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drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, MAY 10, 2006

What's up with the Ascension?

Recently my sister-in-law called my wife and asked for help on a sermon. (This is a commonplace in a family full of ministers.) My wife cordially offered her services: "Sure, I'd love to help. What's it on?" a question to which my sister-in-law replied, "The Ascension." "Oh, can't help you there," was the response.

What's up with the Ascension? It is narrated in Scripture. It is in the Creed. It is part of the church year. But what does it mean? What significance does it have the identity of Jesus? What difference does it make for the Christian life?

I must confess that I have little help to offer on this matter. Such a confession, of course, merely compels my curiosity to investigate the matter. I started by simply re-reading on the relevant portions of Scripture. As yet, I do not have a worked out presentation on the doctrine of ascension. But I do have a number of these I would like to share to spur comment and discussion.

Thesis 1 - The ascension is conditioned by the resurrection. Whatever it may be, the meaning of the ascension is theologically dependent on the resurrection. The ascension of Jesus signals the completion of the 40-day Easter history and therefore its meaning is co-extensive with the meaning of the resurrection.

Thesis 2 - The ascension is linked to final judgment. At the ascension, Jesus takes his place as lord and judge of the world. This status is in effect immediately, though it awaits execution. The time between the times is for Christ the time of being ascended to the Father.

Thesis 3 - The ascension is linked to mission. Jesus commissions the Disciples unto a universal mission immediately prior to ascension (Acts), in conjunction with ascension (John) or in place of ascension (Matthew). For some reason, the ascension institutes the mission of the Church.

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Thesis 4 - The ascension is the precondition for the outpouring of the Spirit. In Luke-Acts, Jesus must ascend to the Father in order for the Spirit to be outpoured. John narrates the outpouring on the evening of Easter, possibly from an already ascended Jesus (who tells Mary not to touch him because he has not yet ascended but invites Thomas to touch him, implying that he has). The Spirit functions in both as the mediator of Jesus' presence and power for the Disciples post-Easter. However one harmonizes the narrative details of accounts, the ascension and the Spirit are theologically linked.

Thesis 5 - The ascension contributes to the universal scope of the cross. According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, one reason why Jesus' sacrifice is once-for-all is because he offers his blood in the heavenly tabernacle. The metaphorical nature of this priestly language does not preclude it from having theological significance: the ascension of Christ (narrated by Hebrews chapter 1) "relocates" his blood to a place where it can be shed on behalf of all.

Thesis 6 - The ascension signifies our eschatological ascent to God. As the recapitulation of human history, the narrative of Jesus is a compressed version of the history of humanity. On the basis of his work, we too will be resurrected and ascend to God.

Any thoughts?

Would you be able to affirm any of these theses as true?

Would you object to any of them?

Can you help to nuance these ideas?

Do you have theses to add?

Labels: [Christology](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 4:59 PM

[11 comments](#)

11 Comments:

At [2:25 PM, May 11, 2006](#), [Lance](#) said...

To expound on #3 (a la Hübmaier), part of the mission of the church is to be Christ's presence on earth (although, Hübmaier took this presence to be bound up in "the power of the keys"). The ascension, along with Pentecost, signals the beginning of this mission.

However, #5 is probably my favorite, for the Hebrews idea of the perfect sacrifice, and that our High Priest is there at all times.

At [2:26 PM, May 12, 2006](#), [Los Federales](#) said...

Ich werde von diesem unsinnigen Plappern ungefähr Dinge ermüdet die Sie nichts ungefähr kennen. Sind Sie sogar nach Sekundärschule gefahren?

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At [7:59 PM, May 12, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Vielleicht sollen Sie zuruech in deinen Unterseeboot eingehen...

At [9:46 PM, May 13, 2006](#), [ap](#) said...

i would add to #1 and say that the resurrection is conditioned by the ascension, as well. enthronement of the King is a further work and adds to the meaning of the resurrection.

regarding #4, oliver o'donovan touches tantalizingly on the ascension by describing the church, in light of the ascension, as the community that speaks God's words (in prophecy and in prayer). i believe this gets worked out in Revelation especially creatively as John consistently describes the church (specifically the martyrs) in terms of prophetic witness and imprecatory prayers (how long, o Lord, until we are avenged?) the whole book is introduced by John's majestic description of Jesus, and the call to perseverance only makes sense in light of true (ascended) authority. whatever we make of the mission of the church being instituted by the ascension, i believe that it begins with thoughts on prophecy and prayer.

i also believe it faithful to add the ascension to atonement accomplished in hte narrative of the Christ event. the finality of hte ascension, God drawing his human Son into the Godhead, accomplishes and effects the drawing creation into God himself. God has embraced humanity because of his Son's ascension.

i recommend Ascension and Ecclesia by Doug Farrow. Farrow also has two helpful articles in Vanhoozer's Dictionary for Theological Interpretation (one of the ascension; the other on the church).

At [3:23 PM, May 15, 2006](#), [pastorchris'place](#) said...

Luke actually says, "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" because the time of ascension, not suffering and death, was approaching. This seems to link all that happens from 9.51 onward as leading up to this climactic moment (his return to heaven)?!?!? So at least to Luke, the ascension is more central than peripheral to the Christ-event.

At [11:57 PM, May 15, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

I wish I knew German.

I resonate with all of these points, but the Hebrews one has me off a bit. I haven't studied a fair amount in Hebrews, if I am honest with myself, I need to pick up Schenck's work on the book to understand a bit more.

I really like what AP said about drawing humanity into the Godhead.

["The Father is Greater than I" \(Bible Brain Buster...](#)

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I love humanity too much some days.

At [7:19 AM, May 16, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Great Post, John. I like the play on words too, "What's 'Up' with the Ascension" (you slay me!)

For a first pass this is a good foundation. I hadn't thought of thesis 5 and 6 much at all before connected with the ascension.

I also agree with Sniper that if the comments on Drulogion switch seamlessly into german they will be even farther over my head. :-)

Unless, of course, the subject is Vorne Kurz, Hinten Lang (a.k.a. "short in the front, long in the back"; Vokuhila; The mullet haircut; hockey hair; etc.)

Another german phrase I have been trying to work into conversations lately is: "Mein schenck arbeitet nicht irgendwie mehr"

At [10:36 PM, May 16, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

"My schenck doesn't work somehow more"?

At [8:06 AM, May 17, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

"My schenck doesn't work anymore"

At [8:38 AM, May 17, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Just for the record, I took the "Captain" to say something like "I am tired of this senseless chatter 'about' things that you can know nothing 'about.'" Have you even gone to high school."

I tried to say, "Perhaps you should go back into your submarine."

At [10:44 AM, May 17, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

Thanks for the clarification

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