

## In Defense of the *Descendit*: A Confessional Response to Contemporary Critics of Christ's Descent into Hell

By Daniel R. Hyde

The phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into hell," was rejected outright as early as the mid-fifteenth century English bishop, Reginald Peacock.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the churches of the West, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, this clause has ever been defended, included, and recited as a part of our "undoubted Christian faith" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 22).<sup>2</sup> It is simply a part of the inheritance of catholic Christianity that we confess and in which we catechize our churches.

Despite its historicity and usefulness, among some Reformed and evangelical authors this clause is believed to be either dubious or an embarrassment recently. One Reformed author, Randall Otto, says,

Reformed churches have from their inception generally accepted only doctrine and forms of worship which

have clear substantiation in Scripture. Because the view of Sheol and Hades as a netherworld is incompatible with the Reformed view, and because there is no truly sensible or widely acceptable meaning for the clause, the *descensus* should be omitted from the liturgical use of the Apostles' Creed. The doctrine and practice of the Reformed faith, recognized for their consistency with Scripture, cannot but be confused by the use of such a problematic article. Let the Reformed congregation rather undertake to know and make Christ known as he is clearly revealed in the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Otto's conclusion is that Reformed churches should not recite this phrase in the Apostles' Creed, and, further, that it should be omitted from the Creed altogether because of the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. Also, he points out, there is no agreed-upon meaning for the phrase. Another contemporary Reformed writer who advocates the removal of the *descendit* clause is Michael Williams. While agreeing with Otto that we should not recite this phrase and that we should delete it altogether, his main ground for his assertion is what he calls "confessional integrity."<sup>4</sup> He explains that since "by their very nature the creeds set forth that which is essential and binding," the *descendit* does not belong in the Creed (Williams, 89). In fact, Williams pushes the argument further than Otto. Williams does not set *sola Scriptura* over against the Creed, but argues that the nature of the Creed itself demands our refusal to recite this phrase: "Refusing to confess that which we do not believe, is not only biblical, but it is also fully creedal," since the creeds stand under the Word of God (Williams, 90). To these Reformed authors' conclusions we can add the conclusion of the evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem, which was encapsulated in the subtitle of his article on this subject: "A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed."<sup>5</sup>

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THE AUTHOR: The Rev. Daniel R. Hyde (M.Div., Westminster Seminary California) is the pastor of the Oceanside United Reformed Church (URCNA) in Carlsbad, California. He is the author of *Jesus Loves the Little Children: Why We Baptize Children* (Reformed Fellowship, 2006), *The Good Confession: An Exploration of the Christian Faith* (Wipf & Stock, 2006), *What to Expect in Reformed Worship: A Visitor's Guide* (Wipf & Stock, 2007), *With Heart and Mouth: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession* (Reformed Fellowship, forthcoming 2007), and "The Holy Spirit in the Heidelberg Catechism," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 17 (2006) 211–237.

1. Reginald Peacock's *Book of Faith*, ed. J. L. Morison (Glasgow: J. Maclehose and Sons, 1909), 304ff. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co Inc., 1950) 5.

2. All citations of the Heidelberg Catechism come from *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1996) 3:307–355.

3. Randall E. Otto, "Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990) page 150.

4. Michael Williams, "He Descended Into Hell: An Issue of Confessional Integrity," *Presbyterion* 25:2 (Fall 1999) 80–90.

5. Wayne Grudem, "He Did Not Descend Into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34:1 (March 1991) 103–113; cf. the

In contrast to the conclusions of these contemporary theologians that the *descendit* clause *does not* belong in the Creed nor on the lips of the biblically conscious believer, the argument of this author is that it *does* belong in the Creed and deserves to be retained because it is an essential part of the doctrine and spiritual life of the Christian church and of its members.<sup>6</sup> This position was well summarized in the words of the seventeenth century Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Witsius (1636–1708), who said that Christ’s descent was “one of the most mysterious, essential, and useful doctrines of our holy Religion,” and, even though the exact phrase cannot be found in Scripture, “We sincerely believe and assert it, when rightly explained.”<sup>7</sup>

#### SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

We begin with a few words about the history of the Apostles’ Creed in general before moving on to the history of this phrase in particular. The phrase “he descended into hell” is found in the Latin manuscripts either as *descendit ad/in inferna* in the *textus receptus* of the Creed and Rufinus’ commentary, *descendit ad inferos* in the Athanasian Creed, or *descendit ad infernum* in Venantius Fortunatus (Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 2:45, 46 n2, 49).<sup>8</sup> This clause was part of the developing creed that has come to us in the *textus receptus* (T) that we call the Apostles’ Creed. Ambrose first called it the *symbolum apostolorum* in 389.<sup>9</sup> Current scholarship has shown that the Creed developed from a fourth-century creed known as the Old Roman Creed (R) and before that, from a mid-third century creed called *proto-R*, until the time of Charlemagne, who solidified the Creed in his realm around 800.<sup>10</sup> This is not to mention the personal creeds extant from the ancient church in writings such as Ignatius of Antioch’s summary of the faith in his *Epistola ad Trallianos* (ca. 107).

This development went hand in hand with the practice of baptism in the ancient church. In his *Apostolic Tradition* (ca. 200), Hippolytus gave a detailed account of a baptism ceremony. Before a candidate received the sacrament, he answered a series of questions, summarizing the faith into which he would be baptized.<sup>11</sup> Over time, this local practice developed into a universal practice using an approved list of the basic articles of the Christian faith.

During this period of development, we first read of the *descendit* among orthodox writers in the *commentarius in symbolum apostolorum* (also called *expositio symboli apostolici*) of Rufinus, a priest in the church in Aquileia, around the year 390. He notes that this

phrase was neither in the Eastern nor the Roman form of the Creed at that time. In his commentary, he said, “Its meaning, however, appears to be precisely the same as that contained in the affirmation BURIED” (emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup> This was also the sentiment of Cyprian.<sup>13</sup> Since some creeds had “buried” while others had “descended,” the “burial” of Christ, therefore, was the same as saying the “descent” of Christ (Schaff, *Creeeds*, 1:21 n6).

This use of the *descendit* clause as a synonym of “buried” is also that of the Athanasian Creed, written around the year 430, and the Creed of Venantius Fortunatus, written around 570, which substitute the *descendit* clause and omit that Christ was “buried.” Among orthodox writers, then, to say that Christ “descended” was originally another way of saying that Christ was “buried.” The Nicene Creed confirms this conclusion by using “buried” with no reference to the descent.

The first use of these two phrases together in one creed is in the Third Sirmian Creed, written by the Arians in 359.<sup>14</sup> In his *Ecclesiastical History*, the early

language of the evangelical theologian Millard J. Erickson who neither rejects nor accepts the truth of the phrase in “Did Jesus Really Descend to Hell?” *Christianity Today* 44:2 (February 7, 2000) 74.

6. Cf. Cornelis P. Venema, *What We Believe: An Exposition of the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1996) 67.

7. Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on What is Commonly Called the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. Donald Fraser, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg: P&R, reprinted 1993) 2:148, 141.

8. Cf. Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles’ Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries*, Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia 43 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepolis Publishers, 2002) 21.

9. “Letter 42” in *Saint Ambrose: Letters*, The Fathers of the Church 26 (New York: Catholic University of America Press, 1954) 227.

10. On the historical development of the Apostles’ Creed, see Westra, *The Apostles’ Creed* 21–72. Cf. *The Creeeds of Christendom* 2:52–55. David P. Scaer says that this development should not be traced from these historical sources only, but from Scripture itself, which is a confessional document. “He Did Descend to Hell: In Defense of the Apostles’ Creed,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35:1 (March 1992) 92.

11. *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome*, ed. Gregory Dix and Henry Chadwick (Ridgefield, Conn: Morehouse Publishing, reissued 1992) 33–38; cf. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeeds* 30, 49; Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 20; Gerald Bray, *Creeeds, Council and Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1984) 96–98.

12. *vis verbi eadem videtur esse in eo quod sepultus dicitur*. Rufinus: *A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. J.N.D. Kelly, Ancient Christian Writers 20 (New York: Newman Press, 1954) 52.

13. Cyprian, *In Expos. in Symb. in loc. p. 22* ed. Oxon. 1682, as cited in *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding 2 vols. (1849–1852; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Press, reprinted 2004) 1:137.

14. Martin F. Connell, “Descensus Christi Ad Inferos: Christ’s Descent to the Dead,” *Theological Studies* 62:2 (June 2001) 266 n7;

church historian Socrates recounts this creed as saying, “When he had descended into the subterranean regions and had administered things there, the keepers of Hades, having seen him, shuddered.”<sup>15</sup>

In the early church period, then, the *descendit* clause was not used in the earliest extant creeds. Furthermore, once this phrase began to be used by the orthodox, it was as a graphic synonym for Christ’s burial.

#### VARIOUS VIEWS

Not only were there variations on the use of the *descendit* in the early church, its interpretation has varied throughout the ages of Christian thought. There are at least six major interpretations of Christ’s descent into hell, which include he suffered further after the cross; he went to give a second chance to the dead; he went and pronounced his victory to those that already believed in him before their deaths; he went to pronounce his victory to Satan; it was a synonym of his burial; and that it means he suffered his whole life—especially on the cross.<sup>16</sup> These shall briefly be summarized below, while the first four, those not adopted by the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, shall receive a brief response.

#### *The Punishment View*

In the first view, which I call *the punishment view*, Jesus’ human soul descended into hell and underwent more suffering for our sins in order to finish the work

John Yates, “He Descended Into Hell’: Creed, Article and Scripture: Part 1,” *Churchman* 102:3 (1998) 247–54.

15. Cited in John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1877) 405.

16. William Perkins gave four views of Christ’s descent: a local descent; as a synonym for “buried”; as a metaphor of Christ’s sufferings; and as a way of speaking of continuing under the curse of death. William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole, or Creed of the Apostles* (London: John Legatt, 1623) in *The Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*, 3 vols. (London: John Legatt, 1626) 1:231, col. 2–233, col. 2.

17. *Ever Increasing Faith Messenger* (June 1980) 7, quoted in Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1993) 163.

18. “Jesus Our Lord of Glory,” *Believers Voice of Victory* 10:4 (April 1982) 3, quoted in *Christianity in Crisis* 164.

19. *Destined for the Throne* (Fort Washington, Pa.: Christian Literature Crusade, special edition for TBN, 1988) 83–84, quoted in *Christianity in Crisis* 164–165.

20. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

of our redemption in the place of punishment and the abode of demons. Modern-day Prosperity Gospel preachers have latched onto this phrase in the Creed, consciously or unconsciously, to promote their heretical views. For example, Los Angeles preacher Frederick K.C. Price said:

Do you think that the punishment for our sin was to die on a cross? If that were the case, the two thieves could have paid your price. No, the punishment was to go into hell itself and to serve time in hell separated from God ... Satan and all the demons of hell thought that they had Him bound and they threw a net over Jesus and they dragged Him down to the very pit of hell itself to serve our sentence.<sup>17</sup>

According to world-renowned televangelist Kenneth Copeland, this punishment was necessary:

When Jesus cried, “It is finished!” He was not speaking of the plan of redemption. There were still three days and nights to go through before He went to the throne... Jesus’ death on the cross *was only the beginning of the complete work of redemption* (emphasis mine).<sup>18</sup>

Finally, Paul E. Billheimer explained the necessity of this suffering of Christ in hell, saying,

Because He was “made sin,” impregnated with sin, and became the very essence of sin, on the cross He was banished from God’s presence as a loathsome thing. He and sin were made synonymous ... [I]t was not sufficient for Christ to offer up only His physical life on the cross. *His pure human spirit had to “descend” into hell...* His spirit must not only descend into hell, but into the lowest hell... The Father turned Him over, not only to the agony and death of Calvary, but to the satanic torturers of His pure spirit as part of the just desert of the sin of all the race. As long as Christ was “the essence of sin” he was at Satan’s mercy in that place of torment... While Christ identified with sin, Satan and the hosts of hell ruled over Him as over any lost sinner. During that seemingly endless age in the nether abyss of death, Satan did with Him as he would, and all hell was “in carnival.”<sup>19</sup>

This view teaches that the work of Christ’s obedient life and death was insufficient to accomplish our redemption. This understanding should be judged in error because it is contrary to our Lord’s own words when he said, “It is finished” (John 19:30).<sup>20</sup> Contrary

to Copeland's assertion, Jesus' words *do* refer to the accomplishment of our redemption. John records Jesus' words with the perfect verb  $\tau\epsilon\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\sigma\tau\alpha\iota$  to denote that Jesus accomplished the work of redemption that was prophesied in Scripture; he accomplished all that the Old Testament required as our sacrifice, and there was no need for him to suffer further in hell.<sup>21</sup>

#### The Second-Chance View

Another interpretation of the *descendit* is that it means Jesus' resurrected and glorified body and soul went to Hades, the place of provisional punishment in the intermediate state, to preach the gospel to those who had died before his first coming in order to give them a second chance to believe. The ancient northern Italian Philastrius of Brescia condemned this view around 380, when he said,

Others are heretics because they claim that the Lord descended into hell, and that he again preached to all who were there after death, so that, assembling in faith there, they might be saved. Against this one can find the prophetic saying of David: "But who will believe in you in hell?" [Psalm 6:6]. And in the apostle: "As many who sinned without the law, will perish without the law" [Romans 2:12]."<sup>22</sup>

More recently, this was the view of E.A. Litton (1813–1897), who says that according to 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6, the "descent" actually took place sometime between Christ's resurrection and ascension.<sup>23</sup> Litton therefore concludes that if Christ went to those who were penitent at the "eleventh hour" of the flood, then he may have "descended" again to those who had never heard of the Savior: "What occurred once may have occurred, and may occur, again" (Litton, 191).

This is also the interpretation of the contemporary German Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, who argues on the basis of Jesus' being the second Adam; he therefore suffered hell for all humanity.<sup>24</sup>

Like the first view, this interpretation ought to be judged as false. The most fundamental reason is that it violates the justice of God. Not only is there no clear text in Scripture that teaches a "second chance," Jesus himself said, "He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). For this reason, the justice of God is proclaimed by the apostolic teaching that "it is appointed for man to die once, but after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27; cf. Luke 16:26).

#### The Pronouncement-of-Triumph-to-Believers View

Moving closer to an acceptable interpretation is the third view that Jesus descended into hell to pronounce his triumph to those who believed in him. In this view, Jesus' "human soul united to His divine person"<sup>25</sup> went to "Abraham's bosom," the place of provisional blessing, to proclaim his victory to those who hoped in him before his advent and to apply his benefits to them.

The Roman Catholic Church, many Anglicans, and many of today's evangelicals hold this point of view.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) said, "The few places where Scripture seems to say anything about this matter (1 Pet. 3:19f., 4:6; Eph. 4:9; Rom. 10:7; Matt. 12:40; Acts 2:27, 31) are so difficult to understand that they can easily be expounded in many different ways." Yet he goes on to defend the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine based on Jesus' sufferings on the cross and Psalm 22, as well as the universal experience of

21. On the view that this verb is used as the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, The Anchor Bible 29A (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 907–908; for the view that it is used as the accomplishment of redemption, see Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 616–618. Leon Morris says this word is another of John's double entendres, signifying that Jesus' life had come to an end, but most importantly, that his work for our redemption had come to an end. *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1987) 814–815.

22. Philastrius of Brescia, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, volume 9, ed. F. Heylen (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 1957) 288–289 translated and cited in Connell, "*Descensus Christi Ad Inferos*": 265.

23. E.A. Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology on the Basis of the Thirty-Nine Articles*, ed. H. G. Grey (London: R. Scott, 1912) 189–191. Interestingly, most Anglicans criticize the view of John Calvin by saying he takes this phrase in the Creed out of sequential order but here, the Anglican Litton also does this as he places the "descent" after the resurrection, even though the phrase occurs before the clause on the resurrection.

24. *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972) 92–95; *Jesus: God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975) 271–273. Cf. the universalism of Connell, "*Descensus Christi Ad Inferos*," 265–269.

25. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1994) 181.

26. For the Roman Catholic teaching, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3.52, *The Catechism of Trent*, 1.5, and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 179–181. In terms of Anglicans, it is important to note that the Anglican view is that of the Thirty-Nine Articles, "As Christ died for us, and was buried; so also it is to be believed, that he went down into Hell" (Art. III). The interpretation of this article of faith varies among Anglicans. For the Evangelical view, see Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* 396 n10.

humanity in suffering.<sup>27</sup> It should also be stated, that this was the view of the Italian Reformed theologian Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562). In his 1542 commentary, *A Plain Exposition of the Twelve Articles of the Christian Faith*, he said that while Christ's body went into the grave at death, his soul went into the "lower regions" and "experienced the same condition as other souls separated from their bodies."<sup>28</sup> It was in that place that the saints were awaiting their salvation. While in these lower regions, Christ preached to the condemned, "rebuk[ing] them for the obstinacy and incredulity they had shown to the words and divine promptings addressed to them by God while they lived on earth" (Vermigli, 44).

The words of Melito of Sardis in his sermon, *On the Passover*, often provide evidence of this view in the ancient church. These words, though, may be taken as a rhetorical proclamation of victory at the resurrection:

100. But he arose from the dead and mounted up to the heights of heaven. When the Lord had clothed himself with humanity, and had suffered for the sake of the sufferer, and had been bound for the sake of the imprisoned, and had been judged for the sake of the condemned, and buried for the sake of the one who was buried,

101. he rose up from the dead, and cried aloud with this voice: Who is he who contends with me? Let him stand in opposition to me. I set the condemned man free; I gave the dead man life; I raised up the one who had been entombed.

102. Who is my opponent? I, he says, am the Christ. I am the one who destroyed death, and triumphed over the enemy, and trampled Hades under foot, and bound the strong one, and carried off man to the heights of heaven, I, he says, am the Christ.<sup>29</sup>

27. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 223–230. Cf. St. Bonaventure, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, Meditation 85, trans. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) 350–351.

28. In *Early Writings: Creed, Scripture, Church*, trans. Mariano Di Gangi and Joseph C. McLelland, ed. Joseph C. McLelland (The Peter Martyr Library: Volume One; Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1994) 43–44.

29. "A New Translation of Melito's Paschal Homily," trans. Gerald F. Hawthorne in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by His Former Students*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 173. A legitimate ancient source for the *descendit* doctrine is the *Odes of Solomon*, 42:11–20.

This view is founded on one main premise: before Christ's first coming, the souls of the dead went to Hades (ᾍδης), which was divided between Paradise and Gehenna (γεέννα). Paradise, called "Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:23) and the *limbus patrum* in Roman Catholic theology, was not heaven, but a temporary holding place for those who would go to heaven *after* the advent of the Lord. Gehenna, on the other hand, was the temporary holding place for those who would go to hell *after* the advent of the Lord.

In response to this view, the apostle Paul calls Paradise "heaven" (2 Cor. 12:2, 4 cf. Rev. 2:7, 22:2, 14). If the response of the pronouncement-of-triumph-to-believers advocate is that Paul said this *after* the advent of Christ, it needs to be reasserted that the blessed hope of the Old Testament saints was to go to heaven and be in the presence of God (e.g., Gen. 5:24; Num. 23:10; 2 Sam. 12:23; Pss. 16:9, 11, 17:15, 49:15, 73:24, 26; Prov. 14:32; Ecc. 12:7; Matt. 22:31–32; Heb. 11:5ff, 13–16). This hope of the ancient fathers is the same hope of New Testament saints (e.g., Luke 16:23, 25, 23:43; Acts 7:59; 2 Cor. 5:1, 6, 8; Phil. 1:21, 23; 1 Thes. 5:10; Eph. 3:14–15; Rev. 6:9, 11, 14:13).

#### *The Pronouncement-of-Triumph-to-Satan View*

Closely related to the previous view is that Jesus descended into hell to pronounce his triumph over Satan. The difference is that while the previous view was a part of Christ's humiliation, this view teaches that Jesus' human soul united to his body went into hell to proclaim his victory over Satan and his minions and to pronounce their condemnation as the first step of his exaltation. This is the view of Lutheranism. In *The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord*, the Lutherans state:

1] And since even in the ancient Christian teachers of the Church, as well as in some among our teachers, dissimilar explanations of the article concerning the descent of Christ to hell are found, we abide in like manner by the simplicity of our Christian faith [comprised in the Creed], to which Dr. Luther in his sermon, which was delivered in the castle at Torgau in the year 1533, concerning the descent of Christ to hell, has pointed us, where we confess: I believe in the Lord Christ, God's Son, our Lord, dead, buried, and descended into hell. For in this [Confession] the burial and descent of Christ to hell are distinguished as different articles; 2] and we simply believe that the entire person, God and man, after the burial descended into hell, conquered the devil, destroyed the power of hell,

and took from the devil all his might. 3] We should not, however, trouble ourselves with high and acute thoughts as to how this occurred; for with our reason and our five senses this article can be comprehended as little as the preceding one, how Christ is placed at the right hand of the almighty power and majesty of God; but we are simply to believe it and adhere to the Word [in such mysteries of faith]. Thus we retain the substance [sound doctrine] and [true] consolation that neither hell nor the devil can take captive or injure us and all who believe in Christ (art. 9).

A contemporary Lutheran expression is found in David P. Scaer, who appeals to Luther's explanation of this phrase as deriving not from texts such as 1 Peter 3, but from the parable of the binding of the strong man (Scaer, 97).<sup>30</sup>

This view holds in common with the second-chance view and the pronouncement-of-triumph-to-believers the medieval doctrine of the "harrowing of hell."<sup>31</sup> The harrow was an Old English pronged tool that was used to move stones from a field before planting. The imagery of the harrowing of hell is that of separating out the righteous from the unrighteous.<sup>32</sup> This separation, or distressing, of hell, was a part of the faith and piety of medieval people. This concept is clearly visible in cathedral frescos, Byzantine plaques, and the paintings of artists such as Fra Angelico, Benvenuto di Giovanni, and Agnolo Bronzino, where Christ is pictured in hell fighting the powers of hell and freeing the righteous captives from its prison (Hornik and Parsons, 18–26, 50).

In response, this view misunderstands the main texts upon which it is based, such as Ephesians 4:9–10 and 1 Peter 3:18–19.

#### *Ephesians 4:9-10*

One biblical text to which proponents of all the above views normally appeal, especially the Lutheran view, is Ephesians 4:9–10:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says,

"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."

(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

As commentators have demonstrated, St. Paul here gives a rabbinic *pesher* upon Psalm 68:18, citing the Psalter and explaining its words in the new context of Christ's victory.<sup>33</sup> In doing this, the apostle presupposes a three-tiered cosmology of the earth ("lower parts"), the heavens ("the heavens"), and the highest heaven (Paul's "far above"). This cosmology sets up his antithetical comparison between Christ's "descent" from the highest heavens, through the heavens, to the "lower parts of the earth" and his "ascent" from the "lower parts," through the heavens, and back to the highest heaven. This highest heaven was earlier spoken of in Ephesians 1:20–21, where Paul said that God "raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion."

This meaning of Christ's descent to the "lower parts of the earth" as his Incarnation and not to a netherworld after his death can be established in the following way.<sup>34</sup> First, Paul's explanation is that Christ's descent was the fulfillment of Psalm 68, where David praises God for his mighty victory over his enemies. In the language of the Psalm, the LORD himself "descended" and therefore "the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the One of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel" (v. 8). He came down to earth, to Mount Sinai, and later to Mount Bashan, and then ascended back to his "holy habitation" (v. 5 cf. 18). According to Paul, the Lord of whom Psalm 68 speaks is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, who descended to earth in order to vanquish sin and death and thereby raise us to heaven. This explains the NIV's translation of this phrase as a genitive of apposition, "the lower, earthly regions."

This interpretation is further evidenced by the use of the phrase "the lowest parts of the earth" elsewhere. In Psalm 139:15 we read, "My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the *lowest parts of the earth*" (NKJV; cf.

30. Cf. *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1986) 135.

31. On the "harrowing of hell" see J. M. McCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh, 1930) 83–130; T. F. Worthen, "The Harrowing of Hell in the Art of the Italian Renaissance" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1981).

32. Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, "The Harrowing of Hell," *Bible Review* 19:3 (June 2003) 22.

33. E.g., F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F.F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 340–345.

34. W. Hall Harris III identifies the "descent" of Ephesians 4 as Christ's coming on Pentecost to give gifts to his church. "The Ascent and Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9–10," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (April–June 1994) 198–214.

“depths” in NIV/ESV). David was created as a human being in his mother’s womb (v. 13), that is, in the “lowest parts of the earth.” The prophet Isaiah also uses this phrase as a metaphor of the inhabitants on earth (Isa. 44:23) and the prophet Ezekiel uses it to speak of death and burial in the ground (Ezek. 26:20, 31:14). This led the church father John Chrysostom to say, “He calls death, the lowest parts of the earth” (Witsius, 2:139).<sup>35</sup>

Finally, Jesus’ own use of the descent/ascent motif in John 3:13 is illuminating. He speaks of descending (Incarnation) and ascending (exaltation). This concept is echoed in the Nicene Creed, which so beautifully states, “Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven.” Just as Christ descended once already to earth, so too he will come again by descending to the earth, not into hell.

Ephesians 4:9–10, therefore, speaks of the Incarnation and ascension of our Lord and has nothing to do with his descent “into hell.”<sup>36</sup> As John Calvin (1509–1564) said, “Many have made glosses much too strong on this passage, saying that Jesus Christ went down not into the grave, but also even into limbo, a place forged out of their own brain.”<sup>37</sup>

35. Cf. *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ed. Mark J. Edwards, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 8 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 164.

36. This is in contrast to L. Joseph Kreitzer, who argues that the “lower parts” refers to a subterranean cavern next to the temple of Apollo in Hierapolis, which was viewed as the passageway to the underworld into which Hades took Persephone in Greek mythology. “The Plutonium of Hierapolis and the Descent of Christ into the ‘Lowermost Parts of the Earth’ (Ephesians 4, 9),” *Biblica* 79:3 (1988) 381–93. Yet Kreitzer’s numismatic and archaeological evidence from that time period never make the connection between the “lower parts” and the Plutonium.

37. *Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, reprinted 1987) 350. Cf. *Commentaries of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1996) 21:275, where Calvin says it is “torture” to these words and “exceedingly foolish” to apply these words to purgatory or hell.

38. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *Pilgrims Among Pagans: Studies on First Peter* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1994).

39. For the view that *pneumatic* here refers to Christ’s resurrection, see J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969) 150–156; Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 197; Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 49 (Waco, TX: Word, 1988) 18–19.

40. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatik*, III:547 as cited in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1994) 341.

### 1 Peter 3:18–19

Two other texts used to support a literal descent of Christ into the netherworld after his death and before his ascension are found in 1 Peter 3:18–19:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.

In order to understand the sense of Peter’s words, the overall context of 1 Peter cannot be forgotten. This epistle is about “pilgrims among pagans,” to borrow the title of a recent work.<sup>38</sup> Peter writes to the pilgrim people of God in first-century Asia Minor on how to live in the world while not being of the world. In the immediate context, Peter writes about the suffering of these pilgrims, saying that if they suffer it is the will of God (2:21, 3:17); that suffering is a means of graciously conforming them to the image of Christ, the paradigm of suffering (2:19–21); and that suffering is a means to bear witness to the pilgrims’ hope (3:15–16). 1 Peter 3:18–19 communicates the irony of triumph as it comes through suffering.

In our sufferings as Christians, then, Peter says, “Christ also suffered” (3:18). Our suffering is linked to his sufferings, not only theologically but also grammatically, as the opening *ὅτι* *καί* clause signifies. Christ suffered “for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous” (3:18). This is a clear reference to his crucifixion, which purpose was to “bring us to God.” Peter then expands upon Christ’s sufferings and our benefit from them, saying Christ was “put to death in the flesh.” This phrase is the result of what he just said about dying “for sins” and “for the unrighteous.” His dying in the “flesh” (*σαρκί*) was not a way of saying the “body,” but a way of saying the realm in which he died. Jesus came and died in our place as a fallen sinner.

Peter then says Christ was “made alive.” This new life occurred “in the spirit” (*πνεύματι*), that is, in the realm of the Holy Spirit, not of Christ’s human spirit. As he was put to death in the realm of sin we were made alive in the realm of holiness. Peter speaks mysteriously of what Paul said so clearly, when he said Christ was “declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness” (Rom. 1:4).<sup>39</sup> 1 Peter 3:18, then, speaks of Christ’s death and resurrection, in which he triumphed.<sup>40</sup>

Verse 19 is where Christ’s descent seems to be taught. The “spirits in prison” (*τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν*)

that Jesus is said to have preached to have been commonly understood either to be all those in the underworld who heard the gospel through the history of redemption, as in the first four views; as the fallen angels, since the word “spirits” is not used without a modifying statement for believers (Venema, 64); or to be restricted to those who died in the flood in the days of Noah after hearing the “preacher of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5, NIV). Grudem follows the ancient view of Augustine and the view of Reformed expositors such as John Calvin in this latter interpretation, correctly pointing out in response to any second-chance view, that a proclamation of the gospel in hell would lessen the evangelistic impetus to which Peter has already exhorted these congregations (1 Peter 3:15).<sup>41</sup> 1 Peter 1:11 strengthens the view that verse 19 speaks of Noah’s preaching, since it says the Spirit of Christ preached through the Old Testament prophets.

This traditional view of Augustine and Calvin is sufficient to refute the view of the Lutherans. Even more convincing, though, is the work of recent scholars such as Andrew J. Bandstra and Karen H. Jobes, who explain 1 Peter 3:18–19 along with its immediate context in 3:20–22, as teaching not only that Christ died and was raised, but that his ascension *was* his proclamation of victory.<sup>42</sup> After telling his persecuted readers that Christ suffered for them to lead them to God, Peter explains how Christ did this: he was “put to death” (crucifixion, v. 18), he was “made alive” (resurrection, v. 18), and he went into heaven (ascension, v. 22 cf. 19). When 3:19 says Christ preached to the spirits in prison, Peter says he did this in the resurrected status of 3:18, which the Spirit accomplished: “in whom/which” (ἐν ᾧ). In this Spirit Christ “went” and proclaimed his victory in his ascension. The verb “went” (πορευθεῖς) is not the verb for “going down” (καταβαίνω) in the New Testament. Furthermore, the context of this verb in verse 19 is determined by its use in verse 22: “who has gone (πορευθεῖς) into heaven.” In 3:18–22, Peter uses four passive participles to express the action of the text. Although Christ suffered unjust persecution and tribulation, he triumphed, because through his death he was made alive and went into heaven. In the same way, Peter comforts his readers that although they, too, may die for their faith unjustly, they will be united to Christ’s resurrection and ascension, since Christ came to “bring us to God” (3:18).

In conclusion, these main New Testament texts used to support a literal descent of Christ into hell do not conclusively teach this doctrine. They more clearly teach that Christ descended in his Incarnation

and ascended back to heaven in his resurrection and ascension (Eph. 4:9–10) and that he died, was raised, and ascended (1 Peter 3:18–19). With these conclusions in mind, it is understandable why those such as Otto, Williams, and Grudem would advocate removing the *descendit* clause altogether from the Creed.

### The Literary Interpretive View

Other than Peter Martyr Vermigli’s espousing of the third view, Reformed theologians from the sixteenth century forward have rejected the first four views in favor of a literary or symbolic view of Christ’s descent into hell. As we will see, these are not two mutually exclusive views, but two sides of the same coin, so to speak. These two views appreciate the theology and piety that flow from this doctrine, contrary to the critics of the *descendit*.

The fifth view, then, is a literary interpretation of the creedal clauses “buried” and “descended into hell.” Following the ancient creeds’ interchanging of the phrases “buried” and “descended” as well as the comments of Rufinus in the late-fourth century, this view states that after Jesus died he was buried; that is, he descended into *Hades*, which is a biblical way of saying “the grave.” In 1531 the reformer of Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli, expressed this view, when he said,

If he had not died and been buried, who would believe that he is very Man? And for the same reason the apostolic Fathers added to the Creed the words, ‘He descended into hell.’ They used this expression periphrastically, to signify the reality of his death.<sup>43</sup>

This interpretation was given confessional status by the Westminster Divines in their *Larger Catechism*, Q&A 50:

41. Augustine, “Letter 164” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series 1*, trans. J. G. Cunningham (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004) 515–521; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter*, trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1996) 22:112–116; Grudem, “He Did Not Descend Into Hell,” 109–110.

42. Andrew J. Bandstra, “Making Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison: Another Look at 1 Peter 3:19,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38:1 (April 2003) 120–124; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

43. Ulrich Zwingli, *An Exposition of the Faith*, in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953) 252.

*Q. Wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after his death?*

*A.* Christ's humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day; which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, *He descended into hell.*

The Westminster Standards' interpretation is further explained when the Shorter Catechism, says that a part of Christ's humiliation consisted "in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time" (Q&A 27). Appended to the Assembly's Shorter Catechism were the Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, and Apostles' Creed. An explanatory note to the descent phrase said, "i.e. Continued in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day."<sup>44</sup> This interpretation is received with approval in the various commentaries on the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechism. The mid-seventeenth century Puritan Thomas Vincent (1634–1678) commented,

*Q. 7. How did Christ humble himself in regard of the consequents of his death? A.* Christ humbled himself in regard of the consequents of his death, in that—1. He was buried. "And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb."—Matthew 27:59–60. 2. He continued under the power of death for a time, namely, until the third day. "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."—Matthew 12:40.<sup>45</sup>

The well-known Puritan Bible commentator, Matthew Henry (1662–1714), also produced a commentary on the Shorter Catechism, in which he expounded with even more questions:

14. When Christ was dead, was he buried? Yes: they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulchre, Acts 13:29. Was he buried according to the custom? Yes: as the manner of the Jews is to bury, John 19:40. Did he

44. *The Confession of Faith; the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, with the Scripture-Proofs at Large...* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1855) 319. Citations from these Standards are from this edition.

45. Thomas Vincent, *An Explicatory Catechism: or, An Explanation of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism* (New Haven: Walter, Austin and Co., 1810) 80–81.

46. Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Shorter Catechism, or, A Scripture Catechism in the Method of the Assemblies* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850) 60.

continue under the power of death for a time? Yes: for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, Matt. 12:40. Was this his descent into hell? Yes: he descended into the lower parts of the earth, Eph. 4:9. Did his separate soul go to paradise? Yes: This day shalt thou be with me in paradise, Luke 23:43. Did his body see corruption? No: Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption, Acts 2:27.<sup>46</sup>

A final example is that of Francis R. Beattie (1848–1906), who in his commentary said approvingly of both the Westminster Catechisms:

This brings us to the deepest depths of his humiliation. His body was taken from the cross by kind-hearted strangers, who were, perhaps, secret disciples, and buried in a new-made tomb. He remained in the state of the dead and under the power of death for a time.... It seemed as if now, surely, the powers of darkness had gotten the victory, and that Satan had triumphed. Death, the penalty of sin, had laid him low, and the grave held him firmly in its grasp. He was really dead. His spirit had gone to God who gave it, and his body lay cold and lifeless in its rock-hewn tomb. It is in this connection that the phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "and he descended into hell," which is alluded to in the Larger Catechism, properly comes up for some brief remarks. This much-discussed phrase does not mean that Christ, in his disembodied spirit, actually went, after his death and prior to his resurrection, to the spirit world, and to that region of the unseen abode where the spirits of the saints of the Old Testament dispensation were held for the time, to declare the full gospel message to them, and so to bring them into the enjoyment of the felicity of the heavenly state. Nor does the phrase mean that the human soul of Christ went really into hell, there to secure a victory over Satan in his own proper abode. Nor, again, can it be rightly taken to signify that his human soul actually went to that place of punishment where the souls of the lost are kept, that he might there fully endure all that was needed to make a full penal satisfaction for sin. To understand the phrase, the meaning of the word *hell* must be observed. It does not mean the place or state of the finally lost, but it rather denotes the invisible world of departed spirits. Hence, the meaning of the phrase is, that during the period between his death and his resurrection Christ's human spirit, or soul, was in the region of departed disembodied souls in the unseen

world, and at the same time his body was lying in the tomb. In his case, of course, the departed human spirit would go to the estate of the blessed, for he had said to the thief on the cross, who died penitent, that they would be together that day in paradise.<sup>47</sup>

### The Symbolic View

The sixth view explains that the *descendit* clause means that Jesus suffered the agonies of hell during the entire state of his humiliation, but especially on the cross. This view is most memorably expressed in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 44:

Q. Why is it added: *He descended into Hades?*

A. That in my greatest temptation I may be assured that Christ, my Lord, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, and terrors which he suffered in his soul on the cross and before, has redeemed me from the anguish and torment of hell.

The language of the Catechism was drawn directly from the theology of John Calvin, who said, “If it is left out much of the benefit of Christ’s death will be lost,” while calling the Roman Catholic dogma of Christ’s descent into *limbo* “nothing but a fable.”<sup>48</sup> Even before Calvin, forms of this interpretation were expounded by Durand of St. Pourcain in the fourteenth century and Pico della Mirandola and Nicolas of Cusa in the fifteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

### EXPLAINING THE REFORMED VIEW(S)

The Reformed interpretations of both the Westminster Standards and Heidelberg Catechism express the correct doctrine of Christ’s descent as two sides of one coin: as to the body of Jesus Christ, he descended into the state of death; as to the soul of Jesus Christ, he suffered the agonies of hell. This double meaning was that of the father of much of Reformed thought, John Calvin, who in his 1545 Catechism of the Church of Geneva, wrote:

It is immediately added, *He descended into hell*. What does this mean? That he not only endured common death, which is the separation of the soul from the body, but also the pains of death, as Peter calls them (Acts 2:24). By this expression I understand the fearful agonies by which his soul was pierced (Q&A 66).<sup>50</sup>

### Descent of Christ’s Body

Let us look at the first side of the coin: regarding the body of Jesus Christ, he descended into the state of death. We see this concept most clearly taught in the previously cited Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 50. As was noted earlier, the phrase “he descended into hell” simply means that Jesus died; it is synonymous with “buried.” With this conclusion Witsius agreed:

Whoever intends, then, to express our Lord’s condition in the grave and in the state of death, in the language employed by ancient patriarchs and prophets, cannot make use of more elegant or striking terms than these: ‘Christ descended into hell, *hades*.’ And this is the native, proper, and literal sense of the expression” (Witsius, 2:143).

Therefore, in terms of his body, the Lord Jesus Christ “descended” into the grave (Ps. 141:7) and passed into the state of death (Gen. 38:35; Ps. 49:14; Isa. 38:10), fulfilling Old Testament prophecy as the promised Messiah. How does this view explain another text that is often appealed to in order to prove that Christ literally descended into hell—Psalm 16:8–10? There David says,

I have set the LORD always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

47. Francis R. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Richmond, Va.: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1896) as cited at [http://www.shortercatechism.com/resources/beattie/wsc\\_be\\_027-028.html](http://www.shortercatechism.com/resources/beattie/wsc_be_027-028.html) (accessed May 3, 2007). James Fisher (1697–1775) in his *The Assembly’s Shorter Catechism Explained, By Way of Question and Answer* (Glasgow: Printed for James Gillies, 1796) 133, said, “Q. 39. What do you understand by these words in the CREED, He descended into Hell? A. Nothing else but his descent into the grave, to be under the power of death, as its prisoner, Psalm 16:10.” Cf. Thomas Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism*, Classis Collector’s Edition, 2 vols. (1853; Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, reprinted January 1993) 1:499–501; Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002) 112–113.

48. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) 2.16.8. Calvin’s full treatment is in 2.16.8–12. It should also be pointed out that this is the interpretation by the contemporary Lutheran Braaten-Jensen, *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 1:548.

49. D. D. Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican: the Interpretation of Christ’s Descent Into Hell in Elizabethan Theology,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 69 (1978) 251.

50. John Calvin, “Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts, Part 2*, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1983) 2:46.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;  
my flesh also will dwell secure.

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,  
or let your holy one see corruption.

This view is not negated by proof-texting Psalm 16, since the New Testament gives the authoritative interpretation of these words. The apostles Peter and Paul both apply this text to the resurrection of Jesus Christ *from the grave*, where David's body remains to this day (Acts 2:30–31, 13:34–35). David's body did not go to an intermediate place of blessing or punishment, but remained in a tomb, in the state of death until the day of resurrection. To get a fuller picture of this reality, let us examine this in some detail.

First, what is the meaning of *Sheol* (שְׁאוֹל) and its New Testament counterpart, *Hades* (ᾗδης)? Depending upon the context, there are three major ways to understand these words.

First, *Sheol/Hades* can refer to the abstract *state of death* and not a spatial locality. For example, Psalm 9:17 speaks of wicked nations who now boast of their power, but who shall be wiped out by *death*. Psalm 55:15 uses *Sheol* in parallelism with *death* to signify sudden death, while in Proverbs 15:24 it is paralleled with life. In Genesis 37:35, 42:38, and 1 Samuel 2:6 the term is used figuratively to speak of death. Since both believers and unbelievers enter the state of death, both believers and unbelievers enter *Sheol/Hades* (cf. Job 14:13–14, 17:13–14, 38:17; Ps. 89:48; Hos. 13:14; Acts 2:27, 31; Rev. 6:8).

Second, when *Sheol/Hades* denote a literal, spatial locality, they can refer to *the grave* (e.g., Gen. 29:31, 37:25, 42:38, 44:29; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Job 14:13, 17:13, 21:13; Pss. 6:5, 16:10, 88:3, 141:7; Eccles. 9:10). In this sense, Scripture says descending into *Sheol/Hades* is a warning to the wicked (e.g., Job 21:13; Pss. 9:17, 49:14, 55:15; Prov. 5:5, 7:27, 9:18, 15:11, 24, 23:14, 27:10; Luke 16:23).

Third, when *Sheol/Hades* denote a literal, spatial locality, they can also refer to *hell*, the place of eternal punishment for the ungodly (e.g., Num. 16:30; Deut. 32:22; Pss. 49:14–15, 88:3; Prov. 9:18; Ecc. 9:10; Luke 16:23, 28; 1 Peter 3:19; 2 Peter 2:9).

When we read the word “hell,” then, we must not immediately think of it as the place of eternal punishment, as this is only one of its three denotations.

In Psalm 16:10, *Sheol* means the literal grave. We come to this conclusion because of the context in which it is used in Acts 2:27 and 2:29–31. In these places Peter contrasts David, whose body “is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (v. 29), and Christ, who was raised from the dead, from his tomb. Furthermore, שְׁאוֹל, translated “soul” in Psalm 16:10, is often used as an idiom for the personal pronoun “me” in Scripture (e.g., Num. 23:10, 31:19; Judg. 16:30). In Psalm 16:10, David is saying “You will not leave *me* in Sheol, nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption.” More specifically, “me” refers to David's dead body, as Peter points out in Acts 2.<sup>51</sup> This was an Old Testament way of speaking, as Numbers 19:11 and 13 make evident; “Whoever touches the dead שְׁאוֹל of any person.” Finally, the poetic parallelism in Psalm 16, in which the second line adds to the first, is between the words “soul” (שְׁאוֹל) and “Holy One” (קִדְמוֹן) on the one hand, and *Sheol* (שְׁאוֹל) and “corruption” (רֵקָה) on the other. David's “soul” is the same as saying the LORD's “Holy One,” that is, as we said above, “me,” while saying *Sheol* is to say “corruption.” The corruption of which David is speaking is the corruption of the body in the grave, in the tomb. Therefore, Jesus Christ *had to be* raised to fulfill this prophecy.

Psalm 16:8–10 speaks not of a descent into the literal place called hell, but of the descent into death, into the grave, from which David hoped for the resurrection of Christ, the first fruits of the final resurrection. For this reason Grudem's description of the view of the Westminster Larger Catechism as being unpersuasive, awkward, and “an inaccurate attempt to salvage some theologically acceptable sense out of the words” misses the mark, since hell translates *Hades*, which can mean the place of the dead as Grudem acknowledges (106). In fact, Grudem bases his rejection of the WLC on the English meaning of word “hell” and not on the word of the Greek version of the Creed, *Hades*. Grudem goes on to argue against Acts 2:27 being a proof for a literal descent into hell based on the fact that the Greek *Hades* and Hebrew *Sheol* can mean “the grave” and “death” (107). Williams also confuses these words when he argues that “the Catechism's interpretation of the descent is within the semantic reach of *sheol* and *hades* (see Acts 2:27), but not *hell* (*gehenna*)” (88).

In contrast to the views of Rome, Lutheranism, and many Anglicans and evangelicals, this exegesis of Psalm 16 means that when Jesus' body was buried, his human soul did not descend into hell, but actually ascended to His Father, as he said on the cross, “Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46; cf.

51. It is interesting to note that Theodore Beza translated Acts 2:27 in his 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the Greek New Testament as “Thou wilt not leave my dead body in the grave.” Cited in Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations* 2:144.

Ps. 31:5; Acts 7:59). Jesus also told the penitent thief on the cross that he would be with the Lord in Paradise: “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43)— the eternal dwelling of God (2 Cor. 12:2; Rev. 2:7). Because of these basic truths from the lips of Jesus, Witsius gave a *reductio ad absurdum* of the views that Christ descended into a place of punishment:

Nor is it probable that the soul of Christ, after conducting the soul of the malefactor to paradise, straightway left it, descended into hell, called out the fathers, and forthwith hastened back again, and introduced them to heaven; whence, at the commencement of the third day he returned to the body, – having, within so short a period, traveled over the space of the whole world, no less than four times (Witsius, 2:145).

#### *Descent of Christ’s Soul*

The second side of the Reformed understanding of Christ’s *descent* concerns his soul, in which he suffered the agonies of hell. This metaphorical view finds expression among Reformed writers and in confessional documents such as the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 44. Besides the already quoted question and answer of John Calvin’s Geneva Catechism, he continued in the very next question:

Q. 67. Give me the cause and the manner of this.

A. As in order to satisfy for sinners he sisted himself before the tribunal of God, it was necessary that he should suffer excruciating agony of conscience, as if he had been forsaken of God, nay as it were, had God hostile to him. He was in this agony when he exclaimed, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (“Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” 2:46–47).

A few questions later, he asks the student a further question on this subject:

Q. 70. How, on the other hand, is it possible that Christ, who is the salvation of the world, should have been subjected to this doom?

A. He did not endure it so as to remain under it. For though he was seized with the terrors I have mentioned, he was not overwhelmed. Rather wrestling with the power of hell he subdued and crushed it (“Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” 2:47).

This exposition of the *descendit* that found its way into the Geneva Catechism (1545) and Heidelberg Catechism (1563) also made its way into the Confession of Faith of John Knox’s English congregation in Geneva:

Suffered his humanity to be punished with a most cruel death, feeling in himself anger and severe judgment of God, even as if he had been in the extreme torments of hell, and therefore cried with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Witsius, 2:519 n26).

This interpretation was not only held by the magisterial Reformed movement on the continent but is echoed in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647):

This office the Lord Jesus did most willingly undertake; which that he might discharge, he was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfill it; *endured most grievous torments immediately in his soul*, and most painful sufferings in his body; was crucified, and died, was buried; and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption. On the third day he arose from the dead, with the same body in which he suffered; with which also he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of his Father, making intercession; and shall return to judge men and angels at the end of the world (8.4; emphasis added).

Whereas the Westminster Larger Catechism gives an ancient historical and literary interpretation to this phrase in the Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism and other expressions give us a theological and practical interpretation.

Thus in regard to the soul of Christ, the descent is a metaphor of the dreadful agonies and terrible sufferings of our Mediator and Savior—his experience of “God-forsakenness” (Venema, 66). This terrible experience is vividly described by Michael Horton in his commentary on the Apostles’ Creed:

You see, at the end of the day, it was not the mockery and loathing of men, nor the law and judgment of Rome, that Jesus feared.... On this night, the Son is alone in hell. Not even the Father is his friend. Nobody loves the Son in this hour.... He is the enemy both of his wicked creation and of his righteous Father.... At last, the moment came: God turned his face of wrath toward his bleeding, dying Son, and made him drink that cup of rejection to the last drop. See

here the price of your redemption: God must hate his own sinless Son.<sup>52</sup>

This clause in the Creed, therefore, is a use of language by which God accommodates himself to us. Grudem, though, says “this explanation does not really fit the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed” (Grudem, 106). In response, we accommodate ourselves to others in metaphorical language when we are excited and when we are down. At the peak of exultation in glory, we describe ourselves as “reaching the stars” or being “on cloud nine.” When we suffer and are in travail, we often say that “I’m in hell,” or “I feel like hell.” There is biblical precedent, as well, for this usage of metaphorical language, whether we are in glory or agony (cf. Isaiah 14:11, 13, 15; Pss. 18:4–5, 31:4, 88:3, 6, 116:3). This metaphorical use of hell was expressed by Johannes Cloppenburg (1592–1652), who spoke of Christ’s sufferings as “a peculiarly exquisite feeling of the curse, when ‘the travail of his soul’ (Isa. 53:11), conflicting with a sense of Divine wrath, sharpened the bitterness of his bodily tortures” (Witsius, 2:148). Even earlier, Calvin expressed this when he said Christ fought “hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death” (*Institutes*, 2.16.10). For this reason, arguments against this interpretation—based on a chronological reading of the Creed, that Grudem (106) and Williams (88) propagate—fail.

In coming to an understanding of this Reformed interpretation, the comments of Caspar Olevian (1536–1587) on the Creed are extremely illuminating. He said the phrases “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried” referred to Christ’s sufferings, which could be seen, while the phrase, “He descended into hell,” referred to his sufferings, which could not

be seen (cf. Ps. 18:5; 2 Sam. 22:6; Matt. 26:38, 27:46; Luke 22:44).<sup>53</sup> Extending Olevian’s helpful distinction further, we can add the fact that the darkness that was “over all the land” (Matt. 27:45) at the crucifixion was a visible manifestation of Christ’s “God-forsakenness” and invisible sufferings in his soul. Olevian went on to say that Christ’s unseen sufferings were necessary since he had to suffer for our salvation in both body and soul (Olevianus, 70).<sup>54</sup>

#### BENEFITS OF RETAINING THE *DESCENDIT*

In light of the Reformed interpretation(s), the *descendit* is an essential part of the doctrine of the Christian church and of its members, yet, it remains to deduce how this is so.

In the first place, retaining this phrase in the Creed links those who confess it to the ancient catholic church as we recite the Creed liturgically and in catechesis. Despite all the problems this phrase has caused in terms of interpretation and despite their doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, the Reformers did not delete this phrase. The Elizabethan Puritan, William Perkins (1558–1602), expressed this benefit when he said, “Nevertheless considering that this clause hath long continued in the Creede, and that by common consent of the Catholike Church of God, and it may carrie a fit sense and exposition; it is not, as some would have it, to be put forth” (Perkins, 1:231, col. 2). When we recite the Creed and say, “He descended into hell,” we join the great cloud of witnesses throughout history, experiencing a transcendence that the tyranny of the urgent in our culture seeks to repress.

Second, since Christ’s descent into hell was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, our faith finds assurance when we are in the midst of struggles. The fact that he not only suffered in his body but that he suffered the extreme agonies of hell for us in his soul (Ps. 22)—a suffering that we will never need to suffer—helps to build an experiential sense of assurance when we doubt. This beneficial aspect of Christ’s suffering of hell is not only taught in the Heidelberg Catechism, but expressed in our historic liturgy for Holy Communion, when the minister says,

[He] hath humbled himself unto the deepest reproach and pains of hell, both in body and soul, on the tree of the cross, when he cried out with a loud voice: ‘My God, my God! why hast thou forsaken me?’ that we might be accepted of God, and never be forsaken of him.<sup>55</sup>

52. Michael Horton, *We Believe: Recovering the Essentials of the Apostles’ Creed* (Nashville: Word, 1998) 101.

53. Caspar Olevianus, *A Firm Foundation: An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma, *Texts & Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 69–70. This interpretation was called “usual” [sic.], “good,” and “true,” by Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole* 1:233, col. 1.

54. Cf. Belgic Confession, articles 18 and 21. On the *Belgic Confession*, articles 18 and 21, see Daniel R. Hyde, *With Heart and Mouth: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession* (Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Fellowship, forthcoming 2007); idem, “We Confess: Article 18,” *The Outlook* 54:11 (December 2004) 8; idem, “We Confess: Article 21,” *The Outlook* 55:3 (March 2005) 7.

55. *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1914) 64. This form is also found with slight modifications in the *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1976) 145 and in the *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (revised ed.; Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier, 1998) 597.

When we hear these words, we are assured that Christ invites us to eat the bread and drink the wine of his supper so that we may experience the accepting love of God on the basis that Christ experienced the forsaking anger of Almighty God.

Third, this phrase brings us comfort in our own physical, spiritual, and emotional sufferings. We know for certain that we are not alone in our struggles in this life because the Son of God suffered for us—as us. The book of Hebrews expresses this so tenderly, saying that Christ was “made like his brothers in every respect” (Heb. 2:17) and “tempted as we are” (Heb. 4:15). Because of the Incarnation and the sufferings associated with it, our Lord was able to be a merciful, faithful, and sympathetic high priest (Heb. 2:17, 4:15) and is therefore “able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb. 2:18).

Fourth, the *descendit* also assures us that we have no reason to fear the experience of death or even death itself. Because of Christ’s suffering the darkness of hell, we can sing and pray with David to the great Shepherd: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” (Ps. 23:4). Since Christ entered hell’s agony but was brought out in triumph, we recite the victory march of the apostolic church: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:56–57). This is our confident prayer because Christ has experienced all the emotions, pains, and torments of death for us.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, how important is the descent into hell of Jesus Christ for us as God’s people? This phrase is a classic way of expressing the words of the Old Testament prophecies of the burial and resurrection of our Lord, which are the foundational truths of Christian assurance. Since Christ died and was buried for us, we are confident that he will be near us in our struggles and weaknesses. With this in mind, we see why it is important not to delete this phrase from the Apostles’ Creed in Reformed churches. Not only is it a biblical phrase, following the principle of *sola Scriptura*, that expresses the work of Christ and our comfort in him, it is an historical phrase that links us as Protestants to our Christian past as members of the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” To delete this phrase would be overly sectarian and remove us from the historic catholic faith. Despite the various interpretations of this phrase and other phrases in the Apostles’ Creed, we use the *textus receptus* (T) of the Western church as an expression of

our catholicity (Scaer, 92). When we recite this phrase as Reformed believers in the all-sufficient work of our Lord Jesus Christ, then, we join myriad of myriads before the throne of grace who have come to experience the comfort we express. ■

#### In Brief: Alexander M’Leod on the Call to the Gospel Ministry

*The Pastor according to God’s heart, has received a regular call to the ministry.*

It is a general proposition of divine inspiration, That no ecclesiastical office is to be undertaken without a call from God. The head of the church was himself subjected to this law. And as there was no exception admitted in his favor, it is vain to expect it in favor of any other. *And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron—So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an High Priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son—called of God an High Priest* (Heb. 5:4–5, 10). By a divine call to any work or office is meant, not merely that it comes to pass in the providence of God that a person is engaged in such work or office, but that he is employed by divine authority therein. The call of God to ecclesiastical office, is *inward*, when there is a divine influence experienced upon the mind, inclining and commanding the person to devote himself to the service of the Church. It is *outward*, when accompanied with external evidence for the satisfaction of the church. It is *extraordinary*, when a person is employed immediately by the Divine Being, without the intervention of such human agencies as are regulated by stated laws. It is *ordinary*, when authority is conferred agreeably to such external order as God hath appointed to be observed as the standing ordinance of his empire. The *inward call* may satisfy a man’s own mind; but others must, in order to receive him, have some external evidence. If this were not the case, there would be no end of imposture. No man is to be recognized as an ambassador of Christ without an outward call. The *extraordinary call*, is always accompanied with infallible evidence. The seal of miracles gives evidence of the authenticity of the commission, and is sufficient to remove all suspicion of fraud. To this evidence the Redeemer hath taught us by his own example to appeal. *The works that I do—they bear witness of me* (John 10:25). But miracles are ceased. It is only therefore for the *ordinary outward* call we are to look in examining the pretensions of ecclesiastical officers—and this consists in ordination by the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery. *The Constitution, Character, and Duties of the Gospel Ministry: a sermon, preached at the ordination of the Rev. Gilbert McMaster, in the First Presbyterian Church, Duaneburgh* (New-York: Printed by J. Seymour, 1808) 22–23. ■