

Affirming Christ's Ascension on the National Day of Prayer

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We live in an age of crises. But one crisis trumps them all.

It's engulfing the American church. *It's a crisis of Christology.* I sometimes call it a "crisis of supremacy." But there's hope. A cure exists. It can be found in a fresh revelation among God's people of the profound biblical teaching on the *Ascension* of our Lord Jesus. Furthermore, on May 5 we can begin applying this cure nationwide in a whole new way.

On the Church calendar May 5 happens to be "Ascension Day." Curiously, it is also officially (as mandated by Congress and proclaimed by the President) our National Day of Prayer. *Is this merely coincidence?*

The first time I came across the phrase "crisis of Christology" was in a Christianity Today article about seven years ago. Last spring the same magazine updated us with an editorial suggesting that though Evangelicals gladly identify with Jesus, we have failed to grasp the full extent of His supremacy, power, majesty and finality. The editors are on to something. Evidences of this crisis are emerging on many fronts. Let me give you three brief examples:

A few months ago I worshipped in one of the largest Bible-teaching churches in the country. But, combining extended spirited worship along with a 45-minute sermon by a well-known preacher, the name of Jesus (or synonyms) was mentioned only five times during the service—total. I had to ask myself: Would a Unitarian be comfortable here this morning? My conclusion was "yes." Unfortunately, this has become an all-too-often pattern uncovered in my travels. What does that suggest about how far short of the passionate vision of Colossians 1 the evangelical movement may be falling? In Colossians 1:18 the Father declares that bottom-line His one overarching purpose in *everything* is for His Son is to have both ascendancy and supremacy? But is this the chief hallmark of American Christianity? Are we known chiefly as those who exalt and exult in the Lord Jesus?

Another example of the crisis: In February, *TIME* magazine carried a front-cover story on "The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals In America." Running eight pages, the well-researched article highlighted respected leaders many of whom, I can attest from personal relationships, love Christ with all of their hearts. However, except in a phrase in the opening paragraph, the name of our Savior was not referenced again—not once! What was highlighted, besides the individuals, were issues like mega-budgets, social and political initiatives, constituencies, trends, enterprises, events, publications, organizational leverage, etc. In no way depreciating the importance of much of this, I still had to ask myself: How is it possible for a responsible periodical to report on one of the most visible and influential movements in America, and not even feel the need to reference the One for whose sake the whole movement exists—in Whom the movement finds its rationale, toward Whom the whole movement desires to

point and by Whom alone there is any hope for the great challenges facing America in this hour? Why is Jesus so "invisible" to our nation when they look at evangelical Christians?

A third example: Just listen to the normal conversations that go on among believers—on Sunday mornings, at Bible studies, during conventions, over coffee. You may be shocked to discover how little our Lord Jesus comes up as we fellowship together; how little is said about Him in terms of His greatness and glory; how meager a vision of Him we leave with each other when our conversations are over (if we leave any at all). In many ways, Jesus is "invisible" *inside* our churches. His role—in terms of how we see, seek and speak about Him—comes much closer to being a mascot than a Monarch.

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Could this "crisis" be at the core of unsettling discoveries of spiritual unhealthiness documented by George Barna and others—that 80% of our churches are either stagnant or dying; that 40% of our pastors admit to struggling with pornography; that 65% of our church youth seriously question the exclusivity of Jesus' lordship; that our full-time missionary force is withering before our eyes? Could this crisis be a prime explanation for the prayerlessness in so many congregations. Latest research indicates that only 3% of U.S. pastors even consider prayer a priority? Could it be that the expression of prayer remains so feeble because to most of us our Lord Jesus simply does not appear to be large enough or supreme enough to inspire it?

Highlighted in the *TIME* article, Dr. J. I. Packer proposes elsewhere that in evangelicalism God's Son has become like *Humpty Dumpty*, shattered into a hundred pieces. Individually we have a piece of the vision, which may or may not excite us. But unfortunately there are currently few efforts to put all the pieces back together. Dr. Stephen Prothero in his recent book *American Jesus* concludes that over the past 200 years our culture has created "a pantheon of Jesuses," allowing each of us to simply pick and choose the Jesus that best meets our needs. We come to Him as far as we *need* Him—that far and no more.

In the midst of this significant spiritual shortfall, I believe it is time for the whole Body to once again embrace the doctrine of the Ascension and its radical implications for our devotion and passion for Jesus.

Every spring Ascension Day celebrates an actual day, just like today is a day, when (according to Acts 1 and scores of other passages) the living Christ ascended to the right hand of the Father to assume His role as Lord of heaven and earth, King of the universe, Ruler of the nations and Head of

the Church. Entering into His rightful inheritance, by the Ascension He manifested in no uncertain terms that "in everything" He was to have the supremacy. Setting Him at His right hand, the Father ratified, validated and eternally secured the full redemptive impact of our Lord's incarnation, teachings, healings, sufferings as well as His victories over sin, Satan and death itself.

What if that kind of message dominated both the affections and the witness displayed in every facet of American evangelicalism? How might *TIME* have written its report differently?

Summed up in what Scripture teaches on the Ascension can be found every dimension of God-given revival for any generation—what I like to call a "Christ awakening." Who Jesus is, *ascended*, holds the answer to all of our prayers and the fulfillment of all of God's promises—whether for an individual, a church, a nation or (ultimately) all creation. Isn't it amazing that when New Testament writers turned to the 39 books of the Old Testament to find texts that could help them interpret the massive awakening they saw unfolding in the first century, the one passage most often quoted or referenced by nearly all New Testament writers (and preachers) was... *Psalms 110*. In it, God speaks of the One (1) whom He has raised up as Lord of all; (2) through Whom He will conquer all enemies and all nations; (3) the vision of Whom, when freshly revealed to His people, compels them to eagerly enlist in His Kingdom advance, and equally (4) inspires them to further His eternal plan the way He does—as a people of prayer.

Which brings us full circle: May 5, 2005—Ascension Day—is also our National Day of Prayer. *What if this year—as a start on reversing and curing the untenable crisis that haunts us—we lifted up all of our prayers for America with one overriding proviso: We want every answer granted by the Father to guarantee far greater revelations and manifestations of the supremacy of His Son, all over the land beginning with the Body of Christ. What if we prayed on May 5—millions of us on the same day—for a thorough-going "Christ awakening," an awakening to God's Son for ALL that He really is as sovereign Lord and Christ?*

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