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## Can Jesus be Sent to People on Earth, Whilst Simultaneously Being in Heaven?

This topic has already been raised at various points in previous chapters. I think the answer to this question must be “yes” - for many reasons. Furthermore, I will be suggesting that these verses of Peter’s sermon which speak of the sending of Jesus (Acts 3:20 and 26) can be interpreted in several ways, depending on the senses in which we understand this “sending”. For example, is it a “private” or “public” sending? Is it to individuals or are Peter’s hearers in Jerusalem to be understood as representing “national” Israel? In addition to these, there are a number of other possible distinctions which we will also need to consider. It is an important topic for understanding our passage because, for example, we read in Acts 3:19-21 of God sending Jesus Christ as a result of the hearers’ repentance, and also that Jesus must be received in heaven until/during the times of restoration etc. If Jesus being received in heaven (a single event with continuing effects) *cannot* happen concurrently with his being sent to people on earth, then the complicated “time-line” found in most commentaries for the events described in Peter’s sermon would appear to be necessary. If on the other hand, Jesus in heaven is simultaneously present with His people on earth then Peter’s sermon unfolds easily and naturally.

I think that recognising that the word “achri” in v. 21 means during rather than until (as I attempted to justify in the previous chapter) goes a long way to alleviating the exegetical difficulties with which many commentators contend when dealing with Peter’s sermon. However, even with this amelioration of the difficulties, it is still *vita*, in my view, to defend Christ’s presence in heaven and on earth during the “Church Age”. This should not be hard to do since it is everywhere taught in the New Testament!

Furthermore, what is true of Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, dwelling amongst His people whilst simultaneously being in heaven corresponds, in the New Covenant, to the relationship of YHWH, the Triune God in the Old Testament, dwelling amongst His Old Covenant people in the tabernacle/temple, and in particular in the Holy of Holies above the Mercy Seat, whilst simultaneously being in heaven—of which the tabernacle was an “exact copy”. The notion of such omnipresence by the Triune God is pervasive in Scripture and everywhere assumed.

In this chapter, I would like to look first at the simultaneous presence in heaven and on earth of God in the Old Testament, then at the corresponding truths regarding Christ in the New Testament, and finally at some of the exegetical difficulties encountered when this simultaneity on the part of Christ is, in practical terms, neglected by various commentators in discussing Peter's sermon.

### *God's Omnipresence in the Old Testament*

Here are some verses that describe this truth:

First, David's words to the Lord in Ps. 139:7-10:

*"Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths you are there  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast."*

Peter's hearers would be at home with the idea that God is in heaven but that He is also, simultaneously, present on earth, and in particular that He dwelt in the midst of His people both in the Tabernacle and subsequently in the Temple and especially between the two cherubim above the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies. Thus for example, God accedes in Ex. 33 to Moses' request that His *presence* will go up with the people.

(Combining these "universal" and tabernacle/aspects of God's presence, Jonah's faith in the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land (Jon. 1:9) was wonderfully demonstrated in his prayer in the belly of the great fish: "When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple" (Jon 2:7)).

Given this background, Peter's words that "times of refreshing may come from the *presence* of the Lord" may refer to a more direct and immediate presence of the Lord than just His presence in heaven from which blessings are sent to earth—after all, God promises to dwell with those of a humble and contrite spirit—the very attitude of repentance that Peter was enjoining on his hearers:

*“For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones’ (Isaiah 57:15).*

Also, Peter, John and the other Apostles knew that Jesus was, and is, God and so it would be natural for Peter to apply the attribute of omnipresence to the risen, ascended and glorified Jesus in the same way as that attribute was naturally understood of YHWH in the writings of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms.

### *Jesus’ Presence in Heaven and on Earth in the New Testament*

Let us start this section with a “transitional” passage—an Old Testament passage which specifically relates to the risen Christ’s activity on earth and in heaven. In Ps. 110:1 we read,

*“The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right until I place your enemies as a footstool for Your feet”.*

This verse, widely quoted in the New Testament clearly establishes the presence of the risen and ascended Christ in heaven. However, in Ps. 110:5, the inspired Psalmist addressing Christ says,

*“The Lord at thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath”*

In commenting on verses 5-7, the Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges says *“The scene changes to the battle-field. The king goes forth to war against his enemies. But he does not go in his own strength. Jehovah is at his right hand to fight his battles. In hot pursuit of his flying foes he halts but for a moment to refresh himself, and then presses on to his final triumph.”*

We see here, then that the glorious reign of Christ, the King, the One Who rules the nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9), not only reigns with God from heaven, but that He and the Lord (Adonai - which is understood to be a reference to YAHWEH) go forth together to fight His battles defeating kings and all other opposition to the glorious Gospel. Acts 4:27 refers to two of these kings and rulers, Herod and Pontius Pilate. Psalm 2 and Ps. 110 are describing the present realities of the Church Age, the Gospel Age, including the times of Peter and his hearers. This is a time both of the reign of Christ at the Father’s right hand in heaven, and also on earth,

victoriously battling together to “make the nations of the earth Your (Christ’s) heritage, and the ends of the earth Your possession” (Ps 2:8) through the proclamation of the Gospel. Perhaps we can see that there is a slaying of our old natures as we are brought into the Kingdom of Christ, as well as Christ’s relentless treading down of *all* that would hinder the accomplishment of His and the Father’s glorious purposes.

For more direct and explicit New Testament references to the presence of Christ on earth and in heaven, we have, for example,

“And behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20b).

“And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.” John 3:13 (KJV).

“I will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb 13:5b).

“Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him”. (John 14:23).

Jesus also comes to us through the Holy Spirit (e.g. John 14:16-17) and Jesus and the Spirit are also present in the preaching of the Word. In Acts 26:23 Paul speaks of the prophets and Moses saying that, “. . . by being the first to rise from the dead”, He [Christ] would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” - a proclamation which Paul relates to his own preaching ministry in Acts 26:17.

We briefly discussed the presence of God in the Old Covenant tabernacle and temple. But John’s Gospel systematically presents Jesus as the fulfilment of this Old Testament type, and also Paul and Peter teach in the Epistles that the Church, Christians individually and corporately, are the temple of the Holy Spirit—we are “lively stones” and He is the Chief Cornerstone. In all these ways, we understand that Jesus is with His people here on earth, even though a glorious consummation of that reality still awaits.

Interestingly, however, the “converse” truth, namely that we here on *earth*, are, even now, seated with God in Christ Jesus in the *heavenly* places (Eph. 2:6) is not an explicit part of what Peter “offers” in his presentation of the Gospel in his Acts Ch. 3 sermon.

Much helpful information about the omnipresence of God and Christ can be found in systematic theology books. For example, see John Frame's *Systematic Theology* pp. 386-389.

### *A Suggested Propositional Basis for the Exegesis of the Sermon in Some Commentaries*

I would like now briefly to look at what might be some of the underlying assumptions that have guided various commentators in "exegeting" Peter's sermon.

A view of many commentators on Peter's sermon is that Christ cannot be sent to earth and/or to people whilst simultaneously being (received) in heaven. We can call this Proposition 1. (I suggest that this view is not held in an *absolute* sense since these commentators know that "Jesus will never leave us not forsake us", but nevertheless, this proposition appears to be *determinative* for their interpretation of Peter's sermon.

We know from Acts 3:21 that Christ must be received in heaven until or during the times of restoration of all things. Let us call the understanding that Christ must be received in heaven *until* the times of restoration of all things Proposition 2A, and the understanding that He must be received in heaven *during* the times of restoration of all things Proposition 2B.

It is held by many commentators that Christ being in heaven until or during the times of restoration of all things implies that He will be sent or come to earth at the end of this specified time period. (i.e. the Second Coming) (Propositions 3A and 3B - corresponding to Propositions 2A and 2B above).

Thirdly, we know from 1 Cor. 15:25-26 that,

*"It is right for Him to reign until He puts all the enemies under His feet; the last enemy made to cease is death"*

and from Ps. 110:1 that,

*"The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right until I place your enemies as a footstool for Your feet".*

These verses together form Proposition 4, and this proposition tells us that Christ is in heaven until the final consummation of all things at the

end of history.

A further proposition, Proposition 5, is that the sending of Christ in Acts 3:20b is the Second Coming of Christ.

When taken together, these propositions create some difficulties for recognising the “inner logic” of Peter’s sermon. One of these difficulties is that whilst the “times of blessing” of v. 20 are seen either as being brought to the Jerusalemites immediately or in the near future as a consequence of their repentance, (or as something related to the Second Coming, or both), the expression “the restoration of all things” in Acts 3:21 is almost universally taken to refer to the future glorious consummation of all things at Christ’s Second Coming (i.e. the sending of Jesus Christ in v. 20) or to the conditions that will obtain following that momentous event, and, in many interpretations, to a restoration of something like the Edenic paradisaical conditions before the Fall—the latter interpretation having a long history—going right back to the Second Century theologian Origen. A difficulty with this interpretation is that such a long time period must elapse between repentance by Peter’s hearers and the Second Coming, and yet, grammatically, according to Peter, both the “times of refreshing” *and* the “restoration of all things” are dependent upon this repentance. So it is really necessary, I think, to try to explain the nature or mechanism of this long-acting causal link. A further difficulty is the apparent mis-match between the conversion of a relatively small number of people in the 1st Century and the size of its consequence, a future cosmic world-wide event, presumably involving billions of people.

We can identify some of these propositions in the commentaries. For example, Darrell Bock appears to hold to Propositions 1, 2A, 3A, 4 and 5. Thus for this commentator, the sending of Christ in Acts 3:20b is the Second Coming of Christ, (Proposition 5) which initiates the times of the restoration of all things/the consummation of all things (Propositions 2A and 3A and 4). These times cannot include the time when Peter is preaching because of Proposition 1.

Yet, these assumptions seems to me to create difficulties for those commentators, including Darrell Bock, who see the sending of Christ in v. 20 as a reference to the Second Coming, and yet who are required, by the presence of the word *hopos* (= so that) in v. 19 (TR) to link, as cause and effect, the peoples’ repentance with the “times of refreshing” and the “sending of Jesus”. Darrell Bock points out that *hopos* usually indicates purpose, and says that “this purpose links to what forgiveness and what the times of refreshing lead to, namely, the ultimate return of Christ”.

This “Second Coming” view seems to me an unlikely way of understanding our passage since the people involved in the “cause” (i.e. the ones who repent) will have been dead and in heaven with Jesus for at least nearly two thousand years, and so will not need Jesus to be sent (the “effect”) since they are already with Him in heaven.

D. Bock goes on to speak of the divine design (represented by the word *dei* (it is necessary) in v. 21 and he sees this as to some extent weakening the strict “cause and effect” aspect of human repentance leading to the return of Christ. He goes on to say,

*“The point of the verse, [i.e. verse 20 in NA27 S.F.] then, is that these events are associated with one another in a kind of package deal rather than in a strict cause-and-effect relationship. Acts 1:6-7 also underscores that God has a specific timing in place, and so this repentance is not the cause of the return”.*

Darrell Bock, thus attempts in his Acts commentary to justify this (Second Coming) interpretation of the sending of Jesus in v. 20. Readers of his commentary may decide for themselves whether, or to what extent, he has been successful, but I would like to thank him for recognising and responding to the need for an explanation—something not attempted (or recognised?) by a number of other commentators who adopt this interpretation.

These profound difficulties are further compounded when verse 20 is translated in a slightly different way—a way that is adopted by a minority on English translations and which will be discussed (and defended) in the next chapter. In this translation, the sending of Jesus in v. 20 is not a “general” sending (in which no destination is stated), but rather it is a sending *to you* (i.e. that God will send Jesus to Peter’s repentant hearers—in the same way as the sending of Jesus is described as having been “to you” in v. 26.

The commentator F. F. Bruce, in discussing vs. 20-21 says,

*“If Jesus must remain in heaven until this consummation [i.e. the establishment of God’s order on earth as the restoration of all things (see p. 85 of his commentary) S.F.] then this is in line with Paul’s exposition of Ps. 110:1: Christ must reign (at the right hand of God) until all hostile powers are overthrown” (Propositions 2A, 3A, 4 and 5). He goes on to say,*

*“But, in the general context of Acts, Peter’s words mean this: the gospel*

*must spread throughout the world; then and not till then, will He return from the right hand of power” (Propositions 4, 5 and 1).*

F. F. Bruce does not specifically explain how the repentance of Peter’s hearers will lead to the sending of Christ so far into the future. F. F. Bruce seems to hint that things might have been different if more Jews, (or the people of Jerusalem as representatives of the whole house of Israel) had responded to the Gospel in the early days of the church, (presumably by this he means that the possibility expressed by the subjunctive verb “He *may* send” in the expression “so that . . . He *may* send Christ Jesus” of v. 20a would, become a reality), but as F. F. Bruce puts it “*it is idle to speculate what might have happened if they* [i.e. the minority responding to the message of Christ] *had formed the majority*”.

Another suggested interpretation of F. F. Bruce’s approach, an interpretation which is sort of complementary to the one suggested above, is that he sees that Peter’s hearers who repent, even though constituting a minority, are, as it were, “doing their bit” in forging a link at the start of a long chain of belief and blessings which will extend through the world (and through an extended period of time). Each link is necessary, and, when complete, Christ will return. Furthermore, if Peter’s hearers are seen as *representatives of “the whole house of Israel”*, (as F. F. Bruce suggests), then this would indeed be quite a substantial link in this chain.



