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# The ascension of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit in patristic perspective: a theological reading

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A woman we know recently recalled a powerful memory from her childhood in the early nineteen seventies. Her parents visited a large church in southern California to see an Easter play, and near the end of the drama this little girl witnessed, with a mixture of fear and delight, how Jesus, who was hooked up to a thinly disguised wire, was pulled up into the ceiling. What was all of this about? Why did Jesus go, and how could that possibly be a good thing? Such questions, however, are not reserved to children growing up in the Jesus movement. Since the New Testament clearly testifies to the ascension of Jesus, theologians throughout the ages have struggled to grasp its significance for those left behind.

Scripture is replete with the antithesis of descent and ascent, and these biblical motifs have been indispensable hermeneutical devices throughout the history of the Christian Church. Following the lead of some early Church Fathers we will attempt to show how they employed the descent-ascent motif as a guiding framework for an exploration of the relationship between the ascension of Jesus and the sending (descent) of the Holy Spirit.

In recent centuries it has been common for the ascension of Jesus to be given relatively little attention in comparison with the cross and resurrection.<sup>1</sup> Such

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1 Despite the general neglect, there are some helpful studies on the ascension which have come from various theological traditions: Boris Bobrinsky, 'Ascension and Liturgy: The Ascension and High Priesthood of Christ in Relation to Worship,' *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1959), 11-28; Boris Bobrinsky, 'Worship and the Ascension of Christ,' *Studia Liturgica* 2 (1963), 108-123; Giorgio Buccellati, 'Ascension, Parousia, and the Sacred Heart: Structural Correlations,' *Communio: International Catholic Review* 25 (1998), 69-103; Brian K. Donne, 'The Significance of the Ascension of Jesus Christ in the New Testament,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30 (1977), 555-568; James D. G. Dunn, 'The Ascension of Jesus: A Test Cast for Hermeneutics,' in *Auferstehung/Resurrection*, eds. Friedrich Avemarie and Hermann Lichtenberger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 301-322; George Florovsky, 'And Ascended into Heaven,' *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1954), 23-28; Joseph Haroutunian, 'Doctrine of the Ascension: A Study of New Testament Teaching,' *Interpretation* 10 (1956), 270-281; John F. Jansen, 'The Ascension, the Church, and Theology,' *Theology Today* 16 (1959), 17-29; Gottfried Kinkel, 'Historical and Critical

neglect can be viewed as a glaring weakness when seen in light of the Church Fathers' emphasis on the ascension as the climax of redemption and the necessary condition for the descent of the Holy Spirit. One exceptional study that seeks to overcome this neglect is found in the research of Douglas Farrow, who makes a persuasive case for the pivotal place of the ascension in the schema of redemption, basing his thesis on the rich theology of the Church Fathers. In order to place the ascension in a larger framework, Farrow has astutely outlined the progression of the descent-ascent motif in Scripture.<sup>2</sup> His suggested delineation covers the entire schema of God's covenantal and redemptive purposes, from Eden and the Abyss to the New Jerusalem and the Lake of Fire. In other words, Farrow proposes that the history of God's action toward his people can be seen as a succession of descending and ascending movements that establish a redemptive rhythm and prefigure the climactic life of Jesus, beginning with the incarnation and culminating in his resurrection and ascension into heaven. The incarnation and ascension, of course, are unique in the sense that they are covenantal acts of God himself as a man.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways this essay seeks to build upon Farrow's work, as we focus on how the early Fathers saw an inseparable connection between the *bodily* ascension of Christ and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. In order to cover this ground, we shall first review the biblical testimony of the ascension of Jesus, followed by a discussion of how the early Fathers used the descent-ascent motif. Once this foundation is laid, we will explore some of the theological significance that the early Fathers saw in the relationship between the ascension and the pouring out of the Spirit, for this was central to their attempts at relating their christology to their pneumatology.

## The ascension of Jesus in Scripture

The two primary historical passages describing the ascension are found in Luke

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Inquiry Respecting the Ascension of Christ', *Bibliotheca Sacra and Theological Review* 1 (1844), 152-178; Bruce Metzger, 'The Meaning of Christ's Ascension', in *Search the Scriptures. New Testament Studies in Honor of Raymond T. Stamm*, ed. Raymond T. Stamm, et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 118-128; Bryan D. Spinks, 'The Ascension and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ: The Christology and Soteriology Behind the Church of Scotland's Anamnesis and Epiklesis', in *Time and Community: In Honor of Thomas J. Talley*, ed. J. Neil Alexander (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1990), 185-201; Peter Toon, 'The Meaning of the Ascension for Christ', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 (1983), 291-301; Bruce K. Waltke, "'He Ascended and Sitteth...': Reflections on the Sixth Article of the Apostles' Creed', *Crux* 30 (1994), 2-8; Arie W. Zwiep, 'Rapture and Heavenly Exaltation in Early Judaism and Luke-Acts', in *Auferstehung /Resurrection*, 323-349.

2 Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 278.

3 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 56.

24:50-51 and Acts 1:9-11.<sup>4</sup> In these accounts, Luke places the ascension forty days after the resurrection (Acts 1:3) while still maintaining its close connection to the resurrection (Luke 24).<sup>5</sup> In each passage, it is clear that the ascension is the essential fulcrum linking the life of Jesus (the Gospels) to the life of the Church (Acts). Even though these Lucan accounts of the ascension are usually seen as normative for our understanding of the ascension as a historical event, other passages expound on the theological significance of the ascension as an 'accomplished fact'.<sup>6</sup> Of particular importance to this study are the passages exhibiting the themes of descent and ascent (such as John 3:13; 6:62; 20:17; Rom. 10:6-7; Eph. 1:20; 4:8-10; Col. 2:12; Heb. 4:14; 9:24; 1 Pet. 3:22).

### The church fathers and the descent-ascent motif

According to the common teaching of the Church Fathers, the most significant manifestation of the descent-ascent motif is the descent of Jesus assuming human nature in the incarnation and the ascent of that human-divine Jesus in his resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father. Quite frequently, the Fathers draw upon these themes in connection with the biblical logic of John 3:13, in which the ascent of the Son of Man into heaven is interpreted as dependent on and proportional to his descent from heaven.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Novatian states in *De Trinitate*, 'the word descended from heaven as promised to the flesh so that through the assumption of the flesh the son of man might be able to ascend to that place, whence the Son of God had descended'.<sup>8</sup> It was argued that if the second Person of the Trinity emptied himself in the incarnation, then the ascension can be seen as a glorification of Jesus' human nature. Hilary of Poitiers

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4 Mark 16:19 is arguably a later addition and its canonical authority is suspect, which is why our focus will remain with the Lucan accounts. For background on Luke 24, see Kelly M. Kopic, 'Receiving Christ's Priestly Benediction: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Exploration of Luke 24:50-53', *Westminster Theological Journal* (forthcoming).

5 Some scholars argue that the reference to forty days in the Acts 1 passage is of typological character since there is an apparent discrepancy of timing between this account and the one in Luke 24. For more specifics see Veselin Kesich, 'Resurrection, Ascension, and the Giving of the Spirit', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 25 (1980), 253; Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., 'The Ascension of Christ and Pentecost', *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 416-421; William Marreeve, *The Ascension of Christ in the Works of St. Augustine* (Ottawa, Ontario: University of Ottawa Press, 1967), 4. Despite these arguments, official church tradition has celebrated the ascension as a real, historical event occurring forty days after Easter.

6 J.G. Davies, *He Ascended Into Heaven* (New York: Association Press, 1958), 30.

7 As early as Ignatius, for example, there was a tendency to juxtapose the incarnation and ascension. 'Jesus Christ...died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven to Him that sent Him, and is sat down at the right hand of the Father.' Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians* 11, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:64.

8 Novatian, *Treatise Concerning the Trinity* 13, in *ANF*, 5:622.

says similarly, 'Then the Word made flesh, even in its manhood, would return [ascend] to the unity of the Father's nature, since the flesh that was assumed had taken possession of the glory of the Word.'<sup>9</sup>

As the completion of Christ's work on earth, the ascension is interpreted by the Church Fathers as the climax of redemption, in so far as it completes the movement of Jesus, the God-man, from humiliation through glorification. John Davies writes that Maximus, in a sermon dating to the 460s AD, refers to the ascension as the completion of Christ's work of redemption. Maximus sums up the essence of the miracle of the ascension in that 'He brought to the Father the manhood which He had assumed from the earth' so that 'He might gain possession of the authority which was His due and that an inviolate faith of promised immortality might remain for us.'<sup>10</sup>

### The theological significance of the ascension

The pattern established by the Church Fathers to interpret the ascension as the climax of redemption, the uppermost point on the upward movement of ascent, is a result of expounding on the theological significance of the ascension, not merely its historical occurrence. Whereas the historical emphases of Luke's accounts of the ascension were not disregarded by the Church Fathers, the *theological content* of the ascension seemed to be the focus of their attention. In fact, the genius of the Church Fathers, according to William Marreeve, is that they 'projected the theological content of the mystery of the Ascension as presented by the majority of the New Testament writers into the events that according to Luke took place on the fortieth day after Christ's Resurrection.'<sup>11</sup> Even though this interest in the theological import of the ascension has led some of the Fathers to over-spiritualize this historical event, it did give the ascension a prominent place in the schema of redemption. Cyril of Jerusalem combined the historical and theological aspects of the ascension in a masterful manner: 'In Bethlehem He descended from heaven; from the Mount of Olives He ascended into heaven. In Bethlehem He came to men to begin the work of Redemption; from the Mount of Olives He ascended to receive the crown for the work of Redemption.'<sup>12</sup> In this passage, Cyril of Jerusalem weaves together the descent-ascent motif with the idea that the ascension is the crown of redemption in a historical-theological tapestry. This is not to say that Cyril valued one stage of redemption more than another. To mark stages of redemption as such is not the same as assigning value. Generally the Fathers are cautious about deducing too meticulously the *effects* and *purposes* of each stage of redemption, for this would

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9 St. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 9:38, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, 9:167.

10 Maximus, *Sermon* 45, in *Patrologia Latina*, 57:625-26.

11 Marreeve, *The Ascension of Christ*, 5.

12 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 14:23, in *NPNF*, second series, 7:100.

be to search out the mind of God. So, as we will discuss in more detail later, even though the Fathers connect the ascension to the descent of the Holy Spirit, they do not normally engage in speculation as to when or how this exchange takes place. What is clear, however, is that the theological significance of the ascension is intricately connected to the descent of the Holy Spirit. Before turning to this topic, one more important patristic insight must be examined.

### The physicality of the ascension

Of primary importance to the Church Fathers in exploring the theological aspects of the ascension is maintaining the physicality of the event and advocating an ascent of Jesus in the flesh. Gregory of Nyssa exhorts his readers to believe that Jesus has ascended in his full humanity for spiritual reasons: 'For as when we see in Him *the weight of the body* which naturally gravitates to earth, ascending through the air into the heavens, we believe according to the words of the Apostle, that we also shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.'<sup>13</sup> John Chrysostom also interprets Jesus' being taken up into the air in Acts 1:9 as a movement of the flesh.<sup>14</sup> In addition, John of Damascus discusses what it means for Christ to have ascended to the right hand of the Father when he 'in the last days became flesh, *has a seat in the body*, His flesh sharing in the glory.'<sup>15</sup> Augustine also affirms that Christ's human nature is the same in heaven as it was on earth, albeit glorified. 'He left the world by a bodily withdrawal, He proceeded to the Father by His ascension as man, but He forsook not the world in the ruling activity of His presence.'<sup>16</sup>

As these words from Augustine illustrate, the Church Fathers insisted without hesitation that Jesus ascended in the flesh. Once this affirmation of the historical reality of Jesus' ascension is acknowledged, the stage is set for understanding the descent of the Holy Spirit as the continuing presence of God with his people. As Gregory of Nazianzen punctuated, 'the dispensations of the Body of Christ are ended; or rather, what belongs to His Bodily Advent...and that of the Spirit is beginning.'<sup>17</sup> This insight necessitates an examination of the descent of the Holy Spirit in connection with the bodily ascent of Jesus.

### The descent of the Holy Spirit in Scripture

Scripture commonly testifies that the Holy Spirit will come only when Jesus has been glorified and seated at the right hand of the Father (John 7:37-39; 15:26;

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13 Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 7:2, in *NPNF*, second series, 5:242. Our emphasis.

14 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* 2, in *NPNF*, first series, 11:14.

15 John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 4:2, in *NPNF*, second series, 9:74. Our emphasis.

16 Augustine, *Homilies On the Gospel of John* 102:6, in *NPNF*, first series, 7:391.

17 Gregory of Nazianzen, *On Pentecost* 41:5, in *NPNF*, second series, 7:380.

16:7; Acts 1:4-11). Luke records the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), equipping the apostles to carry out the work of the kingdom. In John's gospel, however, there is a curious instance involving one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances in which he 'breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit"' (John 20:22). This pre-Pentecost insufflation of the Holy Spirit is one of the most contested passages concerning the connection between Jesus' ascension and the giving of the Spirit stated only a few chapters earlier in John 16:7: 'Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.' In general, however, the common expectation from Scripture appears to be that Jesus needed to ascend in order to fill all things by his Spirit (Eph. 4:10).

The Church Fathers did not ignore evidence of the Spirit's presence before Pentecost. In fact, Cyril of Alexandria interprets the giving of the Holy Spirit as recorded in John 20:22 as a 'real giving of the first fruits of the Spirit.'<sup>18</sup> John Chrysostom likewise understands this pre-Pentecost reception of the Spirit as a gift of spiritual power and grace in order to remit sins.<sup>19</sup> H. B. Swete comments that there is also a traditional interpretation, following Theodore of Mopsuestia, that sees this instance as a potential reception of the Spirit, in which the 'actual outpouring of the Spirit' would follow the ascension.<sup>20</sup> Contrary to this position, Augustine actually affirms that 'the Lord Jesus gave the Holy Spirit twice, once on earth for love of neighbor, and again in heaven for love of God.'<sup>21</sup>

Based on these patristic interpretations, it would seem at first glance that the sending of the Holy Spirit may not have been as intricately connected to the ascension of Jesus in the early church as we have been arguing. This conclusion, however, does not take into account the entire movement of exaltation: beginning at the bottom with the cross, escalating through the resurrection, and culminating in Jesus' physical ascension to the right hand of the Father. We find in many of these theologians, such as Hilary of Poitiers, a tendency to see the resurrection and ascension as constituting one exaltation and glorification of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, one way to deal with the insufflation of the Spirit in John 20:22 is to seek more unity between these various stages of Jesus' glorification. Several Church Fathers, including Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, Hilary of Poitiers, and Augustine affirm the unity of the resurrection and ascension in the theme of exaltation and ascent. Commenting on John 7:39, which says 'the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because that Jesus was not yet glorified', Augustine affirms that the glorification of Jesus includes 'His resurrection from the dead and His ascension to heaven.'<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the gift of the Spirit – whether post-resurrection insufflation or

18 Kesich, 'Resurrection, Ascension, and the Giving of the Spirit', 256.

19 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John* 86, in *NPNF*, first series, 14:325.

20 H. B. Swete, *The Appearances of Our Lord after the Passion* (Macmillan, 1910), 34.

21 Saint Augustine, *On the Trinity* 15:26, in *NPNF*, first series, 3:224.

22 Marreeve, *The Ascension of Christ*, 15.

23 Augustine, *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus* 12:10, in *NPNF*, first series, 4:134.

pentecostal outpouring – is dependent on the physical ascent of Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

The Church Fathers were not primarily concerned to reflect on the 'when' of the Spirit's descent, but simply its theological correlation with the ascension and exaltation of Jesus. This connection was essential in patristic theology because it preserved the descent-ascent motif that was exemplified in the incarnation and ascension of Jesus, facilitating the Fathers' endeavor to organize the rhythm of God's redemption.

Irenaeus was particularly perceptive concerning the descending and ascending rhythm of redemption manifested in the incarnation, ascension, and sending of the Spirit. Douglas Farrow sums up the position of Irenaeus in eloquent prose: 'And if Christ descends and ascends, incorporating the song of redemption into the melody of creation, he does so precisely in order to introduce the life-giving Spirit into the desert of human intransigence.'<sup>25</sup>

### Physical ascent and spiritual descent

From the evidence already presented, it can be seen that a consensus was developing in the early church that saw the descent and ascent of Jesus in the flesh as a precondition for the sending of the Spirit. Aiding this formation of orthodoxy, docetic and gnostic christologies were weeded out, giving room for theological reflection on the Spirit.<sup>26</sup> Tertullian, for instance, believes that the descent of the Holy Spirit was conditioned by the reality of Jesus' ascension *as man*.<sup>27</sup> Or as John Chrysostom has stated: 'Heaven has the holy body and earth received the Holy Spirit.'<sup>28</sup> Hilary of Poitiers also makes this crucial connection and asserts that Jesus had to physically ascend in order to truly fill all things by his Spirit.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, as Cyril of Jerusalem has emphasized, even though Jesus is in heaven, he is by no means absent, but is present in the Spirit.<sup>30</sup>

The consequences of abandoning the ascent of Jesus in the flesh can be seen in the theology of Origen. Even though Origen claims that only after the ascen-

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24 Gary Burge suggests that John has united the cross, resurrection, and ascension in one event of lifting up. The ascension plays the culminating role, the 'dramatic terminus', of confirming the reality of Jesus' post-resurrection glorified state. He concludes that 'in John it is the ascending Jesus who must distribute the Spirit before he finally departs', *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 133, 136, 148.

25 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 60. Farrow admits taking this musical analogy from Tolkien's *Silmarillion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

26 For an excellent discussion of these developments, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (New York: Continuum, 1977), 138-144.

27 Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics* 13, in ANF, 3:249.

28 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Ascension* 2, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 52:773.

29 Hilary of Poitiers, *Homilies on the Psalms*, in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, ed. A. Zingerle, 22:172.

30 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 14:25, in NPNF, second series, 7:101.

sion of Christ is the Spirit sent in full, he substitutes the spatiality and physicality of Jesus' ascension into heaven for an ascent of mind rather than body.<sup>31</sup> Farrow is rightly concerned that an ascended spirit-Christ makes a post-ascension pneumatology more or less redundant.<sup>32</sup> If Christ's spirit is ubiquitous after the ascension, the role of the Holy Spirit is usurped.<sup>33</sup> The influence of Origen's position is the reason some scholars have deduced that 'the early church tended to absorb pneumatology into Christology.'<sup>34</sup> With this caveat, it is fair to say that many of the Fathers believed that only an ascent of Jesus in the flesh would preserve a biblical, post-ascension pneumatology in which the Spirit really does descend from heaven.

### Spiritual benefits for believers

The necessity of the descent of the Holy Spirit after the ascension of Jesus was not merely a matter of intellectual speculation for the Church Fathers. On the contrary, the reason that Jesus ascends is so that the Holy Spirit can pour forth gifts on humanity, the greatest of which is himself. As Ambrose elaborates on Psalm 67:19, since those who were in captivity 'could not receive Him, the Lord Jesus Christ first led captivity captive, that He might pour forth the gift of divine grace into our free affections.'<sup>35</sup> The Spirit pours forth the gifts of God because Jesus has conquered death and ascended. In his commentary on Psalm 19:7 Augustine writes that the Lord Jesus in heaven 'intercedes for us at the right hand of his Father and pours forth from thence the Holy Ghost on all who believe in Himself.'<sup>36</sup>

Not only does Augustine relate the ascent of Jesus with the descent of the Spirit, but he continues the cycle with the ascent of humanity to the heavenly places with Christ. Marreeve points out that for Augustine, 'The Ascension of

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31 Concerning the necessity of the ascension for the sending of the Holy Spirit, see Origen, *Homilies on Luke 24*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 94 (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1996), 103. For evidence of abandoning an ascent of the flesh see Origen, *De Principiis* 2:7, in ANF, 4:284-85. Cf. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 93; Douglas Farrow, 'The Doctrine of the Ascension in Irenaeus and Origen', *ARC, The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies*, McGill 26 (1998), 31-50; Davies, *He Ascended Into Heaven*, 91.

32 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 61.

33 These same concerns are again picked up in the Reformation in the debate between Lutherans and Calvinists regarding *extra Calvinisticum*, which informs how one develops a doctrine of the Eucharist. See David E. Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called Extra-Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966).

34 Stanley M. Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984), 2.

35 Ambrose, *The Holy Spirit* 1:66, in *NPNF*, second series, 10:102.

36 St. Augustine, *On the Psalms* 19:7, in *NPNF*, first series, 8:55.

37 Marreeve, *The Ascension of Christ*, 105.

Christ as man and the sending of the Holy Spirit both make it possible for man to ascend through Christ's humanity to his divinity and to believe in him as God.<sup>37</sup> This continuation of the descent-ascent motif, from the descent of the Spirit to the ascent of humanity to Christ through the Spirit, has ample patristic support. Indeed, John Chrysostom asserts that even though the Spirit descended after the ascension of Jesus, he is not limited to this earth. In fact, since we are united with Christ through the Holy Spirit, 'we therefore have the pledge of life in heaven; we have been taken up with Christ.'<sup>38</sup> With this dynamic between their christology and pneumatology, many of the Fathers were able to maintain a distinctive rendering of the eschatological tension of the now and not yet.

Thus, the descent-ascent motif continues through our ascent into the heavenly places. Farrow sees this ascent of the human nature as the essence of Irenaeus' anthropology. 'Descending, he [Christ] accustoms the Spirit to dwell in an unreceptive environment, making room for him in the fallen creature; ascending, he reconstitutes that environment by means of the same Spirit, and in so doing makes room for the creature in the Father's presence.'<sup>39</sup> Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation seeks to weave together pneumatology and anthropology, framed by the descent-ascent motif. Therefore, 'the Holy Spirit [is] the earnest of incorruption, the means of confirming our faith, and the ladder of ascent to God.'<sup>40</sup> The condition for our ascent starts with Jesus' own ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit, Irenaeus argues, so that we may ascend 'through the Spirit to the Son, and through the Son to the Father.'<sup>41</sup> The Son's own descent and ascent of the flesh made our ascent possible. Stated more eloquently by Farrow, 'Christ's ultimate mission...was to draw the Spirit into man and man into the Spirit, that man might truly become a living being.'<sup>42</sup>

### A springboard for further trinitarian reflection

In addition to providing a fresh way of understanding true spirituality as an ascent toward God made possible by the Spirit, the connections between the ascension of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit delineated above provide a splendid springboard for further reflection on God's mysterious trinitarian being. Even though the Son ascends, this movement is a result of the Son's equality with the Father and made possible by the power of the Spirit.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, the Spirit that descends is the Spirit of the Son who proceeds from the Father.

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38 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Ascension* 2, in PG, 52:773.

39 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 60.

40 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:24:1, in ANF, 1:458.

41 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:36:2, in ANF, 1:567.

42 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 60.

43 Augustine comments on the equality of the Son with the Father by stating that Jesus' 'ascension to the Father signified his being seen in his equality with the Father, that being the ultimate vision which suffices us'. Augustine, *On the Trinity* 9:9, in NPNE, first series, 3:27.

Drawing out the implications of the ascension and Pentecost also raises questions concerning the 'advents' of the trinitarian Persons. Commonly the Church Fathers insisted that the ascension of the Son and the descent of the Spirit signaled a change in the economic dispensations of the Trinity. For example, Origen observed that 'the chief advent of the Holy Spirit is declared to men after the ascension of Christ to heaven, rather than before His coming into the world.'<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Gregory of Nazianzen maintained that before Christ was glorified the Spirit was manifested 'indistinctly', while after Pentecost he is present 'substantially, associating with us, dwelling with us.'<sup>45</sup> But how exactly was the Holy Spirit present in the world and with the covenant people before Pentecost? Is it wise to walk down the treacherous path of dividing redemptive history into various dispensations of the trinitarian Persons, the Incarnation being preceded by the Father's advent and followed by the Spirit's?<sup>46</sup>

Even if the specifics of how each Person of the Trinity acted in the ascension and Pentecost remain a mystery, the action of the trinitarian God in this drama is fully evident in so far as the Father sends the Son, in order that the Son may live, die, rise, and ascend in the flesh, so that the Spirit may come to bestow on us the gift of faith which unites us with the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

Following the lead of the Church Fathers, we have seen how Jesus' physical ascension to the right hand of the Father provides a robust pneumatology by fulfilling the condition for the descent of the Holy Spirit. Scripture and most of the Fathers seem uncompromising in their vision of Jesus' bodily ascension into the heavens, which appears to leave a vacuum on earth that is filled by the presence of the Spirit. With this dynamic of the Spirit, believers are secure because they are in the heavens with Christ even as their current circumstances seem consumed with living in the wilderness. Just as sure as Christ was raised believers will be raised by his Spirit, and thus their flesh will be glorified so that they will be with the risen King who even now sits at the right hand of the Father. Maintaining this trinitarian vision allows the believer in the present to experience the love of God and the grace of Christ in the fellowship of the Spirit, who is the guarantee that we will be with him through all eternity.

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44 Origen, *De Principiis* 2:7:2, in *ANF*, 4:285.

45 Gregory of Nazianzen, *On Pentecost* 41:11, in *NPNF*, second series, 7:383.

46 Cf. Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), who envisioned history in trinitarian terms, with each period dominated by one person of the Trinity: Father (law), Son (grace), Spirit (liberty). He was not, to be fair, a tritheist, although he is often treated as such. See Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 161-92; Jürgen Moltmann, 'Christian Hope – Messianic or Transcendent? A Theological Conversation with Joachim of Fiore and Thomas Aquinas', in *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 91-109.

### Abstract

Scripture is replete with the antithesis of descent and ascent, and the early Church Fathers often employed this framework for understanding the relationship between the ascension of Jesus and the sending (descent) of the Holy Spirit. This essay outlines how many of the early Fathers saw an inseparable connection between the *bodily* ascension of Christ and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. While not normally denying the historical reality of these events, their main emphasis was *theological* rather than merely historical. In this way the Fathers creatively attempted to relate their Christology to their pneumatology without allowing one to swallow the other.

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