troubling after his death, namely, his humiliating crucifixion. In John his crucifixion is linked with his exaltation, and in the Pauline letters his *kenosis* and cross cannot be divorced from his “dominion” above every cosmic and mundane power, a dominion that encompasses life/death, things present/things to come, height/depth, and indeed, the very fullness of God (Eph. 1:21; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 1:16; 1 Pet. 3:22). At issue in Christ’s ruling at the right hand of God precisely in the fullness of his crucified humanity is not the empirical question of how he might be everywhere and yet still fully a human body. At issue rather — for him and for us — is the more profound question of temptation and faith.

Following Paul and Irenaeus, we can observe that Jesus did not succumb to the temptation of rejecting his “cup” of suffering even though he had every right, in his innocence, to protest this unjust verdict. Instead of exploiting and grasping at his divinity by justifying himself or proving his righteousness, he emptied himself, becoming fully human, even to the point not only of death but of experiencing the sting of that death, God’s wrath against sin. As the second Adam, Jesus reversed the consequences of the first Adam and Eve’s grasp at being godlike, thereby bringing sin and death, by enacting the very opposite, self-giving love. In doing this he bestowed on the rest of humanity righteousness and life and restored its birthright of being created in the image of God, freeing it to robustly enact its proper human “dominion” or stewardship of creation.

But if this *kenosis* enacts the full humanity of the one who shared equality with God, then it also reflects God’s nature. It indicates that God is revealed precisely in the humiliation of Christ’s humanity and that the depth of God’s being is characterized by love, a kenotic abundance that does not grasp at or exploit what it possesses but gives of itself in order to liberate others.

This, then, is what it means to say that Christ rules precisely in the fullness of his crucified humanity. His *kenosis* is not a simple negation of power. Indeed, it cannot be divorced from his resurrection, which frees human beings from the power of sin and death and enables them to assert confidently that nothing can separate them from God’s love, neither life nor death, past, present, nor future because in Paul’s words, “all is yours” (1 Cor. 3:22; cf. Rom. 8:38-39). Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation are the “firstfruits” of our resurrection and exaltation. The same Spirit who raised him from the dead enables us to live out of the “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*) — as opposed merely to “empirical” or “prudential” (*psychikos*) — power of his resurrected body (1 Cor. 15). With this spiritual power, which brings life out of death, Christ restores the image of God in us, our created birthright, and frees us to live our human

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lives as stewards of our responsibilities in truly wise and powerful ways. We too now, through Christ's cross and resurrection, have been given the "mind of Christ," a mind that can afford to be kenotic precisely because it is already "above scrutiny" and able to "discern all things" and not because it needs to grasp at or achieve these powers (1 Cor. 2:14-16).

Indeed, we have been baptized into Christ's death and freed to live out of his resurrected life — a life empowered by the Spirit's abundant love, joy, and peace. Our old life in Adam — our false ego — has died. We are now freed to be our true selves in Christ. In this baptism we no longer see one another in the same way. We are now a new creation, a new humanity, freed not only from sin and death but from the very distinctions we use to secure or grasp at our identities — distinctions not only between wisdom/foolishness, power/weakness, but even more basic distinctions between what is law/not-law, male/female, Jew/Greek, slave/free, barbarian/nonbarbarian. We no longer need to exploit one another with our false self's tactics (anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language — or, to draw from another list, idolatry, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness [Gal. 5:19-21]). As those who have been raised with Christ, we can now "clothe" ourselves with his humanity — compassion, kindness, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, and when we have complaints about others, forgiving them (Col. 3:1-17; Ephesians).

We renew this baptism by worshiping with one another, hearing the preaching of the forgiveness of sins that comes in Jesus' name, and "proclaiming his death" by eating his "bread" (his "body") and drinking his "cup" (his "blood") (1 Cor. 11:23-26). As 1 Corinthians indicates, we discern this "body" precisely in the midst of life's messy complexity, in actual conflicts over sex and marriage, lawsuits, social status, syncretistic religious practices, abuses at the Lord's Supper, the use of spiritual gifts, conflicts over worship, the role of women, belief in the resurrection, and so on. Our baptism is renewed daily, not in some ethereal spiritual sphere but in the prosaic circumstances of our lives at home and at work, as those who participate in families, communities, institutions, and as citizens of nations. The Spirit converts us, annihilating the grasping "old Adam or Eve" in us and raising us to our true selves in Christ precisely as we seek to discriminate and sift among the multifarious demands made upon us by those among whom we live and work, and discern our own fears and desires in the face of them.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the *koinonia* (fellowship) of the church flourishes in its purest form when it, like Christ, empties itself for others out of the abundance and

12. See Wingren, *Gospel and Church*.

fullness of the Spirit's life. Our sacrifice of praise takes on an eschatological form in the face of real human need, in the face of Christ in the "least of these" of "all the nations" — the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned (Matt. 25:31-46). We have been given access to the intimacy Jesus shares with his Father, an intimacy that enables us to be fully united with one another, not so we can hoard or contain it but so we can, like Christ, be sent, in this time between his ascension and his final return, as ambassadors for reconciliation in the world (John 17; 2 Cor. 5:20). The metaphor of the pangs of childbirth characterizes the eschatological sorrow and joy we experience as we, empowered by the Spirit, witness to the fact that humanity — indeed, crucified humanity — is with the Christ exalted in glory at God's right hand. The power to live in the fullness of that resurrected life in every moment of our prosaic lives is received in the forgiveness and healing that comes in the name of this crucified Messiah whose fullness fills all in all.