

## HE DID DESCEND TO HELL: IN DEFENSE OF THE APOSTLES' CREED

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I can respect Wayne Grudem's decision to omit "he descended into hell" from his recitation of the Apostles' Creed within the congregation,<sup>1</sup> but I sincerely doubt that he will succeed in winning a sufficient number of adherents to his cause to effect the change. At least this is my hope. More importantly, there are good Biblical, historical and theological reasons for retaining the phrase.

The descent into hell is not the only creedal phrase whose history is cloudy and whose interpretation lacks agreement. Among Protestants "the communion of saints" is taken as an explanation of the Church, while it is used among some Roman Catholics to demonstrate the close association of heavenly saints with the Church on earth. Linguistically both interpretations are highly suspect. Adolph von Harnack saw it as a reference to baptism and the Lord's supper, but it would be hard to point to any place in the Church's history when this view was held. More likely it is a reference to the Lord's supper—that is, the communion of the "holy things," Christ's body and blood. Each interpretation reflects a particular period of Church history, and all the interpretations may in a certain sense complement each other. In the Nicene Creed there is the problem of the *filioque*: "who [the Holy Spirit] proceeds from the Father *and the Son*." The Eastern Orthodox churches in omitting it have history and conciliar authority on their side, but the Western churches may carry the theological weight. To accommodate ecumenical relationships with the Eastern Orthodox churches the Anglican churches are seriously considering eliminating the *filioque*, but in so doing they would pass judgment on their own four-hundred-year Reformation history, a price too high for some to pay.<sup>2</sup> Grudem is asking us to pay a similar price in discarding the descent-into-hell clause. A moment of reflection may be in order.

There are several good reasons to retain the creeds in their present form beyond the simple fact of their antiquity, though this one too cannot be ignored. We are not the first to recognize problems in the history and interpretation of troublesome creedal phrases, and we may have to humbly admit that not all the historical evidence leading to their inclusion is available to

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<sup>1</sup> W. Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *JETS* 34/1 (1991) 103-113.

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Bauerschmidt, "Filioque' and the Episcopal Church," *ATR* 73 (1991) 7-25.

us. Yet this cannot excuse us from squarely facing the available evidence. There is also the question of catholicity, since the creeds serve as signs of ecumenical and catholic unity among Christians who otherwise have fundamental differences with each other. This statement is made with the complete awareness that there are differences in wording and interpretation. Lutherans substitute "Christian" for "catholic" in speaking about the Church, and the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox interpretations of "catholic" differ from each other as they do from that of Protestants. Still the creed provides a fundamental unity for a rent Christendom, which would be further fractured by an alteration to the creed.

Making a substantive change puts us in the position of judge over the past, a position only reluctantly to be taken. The Reformation was not a wholesale rejection of the Church's past in the sense that discoveries had been made that no one in the prior 1500 years knew. It was a reaffirmation of the ancient faith, not the institution of a new one.

Traditional preference may finally decide church practice, but it can hardly be the only determinative factor. Creeds and confessions do not have an independent or autonomous life in the Church but derive their life and authority from the Scriptures with which they must remain in living encounter. The suggested omission of the descent clause deals not only with an ancient creed but, rightfully understood, with the most fundamental document in Christendom apart from the Scriptures themselves. The importance and antiquity of the Apostles' Creed require hesitancy in any proposed change. After all, it involves more than updating the archaic language of a hymn or a prayer or setting one scholarly opinion against another. The proposed alteration has to do with what has been considered an article of the faith for centuries, and differing historical interpretations do not change this.

Concerns about the descent-into-hell phrase are not new even in the modern era. One surfaced in the Lutheran church when "he went to the dead" was substituted in the *Worship Supplement* (a companion volume to *The Lutheran Hymnal* of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) for "he descended into hell."<sup>3</sup> The *Lutheran Worship*, its successor, sticks to the traditional "he descended into hell." For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "he descended to the dead" is relegated to a footnote in their *Lutheran Book of Worship* with "he descended into hell" retained in the common liturgical text.<sup>4</sup> This raises the question of whether hymnals and prayer books are the place to pursue scholarly disagreements with footnotes. Among some Lutherans the reason for excluding the descent clause is complex. The Braaten-Jensen *Christian Dogmatics* sees the descent into hell as a later historical development of Christ's going to the dead. Its

<sup>3</sup> A personal anecdote: When the *Worship Supplement* was introduced into the chapel of Concordia Theological Seminary, then in Springfield, Illinois, a number of students would participate in the Apostles' Creed only at that point where "he went to the dead" was recited. In unison they shouted out one word: "hell." It was effective. The point was made.

<sup>4</sup> *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 85.

theological value in the creed lies in explaining his suffering, a position akin to Calvin's, and in providing a symbol of salvation to those who do not hear the gospel.<sup>5</sup> The latter is merely universalism.

A full discussion on the role of creeds cannot be presented here, but at least they should be seen as derived from the Scriptures. The ancient creeds, especially the Apostles' Creed, should not be seen as inimical to the Scriptures but as preserving their most fundamental teachings, particularly the Christology that constitutes the gospel. In this scheme the Scriptures themselves are regarded not only as the Word of God but also as expressions of the faith by the writers themselves—that is, the Scriptures are themselves confessions. In addition the Scriptures revolve around and preserve the earliest confessions—for example, that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord, and the Son of the living God. From these phrases, preserved in the Scriptures, our Apostles' Creed unfolded, and they are there preserved and made accessible to worshiping Christians. In speaking of creeds—even the Apostles' Creed—we are not strictly dealing with a post-apostolic phenomenon. Juxtaposing a divinely-given Bible and man-made creeds may be overdrawn. As confessions of faith precede Scripture and are preserved there, so Scripture became the source of later creeds.

Rather than limiting the formation of the Apostles' Creed to the years after A.D. 200,<sup>6</sup> we should see it as coming into existence at the same time as did the apostolic Scriptures. 1 Peter 3:18–22 has an outline strongly resembling our creed: Christ's death and glorification; his preaching in the prison (the controverted section on whether or not it refers to the descent into hell); his resurrection; and his ascension. Colossians 2:9–15 reveals a similar outline. Like 1 Pet 3:18–22 it contains a section taken to explain the descent into hell: "He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them" (v. 15).

Unlike the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition, the Apostles' Creed never had official conciliar approval. But an earlier form of it provided the outline for the Nicene Creed and was taken up into the Athanasian Creed, which also contains a descent clause: "[Christ] suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead." Scholars believe that this creed originated in the fifth century and was in wide liturgical use by the time of Charlemagne in 800. The Reformation churches who affirmed these creeds have a stake in the retention and interpretation of the descent clause. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was patterned after the Creed of Jerusalem, which, like the Apostles' Creed at all points of its earliest development, was a baptismal creed—that is, it was recited at the time of one's baptism and thereafter

<sup>5</sup> *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 1.548. In a way the issue is more involved for Lutherans than for evangelicals simply because the Apostles' Creed is the first among those ancient (ecumenical) creeds and Reformation confessions to which pastors and churches are bound. Creeds are part of the canonical foundations for Lutherans, and thus challenges for them are necessarily problematic.

<sup>6</sup> Grudem, "He Did Not Descend" 103.

as a reminder.<sup>7</sup> Though our form of the Apostles' Creed is more recent than the Nicene Creed, its first forms are much earlier and indeed provided the scaffolding for what would emerge first at Nicea (A.D. 325) and later be amplified at Constantinople (A.D. 381). These councils were not starting from scratch but expanding what was already part of their liturgical heritage in connection with baptism. While the Nicene Creed only came into the Church's liturgy many centuries later, forerunners of the Apostles' Creed (which in nearly all cases are indistinguishable from it) were regularly used for instructing the catechumens and at baptism.<sup>8</sup> Among the Church's statements and creeds it now receives the highest honor. Since it was incorporated in conciliar statements of the Church, it has in a sense an even higher authority. Of course the decisions of councils cannot be conclusive for Protestants, but neither can they be ignored.<sup>9</sup> In the Lutheran tradition the Apostles' Creed is not only repeated in the Athanasian Creed but is also the basis for the Small and Large Catechisms of Luther.

The earliest known forerunner to the Apostles' Creed was the *Romanum*, used, as the name implies, in Rome as early as A.D. 150.<sup>10</sup> A comparison with the NT indicates its roots there. It is so similar to the citations from Col 2:9-15; 1 Pet 3:18-22 that we could conclude that the apostolic Church was no stranger to creeds closely resembling our Apostles' Creed. The connection between the *Romanum* and 1 Peter can be made even more conclusive if it is agreed that 1 Peter was written from Rome, as the document itself implies (1 Pet 5:13), and that its author was martyred there, as held by the earliest post-apostolic sources. If it can be demonstrated that 1 Pet 3:18-22 is originally a credal formula in use in Rome, we would have evidence for the early inclusion of the descent into hell in a creed of apostolic times.<sup>11</sup> This is only reinforced by Colossians.

We may have to ask why the reference to the preaching in prison (1 Pet 3:19-20) fell into disuse before being reinstated to a position it previously enjoyed, albeit in the altered and shortened version of "he descended into hell." The Apostles' Creed and its forerunners are highly abridged statements of the Christian faith and avoid elaborations. (This may be a good reason for not seeing the "communion of saints" as an explanation of the Church.<sup>12</sup>) Two possible reasons may be given for the omission of the prison preaching of Jesus from the earliest post-apostolic creeds: (1) The reference to Jesus going in the spirits to preach to the Noahic population may have been Peter's own homiletic addition to a creed already familiar to the

<sup>7</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: David McKay, 1960) 30.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 254.

<sup>9</sup> M. Luther, "On Councils and the Church," *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 41.123.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly, *Creeds* 127.

<sup>11</sup> V. H. Neufeld, *Earliest Christian Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 4, 7, 137-139, 144-145. Cf. also Kelly, *Creeds* 18.

<sup>12</sup> W. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1966) 9-11.

Roman Christians. (2) If it were part of a creed, it fell into disuse because of its length or complexity. The creed expresses matters in short, pithy phrases without explanations or descriptions.

In any event, according to 1 Pet 3:18–22 Jesus did go somewhere after his burial and before his resurrection appearances. The sequence in the Apostles' Creed (dead, buried, descended into hell, rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven) shows a remarkable similarity to that of 1 Pet 3:18–22 (death [humiliation], alive in the spirit [glorification], resurrection, gone into heaven). It is hard to escape the conclusion that 1 Pet 3:18–22 is built around an established creed.

The earliest creeds preserved in the NT asserted that God was the creating Father and that Jesus was the Lord. They separated the earthly life of Jesus from his glorification (1 Cor 8:6; 15:3–4), very much in the style of our Apostles' Creed. This pattern originated in the passion predictions of Jesus and was endorsed by the events themselves.<sup>13</sup> The creeds sprang as much from events in Christ's life as they did from his and the apostles' proclamation. Not surprisingly, creeds preserved in the NT lack acknowledgments of the Spirit and his work, though the faith was consciously confessed at his instigation (1 Cor 12:3). Creeds should not be seen as antithetical or alien to the Scriptures but as their center and content from which the life of the Church is dependent. Something of significance did happen between the burial and resurrection appearances of Jesus, which the Church eventually wanted to preserve in the phrase "he descended into hell." The Colossians and the 1 Peter citations allude to this, albeit in different ways. The retention of ancient creedal formulas in these citations is only reinforced by their references to baptism, the time at which the creed was recited by the baptized (cf. esp. Col 2:12). Considering that both Colossians and 1 Peter in using creedal language bring together baptism and the supernatural event taken as references to the descent into hell, we cannot avoid the suggestion that our Apostles' Creed with the descent clause is maintaining a fundamental Biblical motif.

Problematic with the descent clause are its weak attestation in the post-apostolic Church and, since then, its multiple interpretations. The traditional Roman Catholic view, derived from the medieval period, was that Christ released the OT patriarchs from the *limbus patrum*. This concept was dependent on the view that Christ's redemption could not have full effect until the historical act of Calvary had been completed, a modified dispensationalist view of the atonement. Calvin and the Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms understood the descent clause as a reference to Christ's sufferings.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned, recently popular in Lutheran circles is the opinion that the descent phrase only reaffirmed Christ's death, providing reason for replacing "he descended into hell" with "he descended to the dead." The Latin text of the creed hardly allows for this English rendering, since the Latin word *morior* is used in "was

<sup>13</sup> Neufeld, *Earliest* 108–110.

<sup>14</sup> Grudem, "He Did Not Descend" 112–113.

crucified, *died* and was buried," "he rose from the *dead*," and "he will come to judge the living and the *dead*." *Descendit ad inferna* makes no reference to death. Anyone acquainted with Latin would catch this right away and point to the confusion caused by using the one English word "die" to translate two different Latin words. Other possible interpretations see the descent as Christ's triumph and the offering of a second chance to the damned, a form of universalism.<sup>15</sup> The latter view is offered by the contemporary Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg.<sup>16</sup> All this is complicated further by predictable misunderstandings of the untutored person in the pew. When confronting the phrase, he may properly ask why a nice man like Jesus had to go to hell. What else could he think? Such a question is impossible for those theologians who do not believe in hell. Examining the idea that the descent into hell means God's punitive judgment on Christ might be the first step in unraveling the confusing and contradictory responses to what it actually means to believe that Christ "descended into hell." Luther's understanding of a triumphal descent into hell should be considered.

Calvin from his concept of the sovereignty of God tended to understand the atonement almost exclusively in terms of punitive judgment: "It was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath, and to satisfy his just judgment."<sup>17</sup> The descent-into-hell phrase for Calvin was an opportunity to reaffirm his concept of punitive judgment as central for understanding Christ's death. As Grudem points out, interpreting the descent into hell as an explanation of Christ's death contravenes the word order, which places the descent after the burial and not immediately after the death. Support for retaining the descent clause can be found by reviewing the order of events from Christ's death to his session at the right hand.

The events ordered in this way—that (1) Christ dies, (2) his soul experiences heaven's bliss, (3) his body is buried, (4) on Easter his body and soul reunite for the resurrection—do not allow for Calvin's interpretation of the descent as an additional reference to Christ's suffering. Burial and not descent follows Christ's death. Only if the descent explains Christ's suffering is there reason for its removal to preserve a logical order. The triumphal interpretation of Christ's descent does not contravene the order and provides an appropriate transition between "he was buried" and "he rose again from the dead." Before the resurrection appearances to his followers, he proclaims victory in hell over demonic forces.

The meaning of the word "hell" is not exhausted by understanding it as a place or condition of endless tortures or punitive divine judgments. It must also be seen as the place of God's triumph in Christ over Satan and evil. Sin is not fully comprehended by the concept of immortality but must also be seen in its organic connection with Satan and hell, previously the

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 109.

<sup>16</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968) 272–273.

<sup>17</sup> As quoted from Grudem, "He Did Not Descend" 106.

realm of his uncontested authority. This might be reason enough for understanding the last petition of the Lord's prayer as deliverance from "the evil one" (as opposed to "evil" in a general or impersonal sense). It is not simply a matter of the sovereign God exercising ultimate authority over Satan, sin and evil, but that through Christ's atonement he has banished them and established a rightful claim over them.

In 1549, three years after Luther's death, a superintendent (a type of bishop) offered the novel view that Christ descended to hell for further suffering required for the atonement. The *Formula of Concord* (IX; 1578), the last of the Lutheran Confessions, in condemning this relied on Luther's Torgau sermon of April 16 and 17, 1533.<sup>18</sup> In his explanation of the descent into hell, Luther argued not from passages brought up in the contemporary debate such as 1 Peter 3 but from the parable of the strong man who is conquered by an even stronger one (Matt 12:22-32; Mark 3:22-30; Luke 11:14-23). Luther or his followers never understood this pericope as exhausted by the specific act of the descent. Rather, the overcoming of a strong man by an even stronger one was descriptive of Christ's entire work on earth, culminating in his entering the realm of Satan—that is, hell—and taking from him all his power. It was not simply that Christ's soul left heaven to join his body in the resurrection but that he appeared in both body and soul in hell to announce victory prior to his resurrection appearances on earth. No place on the liturgical calendar is allowed for the commemoration of the descent into hell, but 1 Pet 3:17-22 with its reference to the prison preaching of Jesus is the appointed epistle for Easter eve or Holy Saturday. This would correspond with the moment of the descent as following his burial and preceding his resurrection. The triumphal theme shows up in such Easter hymns as "Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain," "The Strife is O'er," "Lo, Judah's Lion Wins the Strife," and particularly the second stanza of Luther's "Christ Lay in Death's Strong Bands." The confrontation between God and Satan on personal terms, which goes beyond good overcoming sin and evil, is essential to the Reformer's theology as evidenced in his "A Mighty Fortress." The old evil foe is to be dreaded, and it is possible for devils to fill the world even today. Through Christ the Christian does finally win.<sup>19</sup> Again, in his baptismal liturgies (1523 and 1526), Luther retained not only the renunciation

<sup>18</sup> D. P. Scaer, *Christology* (Fort Wayne: Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990) 83-88.

<sup>19</sup> With might of ours can naught be done,  
 Soon were our loss effected;  
 But for us fights the Valiant One,  
 Whom God Himself elected.  
 Ask ye, Who is this?  
 Jesus Christ it is,  
 Of Sabaoth Lord,  
 And there's none other God;  
 He holds the field forever.  
 (M. Luther, "A Mighty Fortress")

of Satan but also the exorcism. In his *Small Catechism* explanation of the second article he sees the Christian rescued not only from all sin and death but also from the power of the devil. Christ, who had conquered Satan, now rescued believers from him. Luther had taken over into his theology the conflict between God and Satan as a major theme from the Scriptures—for example, the fall, the temptation of Christ, his exorcisms, Paul's being buffeted by Satan, and so on. Thus it was a natural theological development for Luther to interpret the descent into hell as Christ's triumph over Satan, even without reference to Colossians 2 and 1 Peter 3. Luther's emphasis on the war between God and Satan was not foreign or unknown to the NT. The question is only whether this theme is the appropriate interpretation of the descent.<sup>20</sup>

Crucial in Luther's understanding is that Christ with both body and soul went to hell to destroy it for believers "and has redeemed them from the power of death, of the devil, and eternal damnation of hellish jaws."<sup>21</sup> He saw the descent as an event subsequent to the reuniting of body and soul. In other words it was the first step in Christ's glorification, followed by his appearance to his followers. Though Luther did not base his argumentation on 1 Pet 3:18–20, as did later Lutheran theologians, his view fits it nonetheless. Verse 18 distinguishes between Christ's death and glorification—that is, he was put to death and then made alive. This being made fully alive always involves restoration through complete resurrection (cf. John 5:21). In his glorified state he preached to the Noachic population, appeared on earth in resurrected form, ascended into heaven, and sat on God's right hand (1 Pet 3:21–22). It may be asked why no mention is made of all unbelievers not hearing Christ's proclamation. A comparison is made by Peter between the waters of baptism and the flood in their destructive powers. As baptism is seen in almost exclusively salvific terms (e.g. Acts 2:28) it is striking to see that here Peter compares it to the flood, which brought cosmic destruction. The water of the flood destroyed the sinful world, as the water of baptism destroys man's sinful nature now. Baptism like the flood involves cosmic destruction, but in another way. A specific reference only to those who were destroyed by that flood—that is, those who refused to be converted by Noah's preaching—naturally fits the sequence. Others in hell did not meet their doom by the cosmic deluge. There is hardly any suggestion that Noah's unbelieving hearers were kept in a special corner of hell, separated from demons and Satan himself, though this idea cannot be dismissed out of hand. The common belief of the Church is that the unbelieving damned and Satan with his angels all occupy the same space (Matt 25:41). Augustine's explanation that Christ

<sup>20</sup> Note should be made of the significant differences in Luther's and Calvin's understanding of hell in the creed. For Luther it is the place or occasion for the proclamation of Christ's victory. Calvin used it to emphasize the divine punitive judgment and wrath in Christ's suffering. This may suggest that in spite of certain basic similarities concerning wrath and the necessity of atonement the Reformers had fundamental differences here, a point that cannot be explored at this time.

<sup>21</sup> *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration IX.4.*



was preaching through Noah must assume that the prison refers to the earth. In the ancient world the prison was used not for correctional purposes but as a holding tank for judgment and execution (cf. the parable of the unforgiving steward in Matt 18:23–35). This will take place only on the day of judgment when a worse fate will afflict the damned in both body and soul.

The descent-into-hell doctrine preserves a double-sided view of Christ's glorification as not only involving our world but, equally important, the one beyond our ken and sight: the supernatural one, inhabited by angels and the souls of the dead. In that world sin had its origin, and there Christ's conquest first was proclaimed. 1 Peter 3:19 speaks of Christ's simply going into the prison and not of descending. Whether or not the creed's descent language is dependent on Rom 10:7, the descending language of going into hell is contrasted with the ascending language of going to the Father's right hand in the ascension. By Christ's descending into hell and ascending into heaven an immediately recognizable contrast is given. A modern worldview supposedly cannot tolerate a three-story universe of a heaven that is up, a hell that is down, and an earth in between. Lutheran theology has traditionally not been burdened with the understanding of God's right hand as a place, so it does not have to involve itself with the direction in which Jesus went in the descent and ascension. It is more a moral or ethical than a spatial contrast. The descent into hell, like other articles of the creeds, intends to bring together in one phrase larger theological realities. As the confession that Jesus is God's only Son refers to his preexistence and deity, a point made more explicit at Nicea, the descent doctrine brings together the entire confrontation between God and Satan, culminating in the Christ victorious appearing before Satan in hell. *Christus crucifixus* is *Christus victor*. While Luther did not hold to any idea of the *limbus patrum* from which Christ released the OT saints by his going into Hades, he did retain the idea of Christ's conquest in his interpretation of the descent clause. The crucifixion had rendered the nether-world impotent. Satan, death and hell were conquered not by an act of divine omnipotence but by Christ's atonement. The descent, the resurrection appearances, and the session at the right hand belong together as a unified proclamation of Christ's victory in the three different but related realms of hell, earth, and heaven. If we remove "he descended into hell," the first and perhaps even foundational level would be removed from the creed.

Luther's explanation of the Second Commandment—that God's help is to be sought in overcoming witchcraft—has been seen by some as a relic from an outmoded worldview. With the rise of Satanic cults nothing could be further from the truth. "He descended into hell" is no less needed or effective in proclaiming that Christ has conquered not only sin and the world but, more importantly, Satan. By eliminating the descent from the creed we lose the one reference to the victory of Christ and the defeat of God's major opponent. In following the Apostles' Creed we are following the Scriptures.