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## THE THEOLOGY OF THE ASCENSION

Peter Mulholland

The Ascension of Jesus Christ, and its consequences and implications, has an ambiguous position in Christian theology. This is due primarily to the paradoxical and obscure manner of its expression in the New Testament. It is also the result of the nature of the Ascension in itself and in relation to the other central christological doctrines: Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Pentecost. In the Patristic period the difficulties and possibilities inherent in giving a consistent theological analysis of the Ascension became manifest. The work of Saint Hilary of Poitiers was particularly incisive, as also was that of Saint Augustine of Hippo. During the Medieval, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation centuries the Ascension was not forgotten, but it did not directly emerge as a controversial issue, and so was not examined in the detail and urgency accorded to other Christian doctrines. In the course of the last century or so, developments in systematic theology and scripture studies have again, if indirectly, placed the Ascension in a prominent position in the examination of doctrine. The collective weight of the Scriptural, Patristic, and modern contributions to the revelation and understanding of the Ascension point towards its purpose as the decisive key to its meaning. It is by placing it in its soteriological context, specifically from the point of view of ontology, that the fuller picture of the Ascension can be appreciated. The effects in the Trinity of the Ascension of Christ, with which Hilary and some of the modern systematicians have been concerned, indicate a substantive and essential role which it has not always been accorded. There can also be greater insight into the whole soteriological process where the difficulties raised by the Ascension are regarded as indicators of its nature, rather than as anomalies to be explained away.

**THE THEOLOGY OF THE ASCENSION**

Peter Mulholland

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## CHAPTER I

### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

#### 1. Preliminary Remarks on the Ascension as Doctrine

The Ascension of Jesus Christ has a place uniquely ambiguous among the principal doctrines of the Christian faith. Even its status as a primary dogma is not something which can be presumed upon. While the other doctrines usually regarded as central to the development in Christ of the relationship of God and creature -Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Pentecost- have been constantly critically assessed, only the Ascension has been subject to so serious a questioning, even from within orthodox Christian theology, of its very existence as a substantive reality in terms both of its nature and of its role.

This situation, however, need not be regarded as a solely negative element in assessing the Ascension, since it derives largely from considerations which are of the essence of the specific character of the doctrine itself, and which are, therefore, indices of that character.

For the purposes of this study, the Ascension will be taken to be the event, if it is such, which terminates the specific encounters of the disciples with the risen Christ, including the apparent change in the state of existence of Christ which that event appears to effect or, at least, to mark. This does not amount to a definition of the Ascension, it is merely an outline description upon which an understanding of the nature of the Ascension might then be focussed.

Even a definition, if one can be formulated, is not the key to a placing of the Ascension within a larger theological framework: it is, rather, the attempt at a correct placing of the Ascension within such a framework which might lead to a more complete assessment of its nature and purpose. This implies that the Ascension has not been placed correctly in some approaches to its meaning and that it is better placed in other analyses: this will, indeed, be part of the argument to be made. In fact, the very difficulties which arise from the attempted placing of the Ascension, as an especially problematical doctrine, mean that it imposes demands upon theological ideas and presuppositions which highlight both their strengths and their possible flaws.

## 2. Definition of Ascension-Exaltation

Even the attempt to define the Ascension is problematical. The New Testament accounts of the event, if that is what it is, are ambiguous and inconclusive in that they present brief and already interpretative descriptions of what took place. Any attempt to define the Ascension of Christ must begin with the recognition that it is, of its nature, indefinable.

Any definition is in itself a limited operation because it aspires to the expression in a set of symbols, -letters, words, similes, metaphors, and so on,- of something which exists in a form other than words alone; so that it is the attempt to translate from one state of being into another in which the object does not actually exist. This is a limitation which applies to all linguistic operations; the conventions and shortcomings of this are generally understood, at least implicitly in practice, by those engaged in using language with precision.

Whenever the subject of an attempted verbal representation-definition is a person this becomes an even more inadequate procedure. The complexity of personal existence means that the ramifications of external change and autonomous growth and action cannot be calculated in the precise terms which are the ideal of definition. Even a great many words will only begin to reflect faintly the place of any action, word, event, or other phenomenon, in the inner life of an individual. The hugely complex web of relationships, history, philosophies,



interpretation, and so on, in which every person is engaged means that simple definitions are only useful where their partialness is appreciated, and that complex definitions are extremely prone to misdefinition.

It is in the attempt to use language in a definitive way of God, and, by extension, anything in which God is argued to have a specific role, that the enterprise breaks down almost completely. The definition of the infinite is logically impossible. Belief in an infinite God points up the narrowness of the human perspective in any definition because each object defined also has relation to infinite being as a crucial quality of what it existentially and metaphysically is.

The Ascension is involved in all these dimensions, so any attempted definition must necessarily be undertaken with a full awareness of the nature of its predestined virtual failure. In addition, there is the uncertainty of the materials at hand from which it might be constructed. The paradoxical, subjective New Testament accounts of the event and their distance from it, and the theology of the state resulting from that event, and the context of both matters within the asserted divine plan, mean that even the flimsiest structure of conclusion is built upon the shifting and uncertain foundations of premises whose shape is being constantly reassessed.

However, within this apparently unpromising milieu there is another factor which, from the standpoint of Christian faith and theology, makes the attempt worthwhile: the belief that

therein is contained the revelation of an absolute truth; and the related conviction that this truth matters.

Even such relatively neutral-seeming words as 'event', 'occurrence', and 'phenomenon' immediately present problems when they are applied to the Ascension.

If the Ascension is an event, the implication must be that some change has taken place. Locating the precise nature of that change is highly problematical in itself. If the event is the departure of Christ; whence does he depart, and to where?<sup>1</sup> The suggestion that he leaves this world, or specifically his disciples, is both stated (Mt 9:15b; Jn 7:33-36; 13:33; 17:11) and refused (Mt 28:20b; Mk 16:20; Acts 9:5) in the New Testament. If the Ascension is, then, a change in the nature of the presence of Christ, it cannot satisfactorily be expressed as a departure from this world. Equally it cannot alternatively be expressed as a departure to another world of existence.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that Christ has been, in some sense, absent from the realm of the Father (Jn 16:28); which is also regarded in orthodox doctrine as unacceptable.<sup>3</sup> However, as will be argued, a modified understanding of the nature of presence and absence in relation to the ascended Christ may allow a resolution of this paradox.

There is also the problem of the relation of time to eternity. If eternity, or sempiternity, is understood as the presence together of all that exists, as opposed to its being the infinite extension of the temporal continuum, then every

existence, including the Ascension, is always present therein, and Christ is ascended from all eternity.<sup>4</sup> This is not an insuperable problem, and can be addressed by postulating the Ascension and the other stages of the Christ-event as constituents of the eternal reality they produce, which touches time at particular points but is not confined by it. An accommodation of this or some other kind toward the divine immutability seems to be required.

Difficulties also exist if the Ascension is seen as an occurrence. The primary problem in this respect is that, whatever is meant by the Ascension, it does not appear to be comprehensible as a part of the cause-effect relationships which make up the empirical world of occurrence. The Ascension has no empirically-demonstrable objective effect upon the material universe, but only upon the relationship of subjects.<sup>5</sup> Neither does it fall simply within the wider scope of the Creator-creation relationship, of the relation of the universe of phenomena to the non-phenomenal being of God.

That the Ascension is envisaged as having a purpose, and that that purpose is directly related to everything else that the New Testament has to say about Christ, appears to be an indispensable part of its expression in the New Testament (Phil 2:9-11; Eph 1:3-14).<sup>6</sup> However it is conceived, the Ascension is not presented as a simple demonstration or vision of divine power, nor as a revelatory or pedagogical device, but as something necessary.<sup>7</sup> The whole context of the Christ-event in

the New Testament is that it is solely for the benefit of creatures, and that God could not be in need of anything which it could bring about; in other words, it is to be understood as a soteriological necessity.<sup>8</sup> This then poses the additional question of what kind of redemptive process requires this particular stage to make it viable.

The specific role of Ascension in relation to Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Pentecost, in bringing about the movement from Creation to Eschaton is capable of, and has generated, many interpretations. Some of these have stressed its connection with the Resurrection; commonly, as will be shown, to the point where the Ascension is a subordinate event, not to be treated as of comparable importance in the soteriological scheme.<sup>9</sup> Others have given more emphasis to its place as the enabling of Pentecost, which has clear New Testament support (Acts 1:8; 2:2-5; Jn 16:7). However, neither emphasis, without the other, can do full justice to the integral place of the Ascension in the New Testament, and indeed without recognition of its relation to the total mystery and mysteries of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

'Ascension' is itself a word and a concept which cannot be used uncritically. It derives principally from the words and word-pictures to be found in the New Testament. The accounts themselves generally use the language of upward motion (Mk 16:19; Lk 24:51; Acts 1:9, 11); but not unanimously (Mt 28:18-20 implies some sort of departure without attempting to

describe it). The dominant word-groups, really the dominant terms, establish the symbolism, at least, of vertical movement: ἀναβαίνω , 'ascend', (Jn 1:51; 3:13; 20:17; Acts 2:34; Eph 4:9, 10); ἀναλαμβάνω , 'receive up', (Mk 16:19; 1Tim 3:16; Ac 1:11). If this does not represent actual movement in a particular direction, as it logically cannot if what was experienced by the witnesses was more than Jesus' spatial relocation, it would seem to be symbolic of a different kind of elevation. This interpretation has sometimes been taken to the point where the Ascension itself is understood almost entirely as a metaphor for a transcendent reality of which it is not itself constituent.<sup>11</sup>

The New Testament usage of Psalm 110:1 (Ac 2:33, 34; 7:55, 56; Eph 1:20; 2:6; Heb 1:13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1Pt 3:22; Mk 14:62; 16:19; Mt 19:28; 26:64; 28:18; Lk 22:69; Rm 8:34; Col 3:1; Rev 12:5; 22:1) and the word-group δόξα , 'glory', (1Tim 3:16; Heb 2:9; Jas 2:1; Lk 19:38; Mt 16:27; Ac 3:13; Jn 8:54; 12:28; 13:31-2; 1Pt 1:21; Phil 2:1; 3:21; Rm 8:17, 30) express the Ascension by focussing upon the person and state of the ascended Christ. Both, used very frequently indeed in the New Testament, address the destiny to which the Ascension takes Christ. The concepts of 'enthronement', 'glorification', and also 'exaltation', are very difficult to handle when a close examination is made of any content of meaning which may be assigned to them.

If the Christ who ascends is argued to be a single person

both divine and human, the problem exists of how his humanity and divinity relate differently, as logically they must, to his Ascension. God cannot be 'glorified' or 'exalted' or 'enthroned' in any sense which implies increase of status. This seems then to require a limitation of the effects of Ascension to his humanity alone, or rather to his whole person through his creatureliness. There is also the connected problem of the relation, even the development, of Christ's humanity to his divinity, and to the Father and Holy Spirit.

Included in this problematic of the nature of the humanity which ascends is the form in which it exists. The empty tomb (Mt 28:6; Mk 16:6; Lk 24:6; Jn 20:6), the physicality of some post-Resurrection appearances (Mt 28:9; Lk 24:30, 39, 43; Jn 20:17, 27; 21:13), and the nature of the risen body in heaven (Mt 22:30; 1Cor 15:35-53), all expose problems which have a direct bearing upon the Ascension.<sup>12</sup>

There is, too, the matter of the activity of the ascended Christ to consider. His intercessory or representative role on behalf of all humanity is central to the New Testament's appreciation of the no-longer visible Christ. Of what, in substantive terms, this intercession might consist is difficult to ascertain if placed in the context of the positive disposition of God toward created persons based upon the omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness of God; there could be nothing required to add to this, it would seem.<sup>13</sup> On an understanding of intercession based upon the nature of the person who intercedes, rather than merely upon words of

intercession, it may be helpful to consider it in the context of the eternal communion of the human and divine, with the ascended Christ as source and originator, and, in that sense, intercessor.<sup>14</sup> This, as will be argued, is an approach which allows greater scope to the soteriological role of Ascension.

### **3. Approaches to Christ's Ascension**

No single method of analysis of the Ascension appears to give a level of insight into its nature and purpose which is in every respect superior to all other approaches. It is in the bringing together of a number of different methods that the best results seem possible. Clearly, this can be framed in a great variety of combinations, and the choices available from this multiplicity will determine the direction taken and the conclusions which can be drawn from the synthesis achieved. Obviously, this does not mean that the choosing of the particular methods to be adopted can be allowed to be arbitrary.

In the present study, the basis for the assessment of approaches to the Ascension will be that it has a purpose, and that its form and content are in every respect designed to permit the most complete fulfilment of that purpose. As a result of this, a mutual enlightenment of form and purpose will be anticipated, and will, therefore, be sought and exploited. The purpose of the Ascension, placed as it is in the context of

the person and actions of Christ, will be argued to be the salvation of created persons. Its soteriological nature will be the decisive perspective in what follows, sometimes explicitly but always at least implicitly.

To this end, a number of strands of available material can be specified which seem best to serve this approach.

The New Testament accounts represent the most direct connection with the experience of the 'witnesses' to the Ascension, expressed in words. This is not, of course, the Ascension itself, so it must be treated as already at least one step removed from the core of what happened; but it is regarded in Christian tradition as a divinely-inspired revelation and is, therefore, uniquely authoritative within the Christian apprehension of the true meaning of the Christ-event. This is of particular relevance in attempting to comprehend the divine element in the Ascension, with its inherent inaccessibility to finite thought. The actual accounts of Jesus' departure and the explanations attributed to Jesus himself have a special place within the scriptural sources, and this will be reflected in the balance of the texts examined. Matters such as the vocabulary of Ascension and apostolic interpretation will also be governed by this priority.

The writings of the Patristic era are the evidence of some of the most pressing theological and spiritual concerns of the first centuries of the Christian Church. In them is to be found a primitive, but already sophisticated, attempt to reconcile



and bring unity to the sometimes obscure and fragmentary nature of the New Testament revelation. New vocabularies and ideas from a variety of philosophical sources were employed in this serious, but uncoordinated, programme of analysis of the essentials of the Christian faith. The value of this for a consideration of the Ascension is in the drawing together of the various elements of the revealed Christ-event into a unifying whole, which was being attempted within the context of a still-forming tradition in which not all the precedents had been set. Hilary of Poitiers, it will be argued, brings a perspective which is of special value to an examination of the Ascension and its place in the overall structure of the Christian faith.

A parallel, but also distinct, process of reassessment of the bases of the Christian faith is to be found in the theology of the twentieth century. In this, the imperative to systematise the doctrinal content of Christianity has provided particularly valuable insights into the Ascension of Christ, despite the limitations, in other ways, of systematic theology. The impetus given by the vigorous new philosophical and religious ideas, including Scriptural interpretation, of the present and preceding centuries has expanded the scope of dogmatic theologies up to, and sometimes perhaps beyond, the previously accepted limits of orthodox doctrine. The need to find a valid place for the Ascension in the overall plan of theology has meant that renewed consideration has had to be given to a relatively undervalued and neglected doctrine. In taking recent

theology as the third strand there is no intention of implying that medieval, reformation, and counter-reformation theology ignored the Ascension; but it was, in general, regarded as an uncontentious and therefore non-urgent matter during most of this period. The advances in understanding that were made during these times exert their influence upon, and are reflected in, more recent theology.

The final strand which, it will be argued, serves to approach the Ascension in its soteriological, purposive, dimension is the continuing need to pursue the enterprise of the placing of both the Ascension of Christ and the salvation achieved by Christ in a single logical framework, in which each seems adequately to be represented in the logical format of the other, and in which both are enhanced by their juxtaposition. This insight grows out of the Scriptural expression, patristic explication, and modern exploration of both Ascension and soteriology. It also demonstrates the absolute resistance of divine mysteries to finite models and to definition, which is an essential consideration in assessing the doctrine of the nature of the Christ-event as it is revealed in the mystery of the Ascension.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST IN THE GOSPELS AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

#### 1. Introduction

All the primary data which exist about the Ascension are contained in the New Testament. Although the Epistles, and most particularly the Pauline corpus, contain interpretative materials which are important in assessing the consequences of the Ascension, the accounts of the event are extremely concise and are contained in the Gospel of Mark and the Lucan writings. The interpretative New Testament material will demonstrate its importance for Christian theology in the use made of it by patristic and modern theologians, but it is the accounts of the moment of Ascension which focus attention specifically on the question of what actually occurred.

The three New Testament accounts of the event which has come to be called the Ascension of Christ, in Mk 16:19-20, Lk 24:50-53, and, Acts 1:6-11, together with the implied departure in Mt

28:18-20, contain a variety of detail which makes the attempt to reconstruct a consistent synthesis of the event a decidedly uncertain enterprise. This is not to say that the accounts necessarily contradict each other, nor that there does not exist the possibility of interpreting them in such a way that they can be made to fit into a single framework, but it does mean that a large degree of uncertainty will remain. Even the author of Luke-Acts has not attempted any such integration in his two accounts.

It is interesting that, in this respect, the accounts of the Resurrection of Christ show similar discordances. The Marcan author, at 16:8, appears to have considered ending his Gospel with the ambiguity of the empty tomb; and the longer ending remains sparse almost to the point of reticence. Matthew stresses the significance of Resurrection and Ascension without attempting to report the actual events themselves. Luke uses the words of Jesus, and the appearance of two men in white clothes, to point to the meaning of both occurrences as radical changes in the relationship of Christ to the Church and world.

The Gospel of John, however, treats Resurrection and Ascension in a way which is different from the other evangelists. The meetings of the risen Christ with his disciples are given prominence in a manner which is quite consistent with John's presentation of the development of that relationship throughout his Gospel. The Ascension is not mentioned at all, in situ, but discussion of its significance is integrated into Christ's discourse, most particularly in

ambiguity deepens the connection between Jesus' suffering and his exaltation. The closest example outside John's Gospel is in the First Letter of Peter. At 1Pt 3:22, the author is speaking of Jesus' being at the right of God, having gone into heaven. This gives Christ's destination in more explicit terms than in John's Gospel, reflecting their different purposes.

#### vii) Other words

ἠρπάσθη Rev 12:5, (her child) was snatched up (to God)  
[Possible allusion to Gn 5:24 : laqakh: took]

εἰμι Jn 7:34, (where I) am  
[referring to where the lifted up Christ is]

The image of the child being snatched up, in Rev 12:5, is difficult to place in relation to the Ascension of Christ; but it seems worthwhile to acknowledge its existence as an example of imagery which refers to the taking up of a symbol one of whose referents is almost certainly Christ, but the relationship of meaning between this passage and Christ's Ascension is, at best, complex and, probably, impenetrable in detail. The reference in Jn 7:34 to where Christ is, or will be, belongs more properly to a consideration of the ascended

state of Christ, though, as will be seen, it does not fit easily into the patterns used to express this state. This passage has Jesus speaking of his destination as one which is inaccessible to his opponents, but it is not elaborated further at that point.

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There is no dominant term used to express what has happened at the end of the series of encounters between the risen Christ and the disciples. Even the individual New Testament authors do not favour one word exclusively. This suggests that no official or authoritatively given vocabulary for the departure of Christ was current in the primitive Christian culture, and that the authors and their sources and readers found any suitable word to be acceptable. It also has the implication that Christ himself spoke of his departure, to the extent that he did so, in terms which, even as presented in the Johannine discourses, did not lead to a particular form of words becoming the common currency of expression. An interesting contrast to the accounts

of the Ascension may be noted, in this respect, in the verbal similarities in Christ's words and actions over the bread and wine on the night before his death (1Cor 11:23-26; Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:14-18). Conversely, a treatment as non-formulaic as that of the Ascension occurs in the variations to be found in the accounts of the empty tomb (Mt 28:1-8; Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-8; Jn 20:1-10).

The choice of words used to express the Ascension, therefore, may be taken to be interpretative after the fact. It was either the experience of those who were present at the event which shaped the choice of words, or the understanding of the event subsequently adopted by the Christian community in its meditation upon and proclamation of the event in its wider context, or both; these may have existed in both oral and written form. This means that, in looking at the words used to describe the Ascension-event, an insight into the earliest Christian interpretation of the meaning of what the witnesses experienced and handed on to their closest associates may be, to some extent, accessible.

Clearly, also, the contexts in which the words were used would have been decisive for the choice of vocabulary.

## **b) The Vocabulary of the Ascended State of Christ**

The state of being which the Ascension brings about has a much more limited vocabulary in the New Testament. It is dominated by two main phrase-groups.

### **i) The influence of Psalm 110:1**

Psalm 110:1, "The Lord said to my lord: Sit at my right, I shall make your enemies your footstool", seems to have provided the early Church with a form of expression to deal with the situation brought about by Christ's being ascended, which had the advantage of being scriptural and at the same time allowing them, as strict monotheists, to deal with the problem of there being two 'Lords'. The Ascension and exaltation of Christ is the obvious focus for such usage, in that it is the situation in which the position of Christ is most obviously problematical to Jewish sensibilities. The use of the metaphor of being at the right of God seems a neat and convenient solution in the search for appropriate expression of the post-Ascension state of affairs, and it was clearly taken as such by the writers of the New Testament, as is evidenced by their frequent use of this image.<sup>1</sup>

The use made of Ps 110:1 is not, however, uniform; nor is it always used in a way which foregrounds its Old Testament provenance. Sometimes it is clearly a matter of quotation, as



in: Ac 2:34; Eph 1:20; Heb 1:13; 10:12. From this there is a spectrum of usage, ranging from nearly-manifest quotation in 1Pt 3:22 to phrases which are verbally almost entirely different from Ps 110:1, but deal with the same ideas: Rev 12:5 and 22:1, "from the throne of God and of the Lamb" ( ἐκπορευόμενον ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ Ἀρνίου. ).

The synoptic gospels place an allusion to Ps 110 in the words of Jesus in answer to the high priest at his trial: ἐκ δεξιῶν καθήμενον τῆς δυνάμεως in Mk 14:62; cf. Mt 26:64; Lk 22:69; the wording is almost identical in each gospel. Perhaps the reported use of this phrase by Jesus himself here, or elsewhere in his teaching, is the reason for the widespread use of this image and its authority. The development of the language here, 'power' for 'Lord', is also a feature of this usage. Sometimes another periphrasis of the divine name is used, 'divine Majesty', in Heb 1:3; 8:1, τῆς Μεγαλωσύνης. Most often God is named outright: τοῦ Θεοῦ in Mk 16:19; Ac 2:33; 7:55, 56; Heb 12:2; Rm 8:34; and, Col 3:1. Other variations include: Ac 7:55, 56 where the imagery of standing ( ἐστῶτα ) is used instead of that of sitting, perhaps representing different emphases on the understanding of the active involvement of the ascended Christ in relation to the continuing struggles of the Church, or his possession of divine authority as symbolised by enthronement at the right of God; the introduction of the throne: Mt 19:28; Heb 8:1; 12:2; Rev 12:5; 22:1; the location of this state: 'heaven' Heb 8:1, 'heavenly places' Eph 1:20; 2:6, 'the heights' Heb 1:3, 'his glory' Mt 19:28. John's Gospel does not make use of

Ps 110:1 in any obvious or systematic way, choosing other methods of expressing and exploring this theme. Only Mk 16:19, and perhaps Mt 28:18, directly link this image with the event of the Ascension, but this lack of explicitness elsewhere is likely to be simply because its connection was, or had become, so obvious that it needed no special emphasis or authorial explanation.

**ii) The use of the term δόξα**

There is a strong sense in the New Testament that the word 'glory' appropriately conveys the mode of being of the ascended Christ. It is also used to indicate that which has been prepared by Christ for the believer who receives salvation. It predominantly expresses this without using the image of heaven as a place.

It is notable that the use of the δόξα family of words in the New Testament is seldom simply a description of the exalted Christ, though it is in 1Tim 3:16; Heb 2:9; Jas 2:1; and perhaps Lk 19:38. Most often it is primarily an expression of relationship, of the sharing of glory. Usually this means the ascended Christ's sharing in the glory of the Father as at Mt 16:27; Ac 3:13 (cf. Is 52:13); Jn 8:54; 12:28; 13:31-32; and, 1Pt 1:21. John's Gospel especially shows δόξα, as a verb, to be an important category of relationship between Christ and his Father; often that of prospective relationship implying the

achievement of Christ's fulfilment.

Philippians 2:11 is transitional in that it portrays Christ as the link between the glory of the Father and that given to the disciple. The glory given to the believer is the step in the soteriological process corresponding to Christ's Ascension and exaltation, and as such it is given through Christ, as in Rm 8:17, 30; and, Ph 3:21.

It may be that there is some sense in which the appropriateness of the use of *δεξιός* and *δέξα* in this context may be influenced by their assonance, which would have some rhetorical value. However, if there is any such process at work it is submerged -with the possible exception of the rhetorically stylized Mt 19:28- and in any case cannot be unarguably demonstrated to be a conscious strategy.

### iii) Other Terms

In addition to Ps 110:1 and *δέξα*, there are a number of suggestive words and phrases used in the New Testament to approach the meaning of Christ's Ascension. Jesus speaks, at the last supper, of 'new ( *καινόν* ) wine' (Mk 14:25) and of the meal being 'fulfilled ( *πληρωθῆ* )' (Lk 22:16) in the coming Kingdom. Eph 1:23 takes up this theme: 'the fulness of all things in all fulfilment' ( *τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν πληρουμένου* ). Matthew places Jesus' ability to bring these things about in Jesus' own words at the point of his departure

(Mt 28:18) 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth' ( *Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῶ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς* ). Jn 14:2 adds 'mansions' ( *μοναὶ* ), Col 3:1-2 'above' ( *τὰ ἄνω* ), and Heb 9:12, 24 'holy place' ( *ἅγια* ) to the vocabulary of the area of New Testament conceptualisation centred upon the Ascension.

The role of the ascended Christ generates a relatively small, but very helpful set of words. Rm 8:34 gives 'intercedes' ( *ἐντυγχάνει* ); Col 1:20 gives 'reconcile' ( *ἀποκαταλλάξει* ); and 1Tim 2:5 and Heb 12:24 agree on 'mediator' ( *μεσίτη* ). Hebrews (9:24) additionally gives a slightly different emphasis to this image: 'to be manifest before the face of God for us' ( *ἐμφανισθῆναι τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν* ).

#### iv) Christ's Ascension as Subsequent to his Resurrection

The New Testament is obliged to deal with the existence of the situation in which it proclaims the permanence of the Resurrection of Christ and, at the same time, acknowledges the cessation of his appearances to the disciples. A number of different strategies are adopted by New Testament authors in response to this state of affairs.

In the Gospel according to Mark, the shorter ending of which, at 16:8, does not go beyond reaction to the empty tomb, the Ascension is recounted in the single phrase *ἀνελήμφθη εἰς τὸν*

οὐρανόν , in Mk 16:19; which is developed only so far as to say that the Lord was working with the disciples in the time following his Ascension.

Matthew's Gospel contains, in words attributed to Christ himself, the same idea of his continuing presence and action in the world at Mt 28:18-20, but omits completely any mention of the manner of, and even the fact of, a departure of any sort. There is certainly the implication and the atmosphere of a decisive change of some kind at the end of Matthew, but it is not explicated at all. Perhaps the author wished to avoid the paradox of describing a final leaving and an eternal remaining in the same sentence.

The Lucan writings address the Ascension very directly, giving two accounts of it: Lk 24:51, and Acts 1:9-10. Both versions follow a pattern very similar to that adopted by Mark and Matthew, in that they stress that Christ's leaving does not imply abandonment of the disciples but that it is, rather, continued help in the form of power given by the Holy Spirit: Lk 24:49 and Acts 1:5, 8. In Lk 24:51 the Ascension is described as *διέστη ἀπ' αὐτῶν* and *ἀνεφέρετο εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν* ; in Acts 1:9-10 as *ἐπήρθη, καὶ νεφέλη ὑπέλαβεν αὐτόν.* , and in Acts 1:11 the men in white use the phrases *ἀναλημφθεὶς ἀφ' ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν* and *πορευόμενον εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν* .

In John's Gospel there is no account of the Ascension at all. However, the author, much more so than the Synoptic writers, presents the departure of Christ as an important element of God's plan which is being worked out through him. The main

explorations of this theme, all expressed in words attributed to Jesus, are: Jn 3:13-15, on the Son of man being able to go up to heaven, and open it to others, because he has come down from there; 6:62-63, on the same theme, but linked to the life of the spirit; 7:31-36, Jesus saying that he is going where unbelievers cannot come; 8:21-30, Jesus belonging to, and going to, the world of the Father; 13:31-14:4, the glorification of Jesus as the preparation of a place for his disciples; 14:12-31, "greater works" and the coming of the Paraclete resulting from the return of Jesus to the Father; 15:26-27, on the same theme; and, 16:5-15, on the necessity of Jesus' departure to the Father as the precondition of the coming of the Spirit. The consistency of this theme throughout the discourses shows the evangelist weaving together several main strands of his theology into a single pattern, in which the departure of Jesus is an essential element. Even apparently distinct passages, such as Jn 1:51, on the angels ascending and descending on the Son of man, and 20:17, where Mary Magdalene is told not to cling to the risen Christ because he has not yet ascended but will do so soon, are consistent with the themes underlying the other Ascension references.

The New Testament Epistles have no substantial concern with the Ascension as an event, but do show interest in the exalted state of Christ. This is an interest principally based upon their soteriological emphasis, in which the glorification of the man Jesus by his union with his own divinity and that of the Father is the means by which the possibility of entry into

heaven is effected for all humanity (this will be considered in detail below). The Ascension as departure is accepted implicitly as the necessary precondition for this.

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Although each New Testament author has his own perspective on the place of the Ascension within the dogmatic constitution of the Gospel, they also all belong to and are influenced by the currents of thought present in the contemporary Christian communities with which they had contact. It is against the background of the central concerns of the earliest Church that the individual contributions of the inspired writers can be identified, contextualised, and assessed. Four main themes within the scriptural treatment of the Ascension seem particularly useful in pursuing this course. They are: the place of the Ascension in the early gospel proclamation; the conflation of Ascension and Resurrection, also at an early stage; the apparently later differentiation of these two doctrines; and, exploration of the analogous relationships between Exaltation and Parousia on the one hand and Ascension and Pentecost on the other.

## 2. The Place of the Ascension in the Early Kerygma

The earliest teaching of the disciples about the meaning of Christ for the world is accessible now solely through the written record of the New Testament. The Acts of the Apostles and some of the Epistles contain more or less direct accounts of the content and theology of this teaching. Ac 2:14-36 tells of Peter's address to the crowd after the Pentecost experience. It contains, at 2:33, the assertion that the risen Jesus has been raised to the heights at God's right hand, where the Father has given him the Holy Spirit. The connection between Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost made here was not always taken up so clearly and explicitly in the written New Testament. The developments in the appreciation of doctrine in the early Christian community seem not to have taken place in a simple manner, and internal and external factors meant that adaptations took place which may have had an influence on the precise understanding of a doctrine such as the Ascension.

In Lk 24:51, *διέστη ἀπ' αὐτῶν* may be a conscious echo of the ascension of Elijah in 2Kg 2:11. The use of this phrase seems to carry with it the sense of the finality of the separation.<sup>2</sup> This verb is to be found in the New Testament only in the Lucan writings. It can refer, in Luke, only to the event of the Ascension. If *διέστη* is taken here to mean a departure which is different from those which concluded Christ's other risen appearances, then, at the least, Luke saw this particular parting as the event which concluded his Gospel and introduced



the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>3</sup> The reading of Lk 24:52a which includes the words *προσκυνησαντες* *αυτον* might be taken to reflect a conscious choice by Luke to postpone the disciples' final commitment of faith in the risen Christ until the conclusion of the Easter events in the Ascension; and that this is intended as the climactic ending of the whole Gospel. This idea depends, of course, upon taking the longer text of verse 52, which is the virtual consensus among scholars. There are some problems, however, with the further argument that Luke intended to express the reservation of the disciples' belief in the Resurrection until the Ascension, so that belief in the Resurrection and belief in Jesus as Lord are inseparable. This creates, rather than solves, problems concerning the composition of the whole chapter and the precise nature of the evangelist's basic intentions. It is possible that Luke uses the term *προσκυνησαντες* in its strict sense of the worship due to the Deity, unlike the use of the term by the soldiers at Mk 15:19 which is clearly ironic but may be read as implying legitimate homage to a king. Lk 4:8 and Ac 10:25-26, on the worship of Satan and of Simon Peter, seem to reinforce this Lucan accuracy, and to explain the Ascension as the disciples' recognition of the proper divinity of Christ: the implication seems to be that this is not achieved on the basis of the Resurrection alone.<sup>4</sup>

This adds weight to the argument for the importance to the understanding of the Acts account of the Ascension of its christological significance being noted. Lk 23:43 can be read

as supporting the case for an Ascension of Jesus from the cross at the moment of his death. This would appear to be part of the pre-Lucan kerygma which Luke did not take up, in favour of the delayed Ascension to be found in Luke-Acts. It is impossible finally to prove that any such kerygmatic concept existed, despite the Johannine vision of the cross as exaltation.<sup>5</sup>

Philippians stresses that the very great glory of Christ whom God has highly exalted, *ὑπερύψωσεν*, to God the Father's glory, *εἰς δόξαν*, Ph 2:9-11 and 3:20-1, is the pattern by which human humiliation is transformed into "the body of his glory" (*τῷ σώματι τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ*).<sup>6</sup> It may have been that the author of Ph 2:6-11 accepted the exaltation of the pre-existent Christ and could write, without compromising this belief, of his specifically human activities.<sup>7</sup> It may even be that *ὑπερύψωσεν* represents the preservation of an early tradition concerning a post-Resurrection pre-Ascension exaltation of Christ which took place while he was still on earth.<sup>8</sup> Christ is 'super-exalted' by God (*ὑπερύψωσεν*); here a particular view of the spatial composition of the universe may well have exerted influence. Christ's entry into the highest heavens, is a concept to be found in the Letter to the Hebrews, with which Ph 2:6-11 shares ideas.<sup>9</sup>

The First Letter of Peter contains a certain ambiguity of expression which might mean the glory of the Resurrection or perhaps the ascended glory of Christ; the author may not wish to make any differentiation in this matter in 1Pt1:21 "God who raised him from death and gave him glory" (*δόξαν αὐτῷ δόντα*).

1Pt 3:22, along with Ac 7:56, Rm 8:34, Eph 1:20, Col 3:1, and others, may indicate an early belief in the heavenly session of Jesus as an article of faith. There is also the question of whether "having gone to heaven" ( *πορευθεῖς εἰς οὐρανόν* ) is based on the Jewish world-picture, or whether it implies a less specific but still transcendent understanding of the Ascension.<sup>10</sup>

The possibility that there is to be found in the New Testament a strand of tradition in which the Ascension of Christ, rather than his Resurrection, is primary, opens a number of questions about the nature of the first disciples' experience and understanding of Christ after his Crucifixion, and its development in the communities out of which the New Testament grew. The general background to the argument in support of this possibility is the synoptic problem and the various issues raised by it. The probability of there being a variety of sources for the parallels, similarities, and divergences of the first three gospels means that it may also be feasible to detect within each gospel a multiplicity of discrete cultural, philosophical, and even theological influences. It is in this context that it may be possible to detect a difference of emphasis within the New Testament in the relationship between the Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ.

In pursuing this matter, it is not necessary to subscribe to any particular one of the numerous putative solutions to the synoptic problem. What is necessary, however, is the acceptance of a solution which allows that there should be expressed in the detail of the synoptics a number of different approaches to their content which, at some stage of their existence prior to incorporation into the final three-gospel form, had substantial independence, in belonging to traditions and communities which had to make some decisions of their own about the meaning and significance of the Christ-event.

Edward Schillebeeckx has argued that the crucial New Testament source for an Ascension-theology distinct from, and with a different emphasis to, the Resurrection-theology which came to predominate is that which has come to be known as 'Q'. He considers Q to be the product of a particular community of Christians who, in the earliest stages at least, were Aramaic-speakers and had a particular interest in the heavenly Christ, more so than in his earthly life, and that this preoccupation finds its way into the passages common to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke which might derive from their 'gospel'.<sup>11</sup>

Schillebeeckx, believing the Lord's prayer (Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:2-4) to be an example of the earliest Q material, sees great significance in this material's being the only recoverable New Testament tradition which shows no trace of accommodation to, or recognition of, the delay in the Parousia. He believes that this oldest Q material brings together the nearness of the Kingdom of God (Lk 6:20b) and the imminent return of the Son of

man (Lk 12:8-9) in such a way that it can only be the heavenly Jesus who is signified. The heavenly exaltation of Jesus is not expressed by Q, as it is in detail in pre-Pauline or Pauline or other synoptic kerygmata, because Q's sense of the nearness of the Parousia means that the Q-community does not require this. He observes that the only title used of Jesus in the early Q is 'son of man' (Lk 12:8-9), and that 'Christ' is not used as a messianic title in Q. He concludes that Q has no explicit Resurrection kerygma, its equivalent being the operation of the heavenly Christ in Christian prophets; but that, on contact with Resurrection traditions, it could recognise and integrate with those traditions in its proclamation of the Parousia.<sup>12</sup> Further, he goes so far as to assert that the New Testament does not, at any point, say that the Resurrection is the decisive event which took place between Jesus' death and the Church's proclamation of him.<sup>13</sup>

Mark's Gospel, Schillebeeckx argues, does not deal with the operation of the heavenly Christ, seeing exaltation and an imminent Parousia as identical, in contrast to Q, which has Resurrection, Ascension, and exaltation undifferentiated; the later, hellenised, Q is affected by this Marcan emphasis.<sup>14</sup> Q also appears to have had some influence on Mark, he thinks, in that sometimes (Mk 16:6; 8:31; 9:31; 10:34) the Resurrection is not in itself exaltation, but is rather the foundation of the expectation of Parousia. The main thrust of Mark's development in this matter is the refusal to accommodate to the delay in the Parousia in interpreting Resurrection and Ascension, so

that Mk 13:26 and 14:62b, in maintaining Resurrection-exaltation over exaltation-Parousia, becomes a source of despondency for the impatient Christian, which Schillebeeckx believes he can detect in Mark, and which he thinks was corrected by the later ending of the Gospel (Mk 16:9-20).<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, Schillebeeckx points to what he sees as the interpretative function of Jesus' exaltation in distinguishing his Resurrection from the miracles of raising the dead and from Old Testament ascensions. He believes the dominant New Testament position to be that the Resurrection, exaltation, and empowerment of Christ constitute a single reality (Rm 1:4; 8:34; 14:9; Col 3:1; 1Th 1:9-10; 1Cor 15:3-8; Mt 28:18b; Eph 4:8-10; Heb 1:3, 5; 2:9; 5:5; 12:2). Even so, he detects some New Testament references to Christ's exaltation, not belonging to Q as such, which appear to pass over the Resurrection; the most significant being the ancient Christian hymns at Ph 2:6-11 and 1Tim 3:16, where he reads humiliation as leading directly to exaltation.<sup>16</sup>

Schillebeeckx regards all this as pointing to there being a tradition belonging to the earliest Christian belief which makes no mention of the Resurrection, but expresses Christ's exaltation by using other categories. He sees in this the influence of Old Testament Solomonic and Wisdom ideas in which exaltation need not involve Resurrection or an empty tomb. It was the growing ascendancy of Resurrection-based Christologies, and their contact with other ideas which, Schillebeeckx believes, provided the impulse for a clearer definition of the

relation of Resurrection and Ascension.<sup>17</sup>

Resurrection as exaltation is argued by Schillebeeckx to be a slightly later position found among the sources of Mark. Whereas Paul, from his different perspective, placed Resurrection and Parousia far apart in time, so that the mission to the world, given at Christ's departure, may be fulfilled. Luke, by making explicit the association of the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost with the sending out of the Apostles requires, Schillebeeckx argues, the separation of Resurrection and Ascension by forty days and a substantive change in the interpretation of the appearances of the risen Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

This whole process of the interpretation of the meaning of the person and actions of Christ, which Schillebeeckx claims has left its stamp on the New Testament, is the growth of a synthesis in which his life, death, Resurrection-exaltation, and Parousia, become understood as a single whole. The diversity of the routes and timing in the formation of this unity is traceable in the differences observable, he argues, between Q and the other sources.<sup>19</sup> The final synthesis benefits from the earlier tensions and disparity, Schillebeeckx believes, because a strong presentation of Resurrection, Ascension, exaltation, and Parousia is necessary if the two facets of Christ's salvific presence -being at the Father's side and being present in a new way to the disciples- are to be held together without necessitating the subordination of one to the other.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, Schillebeeckx's argument is one which is not simply accepted by others. There are many aspects of his case which do not correspond with the understanding of the kerygmatic and historical background of the New Testament to be found in scriptural and theological studies undertaken by other authors. These present some alternatives which also provide valuable insights into the experiences and early interpretations of the Ascension. Those who disagree with Schillebeeckx's view, or hold opinions incompatible with it, do so not only on directly scriptural grounds, but also on the basis of difficulties raised by the wider theological implications of his interpretation of the scriptural evidence.

J. A. T. Robinson is very far from Schillebeeckx's position, in that he believes that the particular strengths of the theologies of certain New Testament passages, such as Acts 2, show that the Ascension as exaltation came to be the dominant kerygmatic formulation later, resulting in some suppression of earlier ideas which related the exaltation of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Resurrection alone.<sup>21</sup> Robinson believes that Luke, in Acts 2, is actually developing this idea beyond anything to be found elsewhere in the earliest preaching, which asserts that Jesus is constituted Christ by his Resurrection. Robinson thinks the Resurrection kerygma to be earlier than the Ascension kerygma, and believes that the Ascension stories emerged as central perhaps due to some serious uncertainties among the later and widening audience of the early Church about what had actually taken place.<sup>22</sup> One of



the difficulties in such an approach as this is that it takes the Ascension story to be supplying the explanation for an already-existing but unaddressed situation -the invisibility of the risen Christ- rather than its being already known but brought to prominence only as questions relating to it need to be answered in the early preaching. H. B. Swete shed some light on this, in seeing the Ascension as the last of the numerous withdrawals of visible presence by the risen Christ, the significance of which was realised by the first disciples only after an extended period of reflection on what it meant that his invisible, ascended presence was no less immediate and salvific than his visible, risen presence.<sup>23</sup> Hans Küng takes a similar approach to this, arguing that Luke, in particular, is attempting the difficult task of making comprehensible, and preachable, the departed Christ as a salvific, though intangible, presence. Küng believes that Luke wished to have the Ascension understood as an aspect of Easter, rather than as a second 'saving fact'.<sup>24</sup>

Systematic theologians, in considering the Scriptural roots of the doctrine, have approached the Ascension from different perspectives. Karl Barth, however, agrees with Swete and Küng in seeing the Ascension as the completion of Christ's Resurrection. This is a basically Lucan approach, and agrees with Luke in holding that the Ascension is primarily a beginning rather than an ending, directly connected with an ultimate, divine, reality.<sup>25</sup> However, Barth stresses that Resurrection and Ascension as exaltation cannot be allowed to

be the raising into glory of the Son of God, even as incarnate, but that they are the revelatory manifestations of that glory which always belongs to him. Thus, the relationship of the events to such a state will necessarily be problematical.<sup>26</sup> Like Swete, Barth thinks the Ascension to be the concluding form of the appearances of the risen Christ, and to be chiefly a revelation of the exaltation of Christ which occurred at his Resurrection.<sup>27</sup> This is a solution which is, in terms of reconciling the temporal and eternal dimensions of the principal Christian mysteries, apparently satisfactory. It achieves this, however, by accommodating the demands of the eternal through compression of the effects of the events in time, as if the fewer the points of contact in time between the eternal and temporal the easier it is to explain their relationship. As will be argued later, there are better ways of handling the time-eternity question in relation to the Resurrection and Ascension.

Gerald O'Collins, examining the scriptural accounts of Resurrection and Ascension, believes the theme of Ascension to be Luke's own; not derived from any traceable source. Indeed, he does not think any Pauline or pre-Pauline traditions (as, 1Cor 15:3b-5; Rm 1:3b-4) separate Ascension from Resurrection at all. O'Collins believes this to be consistent with the Lucan theme of continuity in salvation history, centred upon the unity of Christ as the one who undergoes all for that purpose.<sup>28</sup> The idea that the Ascension is a specifically Lucan theme does not mean that it need be thought of as a Lucan

invention. The differences of emphasis and priority given to the Ascension by the various New Testament writers, even to the point of its omission by some, may be assigned to the specific agendas to which each was committed and the decisions which these produced. The Lucan foregrounding of the Ascension is, as will be discussed later, derivative from his theological and kerygmatic perspective quite as much as the other New Testament authors' choices about the place it has in their writings.

Schillebeeckx concedes two points to G. Lohfink, and others, in relation to the possible priority of the Ascension kerygma over the Resurrection kerygma: that in 1 Peter Resurrection and exaltation are juxtaposed without any specific attempt to reconcile them; and that the exaltation-motif need not necessarily be older than the Resurrection-motif.<sup>29</sup> Lohfink's argument is that both Resurrection and Ascension are expressed in language derived from the Old Testament.<sup>30</sup> Schillebeeckx, in conceding this, does not allow that it can necessarily be inferred, therefore, that the exaltation-motif is undoubtedly derived from the Resurrection-motif.

C. F. D. Moule considers that the best overall interpretation of the totality of the New Testament references is to regard Ascension, Resurrection, and exaltation as entirely interchangeable terms. He takes the reference to the forty days in Acts 1:3 to be part of Luke's strategy of linking the descent of the Holy Spirit with the Jewish feast of Pentecost, which as the Feast of Weeks represented both the harvest and the giving of the Law. Moule interprets Paul's assessment of

his Damascus road experience (1Cor 15:8) as an Easter encounter not decisively separated by the Ascension from others' meetings with the risen Christ. Moule considers the Resurrection-Ascension progression to have been a logical and organic fulfilment of the expectations of authentic early Christian thought, and, based on apparent eyewitness traditions, to be analysed and distinguished as separate 'moments' which are successive components of the whole.<sup>31</sup> This seems a promising approach in that it allows the individual events of Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost to retain their content, while at the same time retaining the essential connection between them as part of their meaning and the basis of their organic unity. The approach of taking the terms 'Resurrection', 'Ascension', and 'exaltation' to be interchangeable in meaning, however, weakens the sense of progression which Moule otherwise favours.

T. J. Weeden argues that the Resurrection as the exaltation of Jesus -which he thinks could be inferred from possible pre-Markan tradition- underwent a later radical change which placed the exaltation in the context of the Parousia, perhaps as a polemical answer to opponents of the early proclamations. He argues that it was the delay in the Parousia which necessitated consideration of the role of the ascended Christ.<sup>32</sup> Weeden believes that Paul and others found this shift of emphasis a contradiction not easily explained, making Mark appear anachronistic, anomalistic, and straining credibility. Working with similar concerns, W. Milligan asserts that the

Resurrection was not the completion of Christ's glory, but also that no further change or development of his person was required to make him ready for the Ascension. He says that, at the time of the writing of the Gospels, Ascension stood as an equal partner alongside Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection as constituents of the faith.<sup>33</sup> Milligan also thinks that the Ascension is best understood as something already attained by Christ at the Resurrection: unity with the Father in the glory of heaven, a heaven which is not elsewhere but everywhere; and that only too-literal an interpretation of the accounts of the Ascension could allow it to be represented as migration from earth to another place called heaven. He sees the Ascension as a corollary of Resurrection with which it is implicitly involved and inseparably connected.<sup>34</sup> Weeden and Milligan, respectively, indicate the scriptural and theological difficulties of a too-literal interpretation of the Ascension accounts, and offer solutions to those difficulties. Milligan's arguments, being based upon the attempt to understand the nature of the Ascension, address the questions raised by the phenomenon which the texts are attempting to put into words; Weeden's discussion is of those texts themselves, to explain the anomalies he found in them in terms of their own origins and background. The latter is, of course, a valid method of considering the problem but it is one which does not make possible a nearer approach to the Ascension as such. The former, being more theological-philosophical in nature, is more

direct in those terms. Both generate problems arising from their particular stances.

Schillebeeckx, therefore, having already elsewhere considered the theological-philosophical nature of the Ascension<sup>35</sup>, is, in now taking the textual route, very tentative in making his suggestions about Ascension and Resurrection in Q; there are, it can be argued, a number of good reasons for this.

Firstly, there is the hypothetical nature of the proffered solutions to the synoptic problem, none of which has solved conclusively all the difficulties present, and some of which present greater difficulties in this context: such as those which suggest substantial oral traditions.

Secondly, the thesis of Q as a separate or independent source within the New Testament leaves much of its history of formation and incorporation uncertain, if not entirely unknown. The material may have undergone processes which had a profound effect on its final form and may have been used and envisaged in ways of which no knowledge remains.

Thirdly, it cannot be demonstrated that Q derived from a specific community which held the views which might be pieced together from the fragmentary, and uncertainly identified, material in Matthew and Luke. It is possible that it represents the writings of one or more individuals who had the intention of influencing or changing, even correcting, the emphasis to be found dominating a particular early Christian community. Dialectical discourse tends not to be written with internal

balance as a primary consideration; quite the contrary.

Fourthly, it would not be possible to be certain that the Q material expresses a coherent and fully-represented theology. Nor can it be shown that the totality of the Q material was incorporated into the New Testament; and, if it was not, the omissions and adaptations of this source adopted by the editing evangelists or others cannot be recovered. If the Q material as found in the New Testament does not deal with the Resurrection, it cannot be said with certainty that it did not do so in its original form; nor can it be said with certainty to have dealt with it in a particular manner. Alternately, it may simply have dealt with Resurrection less satisfactorily than another source, which was then selected for the relevant passages.

If Schillebeeckx's argument is not accepted, the difficulties he highlights, of the relation in the New Testament of Ascension to Resurrection, exaltation, Parousia, and Pentecost do not cease to be problematical: the endings of the four gospels illustrate that quite clearly. However, if the argument is allowed some validity, there are a number of interesting insights which might be derived from it.

The apparently definite forms bestowed by the carefully applied words and symbols of the New Testament upon the Resurrection, Ascension, and the other post-Crucifixion phenomena, cannot hope to express fully the experience of the 'witnesses', any more than they could be expected to express the events themselves: by their nature neither category can be fully represented by words. Working from their different,

indeed unique, points of view and comprehension these witnesses and their associates had to find words which were both consistent with what they had encountered and at least partly comprehensible to their audience. At the core of their experience, as its anchor, was the person of Jesus.

If the individual or group who originated the Q material of the New Testament considered, at the earliest stages, that the event which is now called the Ascension was the decisive transformation of Jesus, and even read back the significance of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection to that event, it is difficult to see how, in the context of the New Testament proclamation, this could be regarded as anything other than a genuine, if particular, account of Christian faith.

The placing of the emphasis on exaltation at the Ascension, if that is what Q does, appears entirely understandable; and if later or contemporary Pauline, Marcan, Lucan, or Johannine theologies came to be recognised as more appropriate, this does not invalidate any or all of them, but rather involves these different insights in a process of mutual illumination. Perhaps this is fossilised evidence of one of the earliest theological discussions in the primitive Church. There is no explicit contradiction between these approaches, nor can an implicit contradiction be read into them without convolution. If they are in some sense rivals, then it is a rivalry which cannot diminish the status for the Church of the Christ they seek to proclaim: concentration on the Ascension is concentration on Christ; so is concentration on his Resurrection, exaltation,



and session. It is a state of affairs which requires a unifying approach to the meaning and place of the risen Christ, but one which also retains the value of each part as an indispensable constituent of that unity.

In exploring this area, Schillebeeckx has pointed out a most helpful distinction in the relationship between the witnesses' experience of the risen Christ and the expression of that experience. Whether Schillebeeckx's thesis is correct in locating the Ascension tradition as primitive or not, and it is difficult to see how it could be finally proved or disproved, it does not alter the fact that the Ascension is present in the New Testament in such a way that, as an element of the early Christian faith and proclamation, it cannot be put aside. Thus, its relation to Resurrection, Pentecost, exaltation, and Parousia, as expressed in the New Testament, demand consideration. Schillebeeckx's probing of this question has the effect, at least, of forcing into the foreground these important and relatively unexplored issues relating to the Ascension.

### 3. Conflation of the Resurrection and the Ascension

The nature of Ascension and Resurrection, including, as they do, a divine transcendent dimension, means that temporal and linguistic categories used to express them, and differentiate between them, will inevitably give rise to anomalies and difficulties. One direction in which New Testament writers seem to have been led by this problematic is that of relating Resurrection and Ascension so closely that the distinctions between them are not emphasised, even to the extent of their being regarded as a single christological phenomenon. This can serve the strong unifying thrust of the apostolic proclamation, but it can also blur the categories which allow insight into these fundamental doctrines on the basis of their distinctive characters and characteristics.

In Lk 24:50, *Ἐξήγαγεν δὲ αὐτοὺς*, seems to imply that the Ascension took place on the day of the Resurrection, which, however, would contradict Ac 1:3. It may be simply the omission of mentioning the space of time which is expressed so accurately, if symbolically, in Acts, or it may reflect two different accounts of the experience which were known to the author and which he chose to leave unresolved in Luke-Acts.<sup>36</sup> Either explanation would be consistent with the thoroughness which Luke claimed for his investigation into the events of Luke-Acts, in Lk 1:1-4. It has even been speculated that when

he wrote his Gospel Luke was uncertain of the length of time which elapsed between Easter and Christ's Ascension; but that he had discovered this by the time he wrote Acts. It is more likely that  $\delta\epsilon$  is used here to introduce a new occasion. The passage in The Epistle of Barnabas, 15.9, which places the Ascension on Easter day or one of the following first days of the week, may be evidence of a tradition about the temporal relation between the two events; however, the grammatical ambiguity of the section, and the Epistle's apparent motive of reinforcing the legitimacy of keeping the day after the Jewish sabbath as a holy day, are sufficient explanations of its limited value in this matter.<sup>37</sup>

A stronger argument may be that Luke simply mentioned the Ascension as a fact without attempting to indicate its relation to what has gone before or to its timing. This was perhaps because the end of Luke's Gospel was merely a brief sketch in which the author does not consider discussing whether or not the Ascension took place on the same day as the Resurrection, leaving further particulars for Acts.<sup>38</sup>

In Lk 5:35, it is not clear whether the taking of the bridegroom  $\alpha\pi\alpha\rho\theta\eta\eta\ \alpha\pi'\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omega\upsilon$  is the Crucifixion or the Ascension. Nonetheless, the days to come are portrayed here as a time of fasting, of trial. The early Church did fast.<sup>39</sup> There is perhaps the implication that Jesus is the bridegroom of the Church as God is the bridegroom of Israel in the Old Testament; such a longer-term relationship might suggest the extended period after the Ascension as the dominant meaning of Lk 5:35.

The words of Jesus to the repentant thief in Lk 23:43 seem to imply that he will not simply be alongside Jesus, *σύν*, but will share with him, *μετ' ἐμοῦ*, in what he possesses. The stress on 'today' and the use of the word 'Paradise', with its meaning of 'enclosed garden', perhaps evoke the Resurrection and, possibly, the Ascension.<sup>40</sup>

The phrases *βλεπόντων αὐτῶν* and *τὸν οὐρανόν*, in Acts 1:9 and 10, need not be seen as dependent upon a pre-Copernican world view in order that it be plausible. The use of *βλέπω* seems to place the Ascension in the same category of events as the other events recorded in the life of Jesus.<sup>41</sup> It may also be that it is implied that the disciples expected Jesus still to be there when the cloud vanished, as some of those present had experienced at the Transfiguration (Lk 9:34-36). The use of the image of the cloud in the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament, is, among other things, a way of expressing the incomprehensibility of the divine nature and divine events. In Acts 1:9, it conveys a divine event whose human dimension is expressed by the taking up of Jesus' risen body.<sup>42</sup> Ascension on the fortieth day, or whenever it occurred, was the end of the series of encounters between the risen Christ and the disciples.<sup>43</sup> Acts contains the only account of the Ascension which treats it as a visible event.<sup>44</sup>

In Acts 2:33-36, Peter's Pentecost sermon, citing Ps 110:1, a single unit of expression is formed by the instrumental dative *τῇ δεξιᾷ* (by the right hand of God) and *ἐκ δεξιῶν μου* (at, or literally, from, my right), which gives a complete picture of

movement into and establishment in the position of exaltation. This is also the vindication of Christ's words to the Sanhedrin in Lk 22:69, fulfilled within two months of their being the final reason for his condemnation. 'Therefore' could mean that Resurrection and exaltation are understood here to be a single event.<sup>45</sup>

Mt 28:18-20, which contains the great commission of Christ to his disciples and concludes the Gospel, does not refer directly to the Ascension. However, it does appear to assume the departure of Christ, in that it contains a statement of Jesus, who is manifestly present, referring to a time when he will be with them in a different way. The emphasis is upon the activity of the disciples acting on his behalf and under his authority which, though not being exercised from a distance, features a broader and less localised involvement of Christ. Also, the presence of Christ with the Church until the end of the age is clearly one which is not based upon a mortal, as it were earthbound, life, but one which transcends mortal life and is continuous with, though different from, the kind of contact which has taken place in the post-Resurrection encounters. Matthew, indeed, seems to assume that, in some way, Christ is already exalted at this point, implying that it is Resurrection rather than Ascension which is the decisive moment of exaltation.

In Mt 28:18, *πᾶσα ἐξουσία* appears not only to mean that there is no authority which is not given to the risen Christ, but

also that he is therefore necessarily without rivals (cf. Dan 7:13; Ph 2:9-11). It is possible that this claim represents the acceptance by the risen Jesus of what is said of the "one like a Son of Man" in Dan 7:14, that "to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him...". The important point is to determine what this passage might have meant for the community for which Matthew wrote; it seems to refer to the continuing role in the life of the early community of Christ himself. This section, Mt 28:16-20, could be taken as a summary of the whole Gospel.<sup>46</sup>

The references in the Gospel of John to Jesus being "lifted up", *ὑψωθῆναι* at 3:14, and *ὑψώσητε* at 8:28, are placed after statements attributed to Jesus about his Ascension and his belonging to heaven. So it is necessary in reading these passages to be aware of the ambiguity, probably intended as such by the author, in the idea of lifting up. John's theme of the Cross as the glorification of Christ is not to be taken as the exhaustion of his theology of Christ's exaltation, as these conjunctions indicate. The association of the Cross and Ascension of Jesus may derive from the use by the early Church of the Aramaic "'stlq" which, like the Greek, unites both meanings; and may have been the word-play which reinforced the initial strong association.<sup>47</sup>

In John, Jesus' 'hour' takes on such a significance that it may signal that it is not appropriate to attempt definitively to separate Cross, Resurrection, exaltation, and session. John

uses a 'mythological' method of expressing 'ascent', which is conceived differently from the Lucan 'ascension'. The Fourth Gospel can, by this approach suggest strongly the simultaneous presence and transcendence of the exalted Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Jn 20:22, describes the Holy Spirit being given to the disciples; and in 20:27 Thomas, unlike Mary Magdalene in 20:17, is invited to touch the risen Christ. It has been speculated that the evangelist believed that between these two encounters Christ's Ascension or glorification had taken place. Perhaps the point being made is that the Resurrection has allowed a new and more direct union between Christ and those creatures who have come to faith in him.<sup>49</sup>

The past tenses in Rm 8:28-30 mean that Paul probably regarded all the matters mentioned -foreknowing, preordination, election, justification, and glorification- as being already at work for the believer.<sup>50</sup> Rm 8:34 seems to indicate that Christ's being at the right hand of God ( *ἐστὶν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ Θεοῦ* ) is in some sense distinct from his intercessory role ( *ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν* ). The reference to the glorification of Christ in Rm 8:34 omits direct mention of the Ascension, which is nevertheless implicit in this sentence.<sup>51</sup>

Salvation takes place in the heavenly Christ, according to Ephesians. The construction, *ἐν (τῷ) Χριστῷ* ( *Ἰησοῦ* ), is unique to Ephesians, where it occurs in its various forms several times (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:11).<sup>52</sup> 'To us' or 'for us', in Eph 1:19, stresses the soteriological dimension of the Father's divine

power and glory. The final words of Eph 1:23, τὸ πλήρωμα  
 τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσι πληρουμένου ('the fulness of all things in all  
 fulfilment') constitute a strange and dense and, ultimately,  
 indefinable form of expression. The emphasis of Eph 2:5-6  
 continues the theocentricity which is a particular feature of  
 Eph 1.<sup>53</sup>

Eph 4:8-10 is a more transcendent expression of the Ascension  
 than Lk 24:51, in that it is portrayed as a heavenly state  
 rather than as a quasi-physical event. The descent of Christ is  
 that made in glory in the descent of the Holy Spirit. In the  
 final phrase of verse 10: *ἵνα πληρώσῃ τὰ πάντα*, the 'filling'  
 and 'fulfilling' aspects of its possible meaning must both  
 carry their weight.<sup>55</sup> The quotation in Eph 4:8 of Ps 68:18  
 relates the Ascension of Christ to the gifts of the Spirit and  
 also gives it a soteriological reference in the phrase "he led  
 captivity captive" *ἠχμαλώτευσεν αἰχμαλώσιαν*.

The blurring of the edges between Resurrection and Ascension  
 in parts of the New Testament is a complex matter, with a  
 variety of influences including linguistic, theological,  
 literary, kerygmatic, and other factors. The interaction  
 between, and even the identification of, these doctrines need  
 not be taken to imply a lack of clarity as the primary cause of  
 this early conflation, which is in any case not unanimous. The  
 events, accounts, and exploration of both Ascension and  
 Resurrection in the New Testament are such as to encourage the  
 use of diverse vocabularies and imagery, which can overlap and



leave room for later latitude of interpretation. The different methods of both expression and interpretation to be found in the Gospel of John and in Luke-Acts illustrate this clearly. The Lucan texts present in one way an experience which the Johannine text presents in a different way. Each uses a specific vocabulary of words and symbols -in the Johannine case one which seems deliberately narrow- which attempt to extend the meanings of those vocabularies by the way in which they are used. Their purpose is the same: to express the meaning of Christ; their perspective is quite different. So, the ambiguity, if that is what it is, which both authors find in the relationship of the Resurrection and the Ascension perhaps reflects a common perception of an indispensable dimension of the nature of both doctrines, rather than something arising from the style and presuppositions of these and other New Testament authors.

That this kind of conflation took place throws light on the earliest understanding of both doctrines, and on the significance of the Christ-event in total. The most obvious internal reason for it would appear to be that the Resurrection and the Ascension were perceived at a very early stage as two sides of a single development in the person and relationships of Christ. In this respect, the differentiation in the New Testament of the doctrines, examined alongside their conflation in the writings of the same authors, can in itself be a means of exploring the content of the New Testament doctrines of the Ascension of Christ.

#### 4. Differentiation of the Resurrection and the Ascension

In Luke-Acts and John's Gospel, particularly, the distinction between the Resurrection of Christ and his Ascension is used to make subtle points about the person of Christ and the formative events involving him. The differentiation of the doctrines is sometimes presented as their being stages in a sequence of temporally-distinct events and sometimes as different layers within the formation of the person of Christ, but the point they have in common is that Resurrection and Ascension represent two particular and separate units of meaning within the unity of the Gospel proclamation of Christ.

The Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles contain the clearest and most consistent differentiation of Christ's Resurrection and Ascension in the New Testament; although, as discussed in the preceding section, this is not a wholly unambiguous situation. The reason for this relative clarity is the temporal disparity between the two 'events'; though there are differences between the two accounts over timing and the precise sequence of events.

In Lk 24:51, the word ἀνεφέρετο<sup>55</sup> is used of the Ascension; it is an unusual term. Its very unusualness mitigates against its being due to a copyist's error in a period when ἀναλαμβάνω had become the established term. It might bear a subsidiary meaning of 'was led up'. The use of the imperfect may suggest a gradual parting. ἀνεφέρετο often has a liturgical connotation

in the Old Testament. In the Septuagint it is used to translate 'qa-tar', meaning 'burn a sacrifice'. Even when used in a more extended sense of sacrificial offering (Is 53:11; Heb 7:27) it has a clear liturgical origin.<sup>56</sup> It is difficult to identify the motive for the omission of the words *καὶ ἀνεφέρετο εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν* in the Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, Freerianus, and Tiflis manuscripts, and by St Augustine, other than their absence from earlier documents. They may be a gloss on *δέσση*; or it may be that Luke (or someone else) added them to a second edition of the Gospel to clarify the meaning of the preceding phrase. The change of tense from aorist to imperfect is also notable.<sup>57</sup> This phrase has been classified as a 'Western non-interpolation', omitted from the Western text but included in the so-called 'Neutral' text. It may be that the omission of this phrase had the purpose of harmonising Luke and Acts, so that the fuller text may be the original. It may also be that when the Gospels were united in a single collection (c. AD 100?) resulting in the separation of Luke and Acts, it was felt to be necessary to make slight adjustments to the texts of both so that they would read coherently in their separate existences. This might account for the placing in Acts 1:2 of *ἀνελήμφθη*, "was taken up", also a non-Western reading, as a link with the Gospel.<sup>58</sup>

The overall situation seems to lean towards there being some question as to whether *καὶ ἀνεφέρετο εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν* belongs to the original Lucan account, which makes sense without it. If it is explanatory of *δέσση ἀπ' αὐτῶν*, either by the author or by

another, it need not be regarded as the insertion of the Ascension account as an afterthought: "he parted from them" is, in context, an adequate way to describe, for believers, the departure of the risen Jesus from 'visible' contact with the disciples. It could well be that as the Gospel text became an instrument of evangelisation and an apologist's tool it was seen to be necessary to counter the criticism that the departure of Jesus was simply his geographical migration after having survived the Crucifixion, which was manifestly not the meaning intended by the author of Luke-Acts.

Other forms of the explanation of the two accounts of the Ascension in the Lucan writings include: the adding of the account in the Gospel at the separation of Luke-Acts, either by Luke or a later editor; or, the introduction of the narrative into both Luke and Acts where neither had previously had any account of it.<sup>59</sup> None of these proposals has gained much support. There are arguments against the idea that Luke-Acts ever had existence in single volume form; Acts 1:1-2 being the strongest internal evidence for this. There does not seem to have existed, at the time of the creation of the New Testament canon, an authority capable of ensuring that a uniform edition of texts would be universally adopted; the process seems to have been over a long period, and no evidence of a single-volume Lucan account has been found. It does not seem feasible to suggest that the author would have been prepared, against his own stated purpose and reference to a time difference in authorship (Acts 1:1), to have radically revised the events of

the Gospel in order that the apostolic account could be included as a single history, when the Christ-event itself had such precedence and independent significance in Luke's concerns.<sup>60</sup> It may be that the inclusion of the Ascension in both Luke and Acts is simply the obvious consequence of the role it has as the connecting link between them, but the separation of Resurrection and Ascension accounts which results makes it clear that Luke does not see them as identical.<sup>61</sup>

The Gospel according to John also recognises a distinction of meaning between Resurrection and Ascension. *Μή μου ἄπτοῦ*, at Jn 20:17, has the present imperative, meaning "cease holding (or touching) me", perhaps, rather than "do not hold me".<sup>62</sup> It probably has several meanings for John in addition to the obvious physical one. These might include: the proper spiritual relationship of the risen Christ and the disciple; the situation at that point in Christ's journey to the Father; the nature of Christ's risen existence; and so on. *οὕτω γὰρ* probably has the purpose of distinguishing between Christ's being risen, which had happened, and his being ascended, which had not at that point; and also of establishing the continuity of Jesus before and after his death and Resurrection.<sup>63</sup>

*ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς* is used rather than the word 'glorified'. Jesus is glorified in the Cross and Resurrection, but this final set of encounters between Jesus and his disciples must still occur.<sup>64</sup>

The transformation of Christ, expressed in its final complete form in the Ascension, was perhaps understood as being made available to the disciples in the post-Resurrection period, during which time they became increasingly aware of the nature of the change in the form of his existence as a prospective and foundational event.<sup>65</sup> There appears to be an implication, noted above, that when Jesus has ascended then will be the time to cling to him. The apparent illogicality of this idea suggests it has a more profound meaning, and expresses in situ the theme of departure to the Father, so strong throughout John's Gospel.<sup>66</sup> An alternative view of this might be taken, in that it may be that only after the disciples' own deaths that they can have the full union which seems to be indicated in the discourses.<sup>67</sup>

An interesting balance of emphasis occurs in the Johannine handling of a differentiated Resurrection and Ascension. It finds expression in the adjacent accounts of the meeting of Mary Magdalene with the risen Christ (Jn 20:11-18) and the incident involving Thomas (Jn 20:19-29); but it must be noted that these texts can be used to support the conflation of Resurrection and Ascension, as already discussed. In the former passage, Jesus makes it clear to Mary at 20:17 that, as has been noted, she should not hold on to him yet: he is risen, but not yet ascended; his ascending to the Father for the disciples is spoken of as the decisive step for them. In the latter, Thomas is told at 20:29 that blessedness for Jesus' followers in total does not depend upon their sharing the tangible

experience of the witnesses to his being risen, but upon their believing in him in spite of his invisibility to them; the Ascension is the point of distinction between these states. This cannot be read as a demotion of the Resurrection in relation to the Ascension, but it is an expression of the essential role to be played by the relationship of the disciple with the ascended Christ, perhaps as a priority over relationship with the risen but not yet ascended Christ which was the experience of the first disciples. This opens to the disciple who is temporally and spatially more distant from the events of the Gospel a relationship with Christ which is as close as that of the closest witnesses of his life, death, and Resurrection. The apparently later and more distant writing of John's Gospel, and the meditation on the universal significance of Christ which it contains, seems to point towards this as a consciously-chosen theme of the evangelist. It places the Ascension at the heart of the vision of this Gospel.

The glorification of the Son, as expressed in Jn 17:1-26, is not a reward for virtue but is, rather, the source of salvation for all.<sup>68</sup> If the glorification of Jesus is understood to be his Resurrection and Ascension, then it is conferred upon him by the Father as that which is his right.

John, however, often seems to regard the crucial function of the Ascension as the departure of Jesus, in itself. This may be connected with his emphasis on the relation between the completion of Christ's mission from the Father, and the mission

of the Holy Spirit which is made possible by that completion; this is repeatedly emphasised in the discourses in the Gospel.

The longer, and probably later, ending of St Mark's Gospel begins at 16:9 with Mary Magdalene's meeting with the risen Christ and ends at 16:19-20 with the Ascension and continuing presence of Christ. There is, in this, a clear separation of the events of Resurrection and Ascension and a very close relationship, in terms of content at least, with Jn 20 and 21, and with Lk 24:13-43. The omission, in Mt 28:16-20, of any mention of the departure of Jesus allows the emphasis on his continuing presence with the disciples to be expressed without qualification; but this is done in terms which leave it very close to Mk 16:20 and to the whole basis for Acts, both of which give accounts of the Ascension.



## 5. Exaltation-Parousia and Ascension-Pentecost Relationships

The nature of the New Testament understanding of the Ascension-Exaltation of Christ is influenced by the emphasis given to its connection with the subsequent event or state, Pentecost or Parousia, which is judged to be its primary purpose. The influence of this understanding can be traced in the passages in the Gospels and The Acts of the Apostles which are concerned with the Ascension; the other New Testament writings, especially the Pauline corpus, concentrate on the significance of the exaltation of Christ as defining his present state. Two strong candidates for this central role in the effects of Ascension are present in the New Testament: the return of Christ at the Parousia; and, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The eschatological return of Christ as the primary consequence of the Ascension is handled in a variety of ways.

In Ac 1:10, the unidentified *ἄνδρες δύο* makes a clear link with the Resurrection (Lk 24:4), perhaps indicating that Luke understood this to be a decisive event of the same species. It also makes it less like the Transfiguration, which had, with its two well-known figures, rather the nature of a revelatory vision, at the end of which no permanent ontological change is suggested.<sup>69</sup> *οὗτος*, in verse 11, is repeated, and this stresses that it is "this same" Jesus who ascends to heaven who will return in the same way. There is also the assumption that

this is the same Jesus who has been the focus of Luke's gospel; continuity of person is emphasised as much as it is possible.

The thought that the apostles were chosen by the Holy Spirit may be an indication that Luke, and possibly the early Church in general, understood the Spirit as being in some respects already present and active in the world prior to the Ascension and Pentecost, leaving the Parousia in the principal climactic role.<sup>70</sup>

The passive, ἀνελήμφθη in Mk 16:19 and 1Tim 3:16, may best be understood as a 'theological passive', that is, describing the action of God without attempting to define that action, merely noting its 'observable' effects. ἀνελήμφθη is used in Ac 1:2, 11, 22, and 1Tim 3:16 to describe Christ's exaltation. The Creeds used ἀναβαίνω or ἀνέρχομαι to refer to the Ascension, rather than ἀνελήμφθη, perhaps because the latter's passive form allows a docetic interpretation; though the Greek Church called the Ascension ἡ ἀναλήψις or ἡ ἑορτὴ τῆς ἀναλήψεως from very early times.<sup>71</sup>

The phrase ἀπ' ἁρτί, before ὄψεσθε, in Jn 1:51, is perhaps best treated as a scribal addition; this means that the verse refers to the, perhaps distant, future, rather than 'henceforth'. The verb ὀπτανομαι is always used in John of the vision of heavenly or spiritual realities, rather than of physical sight.<sup>72</sup> The reference to heaven's being open may be a symbol of free exchange between God and man, after the manner of Is 64:1. The strong association of angels with the End, which is so dominant in the Apocalypse, for example, is likely

to be an element in Jn 1:51. The order "ascending and descending" may be significant, in that it might be taken to mean that the messengers of God hear the prayers made on earth and carry them to God, and return with the answer.

The vision of Jacob (Gen 28:12) is likely to be the source of this imagery, but transformed into an expression of the reality of relations between the divine and the created.<sup>73</sup> In neither Genesis nor John is it made clear what the angels are doing "ascending and descending". It is interesting to note that a later Palestinian Targum takes the angels' motivation in the Jacob story to be their wish to observe God. Jn 1:51 may be best seen as an adaptation of the relic of the synoptic saying about the coming of the Son of Man (Mk 14:62; Mt 26:64; cf. Lk 22:69), adapted to the framework provided by the Jacob story, but making the divine figure active rather than passive in relation to the angels' activity.<sup>74</sup>

There would be problems in arguing that the angels are ministers of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, which is an idea quite foreign to the gospels.<sup>75</sup> Jesus speaks in the plural, that is to all the disciples, not to Nathanael only. Both Nathanael and Jesus use terms from contemporary Jewish messianism, but this verse opens the concept of the Messiah to mean much more than the usual expectations, so that he is to be the instrument of unity between heaven and earth, and between time and eternity.

The word *ἐπι*, used to relate the ascent and descent of the angels 'upon' the Son of Man in Jn 1:51, presents the image of

Christ as the 'ladder' between heaven and earth, and the emphasis here may be not so much on the movement of the angels as upon the connecting role of Christ in relation to heaven and earth. The Gospel will explore the soteriological and christological consequences of this role of Jesus in establishing unity between heaven and earth.<sup>76</sup>

Chapters 7 and 8 of John's Gospel expound upon the departure of Jesus and his place with the Father. The importance of Jesus' identification of his origins and destiny in Jn 8:14 is that he establishes the authority of his witness to himself, which, in Jn 5:31, on other grounds, he declines to exploit. The repeated use of *ἐγὼ* and *ἐγὼ εἶμι* in Jn 8:21-23 is part of the process in John by which Jesus claims certain titles which both define his mission and implicitly lay claim to recognition of his divinity. The oppositions 'below:above' and 'this world:not this world' may be understood as reformulations of the Jewish 'this age:age to come', which is clearly eschatological in purpose, allied with references to Greek thought patterns.<sup>77</sup>

The sending of the Spirit, consequent upon the return of Jesus to the Father, is a theme present in John's Gospel, and also in Luke-Acts.

Jn 14:1-31 concerns Jesus' going to the Father and sending the Holy Spirit; it also includes the effects of Jesus' return on the ultimate fate of his disciples. Only in John's Gospel is the word *μὲν* used in the New Testament. Jesus leaves in order

that his disciples may come to the 'mansions' of heaven (Jn 14:2).<sup>78</sup> The departure of Jesus contains the ultimate consolation, that Jesus leaves his disciples only so that he may be with them forever. Jesus will establish a permanent home for human beings with the Father. The 'many rooms' might be read as a figure for the universality of the salvation wrought by Jesus.<sup>79</sup> Jesus give the reason for his departure as a comfort to the disciples, for the time when he will no longer be visibly present among them; and verse 3 indicates that the separation is not one which will continue until a distant Parousia.<sup>80</sup> The repetition of the theme of 'going and coming' shows John's thought that the synoptic notion of the Parousia does not exhaust this idea.<sup>81</sup> Verses 2-3 reinforce the thought that Jesus' departure is itself the condition of the return; the elevation of Jesus' humanity and the cessation of the contemporary circumstances of his relationship with his disciples making ready the place for complete union of God and creatures.<sup>82</sup>

In Jn 14:12, the "greater works" may be understood as those which are inspired by the Holy Spirit following the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ (7:39). In his exalted state, Christ is portrayed as caring for the Church in its apostolic task. Thus, the Fourth Gospel clearly includes the idea that the "greater works" depend upon the departure of Christ, which is the completion, in some way, of his work. The greatness of the Church's works is not connected with its stature, relative to Christ, but rather with its basis being

the prior fulfilment achieved by Christ, ultimately in his Ascension.<sup>83</sup> The "greater works" seem to be not external successes but, rather, the increasing flow of divine power into the human world; the disciples are promised a participation in the activity of the Father and the Son and the Spirit.<sup>84</sup>

The departure of Jesus is not an abandonment of his disciples which leaves them unsupported and unguided; this is emphasised in Jn 14:16-18. It has a substantive purpose: the sending of the Spirit of truth.<sup>85</sup> The efficacy of the actions of the departed Christ depends upon the disciples fellowship with him in loving obedience. In Jn 14:18-19 the 'short time' seems to refer to the Resurrection appearances of Jesus, but that does not necessarily exhaust the meaning of this passage. The lack of a conjunction between "I will not leave you orphans" and "I will come to you", in Jn 14:18, may be an expression both of the briefness of the interruption in Jesus' relationship with the Church and of the immediacy of comfort offered to the disciples in their situation as 'orphans'.<sup>86</sup>

Jesus' return to the Father, as at Jn 14:28, is a soteriological statement of the need for his departure in order that his promises to the disciples may come to fulfilment. Jn 14:28-31 may be taken as an indication that the peace of Christ flows from the accomplishment of his work in heaven as well as on earth. Jn 14:29 seems to be a return to the emphasis that, properly understood, Jesus' departure is to be a cause of joy, and that this is a property of the Church's character deriving from this.

As expressed in Jn 16:7, the Ascension, as a departure, was regarded as an absolutely necessary precondition for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Christ's sending of the Holy Spirit is portrayed as deriving from his ascended humanity. The sending of the Holy Spirit requires the total union of God and man in Christ, and, thereby, the exaltation of his humanity.<sup>87</sup> The Spirit, in some sense, 'cannot' be sent from the Father until the Son has completed his mission and returned.<sup>88</sup> The Paraclete will bring the glory of Christ into the hearts of the disciples prior to his return in the Parousia.

The farewell discourse of Jesus in Jn 13-17 contains an extended explication of his departure and glorification, and the consequences of this.

F. F. Segovia identifies a chiasmic structure in Jn 13:31-2, in which the second phrase is reversed in this pattern: ABCCBA.

A: the time of glorification ( *Nῦν* and *εὐθὺς* ).

B: the glorification itself.

C: the glorification of God in Jesus ( *ἐν αὐτῷ* ).

Segovia also finds significant the temporal references of the elements of the structure, as indications of a complex which is a profound exploration of the relation of time and eternity in the Ascension of the Son of man:

A: present                                      B: past (aorist) C: past (aorist)

C: past (conditional) B: future                      A: future (and present)

The subtlety of this temporal pattern may be demonstrated in the two A elements of the chiasmus. The aorist *ἐδοξάσθη* (first occurrence) together with *Nῦν* emphasises that the glorification

is already in some sense accomplished. Then, *εὐθὺς δοξάσει* places immediacy and future together in a proximity which asserts that the glorification is still to be completed.<sup>89</sup> This is a suggestion which sees the fulfilment of Christ's mission as future, but not only future, suggesting that the role of the Holy Spirit, rather than a distant Parousia, is meant to be understood as the next stage of that mission.

The First Letter of John, 2:1, speaks of Jesus as "a Paraclete close to the Father" ( *πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα* ). This is a different use of the term 'paraclete' than that found in John's Gospel (14:26; 15:26; 16:7; though 14:16 implies 1Jn 2:1) and suggests the active nature of the role of the ascended Christ, which is quite consistent with the picture of the departed Jesus given in that Gospel (14:1-6, 13-14).

Jesus may be making an orthodox messianic claim in Mk 14:62, in that the position of power next to God is one of the roles of the true Messiah; the high priest's subsequent charge of blasphemy may be a denial of the legitimacy of Jesus' claim, or an assertion that Jesus has gone beyond such a claim, or, most likely, takes Jesus' words as they stand as evidence of the blasphemy for which he is searching.<sup>90</sup> Jesus' answer combines quotations from Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13, but their use is not that expected in contemporary Judaism. The two present participles *καθήμενον* and *έρχόμενον* cannot be simultaneously literally true, except in a transcendent context, and reflect their role as Old Testament allusions. This is an apparent claim to eschatological significance, but what is important in



the context of Jesus as the sender or enabler of the coming of the divine Spirit, though that is not referred to here, is that divine status is required by Christ to do this. The eschatological role of Christ and the sending of the Pentecost Spirit are not only compatible, but mutually necessary.

In Mt 28:19, *οὖν* is significant in pointing out the necessity of the link between the empowerment and glorification of Jesus and the imperative of spreading the word, healing, and baptising on the basis of that power. *εἰς τὸ ὄνομα* and what follows it, placed here, has a number of consequences: that it actually names the Persons of the Trinity; that it acknowledges the right of all Three, including the Holy Spirit, to worship; it recognises the source of the blessings given to the disciples; and, the use of the names is a pledge of obedience to Christ's authority.

Jesus' promise, in verse 20, that he will still be with the disciples indicates that, though exalted, he will not be absent; perhaps it was implicitly understood by the early Church that the Spirit represents at least one mode of his presence.<sup>91</sup>

*ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος* is a peculiarly Matthean construction, found also at Mt 13:39f, 49; 24:3, which might be taken as referring to the era of the Church.<sup>92</sup>

'Judge', in Mt 19:28, may be best understood here in the Old Testament sense of 'rule', rather than 'passing a verdict'. The 'new birth' may actually refer to the physical restoration of the land of Israel. In Mt 26:64, *πλὴν* could be understood as meaning 'furthermore' without loss of its adversarial force in

identifying the lifting up of the Son of man as his vindication.<sup>93</sup>

Luke-Acts makes the explicit connection between the departure of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit, but in a much less emphatic way than is to be found in John's Gospel. Luke indicates that the Ascension will precede Pentecost (Lk 24:49; Ac 1:5, 8); rather than that it must (Jn 16:7). Luke does not emphasise the element of necessity in the relationship between Ascension and Pentecost, but he does seem to take it for granted that there is a link, discernible in the actual experience of the early Church. John's more analytical treatment of the events involving Christ appears to have led him to place this connection in the realms of necessity.

The vision of the glorified Son of man in Rev 1:12-20, along with the vision of the Lamb that was slain (5:5-14), presents a clear picture of the centrality of the glorified Christ as the core of the end of the ages, as this is presented in Revelation. G. B. Caird interprets Rev 5:6, along with 4:5-6, as God's Spirit being separated from the created world by a sea of glass; he sees in this a reason for the necessity of the breaking of the seal by the ascended Christ.<sup>95</sup>

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Both the Parousia-centred and the Pentecost-centred approaches to the effects of the Ascension-Exaltation of Christ can be demonstrated to have New Testament support. Indeed, there is no conflict between the focus on Pentecost and that on the Parousia; both can be held, and must be held, together to present the full picture of the post-Resurrection functions of Christ in both present and future. Taken as complementary dimensions of the Ascension they produce a much richer and more inclusive insight into the soteriological effects of Christ's Ascension than their separate treatment permits.

They also combine to reinforce the necessary, indeed defining, characteristic of the Ascension understood as the divine mystery it is proclaimed to be in the New Testament: the impossibility in principle of its being defined comprehensively or expressed completely in terms of other realities or in words alone. The difficulties of expressing the specific and unique role of the Ascension in a way which does justice to its place in the context of the Christ-event are manifest in the complexities of its New Testament expression.

## 6. Conclusions

χαίρω is a Lucan motif: joy being the dominant emotion at both the birth of Jesus (Lk 1:28,44,47; 2:14,20,38), and his parting.<sup>96</sup> The 'joy' carries the first part of the story, in The Gospel of Luke, into the second part, The Acts of the Apostles; the Ascension acting as the link. The Ascension is clearly understood in the New Testament to be a dimension of the triumph of Christ over death and evil alongside the Resurrection, and the parting which it represents is not in any way regarded as a disaster; this may be compared with the devastation experienced by the disciples after the Crucifixion as it is portrayed prior to the Resurrection. The continuing presence of the ascended Christ is an important element in creating the atmosphere of joyfulness which pervades the post-Resurrection, post-Ascension Church.

The Ascension is handled by the authors of the Gospels and The Acts of the Apostles in ways which make a recovery of the nature of the witnesses' experiences a most difficult task. This is true in part of the 'externals' of the event: what was actually seen and heard by those present?; when did the event take place?; where did it occur?; and so on. It is also true of the 'inner' meaning of the event: what relation of the body to the spirit is expressed by it?; how are the concepts of departure and continuing presence to be held together?; in what sense are the ideas of divine immutability and change modified by the Ascension?; what is its historical status?; and so on.

Without avoiding these valid questions, which are addressed by patristic and modern authors, who give particular attention to the Pauline issues regarding the Ascension, it seems possible to argue that the New Testament is unequivocal in its assertion that Christ ascended, even if it is decidedly equivocal in its interpretation of that event, if event is the correct term. The theological issues it raises are so substantial that the effect of its presence in Christian faith and teaching is beyond doubt, and even if it were not in the explicit Scriptural revelation its meaning of the simultaneous departure and non-departure of Christ would certainly have to be addressed in some form.

The Ascension of Christ and the state of affairs resulting from it can be seen to have a pervasive and often implicit influence upon the New Testament in total by its being interpreted as the achievement and expression of the already-realised promise of final victory by Christ. It is itself a major theme which interacts with the other main themes of the New Testament in a way which is both linguistically and theologically complex. This is a central part of the explanation of the immensely varied interpretations of the role and significance of the Ascension to be found in the writings produced in the centuries following the apostolic age. The patristic writings, to be considered next, contain important discussions of the Ascension, and its theology, addressing particularly those issues raised by the difficulties inherent in the New Testament accounts and interpretations.

## CHAPTER III

### INSIGHTS INTO THE THEOLOGY OF THE ASCENSION DURING THE PATRISTIC ERA INCLUDING THE PARTICULAR CONTRIBUTION OF SAINT HILARY OF POITIERS

There is, in general, a less systematic and uniform concern with the Ascension evidenced in the work of the patristic writers and their contemporaries than there is with the other principal christological doctrines. Some writers do have significant points to make about Christ's Ascension, both in itself and, especially, in relation to other doctrines and other concerns; but the extant writings of many important theological figures of this period give little or no extended consideration to the nature or to the consequences of the Ascension. This may be, in itself, an indication of their

estimation of its significance, or of its being a doctrine which has a secondary place in relation to one or more 'primary' doctrines: particularly Resurrection and Pentecost.

Whatever the place given to the Ascension by the writers of these early centuries, the volume of theological, apologist, homiletic, and other Christian writings produced during this period means that among them there was inevitably some consideration of this doctrine because it has scriptural roots and was beginning, in an irregular and often localised manner, to be celebrated as a distinct feast in the Christian calendar. There were also a few theologians who argued that a more significant role be recognised as belonging to the Ascension.

## 1. Principal Patristic Themes

While every important author of this period has a different approach to the Ascension, as to other doctrines, four basic types of answers to the problem of the placing of the Ascension emerge as identifiable themes. They are not really schools of thought which can be related to groups of like-minded thinkers or to a particular time or tradition, but, rather, they seem to develop out of the common emphases of individuals applying their minds to the same problem or set of questions.

### a) The ascended Christ and the Church

One approach to the understanding of the Ascension grew out of a concern with the relation of the ascended Christ to the Church. This involved taking the Ascension to be essentially a shift in the emphasis of the person and work of Christ from the created to the divine realm, recognising that at all points he must be directly involved in both.

Justin Martyr, in Chapter 26 of his First Apology, indicated that he regarded the Ascension as the decisive moment at which the Church becomes subject to persecution in its defence of truth.<sup>1</sup> He regarded this as the point at which the work of God is carried on by the heavenly Christ primarily through his people. Concerning the time prior to the Ascension, Justin saw



this work as carried out directly by Christ's incarnate person for those people, who were, during Christ's visible Incarnation, solely the recipients of this action, as distinct from their being also its agents in the post-Ascension, post-Pentecost Church. Justin even went so far as to see in the Ascension the empowerment of the Church, giving it spiritual legitimacy to act in God's name; in doing so he assigned to the ascent of Christ some of the effects usually assigned to the descent of the Holy Spirit, perhaps wishing to avoid too complete a distinction between them.

Two centuries later, Gregory of Nyssa came to a similar understanding of Christ's Ascension as a modification of the mode of his presence to the disciples. In his Oratio Catechetica, 32, he wrote of Christ's promise to be always with his disciples in a way which precluded their ever being separated by external forces (cf. Mt 28:16-20; Mk 16:19-20; Jn 14:18-21; Rm 8:38-39).<sup>2</sup> Gregory contrasted the Ascension to heaven as a 'visible' event with its invisible consequence which allowed the disciples to retain the conviction that the ascended Christ continues to be everywhere present. There is some ambiguity in this statement, since it seems to imply that Christ's post-Ascension presence is located in the minds of the disciples. Without directly addressing this apparent difficulty, Gregory also spoke of the post-Easter events and their "divine quality and their connection with sublime and transcendent power" and their "supernatural character"; this was worded in such a way as to leave no possible doubt that he

believed the Ascension to be a divine reality and not simply a product of the Church's faith.

In Letter 17, 12, Cyril of Alexandria made it clear that he believed that the nature of the sacrifice of the Eucharist depends upon an understanding of the spiritual nature of Christ's existence as derivative from his being both risen and ascended, and being thereby present to all mankind.<sup>3</sup> Cyril ridiculed the idea that the Ascension represents the removal of Christ to "a safe and secure place" which would leave him in the position of having fled from the continuing danger of being ensnared or plotted against by his enemies. In Letter 50, 15, he pointed to the triumphant way in which the Ascension is portrayed in Scripture as a conclusive sign that Christ continues to work for humanity, particularly through the Church, as God and man in the presence of the Father, having defeated the enemies both of God and of mankind.<sup>4</sup>

The special contribution made by this type of consideration of the Ascension is that it bases the presence of Christ to the Church and to all creation on his heavenly existence. Other ways of expressing this presence tend to see it as based in the Resurrection and through the agency of the Pentecost Spirit. This approach does not detract from that basis, but it does recognise the significance, in its own right and not as simply a necessary precondition for the others, of the definitive entry into the divine realm of God made man.

## b) Development of the person of the ascended Christ

A second theme, which is closely related to the first, is that the Ascension represents the entry into a different mode of existence for Christ in himself, and not solely in relation to the Church. This is not in opposition to the first theme, but it does represent a difference in emphasis and in theological insight.

In Libellus de Oratione, 23.1-2, Origen stressed the need to avoid spatial categories in speaking of the Ascension and in seeking to understand the mode of existence of the ascended one.<sup>5</sup> He did this by emphasising that the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ must be in his spiritual body. This was an explanation with which Methodius, in De Resurrectione, 7.8, took issue by defending, from the starting point of Christ's physicality, the complete identity of the incarnate, risen, and ascended body of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

John Chrysostom, in contrast, assessed the significance of the Ascension by concentrating particularly on its effect upon the humanity of Christ. He believed that the humanity which was encountered by the disciples in the period between Resurrection and Ascension was constituted differently than it had been during the Incarnation as such. He argued that the risen Christ was seen by the disciples during the 'forty days', but not in the same, continuous, way that he was before the Resurrection, but rather in a way which reflected his new existence and the purposes for which that existence had been brought about. He

implied, too, that this existence continues in the ascended Christ.<sup>7</sup> He considered that the Ascension was a real departure of the risen Christ from even his post-Resurrection form of contact with the ordinary world of human life. Christ's unique relation to the divine, even in his humanity, was understood by Chrysostom to be the whole point of all that the New Testament has to say, and that the Ascension represents the fulfilment of his mission from the Father. The disciples' reaction to his departure, as compared to their reaction to his Crucifixion, was, he argued, proof of the positive nature of that departure and of its place in the divine plan.<sup>8</sup>

This theme, of the Ascension as an event and state of being with effects upon the person of Christ, reflects a concern with questions about the nature of the Ascension as a christological event, rather than as primarily an ecclesiological matter. It looks at the effects of the Ascension specifically upon the ascended one, but, like the first theme, it does not seek to explore in a more developed way the wider theological ramifications.

### c) Christ's Ascension as the opening of Heaven

The third theme does go further in tracing the effects of the Ascension in that it attempts an explanation of its purpose. This is the dominant patristic approach to the Ascension and is to be found throughout the period in its various forms. Its basic idea is that the Ascension of Christ represents the opening up of the way to heaven, or of the gates of heaven, for humanity. It brings into discussion, though often in an undeveloped form, the soteriology of the Ascension.

Tertullian, in Adversus Gnosticos Scorpiace, Chapter X, asserted that heaven is open to the Christian through the Ascension, prior to any actual entry, so that when the worthy individual comes to its threshold there is no additional delay, but simply direct entry prepared for by Christ, who is waiting to receive his people.<sup>9</sup> This is an interpretation of the Ascension which addresses its nature primarily in terms of its function. It is concerned with the present or eternal function of the Ascension of Christ, while not separating this from the event itself, using an approach which is more commonly applied to other christological-soteriological mysteries, especially to the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

In his Expositio Fidei, Athanasius regarded Christ's Ascension as showing the way for humanity to heaven by fulfilling the role of precursor, 'prodromos', in his own crucified and risen humanity, in which he acts as judge of who is worthy to enter heaven.<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, in referring to the

Ascension, particularly in Contra Arianos, 2.15, 1.40, was often concerned to defend the consubstantiality of the Father and Son against Arian subordinationism, by insisting that in the Ascension it is Christ's humanity alone which ascends and is exalted, because the full divinity of the Son cannot be exalted.<sup>11</sup> This kind of accentuating of the effect of the Ascension specifically upon the humanity of Christ -while such an emphasis does allow a defence of his real divinity- can depend upon a theology of Ascension as exaltation which does not allow for the possibilities which can arise from exploiting the radical unity of Christ's personhood and its consequences.

Rufinus of Aquileia (AD 345-410), a monk and an opponent of Jerome, in Commentarius in Symbolum Apostolorum, 31, emphasised the Ascension's role in taking the fleshly dimension of the Word made flesh to its rightful place in heaven.<sup>12</sup> J. G. Davies' sympathy for, if not agreement with, Rufinus' concept of a non-personal humanity of Christ taken up at the Ascension, as the means by which the Ascension applies to all humanity, seems to regard as dispensable the necessary particularity of human existence in the cause of an idea of the transmission of salvation which seems dependent upon the Platonic theory of forms, and seems also to compromise the reality, and therefore the soteriological efficacy of the humanity of Christ, raising more difficulties than it solves.<sup>13</sup>

The central purpose of Christ's Incarnation, Ambrose wrote in Tractatus de Fide Orthodoxa, 3.51, is the preparation of the road to heaven for humanity. Christ can do this, Ambrose argued

in section 4.7, because his Resurrection and Ascension are those also of all mankind, or at least of all believers who constitute his Body, through his redeeming person.<sup>14</sup> Such a use of the doctrine of the mystical body to account for the means by which the soteriological benefits of Christ's Ascension are transmitted to others has its advantages: it dispenses with the need to argue for a quasi-medium for the transmission of salvation from Christ to creatures; it involves a directness of connection between Christ and the Church which is sacramental; and, it has an internal consistency of argument which seems superior to the classical theory of atonement, with its concentration on the defeat of the devil. Its principal disadvantage is that it seems to require an explicit faith in Christ as the means of becoming attached to salvation, which is problematical to the idea of the universality of the salvation achieved by Christ.

An Ascension sermon, attributed to John Chrysostom but possibly written by Nestorius, in 'Codex Berolinensis', 77, considered the Feast of the Ascension to be that of the success of the mission of Christ and his victory, in which he ascends "in order to make heaven passable to those upon earth".<sup>15</sup> This idea is not developed in the sermon, but even in such an unexplicated form it does attribute to the Ascension a vital function in the entry of created persons into heaven, from which they are otherwise excluded by their not belonging there.

Similarly, Maximus, the fifth century Bishop of Turin, described Christ as having, at his Ascension, forever opened

the gates of heaven to man, now made rightfully an inhabitant, by his defeat of death and the devil; the Ascension being proved by Pentecost.<sup>16</sup> Maximus had a sophisticated theology of the Ascension which places many of his thoughts in the fourth of the general approaches of his era to the subject, but the breadth of his insight means that he, more so than others, cannot simply be categorised exclusively into any one of these groups of ideas.

The theme of the opening of heaven by the Ascension of Christ, in particular, leads to the obvious questions of why and in what manner it may be said to have been closed to entry. Whether the closure was understood as being due to sin, or the devil (Maximus), or to the nature of existence (Tertullian, Ambrose, Chrysostom/Nestorius), it had a strong influence upon the interpretation of Christ's Ascension. Allied to this was the question of how heaven could be closed by any of these against the will of God.



#### **d) The Ascension and the Holy Trinity**

It was the fourth of the types of patristic approach to the understanding of the Ascension which enabled those who pursued this way to produce the most incisive answers to the kind of questions raised by the other themes, though not necessarily in the same terms as those on which the questions were posed. This approach concentrated on the effects within the Trinity of the entrance into the divine life of God made man, and the consequences of those effects in soteriological and other terms. It is this approach which appears the most fruitful for later development of the doctrine of Ascension, and, in conjunction with the theme of the opening of Heaven, to be especially incisive for contemporary theology. So, it is the effect of the Ascension upon the Trinity which seems the most useful of the four main themes to explore in detail. The dominant, though not the only, patristic figure to take this route was Hilary of Poitiers.

## 2. Hilary's Methodology

Hilary's particular perspective on the Ascension grew, to some extent, out of the theological method he used in examining this doctrine. Hilary's involvement in the Arian controversy was one of the principal external influences on his discussions of Christ's exaltation. In arguing against the divinity of Christ, New Testament passages such as Ph 2:9, Ac 2:36, and 1Cor 15:24-28, were frequently used by Arian writers to claim that the exaltation of Christ proved that he could not be divine because God could not be exalted. These texts, and others, became the battleground between the Arian and anti-Arian parties, and required a treatment different from the non-controversial exegesis which had been applied to them in earlier writings. Those involved in arguing over these passages included: the Arians Germinius, Marcellus of Ancyra, and Eunomius; and the anti-Arians Eusebius of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea.<sup>17</sup>

Hilary, like Gregory of Nyssa, approached the task of defending orthodox doctrine by using exegesis of scripture as a starting point for argument and developing this far beyond the explicit meaning of particular texts, in a manner which is close to what has come to be called systematic theology. This was necessary in the context of the Arian controversy because both sides were using the same scriptural texts to justify their relative positions; so it was necessary to construct complex arguments which drew on all parts of the New and Old

Testaments, and on the logic of philosophical method, to reinforce the interpretation in situ of the key texts.<sup>18</sup>

The areas of doctrine on which Hilary concentrated, and the pressure of the controversies in which he engaged, led him to identify and address questions which soon came to be widely debated as crucial matters of doctrine. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa worked to bring a consistent vocabulary to bear upon the discussion of the Trinity and the Incarnation which Athanasius and, later, Hilary had led by their championing of the homoousion terminology. Even so, Hilary sometimes chose to use words in ways which left their precise meaning in doubt, arguing, for reasons of conciliation, that 'homoiousios' could express the Nicene doctrine, while preferring 'homoousios'. However, even when he appeared to stray into questionable language Hilary seemed to do so deliberately, in order to push the possibilities of that language beyond its contemporary limitations; for example, the apparent docetism of De Trinitate 10.27-28, 35, and 11.2 is balanced by the clearly non-docetic observations of 10.24, in which Christ's eating and drinking are cited as demonstrating the reality of his human nature.<sup>19</sup>

Hilary's desire to encourage dialogue between the eastern and western Church seems to have developed in part from his own sympathy for both approaches to the task of theology. His concern with speculative theology was inseparable from his concern with salvation in De Trinitate, 6.35, 8.7, 12.56-57, where he wished to show the indispensability of faith for

individuals in obtaining the salvation made possible by the Incarnation. Hilary appeared positively to promote the belief that philosophy and mysticism are the twin requirements of a valid theology.<sup>20</sup>

One particularly valuable aspect of Hilary's methodology was his willingness to address logical difficulties which he encountered in the course of his thinking about the Trinity and about salvation. His mystical leanings did not lead him to use the concept of mystery as a way of avoiding apparent problems, but as a spur to exploring them as important matters of faith. If his approach was not as linguistically rigorous as the Cappadocians it was nonetheless incisive, as his examination of Christ's Ascension demonstrates.



### 3. Hilary on the Ascension

Hilary's consideration of the implications of Christ's Ascension is to be found mainly in his De Trinitate, written against the Arians during his exile in Asia Minor from AD 356 to 360.

De Trinitate has as its main concern the person of Christ, particularly the full reality of the humanity and divinity which constitute his person, rather than the doctrine of the Trinity itself. Hilary chose to address the Arian perspective on the weakness of Christ's humanity by concentrating on the divine Logos in its three stages of pre-existence, kenosis, and exaltation.<sup>21</sup> In the course of doing this, Hilary showed his awareness of soteriology as an indispensable element in the understanding of the person and nature of Christ.

Hilary believed that the problems connected with understanding the nature of the union of God and man in Christ are best addressed by taking the Incarnation and the Ascension as two distinct but mutually enlightening manifestations of the same process. He considered, in Tractatus super Psalmos, 68.25, the logical problem posed by the existence of the situation in which the incarnate Son of God seemed not to overwhelm, by the glory of his Godhead, the humanity which had been assumed.<sup>22</sup> The solution favoured by Hilary was to argue that the effects which such a union would naturally produce had somehow been nullified by divine decision. He used the word 'evacuatio' to

express this, but was careful to avoid giving the impression that the word meant anything beyond the meaning of the neutralising of the visible effects of this union.<sup>23</sup> However, Hilary did not address the presupposition underlying this idea; he accepted that the proximity of Christ's divinity would have overwhelmed his humanity. There is no recognition of the clear Christian teaching on the ubiquity of God, which means, in a different sense, that all human beings are in a direct proximity to the divine without any sensual or psychological disturbance or even effect. Thus, disregarding such a contrary perspective, Hilary was led to commit himself to arguing from positions which did not really strengthen the essential thrust of his argument, and may not have been necessary to it: this aspect of Hilary's discussion seems to have taken him away from more central issues. It is a choice of direction which, while it does modify, does not seriously weaken, his case for the centrality of Christ's ontology to the meaning of salvation, and the role of the Ascension in it.

One of Hilary's chief insights into the Ascension derived from his defence of the full divinity of Christ. Despite his relatively tolerant attitude to the use of the homoiousion as a way of expressing orthodox Christian doctrine, as in Liber de Synodis, 67-9, 74, Hilary took with great seriousness the consequences of the unity of God and man in Christ, both in itself and in relation to the Trinity.<sup>24</sup> He used the concept of kenosis to deal with the tensions this creates in speaking of the incarnate Son, in De Trinitate, 12.6, 9.38.<sup>25</sup> Hilary's

working out of the implications of these tensions for the ascended Christ, in relation particularly to the Father, yields some very interesting insights.

The unity of God and man in Christ, on the basis of which he is able to act as Mediator, was understood by Hilary as the means by which salvation is made available to creatures.<sup>26</sup> It is the single entity, in which Christ unites absolutely and completely the divine and the created, which Hilary saw as the active centre of the soteriological role of the Ascension.<sup>27</sup> This is to be placed in the context of the absolute ontological otherness of the divine which is implied in Hilary's discussion of the distinctions between God and man.<sup>28</sup>

However, at times Hilary himself appeared to find the absolute nature of such a distinction too severe and he seemed to find it necessary, when speaking of the sufferings of Christ's humanity, to take up an almost docetic stance: "why do we think of the flesh conceived by the Spirit in terms of the nature of an ordinary human body?"<sup>29</sup>

Hilary's apparent reluctance to apply the implications of ontological otherness rigorously to the incarnate Christ did not extend to his thinking about the ascended Christ. Indeed, it was perhaps his determination to portray the Ascension as a crucial ontological advance in the person and relationships of Christ which has led to the particular reservations he allowed in relation to the incarnate Christ. Hilary, in De Trinitate, 9.6, wrote: "There is a distinction between the three states: God, before his human life; then God-and-man; and thereafter

wholly God and wholly man."<sup>30</sup> He takes the argument further by saying that "in the Lord Jesus Christ a person of both natures is encountered".<sup>31</sup> These two statements, taken together, show Hilary beginning to grasp the implications of the Ascension understood as an indispensable stage in a soteriology which has, as one of its defining purposes, the ontological conciliation of God and non-god.

Hilary seems consistently to have had as his understanding of Christ's exaltation the sharing by his humanity in the glory and honour of the Father. This exaltation, which Hilary sometimes identified with the Resurrection, is the 'birth' into the life of the Trinity of the Son of man.<sup>32</sup>

Hilary's conception of the divine plan was that its purpose was the exaltation of the humanity of Christ to become fully united with the divine Trinity through union with God the Son, and to share as fully as is logically possible in the power of the Godhead.

In De Trinitate, 10.6, in contradiction of the Arian argument that Jesus' words about himself can, in general, only refer to his human nature, and not to his divinity, which they disputed, Hilary wrote:

"We are not, of course, denying that all these words of his do refer to his Being. But, granted that Jesus Christ is both God and man, and that he did not begin to be God when he became man, or cease to be God also when he was man; -granted too, that after his humanity was taken up into God, the entire humanity was totally deified,- the meaning of his words must correspond exactly with the mystery of his existence." 33



Hilary read "Deus erit omnia in omnibus" (1Cor 15:28; Vulgate translation) as meaning that Christ, at his Resurrection, has become in all respects divine so that his humanity and divinity together participate fully in this glory. He argued that all people who rise from the dead through the salvation initiated by Christ will also be deified in their risen bodies, and will come to share in the same glory. The mechanism for this transferring from Christ to his people of the possibility of entry into divine glory is, Hilary thought, the likeness to Christ given to the redeemed in the general resurrection.<sup>34</sup>

Hilary took Eph 4:4-10 to mean that there is a direct connection made between the idea of God's being over, through, and in all and the Ascension of Christ as that which universalises his active presence. Ephesians uses the Psalmist's connection, in Ps 68:18, between the ascending on high of the Lord and leading of captivity as itself a captive, to emphasise the victorious nature of the Ascension of Christ to which it is applied, and Hilary regarded this connection as a key to the soteriological significance of the Ascension.

It was in his discussion of the nature and place of the Ascension that Hilary went furthest in examining the formative role which ontological imperatives might have in an orthodox soteriology. Hilary's strength at this point was in his willingness to explore the underlying philosophical questions raised by the scriptural accounts and explications, and being prepared to acknowledge paradoxes and difficulties without

feeling that the New Testament's integrity is threatened by them.

One of Hilary's key anti-Arian texts was Jn 17:5-11. The polemical strength of this text is in Jesus' words asking the Father to glorify him with the glory he had with the Father before the world came to be. It also includes the idea that the followers of Jesus will also share his glory when they become one with him as he is with the Father. The exaltation of Christ is presented as the fulfilling of a process which begins with the withdrawal -in some sense- from divine glory by Christ, followed by a return to that glory which includes humanity: both his own and that of his disciples. This, for Hilary, was the clear assignment of a soteriological role to the exaltation of the whole person of Christ. An implication of this is that the 'forma servi' which Christ assumed should be glorified in the Father. Hilary used the Johannine concept of 'gloria' to examine the 'advent' of Christ; in this context it becomes clearer why Hilary preferred the term 'advent' to describe the coming of Christ, with its emphasis on the continuity of his person, while avoiding here the term 'incarnation'.<sup>35</sup>

If the Ascension represents, as Hilary argued, a late stage in a process of development in the relationship between the divine and the non-divine, then the origins, evolution, and conclusion of that process must be an important determining factor in the need for, and form of, the person and works of Christ as Saviour or Mediator. Hilary expressed the development in these terms: "ut cum aliud sit ante hominem Deus, aliud sit

homo et Deus, aliud sit post hominem et Deum totus homo totus Deus"; the core idea of which might be expressed as "God, before his human life; then God-and-man; and thereafter [after being divine and human] wholly God and wholly man."<sup>36</sup> This is a condensed and enigmatic summary of a complex theological position with wide-ranging christological and soteriological implications.

"God, before his human life" (or, "God is one thing before he became man") is a phrase which can be properly understood as part of orthodox theological discussion only if the word "before" is used to express priority, and is recognised as a temporal metaphor in relation to eternal reality. The problems involved in handling events and persons which are argued to exist in the realms of both time and eternity are present throughout any Christian soteriology, and Hilary does not try to ameliorate them in his choice of terminology. The difficulties of defending both the immutability of God and the effectiveness of the Christ-event in the divine sphere are brought to their sharpest focus in the Incarnation and Ascension of Christ. If the phrase implies non-unity, prior to the Incarnation, of the humanity and divinity of Christ from the created perspective, it accurately represents the position. If it were to be taken to mean change in the Trinity from non-unity to unity of the human and divine in Christ, it would represent a conception of eternity as time writ large. Hilary, therefore, almost certainly meant this to be a phrase grounded in creaturely perception of the process he describes. The same

caution applies to the second phrase in his summary.

"Then God-and-man" (or, "man and God together is another thing") is a very compressed description of the basic premiss of the Incarnation. It concentrates on the uniting of the divine nature and human nature in Christ as the stage between that at which the divinity alone exists and the humanity is a potential and their being united in a way which somehow implies an enhancement of both natures by a subsequent development. In the simple adjacency of 'God' and 'man', which this middle stage suggests, Hilary appears to refer to the Incarnation as such, leaving the final stage to be reached in the Resurrection or Ascension or both. However it is intended, it seems logical to interpret Hilary's assessment of the Incarnation as a central but penultimate part of the process leading from the separateness of God and non-god to the union of God and non-god through Christ.

"And thereafter wholly God and wholly man" (or, "after man and God, man is complete, God is complete") is a very strange expression indeed. There is nothing to indicate that Hilary believed the humanity of the incarnate Christ to be incomplete; and certainly the idea that his divinity was lacking in some way would have been alien to Hilary's theology and faith. The concept of the development of Christ's humanity "*aliud sit post hominem et Deum*" to a fulness, as a possible meaning of "*totus homo*", would be consistent, but to apply that idea to the divine would not. "*Totus Deus*" may be intended as an analogous or metaphorical way of including the divinity of Christ in the

total fulfilment of his person in the Resurrection and Ascension. One possible way of taking Hilary's phrase, which allows it to have a non-theoretical force is to take "totus homo totus Deus" to apply to the hypostatic union and to the integration of the two natures in Christ's single person. This is also a potential means of extending, within an orthodox christology, the exaltation of Christ to include his divinity without implying that God can be 'exalted'. For Hilary, the effects of the Resurrection, and particularly of the Ascension, must also be applicable to the Godhead. There appears to be here a solution to the question, raised by Hilary, of the way in which the 'disturbance' created in the Trinity by the union of God the Son with human nature can be resolved. If the disturbance caused by the adjacency of the divine and human in Christ is due to disparities of ontological response and relationship of the two natures with the Father and Spirit, the total integration of God and man in Christ may be the uniting and resolving of the two into a singularity of being which is simple and inclusive.

Hilary saw the Ascension as the mirror-image of the processes involved in the advent of Christ, but without losing what had been gained during the Incarnation. He believed that in the exaltation of Christ, of which the Ascension is an indispensable element, "evacuatur forma servi et assumitur forma Dei"; this is the means by which, as both God and man, Christ reigns in heaven at the Father's right hand.<sup>37</sup>

In a central passage on this theme, De Trinitate, 11.28, Hilary combined a consideration of the notion of the 'defeat of death' with ideas drawn from Phil 3:21 on being conformed to the body of Christ's glory, to produce a synthesis of the effects of the Ascension on the ascended one.<sup>38</sup> He argued that the humanity of the exalted Christ is transformed, without being destroyed or overwhelmed, from its natural state of existence into that of his divinity, by which it is elevated and to which it is subjected; and by this, death is transformed into life.<sup>39</sup> Hilary's word 'subiectio' really implied that, in the Ascension, Christ's humanity became the subject of his divinity, rather than subject to it.

The assertion that in the Incarnation Christ is 'God-and-man', but that only through Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension does he become 'wholly God and wholly man', suggests that Hilary believed this advance to be one of the primary goals of the Christ-event. It suggests, too, that Hilary, in considering the Ascension, had in mind the arrival at a point in the development of Christ's person and relationships which was willed from the outset by God, but which could only be brought about by the specific stages of development which had preceded it, and without which stages it could not be achieved. Hilary seemed to be in search of the structures which support this situation, but instead of pursuing this line of thought he turns his attention to the present means by which the creature is incorporated into the process: for him, this is principally the Eucharist.

His approach to the discussion of the Eucharist showed his interest in the establishment of the indwelling of God in man as "the mystery of the real and natural unity"; "mysterium verae ac naturalis unitatis", in De Trinitate 8.17.<sup>40</sup> This is quite consistent with his overall understanding of salvation as the fullest exploitation of the relationship between God and creature, which is made possible by Christ.

Hilary used the phrase "Deus erit omnia in omnibus" to extend to the Body of Christ (meaning, his people) the concept that Christ's human nature participated in the 'forma Dei' of his divine nature; so that, as the Church is united to Christ and in that sense is Christ, so it participates in that 'forma Dei'.<sup>41</sup> It is this participation which, Hilary argued, constitutes entry into heaven and, therefore, salvation.

Hilary stressed the role of Eucharistic communion, in which, he argued, believers are capable of receiving into their human nature the indwelling of the flesh of Christ, and which, through Christ's generation by the Father, allows a mediated but direct access of the creature to a God with whom it does not share any ontological commonality.<sup>42</sup>

The purposes for which Hilary wrote De Trinitate, especially his criticisms of Arian christology and his wish to achieve progress by reassessing some of the terminology used in the controversies, meant that one particular and most suggestive area of his thought remained largely undeveloped. That area is his attention to the extended implications of the total

otherness of being of the divine and the created, and the conciliation of the two incommensurable ontologies by the mediatorial role of Christ. Hilary certainly recognised this dimension of the saving person and work of Christ but chose, for perfectly valid reasons, to develop his arguments in other directions.

In doing this, Hilary hinted at a whole series of interconnected matters which touch upon the nature of the soteriological enterprise and the factors which determine its form, both in total and at each stage. This is not seen in isolation from the other levels at which the redemptive process operates, but it is as a fundamental and indispensable dimension in its own terms.

Perhaps the most incisive insight of Hilary of Poitiers into the soteriological role of the Ascension was his particular interest in one aspect of its nature: that the Ascension may be understood as the ending of a disturbance in the divine unity which the kenotic Incarnation produced (De Trinitate, 12.6, 9.38). It has been argued that this remarkable assertion grew out of Hilary's concentration upon the self-evacuation and self-renunciation of divine glory (implied in Phil 2:5-11, especially v. 7) which God the Son embraced in becoming man.<sup>43</sup>

The source of this imputed disturbance of the divine unity is the infinite ontological distance between the humanity of Christ and the divinity of God the Father, compounded with the indissoluble union of humanity and divinity in the person of Christ. In this, stress is laid upon the important role of the



unity of Christ's person.<sup>44</sup> Hilary placed the significance of the Ascension in its being the elevation of the humanity of Christ into harmonious association with the Godhead of the Father and the Son. Hilary may be read as considering this to be the goal of the Incarnation.

Hilary acknowledged that the humanity of Christ is that which was born, suffered, and died; but he also stressed the glory into which that nature is transformed in order that it be effective as the saving representative of all human nature (De Trinitate, 1.33). In following this through, Hilary seemed to imply that it is the imperative of the unity of Christ's person which makes what may be said about the Ascension, as primarily the exaltation of Christ's human nature (De Trinitate, 11.14), also refer in some sense to his divinity and, by extension, to the Godhead's unity which is as it were reinstated by the 'reunion' of Christ with the Father.<sup>45</sup>

While finding this to be a valuable approach both to soteriology and, specifically, to Ascension, Davies seeks to limit the scope of what may legitimately be said in this respect, wary of its application being taken beyond reasonable limits. He comments:

"We may even then go as far as Hilary in asserting that the Incarnation involved a partial disruption of the divine unity, which was restored by the Ascension, if we understand that disruption not in a metaphysical sense but as taking place in the sphere of consciousness."<sup>46</sup>

Davies seems to understand Hilary's thesis of the disturbance of the divine unity, resolved by the Ascension of Christ, as no more than a necessary evil which could not be avoided if the Incarnation was to occur; whereas Hilary seemed rather to imply that this disruption and its resolution is the means by which the ontological distance between God and Creation is transcended. Davies further emphasised his own difficulty with this idea by stressing that it represents a psychological, rather than an ontological, discontinuity in the incarnate Christ. This would greatly weaken the soteriological impact and role which Hilary, without developing it very far, assigned to this phenomenon.

Hilary's conclusion was that the Ascension's real meaning is that the Son of man now also has as his dwelling place God the Father. The Incarnation disrupted the unity of Father and Son and the Ascension has restored that perfect unity, adding to it this new state of affairs, that through the Incarnation the Son of God is now also the Son of man. This appears to be the idea at the heart of Hilary's understanding of the kenosis and the exaltation of Christ.<sup>47</sup>

There is the clear expression in the writings of Hilary that he believed that the Ascension should be regarded as, principally, a stage in the development of the person and relationships of Christ. One consequence of this, to which he gave considerable attention, was that he saw that the succeeding stages of the Christ-event could only be fully

appreciated in relation to each other; so, Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost, are the stages which take the relationship between the divine and the non-divine from Creation to Eschaton. In doing this, he did not lose sight of the other central focus of his soteriology, that everything connected with Christ is unified precisely by its dependence upon his person and the relationships generated by his existence.

#### 4. Subsequent Writings

Hilary did not follow up all the consequences of the insights his thought generated, because he had other concerns. Other authors, including some major patristic writers, did take up some of these matters and developed them in ways which provided additional insights into them. This does not necessarily mean that this was the result of a direct influence on them by the writings of Hilary, but it does reflect a development in theological thought along similar lines to that which he found so incisive.

For example, in Sermon 39A, Maximus of Turin argued that the proper understanding of the Ascension depends upon achieving the proper perspective on the existence of divinity and humanity together in Christ.<sup>48</sup> His emphasis on the inseparability of the Father and the Son meant that he found a simplistic descent-ascent theology to be quite inadequate for expressing the relational developments from Incarnation to Pentecost. Maximus used the incident of the encounter between Mary Magdalene and the risen Christ, in Jn 20:11-18, as a means of examining this dimension of the divine relationships in the context of Resurrection and Ascension. The main insight he had into the consequences of this incident was that the Ascension is actually the human perspective on a divine event. Magdalene is told not to cling to Jesus, Maximus believed, because she has not yet come to 'grasp' the nature of the risen Christ,

unlike Stephen at his martyrdom. The Ascension is to be understood, therefore, as the manifestation of the the disciples' correct realisation that Christ is to be looked for first of all in heaven. For Maximus, the decisive change is in the point of view of the believer in apprehending the eternal truth with which he is confronted; the Ascension is not, he argued, an alteration in the divine economy so much as it is a revelation of that economy in its eternal form, based upon the Christ-event. Also, in Sermon 44, Maximus examined the application of the phrase from Psalm 68:18, "Ascending on high, he led captivity captive; he gave gifts to men". His explanation has a strongly soteriological flavour; he wrote:

"This phrase is to be understood in this way- that the captivity of the human being, whom the devil had captured for himself, the Lord captured for Himself by rescuing him, and this very captive captivity, as it says, He took to the heights of the heavens. Both captivities are called by the same name, then, but both are not equal, for the devil's captivity subjects a person to evil, whereas Christ's captivity restores a person to liberty." 49

Maximus saw the imagery of the Ps 68 as one which compares the Ascension of Christ to the triumphal procession of a victor in which the imagery is not of captives forming part of the procession, but rather that captivity itself is paraded as having been conquered. He also understood the phrase "he gave gifts to men" as a reference to the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit, and all the subordinate gifts which accompany that gift. He also regarded the Session of Christ at the right hand

of the Father, illustrated by the use of Ps 110:1, as a refutation of the validity of any subordinationist doctrine, and thus as vital to a correct understanding of the nature of the divine Trinity.<sup>50</sup>

Augustine of Hippo began his sermon De Ascensione Domini IV by noting that some mysteries in scripture are yet to be discovered, which seems to indicate, in context, that he believed that some mysteries connected with the Ascension fall into this category.<sup>51</sup> This, perhaps, indicated his own dissatisfaction with the limitations on what could be said about the Ascension, and an awareness that its place in the overall doctrinal scheme was not yet adequately worked out. In paragraph 2, Augustine envisaged the Ascension as Christ's liberation from earthly limitations in order that he may carry out his universal task of bringing mankind to his Father. Also, he argued, this liberation makes it possible for Christ to have access to the inward life of the believer, which he regarded as another crucial objective of Christ's work. Augustine, in paragraph 3, understood salvation as the restoral of forfeited immortality, so that the Ascension is the fulfilment in Christ of that immortality which makes him the active centre of the access to eternal life of fallen creatures. Augustine's insight, in paragraph 4, into the complexity of the ascended Christ's relationship with the Father, and the Holy Spirit, which was close to the thought of Hilary of Poitiers, is perhaps a clue to his thinking about the mechanism by which the

Ascension is the point of the irreversible achievement of the soteriological work of Christ. Augustine's analysis of the transmission of salvation has definite Platonic echoes, especially in the allusive but undeveloped phrase "unformed form of all things"<sup>52</sup>, but his overall consideration of the Ascension was not dominated by this approach. Indeed, in paragraph 6, he used the Pauline image of Christ as Head of the Body, 1Cor 12:12-30, to discuss the ascended Christ's role as Saviour. Augustine concluded the sermon with a reaffirmation of his belief that being incarnate 'allows' Christ to be Saviour, and that being ascended completes what this makes possible.

Augustine's doctrine of 'totus Christus' was one of the main themes at the heart of what he had to say about the Ascension. The purpose of this doctrine was to address the question of how the Ascension of Christ is a salvific event or state for the rest of humanity. It did this by concentrating on the wholeness of Christ's 'mystical body' whose Head is Christ and whose members are those who are united with him. Augustine asserted that the individual believer will also undergo both resurrection and ascension.<sup>53</sup> This union of the Body of Christ was seen by Augustine as the context within which, and by which, the Ascension of Christ which is proper to him alone becomes available to mankind as a soteriological enablement in which it can participate.

In De Fide et Symbolo, 6, Augustine took a very subtle approach to the recognition the genuine difficulties of explaining to non-believers the idea that there could be in

heaven something pertaining to earth.<sup>54</sup> His answer to this grew out of 1Cor 15:44, which is part of an explanation by Paul in response to similar difficulties. Paul's approach was to emphasise the radical difference between the natural and the spiritual, rather than one which sought to blur or lessen that distinction. He does this in order to stress the elevated nature of the risen life, and its superiority to the present. The result, Augustine inferred, was that Paul found it necessary, in 1Cor 15:50, to conclude that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom. Augustine conceded that Paul appears to side with the objectors to the idea of physical ascension, and explained it in a way which is consistent with his argument for the 'totus Christus': that it is the continuity and unity of the individual which is carried over in ascension, and that the state in which individuals exist is determined by the demands of the situation in which God places them, and that God provides appropriately. This led Augustine to the insight that, as the earthly body is adapted to earthly life, so the ascended, spiritual, body is adapted to life in heaven. The spiritual body is subject to the spirit, he said; in other words, the analogous use of the term 'body' to describe the faculties and senses needed by the creature in heaven must include the recognition that it stands in a different relation to the person than before death. Augustine argued that what is 'animal' in human nature has no place in heaven, and that the adaptation to heavenly life also requires the removal of the imperfections of the earthly existence.



A few decades later, Pope Gregory I, in his Homily 29 on the Gospels,<sup>55</sup> in paragraphs 5 and 6, asserted that Christ's Ascension was to the higher 'ethereal' heaven, above the lower 'aerial' heaven into which Enoch and Elijah are taken. Gregory was clearly distinguishing the nature of Christ's Ascension from that of others. He argued that this is because Christ is the uniting of God and creature in one person, so that Christ's humanity is taken into the life of the Trinity in a way that can be true of no one else: that he is there by right, by the nature of his being. Gregory envisaged the Ascension as the freeing of creation from its own boundaries and the opening of those boundaries to the direct access of the Holy Spirit. In paragraph 10, he placed Christ's Ascension within a process of salvation, with the sequence: Incarnation; Crucifixion; Resurrection; Ascension; followed, he implied, by Pentecost. All these stages were to be regarded as necessary 'leaps', a phrase based upon Song of Songs 2:8, or advances in the predestined plan of God, each having an indispensable role in the establishment of redemption. Thus, Gregory seemed to be pointing to an inclusive understanding of the work of Christ in which no single event is seen as the decisive, pre-eminent, act of salvation, but that each stage is an equally necessary step in a totality which is the means of establishing Christ as Saviour.

Hilary, Augustine, and Gregory all touch upon the tensions inherent in reconciling the doctrines of the Trinity, the Ascension, and salvation. Each, in a different way, detected certain ways in which the doctrine of the Ascension, as they understood it, demanded some reconsideration of intraTrinitary and soteriological relationships. Each one also saw this need for further thought in a positive light, as an opportunity for additional insights into the divine mysteries. That they did not themselves pursue further these openings was apparently due to their own particular concerns leading them elsewhere. Some of these problems were noticed and tackled by theologians in later ages, some were given less prominence; but they provided a starting point for certain avenues of theological thought when concentrated attention was given again to the Ascension.

Although the approaches of the principal writers of the patristic era were fundamentally theological in character they also in their different ways, represented an increasingly philosophical emphasis in the examination of the Ascension, particularly in its soteriological dimension. This stemmed from the deepening realisation of the necessity of considering all the elements of Christian doctrine as interrelated constituents of a single reality, embracing both the divine and the created spheres of existence. In practice, as their consideration of the Ascension and exaltation of Christ demonstrated, this led to the development of a properly Christian metaphysic, examining by logical means matters whose proof or refutation

lay outside the scope of scientific, mathematical, empirical, or other demonstration. The patristic authors were often influenced by prevailing or persuasive schools of philosophy, such as Augustine's use of Platonic and Aristotelian categories, but, in testing these against their developing theologies, new and genuinely Christian categories had to be developed so that the application of logical criticism could consistently produce a balance between exegesis and creativity.

The development of an indispensable soteriological dimension in the patristic doctrines of the Ascension, in which Hilary and Augustine are prominent, had its effect not only upon the doctrine of the Ascension but also upon the theology of salvation itself. The dominant relationships of soteriology, -with Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection seen as the principal sources of salvation- had to be balanced against the weight of the vital soteriological role of the Ascension and Session of Christ, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; and where this was not done, the danger of an imbalanced soteriology was real.

## CHAPTER IV

### CRITICAL SURVEY OF THEMES IN MAJOR MODERN THEOLOGIANS' TREATMENT OF THE ASCENSION

During the medieval, reformation, and counter-reformation periods the areas of controversy and therefore, generally, of development in theology were centred on issues -such as revelation, Sacrament, faith, individual salvation, and ecclesial authority- which did not focus attention on the Ascension in a way that resulted in its being developed much beyond its patristic form. Even such related matters as were discussed in detail, for example the intercession of saints, did not result in substantial progress being made in the understanding of the Ascension itself.

The themes which had come to prominence in the various patristic approaches to the Ascension, and most strongly in the writings of Hilary, were taken up again with renewed emphasis as a result of the new perspectives which were opened by the use of the techniques of systematic theology. Principally, in this respect, the imperative to identify and explore the connections between the different elements of scriptural and

theological thought, which is the concern of both patristic and systematic theological methods, led to the re-opening of lines of discussion which connected these two theological periods, and, specifically, to a renewed exploration of some of the central questions relating to the Ascension.

The development of systematic theologies in the nineteenth century, and more particularly in the twentieth, led to a revival of interest in the doctrine of the Ascension of Christ. The Ascension had been relatively neglected in traditional dogmatics, which concerned itself with the christological doctrines which were understood as central to theology: the Incarnation; Crucifixion; and Resurrection. In the attempts to construct a systematic analysis of the whole shape of Christian theology, however, the Ascension could not be set to one side; and though it was not usually the centre of attention, it was recognised as, in some way, an indispensable element of the total system, based, as it was, on a revelation which included it, however ambiguously.

This did not mean that the larger doctrinal significance of the Ascension was always acknowledged. Many systematic theologies have reinforced the perceived minor status of this doctrine in relation to others. What it did mean, however, was that the most influential systematicians had, at least, to give serious consideration to the place of the Ascension in an overview of the total meaning of doctrinal theology. So, without becoming more prominent in its own right, the Ascension was given a level of attention among leading theologians which

it has seldom enjoyed in any other period of Christian thought. In the course of the treatment given to the Ascension, the particular preoccupations and presuppositions of the different theological systematisations in which it is set influence decisively its interpretation and the role it is understood to have in the total Christ-event.

The principal twentieth century theologians, not only systematicians, include several whose approaches to the task of theology led them to a reassessment of the Ascension. Among the most interesting are the insights of Balthasar, Barth, Kasper, Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and Tillich; and also, Moberly. The scriptural work of Bultmann also yields some significant ideas. These theologians, and their contemporaries, have some elements in common in their examination of the Ascension, deriving both from their common theological interests and their mutual influence; but they also manifest a wide range of opinion, including areas of disagreement, and so offer a broad, but also an often detailed, range of analyses of the Ascension of Christ.

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The relationship between Christ's Resurrection and his Ascension has been a matter of continuing discussion throughout the history of Christian thought. In the more recent debates on this matter three main approaches have emerged.

Firstly, there is the tendency which sees Resurrection and Ascension as identical; this has been the dominant opinion, mainly because it offers an integrated solution to many of the difficulties inherent in that relationship by taking a route where a unity, rather than a relationship as such, exists.

Secondly, there is the view which sees the Resurrection as clearly the dominant element, and which places the Ascension in a subordinate role.

Thirdly, the Ascension is regarded as an equal partner with the Resurrection having its own distinct and indispensable role within the doctrinal structures of both christology and soteriology; this has been the least supported of the three approaches.

All three interpretations have produced valuable insights into the nature and place of the Ascension.

The ideas of those who pursued these particular problems, usually as secondary to their main concern, allow a survey of the central themes of the systematic and scriptural insights into the Ascension which gives an overview of the place given to the doctrine in the course of the twentieth century. This provides a solid basis for any attempt to reconsider the Ascension, and the possible insights which might result from such a reconsideration.

## **1. Christ's Resurrection and Ascension: the problematic of their identification**

### **a) Identity of Resurrection and Ascension**

Those theologians who have argued for the irreducible unity of Resurrection and Ascension have given different reasons for the adoption of this position. These reasons include: the obscurity of the New Testament data; the lack of the necessity of making a distinction between them; the indications of this unity in the New Testament; the desire to place the Resurrection as the central mystery of salvation; and, the wish to avoid the apparently unnecessary complications involved in making any distinction. The arguments for this conclusion are, thus, broad-based.

Among those convinced that the New Testament does not allow for separate doctrines of Resurrection and Ascension, the most textually-driven scheme is offered by Rudolf Bultmann.

Bultmann does not seek to empty of content what is represented by the New Testament accounts of the Ascension. He stresses that the obscurity about whether Resurrection and exaltation are identical or whether exaltation followed later, at the Ascension, does not negate the intimate connection between them; indeed, he regards them as inseparable, and believes that the kerygma of both Resurrection and exaltation



underwent similar processes of crystallisation into formulaic statements.<sup>1</sup>

At no point in Theology of the New Testament does Bultmann apply either the term or the concept of myth directly to the Ascension; it was for the means of its expression that he reserved this terminology. Bultmann's own approach is that he finds an elision of Crucifixion, Resurrection, exaltation, and Ascension to be the most complete solution to the textual problems he identifies. He does this, not in order to attack the validity of the use of any of those concepts, but so that they might be understood as providing, in different ways, the context for each other. However, his proffered solution to the meaning of the Resurrection, that it is primarily an expression of the meaning of the Cross, is one which does question the independent reality of Resurrection and, therefore, of Ascension.<sup>2</sup> Bultmann's concern is with the nature of the revelation embodied in Scripture, and he feels no obligation to place the Ascension or other episodes in the New Testament in a systematic or doctrinal scheme worked out at a later stage on the basis of the primary revelation. This, of course, need not mean that a systematic theology would necessarily produce a fundamentally different assessment of the relation of Ascension to Resurrection than one which has an exclusive concentration on scripture.

Working from a different perspective, Hans Urs von Balthasar also finds the identification of these two stages to be the

most satisfactory explanation of both. Balthasar's understanding of the departure of Jesus is that it is a journey to the Father made in the Resurrection itself, to which the Spirit bears witness.<sup>3</sup> He equates the departure of Jesus with his Resurrection, and does not regard the return to the Father as having a distinct substantial form, despite the importance he gives to the departure. This seems to be the result of the emphasis he places upon the category of glory as a substantial element in the soteriological framework of the Christ-event, centred upon the Resurrection of Christ, to which the Ascension is wholly subordinate.

Walter Kasper pays a great deal of attention to the Ascension as part of Resurrection because it is a matter which impinges upon so much of his christological thought. Kasper argues that the idea of the identity of the Resurrection and exaltation of Christ is a possible solution to a number of anomalies he detects in their relationship, as presented by the New Testament. In Jesus the Christ he writes:

"In the pre-Pauline hymn to Christ in the letter to the Philippians (2:9) the term 'exaltation' is used instead of 'resurrection'; this vision is echoed in many passages in the New Testament (Lk 24:26; Eph 4:8ff.; 1Tim 3:16; Heb 12:2; 2Pet 1:11; Acts 5:6). In other places the exaltation is the direct consequence of the Resurrection and mentioned directly with the latter, as for instance in the old two-tier-Christology of Rom 1:3f. (cf. also Acts 5:30f.; 1Thess 1:10; Eph 1:20; 1Pt 1:21; 3:22 et al). The Risen Christ lives his life to God (Rom 6:9f.). Therefore in Mt 28:16ff. the Risen Christ appears exalted in the only report of a post-Resurrection appearance in this gospel -and shows his divine authority. But it is in John's gospel that the association is closest and most significant of cross, Resurrection, Exaltation and sending of the Spirit." 4

This interpretation of the relationship between Resurrection, Ascension, and exaltation finds support in the repeated absence of a clear-cut distinction in John's Gospel between the return of Jesus to the Father and his rising from the dead (Jn 3:13-15; 7:33-36; 14:1-31). However Jn 20:17, the meeting of the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene, is decidedly problematical in this respect, as Kasper realises. He takes this passage to express a stage in the process at which Jesus is already risen and in some sense still "ascending" at this meeting with Mary.<sup>5</sup> It opens the question of the way in which Kasper regards the Ascension: as event or state or process or moment, or none or some or all of these. The handling of the incident by John, in a manner quite different from Mt 28:1-10, Mk 16:9-11 (in the longer ending), and Lk 24:1-12, seems to indicate that he has an interpretative point to make here, using Mary Magdalene's participation as the vehicle. The Ascension is clearly treated in Jn 20:17 as distinct from the Resurrection, but very closely connected to it, so that each stage can shed light upon the nature of the other. There seem to be more difficulties in placing this passage in a view of Ascension as included in Resurrection than there would be in treating them as in some sense distinct. The idea that "ascending", if understood to be a process with extension through time, is an as yet uncompleted phase during Christ's risen appearances is interesting, but is not allowable on the basis of this Johannine passage: the "not yet ascended" of Jn 20:17 can only mean that the already-risen

Christ envisages the Ascension as, in some sense, a future occurrence.

Kasper regards the risen Christ as being already in the process of ascending to the Father, having been "raised in exaltation" through the Crucifixion itself to possess all power (Jn 12:32) and so is already empowered to give the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22). For him, as for Bultmann, the conclusion to be drawn from this is that the Cross to Pentecost sequence, in which Resurrection and Ascension are to be placed, is a "single indivisible mystery" by which Christ opens the way to life for himself and, thus, for others. The weakness of suffering, he argues, is removed by this movement from kenosis to Resurrection, exaltation, and transfiguration, which is redemption brought about by God's embrace of suffering to end its alienating power, this redemption is expressed in the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

In equating Resurrection and Ascension, Kasper sometimes apparently disregards New Testament passages which suggest otherwise. He describes the 'forty days' of Acts 1:3 as a Lucan "insertion" which "disintegrates" the unity and unanimity of the New Testament on the timing of Jesus' Ascension. This raises problems, because it is difficult to see how this passage in Acts is not also to be regarded as an essential part of the New Testament data about the Ascension, and as having a crucial role in the revelation of the nature of the Christ-event. Kasper interprets the forty days and the cloud into which Christ disappears as symbols drawn from the Old Testament

for theological purposes, principally to connect Jesus with Moses and the divine covenant. Additionally, Kasper's assertion that the parallels with the Easter accounts that he finds in Acts 1:1-12 "prove" that Luke's account of the Ascension is a Resurrection story, which does not have a substantive and distinct character. This seems a rather too strongly-worded claim, and seems also like reading the New Testament account in the light of a particular conclusion with which it is not quite in accord.<sup>7</sup>

For Kasper, the bodiliness of the exaltation of Christ is not an obstacle to the argument for its soteriological nature, but constitutes its enabling role in this respect. He writes:

"The corporeality of the Resurrection means that Jesus Christ while entering God's dimension through his Resurrection and Exaltation is at the same time completely in the world in a new divine way and is by us and with us 'to the close of the age' (Mt 28:20). Through Jesus' Resurrection and Exaltation a 'piece of the world' finally reached God and was finally accepted by God." <sup>8</sup>

The effect of this entry into the divine realm of a 'piece of the world' constitutes the bringing into being of heaven itself, whose prior existence, Kasper asserts, cannot be simply presumed. This indispensable soteriological, and also eschatological, development is located by Kasper in the corporeality of the Resurrection, as an event or state which stands at the apex of reality in total. Questions about the manner of such a Resurrection are unlikely to find significant answers, he believes, citing scripture as a precedent.<sup>9</sup>

Kasper has operated with two, largely unresolved, approaches to the Ascension. One is the scriptural, in which he has a reductive and rigorous attitude of allowing little or no independent place to the Ascension, even to the extent of suppressing the influence of New Testament texts which do not fit this pattern. The other approach, the doctrinal, sees the exaltation of Christ as absolutely vital to the possibility of salvation for creatures, without which there is no heaven. While this is a consistent argument, it seems to favour an assessment of the role of the exaltation in which Christ rises into glory while the idea of a specific Ascension is regarded as unnecessary. This supports the case being made by Kasper for Resurrection-exaltation, but it does so at the cost of an apparent manipulation of the New Testament data, such as the forty days in Acts 1:3 and the Magdalene incident at Jn 20:11-18, which is difficult to justify on neutral grounds.

This difficulty, of defending the unity of the person and work of Christ and at the same time giving adequate weight to the particular doctrinal processes in which Christ is revealed, is felt even more acutely by Karl Barth than by Kasper. The tension between the identity and the distinctiveness of Resurrection and Ascension becomes both problematical and revealing, though Barth still favours the unity of Resurrection and Ascension.

In his Church Dogmatics, Barth works upon the basis that the Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ constitute a single

event.<sup>10</sup> He places the Resurrection and Ascension together as the inspiration for the Church to praise and be thankful to God.<sup>11</sup> The connection between God and his Church is the unity of Christ's Body whose Head is in heaven and whose earthly Body is the union of believers.<sup>12</sup>

Barth, thus, considers the Resurrection and Ascension together to be the primary revelation in time of the eternal union in Christ of Creator, who becomes creature, and creatures, who do not become the Creator but are exalted through Christ's unity of existence.<sup>13</sup> He argues that, as the union of the Son of God and the Son of man in the Incarnation is perfect and complete, the Resurrection and Ascension cannot be said to be a further augmentation or development of the person of Christ but are the event of his self-declaration. Indeed, he argues that the being of Christ is itself the renewing of the form of this world even without Resurrection and Ascension, which cannot make him different because nothing could be better or higher than his person.<sup>14</sup>

It is precisely because he envisages Resurrection and Ascension as the revelation of what is already the case that Barth argues that they represent one event, rather than two. He also has difficulties with the notion that exaltation could be thought of as an abstraction which implies a change of state in Christ.<sup>15</sup> Barth approaches this matter by asserting that Christ, both God and man, is exalted as man from all eternity, in election and decree at least, because he is the immutable Son of God.<sup>16</sup> He stresses his view that as an event, of which

Resurrection and Ascension are distinct moments, this must represent an earth-based and revelatory phenomenon because of the impossibility of event or change in the Godhead.<sup>17</sup>

Barth disagrees with Bultmann's view that the Resurrection is the New Testament's way of symbolising the arising of faith in the disciples, expressing their recognition of the meaning of the Cross. Barth places Resurrection and Ascension as divine actions alongside, and distinct from, the life of Jesus which led to his death.<sup>18</sup> His theme of Christ as the focus of the divine self-revelation has led him to deal with the apparent conflict implicit in the doctrine of the Ascension, between the change in trinitary relationships it seems to require and the eternal immutability of God, by proposing that Christ's exaltation is from all eternity and that this is revealed in the Ascension. He argues that:

"Indeed, it must be said, even of the Son of God become man, that even as such, living, suffering and dying, He had not to be raised to the right hand of the Father, but already was the one Raised to the Father's right hand; only that he was not manifest as being just that, but (with the exception of those 'signs' of His glory) was hidden, concealed, shut off from the eyes of the world, nay, even from the eyes of His chosen and called disciples. What happens in the 'raising' of Christ in His resurrection from the dead is that He is now manifest in His supreme sovereignty." <sup>19</sup>

This does address the difficulty, but not altogether satisfactorily. It seems to remove the substantiveness of the



earthly dimension of the Ascension as a solution to a problem which lies elsewhere: in the relationship of eternity and time.

If the event of the Resurrection and Ascension, which has a temporal location within the created universe, is regarded as the source of the exaltation of Christ, which is an eternal state of reality in the divine realm, the priority of event over state cannot simply be equated with any analogous event-to-state causality based solely in the sphere of created time. In the latter case an event must precede, in time, any state which is the result of that event: a window is in a state of brokenness only after the event of its being broken. Barth took the state of exaltation of Christ to be eternal and, therefore, prior to the Ascension-event which, he argues, can only be a revelation of what precedes it.

However, if it is argued that eternity, because it is a different form of existence, cannot simply be asserted to be prior to whatever occurs in time, then the relation of created event to eternal state will not be the same as that between a temporal event and the state it produces. The exaltation of Christ, which is eternal because it also exists in the divine sphere, can derive from the event of the Ascension, which is a movement beginning in one sense in the realm of Creation, because the effects of the Ascension in eternity will be proper to that form of existence, and as such will not be subject to temporal restraints: the immutability of God is not, therefore, threatened by such a priority of time over eternity. The exaltation of Christ, God and man, represents a radical

restructuring of relationships within the Trinity in the cause of opening those relationships to created persons. There is no contradiction in the locating at a particular point in time of the Ascension-event which makes brings this about. Such an understanding does allow for a more substantive and separate role for the Ascension-exaltation in relation to Resurrection than that which Barth's revelatory scheme, in particular, envisaged. Barth, while appearing to accept that what exists at all in God must always exist, seems also to have had reservations about allowing that some of the consequences of the relation of eternity to time must necessarily be complex to the point of being contrary to temporal logic, and took avoiding action by assigning, for example, the Ascension to the category of a revelatory and, in this context, secondary role.

## b) Subordination of Ascension to Resurrection

There is no absolutely clear distinction between those who argue for the identity of Resurrection and Ascension, and those who believe the latter doctrine to have a distinct but subordinate role in relation to the former. The difference of emphasis becomes important, however, at the point where the function of the Ascension is recognised as having effects which cannot also be attributed to the Resurrection in itself. This depends upon the particular theological framework within which the doctrines are placed. The most prominent theologian of recent years for whom this was the favoured approach is Karl Rahner.

Rahner uses the word 'transition' of the festival of the Ascension, in the sense of its being the movement from Christ's Easter to the Easter of all created beings, which he identifies as Pentecost.<sup>20</sup> For Rahner, Easter celebrates the joining together of the exaltation on the Cross and the exaltation at the right hand of the Father; and it is to Pentecost alone that the Easter events are orientated for their fulfilment.<sup>21</sup>

Rahner regards the celebration of the festival of the Ascension as the conclusion of Easter because Easter is to be understood as Christ's "full and final consummation" in itself, with nothing further to be accomplished in him.<sup>22</sup> He asserts that the risen person of Christ is the final form of his person, and the source of Resurrection for others. He argues that the statement that "he lives in the glory of God"

underlies, and is prior to, the particular encounters with the risen Jesus, both in logic and in revelation (Rm 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 10:12; 1Pt 3:22; etc.).<sup>23</sup>

Both of these expressions tend towards the reduction of the independent substantiveness of Ascension-exaltation by eliding it into Resurrection; in comparison, Rahner did not also argue for the elision of Cross into the Resurrection, which might seem to be suggested by this approach. He is clear that the Resurrection is really the "full and final consummation" of Christ, through which he imparts his Spirit. The concentration on the person of Christ, which led Rahner to this assessment, results in a reduction in the weight which can be given to the specific effects of the distinct soteriological functions of the ascended Christ's developing relationships with the divine Persons and with human persons.

These developments are so crucial to the analysis of the carefully co-ordinated soteriological manoeuvres involved in Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost, that they seem to demand that, at each stage, not only the internal status of the person of Christ be assessed but that the relationships generated by his person be given equal weight. The person of Christ is modified not for internal reasons, but for its strategic soteriological role, to which each movement, including the Ascension, seems indispensable. For this reason, the subordination of the Ascension to the Resurrection, while it has some advantages, also creates some significant limitations.

### c) Ascension as distinct but subordinate

The giving of a distinctive place to the Ascension in relation to the Resurrection is not often to be found in modern Christian theology. There seems an inbuilt reluctance to ascribe equality of importance to the Ascension, even by those who see its indispensable and substantial soteriological role. Among modern theologians, as was noted above, Edward Schillebeeckx comes closest to giving the Ascension a status comparable to that of the Resurrection; even he, however, appears uncomfortable with any idea of their having equal standing.

Schillebeeckx considers the Resurrection to be the central redemptive action. He believes that Ascension, Pentecost, and the Parousia are to be included in this mystery, so that it is the single reality upon which salvation is based.<sup>24</sup> He also places the important role of the Ascension within his understanding of the developing nature of the Incarnation, in which term he includes everything directly connected with Christ. He believes that Scripture indicates that Christ had to become the Saviour; that he was not so simply on the basis of having become man, but that through his Cross, Resurrection, and glorification, the purpose of God was achieved for creatures. Schillebeeckx also argues that it is a purpose which is, in principle, already completed in the Ascension because

the role of Christ as precursor is already established. In Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God he writes:

"All these divine prerogatives of the man Jesus come to him through the fact that by the Ascension he is 'with the Father', taken up in the cloud of the divine presence which 'makes all things new'; this Jesus of Nazareth is the king of the universe, the Christus Victor. It is clear that according to Scripture Christ had to become king." 25

Prior to the Ascension, Schillebeeckx argues, Christ is conditionally the Messiah because it is at the Ascension that he becomes the Son of God in power in his humanity, and that thereby the reality of salvation, as distinct from the principle, is in place. <sup>26</sup> Schillebeeckx seems to be looking for a way of acknowledging the substantiality of the Ascension while, at the same time, retaining the pre-eminence of the Resurrection among the developmental stages of the mystery of Christ. His proffered solution involves the distinguishing of the functions of Ascension and Resurrection and their effects on, and within, the continuum of the salvific person of Christ, so that the indissoluble link between the doctrines does not require the suppression of the efficacy of the Ascension-exaltation to protect the centrality of the Resurrection.

Schillebeeckx later reconsidered his views of the respective roles of Resurrection and Ascension, as was noted of his Scriptural analysis. He has become less committed to defending the pre-eminence of the former over the latter, seeing both as indispensable and as different stages in the process of

constituting Christ, risen and ascended, as Saviour. He argues that what took place between the Crucifixion of Jesus and the Church's preaching of him is not explicitly identified in the New Testament as the Resurrection.<sup>27</sup> He has come to regard the New Testament data for this period as an opportunity to be taken rather than as a problem to be explained:

"The sending out of the Twelve and the actual giving of the Spirit Luke associates with the event of Pentecost, while for him the resurrection and ascension are separated by an interim period of forty days. Thus the Lucan theology entails changes in the substantive meaning of the appearances: the Easter appearance is the bridge between the finish of Jesus' life and task on earth and, via the ascension, the start of the pneumatic missionary task of the Church." 28

The Resurrection is not, in this account, removed from its pivotal role in the Cross-to-Pentecost stages of Christ, but it is placed as a movement from one state to another. This allows Schillebeeckx the opportunity to interpret in a more dynamic way the effects of Resurrection and, especially, Ascension and Pentecost in a soteriological and scriptural context.

Within the spectrum of opinion upon the relative significance of Resurrection and Ascension, and taking account of some different emphases, the Resurrection is clearly regarded in modern theology as dominant. It is noticeable that the greater the weight given to the scriptural data in a particular approach, the greater the dominance of the Resurrection; while, the greater the emphasis upon the soteriological and, to a lesser extent, the christological implications, the closer their relative positions become, though Schillebeeckx takes a broadly opposite route. At the latter end of this range of assessments it sometimes appears that it is only for reasons of decorum that the equality of Ascension and Resurrection cannot be admitted.

The question of how the Ascension stands in relation to its sequel, Pentecost, will also provide comparable perspectives on its place in relation to other doctrines.



## 2. The Ascension and Pentecost: the making present of the absent (ascended) Christ?

There are, unsurprisingly, parallels between the way in which modern theology has examined the relation of the Ascension to its preceding mystery, the Resurrection, and its relation to its succeeding mystery, Pentecost. Pentecost, here, is taken to mean the event recounted in Acts 2:1-4, 2:5ff., and also the 'new' relationship of the Holy Spirit to created persons which stems from the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. Three main lines of more recent theological thought have been applied to the Ascension and Pentecost.

Firstly, that the Ascension and Pentecost are identical.

Secondly, that Pentecost is the more important stage, and that Ascension is less central, and even that the Resurrection is the crucial enabling mystery for Pentecost.

Thirdly, there is the understanding that Pentecost is dependent upon Ascension. As is to be expected, these distinctions are not always clear-cut.

### a) Identity of Ascension and Pentecost

The argument that the Ascension and Pentecost cannot be thought of as distinct from one another derives in part from the wish to retain the sense of the total unity of the mystery of Christ, including the descent of the Holy Spirit which he enables; this is what primarily drives those for whom this is the preferred analysis.

Walter Kasper's preference for the integration of Cross, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost as a "single indivisible mystery" gives a strong soteriological unit.<sup>29</sup> However, it also allows him to elide Ascension into Easter and Pentecost in a way which reduces its substantive soteriological role very considerably compared to the other components of the 'mystery'. His observation, which he reads into Jn 14:15-24, that Jesus' return "is at the same time" the pouring out of the Spirit need not necessarily carry with it the implication, which seems present, that it is also the same thing. Kasper seems not to wish to develop the connection between the Ascension and Pentecost, preferring to concentrate on the connection between the Pentecost Spirit and the primitive Church.

This connection between the exaltation of Christ and the beginning of the Church is important to Kasper, who located it in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Kasper sees in the foundation of the Church the rooting of the Apostolic preaching

and witness in the trinitary nature of God (Acts 2:32f.; 7:55f.).<sup>30</sup>

Like Kasper, Karl Rahner seeks to place the Ascension in such proximity to Pentecost that it becomes difficult to discuss the former as a separate stage of the Christ-event. Rahner does this for slightly different reasons, which had an effect upon the way in which Ascension was placed in his theological work.

It is because the death and glorification of Christ means that the Holy Spirit becomes the Spirit of God made man, as distinct from being simply the Spirit of God, that Rahner too envisages the indispensable connection between Ascension-exaltation and Pentecost.<sup>31</sup> Rahner uses the word 'transition' of the Ascension, meaning that it is the movement from Easter to Pentecost.<sup>32</sup> He also calls Easter the 'glorification' of the Redeemer, which includes exaltation on the Cross and to the right hand of the Father.<sup>33</sup>

A further consideration is the idea that the nearness of the exalted Christ is "in his Spirit". He writes:

"Considered as an event the ascension does not only have the connotation of departure and distance. On the contrary it is the festival of the nearness of God. The Lord had to die in order really to come close to us.....And if the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord constitute one single event, the particular aspects and phases of which cannot be separated one from another, then the separation implicit in this festival is simply another way of expressing the nearness of the Lord in his Spirit, which has been imparted to us through his death and resurrection." 34

Like Balthasar, Rahner envisages the Pentecost Spirit as the form of the presence of Christ. This means that the Holy Spirit mediates Christ, the mediator of immediacy, to created persons. It appears to stem from the difficulty of placing the Spirit in a role within this scheme of things which reflects the necessity of the coming of the Spirit as a sequel to Christ's Ascension. This is also in tension with both the idea that Christ's departure actually brings him nearer to creatures, and the idea that it is the Ascension of Christ, making the Holy Spirit into the Spirit of God made man, which is the connection between Ascension and Pentecost.<sup>35</sup> The complexity here seems to result in a circularity of argument which, however, as will be argued later, does not necessarily invalidate this insight.

## **b) Ascension as subordinate to Pentecost**

Where the Ascension is regarded as secondary to what it, or the Resurrection, achieves in bringing about the decisive state of Pentecost, it can be seen to be within a theology which lays great stress upon the life of the Church community as the field of operation of the Holy Spirit, which is the final achievement in this world of the person and work of Christ. More attention has to be paid, in this approach, to the way in which the Ascension initiates the descent of the Pentecost Spirit.

Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that the Synoptic expression of the Ascension, which emphasises the installation of Christ in joint sovereignty with the Father, is elucidated further by John's Gospel. John relates the return closely to the preceding descent of Christ and also, he argues, does not see the return as an alteration in the dependence of the Son on the Father.<sup>36</sup> Balthasar understands John as linking the departure of Jesus (Jn 16:7) with his return to believers specifically in the coming of the Holy Spirit, and with the coming also of the presence of the Father (Jn 14:18, 20, 23) which is the result of the dissolution of distance by Christ's being "taken up into identity" with the Father.<sup>37</sup> He connects the coming of the Holy Spirit with the Ascension in similar terms:

"His [the Holy Spirit's] work unfolds as a consequence of the bringing about of a 'distance' between the Father and Son in the kenosis and the 'abolition' of this in the return of the Son to the Father, and hence lies out beyond the 'form' which Jesus made visible to us and the subsequent replacement of this by invisibility: but this comes about in such a way that, in the Spirit's act of glorification, we neither let go of the form 'which has existed' nor yet can dispense with its removal, if it is truly present for us." 38

In terms reminiscent of Hilary of Poitiers on the 'disturbance' of Trinity by the ascended humanity of Christ, Balthasar here considered the return of the Son to the Father as the abolition of a 'distance' between them, initiated by the kenotic Incarnation, which is the conversion from the visible form of Christ to his removal into invisibility, both of which stages are indispensable. It is in this movement that he believes the glorifying work of the Spirit is to be located.

He also sees in the New Testament's concern with the rapid early growth of the Church (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:7; 9:31) a focussing upon the working of the exalted Christ in the Holy Spirit, rather than upon its simple numerical increase.<sup>39</sup>

Balthasar relates the resolution of this distance, effected in the return and exaltation of the Son, to the work of the Holy Spirit, which work, he asserts, is a consequence of the Son's return.<sup>40</sup> He describes the exaltation of the Son as the Son's victory for himself, which provides the 'raw material' of the kingdom which must then be developed in the world.<sup>41</sup>

The value of this image of Balthasar's is considerable, but it might be more effective still if, at this point, it included

the idea of Christ's being also the active enabler of the growth of the kingdom. He does not attempt to connect the image of the 'raw material' with the effects of the invisible presence of Christ in the world. This is perhaps due to the stress he elsewhere puts on the Ascension as movement to invisibility without withdrawal of presence.<sup>42</sup>

Karl Barth's concern with the working of the Holy Spirit is wider than that of Balthasar because he operates with a definition of Church which was less specifically sacramental and more diffuse. He is especially interested in the way in which Christ, as Saviour of all mankind, can offer his Spirit to all. He was required, therefore, to look more closely at the connection between Ascension and Pentecost, though the latter remained dominant.

A particularly interesting perspective emerges from Barth's analysis of Christ's exaltation in relation to the role of the Holy Spirit which derives from Pentecost. He writes:

"Risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, seated at the right hand of God the Father, Jesus is remote from earthly history and the community which exists in it. He is separated from it by an abyss which cannot be bridged. He is even hidden from it in God (Col 3:3) -and with Him, of course, the true life of the community....He overcomes that abyss in the Holy Spirit, operating here from that exalted status, working in time..."<sup>43</sup>

There is an imprecision in such an understanding of the way in which the absolute discontinuity between the divine and the

created can be transcended. Barth locates the bridging of that 'abyss' which, he believes, operates on the person of the risen and ascended Christ, specifically in the action of the Holy Spirit. This does allow for the advances in the soteriological situation made by Christ: Barth writes that it is "He [Christ]" who "overcomes that abyss". However, it means that Christ remains limited by this separation between God and Creation, which is problematical because it implies a division in his person between his divine and human natures. Such a division would, in fact, preclude the possibility of his existence as a single person. The problem is not in Barth's argument for the existence of such an 'abyss', which seems ontologically necessary, but rather in its location in relation to the person of the ascended Christ, which seems ontologically untenable. If a central soteriological function of the Christ-event is to enable the Holy Spirit to operate in created existence as properly part of it, then the 'abyss' between God and creature must be bridged in Christ, so that he is himself unhindered by it. Indeed, Christ himself is, in person and relationships, the only viable candidate to be this 'bridge', in Barth's terms, on the basis of his Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension.

Barth finds in this 'bridging' the source of an equilibrium in which the glory of God and the salvation of creatures coincide at the point where the Christ-event becomes something which God does for himself as well as for created persons.<sup>44</sup> The 'bridge' is exploited primarily by the Pentecost Spirit.



### c) Ascension as the enabling of Pentecost

The difference between those analyses which regard the Ascension's purpose as enabling Pentecost and those which regard the Ascension as the ultimate achievement of Christ, which is exploited by Pentecost, is to be understood in terms of emphasis rather than of fundamental disagreement. There are, nevertheless, ways in which the latter emphasis allows important insights into the Ascension which cannot be derived from the former with equal clarity.

R. C. Moberly, a relatively neglected, but incisive, theologian of the atonement has a special interest in the Ascension. The occasion for his interest is, in this regard, its priority over Pentecost. He argues that the presence of the Holy Spirit to the world is based upon the Spirit's being the Spirit of Christ. The humanity of Christ must mean, he believes, that the Spirit of God is the Spirit also of the Incarnate, so that it is the Spirit of God become the Spirit of man, and that is the basis on which the Pentecost Spirit relates to humanity. Moberly is careful to distinguish the being the Holy Spirit takes from the Son of man from that which the Spirit takes from the divine being of God the Father and God the Son or, significantly, their relationship.<sup>45</sup>

Moberly recognises the importance of the 'Filioque' as the precondition for such an understanding of Pentecost. He sees the doctrine of the procession of the Spirit from the Father

alone as endangering an integrated doctrine of atonement, especially in the matter of the relationship between Ascension and Pentecost. He argues that it is the presence of the Son of man in heaven which allows the clearest recognition of the significance of the Incarnation and all it initiates. In Atonement and Personality he writes:

"The meaning of the Incarnation was not exhausted; -there is a sense in which it may be said to have hardly yet begun;- when Jesus Christ passed away from this visible scene of mortal life. That real significance of Incarnation, hardly then as yet begun, is to be recognized not more directly in the contemplation of the Presence of the Son of Man in Heaven -with all that that contemplation carries in its train;- than in the recognition of the Presence and working here on earth, of the Spirit of Incarnation and of the Incarnate." 46

For Moberly, the full impact of this statement derived from the incomparability of that which pertains to the divine and that which is created. He considered that to go beyond the quite conscious use of the one category as no more than an illustration for the other is to become involved immediately in error. It was in his discussion of the way in which human beings are related to the created world and the way in which they relate to God, that Moberly found the strongest argument for the need to remain aware of the absolute otherness of being of the divine and created spheres of existence.<sup>47</sup>

#### d) Pentecost as subordinate to Ascension

The major modern theologian who argues most strongly that the Ascension is the dominant mystery in relation to Pentecost is Edward Schillebeeckx. Even more than Moberly, he regards the Ascension as a soteriological necessity which has its own ontological status. He does not lose sight of his belief in the centrality of Resurrection but, in relation to Pentecost, he sees the Ascension as the decisive step within the Trinity towards consummation of the Christ-event.

There is a strong sense of the necessity and dynamism of the relation between Ascension and Pentecost in Schillebeeckx's analysis. Balthasar's image of the Spirit as the 'down-payment' of the definitive inheritance seems, in contrast, to limit rather than promote the concept of the full and active presence of the Holy Spirit, coming after the return of the Son.<sup>48</sup>

Schillebeeckx considers that the principal events in the life of Christ as experienced and expressed in Scripture are interpretations, from the human perspective, of divine relations.<sup>49</sup> Central to his soteriological, and sacramental, connecting of Ascension and Pentecost is the understanding of God the Son as co-principle of the Holy Spirit with God the Father, and that this is the basis of the organic unity of the Triune God.<sup>50</sup> An acceptance of the 'Filioque' as the correct understanding of the structure of the Trinity is indispensable to this part of Schillebeeckx's argument. He finds New

Testament references to the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ a firm enough basis upon which to build this line of thought.

He sees the Ascension as the establishment of Christ, God and man, as Lord; and views the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost as the supreme exercise of that Lordship.<sup>51</sup> He argues that this stems from the place of the humanity in the procession of the Holy Spirit, in that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the whole Christ, in the way that the Spirit is the Spirit of God the Son. It is this element of the creature in direct union with one co-principle of the Spirit which is the source of the ontological basis of the distinctive entry of the Pentecost Spirit into the created world. He writes:

"The last phase of the mystery of Christ, between the ascension and the parousia, is therefore the mystery of the sending of the Holy Spirit by Christ as the climax of his work of salvation." 52

The relationship between the Ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit into creation at Pentecost is given a dynamic basis in Schillebeeckx's analysis of the effects of the Ascension in the life of the Trinity. The concept of 'mediated immediacy', which he finds so incisive in the context of the present availability of God to creatures, is a consistent element of Schillebeeckx's soteriological scheme.<sup>53</sup> In this concept, he sees a way of reconciling the need to place the achievement of Christ as necessary to the possibility of salvation and the need to regard what is achieved as direct and

unmediated. Such an understanding of the exaltation of Christ, which places it in a consistent and active soteriological role, strengthens the logical framework of the Christ-event as a whole, and makes more comprehensible and logical the sequence: Resurrection-Ascension-Pentecost.

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Like the problems which emerge in the consideration of the Ascension in relation to the Resurrection, from which it derives, so those which emerge in relating the Ascension to Pentecost, as derivative from Ascension, help not only to place the Ascension within the totality of doctrine, but help also to define it in its own right. Certainly both the Ascension and Pentecost can mutually illuminate their respective meanings by being placed in explicit relation to one another. The tendencies toward identification, or toward dominance of one doctrine over the other can become problematical, rather than constructive, if taken to be the whole solution. However, where they are recognised as emphases which neither pretend separately to provide complete answers nor exclude the possibility of their being complementary dimensions of a complex situation, these various approaches, taken together,

give valuable insight into the irreducible necessity of the Ascension in the total Christ-event. It is, thus, toward the person, actions, and functions of Christ as Saviour that the Ascension looks for its full explanation and purpose.

If those theological approaches to the Ascension which argue for the substantiveness of its role in relation to Resurrection and Pentecost are conceded to have validity, which seems a reasonable and, in many respects, necessary conclusion whatever their valuation of its centrality, then the substantiveness of the Ascension in its own terms will also produce insights into its nature and purpose.

### **3. Christ's Session and Exaltation: the nature of the ascended life**

In recent times, theologians' concern to be relevant to human need in doing theology has led some to a reluctance to become involved in what can appear to be speculative metaphysics. The corresponding awareness, however, of the importance of the person of Christ, as directly connected with the message of Christian faith to the world, has allowed theologians to feel that attention to Christ in heaven is both valid and relevant. The ascended Christ has been considered in terms of: his Session at the right hand of the Father; the exaltation and glorification of his humanity, and its relation to his whole person; and, the eschatological nature of his ascended life.

#### **a) The Session of Christ**

The New Testament authors, influenced particularly by Ps 110:1ff, often used the imagery of the right hand of the God to express the present life of the ascended Christ. An awareness of the limitations of such pictorial imagery has been a feature of more recent theological considerations of the Ascension. Nevertheless, the idea of the adjacency of Christ to the Father has been a constant, if not dominant, theme among modern theologians. The concept of the Session of Christ has tended to be subsumed into that of exaltation or glory, but the Session

is occasionally acknowledged as having a role in its own right

Paul Tillich, for example, briefly examines the Session of Christ. He considered Luther's identification of the "right hand of God" as God's omnipotence to be a recognition of the absurdity of a literal reading. In the context of 'the New Being', Tillich argues, it symbolises the original, preserving, and directing creativity of God, exercised in all things as the actualisation of 'the New Being' manifested in Christ.<sup>54</sup>

Karl Rahner draws together the related themes of the Session and the exaltation of Christ, in order that the derivation of his glory, in the immediate unity of Son and Father, is not separated from the resultant glory he experiences.

One of the questions to which Rahner frequently returns is the paradox of the particularity and the universality of Christ. He uses the relation of the risen body of Christ to the concept of heaven as a means of sharpening the focus of this problem. Beginning with the experience of the apostles' post-Resurrection encounters with Christ, and the possibility of gaining from these some understanding of the perfected condition of the body in which "the created spirit achieves itself", Rahner asks the question of whether the local, spatial existence of the risen Christ means that heaven is to be regarded as a place, as well as a state.<sup>55</sup>

Rahner's own preferred approach to this is to concede that 'place' may be used of the risen body, provided that it is recognised that the word cannot be given the same content as it



would have in ordinary usage. He writes of heaven as the highest sphere of existence, into which Christ has 'ascended' at his 'Ascension into Heaven'. It is as a result of this event of Ascension, Rahner argues, that "the bodily substance of man" may emigrate to Christ; specifically to Christ, who has made this 'region' the natural home of the risen and transfigured person.<sup>56</sup> Rahner comes to this view under the influence of his dissatisfaction with the concept of the 'glorified body' of Christ, and of others, while admitting it as nevertheless the best expression of "historical self-consummation of the Lord", though one which does not seem to him to cover all the implications of such important texts as Philippians 2.<sup>57</sup>

He considers that the Ascension-exaltation of Christ has a decisive soteriological role. It is the Ascension which eternally establishes the incarnate Logos as the mediator of the immediacy of God to created persons; and it is the hypostatic union alone, he asserts, which establishes and bestows this grace upon creatures. The immediacy which the exalted Christ makes possible for creatures must be with the Father, he argues, and must be ever active because the whole thrust of Christ's incarnate and risen existence is directed toward relationship with the Father.<sup>58</sup>

Another connection which Rahner clearly believes to be important in this matter is that which must be established between the risen-ascended Jesus and the historical Jesus. He defines eternity as history completed and accomplished, rather than its being the projection of history into another

dimension. He argues that the unifying element is that incarnation and exaltation comprise a single 'act of religion', and not two distinct acts, in which alone the single reality of Jesus can be expressed fully.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, Rahner further argues, while the ascended Christ leaves behind his childhood, youth, maturity, crucifixion, dying, and death, these stages enter into exaltation in his person of which they have become part, so that in his leaving and his return he remains the same. So Christ, by his entry into the Father's glory, has both gone and remained, thereby giving to creatures the opportunity to live his life and to be brought to life with himself through his belonging to God.<sup>60</sup> Rahner is both dissatisfied with the limitations imposed by the idea of 'glorified body' and prepared to be influenced by it in speaking of the ascended Christ.<sup>61</sup> He balances this by giving weight to one of his main concerns in dealing with the Ascension: the problem of the nature of human existence in an exalted state, or place.

## b) The Glory of the Ascended Christ

Much modern theology on the ascended Christ has concentrated on the glory he takes to himself in his exaltation. This has ranged from a concern with Christ's investment with power - which is close to the idea of the Session- to the attribution of a central soteriological role to the category of glory itself. Within this range has been included the idea of glory as mythical language and exaltation as an concept almost completely freed from its normal human meaning. Thus, both glory and exaltation have been used in a broad sense to explore what can be said of Christ between Ascension and Parousia.

In the Ascension, Schillebeeckx argues, the risen Christ becomes universal Lord. Christ's glorification, following humiliation, is the goal of the Incarnation; it is indeed, he believes, the eternal form of the Incarnation which is the eternal basis of the Redemption. This is the way in which God the Son exists having become the Son of man. So, Schillebeeckx considers Ascension, rather than Resurrection, to be Christ's entry into this glory:

"The Ascension is: (a) the investiture of Christ risen from the dead as universal Lord and King, with which is connected (b) the glorification of Christ which constitutes him definitively and fully the Messiah and the eschatological 'Son of Man.' The Ascension is the change from 'exinanitio' to 'glorificatio', from humiliation to exaltation; it is the eternally enduring goal of the incarnation of the Son of God." 62

The exaltation of the ascended Christ is, Schillebeeckx argues, nothing less than the form of divine existence modified, though not fundamentally changed, by the Incarnation of God the Son. It is also, he believes, the source of the necessary connection between Christ's Resurrection and his presence in the Church.<sup>63</sup> The exaltation of the Son of Man is the heavenly form of the Incarnation which is provisional because it has inevitably had a temporal and limited created dimension which cannot be brought into the eternal and infinite being of the Trinity. The Incarnation is the movement of the divine into this necessary engagement with creation, the Ascension is the equally necessary disengagement with certain specifics of created existence; both movements are driven by the soteriological imperatives which underlie the whole Christ-event.

Bultmann, with similar questions in mind, finds a complexity of meaning in Ephesians 4:8-10.<sup>64</sup> He believes that "Now this, He ascended, what is it but that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth?" does not correspond to the usual New Testament meaning of descent into Hell because it reflects the Gnostic myth that the realm of the dead is in the air and not in the earth, which is the normal Old Testament imagery. He sees in this the adaptation of Ps 68:18 in the service of a different world-view or mythology which, taken with Col 2:15 and 1Pt 3:22, expresses the Ascension of Christ as simultaneously the defeat of the demonic powers which had ruled

the world. He also finds traces of this particular 'mythos' in Jn 12:28-32 (cf. 16:10f.) in the context of Jesus' identification of his passion with his exaltation and glorification.

Bultmann interprets this as the view that, through his exaltation, Christ reconciles the world to himself by ending the cosmic disorder, reflecting a Gnostic myth modified by a Jewish-Christian eschatology of a postponed future parousia. He argues that this is more than the simple presence of Gnostic motifs and represents, rather, a systematic following of the Gnostic mythology in the earliest Christian thought which manifests itself in these New Testament passages. He believes that this situation, which includes much of the New Testament's treatment of the Ascension, is the result of the Hellenistic kerygma whose growth in the early Church reflected the diversity of Greek philosophies.<sup>65</sup> He is led by this to see Paul, who was not a personal disciple of Jesus and his preaching, as a convert to this kerygma, whose theology (and the theology of whose 'school') was a new structure in relation to that preaching.<sup>66</sup>

One of the consequences of this for the New Testament theology of the Ascension, if it were to be accepted, is that it places Gnostic influence at a very early stage of its formulation. It is in this setting that Bultmann places Paul's understanding of the Ascension:

"According to 1Cor 15:5-8, where Paul enumerates the appearances of the risen Lord as tradition offered them, the resurrection of Jesus meant simultaneously his exaltation; not until later was the resurrection interpreted as a temporary return to life on earth, and this idea then gave rise to the ascension story (Lk 24:50-53; Acts 1:3-11)." 67

Bultmann is not simply examining the New Testament expression of Christ's Resurrection and Ascension-exaltation; he is also attempting a theological interpretation, in which the sources of the imagery and symbolic systems used to express them are considered to have had a decisive influence upon the content of the doctrines themselves. While it is necessary and valuable to recognise the validity of this exercise, so that the underlying presuppositions of the Scriptural forms of expression can be properly appreciated, it is also necessary to identify that which is proper to the original insights and revelations of the uniquely Christian content of the New Testament. Bultmann's contribution to this process has been to offer a particularly helpful corrective in understanding the relation of form to content in the revelation of doctrine. However, his argument that the Ascension story arises from the need to explain the temporary nature of Christ's "return to life on earth" does not address the nature of that risen life as it is presented in the New Testament, nor does it adequately explain the Ascension itself, beyond its having an explanatory role for the early Church: its substantiveness is sacrificed. Nevertheless, what the New Testament has to say about the Ascension of Christ can

be clarified in terms of its internal logic, as well as of the external influences from the contemporary world of ideas.

Barth places the significance of the Ascension in the Session and exaltation of Christ, in which his humanity in some sense participates in the divine glory without being actually assumed into the Godhead.<sup>68</sup> He interprets the Biblical language used of Jesus' Resurrection appearances as his exit from the limitations of death and his entry into the life of God, and believes this period to be a transitional stage in this process.<sup>69</sup>

The humiliation of Jesus is, Barth argues, also his exaltation; this is applied to others by being a basis and type of mankind's reconciliation with God; and is also an unavoidable stage of transition on the route to exaltation.<sup>70</sup> So, he contends, exaltation cannot be understood solely in terms of a power analogous to earthly power, but it is an exaltation which includes the humiliation, suffering, and death which belong to Christ's history.<sup>71</sup>

Barth goes on to argue that the only kind of christology which can adequately address this dimension of reconciliation is one which takes Christ's humanity as seriously as his divinity.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, he places the reconstitution of the covenant with mankind precisely in the exchange of the abasement of God with the exaltation of the creature which is the heart of the mission of Christ.<sup>73</sup> He is aware that there is the danger of tautology in speaking of the exaltation of

Christ, and that this may be avoided by seeing it in terms of the freeing of the one who was bound, tempted, suffering, victimised, and killed as a servant, who is also Lord.<sup>74</sup>

This argument, that exaltation cannot mean that Christ has changed, because he could not become better or higher than he is, assumes that the use of the term 'exaltation' in this context must have its usual meaning. There is no necessity that exaltation be taken to imply such a 'raising up' of Christ, or even that the value judgments which relate divine and created being in this way need be conceded. It is the absolute distinction and incommensurability of God and non-god which makes the content of the language of exaltation so difficult to use; a concentration upon the soteriological consequences of Christ's Ascension, rather than the fear of compromising his divine immutability, would reduce this difficulty. Barth develops this approach, but continues to find the idea of exaltation a limitation on the place of the Ascension in the scheme of reconciliation.

One of the principal themes which Balthasar explores in his whole examination of the category of glory is that of its hiddenness. He finds valuable insights in John, who envisaged the Incarnation of the Logos (Jn 1:14; 2:11; 11:4, 40) not as the laying aside of glory, but as itself a glorification, though one which is not yet manifest to creatures (Jn 7:39).<sup>75</sup> The taking up of the humanity of Christ into the essential glory of God for the salvation of all created persons is the



doctrine in which he found Synoptic, Johannine, and Pauline theology flowing together.<sup>76</sup>

Balthasar views the withdrawal of Christ in ascending as the last of the many concealments of glory which he sees as characterising the establishment of the New Covenant. However, he contrasts the 'end' of the New Covenant with the end of the Old; the latter being superseded by the former which is then established as final.<sup>77</sup> It is the very concealment of the post-Ascension Christ which creates the tension of Christian hope, looking to a future and as yet inconceivable glory in the Trinity, which Balthasar holds to be the definitive character of subsequent history.<sup>78</sup>

He tries to hold together the definitive nature of the Christ-event as finally victorious, with the need for continual struggle in the present, post-Ascension Church:

"Accordingly, he has won the victory for himself but not yet for us, and in Revelation and 1Cor 15:25f. he continues to fight. When he is exalted by the Father as ruler over the cosmos, it is as if he were given only the raw material of the definitive kingdom; the possibilities in this material must first develop in the world -possibilities entrusted to man's administration on the basis of creation- and what has been developed through man until the end of the world becomes once again material, on a higher plane, that is to be given its shape by the forming powers of the kingdom of God. Thus the 'future of Christ' depends on the future of humanity, but the future of humanity is in a provisional state that is orientated towards the future of Christ." 79

The dominance of the category of glory in Balthasar's scheme of theology inevitably determines the way in which the nature

of Christ's ascended life is examined. It leads him to think of the Ascension as the concealment of the divine glory of God the Son made man. In some respects this is certainly the case; but the Ascension of Christ is primarily an entry into glory, not a glory which is in some sense withheld from expression in creation by the will of God, but a glory which cannot be expressed in creation because it belongs in the divine realm. Balthasar's idea of the 'raw material' of the kingdom, still to be developed and formed in the created sphere, is something of a corrective. It allows the Ascension a positive role in creation while placing its active centre in the exalted person of the ascended Christ. The category of glory, as presented by Balthasar, does not seem able to cope as convincingly with this aspect of Ascension.

### c) Ascension as Eschatology

The eschatological consequences of the Ascension emerge from the combination of the salvific purpose and the eternal nature of the state of existence of the ascended Christ.

Kasper argues that the exaltation of Jesus as a dimension of Resurrection is also, at root, eschatological. He traces the link between the New Testament use of the category of exaltation and the use in neo-Judaism of exaltation or ecstasy, which he believes to have been the only category available to neo-Judaic thought to express an individual's eschatological significance. In the earliest references in the New Testament (1Thess 1:10; Acts 3:20) too, Kasper interprets Jesus' brief exaltation as the preparation for his eschatological return as Messiah.<sup>80</sup>

In order to balance this view of Christ's exaltation, Kasper immediately stresses the complementary idea that Jesus' enthronement at the right hand of God is not a separation from this world but is, rather, a new kind of existence. He also argues that, by participation in the power and glory of God, Jesus is present to created persons in the world as a result of being in God, and comes now as an advocate from the Father. Relating this to the concept of the corporeality of Christ's Resurrection and exaltation, Kasper is able to include his idea, noted above, that a 'piece of the world' has entered into the realm of divine existence alongside the idea of God having

entered creation in Christ. By 'corporeality' Kasper means, in this context, the direct involvement of the whole man in the world by being a part of it, and he distinguishes this from physicality or materiality as a way of understanding Christ's Resurrection and exaltation.<sup>81</sup>

The concept of a 'piece of the world' having entered into the life of the Trinity is a most suggestive expression of the soteriological and ontological possibilities which are raised by developing the implications of the Ascension as an event which is efficacious primarily in the divine realm. This is a theme which Kasper has developed less fully than others, but it demonstrates his awareness of the issues involved in the exaltation of the humanity of Christ.

It is because R. C. Moberly has such an apparently clear perspective concerning the otherness of God and Creation that he is able to discuss the indispensability of the Ascension to both Pentecost and the Eschaton.<sup>82</sup> He believes that Atonement is best understood in terms of the return of man to God and that this is achieved on the basis of the person and actions of Christ, one of whose primary tasks is to allow some form of union to be established between the wholly unlike ontologies. Moberly remains concerned with the role of personality in this process, while recognising the importance of these ontological implications.

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As happens with every aspect of the theology of the Ascension, the question of the nature of Christ's ascended life generates numerous connections with other doctrines and with philosophical concepts. The relationship between the event and the ontology of the Ascension is very closely related to the issues raised by the Session and exaltation of Christ, as possible ways of understanding and analysing the nature of the Ascension. This involves the attempt to find logical and, at least initially, non-theological categories, which can throw light on theological statements and questions about the Ascension and can, perhaps, give a more complete appreciation of that doctrine. It is to this approach that attention may now be given.

#### **4. Event and Ontology of the Ascension: the relationship of change and staticity in the divine**

If the Ascension of Christ is to be understood as, in some sense, an event, as the cause or the result of a change from one state of being to another, or as that change itself, it must be involved in a cause-and-effect sequence of some kind. The nature of the Ascension can, therefore, be assessed on the basis of its place within the complex of cause-effect relations which exist within, and help compose, the total content of the Christian Gospel. The principal relationship which can shed light on it is that between the event of Ascension and its most immediate result: the exaltation of Christ.

The Ascension and exaltation of Christ have been understood as relating to one another in a number of different ways in recent theology: in which the event of the Ascension is the decisive element; or, that the ontological state of exaltation is primary, even to the point of regarding the event as simply a sign of what has occurred; or, in seeing the event of Ascension as the initiation of, and cause of, the state of exaltation, giving weight to both event and state.

### a) Event as the central element of the Ascension

The least influential of these approaches has been that which proposes the Ascension-event as the crucial movement to Session of which event the exaltation is an effect. The New Testament basis for this is weakened by the references to the ascended Christ as the central figure of the primitive Church. Only Bultmann has given this approach any real support, his reasons being the mythic character of the scriptural language about the ascended Christ and the, contrastingly, definite event of the disappearance of the earthly Christ.

Bultmann's approach, attempting to place the Ascension accounts in their contemporary philosophical and religious context, is not necessarily one which makes the 'event' of Christ's Ascension more accessible to the modern reader. Indeed it has, rather, the effect of increasing the uncertainties inherent in attempting to understand its nature; but this must actually be a truer reflection of its mysterious character, respecting as it does its resistance to finite representation as a matter including divine involvement.

J. G. Davies takes a position which is in disagreement with Bultmann's belief that the exaltation of Christ is presented in the New Testament as the effect of his Resurrection:

"Two factors, however, militate against this position. First there is the Philippian passage that we have already considered [Phil 2:9-11] and seen to be a direct reference to the Ascension. Second, there is the use of the verbs *ἐγείρω* and *ἀνίστημι* which examination shows never refer to any exaltation beyond the recall from death." 83

The difficulty of the tension which exists between the argument that the Resurrection and the Ascension are distinct events and the argument that they are different aspects of the same reality is that both positions have, on ontological grounds, their merits. One difficulty is that if it is asserted that exaltation is the result of the Ascension, the role of Resurrection appears to be relatively limited, which would be an unbalanced interpretation of the scriptural presentation of both. If the 'events' of Resurrection and Ascension are regarded as formative of the ontological position of Christ in relation to the Father and the Spirit and to creation, then it is possible to see them as distinct but mutually necessary events. If, however, Resurrection and Ascension are understood as the respective ontological and relational states of Christ, then a different interpretation of their positions is required. One possible solution is to regard the Resurrection as the relationship of the exalted Christ with creation, and the Ascension as the relationship of the exalted Christ with God the Father and God the Spirit. If this is a viable approach, it requires a quite specific differentiation of Ascension and Resurrection, but its most radical effect would be in terms of the definition of the ontological nature of the event of the Ascension. This approach will be explored further in the next chapter.



## **b) Decisiveness of the ontological state produced by Ascension**

A more widely supported assessment of the relation of event and state in the Ascension-exaltation is that which places the greater emphasis on the ontological state of the person and relationships of Christ ascended. This views the Ascension in terms of what it achieves, particularly in the divine sphere of existence, but also in relation to created persons.

One of the principal themes in Barth's approach to the reconciling mission of Christ is that it is based upon what takes place in his person, so that the link with christological issues is central. He argues that this is the only legitimate approach to soteriology. In pursuing this he makes the point that the Ascension of Christ does not mean that any or all of God's people will 'ascend':

"We are not told that...the Virgin Birth and ascension of Jesus Christ became universally possible for mankind, or even for Christ's own people, or even for one of them." 84

Barth is making an important point here about the nature of the entire Christ-event. The Incarnation of God in Christ is necessarily fundamentally different from the conception and birth of any other human being; the same is true of the death of Christ. His Resurrection and Ascension, therefore, must also differ from the rising from the dead and entry into heaven of ordinarily constituted human persons. The basis for this

difference is the unique ontological format of Christ who alone is both God and non-god. This is not to question the reality of the human experiences of Christ, nor to challenge the doctrine of his divinity. It is the union of Creator and creature in the person of Christ which, it may be argued, is at the heart of the soteriological enterprise, and that at each stage enablements are being set in place which will ultimately allow all creatures entry into union with God, but in a way which differs from that which is possible for Christ. The Ascension is one of these stages.

There appears to be some tension between the implications of Barth's ideas on the uniqueness of the Ascension of Christ, and his thoughts on the Ascension envisaged solely as a means of revelation, thus denying it a substantive role in his theology, such as was given to Incarnation and Crucifixion.<sup>85</sup> This is consistent with Barth's theme of the self-revelation of God in Christ, except that for the other central Christian doctrines he traced that revelation to the substantive involvement of God directly in them; but he sees the Ascension as revelation of God in a more representational manner. Yet the New Testament presents Ascension, along with Resurrection, as an important progression in the development of the person of Christ. Barth seems to create, rather than identify, a paradox in stressing the revelational nature of the Ascension and then allowing the Ascension and exaltation of Christ a substantive role in the establishment of Christ as Mediator.

Rahner's placing of ontological issues at the centre of his understanding of salvation means that, while he broadly agrees with Barth, he has to look more closely at the effects of the Ascension within the Trinity relationship. In Theological Investigations, Volume IV, he writes in terms which show significant differences between his thought and that of Hilary and Balthasar:

"One would have to show, in other words, that in the incarnation, and in the resurrection which is its consummation, the transfigured human reality of the Logos remains truly and perpetually the mediator to the immediacy of God. One would have to show that the essence of the supernatural grace bestowed upon creatures, given in the hypostatic union and essentially deriving from it, and not elsewhere, implies an immediacy which has a certain ontological presupposition, which may be indicated by the concept of a mediated immediacy. For immediacy is always immediacy to something....The risen and exalted Lord must be the permanent and ever-active access to God, which is always being used anew and can never be left as something passed over and past. He must always show the Father." 86

The idea of 'mediated immediacy', upon which Rahner focuses in examining the Ascension, is incisive but also decidedly problematical. If 'immediacy' means that no intervening medium exists between God and creature, in Christ himself initially and then in other created persons, where some form of mediacy has previously applied, then the establishment of immediacy must mean the modification of one or both participants in the relevant relationship, or of the nature of the relationship itself. Yet if the immediacy established by Christ enables immediacy between other creatures and the Father, without

modification of their persons or relationship, it seems that the only explanation must be in terms of the necessity of some ground or medium for the transmission of this enablement.

For Rahner, it is the risen and exalted Christ who makes immediacy possible by providing a transfigured human reality which is itself access to God. This leaves the problem of how the modification of a single individual human person, even one in union of being with the divine Logos, actually opens for others access to God. Rahner states only that this happens because "the hypostatic union implies an immediacy which has a certain ontological presupposition", without specifying the precise nature of this implication. He declines to take the route of considering that it may be, in some sense, the modification (even when this word is divorced from its temporal implications of a prior and/or subsequent difference of state) of relationships within the Trinity, required to allow the Ascension of Christ to take place, which enables divine immediacy with creatures on the basis of an accommodation to the humanity of Christ in the Trinity-relationship.

The problem of the means by which the salvation achieved by Christ is transmitted to creatures also emerges when Rahner discusses the way in which the history of Jesus is both taken up with him into heaven and is at the same time properly history.<sup>87</sup> Though the idea of Christ's life as "a human life which belongs to God" expresses his connection with created persons, it is more difficult to see how it can "give us an opportunity to live his life", beyond its being a poetic image.

This seems an attempt to establish a quasi-medium for the transmission of salvation on the model of Irenaeus' doctrine of 'anakephalaiosis', which is difficult to integrate with a theory of immediacy.

Tillich, like Barth, regards the problems raised by soteriology as the generators of the christological question, and as the decisive guidelines in the production of some answer to them. He argues that this is the case to the extent that he finds it possible to say that "Christology is a function of soteriology".<sup>88</sup> This is consistent with his central theme in Systematic Theology: the establishment by Christ of 'the New Being' as the principle of salvation for mankind. It is in this context that Tillich examines and interprets the central christological, and therefore soteriological, doctrines, including the Ascension. What Tillich has to say about the Ascension is conditioned by his development of the idea of 'the New Being'. He declines to give a short definition of 'the New Being', believing that it is explicable only in terms of his whole system of theology, and in its applicability to the concrete human situation.<sup>89</sup> However, he is prepared to define an important dimension of 'the New Being' in these terms:

"New Being is essential being under the conditions of existence, conquering the gap between essence and existence." <sup>90</sup>

Tillich understands 'essence' to be what something actually is, with its accompanying value judgments. 'Existence' is the way in which something actually is, again, accompanied by value judgments. Tillich recognises the ambiguities inherent in the use of such terms, but believes their religious meanings of the created and the actual world, respectively, to be crucial to the whole of theology.<sup>91</sup>

'The New Being', he argues, restores the unity of existence by overcoming the the cleavage between essential and existential being. It addresses the merely potential character of essential being, and the estranged character of existential being, to make possible an actuality free from this estrangement.<sup>92</sup> Tillich locates the manifestation of 'the New Being' in Jesus as the Christ.<sup>93</sup> He therefore sees one purpose of his Systematic Theology as an exploration of the establishment of Christ in this soteriological role.

One of the results of this approach is Tillich's assertion that the expressions of faith cannot be replaced at will by theologians or others who attempt to interpret and criticise them, but are to be judged within the consciousness of the Church. The symbols, he believes, essentially express Christ's subjection to and victory over existence which, he argues, may be called 'salvation'.<sup>94</sup>

Tillich's application of these criteria to Christ's Ascension begins with a rejection of the spatial content of the New Testament accounts. He takes the distinction between heaven and earth to refer to the qualitative difference between divine and

creaturely existence, so that even an implied movement in space means nothing apart from its symbolic role, in which the literal is by definition inapplicable.<sup>95</sup> In addition, he finds equally inappropriate any idea of pre-existence or post-existence applied to the nature of Christ, the latter expressed by the Ascension, as stages in a narrative detached from explicit symbolism.<sup>96</sup>

The dominance of the concept of 'the New Being' in his argument is such that Tillich is concerned to relate the principal christological and soteriological doctrines to this concept, and is much less concerned with their relation to each other.<sup>97</sup> This imposes some limitations on his appreciation of the progress made at each step of the development of the Christ-event, in which each mystery is not only a logical, but also a soteriological, precondition for the possibility of the subsequent stage. In concentrating on the relation of each doctrine to his central guiding principle, Tillich has to place their interconnections in a subordinate role. Consequently, he gives a much lower profile to the distinctive nature of Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost than can be found, for example, in Barth's Church Dogmatics.

While being concerned that the symbols of the revelation of God's purpose in Christ cannot arbitrarily be altered, Tillich did consider the symbols used to express that purpose to be of a secondary nature in comparison to the ontological realities to which they point. Thus for him, the Ascension is not an

event which brings about 'the New Being' but is, rather, a symbolic expression of what has taken place in another sphere of existence.

Tillich places the reconciliation of disparate forms of being at the centre of his analysis of the soteriological process. He is concerned with the conciliation of divine and created being; and, even more, with the reconciliation of essential and existential being within creation. The place which the Ascension might occupy in this scheme could involve more than Tillich allows for in his assessment of its symbolic nature.

The Ascension, it may be argued, can be found a place in the conciliation of divine and created being, in the sense that it involves the entry of the humanity of Christ into the relationships of Trinity with the Father and the Spirit, though not with the Son, who cannot be in relationship with himself. The Ascension can also have a role in the reconciliation of essential and existential being, bringing into the life of the Trinity, as it does, the essence of created being which has been formed existentially, and therefore authentically, in the Incarnation and Crucifixion, and eternalised in the Resurrection of the one man Jesus Christ. Only the particular developments made possible by the Ascension of Christ could have these particular effects; the Resurrection alone cannot be said to have achieved this unless it is defined in such a way as to include Ascension.



### c) Equality of event and ontology in the role of the Ascension

In giving event and ontology a more equal, and mutually indispensable, role in the reconciliation of God and creation some theologians have taken a middle way in which the substantiveness of the Ascension-event actually enhances the significance of the exaltation-state. The sense that either event or state must predominate gives way, in this approach, to the sense that, apart, they are inexplicable or impossible.

Using categories and emphases different to those of Tillich, Balthasar is drawn to this conclusion in exploring the Incarnation and Resurrection in terms of the dissolving of boundaries between God and creation. In The Glory of the Lord, Volume VII, he writes:

"It is important at this point to see that the dissolution of the boundaries that God imposed upon himself in the Incarnation of his Word who was to bring all things to fulfilment, had to take place from within, in accordance with the Incarnation and the Cross, but in such a way that the taking on of finitude (going as far as the prison of being forsaken by God and Hell) should not be nullified, but brought to fulfilment in God: not disincarnated, but made spiritual in the Resurrection." 98

He defines these boundaries as the alienation of humanity from God, brought about by sin, which Christ's humanity allows God to share. The objective crossing of the boundaries is achieved, he contends, by Christ's being subjectively 'taken up'.<sup>99</sup> This comes about, he argues, because neither is the

divine in Christ alienated from itself by the Incarnation nor is the human alienated from itself in his Ascension; his humanity, rather, is brought into the open relatedness of the life of Trinity.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, he points to the centre of the 'mystery', according to Paul (Eph 1:13f.; 2:1ff.; 3:6), being the opening of the 'once closed' people to universality by the Cross and Resurrection.<sup>101</sup>

For Balthasar, the hiddenness of the glory, 'doxa', which is also openness remains a mystery alongside the 'down-payment' of the Holy Spirit as the certain hope of Christians. He conceives of Christ as the image of God because of this mystery, and believes that the tension involved, between openness and hiddenness, is left in the care of the Father.<sup>102</sup> He calls the concurrence of glory and humiliation in Christ and the Church, manifested through the Spirit, the 'exact reality' of all existence.<sup>103</sup> This brings Balthasar into close agreement with his understanding of Barth's insight that the self-disclosure of God's glory in Christ enables the Spirit to bring about creation's response of "glorificatio", which it is able to do by looking from itself and looking to Christ, "in whom glory and glorification become absolutely one".<sup>104</sup>

Balthasar believes the boundaries between God and creation, which Christ dissolves, to be 'self-imposed' by God in the Incarnation.<sup>105</sup> It would, perhaps, be more accurate to say that they are 'accepted' or 'embraced' by God as necessary accompaniments to the Incarnation, and even to the act of creation. The logical necessity of such boundaries, which have

their roots in the ontological total otherness of God and creation, could not arbitrarily be dispensed with by God without compromising the integrity of both Creator and creation and their relationship. Nor can those boundaries between persons be absolutely dissolved because they exist as a result of the existence of God and that which is not-god.

Later, Balthasar does give greater weight to the ontological conciliation effected by the return of Christ into the life of the Trinity. He writes:

"But it is only the third, trinitarian level that brings the definitive solution. Since God does not alienate himself from himself by becoming incarnate (since the obedient Son of Man is only the illustration of the eternal relatedness and selflessness of the divine Persons), Christ does not alienate man from himself when he raises him from the apparently closed substantiality of his personal being (in which he thinks that he definitively stands over against God) into the open relatedness of the life within the Godhead." 106

However, in doing so, Balthasar makes a clear distinction between this return as the solution, for Christ alone, of the ontological disturbance which results from the union of God and man, and the soteriological level, which he sees in terms of the release of humanity from slavery to sin. Though Balthasar stresses the interrelatedness of these two levels, he does not go as far as might have been possible in explicating any specifically ontological conciliation of God and created persons, which appears to be demanded by the former position.

In exploring the implications of the abolition of distance between the Father and the Son Balthasar comes close to the position of Hilary of Poitiers on the kenotic disturbance of the divine unity by the Incarnation.<sup>107</sup> Hilary's attribution of disturbance in the Trinity stemmed from his interest in the effect on the Godhead of the union of one Person of the Trinity with part of creation; this disturbance being resolved by the establishment of that humanity as properly part of the divine realm, completed in the Ascension. Balthasar uses the symbol of "the distance of obedience", which suggests an impairment of absolute union, to express that which requires resolution between the incarnate Son and the Father and Spirit; the distance is closed by the establishment of the Son of man in power, at the Ascension. Both Hilary and Balthasar recognise the provisional nature of the disturbance-distance and the absolute nature of its resolution.

Moberly is interested in the role of personality in possible theologies of the atonement, but it is personality primarily in the sense of 'being a person', rather than a concern with personality in the sense of 'being a person with a particular qualitative character'. In other words, it is the centrality of the category of personhood with its resultant relationships to the achievement of atonement with which he is chiefly occupied.

This allows him to explore the nature of Christ's salvific role in terms of the reconciling of created persons with the divine Persons in a way which is much broader than the category

of forgiveness can allow; though he includes forgiveness in the context of personality.<sup>108</sup> He believes that a theology of atonement which does not give full weight to the existence of personhood and relationship can never be adequate, and argues that this is the medium through which that which is achieved at Calvary is made present to all people throughout history in Pentecost.<sup>109</sup>

Moberly considers the function of the Ascension to be indispensable to this process. He sees it as the means by which the absolute otherness of God and creature, which must have some inhibiting effect on reconciliation, is transcended. In this, he shows a concern, similar to that of Schillebeeckx and Hilary, for the substantive soteriological role of the Ascension, but like them he has reasons, in the context of his overall argument, for not developing this insight in itself.

Schillebeeckx's thoughts about the decisive place of the Ascension in soteriology and sacramental theology share some common ground with the insight of Hilary that the Ascension is a substantive ontological stage in the conciliation of the divine and the created through Christ.<sup>110</sup> Their differences of emphasis reflect the different approaches and concerns which had brought them to this matter. Hilary regarded the Ascension as the resolution of the relational disturbance in Trinity which results from God the Son's becoming man. Schillebeeckx sees the Ascension as the achieving of an inclusiveness within

the divine relationship which can accommodate the humanity of Christ.

Together, even across their broad range, and in spite of the differences in approach from which they stem, these arguments point to an important dimension of soteriological thought in the theology of the twentieth century in which the event and effect of the Ascension of Christ have a pivotal role: the need for ontological conciliation of the divine and the created as a fundamental objective of the saving work of Christ; an objective which must have a decisive formative role in the shaping of the person and work of Christ in all the key stages of the redemptive process, and in its overall purpose. It is in the attempt to apply this understanding to the Ascension that the problems and, even more, the possibilities of its role become clear.

## **5. The Ascension and Christology: the function of exaltation in the soteriological strategy**

The more clearly modern theologians have been able to argue for the substantiveness of the Ascension as an indispensable element in the christocentric divine plan for the future of creation, the more incisive have been their insights into the nature of that divine strategy and its enactment. This has had the complementary effect of allowing further appreciation of the Ascension on the basis of its specifically soteriological value. Assessment of the Ascension on this basis depends upon the particular model of salvation being used in the analysis. For this reason, the Ascension is given a wide variety of evaluations: from its being of peripheral value; through a middle range of involvement; to a position at, or close to, the centre of soteriological concerns.

### **a) Subordinate nature of the role of the Ascension**

As has been noted, the Ascension has had to be addressed by many modern theologians if only, at the minimal level, because of its presence in the scriptural record. Among those who have decided that it can be given no more than a fairly low status Tillich has given his reasons most clearly.

Despite the title of Systematic Theology, Tillich's work is in many respects a fundamental theology. It is concerned, to a very great extent, with the presuppositions and principles which are the bases of the theological task, and with the existential conditions for human salvation in the form of participation in the content of divine revelation.<sup>111</sup> As a result, the systematisation of Tillich's ideas is formed to a considerable degree by this emphasis. In relation to the Christ-event Tillich places the Ascension in a posterior and derivative position, rather than in an anterior role, and by so doing comes remarkably close to the positions of both Barth and Bultmann, different as they are from each other in other ways.

Bultmann argues that the Ascension accounts in the New Testament are expressed in mythological language. In examining the imagery of ascending and descending in John's Gospel, for example, this allows him to look beyond the sequence of events to the soteriological structures which might underlie them. It leads him to envisage Christ's descent from pre-existent glory and his ascent to exaltation as a single unit which forms the basis of eternal life for humanity and the revelation of God's purpose in Christ.<sup>112</sup>

In saying this, Bultmann is careful to distinguish between the status of the images used and that of the religious teachings they were intended to express. As has been noted, he traces the main sources of this imagery to Gnostic and mystery religion mythology. He finds the clearest indications of this



influence in the writings of John the Evangelist and Paul, but with the implication that in the whole theology of the New Testament related influences can be discerned.<sup>113</sup>

One of the results of this insight was a sensitivity to the variety of background imagery which may be discovered to operate within single New Testament passages, exerting an important, sometimes a decisive, influence upon their meaning. Bultmann believes that this tendency surfaces, for example, in 1Cor 11:23-25, in which he finds the influence of liturgical usage in the account of the Last Supper, compared to Mk 14:22-24. The ease of acceptance of the idea of sacramental reception of the body and blood of the exalted Christ which is one with the crucified body, he argues, was due to the already well-known mystery-religion concept of the body of the cult-divinity which is both dead and powerful in its effect.<sup>114</sup>

Bultmann's attempt to trace and understand the background of mythology and circumstance in the formation and formulation of the New Testament allows an approach to the Ascension of Christ which is freed from many of the surface difficulties of the text. This is made possible by conceding that the background is not merely the source of problems to be tackled, but is the context and the key to the precise meanings. The Ascension is thus available to be considered in terms of the complex of symbolic, semantic, religious, and mythical dimensions in which the earliest Christians sought to understand, express, and communicate whatever reality lay behind and within their experience of it.

A potential danger in Bultmann's approach, though not one he seems to intend, is that it left open the possibility that the Ascension accounts are explicable in terms of their inner logic and their power to express a universal, idealised truth with no external reference, perhaps that: the good man will enter heaven. This does not fully reflect the contention of the New Testament that Christ is actually the Saviour who makes possible the reality of entry in heaven. The 'mythological' expressions of this are undoubtedly there, but their priority over the core events they express would undermine any proposed soteriology.

#### **b) Ascension as a significant soteriological doctrine**

The relationship of humanity to the created order which sustains it is characterised by R. C. Moberly as automatic, material, and mechanical in its blind properties and natural operation. He understands the divine as a sovereign and transcendent being that has no dependence on material conditions and operates at a wholly different level from that of humanity. Yet Moberly places his discussion of this ontological incommensurability in the context of an attempt to express something of the nature of the personhood of Christ.<sup>115</sup> He argues that it is only the humanity of the infinite God which can be said to be united with creation in the Incarnation. He stresses, by the manner in which it is

expressed, that there can be no thought of applying such concepts as the transitional between God and non-god, or of their intermingling, in any discussion of the Incarnation of God.

This is an understanding which has a particular importance for the Ascension as salvific. In Moberly's analysis, the Incarnation of God as man represents the joining together within the boundaries of creation, by means of the unique category of personhood, of two forms of existence which are otherwise resistant to co-existence. The Ascension may be understood, on this basis, as the taking of that unique conjunction of God and non-god into the divine realm. Ascension, then, is not a relocation of the incarnate Son of God into a different mode, but is, rather, an application of the consequences of the same, now fulfilled, hypostatic union to the divine, as well as to created, being. Moberly did not pursue the implications for the Ascension of his insights into atonement.

Later theologians have found in this general direction of thought an impulse to include the Ascension more fully into their theories of salvation. This has sometimes seemed a rather reluctant inclusion, where other concerns have been more pressing, but it has meant that the Ascension-exaltation of Christ has had to be recognised as a stage without which his person and work cannot be fully understood.

The soteriological role of the Ascension, as expressed by Paul, is interpreted by Balthasar as an adoption of the pre-Pauline concept of substitution. Balthasar writes:

"No matter how true it may be that the word of the proclamation has a divine power of its own, and that the Spirit is bestowed on those who hear, the 'proclamation' and public announcement (Gal 3:1) that the crucified Jesus was and remains the decisive event of salvation in the entire cosmos can be accepted in faith only if a context in which it can be understood is given at the same time: besides the christology of obedience in Phil 2, it is above all the (likewise pre-Pauline) idea of substitution in the light of Is 53 and thence the idea of the ascent of the Christ who is experienced and attested as risen, to take the place of a mediator of the whole cosmos (1Cor 8:6) and lord in the place of Sophia or of the Logos (Col 1:15ff.)." 116

Balthasar recognises here the point made by Bultmann, that the proclamation of Christ by the early Church depends for its comprehensibility upon the context from which the imagery is derived. He places the imagery of obedience, substitution, mediatorship, Sophia, and Logos in this category of expressive imagery. However, unlike Bultmann, he is keen to stress that he reads the proclamation of the risen and ascended Christ in direct relation to what he calls "the decisive event of salvation in the entire cosmos". The inseparability of the event and its announcement is, he indicates, because its being proclaimed is an indispensable part of its purpose.

An alternative model used by Balthasar to express the soteriological efficacy of the Ascension is that of the

creation of a 'space' identical with the risen and exalted humanity of Jesus. This 'space' is created by Christ's Resurrection, his victory over death. Balthasar specifies that it is an 'anthropological space', and that it is what is meant in the New Testament when Jesus is said to be exalted "above all the heavens", that is above all created power (Eph 4:10; Heb 1:1-3:6).<sup>117</sup> He defines this 'space' as that into which the Christian message led people forth. This is clearly meant to be a soteriological function of the exalted Christ. It echoes Barth's idea of the ascended humanity of Christ taking all humanity into heaven. It differs in that it gives Christ's humanity a role in preparing a place in God's glory into which other human beings can 'fit', rather than simply leading the way in some unspecific manner. Balthasar defines the 'power' of the exalted Christ as the maintaining of divine dominion over the world, while it is shared with the risen and exalted man Jesus (Rom 8:34; Heb 1:3; Mt 28:18; Phil 3:21).<sup>118</sup>

The Church is central to Balthasar's understanding of the time between the Cross-Resurrection-Ascension and the Parousia.<sup>119</sup> He finds this present in the New Testament, where the departure of Jesus is linked to the mission of the Church. In Luke and Acts he reads the Ascension of Jesus and his presence in the Church, in faith and hiddenness, as the final stage of the invisible presence of God's glory prior to the Parousia. He interprets Matthew's stories of Jesus' 'encounter en route' with the women, the rumours, the episode of the alleged bribing of the soldiers, and the stylised missionary

discourse as further development of the understanding of the departure of Jesus.<sup>120</sup>

Balthasar wishes to stress that the gains made in soteriological terms by the exaltation of Christ are not only as a generator of faith among individuals and communities. He writes of both the 'objective' and 'subjective' effects:

"Or must not the objective crossing of the boundary, the objective abolition of man's alienation from God [brought about by the exclusion of God through sin], where the boundary is the human nature which Christ shares with him, be completed through a subjective crossing of the boundary that transforms the act of 'being laid hold of' into an act of enthused 'taking up' and 'pursuing' (Phil 3:12-14)?" 121

Balthasar clearly believes that his rhetorical question should be answered 'Yes'. In making use of this passage from Philippians, Balthasar portrays the crossing of this boundary as an act performed by Christ in bringing those who follow him to the life that he has taken up. There then arises the problem of whether the boundary in Christ which is dissolved is that of sinfulness or that of humanity, including his own. If it is sin which is to be transcended, it must have the role of having closed the boundary, between the created and the divine, actually within human nature. If it is human nature which is to be transcended, then the objective abolition of that boundary which results from the creation of human nature is an alienation prior to that of sin. If both sin and human nature are to be transcended, the soteriological role of the Ascension

is more substantial in that the advances made by the Cross and Resurrection are united by the taking up into the divine realm of Christ who has already overcome both sin and the limitations of human nature, and is active in making this possible for others.

Similarly, Barth's view, that the immutability of God must be considered an absolute in assessing the effect of soteriological events, does not mean that he considers the Ascension, and Resurrection, to be without substantive significance in the scheme of reconciliation. Paradoxically, he believes the Ascension to be the event by which Christ adopts a mediatorial position whereby sin is forgiven and solidarity with sinners is effected.<sup>122</sup> Christ's exaltation, he argues, is not a state of rest following the activity and work which preceded it, but is an active relation of his history to the coming Kingdom of God.<sup>123</sup> This is to be seen as the basis for Jesus' authority to commission his disciples to go beyond the previously declared limits in a mission to the whole world (Mt 10:5; 28:18-19).<sup>124</sup>

Despite the difficulties he raises about the relation of event to state in examining the exaltation of Christ, Barth considered the exalted state of Christ to be in certain respects the key to the reconciliation of God and mankind.<sup>125</sup>

He sees the conjunction of divine and human essence in the exalted Christ as that which makes him the Reconciler. His humanity is both like and unlike all humanity, in being real

but also true man; in this role as true man Christ is exalted because he is completely different from other men, and is salvific because he is of the common essence of humanity. Barth writes:

"For in Him, in this man, we have to do with the exaltation of the essence common to all men. In virtue of the fact that He is the Son of God, and therefore of divine and human essence, He is the Son of Man, the true man. Completely like us as a man, He is completely unlike us as the true man. In the essence common to us all, as a man like ourselves, He is completely different. This is His exaltation. This is why He is raised above us and therefore for us. For He is the Son of God, and in Him our human essence is conjoined with the divine essence. In this being as the Son of Man, the true man, He is the Reconciler of the world with God." 126

'Essence', in this context, means 'intrinsic being or nature' (Wesen -used here), rather than with what is more usually called the 'natural' (Natur -not used).<sup>127</sup>

Barth's contention that the Ascension of Christ represents, in some sense, a remoteness from his preceding human history is one which sits uneasily alongside his sacramental, that is baptismal and eucharistic, theology of the presence of Christ to the Church. Barth argues that this is solved by the divine ubiquity of God the Son. Calvin, wishing to preserve the integrity of Christ's ascended body, placed his corporeal humanity in heaven in an advocacy role. Barth, however, uses a distinction between the general presence of Christ and the special presence of Christ to believers.<sup>128</sup> There exists in this approach an apparent conflict because the general presence



of Christ seems to depend upon the involvement of his humanity in relationship with God in a way which enables the exaltation of all humanity, while at the same time Christ's presence to humanity seems to be mediated through the divine ubiquity. There is also the problem of the means by which the exaltation of the humanity of Christ is transmitted to other human beings; an understanding of the nature of human existence which assumes that the medium of such a transmission can be taken for granted seems to involve a very specialised and unusual understanding of human reality: one which is hard to justify.

In considering this problem, Kasper finds that the complex of dynamic relationships which make up the Christ-event, for which he uses the metaphor of a drama involving all existence, brings into unity not only christology and soteriology but also the theologies of kenosis and exaltation. He writes:

"This important text [Phil 2:6-11], then, is speaking of Jesus Christ who from eternity existed in the essential form of God, but then emptied himself to the extent of suffering death on the cross and was finally exalted to be 'Kyrios', i.e. world ruler possessed of divine rank. The christology of pre-existence and the christology of cross or kenosis and exaltation are united in a vast drama that embraces heaven and earth. Christology here emerges within the framework of soteriology." 129

By placing christology within the framework of soteriology Kasper, like Tillich, implies that the sequence of stages from Incarnation to Ascension is, at root, soteriological. That is to say that, while the Trinity is revealed in the person and

actions of Christ, Christ, as such, actually comes into existence to bring about salvation; this is a long-standing insight into the Christ-event. It also means that Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost are, at root, about Creation; and that the form of, as well as the impulse for, the Ascension, from which created persons appear most remote, is driven by the imperative of the salvation of creatures. The Ascension is christological because it is soteriological.

Similarly, Schillebeeckx locates the foundation of the exalted Christ's specific soteriological role within the Trinity in the union of God and creature. He thinks it could best be expressed in this way:

"In virtue of the Hypostatic Union we are confronted with a divine way of being man and a human way of being God. The man Jesus is the existence of God himself (the Son) according to and in the mode of humanity. For person and nature are never extrinsic elements separate from one another. The God-man is one person." 130

Many of the implications of this for creaturely relations to God through Christ are explicated in Schillebeeckx's concern with Sacrament throughout his book Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God. He is also, though to a lesser extent, occupied with the implications of this situation within the relationship of the Godhead, with its particular ontological features. The main aspect of this, as has been noted, is the attention he pays to the connection between the Ascension and

Pentecost. In doing this he develops the implications of arguing that the union of God and man in Christ produces a human way of being God, with the crucial realisation that God is Trinity, and that this involves a complex of Persons and relationship into which the Ascension has introduced what might, with concessions to the eternity and unmutability of God, be described as modifications; which modifications can have only a soteriological motivation, since they can only 'benefit' God by benefiting creation. In the Ascension those implications demand direct attention more than at any preceding stage of the Christ-event.

The soteriological dimension of the Ascension of Christ emerges as playing a particularly important part in the assessment of its nature because it touches on the crucial question of the necessity of the Ascension itself. If the Ascension has sometimes been regarded as the source of inconsistencies which have to be smoothed away, it has also, and more productively, acted as an indicator of what must be included in a more complete theology of salvation. It is also a constant reminder that any attempt to systematise the Christ-event will always have to respect its essentially mysterious nature.

No straightforwardly consistent pattern of appreciation of the place of the Ascension in Christian theology could be expected to arise out of such diverse approaches as those represented by thinkers as different as Bultmann, Balthasar, and the others.

Bultmann examines the New Testament accounts, arguing in favour of the identity of Resurrection and Ascension, in which Resurrection is the dominant dimension, and emphasising that the exaltation of Christ is on the basis of this single event. Barth also sees Ascension as part of Resurrection, and as subordinate in importance to the Pentecost event; for him, the state of glory into which Christ ascends is the key to the soteriological significance of the Ascension. For Tillich, Christ's taking of his place at the right hand of the Father is a state which is the result of the soteriological Christ-event, rather than a central part of it. Rahner argues for the subordination of the Ascension to the Resurrection, and virtually identifies Ascension and Pentecost; he sees the Session of Christ as having a role as an important development in the state of being of Christ. Balthasar, too, views Resurrection and Ascension as a single complex reality and also sees Pentecost as a component of this which relates primarily, however, to Resurrection; but he finds the Ascension's soteriological significance, which derives from both its event and the resulting state, in its relation to the central category of glory. For Moberly, the Ascension is primarily an event and state in which the enabling of Pentecost within an

eschatological framework gives the Ascension an important soteriological role. Kasper identifies Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost as a single eschatological and soteriological necessity. Schillebeeckx argues for the distinct but subordinate role of the Ascension in relation to Resurrection, and places Pentecost in a subordinate position in relation to Ascension; he sees Resurrection as the supreme exaltation of Christ, and Ascension as a consequence of that, with its own soteriological indispensability.

What emerges is the sense that the Ascension of Christ raises issues of christology and soteriology which are at the heart of any search for a wholly consistent systematic or dogmatic theology. The determination to ask and attempt to answer the difficult questions which arise from the placing and content of the doctrine of the Ascension has contributed to the rigour of the investigations of these theologians. They indicate the all-embracing complexity of the doctrine of the Ascension of Christ, and the necessity of avoiding simplistic explanations of this doctrine, especially those which remove it from its soteriological context.

Although it has rarely been the centre of attention in more recent theology, the Ascension-exaltation has sometimes been foregrounded because of its proximity to other doctrines and issues which have been regarded as central theological concerns. These connections have included: its relation to the Resurrection, involving the question of its own separate

existence; its possible role in relation to Pentecost; the categories of Session and exaltation in understanding the nature of the ascended life of Christ; the way in which the event of Ascension relates to the ontological state of exaltation; and, the role of the Ascension in the salvation effected by Christ. Though all these connections have allowed modern theologians insights into the nature of the Ascension, it is the last of them, the soteriological, which seems both the most complete and the most open to further exploration. This is the case because it provides access to the broadest perspective in which the Ascension can be placed: the progression from Creation to Eschaton, which also takes in the Incarnation and Crucifixion, as well as the Resurrection and Pentecost. It is from this perspective that patterns which make their appearance most clearly in the Ascension of Christ can be seen to be present and active at every stage of the atonement of created persons and the Persons of God. This approach indicates the direction in which the Ascension might be most profitably explored further: that of soteriology.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS:

#### THE PLACE OF THE ASCENSION IN THEOLOGY

The interconnectedness of the Ascension with all the other principal christological-soteriological doctrines means that there will inevitably be a tendency, in considering any aspect of the Ascension, towards explaining it in terms of its neighbouring mysteries. While this is clearly a necessary consideration, it can lead to the impression that the Ascension is a subordinate doctrine with a less than essential role; this route has often been taken in theological study of the Ascension: Bultmann, Balthasar, Kasper, and Barth argued that Resurrection and Ascension are identical; and Rahner saw Ascension as distinct but subordinate. An alternative to this is the attempt to place all the stages of the Christ-event in a framework to which they all relate and of which they are all constituent parts; this, too, is a well-trodden path: Hilary of Poitiers and Schillebeeckx found this a fruitful approach.

The former approach -identification of the Ascension with other doctrines, and its subordination to them- can result in

an attempted unification of theology in which the Ascension seems not quite to fit. Attempting to place the Ascension in an inclusive theological pattern in such a way that it fits precisely alongside the other doctrines as their equal can provide a corrective to the subordinationist and identifying tendencies, which have been so influential.

### **1. Theological perspectives**

In order that the doctrine of the Ascension may fit properly into such an inclusive pattern it must be assessed in terms of its own peculiar features, avoiding explanations which minimise or seek to explain away the difficulties raised by those features, but allowing scope to those explanations which, rather, regard those features as signposts to the total meaning of the doctrine. This allows an organic, as distinct from imposed, solution to emerge to the problems of the function and the placing of the doctrine of the Ascension. Among the themes which run through the scriptural, patristic, and modern treatments of the Ascension there does emerge a group which, taken together, seems capable of defining its nature in a way which is both precise and inclusive.

In this respect, there are seven particularly useful theological perspectives generated by the nature of the doctrine of the Ascension:



### **a) Ascension as development upon Resurrection**

The effects which the Resurrection is designed to have upon the person and relationships of Christ are necessarily, and also designedly, carried forward into the Ascension of the risen Christ.

The New Testament witness to the risen Christ makes it clear that the person encountered by the disciples is the same person as the crucified Jesus (Mt 28:6-7; Jn 20:16-17, 27-29). It also leaves no doubt that after the Resurrection both the person of Christ and the nature of his meetings with the disciples have undergone radical transformations (Mk 16:12-13; Lk 24:16, 31-35, 38-43; Jn 21:4). These transformations seem to be regarded by New Testament writers as the result of the nature of what has occurred, rather than as symbols revealing a truth the substance of which lies elsewhere. It is also clear that the changes are portrayed not as belonging to the perceptions of those who encounter the risen Christ, but to the Christ who is encountered (although Bultmann, as has been noted, disagrees with this interpretation, regarding the Resurrection specifically as "the meaning of the Cross"). The priority of the transformed person over the transformed relationships of Christ, or vice versa, is an even less straightforward case to decide. The subsequent carrying over of the person and relationships of the risen Christ into the form of existence initiated at the Ascension, if that is how Ascension is understood, can give further insight into Christ's risen life.

If the fundamental advance of the Resurrection is in the nature of Christ's personal existence, that advance might either simply be carried over into the divine sphere at the Ascension, or a further modification of his personal being may be required. The former option would suggest that in the Ascension the risen Christ is taking up, or, is showing that he has taken up, his rightful place in the divine realm, which also involves a particular relationship with the created. The latter option -that further development occurs- could be taken to suggest that the Resurrection, seen as a phenomenon distinct from the Ascension, has a significance and an application limited to the created realm only, and is not in itself Christ's definitive entry into the life of the Trinity.

The Ascension as an advance in the nature of Christ's relationships has different implications. There is undoubtedly an alteration in the manner of the relationship between Christ and the disciples at the Ascension: the kind of encounter which constituted the Resurrection appearances ceases at the Ascension, which is therefore presented as a withdrawal. Christ after the Ascension is regarded by the disciples not as absent, but as present in a different form (Mt 28:20; Mk 16:19-20; Lk 20:50-53). There is also the sense that he is entering a relationship with God the Father which is in some way different from that which existed before (Jn 14:12-13, 28).

However the advances of the Ascension are to be understood, their dependence upon those of the Resurrection is not generally a matter of dispute. The Resurrection is regarded as

a final and eternal victory over sin and death, the effects of which will not be lost, and the Ascension, however it relates to Resurrection, takes place in the context of the risenness of Christ.

**b) Christ's apparent absence as defining his ascended state**

The apparent absence from creation of the ascended Christ, both in the immediate aftermath of the event and in the long-term experience of the Church, is a defining element of the perception of the exalted state of Christ (Jn 13:33; Acts 1:11).

The period of time between the Resurrection of Christ and his Ascension, however long it may have been, and the time after the Ascension are distinguished most decisively by the cessation of the appearances of the risen Christ to the disciples. The experiences of Stephen and Saul (Acts 7:56; 9:3-7; but, for Paul's assessment, see 1Cor 15:3-8) appear to be different in character to the pre-Ascension encounters. It seems clear that the pre-Ascension experiences of the disciples were quite different from those prior to Christ's Crucifixion. These encounters are not presented in the New Testament as evidence that Jesus did not die on the Cross and that he returned to his old life.

When Christ departs at the end of what, in retrospect at least, was perceived by the early community as the last of his

risen appearances, a new phase of the story is initiated. The departure is not regarded as a further disaster on the lines of the Crucifixion, this is ensured by the Resurrection itself, but it is regarded as a reason for rejoicing and for going out, eventually, to confront the world with what has happened (Mk 16:16-20; Lk 24:50-53). Christ's invisibility, as the disciples are shown to realise, cannot be equated with his absence; but he is now to be regarded as accessible only through faith.

As in the case of God the Father, the imperceptibility to living human beings of the ascended Christ does not suggest concealment as a deliberate choice so much as its being an organic characteristic of the nature of that state of existence. That the ascended Christ's state includes his humanity is already dealt with in the mobility and freedom of appearance enjoyed in his risen pre-ascended state. The empty tomb, as a defining element of Christ's Resurrection, is also an indication of the inclusion of the new relationship of Christ to his physical body which is carried over into his Ascension. The end of the Resurrection-encounters may be because their revelatory purpose has been achieved, or it may be that they are replaced by the further-developed relational nature of Christ's presence to creatures; in fact, both functions seem to be served by this development.

### c) Invisible presence of Christ as proper to the Ascension

The predominantly invisible, but real, presence in creation attributed to the risen Christ, points to the form of Christ's risen existence as being of the nature of a 'sacramental' presence, with the Resurrection perhaps representing the basis for the relationship between Christ and creation, while the Ascension is to be seen as a further development, this time in the divine realm, with its own proper consequences.

It does not seem sufficient to explain the totality of the presence of the ascended Christ to created persons solely in terms of his presence in the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, though this is clearly a central element of it. Christ's accessibility to believers is a direct communion, rather than a mediated communication (1Cor 1:8-9). This directness of access to a Christ who is no longer confined by the limitations of his human nature is very close to the form of union envisaged in an understanding of sacrament as communion of being.

While the emphasis on the ascended Christ seems to be centred upon his exalted place at the right hand of the Father, Christ as risen seems to be seen in relation to created beings; it is the unity of the person of Christ which makes this dichotomy tenable. The risen Christ is risen in order that all creatures may be delivered from death and oblivion, and the relationship of Christ to others based on the Resurrection is one of active salvation. Christ, considered from the perspective of his Ascension is more ontologically remote, though not absent; he

is one who is active elsewhere for the good of creatures. This perception of remoteness, deriving from the New Testament accounts, is based on the appearances of the risen Christ in contrast to the disappearance of the ascended Christ, but it may also be argued to be based on the respective functions of these two christological and soteriological mysteries.

#### **d) Ascension as new relation of Christ to Father and Spirit**

The Ascension, as a movement from the created sphere of existence into the divine, with the exalted life which the Ascension initiates, may be understood as representing the new relation of Christ, as God and creature, to the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The Ascension bears, in some respects, a closer structural affinity to the Incarnation than to the Resurrection or to any of the other christological events. The Incarnation is the entry of the Son of God into the created sphere as rightfully part of it; the Ascension is the entry of the created Son of man into the divine sphere as rightfully part of it. This is not an equivalent entrance because divine Persons and the divine sphere of existence and created persons and the created sphere are, by definition, utterly incomparable. Only the uniquely constituted Son of God made man could take these original steps. The Incarnation depends upon the nature of the Creation-act of God but is a distinct action of God, involving

as it does the participation of the divine being itself. The Ascension depends additionally upon the death of Christ at the Crucifixion and his Resurrection as elements of this distinct Redemption-act of God. It is the soteriological perspective which can act as the basis for an extended exploration of the reasons and mechanisms for the uniting of humanity and divinity in one person, and the role that this union has in bridging the absolute otherness of God and creature, achieved in a final way in the person and relationships of Christ at his Ascension.

The radical unity of the person of Christ, which overcomes the logical and ontological forces which must act to prohibit the union of the incommensurable divine being and created being, allows the possibility of the Incarnation, which is completed by his Cross and Resurrection. One of the key results is that his person becomes inseparable from, even identical with, his relationship with the Father and the Spirit in the Ascension: the ascended Christ, even in his humanity, is Love, is perfect relationship. In order that Father and Spirit remain in the trinitary communion of being with God the Son they must also be in communion of being with the humanity in which the Son is invested, which thereby enters into the divine realm of the Trinity as part of its totality of personal and relational being. Hilary's concept of 'disturbance' and Balthasar's concept of 'distance', and their resolutions, discussed above, address the central issues involved here.

**e) Ascension as the transcending of the boundary between God and non-god**

If the Ascension is the transcending in Christ of the ontological boundary between the divine and created spheres of existence, it would seem necessary that it must also include the neutralisation of the effects and limitations of that boundary on the person and relationships of the ascended Christ.

Christ, as both God and creature, represents in his person the union of the divine being and the created. In his incarnate life, Christ's relationships were disturbed by the contingencies which applied to his humanity: his humanity related humanly to creation and to the Father and Spirit; his divinity related divinely to creation and to the Father and Spirit. Thus, it may be argued, the incarnate Christ sustained a complex of relationships which reflected his ontological character, but which were generated by his dual nature rather than by the unity of his person. Christ's death and Resurrection are the separation of his person from contingent created existence and its freeing into an absolute existence in which the unity of his being supersedes the duality of his natures and becomes the generator of his relationships. The person and relationships of Christ thus become inseparable and produce an equilibrium in which the existence of a relationship with Christ irreducibly includes the reality of his personal presence to the other in the relationship, and, conversely, the



ubiquitous presence of the risen and ascended Christ means that all created persons are always in some form of relationship with him. It also means that the ascended Christ, God and non-god, enters into a fully realised union of person and relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Deriving from the Resurrection and Ascension, this unity of Christ means that the Father and Spirit can relate to Christ as a single being without the previous, provisional complexity of relationship which applied to the incarnate Christ. The union of the person who is both Son of God and Son of man is consummated in the Ascension, in which the Father and the Spirit are eternally in this single relationship with the single person of Christ.

**f) The enabling of entry of Christ's humanity into the life of the Trinity**

The Ascension cannot adequately be portrayed as less than the entry of Christ's humanity, as a dimension of his total personhood, into the life of the Trinity, and it must include the accommodations which are required to allow this otherwise previously impossible entrance to take place.

If the entry of a created person into the communion of Trinity is not possible prior to that of Christ, then two points may be argued from this, on the wider basis of Christian theology. Firstly, that an obstacle exists, or an enablement is

absent, which is overcome in and by Christ. Secondly, that the overcoming of this obstacle also creates the conditions for an entry of some sort into the trinitary relationship for other created persons, which is its purpose.

The Trinity-relationship prior to the advances of the Ascension must be based upon a purely divine format: the circumincession of Father, Son, and Spirit, constituting the One God. The post-Ascension Trinity-relationship must be based upon a format which is inclusive of both the divine and created dimensions of the one person of Christ: the circumincession of Father, Son of God and man, and Spirit, constituting the One God, from whose being the totality of the person of Christ cannot be excluded.

It seems necessary to avoid simply equating: i) the factor which enables all created beings the potential for access to the Trinity's being; with, ii) the person of Christ. The Ascension is an event which has a direct effect upon Christ and upon the Father and Spirit, but not, in itself, upon created persons as a whole. Yet it enables, prospectively as it were, the entry of created persons into a sharing in the life of the Trinity, which would not be possible if it produced an enablement applicable only to the humanity of Christ.

The accommodation made in and by the Trinity for the Son of man who is one person with God the Son seems to be one which also allows the possibility of other creatures having an access to God which, while not being the same as that of the ascended Christ, is based upon this accommodation. A creaturely

dimension to the Trinity relationship which does not compromise the divine integrity of the Persons of the Trinity, but is inclusive of the humanity of Christ and, on the basis of the enablement established thereby, is inclusive of other created persons, may provide a consistent basis for the role that the Ascension has in pursuit of the objective of the salvation of created beings.

#### **g) Ascension as the basis for Pentecost and Eschaton**

If the Ascension and Pentecost are understood to be integral stages of the salvific events centred on the person and relationships of Christ, then the consequences of the relational basis of the entry into Trinity of the ascended humanity of Christ cannot be excluded from the foundation of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and of the eschatological entry of other created persons into final communion with the Trinity.

The presence of Christ in both the divine and created spheres of existence can be understood in terms of his belonging to both on the basis of his unique ontology. The new form of the presence to creatures of the Holy Spirit after the Pentecost-event cannot be explained in the same way because the Spirit did not become one person with a creature, but the Ascension seems to provide an access based upon the role of the entry of the humanity of Christ into the divine realm. The temporal

sequence of Ascension followed by Pentecost is perhaps a revelation of the logical priority of the former over the latter. If the humanity of Christ is the basis of the new accessibility to the Spirit of creation, it suggests that unincarnated God as well as incarnated God can draw upon the soteriological enablements engendered by the Incarnation-to-Ascension progression.

The roles of the Father and the Spirit in these stages is very suggestive. The Spirit seems to have an access to creation which is different to that of the Son. The ascended Christ and the Pentecost Spirit, but not the Father, have attributed to them special forms of presence in creation. Equally the eschatological union of creatures with God is clearly understood to include the Father. The intraPersonal dynamics of the Trinity may provide an answer to this specific set of relationships. If the Father begets the Son, and this is a flow of existence which cannot be said to be identical in reverse - that is, that the Son also begets the Father- then the Incarnation of the Son cannot be said to flow directly into the being of the Father. If the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, on the Filioque model, then the Incarnation of the Son can be said to flow directly into the Spirit, but in a way which is modified by the involvement also of the Father. No compromise of the Spirit's divinity is involved here, because no compromise of the Son's divinity is involved in the Incarnation.

In the Eschaton, created persons can be in communion with the Father because they are given access to the divine life through the salvific enablements established by Christ and the Holy Spirit; the Father can enter into this relationship without the prior need for the involvement of his Person, as distinct from his relationships, in the 'modifications' introduced at the Ascension.

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Cumulatively, these closely related themes can form the basis of an evaluation of the Ascension based upon the contribution it makes to the purpose of the whole divine enterprise of the Creation-act which is fulfilled in the Redemption-act.

In short: the effects of the Resurrection are carried forward into the Ascension; the apparent absence of the ascended Christ is an element of his exalted state; his invisible presence in creation might be described as sacramental in nature, with the Resurrection as the relationship between Christ and creation, and the Ascension being a further development with other consequences; the Ascension represents the relation of Christ to the Father and Spirit; it is the final stage in the transcending in Christ of the ontological boundary between the divine and created spheres; the Ascension is the entry of Christ's humanity into the life of the Trinity, including the

accommodations which allow this to take place; and, the consequences of the relational basis of the entry into Trinity of the humanity of Christ are the foundation of Pentecost and of creatures' eschatological entry into communion with the Trinity.

Taken together, this grouping points to the value of a consideration of the Ascension centred upon its role in a soteriological evaluation of the Christ-event. One of the key questions which this poses is: why is the Ascension necessary? If the whole content of the Christian Gospel is argued to be based on the freely-chosen but non-arbitrary action of a God who does not act whimsically, but on the basis of need, then the Ascension, as part of this divine action, must be assessable on the same grounds.

## 2. The Ascension: A Soteriological Perspective

The fullest understanding of the Ascension of Christ, it may be argued, can be derived primarily from an examination of its purpose. The Ascension is not an isolated event whose form and content is free-standing and self-serving; it belongs within the totality of the Christ-event, and is shaped by the demands of the objectives which that is designed to fulfil. The key to an examination of the Ascension, and of the other stages of Christ-event, individually and in total, is the claim of Christian faith that they are absolute prerequisites for the salvation of created persons, and are not merely symbolic or revelatory in character. If it is the case that salvation could not occur without these events, the question of why that is so is a matter which must be addressed.

In attempting to do this, an approach to the nature of salvation which allows the role of the Ascension to be shown as both indispensable and significant will be explored. Such an approach, which, as has been recognised, is not the only valid interpretation of the soteriological importance of the Ascension, can demonstrate the reasonableness of an assessment of the Ascension which is in agreement with those arguments for a maximising of its effects in a soteriology which concentrates on the necessity of an ontological conciliation of the divine Persons and created persons.

### a) The necessity of Salvation

It does not seem satisfactory to envisage the salvation wrought by Christ as concerned solely with the liberation of creatures from the effects of sin. Sin, with its consequences, is certainly a vital dimension of a Christian soteriology (Mt 18:8-9; Mk 9:43-47; Jn 1:29; 16:8-9; Rm 6:2-23; 1Cor 15:54-57; 1Jn 1:7-8; and many others). However, in the New Testament, the teaching of Christ and the apostles on the infinite mercy and the omnipotence of God seems adequately to provide the means by which repented sin can be absolved (Mt 18:23-35; 19:26; Mk 10:27; Lk 18:27; Rm 9:16; Eph 2:4-6; Jas 2:12-13). This has still left, though, the problem of identifying the objective of the extended nature and the complexity of the Christ-event, which appears to add nothing essential to the divine ability to deal with sin, but places sin as a constituent of the complex obstacle to communion with the divine which is addressed by the Redemption-act of God. It is, therefore, also to that obstacle's other possible effects that the soteriological Christ-event seems to owe its specific shape, including that of its constituent stages: Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost.

The Old Testament is clear about the infinite superiority of God over Creation (Gn 1:1-2:4; Ex 3:1-6; Ps 113:4-6; Is 55:8-9). It correspondingly envisages the fate of the righteous dead as an existence which is not to be regarded as entry into the realm of God (Ps 88:11-12; 115:17; Prov 21:16). Though later



the concept of a heaven of the righteous can be traced (Dn 7:9-27), it had not, even during the lifetime of Jesus, come to be the undisputed concept in Jewish religious thought of the afterlife as a glorified existence (Mt 22:23; Mk 12:18; Ac 23:8). The New Testament does contain a dominant theme of the existence in glory of the righteous dead, made possible by Christ; but it also contains the seeds of an obstacle to that heavenly existence which is not found in the Old Testament: that God is Trinity.

The New Testament does not present the Triune existence of God -as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit- in terms of its being a problem in this soteriological respect because the revelation of the nature of God as Trinity is in the context of the opening for creatures of the way to heaven. Nevertheless there are, in the solution, indications of the nature of the obstacle. The heaven of the New Testament to which the disciple aspires is quite different in conception from any in the Old Testament, because the God, whose realm of existence it is has been self-revealed to be, is fundamentally different from the unitarian image of God which completely dominates the Jewish revelation.

The heaven of Judaism is the existence of the one person of God in intimate relationship with created persons. The heaven of Christianity is the existence of the three Persons of God in mutual relationship, into which created persons are admitted. This is a crucial difference. In the Jewish understanding, heaven is the establishment of a relationship as fully realised

as possible between the divine and created persons in which both can exist in their respective modes and relate without further difficulty, on the same basis as the divine presence in Creation. In the Christian understanding, a union or relationship already exists between the divine Persons to which created persons can have no admission because that relationship is itself divine as it includes and unites the three Persons and is itself the one God. Without further enablement the creature remains outside this central heavenly relationship in a secondary association, and full communion with the divine is excluded. The primary obstacle to the Jewish heaven is the sinfulness of creatures. The primary obstacle to the Christian heaven is the nature of existence itself. Aquinas envisaged the divine and the non-divine as totally other categories, incommensurable and uncompoundable.<sup>1</sup> Sinfulness, of course, intensifies this alienation, and must also be addressed.

The core of the New Testament's revelation of the purpose of the person and work of Christ is that he establishes for created persons the means of entry into a communion with the divine which would otherwise be unattainable: in other words, that he is the Saviour (Lk 2:11; Jn 4:42; Ac 5:31; 13:23; 1Pt 1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:18; 1Jn 4:14). Moltmann discusses the idea that, if God creates salvation for people who otherwise cannot have access to its benefits, the Redemption is the opening of a closed system.<sup>2</sup> On the subject of the nature of what this salvation will achieve John's Gospel, in particular, has a discussion on the effects of the Ascension in terms of the

union of the Father and the Son, and of the union of the Son with his disciples (Jn 10:30; 14:10-11; 17:11, 21-26). The nature of that salvation is expressed in each of the stages in the development of Christ's person through the events in which he is central, and its achievement is focussed particularly sharply by the Ascension. Moberly argues that, however like the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity it may be imagined to be, no created relationship can approach the meaning of divine unity; the nearest that creatures can get to this, he believes, is mediated by Christ.<sup>3</sup>

#### **b) The establishment of Salvation**

If the opening of heaven, that is, of access to the life of the divine Trinity, is at the heart of the salvation achieved by Christ, then each of the main stages of the Christ-event must play a substantive and indispensable role in the processes which make this possible. The Ascension of Christ was expressed in just such terms by many writers of the patristic era, and, by extension, this indispensability must also apply to the other principal soteriological doctrines.

The creation by God of that which is not-god is the source of the discontinuity of being which, simultaneously, allows the proper existence of Creation as a distinct entity and precludes the possibility of a fully-realised communion of being between the two ontologies. Tillich argues that there is no proportion

or gradation between the finite and the infinite, that there is an absolute break; and that God is beyond the infinities to be found in Creation.<sup>4</sup> Yet the purpose of the Creation-act of God seems to be precisely that communion of being should be achieved in as fully-realised a way as is possible (Jn 17:21-26). The Gospel claims to reveal the means by which God takes Creation from separateness to communion; and that means is Christ.

Prior to the Incarnation, -a priority which is not simply on the temporal level-, God does not exist in Creation as part of it, nor does Creation, or any part of it, exist in the divine realm as belonging to it: the discontinuity is absolute. In considering this, Rahner believes that God does not become other than God by creating, and that Christ enters Creation on the basis of his origin in and as God.<sup>5</sup> The Incarnation is the coming into being of a single person who can exist properly in both the divine and the created spheres by being both a divine Person and a creature. At this stage the effects of the transcending of the absolute otherness of God and non-god is limited to the person of Christ and does not extend to the Father and the Spirit nor to other created persons. Christ's relationships are subject to the constraints of the ontological complexity produced by the Incarnation. Moltmann sees the salvation initiated by the Incarnation of God as Christ, as enabling the eventual association of created persons in union with God, and the overcoming of the prohibitions on this as a central objective of salvation.<sup>6</sup> Though he is a single person,

Christ relates to the Father and the Holy Spirit as God the Son and as a human being, and he relates in corresponding ways to other creatures: thus, his whole person cannot be expressed in either realm of existence. Barth considers that revelation is the means by which the boundary between God and humanity becomes manifest, and that Christ is the only one able reveal this.<sup>7</sup> This, perhaps kenotic, situation is a temporary, though necessary, stage in the conciliation of the divine and created ontologies in total. Hilary of Poitiers argued that in Christ's person both natures are encountered, and that it is a kenosis of some kind which makes this possible.<sup>8</sup>

The Crucifixion is the next stage. The death of Christ severs his relationship, including that of dependence, with the rest of Creation. His death, as is the case for all human beings, also removes the contingency and relativity which characterises all human relationship and existence in material life. Teilhard de Chardin asserts that death has the function of opening the inner self to God, so that God may penetrate the being of persons thus made ready.<sup>9</sup> Death, the Christian analysis implies, is, for every created embodied person, the process by which an individual's life and being become identical; in which who a person is and what a person is converge, and subjective and objective existence cease to be distinct and the person therefore becomes a singularity, being also no longer involved in the extended partialness and plurality of material life. The possibility, significant in this context, of further development of the individual after death, might be considered

in terms of movement towards a necessary personal perfection.<sup>10</sup> In death, Christ is liberated from the ties and dependencies of created existence, and also from certain of its limitations. The liberation of the dead Christ from created relationships removes him from the situation in which his one person is involved in interactive relationships with creatures generated on different bases by his divinity and his humanity.

In the Resurrection, the radical unity of the person of Christ, it may be argued, generates all his relationships from the baseline of the unity of his person rather than from the distinction between his two natures, so that the person and the relationships of Christ become irreducibly one, and he relates to the Father and the Spirit and to created persons as Christ, God and non-god. Brunner locates the immediacy between God and creatures as taking place in Christ and in creatures, in the context of the complete mediacy of creation.<sup>11</sup> As the relationship of the Persons in the Trinity is itself the One God because it includes those Persons, so the relationships of the single person of the risen Christ are themselves the One Christ because they include, and cannot be separated from, his person (Eph 2:14). Christ alone has, at this stage, achieved total freedom to exist fully in both the divine and the created spheres of being. The Resurrection is the effect in Creation of this new state of Christ's existence; the effect of this new state in the Trinity is the situation represented by the Ascension.

### c) The role of the Ascension

After Christ's Resurrection, in the Ascension and due to its consequences, God the Father and God the Spirit can engage in communion of being with God the Son, a communion demanded by the nature of Trinity, only by also engaging in communion of being with the Son of man. Thus, the Resurrection means that what was logically impossible in the previously-existing circumstances, because of the incommensurability of God and non-god, becomes in the situation brought about by the Ascension logically indispensable (Ac 2:33; 7:56). This situation, that the Ascension takes the Resurrection a stage further, has sometimes been expressed in terms of its being the attainment of heavenly sovereignty by Christ, with all its consequences.<sup>12</sup> These developments, if accepted as such, represent a fundamental restructuring of the nature of being in the cause of the salvation of created persons.

The ascended Son of man, part of creation, enters thereby into a relationship of communion of being with the Father and the Spirit; though not with God the Son with whom he is one person, and therefore not in interpersonal relationship. Aquinas explored the serious logical problems in any attempt to locate Christ's ascended humanity in all three Persons separately, or in union with all Three; neither of which, he argued, is necessary for Pentecost.<sup>13</sup> Although he enters into that relationship which is the one God, and though he is one person with God the Son, the Son of man remains a creature (Heb

8:1; 10:12; Eph 1:10; 1Pt 3:22). That the Son of man remains eternally a creature is demanded both by his existential integrity and by the substantiveness of his existence; it is also soteriologically crucial.

Having once become part of this communion of being, the Son of God made man cannot withdraw from it, even if he should wish to do so; this is how he now exists, and he can do so in no other way. The same is true of God the Father and the Holy Spirit; this is how God now exists in the structures of divine being. Barth saw Christ as bearing human nature into the place and way that God exists, and that this is the purpose of his work.<sup>14</sup> Thus, without compromise of the divine or the created ontologies, that which is not-god becomes a dimension of the experience, and therefore of the self-experience, and therefore of the selfhood, of God.

In the Ascension specifically, the possibility of communion of being with God extends only to the humanity of Christ and not to humanity or to created persons in general. This is logically necessary since the role of Christ as the bridging factor between the divine and the created must be established prior to the exploitation of that bridgehead in Pentecost and the Eschaton. The Ascension is the breaching, without artificiality or compromise, of the otherwise absolute logical prohibition on communion of being between non-incarnate God and Creation, which obtained prior to this development. It is in the relationships, as distinct from the Persons, of the Father and, differently, of the Spirit that the possibility is



activated of the ultimate transcending of this barrier. The distinction is important. Created persons, other than the Son of man, cannot become hypostatically one with a divine Person; so, the Redemption is not designed to unite, hypostatically, all redeemed creatures with a Person of the Trinity, but is designed to allow access to the Persons of God through inclusion in the Oneness relationship which is the One God (Jn 5:17-30).

What is crucial to the soteriological value of the Ascension is that, in becoming open to communion of being with the Son of man, Father and Spirit become open to ontological communion with all created persons (Jn 14:6). A central component of this is that Christ, as mediator, does not stand between people and God, but that his task is to enable union, and to unite them, with God.<sup>15</sup> In this, the continuing reality and substantiveness of the humanity of Christ is the decisive element. Although the ontology of Christ, and the development of that ontology, must remain unique, the creatureliness of the Son of man is also that of all created persons. The logic of divine existence demands the inclusion of the total person of Christ in order to retain the completeness of the Trinity-relationship. In soteriological terms, it is the non-identity, at the Ascension, of the relationship which is God and of the person of Christ, which forms it, which allows the Trinity of God to become open to relationship with created persons other than the Son of man. If Christ were the totality of that relationship, personified, the divine would remain closed to the entry of other creatures

into communion because the humanity of Christ would itself fill that capacity. This, on soteriological grounds, cannot be the case.

The result of this is that God, Father, Son, and Spirit, by their ontological access to the Son of man, generate a capacity for ontological communion with all created persons. The idea that Christ ascends after fulfilling his mission, paradoxically, to carry it on, is a very suggestive one.<sup>16</sup> Through Christ, God becomes as it were self-prepared for communion of being with creation. That this occurs in the sempiternal Godhead means that it is the eternal state of the existence of God, and that at every point at which God touches time, at every point of created existence, the Ascension is active. As with the other stages of the Redemption-act, the state derives from the event, and the temporal dimension of the event does not compromise the divine immutability. The teleological purpose of creation, union with God, is thus, at the Ascension, a possibility which depends for its fulfilment only upon the willingness of created persons to enter into that stance of personal openness in which the Pentecost Spirit and the risen Christ can exploit the ontological developments formed by the total person and actions of Christ. It is possible, on this basis, to think of Pentecost as the prospective consummation of the Incarnation, and of the atonement.<sup>17</sup>

#### **d) Subsequent soteriological developments**

Through the Ascension, building upon the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and the Resurrection, Christ has established the relational basis for the Trinity's Redemption-act on the baseline of the unity of God and creature in his person. This is also the basis of the relationship which the Holy Spirit generates at Pentecost. At Easter, the disciples encountered Christ in the fullness of his person, as God and man; Christ's divine nature was no longer mediated through his humanity, but there was one encounter with both natures: the complex nature of recognition in these encounters is very suggestive of their new basis. Though the Spirit at the Pentecost-event encounters the disciples on the same relational basis, the Person encountered is not both God and man, but God alone (Rm 8:26-27). Athanasius saw the relationship of Spirit to creatures and of Spirit to Christ as integral.<sup>18</sup> The Ascension is the source of the Spirit's capacity for mutual relationship with creatures despite their total otherness of being, but it is not a derivative capacity in any other sense; it is proper to the relational capacity of the Pentecost Spirit.

The Ascension-relationships within the Godhead are the prerequisite for the Pentecost-event. Pentecost itself indicates that the particular engagement of each divine Person in this self-modified ontological communion is unique to that Person. The Son of God, by union with the Son of man, enters into the Ascension-relationship on that unique ontological

basis. The Father and the Spirit have no such distinction from one another, having the same, solely divine, ontology. Pentecost, however, makes manifest the existence of a real distinction between the Father and the Spirit. If there is some necessary factor within the Godhead for the Spirit's role at Pentecost, then procession from the Son as well as the Father could be that factor. Where the Filioque may be significant here is in terms of the possibility that Pentecost represents the transcendence, of the obstacles to communion which derive from the total otherness of being of God and non-god, by the Person of the Spirit as well as in the Spirit's relationships, through the Son, by the advances made in the Christ-event. If the Spirit in some sense takes being from God the Son, then the ascended person of Christ may mean that God the Son, as one person with a creature, provides the Spirit with a Personal existence which transcends the prior ontological discontinuity. Schillebeeckx envisages the involvement in God of Christ's ascended humanity, on the model of Filioque, as allowing the advance of Pentecost.<sup>19</sup> Christ does not mediate the Spirit to Creation at Pentecost, but has been the mediator of the Redemption-act of God by which the immediacy of the Spirit, as well as that of Christ himself, is established. It can be argued that direct access to God is possible only through those channels of communion opened by Christ and the Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

The completion of the Redemption-act, in the admission of all worthy created persons into communion of being with the Trinity, can only be attained by the engagement of Incarnation,

Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost. This very extended and carefully co-ordinated series of ontological and relational manoeuvres allows, in the Eschaton, a simplicity of format which derives from the directness of the interrelationship of divine Persons and created persons.

The absolute ontological discontinuity between God and non-god, which is the inevitable consequence of the Creation-act, is replaced in the Eschaton by absolute communion of being, on the basis of the personal and relational developments achieved by Christ. Irenaeus considered that the whole content of the person and actions of Christ are the source of recapitulation in its role as divine salvation.<sup>21</sup> Neither creation nor its eschatological completion could have been implemented or fully realised without the necessary connection between them, of which the Ascension is an indispensable, and most revealing, element.

The Ascension of Christ, by the paradoxical nature of its Scriptural expression and the theological difficulties which it generates, raises numerous questions about the Christ-event of which it is an integral part. It is a dogma which resists simplistic solutions and seems adequately to be expressed only in the inclusive context of the soteriological process in which it may be examined in terms of its total purpose. In seeking to place the Ascension in a soteriological scheme which can accommodate the peculiarities which stem from its nature, a critique of the nature of salvation emerges which suggests that it is the ontological dimension, particularly in terms of person and relationship, which provides the most incisive insights into its functions and form. This is not to ignore the necessity of recognising that the dimension of divine involvement will unavoidably mean that the Ascension must remain beyond definitive conceptual expression, but, as an element of the Christian revelation, its accessibility is part of its meaning, and its meaning derives primarily from the claim that it has a central place in the whole of existence as understood from the perspective of the interlocking of the Creation and Redemption acts of God.

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Tractatus super Psalmos, 2.33:  
"...in gloria Dei patris hodie genitus nascitur, id est,  
in manentem antea Dei formam per praemium mortis formae  
servilis assumptio honestatur."  
PL 9:282AB.
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"Nec sane negamus, totum illum, qui eius manet, naturae  
suae esse sermonem. Sed si Iesus Christus et homo et Deus  
sit; et neque cum homo, tum primum Deus; neque tum cum et  
homo, tum non etiam et Deus; neque post hominem in Deo non  
totus homo totus Deus; unum atque idem necesse est  
dictorum eius sacramentum esse, quod generis."  
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Cf. De Trin., 11.49. PL 10:432A,12-13,B,7-9.
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 "The text is the most important we have so far met, for it contains the most detailed statement of the meaning of 'subiectio': it is the transformation ('concessio', 'transitus', 'desinentia') of one being into another, whereby the first ceases to exist in the manner which is natural to it ('a se secundum quod est desinens') and acquires the qualities of the second being ('cuius concedit in formam'). The former being is not annihilated, or brought to non-existence, but is elevated, exalted and transformed into a more excellent state of existence ('desinit autem, non ut non sit, sed ut proficiat'), and by this change, by this passage from one condition of existence to another ('in speciem suscepti alterius generis transeundo'), it is said to have become 'subjected' to that other being."
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De Trin., 9.38:  
 "Ita homo Iesus Christus maneret in gloria Dei patris, si in Verbi gloriam caro esset unita: rediretque tunc in naturae paternae etiam secundum hominem unitatem Verbum, caro factum, cum gloriam Verbi caro assumpta tenuisset."  
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