

## The Larger Catechism

### Questions 53

**53. Q. How was Christ exalted in his ascension?**

**A.** Christ was exalted in his ascension, in that having after his resurrection often appeared unto and conversed with his apostles, speaking to them of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God,[220] and giving them commission to preach the gospel to all nations,[221] forty days after his resurrection, he, in our nature, and as our head,[222] triumphing over enemies,[223] visibly went up into the highest heavens, there to receive gifts for men,[224] to raise up our affections thither,[225] and to prepare a place for us,[226] where he himself is, and shall continue till his second coming at the end of the world.[227]

#### Scriptural Defense and Commentary

[220] **Acts 1:2-3.** Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: To whom also he showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. [221] **Matthew 28:19-20.** Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. [222] **Hebrews 6:20.** Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec. [223] **Ephesians 4:8.** Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. [224] **Acts 1:9-11.** 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. **Ephesians 4:10.** He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) **Psalms 68:18.** Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the LORD God might dwell among them. [225] **Colossians 3:1-2.** If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. [226] **John 14:3.** And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. [227] **Acts 3:21.** Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

#### *Exalted in His Ascension*

Part of our Lord's exaltation is His ascension. The resurrection without the ascension simply means that Jesus overcame death. The Westminster divines seem to have placed the entire post resurrection episode as part of our Lord's ascension.

Scripture does not give us much information about the ascension. All the gospels give us the account of the resurrection while only two gospels give us an account of the ascension (Mk. 16:19; Lk. 24:50-52).<sup>1</sup> We are told, "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." The ascension is also mentioned in Acts 1:9-11. There are several things we can say about this period after the resurrection and his actual ascension.

#### *After the Resurrection*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. T. V. Moore, *The Last Days of Jesus*, 182.

We learn that Jesus was on the earth for forty days after he rose from the dead: “being seen of them forty days” (Acts 1:3-8). There is no indication that he *continuously* remained with them for forty days but only *occasionally and repeatedly* (cf. Vos). The verb used in 1Cor. 15 is “appeared” — “he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, ...he appeared also to me.” This suggests that He appeared here and there at will. The classic example is his appearance to His disciples in the room (Jn. 20:19ff.). So our Catechism states, “Christ was exalted in his ascension, in that having after his resurrection often appeared unto and conversed with his apostles, speaking to them of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God...” Notice again the words — “often appeared unto and conversed...” Acts 1:2 says, “to them [the disciples] he presented himself alive...”

The conversations between him and his disciples were about “things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” That is a direct quote from Acts 1:3. It is worth noting — the conversations were not over the glories of His own personal experience or about mundane things which would pass away. The topic of the kingdom became the reason for the disciples’ question about the nature and timing of the establishment of His rule (Acts 1:6).

Ridgeley believes that it was at this time that the directions for the nature of Christ’s kingdom through His church were given. The way the church was to function, her officers, the Lord’s Day, the great commission, etc. “Again, though it is not particularly mentioned in the evangelical history, yet it is not improbable, that our Saviour spake to his disciples concerning the nature of the gospel-church and its government, how they were to exercise their ministry in it, what doctrines they should preach, what success should attend them, and what they should suffer for his sake.”<sup>2</sup> As he later notes, though we can’t be certain about what exactly they spoke, we certainly know that specific instructions regarding those very matters were revealed to them at some point since they penned those instructions in the NT.

Sometime before He ascended, He gave the great commission: “giving them commission to preach the gospel to all nations...” On account of His exaltation as evidenced by the resurrection, Jesus commissions them because all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him. The great commission is to be executed under His authority. This is important. Evangelism is not the product of a zealous group of people — Christ commanded His disciples on the basis of His authority. He is in the position to command since He overcame death and has been exalted (not fully yet but this is simply a stage towards it). We are not conveying our opinions or proselytizing for our cause — the Lord commanded us. Our labors are ministerial and not dominical; our evangelism is declarative and not legislative. That is, we are servants doing the Lord’s bidding (ministerial); we are declaring His Word and not legislating our laws (declarative — “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded”, Mt. 28:20).

From Acts 1, we learned that our Lord was with his disciples for forty days (“forty days after his resurrection, he, in our nature, and as our head”). The catechism states that he was “in our nature, and as our head” — that is, Jesus did not cease being human (in our nature) — Heb. 6:20 says, “Jesus has gone as a

<sup>2</sup> Ridgeley, *Commentary*, 1:618-9.

forerunner on our behalf". We have already established this point from our study of the previous LC question (exaltation and resurrection). The divines make an additional point. As the resurrected Christ, in His exalted state, he ascended in human nature as our head. He was not only raised but also exalted and that exaltation includes His Lordship as head over all thing for the sake of the church, His body (Eph. 1:22). It is like (though the comparison is feeble) a neighborhood friend whom we've known for years since we were children. But that same friend has become the president of the United States. He is still from our neighborhood, he is still human but he holds a higher office than he did before. Our Lord was resurrected and exalted as head of the church. His state is entirely different.

The resurrection and the subsequent ascension meant that He conquered all His and our enemies ("[triumphing over enemies](#)"). The verse used to support this is Ephesians 4:8. It says, "Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men." The verse is interesting. The divines obviously had in mind the phrase "he led captivity captive" or "he led a host of captives" (ESV). What did Paul mean? Using the reference from Ps. 68 in which God triumphantly comes and rescues His people, Paul states that a further fulfillment of that theme has been accomplished by Christ. In Eph. 1:19-22, Paul spoke of how Christ was "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion..." Jesus is triumphant over all powers. "His enemies had rejected and crucified him, but now— in spite of their hatred and opposition — he ascended into heaven to be proclaimed King of kings and Lord of lords!" (Vos, 117)

### *The Ascension*

After the forty days, our Lord really went to heaven: "[visibly went up into the highest heavens, there to receive gifts for men.](#)" Acts 1:9-11 emphatically teaches that Jesus visibly ascended toward heaven ("they were gazing into heaven as he went"). We are told that "a cloud took him out of their sight" and that He was taken "into heaven" (v. 11). As one commentator notes, "The ascension was not the beginning of his heavenly exaltation. It was the ultimate confirmation of the status that had been his from the moment of his resurrection."<sup>3</sup>

Let us observe several points from this spectacular event. *First*, as noted by Peterson, the ascension was the confirmation of His exaltation and not just the beginning of it. *Secondly*, we should not think he went into another physical location (somewhere further away from here). It is a real place but the phrase "a cloud took him out of their sight" suggests that He entered into the presence of God. God's glory is represented as a cloud (cf. Ex. 40:34-35). During the transfiguration, the cloud came down from which God spoke to the disciples by saying "This is my Son, my Chosen One, listen to him!" (Lk. 9:34-35) So, His departure (about which he spoke on the mount of transfiguration, Lk. 9:31) in Acts 1 was a departure into heaven itself, into the very presence of God. Since His Session follows after this, we see right away that He ascended into the presence of God. *Thirdly*, as already intimated, heaven is a place because Christ's human body is there. His body takes up space. Heaven, to which we are going, is

<sup>3</sup> David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 115.

a place and not an ethereal state or condition. *Fourthly*, it was a visible departure to confirm for the disciples the reality of the exaltation. That he disappeared without nobody noticing it would have been easily dismissed — many people have (sadly) disappeared and no one ever found them. The visible departure was confirmed by the disciples; it was not an assertion without witnesses. *Fifthly*, the testimony of Scripture (more importantly) teaches that the way He departed is the way He will return. Acts 1:11 states, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Those who deny the resurrection also deny the ascension as well as the return. All of these states of His exaltation hang together.

His entrance into the eternal presence of God in heaven was a coronation event. The divines state that he went into the highest heavens “[there to receive gifts for me.](#)” Eph. 4:8ff. and Ps. 68:18 teach this simple fact. The gifts which He gave to men (Eph. 4:8) are listed in v. 11 (“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,”). These teaching gifts were given for the benefit of the church as the rest of the passage in Eph. 4:12ff. teach. Paul is saying that the exalted Lord was exalted so as to give the church gifts, gifts for the edification of the whole church.<sup>4</sup> His glory is to our benefit. Spurgeon perfectly captures this in one of his *Morning and Evening* meditations (May 14):

All that He has He shares with His people. The crown royal He has placed upon the head of His Church, appointing her a kingdom, and calling her sons a royal priesthood, a generation of priests and kings. He uncrowned Himself that we might have a coronation of glory; He would not sit upon His own throne until He had procured a place upon it for all who overcome by His blood. Crown the head and the whole body shares the honour. Behold here the reward of every Christian conqueror! Christ’s throne, crown, sceptre, palace, treasure, robes, heritage, are yours. Far superior to the jealousy, selfishness, and greed, which admit of no participation of their advantages, Christ deems His happiness completed by His people sharing it.

The ascension furthermore solicits our affections: “[to raise up our affections thither.](#)” We can clearly see that this is a direct reference to Col. 3:1-2. Christ is in heaven at the right hand of God and therefore we are to set our minds on things that are above. “The fact that our Savior is in heaven should make us think of heaven and value it more highly than our possessions in this world. ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’” (Vos) If we are united to Him by faith (in our Spiritual union with Him), then we should consider Him and to order our lives in view of where He is.

As we raise up our affections for Him in heaven, we find that He entered there “[to prepare a place for us.](#)” Jesus said in Jn. 14:3, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” He did not depart to desert us but instead to prepare a place for us. Heaven is a place, as we mentioned. We don’t know very much but

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<sup>4</sup> “This bestowal of gift is a farther allusion to the custom of princes in their triumphs; on which occasion they extend their royal bounty to their subjects.” (Ridgeley, 1:623)

enough. The language should not be stretched — a place is prepared for us in heaven (the nature of which is not clear) but more importantly, He will take us to himself “and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also”, Jn. 14:3). That is the point of it — to be with Him — “and so we will always be with the Lord” (1Thess. 4:17).

Lastly, we are told that our ascended Lord will remain in heaven until He returns: “where he himself is, and shall continue till his second coming at the end of the world.” Acts 3:21 clearly speaks to that — “whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.” What this last statement does not indicate is exactly what He does during this interim period. The next question addresses that but it is clear that He is not idly waiting. Our Lord reigns in might and is active in exerting His power for the glory of His Father.