

## HE DID NOT DESCEND INTO HELL: A PLEA FOR FOLLOWING SCRIPTURE INSTEAD OF THE APOSTLES' CREED

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It seems to me that a confession of faith should be repeated only if it represents things one genuinely believes to be true. Yet I personally do not believe that Jesus "descended into hell" after he was "buried." So whenever I am in a church where the congregation says the Apostles' Creed, my version of the section in question sounds like this:

... suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, ... the third day he rose again from the dead. ...

In this article my purpose is to give reasons why it seems best to consider the troublesome phrase "he descended into hell" a late intruder into the Apostles' Creed that really never belonged there in the first place and that, on historical and Scriptural grounds, deserves to be removed.

### I. THE ORIGIN OF THE PHRASE "HE DESCENDED INTO HELL"

A murky background lies behind much of the history of the phrase itself. Its origins, where they can be found, are far from praiseworthy. Philip Schaff has summarized the development of the Apostles' Creed in an extensive chart, part of which is reproduced on the following pages.<sup>1</sup>

This chart shows that, unlike the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition, the Apostles' Creed was not written or approved by a single Church council at one specific time. Rather, it gradually took shape from about A.D. 200 to 750.

It is surprising to find that the phrase "He descended into hell" was not found in any of the early versions of the Creed (in the versions used in Rome, in the rest of Italy, in Africa) until it appeared in one of two versions from Rufinus in A.D. 390. Then it is not included again in any version of the Creed until 650. Moreover Rufinus, the only person who includes it before 650, did not think that it meant that Christ descended into hell but understood the phrase simply to mean that Christ was "buried."<sup>2</sup> In other words,

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<sup>1</sup> P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1931]), 2. 52-55.

<sup>2</sup> Rufinus says, *vis verbi eadem videtur esse in eo quod sepultus dicitur* (quoted in Schaff, *Creeds*, 1. 21 n. 6). Schaff notes that apparently the phrase was found somewhat earlier (around A.D. 360), but it was not in any orthodox creeds or any versions of the Apostles' Creed but in some

## THE GRADUAL FORMATION OF THE APOSTLES' CREED

Ultimate Text of the Western Creed.	CREDO (I believe):					
	Art. III.					
Pirminius, A.D. 750.	QUI Conceptus est	De Spiritu Sapeto	Natus	Ex Maria Virgine	Passus	Sub Pontio Pilato
	Who was Conceived	By the Holy Ghost	Born	Of the Virgin Mary	Suffered	Under Pontius Pilate
I. St. Irenaeus, A.D. 200.	τὸν σαρκωθέντα ὑπὲρ τῆς μητέρας φωτηρίας (ἀνθρώπου ἐγένετο)		(Generationem)	τὴν ἐκ παρθένου γένουσι (ex Virgine)	καὶ τὸ πάθος	(SUB PONTIO PILATO)
II. Tertullian, A.D. 220.	(missum a Patre in Virgine)	(EX SPIRITU Patris Dei et virtute)	NATUM (carnem factum et ex ea natum)	EX VIRGINE MARIA	CRUCIFIXUM (passus)	sub Pontio Pilato
III. St. Cyprian, A.D. 250.						
IV. Novatian, A.D. 260.						
V. Marcellus, A.D. 341.		ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου	γεννηθέντα	καὶ Ἄβριας τῆς παρθένου		τὸν ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου
VI. Rufinus, A.D. 390. Aquileja.	QUI	de Spiritu Sancto	natus est	ex Maria Virgine		sub Pontio Pilato
VII. Rufinus, Rome, A.D. 390.	qui	de Spiritu Sancto	natus est	ex Maria Virgine		sub Pontio Pilato
VIII. St. Augustine, A.D. 400.	qui	de Spiritu Sancto also [per Sp. Sanct.]	natus est	ex Maria Virgine also [et]	passus	sub Pontio Pilato
IX. St. Nicetas, A.D. 450.	qui	ex Spiritu Sancto	natus est	et Virgine Maria	passus	sub Pontio Pilato
X. Eusebius Gallus, A.D. 550(?).	qui CONCEPTUS EST	de Spiritu Sancto	natus est	ex Maria Virgine		
XI. Sacramentarium Gallicanum, A.D. 650.	qui conceptus est	de Spiritu Sancto	natus est	ex Maria Virgine	passus	sub Pontio Pilato

he took it to mean that Christ "descended into the grave." (The Greek form has *hadēs*, which can mean just "grave," not *geenna*, "hell, place of punishment.") We should also note that the phrase only appears in one of the two

creeds of the Arians, people who denied the full deity of Christ, holding that the Son was created by the Father (see Schaff, *Creeds*, 2. 46 n. 2). (Schaff does not give documentation for this reference to Arian creeds.) It should be noted that throughout his *Creeds of Christendom* Schaff has several editorial comments defending an actual descent of Christ into hell after his death on the cross. Thus for example he says that "Rufinus himself, however, misunderstood it by making it to mean the same as *buried*" (1. 21 n. 6). Thus Schaff assumes that to understand the phrase to mean "he descended into the grave" is to misunderstand it (see also 2. 46 n. 2; 3. 321 n. 1).

Art. IV.			Art. V.				Art. VI.	
Crucifixus	Mortuus	Et Sepultus	Descendit ad Inferna	Tertia die	Resurrexit	A mortuis	Ascendit ad coelos	Sedet ad dexteram
Was Crucified	Dead	And Buried	He descended into Hell	The third Day	He rose again	From the Dead	He ascended into Heaven	And sitteth at the right hand
					καὶ τὴν ἑγερσίν (et resurgens)	ἐκ νεκρῶν	εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς ἀνέλθων (et in claritate receptus)	
	(MORTUUS)	(ET SEPULTUM secundum Scripturas)		TERTIA DIE	resuscitatum (a Patre) (resurrexisset)	E MORTUIS	receptus in coelis (in coelos resumptus) (in coelos ereptus)	SEDENTEM nunc AD DEXTERAM
σταυρωθέντα		καὶ ταφέντα		καὶ τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ	ἀναστάντα	ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν	ἀναβάντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς	καὶ καθημένον ἐν δεξιᾷ
crucifixus		et sepultus	DESCENDIT in INFERNAM	tertia die	RESURREXIT	A mortuis	ASCENDIT in COELOS	SEDET ad dexteram
crucifixus		et sepultus		tertia die	resurrexit	a mortuis	ascendit in coelos	sedet ad dexteram
crucifixus		et sepultus		tertio die	resurrexit	a mortuis	ascendit in coelos	sedet ad dexteram
				tertio die	resurrexit	vivus a mortuis	ascendit in coelos	sedet ad dexteram
	mortuus	et sepultus		tertia die	resurrexit	a mortuis	ascendit AD coelos	sedet ad dexteram
crucifixus	mortuus	et sepultus	Descendit AD Inferna	tertia die	resurrexit	a mortuis	ascendit ad coelos	sedet ad dexteram

versions of the Creed that we have from Rufinus. It was not in the Roman form of the Creed that he preserved.

But this means that until A.D. 650 no version of the Creed included this phrase with the intention of saying that Christ "descended into hell." The only version to include the phrase before 650 gives it a different meaning. At this point one wonders if the term "apostolic" can in any sense be applied to this phrase or if it really has rightful place in a creed whose title claims for itself descent from the earliest apostles of Christ.

This evidence of the historical development of the phrase also raises the possibility that when it first began to be more commonly used it may have been in other versions (now lost to us) that did not have the expression

“and buried.” Then it would probably have meant to others just what it meant to Rufinus: “descended into the grave.” But later when the phrase was incorporated into different versions of the Creed that already had the phrase “and buried,” some other explanation had to be given to it.

It was this mistake of inserting the phrase after the words “and buried”—apparently done by someone around A.D. 650—that led to all sorts of attempts to explain “descended into hell” in some way that did not contradict the rest of Scripture.

Some have taken it to mean that Christ suffered the pains of hell while on the cross. Calvin, for example, says that “Christ’s descent into hell” refers to the fact that he not only died a bodily death but that “it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God’s vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 44, asks:

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

Answer: That in my greatest temptations 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.<sup>4</sup>

But is this a satisfactory explanation of the phrase “He descended into hell”? While it is true that Christ suffered the outpouring of God’s wrath on the cross, this explanation does not really fit the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed. “Descended” hardly represents this idea, and the placement of the phrase after “was crucified, dead, and buried” makes this artificial and unconvincing as an interpretation.

Others have understood it to mean that Christ continued in the “state of death” until his resurrection. The *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 50, says:

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.*

Of course it is also true that Christ continued in the state of death until the third day, but once again it is strained and unpersuasive as an explanation for “He descended into hell” in the Creed. The placement of the phrase would then give the awkward sense: “He was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended to being dead.” This interpretation is not an explanation of what the words first meant in this sequence but is rather an inaccurate attempt to salvage some theologically acceptable sense out of the words.

Moreover, the English word “hell” has no such sense as simply “being dead” (though *hadēs* can mean this), so this becomes a doubly artificial explanation for English-speaking people.

<sup>3</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1. 515 (2.16.10).

<sup>4</sup> Schaff, *Creeds*, 3. 321 (italics his).

Finally, some have argued that the phrase means just what it appears to mean on first reading: That Christ actually did descend into hell after his death on the cross. It is easy to understand the Apostles' Creed to mean just this (indeed, that is certainly the natural sense). But then another question arises: Can this idea be supported from Scripture?

## II. POSSIBLE BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR A DESCENT INTO HELL

Support for the idea that Christ descended into hell has been found primarily in five passages: Acts 2:27; Rom 10:6-7; Eph 4:8-9; 1 Pet 3:18-20; 1 Pet 4:6. (A few other passages have been appealed to, but less convincingly.)<sup>5</sup> On closer inspection, do any of those passages clearly establish this teaching?

1. *Acts 2:27*. This is part of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, where he is quoting Ps 16:10. In the KJV the verse reads: "Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption."

Does this mean that Christ was in hell after he died? Not necessarily, because another sense is certainly possible for these verses. The word "hell" here represents a NT Greek term (*hadēs*) and an OT Hebrew term (*šē'ōl*), both of which can mean simply "the grave" or "death" (the state of being dead). Thus the NIV translates Acts 2:27: "Because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." This sense is preferable because the context emphasizes the fact that Christ's body rose from the grave as opposed to David's body, which remained in the grave. The reasoning is: "My body also will live in hope (v. 26), because you will not abandon me to the grave" (v. 27). Peter is using David's psalm to show that Christ's body did not decay. He is therefore unlike David, who "died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day" (v. 29).

Therefore this passage about Christ's resurrection from the grave does not give persuasive support for the idea that Christ descended into hell.

2. *Rom 10:6-7*. These verses contain two rhetorical questions, again OT quotations (from Deut 30:13): "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the deep?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." But this passage hardly teaches that Christ descended into hell. The point of the passage is that Paul is telling people not to ask these questions, because Christ is not far away, he is near, and faith in him is as near as confessing with our mouth and believing in our heart (v. 9). These prohibited questions are questions of unbelief, not assertions of what Scripture teaches.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Matt 12:40, which says that Christ will be three days and nights "in the heart of the earth," simply refers to the fact that he was in the grave between his death and resurrection (cf. LXX Ps 45[46]:2 with Jonah 2:3).

Some may object, however, that Paul could not have anticipated these questions as possible thoughts of his readers unless it was widely known that Christ did in fact descend "into the deep." This may in fact be true, but even in that case Scripture would not be saying or implying that Christ went into "hell" in the sense of a place of punishment for the dead (which would ordinarily be expressed by *geenna*) but rather implies here that he went into "the deep" (*abyssos*), a term that often is used in the LXX to refer to the depths of the ocean (Gen 1:2; 7:11; 8:2; Deut 8:7; Ps 106[107]:26) but can also apparently just refer to the realm of the dead (Ps 70[71]:20).<sup>6</sup>

Paul here uses the word "deep" (*abyssos*) as a contrast to "heaven" in order to give the sense of a place that is unreachable, inaccessible to human beings. The contrast is not "Who shall go to find Christ in a place of great blessing (heaven) or a place of great punishment (hell)?" but rather "Who shall go to find Christ in a place that is inaccessibly high (heaven) or in a place that is inaccessibly low (the deep, or the realm of death)?" No clear affirmation or denial of a "descent into hell" can be found in this passage.

3. *Eph 4:8-9*. Here Paul writes: "In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?" (RSV).

Does this mean that Christ "descended" to hell? It is at first unclear what is meant by "the lower parts of the earth," but another translation seems to give the best sense: "What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?" (NIV). Here the NIV takes "descended" to refer to Christ's coming to earth as a baby (the incarnation). The last four words are an acceptable understanding of the Greek text, taking the phrase "lower regions of the earth" to mean "lower regions that are the earth" (genitive of apposition). An English example is "the city of Chicago," by which we mean "the city that is Chicago."

This NIV rendering is again preferable in this context because Paul is saying that the Christ who went up to heaven (in his ascension) is the same one who earlier came down from heaven (v. 10). That "descent" from heaven occurred when Christ came to be born as a man. So the verse speaks of the incarnation, not of a descent into hell.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *1 Clement 28:3* uses *abyssos* instead of LXX *hadēs* to translate Ps 139:8: "If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there." In the NT the term is used only in Luke 8:31, Rom 10:7, and seven times in Revelation (there it refers to the "bottomless pit"). Thus although the term can refer to the abode of condemned demons (as in Revelation) this is not its common sense in the LXX or a necessary sense in its NT usage. The primary force of the term is a place that is deep, unfathomable to human beings, ordinarily unable to be reached by them. (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1979], 2. 525, notes that *abyssos* is the ordinary LXX translation for Hebrew *têhôm* and that *têhôm* is used in the Mishna [*Pesah* 7:7; *Nazir* 9:2] to refer to a grave that had been unknown.)

<sup>7</sup> Referring to Eph 4:9, H. Bietenhard says, "In modern exposition the reference of this passage to the *descensus ad inferos* ('he descended into hell' in the Apostles' Creed) is almost without exception rejected" (*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 2. 210).

4. *1 Pet 3:18-20*. For many people this is the most puzzling passage on this entire subject. Peter tells us that Christ was "put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark" (RSV).

Some have taken "he went and preached to the spirits in prison" to mean that Christ went into hell and preached to the spirits who were there, either proclaiming the gospel and offering a second chance to repent or just proclaiming that he had triumphed over them and that they were eternally condemned.

But these interpretations fail to explain adequately either the passage itself or its setting in this context. Peter does not say that Christ preached to spirits generally but only to those "who formerly did not obey . . . during the building of the ark." Such a limited audience—those who disobeyed during the building of the ark—would be a strange group for Christ to travel to hell and preach to. If Christ proclaimed his triumph, why only to these sinners and not to all? And if he offered a second chance for salvation, why only to these sinners and not to all? Even more difficult for this view is the fact that Scripture elsewhere indicates that there is no chance for repentance after death (Luke 16:26; Heb 10:27).

Moreover the context of 1 Peter 3 makes a "preaching in hell" unlikely. Peter is encouraging his readers to witness boldly to the hostile unbelievers around them. He just finished telling them to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you" (1 Pet 3:15). This evangelistic context would lose its urgency if Peter were teaching a second chance for salvation after death. And it would not fit at all with a "preaching" of condemnation.

In order to give a better explanation for these difficulties, several commentators have proposed taking "spirits in prison" to mean demonic spirits, the spirits of fallen angels, and have said that Christ proclaimed condemnation to these demons. This (it is claimed) would comfort Peter's readers by showing them that the demonic forces oppressing them would also be defeated by Christ.

But Peter's readers would have to go through an incredibly complicated reasoning process to draw this conclusion when Peter does not explicitly say it. They would have to reason from (1) some demons who sinned long ago were condemned, to (2) other demons are now inciting your human persecutors, to (3) those demons will likewise be condemned some day, to (4) therefore your persecutors will finally be judged as well, to (5) therefore do not fear your persecutors.

Those who hold this "preaching to fallen angels" view must assume that Peter's readers would "read between the lines" and conclude all this from the simple statement that Christ "preached to the spirits in prison who formerly disobeyed." But does it not seem farfetched to say that Peter knew his readers would read all this into the text?

Moreover, Peter emphasizes hostile people, not demons, in the context (vv. 14, 16). And where would Peter's readers get the idea that angels sinned "during the building of the ark"? There is nothing of that in the

Genesis story about the building of the ark. And (in spite of what some have claimed) if we look at all the traditions of Jewish interpretation of the flood story, we find no mention of angels sinning specifically "during the building of the ark."<sup>8</sup> Therefore the view that Peter is speaking of Christ's proclamation of judgment to fallen angels is really not persuasive either.

Another explanation has been that Christ, after his death, went and proclaimed release to OT believers who had been unable to enter heaven until the completion of Christ's redemptive work.

But again we may question whether this view adequately accounts for what the text actually says. It does not say that Christ preached to those who were believers or faithful to God but to those "who formerly did not obey." The emphasis is on their disobedience. Moreover Peter does not specify OT believers generally but only those who were disobedient "in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark" (v. 20).

Finally, Scripture gives us no clear evidence to make us think that full access to the blessings of being in God's presence in heaven were withheld from OT believers when they died. Indeed, several passages suggest that believers who died before Christ's death did enter into the presence of God at once because their sins were forgiven by trusting in the Messiah who was to come (Gen 5:24; 2 Sam 12:23; Pss 16:11; 17:15; 23:6; Eccl 12:7; Matt 22:31-32; Luke 16:22; Rom 4:1-8; Heb 11:5).

The most satisfactory explanation for 1 Pet 3:19-20 seems rather to be one proposed (but not really defended) long ago by Augustine: The verse does not refer to something Christ did between his death and resurrection but something he did "in the spiritual realm of existence" (or "through the Spirit") at the time of Noah. When Noah was building the ark, Christ "in spirit" was preaching through Noah to the hostile unbelievers around him.<sup>9</sup>

This view gains support from two other things Peter said. In 1 Pet 1:11 he says that the "spirit of Christ" was speaking in the OT prophets. This suggests that Peter would readily have thought that the "spirit of Christ" was speaking through Noah as well.

Then in 2 Pet 2:5 he calls Noah a "preacher of righteousness." He uses the noun *kēryx*, which comes from the same root as the verb "preached" (*ekēryxen*) in 1 Pet 3:19. So it seems likely that when Christ "preached to the spirits in prison" it was preaching that Noah did as Christ preached through him.

These people to whom Christ preached through Noah were unbelievers on the earth at the time of Noah, but Peter calls them "spirits in prison"

<sup>8</sup> For an extensive discussion of Jewish interpretations of the sin of the "sons of God" in Gen 6:2, 4 and of the identity of those who sinned while the ark was being built see "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature," in W. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Leicester/Grand Rapids: InterVarsity/Eerdmans, 1988) 203-239. (This appendix has a lengthy discussion of 1 Pet 3:19-20 that can only be briefly summarized here.)

<sup>9</sup> This section is a brief summary of a more extensive discussion of this passage in Grudem, *First Epistle* 157-162, 203-239.



because they are now in the prison of hell even though they were not just “spirits” but persons on earth when the preaching was done. (The NASB says that Christ preached “to the spirits *now* in prison.”)

We can speak the same way in English: “I knew President Bush when he was a college student” is an appropriate statement, even though he was not president when he was in college. The sentence means: “I knew the man who is now President Bush when he was still a student in college.” So “Christ preached to the spirits in prison” means “Christ preached to people who are now spirits in prison when they were still persons on earth.”<sup>10</sup>

This interpretation is very appropriate to the larger context of 3:13-22. The parallel between the situation of Noah and the situation of Peter’s readers is clear at several points:

<i>Noah</i>	<i>Peter’s readers</i>
righteous minority surrounded by hostile unbelievers God’s judgment was near	righteous minority surrounded by hostile unbelievers God’s judgment may come soon (1 Pet 4:5, 7; 2 Pet 3:10)
Noah witnessed boldly (by Christ’s power)	they should witness boldly (1 Pet 3:14, 16-17; by Christ’s power: 3:15; 4:11)
Noah was finally saved	they will finally be saved (3:13-14; 4:13; 5:10)

Such an understanding of the text seems to be by far the most likely solution to a puzzling passage. Yet this means that our fourth possible support for a descent of Christ into hell also turns up negative: The text speaks rather of something that Christ did on earth at the time of Noah.

5. *1 Pet 4:6*: “For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God.”

Does this verse mean that Christ went to hell and preached the gospel to those who had died? If so, it would be the only passage in the Bible that taught a “second chance” for salvation after death and would seem to contradict passages such as Luke 16:19-31 and Heb 9:27, which seem to deny this possibility. Moreover, the passage does not explicitly say that Christ preached to people after they had died and could rather mean that the gospel in general was preached (it does not even say that “Christ” preached in this verse) to people who are now dead, but that it was preached to them while they were still alive on earth.

In fact, that is a common explanation and seems to fit this verse much better. We see support for this in the second word of the verse, “this,” which

<sup>10</sup> My student Tet-Lim Yee has called my attention to another very similar expression elsewhere in Scripture: Naomi speaks of how kindly Ruth and Orpah “have dealt with the dead” (Ruth 1:8), referring to their treatment of their husbands while the husbands were still alive.

refers back to the final judgment mentioned at the end of v. 5. Peter is saying that it was because of the final judgment that the gospel was preached to the dead.

This would comfort the readers concerning their Christian friends who had already died. They may have wondered: "Was the gospel any benefit for them, since it did not save them from death?" Peter answers that the reason the gospel was preached to those who had died was not to save them from physical death (they were "judged in the flesh like men") but to save them from final judgment (they will "live in the spirit like God"). Therefore the fact that they had died did not indicate that the gospel had failed in its purpose, for they would surely live forever in the spiritual realm.

Thus "the dead" are people who have died and are now dead, even though they were alive and on earth when the gospel was preached to them. (The NIV translates "For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead," and NASB has "those who are dead.") This avoids the doctrinal problem of a "second chance" for salvation after death and fits both the wording and the context of the verse. But this means that this final passage, when viewed in its context, turns out to provide no convincing support for the doctrine of a descent of Christ into hell.

It seems that people on all sides of the question of whether Christ actually descended into hell should be able to agree at least that the idea of Christ's "descent into hell" is by no means taught clearly or explicitly in any passage of Scripture, and for many others it will seem appropriate to conclude that this idea is not taught in Scripture at all.

### III. BIBLICAL OPPOSITION TO A DESCENT INTO HELL

In addition to the fact that there seems to be little if any Biblical support for a descent of Christ into hell, there are some NT texts that apparently deny the possibility of Christ's going to hell after his death.

Jesus' words to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), imply that after Jesus died his soul (or spirit) went immediately to the presence of the Father in heaven, even though his body remained on earth and was buried. Some people deny this by arguing that paradise is a place distinct from heaven, but in both of the other NT uses the word clearly means "heaven": In 2 Cor 12:4 it is the place to which Paul was caught up in his revelation of heaven, and in Rev 2:7 it is the place where we find the tree of life, which is clearly heaven in 22:2, 14.<sup>11</sup>

In addition the cry of Jesus, "It is finished" (John 19:30), strongly suggests that Christ's suffering was finished at that moment, and so was

<sup>11</sup> Further support for this idea is found in the fact that though the word *paradeisos*, "paradise," could simply mean "pleasant garden" (especially used in the LXX of the Garden of Eden), it also frequently meant "heaven" or "a place of blessedness in the presence of God" (cf. see Isa 51:3; Ezek 28:13; 31:8-9; *T. Levi* 18:10; *1 Enoch* 20:7; 32:3; *Sib. Or.* 3:48). This was increasingly the sense of the term in intertestamental Jewish literature (for several more references see J. Jeremias, "*paradeisos*," *TDNT*, 5. 765-773, esp. p. 767 nn. 16-23).

his alienation from the Father because of bearing our sin. This implies that he would not descend into hell but would go at once into the Father's presence.

Finally, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46) also suggests that Christ expected (correctly) the immediate end of his suffering and estrangement and the welcoming of his spirit into heaven by God the Father (note Stephen's similar cry in Acts 7:59).

These texts indicate, then, that Christ in his death experienced the same things believers in this present age experience when they die: His dead body remained on earth and was buried (as ours will be), but his spirit (or soul) passed immediately into the presence of God in heaven (as ours will). Then on the first Easter morning Christ's spirit was reunited with his body and he was raised from the dead, just as Christians who have died will (when Christ returns) be reunited to their bodies and raised in their perfect resurrection bodies to new life.

That fact has pastoral encouragement for us. We need not fear death, not only because eternal life lies on the other side but also because we know that our Savior himself has gone through exactly the same experience we will go through. He has prepared (even sanctified) the way, and we follow him with confidence each step of the way. This is much greater comfort regarding death than could ever be given by any view of a descent into hell.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Does the phrase "He descended into hell" deserve to be retained in the Apostles' Creed alongside the great doctrines of the faith on which all can agree? The single argument in its favor seems to be the fact that it has been around so long. But an old mistake is still a mistake, and as long as it has been around there has been confusion and disagreement over its meaning.

On the other side there are several strong reasons against keeping the phrase. It has no clear warrant from Scripture and indeed seems to be contradicted by some passages in Scripture. It has no claim to being apostolic and no warrant (in the sense of a "descent into hell") from the first six centuries of the Church. It was not in the earliest versions of the Creed and later was included in the Creed because of an apparent misunderstanding about its meaning. Unlike every other phrase in the Creed, it represents not some major doctrine on which all Christians agree but rather a statement about which most Christians seem to disagree.<sup>12</sup> It is at best confusing and in most cases misleading for modern Christians. My own judgment is that there would be all gain and no loss if it were dropped from the Creed once for all.

<sup>12</sup> In a recent article R. E. Otto adopts a similar recommendation: "To include such a mysterious article in the creed, which is supposed to be a summary of the basic and vital tenets of the faith, seems very unwise" ("*Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Doctrinal Conundrum*," *WTJ* 52 [1990] 150).