

RECEIVING CHRIST'S PRIESTLY BENEDICTION:
A BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL
EXPLORATION OF LUKE 24:50-53

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Today is Ascension Day, and that means that it is a day of great joy
for all who can believe that Christ rules the world and our lives.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

I. *Introduction*

What does it mean to be blessed by God? Numerous responses could be given to this vague question, and many such answers inevitably end up with a problematic view of a “theology of blessing,” which more accurately reflects American prosperity than biblical realism. Nevertheless, the language of “blessing” is biblical. The restrictive manner in which I want to investigate this idea is by exploring the ascension of Christ, which, it will be argued, provides a basis for understanding the blessing of Christ given in the form of a priestly benediction.

Beginning our investigation by narrowly focusing on Luke’s particular understanding of the relationship between Christ and blessing, special attention will be given to Jesus’ ascension found in Luke 24:50-53. In this brief biblical exploration we will compare Luke’s imagery with (1) relevant background material and (2) a few indications of how this idea is taken up and developed in the NT, especially in Acts. After outlining the basic biblical foundation for the connection between benediction and ascension, we will give some examples of how these ideas have been used historically to inform a theological understanding of Christ’s presence in the church, as well as an understanding of the atonement. This latter discussion will draw from the witness of some early Fathers, Calvin, and a few Puritans as examples of how earlier generations made these surprising connections.

II. *Receiving Christ’s Benediction: Some Biblical Background*

While some commentators have argued that in the NT the idea of blessing is relatively minor in comparison with the OT, such an evaluation can be overstated. There is little question, for example, that Luke’s Gospel makes extensive use of the idea of blessing/benediction: various forms of εὐλογέω (*I bless*) are

found in Luke 1:42, 68-69; 2:28-32, and other places, and in various ways the writer seems to be highlighting important OT language and imagery.¹

There is a kind of rhythm or movement of blessing from the beginning of Luke's Gospel. Early on the reader learns that Mary is blessed for believing that the Lord would fulfill his promise to be faithful to Israel through her child, who is himself blessed. In this context the language of blessing can fairly be understood in terms of *presence*: God is distinctly *with* Mary, and *with* her child (Luke 1:42). Zacharias will likewise connect the language of blessing with the visitation of the Messiah, noting that this one has come to bring redemption to the house of David (Luke 1:68-69). Similarly, Simeon, when holding the promised Messiah, instinctively "blessed God" and makes the salvific connection that his "eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory of your people Israel" (Luke 2:28-32). Throughout these opening scenes the language of blessing is woven together with indications of God's redemptive presence.

Whenever the theological idea of blessing shows up in Luke, the suggestion of God's particular presence always seems to be implied. One could argue that at his baptism Jesus receives a heavenly benediction, hearing the divine voice which brings an assurance of the Father's loving presence.² Another powerful example of this can also be found in Luke's telling of the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36 || Matt 17:1-8 || Mark 9:2-8), wherein he carefully paints a visual picture which in many ways parallels Aaron's liturgical blessing. Vernon Kleinig perceptively makes this case, concluding, "In the NT, the light of the knowledge of God's glory is given in the countenance of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4-6), and many of the expressions in the Aaronic benediction find their fulfillment in his Transfiguration."³ Jesus' face shines like the sun, and just as with Moses, the radiance produced by God's presence changes the human as a result of the encounter. The Aaronic benediction, as we will see shortly, was given by the priest to the people, indicating God's presence with them. If such connections are fair, then it seems that the implications of the Messiah's personally laying hands on the youth and blessing them (Luke 18:15-17 || Matt 19:13-15 || Mark 10:13-16) might demonstrate more than a call for people to be kind to children. Might not there be a richer theological reading of scenes like these?

¹ In the OT, the root בָּרַךְ covers a wide range of ideas. It is commonly used to convey the idea of blessing, covering everything from creation and patriarchal blessings to our particular interest of priestly blessing/benediction. Although the semantic range is wide for בָּרַךְ, it is agreed that "the power of pronouncing blessings in Israel was especially vested in God's appointed agents, namely priests" (Michael Brown, "בָּרַךְ," *NIDOTTE*, 1:761, see 755-68). In the LXX, εὐλογέω is the most common representative of בָּרַךְ. Nevertheless, one must not simply look to etymology, but also to places where the *concept* of blessing occurs, even when the particular language is not employed (H. G. Link, "εὐλογέω," *NIDNTT*, 1:207, see 206-15).

² Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 46-47.

³ Vernon Kleinig, "Providence and Worship: The Aaronic Blessing: Numbers 6:22-27," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 19 (Dec. 1985): 122.

For our purposes I will now focus on the end of Luke's Gospel, arguing that the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry, as seen in the ascension, comes alive when approached from the vantage point of the idea of benediction.

III. *Luke 24:50-53 as a Benediction?*

Luke concludes his Gospel with these words:

And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed [εὐλόγησεν] them. And it came about that while He was blessing [εὐλογεῖν] them, He parted from them. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, praising [εὐλογοῦντες] God. (Luke 24:50-53, ESV)

Every exegete must wonder about the mysterious nature of what is taking place here. Contemporary commentators fall into four main categories in approaching this passage. First, some, including Leon Morris, seem to neglect entirely the idea of blessing given in Luke 24.⁴ Second, others, including I. H. Marshall, see similarity here to a priestly blessing, but leave the idea relatively undeveloped.⁵ Third, a few commentators, like Joel Green and Claus Westermann, argue against seeing this as a priestly benediction, but normally allow for a "leave-taking" blessing.⁶ Fourth, such voices as Dennis Hamm and Gerhard Lohfink argue on behalf of the idea that Christ is functioning in a priestly fashion by giving this blessing.⁷

It has become so common to downplay the idea of the ascending Christ's giving a priestly benediction in Luke 24 that few contemporary readers of scripture are even aware of this as a possible interpretation. But this neglect is more of a modern phenomenon than one might expect, since we find this priestly benediction as an aspect of Christological reflection throughout the history of the church. It is my aim to stimulate fresh thinking about the benediction/blessing given by the ascending Christ. In order to accomplish this, we must begin with a further exegetical discussion of Luke 24, outlining the basic

⁴ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary* (rev. ed.; TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 375-76.

⁵ E.g., William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 1076-77; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 908-9.

⁶ E.g., Richard J. Dillon, *From Eyewitnesses to Ministers of the Word: Tradition and Composition in Luke 24* (Anbib 82; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978), 222 ff.; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 860-61. See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 3:1945.

⁷ Josef Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1977), 672; Walter Grundmann and Friedrich Hauck, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas, Vol. 2* (rev. ed.; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1961), 453-54; Dennis S. J. Hamm, "The Tamid Service in Luke-Acts: The Cultic Background Behind Luke's Theology of Worship (Luke 1:5-25; 18:9-14; 24:50-53; Acts 3:1; 10:3, 30)," *CBQ* 65 (2003): 215-31; Gerhard Lohfink, *Die Himmelfahrt Jesu: Untersuchungen zu den Himmelfahrts- und Erhöhungstexten bei Lukas* (SANT; Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1971), 147-76. For an extensive exploration of Luke 24 see the full study of Dillon, *From Eyewitnesses to Ministers*.

arguments for why this passage might be read as Jesus' giving a priestly benediction. Then we will turn to theologians of old to see what they made of this observation and how we might follow their thinking to enrich aspects of our theology.

Near the middle of the twentieth century, P. A. Van Stempvoort drew heavily from his studies of ancient Jewish literature and argued powerfully that the exegete should be sympathetic to understanding Luke 24:50-53 as a priestly blessing.⁸ He begins by noting that the language Luke employs of Jesus' "lifting of the hands" is the *terminus technicus* for priestly blessing, and this is confirmed, Van Stempvoort continues, by Luke's addition of the statement "he blessed them." He continues: "Moreover, the *eulogia* of Christ corresponds to the *eulogia* of the *ecclesia parva*. This is a detailed reference to the region of the temple." Furthermore, Van Stempvoort finds in Sir 50:20-22 "the literary background of Luke's description of the last Christophany."⁹ This is a reference to Ecclesiasticus, or Wisdom of Ben Sira, and an excellent recent translation of Sir 50:20-22 reads:

Then, coming down he would raise his hands over all the congregation of Israel. The blessing of the Lord would be upon his lips, the name of the Lord would be his glory. Then again the people would lie prostrate, receiving the blessing from the Most High. And now, bless the God of all.¹⁰

In his important though somewhat neglected study, Van Stempvoort builds on this background and argues that Luke presents Jesus in this priestly fashion. When taken as a literary unity, Luke points the reader toward the benediction's significance as embodied in the ascending Christ. Luke begins with the story of Zechariah, a priest who loses his ability to bless after the incense offering because of his unbelief; and thus when he comes out, Zechariah cannot speak to the people:

So it is apparent in the text that he could not give the priestly blessing. However, we know from m.-Talmud 7.2 that after the incense offering the priestly blessing was given to the people. Thus the service of Zechariah was an unfinished *leitourgia*. There is surely even something ominous in that situation for a writer who knew the Jewish mind as well as Luke did. With conscious artistic style Luke ends the Gospel with the same image as he began it. At the end, however, there is a priest really blessing, a finished *leitourgia*. The ominous aspect of the blessing now is that it takes place on the Mount of Olives, outside the temple, the beginning of the new age of the Church. (Luke 1:22)¹¹

⁸ Van Stempvoort was influenced by the findings of A. Schlatter, *Das Evangelium des Lukas* (1931); David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinical Judaism* (1956; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1976).

⁹ P. A. Van Stempvoort, "The Interpretation of the Ascension in Luke and Acts," *NTS* 5 (1959): 34.

¹⁰ Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes* (AB 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987), 547-48, see 553-55.

¹¹ Van Stempvoort, "Interpretation of the Ascension," 35.

Lest we think Van Stempvoort is alone in making this literary connection in Luke's Gospel, we find that Joseph Fitzmyer draws a similar conclusion when he simply states: "What Zechariah (1:21-22) could not do, that Jesus does to his silent followers (cf. 1 Tim. 2:8)."¹² Although many will agree that Luke does not seem to focus on Christ as priest, may it be that we have overlooked an element of his careful construction, which serves as a kind of Gospel liturgy: could Luke be leading us to look to the heavens where Christ, the great high priest, now resides?¹³ Although Luke is arguably written primarily to a Greek audience, he certainly displays a deep knowledge of Judaism, and we must not discount this. Hamm's careful study argues along these lines, as he makes the powerful case that Luke-Acts is a work in which "the Jerusalem temple figures more frequently than in all the rest of the NT writings taken together."¹⁴ According to Hamm, the priestly blessing of Jesus in Luke 24 must be understood not only in light of the annual atonement service, but the twice-daily whole offering, or Tamid service. In other words, there was a regular role of priestly benediction in the life of first-century Jews.

We must further note that how Luke ends his Gospel closely resembles Lev 9:22-23 (ESV):

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after making the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offering. And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people.

John Nolland recognizes the parallels between Luke 24:50ff. and Sir 50, but he argues that at some points, Luke's text is even closer to the LXX version of Lev 9:22.¹⁵ In the book of Numbers we are told the words Aaron is to proclaim, in what becomes known as the Aaronic benediction: "The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace" (Num 6:24-26). In Leviticus, Aaron gives this blessing to the people and makes several offerings, praying for the forgiveness of sin and the bestowal of peace (see Deut 10:8; 21:5; 1 Chr 23:13).

This close connection between atonement and blessing is found not only in scripture, but also in Sir 45, where we find a great hymn which moves from honoring Abraham and Moses, on to Aaron. It proclaims that Aaron and his children were anointed in an everlasting covenant "as long as the heavens endure": the Aaronic task was to "bless the people in his name" and "to offer sacrifice to

¹² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke 10-24* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1590.

¹³ Commenting on Luke 24:50-51, Norval Geldenhuys argues that "like the high priest when he came forth from the temple on great feast days, [Jesus] lifts up his hands and blesses His disciples as the eternal High Priest (cf. Ps. cx and Heb vii-ix)" (*Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951], 645-46).

¹⁴ Hamm, "Tamid Service in Luke-Acts," 220.

¹⁵ John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53* (WBC 35C; Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 1227.

the Lord, incense and a pleasing odor as a memorial portion, to make atonement for the people” (Sir 45:15-16). *One cannot separate atonement from blessing*, for this would be an incomplete picture, according to Sirach. So when Aaron (and his priestly line to follow) would give this benediction, it served, as Kleinig vividly argues, as “the liturgical equivalent of the rainbow.”¹⁶ The people of God were consistently reminded, through this blessing, of *God’s presence and faithfulness* despite their sins, and it was this blessing that would become such a comfort to those weary and exiled believers who questioned if their God had forgotten them.¹⁷

In Luke’s profound portrait of the ascending Christ, he seems to pick up on this liturgical imagery. Jesus departs and blesses his disciples at the same time; he had made the perfect and final sacrifice, securing the forgiveness of sins for his people (Heb 7:26-27; 10:12). While the Leviticus story goes on to tell how the people fell on their faces because of God’s holiness, in Luke the people respond with “great joy” and they were “continually praising God in the temple.” It is in light of such differences that some conclude that this is no priestly blessing, but rather a simple departing gesture, an argument I will address below.

If this is a priestly benediction, why the different reactions to the blessing received in Leviticus and Luke? I think the differences point not away from seeing Jesus as giving the Aaronic benediction but to his fulfilling it. Whereas Aaron could lift his arms and pray for God’s face to shine on the people, in seeing Jesus ascending into the heavens these believers saw the actual face of God shining. While they had heard of God’s graciousness, now they had seen him who is Gracious. While they had held out for God’s lifted countenance, they now saw it actualized. While they had longed for the peace promised in the benediction, they now knew him who was Peace. The great High Priest came and not only pronounced the benediction, but he *became the benediction*. Here the medium is the Mediator, and thus he is not to be looked beyond, but rather looked to. Those who saw the ascension *witnessed the personification of Aaron’s benediction in Jesus Christ!* What was their response? In keeping with the pattern throughout the scriptures, they received God’s Blessing (i.e., Jesus), and became a blessing to others through the spreading of the good news (see Gen 12:1-3; Ps 32; 1 Cor 11:23).¹⁸

Of special interest for our study is the fact that throughout the Psalms the imagery of God’s face shining appears in ways that consistently harken back to this Aaronic liturgy (e.g., Pss 67:1; 80:3, 7, 19; 31:16; 119:135). With this

¹⁶ Kleinig, “Providence and Worship,” 120.

¹⁷ The recent *Jewish Study Bible* sees two blessings in Lev 9:22-24: the first before Aaron goes into the tabernacle, and the second, upon leaving it. The first blessing was a prayer that God would “deal favorably with the people;” and the second prayer was that “God favor them all with His manifest Presence—to which the Lord then responds by making His long-awaited appearance” (*Jewish Study Bible: Tanakh Translation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 226).

¹⁸ See Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 46-54.

background, let us listen afresh to Psalm 67, which echoes the Aaronic benediction, and the expectation that one day there would be a cosmic or global reality to this blessing. By looking back at this Psalm we may be in a better position to understand not only the end of Luke's Gospel, but also the book of Acts:

May God be gracious to us and *bless us and make his face to shine upon us*, that your way may be *known on earth, your saving power among all nations*. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! The earth has yielded its increase; *God, our God, shall bless us*. *God shall bless us*; let all the ends of the earth fear him! (Ps 67:1-7, ESV, emphasis added)

The idea of the priestly benediction was held out as a hope not only for Israel, but for the world. God's people were to receive the blessing of God's face shining upon them, and this reality was then to become the praise of the world, of all the nations! This is exactly what we find in the early church after Christ ascends.

In Acts it does not take long for the disciples to move from watching the ascending Christ to proclaiming him as the locus of the expected blessing of old. Peter boldly preaches with the hope that others will turn to God and receive his blessing through Christ (Acts 2:14-38). Throughout Peter's preaching, the motif of blessing plays a vital role: "It is you who are the sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed [(ἐν)ευλογηθήσονται].'" For you first, God *raised up His Servant, and sent Him to bless you [εὐλογοῦντα]* by turning every one of you from your wicked ways" (Acts 3:25-26). Blessing has reached a climax with the incarnation, and now preaching points specifically to the personified Benediction for salvation. F. F. Bruce rightly notes, "For Christ was the descendent of Abraham in whom this blessing became a reality."¹⁹ If we had time to explore this further, we would see that Paul picks up this motif of blessing in three primary ways: in his benedictions, in the idea of the Eucharist, and in his connection of Christ as the blessing of Abraham.

IV. *The Ascension and the Benediction of Christ: Some Christological Reflections*

If one is open to reading the ascending Christ in terms of the exalted Priest who blesses his people, then we may begin to work out possible theological implications. I will simply suggest two theological areas which might be enriched if we incorporated the biblical imagery of Christ's benediction into our formulations. It will be argued that such an attempt is not novel but draws upon a rich and long theological history.

¹⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 94. Bruce continues by arguing that Jesus came "to bestow God's best blessing upon them [the Jews], turning them away from their wickedness. They had not paid heed to Him at first when God sent Him; let them pay heed now, when God in His pardoning grace gave them a fresh opportunity; else they would forfeit the covenanted blessing" (ibid.).

1. *The benediction given by the ascending Christ should inform our understanding about the presence of Christ among the church.*

In his careful study of *blessing*, Claus Westermann does discuss Luke 24. But Westermann, contrary to what might be expected, argues against seeing Luke 24:50 as a priestly blessing, since he believes Luke is simply referring to Jesus' giving a gesture of departure.²⁰ He does concede that Luke's wording could be influenced by a priestly model, but he believes that "the idea of a high priest who is taken away after he bestows the blessing is absurd," since, he argues, in the OT it is the congregation which is sent away, not the priest.²¹ Behind this point is the question of presence and priesthood. Is Jesus present or absent?

I think Westermann has overstated his case. For one thing, Westermann goes on to conclude from this passage in Luke that this blessing is about giving power to his disciples so that he will be tied to them in a special way.²² Once this is conceded, then the conclusions are not as different as they first appeared, for both are in some sense about *presence*. Normally the Aaronic benediction given by the priest to the congregation reminded them of God's presence and care, so that they knew God remained with them even though the priest sent them away. Yet how are we to see Jesus' act as a priestly blessing when he is the one who departs?

It is impossible, or at least ill-advised, to try to separate the blessing of Christ here from the giving of the Spirit, for in the Gospels we find that the Holy Spirit is the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4), who is sent by the ascended Christ (see John 14:16-17; 15:26; 16:6-9, 13-15). T. F. Torrance makes the strong claim that "Pentecost is the content and actualization of that high priestly blessing [he is referring here to Acts 1]. He ascended in order to fill all things with his presence and to bestow gifts of the Spirit upon men."²³ In the farewell discourse Jesus says it will be best for him to go away, so that he can send the Comforter: this Comforter is, according to Paul, the Spirit of Christ,²⁴ another Paraclete (e.g., John 14:16: *παράκλητος*). Strangely, Jesus turns the priestly benediction around, in that he, rather than the congregation, departs; but in his departing he comes afresh by his Spirit so that he will never be away from the congregation.²⁵ Thus,

²⁰ It is also noteworthy that when men like Moses (Deut 33) and Abraham (Gen 49) depart from this life, they likewise give blessings.

²¹ Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (trans. Keith Crim; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 87.

²² *Ibid.*, 88.

²³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 118. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; LCC; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1393 [4.17.26].

²⁴ E.g., in Rom 8:9-11 Paul demonstrates the fluid relationship between Christ and the Spirit, making the following movements in his statements:

the Spirit of God dwells in you (v. 9),
 you have the Spirit of Christ (v. 9),
 Christ is in you (v. 10),
 the Spirit is life (v. 10),
 the Spirit of him who raised Jesus (v. 11),
 this Spirit dwells in you (v. 11).

²⁵ I think Joseph Fitzmyer is much closer than Westermann, since he sees the lifting of Jesus' hands as following the priestly model found in Melchizedek (Gen 14:16-19), or Aaron (Num 6:23-27), or Simon son of Onias (219-196 B.C., found in Sir 50:20). See Fitzmyer, "The Ascension of Christ and Pentecost," *TS* 45 (1984): 409-40, esp. 425.

he blesses them, and so sends his Spirit upon them so that they might be blessed with all the heavenly blessings (Eph 1).²⁶ Jesus' blessing and the sending of the Spirit become inseparably connected.

John Calvin reads Luke 24:50-53 in a similar way, seeing Christ as giving a priestly benediction, and that benediction is connected with the sending of the Spirit. This is seen, for example, in his exposition of Num 11:22-27 (the Aaronic benediction), which Calvin understands as necessary background for rightly interpreting the end of Luke's Gospel.²⁷ In his discussion of Num 11, Calvin argues that the believer was to take comfort in the benediction, for it reminded the people of God's reconciling power and motives. Calvin admits that "to bless" can simply mean to pray for people, which he acknowledges is "the common duty of all pious persons." However, in this particular passage from Numbers something more is being discussed, for this is not just a prayer but a "rite," which was "an efficacious testimony of God's grace; as if the priests bore from His own mouth the commandment to bless."²⁸ There is more than a prayer here, observes Calvin, who then immediately jumps to Luke's portrait of the ascending Christ with raised hands. Here he sees Jesus giving—and thus fulfilling—the priestly benediction. For Calvin, the priests must be seen as "appointed ambassadors to reconcile God to the people; and this in the person of Christ, who is the only sufficient surety of God's grace and blessing."²⁹ The blessing always pointed to God's presence, and that is fulfilled in Christ: paradoxically, Christ ascends, but in so doing he does not remove his presence. Here we encounter the key tension of maintaining both the presence and absence of the ascended Christ, and I think the benediction provides creative categories to handle this potential problem.³⁰

Lest this be thought an obscure approach, let me note in passing that several of the early Fathers made similar connections between the ascension, the blessing, and the sending of the Spirit.³¹ Origen, for example, argued that the ascension was "the condition for the sending of the Holy Spirit."³² Significantly, we find Origen's reflections on Luke 24:50 in a fragment from his writings where he argues strongly that Jesus' blessing must be understood in light of the Aaronic

²⁶ Here we see a significant qualitative difference between Jesus' benediction and all earlier ones. According to J. W. Kapp, "The main idea [of a benediction] was that the name of Yahweh was thus put on the people" ("Benediction," *ISBE*, 1:457). No one could possibly accomplish this end like God Incarnate.

²⁷ See esp. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:246-47.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 246-47.

³⁰ See Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999). This tension is, in a peculiar way, what is behind Farrow's entire study.

³¹ For background on the early Fathers' view of the ascension and the gift of the Spirit, see Kelly M. Kapic and Wesley Vander Lugt, "The Ascension of Jesus and the Descent of the Holy Spirit in Patristic Perspective: A Theological Reading," *EvQ* (forthcoming).

³² William H. Marvee, *The Ascension of Christ in the Works of St. Augustine* (Ottawa: Saint Paul University; University of Ottawa Press, 1967), 9.

benediction. In this priestly activity, as Origen conceives of it, Christ “bestows power on the disciples through his blessing;” and this power, for Origen, as he elsewhere makes clear, is the giving of the Spirit.³³

If we accept that Christ gives the priestly benediction as he ascends, and that this somehow informs our understanding of his presence, particularly in terms of the gift of the Spirit, then how might that influence elements of our ecclesiology? A few suggestions are worth considering.

To begin, in what way might this observation contribute to our appreciation of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper? The cup of blessing which we bless (τὸ ποτήριον τῆς εὐλογίας ὃ εὐλογοῦμεν) which Paul mentions in 1 Cor 10:16 testifies to Christ’s presence, in some manner. For “is it not a participation in the blood [and body] of Christ?” Instead of focusing on the actual elements, perhaps our discussion could proceed in more helpful ways by exploring the blessing assumed here.

This is the way that Calvin tends to move, as much of his discussion about the ascension takes place within the larger context of his exploration of the Lord’s Supper. Calvin wants to preserve the continuing humanity of our high priest, but he does *not* want to deny Christ’s real presence in the Supper. Calvin prefers not to speak of Christ’s coming down in the bread, but of our rising to him by the Spirit: “To them [Roman theologians] Christ does not seem present unless he comes down to us. As though, if he should lift us to himself, we should not just as much enjoy his presence!”³⁴ Behind Calvin’s concern is that he believes the Roman view of the Supper leaves out the work of the Spirit who unites us to the ascended Christ; and for Calvin, it is crucial to see that by the gift of the Spirit we are united to our head who is even now in the heavens (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1).³⁵

Furthermore, how might this view of the benediction of Christ influence the way we approach the gift of the keys of the Kingdom, which calls the church to employ the representative power to bind and loose on earth (Matt 18:18)? Matthew 18:18 is another passage that Calvin sees as directly tied into the biblical trajectory of the Aaronic benediction, viewed through a Christological matrix: here Christ’s disciples speak forth his blessing and cursing.³⁶

Might not an extended exploration of Christ’s blessing and the gift of the Spirit add weight to our weekly liturgical benedictions?³⁷ There remains a debate on whether we should view these as prayers or proclamations, and I

³³ Origen, *Homilies on Luke: Fragments on Luke* (trans. Joseph T. Lienhard; FC 94; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 227. For more on Origen, and in a comparison to Irenaeus, in which Origen is cast in a fairly negative light, see Douglas Farrow, “The Doctrine of the Ascension in Irenaeus and Origen,” *ARC: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University* 26 (1998): 31-50. Farrow does not mention the role of the benediction in either thinker.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1403 [4.17.31].

³⁵ For a stimulating discussion on this element of Calvin’s thinking, see Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1995).

³⁶ Calvin, *Books of Moses*, 3:427.

³⁷ “Since [God] declares nothing by His ministers which He will not Himself fulfill and perform by the efficacy of His Spirit” (Calvin, *Books of Moses*, 2:246-47).

think Luke 24:50 must be brought into that discussion. The Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna reminds us that, following the example of Moses before the burning bush, "Priests officiated barefoot in the sanctuary; and to this day they remove their footwear before pronouncing the priestly benediction in the synagogue service."³⁸ They do so because this act, as at the burning bush, is understood as pronouncing the presence of God among the people. God in Christ by his Spirit is present, and he tends to bless the universal through the particular: the congregation by the priest, and the world by the congregation.

2. *The benediction given by the ascending Christ should inform our understanding of the atonement.*

When we find a priestly blessing given in the OT and in other Jewish literature, it commonly comes only after sacrifices have been made.³⁹ For example, as we noted earlier, Sir 45:15-16 makes the connection between the priest who is to bless the people in the Lord's name and who offers sacrifices on their behalf. After Hezekiah restores temple worship and all the people celebrate the great Passover, which is filled with sacrifices, we read that at the end of the prolonged celebration "the priest and the Levites arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer came to his holy habitation in heaven" (2 Chr 30:27). Two key intercessory activities of the priest were offering sacrifice and blessing the people. Yet what is the link between the sacrifice and the blessing?

Some theologians have argued that sacrifice and blessing are inseparable, and that the sacrifice is incomplete without the benediction given. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, believed that we should view the ascension in terms of Christ being the "first fruits." Here the idea of "first" was not just first among many. The first fruits were offered as representations of the whole, so that when one offered the first fruits of their harvest to God, they sanctified the entire crop: the universal made holy through the particular.⁴⁰ What I find so fascinating about Gregory at this point in his argument is how he ties together sacrifice, blessing, the gift of the Spirit, and the redemptive activity of the church. "So by means of his manhood [Christ] was offered and finally sanctified, and then, received the Holy Spirit, thus becoming the source of blessing to all mankind (Acts 2:33)."⁴¹ Gregory clearly sees a connection between the sacrifice and the blessing, and he is not alone. Again Origen, when commenting on Luke 24:50, concludes: "By his actions on behalf of men, he raised his hands for the sake of

³⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus = [Shemot]: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 15.

³⁹ See Hamm, "Tamid Service in Luke-Acts," esp. 217-18.

⁴⁰ Peter Toon, "The Meaning of the Ascension of Christ: Part 2 of Historical Perspectives on the Doctrine of Christ's Ascension," *BibSac* 140 (1993): 298. See John Flavel's Protestant Scholastic language of Christ ascending as "a public person or forerunner, in our names, and upon our accounts" (*The Works of John Flavel* [6 vols.; London: W. Baynes and Son, 1820], 1:504).

⁴¹ J. G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), 172-73. Quoted by Toon, "Meaning of the Ascension of Christ," in reference to Gregory of Nyssa.

man, and saved the believers.”⁴² Origen feels comfortable seeing the priestly benediction of Christ as part of his salvific activity. John Chrysostom concludes that “the ascension marks the event of reconciliation between God and mankind. Enmity and war must give way to peace.”⁴³ These are just hints of the possible connections made by some of the Patristics who see a relationship between the sacrifice of Christ and his ascension benediction. What may be even more surprising is that some Protestants see similar links.

We have already found Calvin’s willingness to see Christ as offering a priestly benediction, but now let us observe that he also makes a connection with the sacrifice. In his commentary on Heb 7:7, Calvin juxtaposes the blessing given by Melchizedek and that of the ascending Christ, and again he explicitly mentions Luke 24:50. After giving examples from the OT of priestly activity, Calvin argues that “the priest in offering sacrifices represented Christ, so in blessing the people he was nothing more than a minister and legate of the supreme God,” which he concludes should be how we interpret Luke 24:50. “The practice [in Luke 24:50] of lifting up the hands he no doubt borrowed from the priests, in order to show that he was the person by whom God the Father blesses us.”⁴⁴ In other words, if there were no benediction the sacrifice would be suspect.

We find other Protestants making similar connections, but beyond Calvin I will simply have time to mention the work of the Puritan Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680). Goodwin believes that one must see the suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ as one fluid movement. If any part of it were missing the whole would be undercut.⁴⁵ Goodwin argues that the life and death of Christ serve as the foundation for the believer’s faith that reconciliation with God is achieved, and this is the “lowest step of this ladder.” Christ’s resurrection and ascension serve as the other steps and are the “top and full triumph of faith therein.”⁴⁶ Our assurance of salvation, according to Goodwin, is directly linked to Christ’s rising into the heavens. If our Surety has been raised and is now seated at the right hand of God, so will all those for whom Christ acts, which are all who believe.

The cord that binds together Christ’s death and resurrection with his heavenly ministry is his ascension, and in the ascension Goodwin highlights the priestly work of Christ, noting that the last action Christ does while ascending into

⁴² Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, 227.

⁴³ Marvee, *Ascension of Christ*, 11. See John Chrysostom, “Homily on the Ascension, 2,” PG 50, 444.

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 162.

⁴⁵ See Thomas Goodwin, “Christ Set Forth, on Rom. viii. 34,” in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (ed. John C. Miller; 12 vols.; Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861–1866, orig. 1651), 4:44; Goodwin, “The Heart of Christ in Heaven, Towards Sinners on Earth . . .” in *Works*, 4:95–150. See the conclusion of G. C. Berkouwer: “It is incorrect to speak in this connection of a hierarchy or order of values, as though the ascension were less important than the resurrection. Such an approach is not only atomistic but also, fundamentally, unhistorical” (*The Work of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], 206 n. 5).

⁴⁶ Goodwin, *Works*, 4:45.

heaven is to *bless* his people. Here Goodwin follows the priestly interpretation of Luke 24:50-51.⁴⁷ By blessing the apostles Christ declared that “the curse was gone, and that sin was gone.”⁴⁸ John Flavel (1630–1691), a Puritan contemporary of Goodwin, similarly claims that these blessings from Luke 24 “were the mercies which his blood had so lately purchased for them.”⁴⁹ This priestly action by Christ was a nonverbal way of communicating what he could have spoken. Thus Goodwin puts words into the ascending Christ’s mouth: “I have been dead, and in dying made a curse for you; now that curse I have fully removed, and my Father hath acquitted me and you for it; and now I can be bold to bless you, and pronounce all your sins forgiven, and your persons justified.”⁵⁰

Without the priest’s blessing how did the believer know the sacrifice was accepted and their sins were forgiven? The benediction was not optional, but a necessary conclusion to the priest’s atoning activity. Once the link is made between ascension and benediction, then one can understand why some Puritans, including Goodwin and Flavel, spoke of the ascension also in terms of a military triumph, normally comparing the ascending Christ to “Roman triumphs” and their *spargere missilia*.⁵¹ Christ, as the victorious warrior, demonstrates his victory by performing the two triumphal acts (*actus triumphales*): he binds his enemies (sin, death, and Satan) and then distributes gifts (the Holy Spirit).⁵²

One final point worth noting about Goodwin is that he uses the ascension to connect the first and second creation by comparing the first blessing of Adam and Eve in Gen 1 with the blessing received by the apostles in Luke 24. Here we encounter Goodwin’s own form of a recapitulation theory, whereby Christ makes all things new, summing them all up in himself. What is most interesting is how the ascension is the key here, especially in terms of benediction. The original blessing through the particularity of Adam and Eve was to reach all of creation. Now the blessing of God comes particularly through Christ to his disciples, the church, and they go out and proclaim the benediction to all who will believe—again, the universal is blessed through the particular. In the original

⁴⁷ Christ blessed his disciples, leaving “a blessing upon earth with them, for all his elect, to the end of the world” (Goodwin, *Works*, 4:46). Flavel is also quick to make the pastoral connections from the benediction: “There was a great deal of love manifested by Christ in this very last act of his in this world. The last sight they had of him in this world was a most sweet and encouraging one. They heard nothing from his lips but love, they saw nothing in his face but love, till he mounted his triumphant chariot, and was taken out of their sight” (Flavel, *Works*, 1:507).

⁴⁸ Goodwin, *Works*, 4:46.

⁴⁹ Flavel, *Works*, 1:507.

⁵⁰ Goodwin, *Works*, 4:46.

⁵¹ Flavel, *Works*, 1:506.

⁵² See Goodwin, *Works*, 4:46-48. This imagery is not new with Goodwin, but commonly employed, e.g., Lancelot Andrewes, *Ninety-Six Sermons* (rev. ed.; 5 vols.; Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1865–1871), 3:227; see the Lutheran orthodox theologian Leonard Hutter, *Libri christianae concordiae: symboli ecclesiarum ἑνωστικῶς Lutheranarum, novissimo hoc tempore, longè augustissimi; explicatio plana & perspicua* (Wittenberg: Sumtibus Zachariae Schüreri, 1608), 1046.

creation, God saw his work as good and blessed it; similarly, the ascended Christ, “now that he had by that ‘one offering perfected for ever all the elect,’ he comfortably vieweth and pronounceth it perfect, and them blessed; and so goes to heaven, to keep and enjoy the Sabbath of all there.”⁵³

As theologians and pastors we must always push ourselves to see the atonement not only in legal terms, but in the rich tapestry presented in scripture (e.g., *Christus Victor*, market place, recapitulation, etc.). Remembering this priestly blessing of Christ can further help us appreciate the rich textures found in the biblical witness of the atoning work of Christ.

V. Conclusion

We have rocketed through much material which truly deserves more detailed attention than we have time for in this exploratory study. Through biblical testimony we see that as our Lord rises into the heavens, he appears to do so as the exalted high priest who personifies and then gives the ultimate benediction. We have seen how some key early Church Fathers, Calvin, and a sampling of the Puritans highly value this final earthly act of Christ, reading it as the great benediction. In light of this survey, one might conclude that the church today should be encouraged to have a richer understanding of receiving Christ’s benediction, which testifies both to the presence of God among the congregation and to the completeness of the atoning work of the Savior. My hope is that through revitalization and deeper understanding of the ascension, the church’s worship may be enriched.

⁵³ Goodwin, *Works*, 4:46.

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