

REFORMATION 500 WEEK 18: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, QUESTION 46-49

[No Reformation History this week due to the length of the Catechism explanation]

Question 46: WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND BY THE WORDS, “HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN”? **That Christ, in the sight of His disciples, was taken up from earth into heaven, and continues there in our behalf until He shall come again to judge the living and the dead.**

Question 46 begins to explain the biblical basis of article 6 of the Apostles’ Creed: “He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” “After Christ had given many infallible proofs to His apostles of His resurrection from the dead, and of His true humanity, He ascended into heaven, in the sight of His disciples, on the 40th day after His resurrection [Acts 1:3-9]” (Ursinus, 242). “And while they looked steadfastly toward 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” (Acts 1:10-11; cf. Phil. 3:20).

Heaven is said to be God’s “dwelling place” (1 Kings 8:30); not that He is contained or confined there (He is everywhere), but because it is there that He especially manifests His glory and presence to the angels and to “the spirits of just men made perfect” (Heb. 12:23). Heaven is a real place (“I go to prepare a *place* for you”) – high above and outside the *visible* universe. God created things “*visible and invisible*” (Col. 1:16). Christ “ascended *far above* all the heavens” (Eph. 4:10). He has entered “into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb. 9:24).

Question 47: BUT IS NOT CHRIST WITH US EVEN UNTO THE END OF THE WORLD, AS HE HAS PROMISED? **Christ is true man and true God. According to His human nature He is now not on earth, but according to His Godhead [i.e. divine nature], majesty, grace, and Spirit, He is at no time absent from us.**

Christ ascended into heaven according to His resurrected and glorified human nature, not according to His divine nature, “for this was already in heaven before His ascension.... Cyprian says, ‘The Lord ascended into heaven, not where the Word of God had not been before...but where the *Word made flesh* did not sit before.’” (Ursinus, 243-44). Therefore, when Christ said, “I go away,” or “I leave the world,” He was speaking according to His human nature; and when He said, “I am with you always,” He was speaking according to His divine nature.

Question 48: BUT IF HIS HUMAN NATURE IS NOT PRESENT WHEREVER HIS DIVINE NATURE IS, ARE NOT, THEN, THE TWO NATURES OF CHRIST SEPARATED FROM ONE ANOTHER? **Not at all, for since the divine nature is incomprehensible and everywhere present, it must follow that it is indeed beyond the limits of the human nature which it has assumed, but it is yet nonetheless *in* the human nature also, and remains personally united to it.**

Christ’s everywhere present divine nature remains personally united to His finite human nature in heaven: “these two natures are so closely united in one Person

that they were not separated even by His death (*Belgic Confession*, article 19). The writers of the Catechism were careful to maintain the historic position of the Christian church, stated in the creed of Chalcedon: “the two natures subsist in the single person of Christ, without confusion, without change, without division, *without separation*.”

Question 49: WHAT BENEFIT DO WE RECEIVE FROM CHRIST’S ASCENSION INTO HEAVEN? **First, that He is our Advocate in heaven [1 John 2:1]. Second, that we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge, that He as the Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself [Eph. 2:6]. Third, that He sends us His Spirit as an earnest [guarantee], by whose power we seek those things which are above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God, and not things on earth [Col. 3:1-2].**

The first benefit of Christ’s ascension is He is our Advocate in heaven. “If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). An advocate is an intercessor, one who pleads in behalf of another. When we sin as believers, Christ does not plead our innocence or temporary insanity or extenuating circumstances. Rather, as part of His priestly office He makes intercession for us by pleading His perfect sacrifice for our sins: “the blood of Jesus Christ God’s Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). “Christ presents before the Father the very body and soul in which our sins were completely punished and paid for, in order that the Father, by virtue of the one sacrifice accomplished in Christ’s body and soul, might turn away His anger from our sin” (Casper Olevianus, *A Firm Foundation*, page 79).

The second benefit of Christ’s ascension is that it is a guarantee that when we die, Christ will take our souls up to Himself in heaven (Luke 16:22; 2 Cor. 5:8). As our only High Priest, Jesus ascended into heaven to bring us *free from all sin* into God’s Most Holy Presence (Heb. 9:12; 10:19)! Jesus said to His disciples, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2-3). The fact that we are *inseparably* united to Christ in heaven (Eph. 1:23; 5:30) means that we already possess heaven in Christ our Head and Brother (Eph. 2:6); “for if He who is our Head has ascended, we also, who are His members, shall certainly ascend” (Ursinus, 252).

The third benefit of Christ’s ascension is that He has “sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a *guarantee*” (2 Cor. 1:22) – a “guarantee of our inheritance” (Eph. 1:14; cf. 1 Pet. 1:4). The Spirit’s presence in our hearts is like a down payment that one day we believers will receive our full inheritance – which is to see Jesus face to face. Jesus had to convince His discouraged disciples that it was to their advantage that He go away to the Father, so that He could send them the Holy Spirit (John 16:7) – not only to give them a fuller revelation of Jesus as the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord-Messiah (John 14:17-24), but also to pour out His Holy Spirit upon all His elect in all nations and bring them all into heavenly joy and glory (Acts 2:17). By the Spirit’s power we seek “those things which are above” (Col. 3:1) – we seek to keep our eyes on Jesus in heaven (Heb. 12:2), to obey His Word out of thankfulness for salvation, until the day He takes us up to Himself. Jesus desires us and all His elect to be with Him where He is (John 17:24); and by the Spirit’s grace we do too (Acts 7:59)!

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