



Pastor's Update

Sunday, February 25, 2024

“He ascended” what does it mean? (Ephesians 4:9)

A few days ago my wife read a passage from the New Testament and asked me to share my thoughts on it. After pondering a few moments I realized that I could not respond without careful investigation. The passage at issue reads as follows: “Therefore it says, ‘When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and gave gifts to men.’ (Now this expression, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all in all” (Ephesians 4:8-10). My aim in this week’s reflection is to answer the question, What is the significance of this passage in its immediate literary context?

To begin, since Ephesians 4:8 is a citation of Psalm 68:18, it is necessary for us to understand the verse in its setting in the Psalm. Psalm 68 is an enthronement or royal psalm. These psalms were used for special occasions in the religious services for the king which celebrates the triumph of a king over his enemies. According to Kirkpatrick, “The theme of this magnificent Psalm is the march of God to victory. It traces the establishment of His kingdom in Israel in the past; it looks forward to the defeat of all opposition in the future, until all the kingdoms of the world own the God of Israel as their Lord and pay Him homage.” This theme is in keeping with the intent of war (holy war) in the Bible, that is, the defeat of evil and the establishment of a society based on God’s Law.

By citing Psalm 68:18, Paul is applying the theme of the Psalm to Jesus’ victory over His enemies and the establishment of a new society. Notice that the issue is about the meaning of the expression “He ascended.” (Eph. 4:9). That is why Paul goes on in Ephesians 4:11 and enumerates what are known as the five-fold ministry gifts which the exalted Christ gave to the church: “And He gave some as apostles, and as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors, and teachers.” Paul then clearly states in the following verses that Christ gave these gifts for the immediate goal of equipping the saints for the work of service and to the ultimate goal of attaining unity in the faith (see Ephesians 4:12-13).

The point of Ephesians 4:8-12 then is this: Through His death and exaltation (i.e. “descended” and “ascended”) Jesus has conquered His enemies and has given to the church the appropriate equipment to fulfill God’s purpose for humanity which is to build a new community, the new temple, the body of Christ.

By God’s Grace and for His glory,

Pr. Francis

We should always remember that the message of the gospel is not only for this present age but also for the world to come. The pluralist would have us believe that all there is to life is found in this present world. The Christian message, however, involves hope beyond the grave. The only hope for the world is Jesus Christ.

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