

Power point: Ephesians 1:15-23

by [Mark Harris](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

As long as the ascension is in any way related to upward movement (like an elevator going to the clouds), I am and will continue to be unmoved. The vertical directional imagery just doesn't do it for me. I am not even moved to argue about whether or not "it" happened.

The doctrine of the ascension may have been given bad press because of its popular meaning, which seems related to ideas like "ascending to the third floor," and less often to "ascending to the place of power." That is, it's vertical. Most people's views of the ascension center on the image of Jesus going up in the clouds.

Over the years my thinking about the ascension and doctrine in general has changed in several ways. I have a growing sense, for one thing, that it is not necessary to discard doctrines that seem more or less senseless. Better to simply let them be. If we need them they will be there waiting for us to pick them up. Meanwhile let them lie fallow.

Even more important, I believe that we can change the popular view of the ascension, with its limitations. If the ascension is not about a direction but about the place Jesus occupies in creation and in our hearts, it becomes a powerful counter to the powers of these days. In the unending wars against drugs, terror, Iraq, etc., we need such a doctrine. This doctrine of the ascension is not new; it reaches back into the earliest believers' views, which emphasized our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

The problem is that the event doesn't read that way in the texts. What we get is, "As they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9), and "While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:52). These passages leave very little question—the activity was about leaving, being lifted up, being carried. The activity was called by the church "the ascension."

In the early days of the church, belief in the ascension had political consequences, since the ascension was understood to be about the power of Jesus. Jesus was more central, higher, more like "the head" than the head of state was. Astounding witness

and martyrdom followed.

By the time the full-blown doctrine was in place and creedal, the hope was that Christians would be respectful of those in high places. So it is no wonder that the ascension came to be visualized as Jesus lifted up into the clouds. It made for really great paintings, a fine casting of prayers and incense, and not too much threat to the powers that be. That visualization was a bit more respectful to the emperor than telling him that he was not actually the head of all, but that Jesus was.

In Ephesians we are presented with a stark reminder of the early church's understanding of the power of the risen Christ, who was placed by God "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come."

In the early church there also arose a theory about just who Jesus Christ is: it was the notion of recapitulation—that somehow in Christ the church, the people of God, got right-headed. That too grew from the notion of ascension as expressed in Ephesians. God has "put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

We might also think of the ascension as an expansion of the theme of the incarnation in the light of the imagery of the Last Supper. If in sharing the eucharistic meal we become the body of Christ, he remains our head. We imagine Christ as the head of the body of which we are all parts. He has also ascended to the head of the table, where he presides.

The ascension proposes that Jesus Christ has taken a place above all the principalities and powers in the world. He has become that to which we turn in order to find meaning and fulfillment in living. In this sense the ascension is a key doctrine in these latter days. It is not one that patriots of any stripe will like very much. If we turn to Paul, we see that he speaks of the "spirit of wisdom" by which to discern these things. If we use that spirit, we'll be led to proclaim Christ's absolute rule—not as king, but as one who feeds and sustains.

Giving all other powers their due and their respect, we Christians cannot as a matter of total confidence or supreme trust embrace the flag, support the government, or pledge allegiance to the country for which they stand. Rather we end up having to say with Paul that Christ Jesus is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that

which is to come.”

Perhaps the visual notion of the ascension is the movement of the Christ to the place at the head of the table as our great high priest, the head of the true state that is the church, the body of Christ of which Christians are all parts. Friend Jesus, move up!