

# Christ's Descent into Hell

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[This paper was delivered on June 16, 1959, before the Michigan District Pastoral Conference in session at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, Benton Harbor, Michigan, June 16–18, 1959, and is being published at the request of the Conference.]

The work assigned to me is monumental in its scope and implications. The brethren who assigned it to me may have been aware of that. I must concede that I was not, not even remotely so in comparison with what could and ought to be presented in this area of Christian doctrine. Limited and restricted as my presentation will be, due to personal inability to soar to the required heights and the accompanying demands of a busy ministry—I do hope and pray that nonetheless my efforts will prove beneficial to those of you who shall have the fortitude to hear me through, stimulating you to new interest and study regarding this very vital subject!

My work is divided into three main parts:

- I. An examination of the most pertinent passages, being primarily I Peter 3:18–20 together with Ephesians 4:8–10<sup>\*</sup>; Colossians 2:14, 15; Psalm 68:18.
- II. What does the Christian Church mean when it confesses: HE DESCENDED INTO HELL? The Ancient Church before the Reformation; The Lutheran Symbols; The Reformed Church; The Roman Church.
- III. What is the importance of the *correct* understanding of Christ's Descent into Hell?

## I Peter 3:18–20

Christ also died once for transgressions (or ἕπαθεν instead of ἀπέθανεν as the Koine and the Vatican text would have it, changing the meaning not at all) the Righteous One for those who are unrighteous, in order that He might bring you (or *us*, depending upon which variant we prefer) to God. Who was put to death according to the flesh, but made alive according to the spirit; in which also He went to preach to the spirits in prison; who once upon a time were disobedient when the forbearance of God waited during the days of Noah while the ark was being made ready, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were rescued through water.

The apostle is addressing his First Epistle to Christians who were subject to great trials; who were living in the midst of a thoroughly evil generation; and who, because of their trials and because of constant exposure to the most insidious temptations, were inclined to give up their faith for the seeming advantages which the unbelievers about them enjoyed. He would, however, have the Christians triumph over their fleshly inclinations and preserve inviolate their precious heritage by remembering the tremendous purchase price of their redemption, the glory and privilege which was now theirs as children of God, the futility and evanescence of all earthly things, and the final, grand inheritance waiting for them in eternity.

Throughout this Epistle a note of triumph is discernible: of good over evil; of life over death; of exaltation over degradation—finding its source, of course, in Christ who suffered all things for us that He might assure to us conquest of all ills and sorrows inherent in and associated with sin and the concomitant power of the devil. Thus, in looking for a correct exegesis of any portion of Peter's First Epistle, we must be fully aware of the general content, trend, and aim of the entire work, lest we go astray by far-fetched, fantastic interpretations which cannot possibly be supported by the context specifically, nor by the truth of Scripture generally! That such aberrations have been widespread, and still are, in regard to this specific portion of Peter's writings, we shall soon see.

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\* It should be noted that the wording of this passage together with Psalm 68:18 does not necessarily compel the application to Christ's Descent into Hell. – Ed.

The apostle begins the third chapter of this Epistle with an extended exhortation to a life in the spirit: which overcomes the natural inclinations of the flesh; which is not in conformity with the spirit of the unbelievers surrounding the Christians, but sets them apart by their godly virtues; which resists being incited to retaliation when suffering evil—knowing full well that eventually the child of God will have its day of triumph, even as Christ his Lord did who suffered a while, only to be gloriously triumphant at last.

In verses 13–17 immediately preceding our text, the conformity of the Christian’s conduct with that of his Lord is emphasized and exhorted to. Thereupon, beginning with the causal conjunction ὅτι, the words of our passage are adduced in corroboration. The Christians ought to be willing to suffer because they are mindful of and committed to imitate their Master who also was perfectly willing to suffer and to die, though He was completely innocent of any wrongdoing. The inspired writer packs into one brief, powerful clause the whole wondrous, matchless story of our Lord’s redemptive work for a fallen world: Christ died (or suffered) once (just once, because that was sufficient and acceptable to the Father). —He suffered because of sin, of all the sin of all the world, for all time—the Righteous One for all, for the many unrighteous ones—in order that He might bring you (or us) to God.

We would dwell briefly on the beauty and the import of that expression: THAT HE MIGHT BRING YOU TO GOD. Peter here calls most forcefully to our attention what this world would be *without* the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and what Christ has done for the whole world by paying the price of our redemption. Such graphic, impressive ways of presenting the great truth of our reconciliation to God are not at all unusual for this Apostle! How quickly the familiar passage I Peter 2:25 comes to mind; or this one: 2:9, 10; and yet again: 1:23. We recall that it was this same Peter who, after healing the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, boldly testified to the rulers, elders, and scribes of Israel: for there is none other name given under heaven whereby we must be saved! (Acts 4:12). Christ brought us to God, us who were enemies of God; separated from God by our own inherited evil nature; who could never, never have come back to God by any possible will or act of ours; who would therefore have had to be separated from Him in all damned, agony-filled eternity—us He brought back, was our divine Mediator; blotted out the handwriting against us; made us true children once more instead of bastards; thereby assured to us all the treasures of God’s grace eternally! See what happened, Peter would say, because our Lord and Master was willing to suffer and die innocently, was willing to “take the rap” for all the guilty ones. No lasting harm came to Him on that account, though He endured temporary suffering and death. Only blessing, help, benefit, salvation for the whole sin-cursed world was the fruit of it!

Obviously, the deduction the inspired writer would have his readers make is not that they could produce blessings equal to those produced by Christ by imitating His willing, patient suffering. But he would have them remember that theirs must be a spirit in conformity with that of their Master; that they cannot shun and escape suffering (and, if necessary, death) and still be of His mind; that they should be proud and eager to take upon themselves the full weight and measure of the cross—all the more so since they know the temporary nature of suffering and their eventual triumph over it in and through Jesus Christ, who also triumphed and was glorified, after He had suffered a while.

Once more taking in a great deal of territory in just a few brief words, Peter now brackets the two closely related truths of Christ’s death and resurrection into the sweeping clause: Who was put to death according to the flesh and was made alive according to the spirit. He introduces this clause with the affirmative particle μέν, which in New Testament Greek has declined enormously in frequency. Our Lord truly suffered the pains of death. His human body which He had of Mary was enveloped with the horror, the gloom, the stark reality of bitter death. The centurion testified to it; Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, as well as the women who were present at His sumptuous though precipitate entombment, were only too sadly aware that His death was not one shammed or staged. It was a *real* death for *real* payment for *real* sin! The passive is here used (as it is also used in regard to His being made alive) to indicate that death came to Christ from an agency and instrumentality outside of Him: The Father who decreed His vicarious sacrificial death and the enemies who unknowingly served as God’s instruments.

Mindful of Jesus' words in John 10:17, 18, we see here once more the stress which the holy writer of this Epistle lays on the utter willingness of Jesus to suffer and die. While He was most assuredly put to death according to His flesh, His body, He did not remain in death.

He was made alive (again the passive is used) according to the spirit. Arndt and Gingrich define πνεῦμα as "that part of Christ which, in contrast to σάρξ, did not pass away in death, but survived as an individual entity after death." In our floundering, halting, incompetent conception of this mystery we can do no more than to say something like this: Christ's body lay dead in the grave, stark and lifeless, from late Good Friday until early on Easter morning. When the time came, His body, which had not seen the usual corruption (in itself a great mystery), was reunited with the soul, the spirit which had not died, by the power of God, who raised Him from the dead, and also by His own power, the divine, almighty power which He possessed as the Son of God (referring once more to John 10:17, 18).

If anyone feels capable of further shedding light on the inner workings of this marvelous occurrence, I shall be a much interested student, provided of course that there is something to learn beyond the very little which we are already aware of and able to perceive. We believe it correct at this place to understand the term πνεῦμα as not meaning the Holy Spirit, but rather, as we have stated, that part of man which is spirit, in contrast to that part of him which is σάρξ, body, or flesh. The juxtaposition of θανατωθείς over against ζωοποιηθείς seems ample justification for this conviction, as well as the statements in the text immediately following.

We now approach with a certain amount of trepidation the very heart of our text, that part which we might well consider the *sedes doctrinae* of Christ's Descent into Hell. It is that relative clause about which all the controversy has raged through the centuries and still continues to rage: ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πηρέμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν. This is as good a time as any to dispose of the conjecture by Schulz, that the words ἐν ᾧ should actually be Ἐνώχ (Enoch) or that of Dr. Rendel Harris who contends that Ἐνώχ (Enoch) has been omitted after the words ἐν ᾧ καὶ by a scribe's blunder in dropping some repeated letters. Dr. James Moffatt, to whom we are indebted for the information, accepts this conjecture because, as he says, "the story of this mission is told in the Book of Enoch," and brazenly uses it in his translation of the New Testament, as also does Goodspeed.

In rebuttal, we would briefly state 1) that the Book of Enoch is not canonical; 2) that the sudden introduction of Enoch's name as having done something which is ascribed by Peter to Christ is conjecture of the lowest order indeed; 3) not one single MS. has the reading with Ἐνώχ; 4) it is more than likely another clever device emanating from the bottomless pit designed to rob us of one of the most comforting and reassuring Scripture truths. So it was our *Lord Jesus Christ and not Enoch* who went into hell and preached to the spirits there.

We take ἐν ᾧ as in reference to the spirit, the spirit according to which He was again made alive after suffering death. And therefore, fully aware of the many widely divergent views on this question, we take the position that our Lord went down to hell according to both soul and body: in the body that after His death had now been reunited with the soul, coming back glorified from the dead. We believe that the unnamed writer of the article on *Christ's Descent into Hell* in the *Concordia Cyclopaedia* of 1927 made a very cogent point when he reasons: "If Christ had made the descent while His *body* was in the power of death, it could not have been a *triumphant* descent" (emphases ours).

We grant that with God nothing is impossible, and that thus Christ could have entered the confines of hell according to His spirit only, separate and apart from His body. However, considering the intent and purpose of His descent—the triumph over the disobedient spirits—what more effective, compelling, convincing manner could He have chosen to demonstrate His irresistible power and conquest over all the forces of evil, than to show that He whom they considered made ineffective by death was very much alive, according to both soul and body, and thus to prove to all who had aligned themselves against God and His grace—whether devil or man—that they were doomed indeed.

Aside from the above reasoning, we find it difficult to grasp why Peter should first state that Christ was made alive according to the spirit (after being put to death according to the flesh), and then to state that He descended into hell, unless he intends to say just what we have stated above: that both soul and body went into

hell. His spirit never saw death, certainly. But Peter first speaks of His return to life and then speaks of His descent into hell. The difficulty, it appears, would be on the side of those who maintain that He descended into hell according to the spirit only, while His body was still lying in the grave. We see a good deal of significance in the fact that the gentlemen who hold this position are to a large extent identified with those who see in the descent into hell a purpose quite apart from the one which Holy Scripture states—of which more in good time!

What is it that Christ, according to the inspired Apostle, did after His body had been reunited to His soul, to renewed life? πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν, going, proceeding, traveling, He preached. He had an *objective*, a place to which He wanted to go, and He had a purpose in going there: to announce something, to make known something, to proclaim something aloud. The place to which He proceeded in order to preach is identified as a φυλακή, a prison and the inhabitants of that prison as spirits πνεύματα described as ἀπειθήσαντα, disobedient and as corporeally inhabiting this terrestrial world at the time of Noah.

There are many, many erring souls who since the earliest Christian times have had a false conception of Christ's Descent into Hell, especially its purpose and intent. The most vocal spokesman of this group, whom I have met, appears to be Johann Ludwig Koenig, *koenigl. Preussischer Garnisonprediger zu Mainz*, who in a book published in 1842 devotes some 280 pages toward demonstrating that Christ's Descent into Hell, as we confess it in the *Apostles' Creed*, was actually nothing else but a descent into the *Underworld*, the abode of the dead, for the purpose of giving the souls of the departed one more opportunity to accept the Gospel—which either they had not heard or not heeded while in this life—thus escaping eternal damnation if they now accepted it (of which he concedes that most likely there was only partial success).

We are most happy to note that the Holy Spirit had Peter use the term φυλακή to indicate hell. While this term may at times be used in a more favorable sense as a place of guarding and protecting and also as a division of time (scil. while men are on guard), it is most often used in the sense that it is a place where prisoners are kept against their will, awaiting deserved or undeserved punishment. Arndt and Gingrich relent so far as to define φυλακή: “Of the underworld or the place of punishment in hell. It is in the φυλακή in the latter sense that Satan will be rendered harmless during the millennium (Revelation 20:7).” In a cross-reference regarding the word πνεῦμα they state: “τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν belongs here (that is, after a person's death, his πνεῦμα lives on as an independent being) *if* (emphasis ours) it refers to Jesus preaching to the spirits of the dead in hell, whether it be when He descended into Hades, or when He returned to heaven.”

Once more we express our joy at the fact that the term φυλακή was used rather than ἄδης, since it is so much more definitive, so much more restricted. It should really take the wind out of the sails of such as would water down Christ's descent into hell from a triumph over all that is evil into a pleasant, merciful (?) jaunt for the purpose of converting the sometime unconverted, or announcing salvation to the saints who died before His coming. This φυλακή to which our Lord descended after His body came back to life from death is the place of horror and torment to which, Peter tells us, certain disobedient spirits had been consigned by the righteous, deserved judgment of God.

The πνεύματα were ἀπειθήσαντα (from the verb ἀπειθέω, disobey.) Arndt and Gingrich note: “Since, in the view of the early Christians, the supreme disobedience was a refusal to believe their Gospel, ἀπειθέω may be restricted in some passages to the meaning ‘disbelieve,’ ‘be an unbeliever.’ This sense, though greatly disputed (it is not found outside our literature), seems most probable in John 3:36; Acts 14:2; 19:9; Romans 15:21, and only slightly less probable in Romans 2:8; I Peter 2:8; 3:1, perhaps also in v. 20 (our locus) and 4:17.”

We are thus here dealing with a certain number of unbelievers, spirits who defied the revelation of God's will that they should turn from their evil, fleshly ways and accept the forgiving mercy of God in the promised Savior. This happened once upon a time ποτε ὅτε while the forbearance of God waited in the days (the life-time) of Noah while the ark was being made ready, or being constructed. Κατασκευάζω is a favorite word used in reference to the construction of ships. The flagrant, defiant, outrageous disobedience of these persons (who are now spirits in prison) consisted in this that the forbearance μακροθυμία of God was *disdained* by them, so that neither the allotted time of 120 years, nor the testimony of Noah, the preacher of righteousness

δικαιοσύνης κήρυκα (II Peter 2:5), testifying both by word and by building the ark, could move them to give up their folly!

When finally the God-appointed day of reckoning dawned, when the most disastrous cataclysm which has so far occurred on this earth came with devastating power—then, alas, only a few, that is eight souls were saved by means of water! Yes, they were saved by *water*—for the very water which enveloped and engulfed all life on earth in its inescapable, death-dealing clutches served at the same time in a life-preserving manner to bear up the ark with its precious seed for future human and animal life. The defiant, disdainful spirits, on the other hand, who had spurned their time of grace now felt the full impact of the truth: Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man sows, that he will also reap! (Galatians 6:7). While their misused, desecrated bodies were briefly engulfed by the waters and somewhat later carne bloated and putrid to the surface disintegrating by and by, until the Judgment Day should see them restored to physical pain and horror—their souls went immediately to the φυλακή, the unspeakably horrible place of torment originally prepared for and already inhabited by certain other notorious, disobedient spirits who had not even been satisfied with the already experienced glories of heaven!

To these disobedient spirits, upon whom the judgment of God had been consummated, who were now merely waiting for the great Judgment Day to make public before all the world their judgment and condemnation, to these Christ preached ἐκήρυξεν, (from κηρύσσω announce, make known, proclaim aloud). While this word is quite frequently used in connection with Gospel preaching, it is not used in that manner to the exclusion of others. Cf. Romans 2:21; Galatians 5:11; Acts 15:21. If the verb εὐαγγελίζω had been used—then those who mistakenly prate of another chance for those once condemned might have some basis for their contention. But our inspired text says nothing of Gospel-preaching, nothing of just one more opportunity to repent because they now could see that God had truly sent a Savior for whose gracious appearance and redemption they previously had no time and no interest—and that at this time it Was finally a case of now or never.

The proponents of Gospel-preaching on the part of Christ to the disobedient spirits in hell believe they possess a telling, clinching argument in I Peter 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.” We counter by noting that no time is specified as to when this preaching took place, and that in harmony with all other Scripture truth it must have preceded the death of those preached to. While these may have been the wicked men at the time of Noah, that is not imperatively the case.

Since we cannot accept the assertion that our Lord preached the Gospel to the disobedient spirits in hell, we are now constrained to decide for ourselves just what the content of His preaching was. Christ had just won the greatest battle of all time over the combined forces of sin, death, devil, and hell. He was, if we may be pardoned for saying so, still flushed with excitement and joy at what He had so decisively accomplished. What extent of imagination and deduction is necessary to conceive of a triumphant, glorious entry into the very lair of the Great Serpent, there to lord it over and to exult over those who had sworn eternal enmity and destruction to the Prince of Life, and who must now in impotent fury acknowledge shattering, overwhelming defeat!

Nor need we restrict ourselves to induction and imagination in this matter. Taking into consideration the triumphant note that pervades this whole Epistle of Peter; aware of the other passages which form part of our study, and which certainly leave no doubt about the celebration Christ staged over His defeated enemies; fully cognizant of the fundamental truth: that the Son of God was manifested for this purpose that He might destroy the works of the devil; carefully considering also the finality of judgment which Scripture pronounces upon those who die in their sins (cf. the story of Dives in Luke 16, and Hebrews 9:27: “it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment”)—we may well visualize the sermon of Christ in hell as a burning, searing, stinging condemnation of all those unfortunates who were already occupying hell or who would still enter it in time to come. This was part of the pains and torments of hell for all who heard it and would later hear about it. What pangs of conscience, what accusations of folly realized too late it must have induced in every breast; what a storm of execration it must have brought upon the head of the great Deceiver, who was responsible for their immeasurable torment and misery!

By what has been said we have implied that Peter does not wish to restrict Christ's sermon merely to the disobedient spirits at the time of Noah. We consider them representatives of all the damned, devils and human. Over them all resounds the triumphant, exultant cry of the divine Victor who has appeared in the flesh to give them indisputable evidence of His victory and their defeat and subsequent punishment.

While we judge the locus I Peter 3:18–20 to be the *sedes doctrinae* of Christ's Descent into Hell, there are several related passages which bear out and support the truths therein set forth. The first of these we shall consider is Ephesians 4:8–10, which incorporates in part the passage Psalm 68:18. We translate: Therefore He says (or, it is said): as He ascended to the heights, He took captive captivity; He gave gifts unto men. This, however, that He ascended, what is it if not that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth. The One who descended is also the very One who ascended high above all the heavens in order to fill all things. Since a section of the Old Testament passage is part of our passage, and since there is to be a continual inter-reference between the two, we immediately offer this translation: You ascend to the heights; you lead captive many captives; you take gifts for men; even for those who are rebellious; so that the Lord God may dwell.

Of the risen Jesus, appearing to His disciples on the evening of Resurrection Day, it is written (Luke 24:44): Then He said to them: These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, and in the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Thus the inspired writer of Ephesians, having in v. 7 of chapter 4 introduced the statement that grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift, and continuing in verses 11–16 to describe the nature and the purposes of these gifts to the Church, makes it a point in verses 8–10 to demonstrate that the passage from Psalm 68 finds its fulfillment in the Christ who has become the gloriously triumphant and exalted Lord and Ruler of all things. We thus have certification from the Holy Spirit that the passage from the Old Testament refers typically and positively to Christ and to no one else. Nor can there be the least question that both passages present in most forceful, clear-cut language the radiantly triumphant Christ as Victor over all His enemies. We are also compelled to interpret the Old Testament quotation as well in the manner in which the apostle quotes it as also in the manner in which he makes application of it.

The questions chiefly confronting us in these two passages are these: 1) What is meant by the *ascent on high*? 2) What is meant by either  $\text{שָׁבַרְתָּ שְׁבִיבִים}$  or  $\eta\chi\mu\alpha\lambda\acute{o}\tau\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\epsilon\nu\ \alpha\acute{\iota}\chi\mu\alpha\lambda\omega\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu$  3) What are the gifts given to men or among men? 4) Who are the rebellious mentioned in the Psalms passage only? 5) How are we to understand the expression: *The lower parts of the earth*?

The lexicons available to us translate  $\acute{\upsilon}\psi\omicron\varsigma$  as height, high places, heaven (mostly) and  $\text{מְרוֹם}$  as place of height, pinnacle, heaven. While we are willing to agree with Tholuck that in the Psalm David may have Mt. Zion in mind when He sketches the picture so beautifully portraying the Lord in His triumph, the ultimate understanding must be (and Tholuck concedes that) that this refers to Christ's glorious, yet serenely majestic ascent into heaven from Olivet. To be sure, the ascent from the earth was quiet enough; the real excitement and celebration began when He entered the portals of heaven (cf. Psalm 47:5–8). There seems to be general agreement among theologians on this meaning of Christ's ascent on high.

When it comes to  $\text{שָׁבַרְתָּ שְׁבִיבִים}$  and  $\eta\chi\mu\alpha\lambda\acute{o}\tau\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\epsilon\nu\ \alpha\acute{\iota}\chi\mu\alpha\lambda\omega\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu$  it is quite a different matter. We offer a few examples of translation to indicate the general divergence: The OT passage is translated by the KJ, *thou hast led captivity captive*; by the RSV, *leading captives in thy train*, by Luther, *has tdas Gefaengniss gefangen*; by Tholuck, *fuehrest Gefangene mit*; I myself lean to the translation, *you lead captive many captives*. As for the NT quotation, the KJ has, *he led captivity captive* (with the notation, *a multitude of captives*); RSV, *he led a host of captives*; Luther, *hast das Gefaengniss gefangen gefuehrt*; Moffatt, *he led a host captive*; my translation, *he took captive captivity*. It will be noted that both Luther and the KJ are consistent in the presentation of captivity being led captive. And since that is the way Paul quotes and thereby at the same time interprets the OT passage, it must be the correct way for us to understand it! Nor can any other translation quite as well express the triumph of the Christ over His bitter, defiant, vociferous, clever, powerful enemies who are now decisively and ignominiously defeated, though they were ever so formidable! They who were the captivity who would hold mankind in abject thralldom by the power and curse of sin, have now been overcome and taken captive by

the real Champion! The idea that the captives are those whom Christ has won, first by His atonement and subsequently by their acceptance of His Gospel, is appealing enough. Yet, in view of the reasons adduced, we must discard it as untenable. What now of the gifts given to men or among men? Referring to the Psalms passage, my edition of the KJ notes that the gifts received for men should be understood as gifts “in the man,” to which the RSV seems to agree by translating: “Receiving gifts among men.” Luther, *hast Gaben empfangen fuer die Menschen*. Tholuck, *nimmst dir deine Gaben unter den Menschen* (oder, *an Menschen, d.h., die Menschen selbst als Gaben*). The difficulty stems from the fact that the Hebrew verb  $\text{קָבַץ}$  can mean take, receive, take over, and that the letter  $\text{ב}$  used as a preposition may mean in, on, unto, with, for.

There is no difficulty in regard to what the word *gifts* means. The compounded problem is what they are and what is done with them by our Lord Christ. But Paul, speaking as he was moved by the Holy Ghost, tells the Ephesian congregation that the Son of God, made man, gave gifts to men:  $\text{\u0395\u0314\u0314\u0311\u0314\u0311 \u0314\u0314\u0311\u0314 \u0314\u0314\u0311\u0314}$   $\text{\u0391\u0314\u0314\u0311\u0314\u0311\u0314}$ . Several codices would have  $\text{\u039a\u0311\u0311}$  before  $\text{\u0395\u0314\u0314\u0311\u0314}$ —which would be a normal way of writing, although hardly changing the meaning. A number of texts call for  $\text{\u0395\u0314 \u0314\u0314\u0311\u0314\u0311\u0314}$  instead of the mere dative  $\text{\u0391\u0314\u0314\u0311\u0314\u0311\u0314}$ , which would require the translation among men, yet would not, if it were allowed, change to any marked degree the idea that the gifts were distributed by Christ to men. All the NT translations available to us (including even our ultraliberal friend James Moffatt) are agreed that  $\text{\u0391\u0314\u0314\u0311\u0314\u0311\u0314}$  must be rendered to men (or, unto men). As for gifts, they are named by Paul in vv. 11–16 of our Ephesians chapter.

We would also venture to assert that David, foreseeing the Christ reigning in great glory in the Church on earth with many patent demonstrations of His power and grace, expresses that fact in the words  $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$   $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$  that the Lord God may dwell (either there or among them). As for the rebellious mentioned in the Psalm, we consider that a reference to the inborn enmity and opposition of man toward God, manifesting itself in utter depravity and, specifically, the inability to appreciate and apprehend the gifts which Christ has made available to him. This natural rebellion must be overcome by the Holy Spirit, who enlightens and takes possession of the human heart, which only then is able to appropriate and have the benefit of Christ’s matchless, heavenly gifts.

That brings us to the final question we posed: How are we to understand the expression:  $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$   $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$ ? We quote, from Arndt and Gingrich (art.  $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$ ): “Some think the pass. refers to Jesus’ burial. Many (Tert., Chrysost., F.C. Baur, Wohlenberg, Clemen<sup>2</sup> 90, O.Holtzmann) take  $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$ .  $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$  to be Hades [*sic*] ... Others hold that Jesus’ coming on earth, the *incarnation* is meant.” For our immediate purposes, we must decide whether or not this expression refers to Christ’s Descent into Hell. We believe that it does! We have several times referred to the pervading note of triumph which emanates from both the Psalms and the Ephesians passage, a triumph celebrating the leading captive the captivity and the blessing, peace, and joy which the Lord Jesus has thereby brought to those that are His. As he considers this, the Apostle is in an exalted, exulting state of mind. He would expatiate just a bit on this great, grand truth! That causes him to raise the question: Now the fact that He ascended, what else is it if not that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth? And to answer: He who descended is the same who also ascended high above all heavens, that He might fill all things!

Note the contrast presented here: the highest heavens are contrasted with the lowest depths of hell. We could perceive a reference here to the contrast between suffering and glory, especially in view of Romans 10:6, 7, where the apostle is specifically speaking of bringing back Christ *from the dead*. But we see a difference in this instance: here is the all-conquering, all-triumphant, all-pervading Lion of Judah, who fills all things, no matter whether they be the heights of heaven or the depths of hell, with His reigning presence—before whom even the princes of hell must cringe and grovel in subjection! If there were no other word of Scripture which sets forth our Lord’s descent into the Bottomless Pit, we might have a little difficulty understanding this particular passage in that sense. However, in view of I Peter 3:18–20, which we have treated, and also in view of Colossians 2:14, 15, which we shall shortly consider, we are confident that the words  $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$   $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$  specifically refer to *Christ’s Descent into Hell*.

If the Codex Vaticanus, most of the MSS. of the Byzantine Texts and of the Latin Versions, and Weiss would have a  $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$  after  $\text{\u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314 \u0314}$  (He *first* descended,), so much the better, for it serves to support our

contention that the buried Christ, made alive in the grave, first descended in glory into hell before returning in glory to the earth and shortly thereafter ascending in glory into heaven where He now reigns at God's right hand in glory, filling all things. If He was to fill *all* things with His glory, that would of necessity include the confines of hell, to which He so triumphantly and jubilantly descended!

We offer *ad finem* the passage *Colossians* 2:14, 15: Wiping out the certificate of indebtedness against us, which with its requirements was against us, and this He picked up from the midst, nailing it fast to the cross, having disarmed the authorities and the ruling powers, He exposed them publicly, triumphing over them in Himself. The Apostle has reminded his beloved congregation at Colosse of the many spiritual blessings which have come to them by their acceptance of the Gospel. Among these he included their deliverance from the dominion of darkness and their transfer to the kingdom of God's beloved Son (1:13). He emphasized the complete dominion and authority of this Image of the invisible God (1:15), who is before all things, and in whom all things hold together (1:17). For in Him all the *fullness* of God was pleased to dwell (1:19). He reminds them that in Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3) and pleads with them to live in the Lord Jesus, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith (2:6, 7). He warns them against being made a prey of philosophy and vain deceit (2:8), since they have come to *fullness* of life in Christ, in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily, and who is the Head of all rule and authority (2:1, 10). Thereupon, having recalled to them in v. 13 that God made them, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of their flesh, alive together with Christ, having forgiven us all our trespasses—he continues with the words of our passage.

We have adduced the foregoing in order to call attention to the triumphant note which jubilantly sings its way through *Colossians*, finding its wellspring in Christ triumphant and embracing in its reverberations and tonal nuances the hearts and lives of those who are partakers of His power and glory. Of this triumphantly ruling Christ the apostle says that He wiped out, erased, obliterated the certificate of indebtedness against us, which with its requirements was against us. Χειρόγραφον is the unusual word here, a hand-written document which makes claims against someone. Δόγμα is the familiar word, but the sense in which it is used here (decree, ordinance, command) is less familiar, although it is actually the primary sense. The reference in either case is to the stern, insistent demands of God's sacred Law, which curses everyone who will not keep it perfectly, and which therefore accuses and condemns all men, for no one has fulfilled it!

Paul repeats the fact that Christ has freed us from the curse and condemnation of that Law in a varied presentation: He says that our great Mediator picked up that certificate of indebtedness out of the midst, nailing it to the cross. We consider μέσος as that area or space which exists between God and man, as long as man is still separated from God by sin not atoned for and not forgiven. The χειρόγραφον made this area a very solid, impenetrable area. Man simply could not approach God as long as it was there! Yet our Champion of champions, our divine High Priest removed it once for all and nailed it fast to the cross.

The picture is as beautiful, appealing, and comforting as it is unique and unusual. If the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all, and if He was nailed to the cross because of that assumed iniquity—then, actually the iniquity was nailed to the cross with Him! Christ is here presented as Himself nailing our sins to the cross because He was willing to be crucified; concurring in His Father's will, and being instrumental in bringing the perfect, total sacrifice which would cancel the indebtedness of Mankind to God. When it had all been accomplished; when the last, full measure of the staggering debt had been paid to the uttermost farthing; when our Lord had poured out His soul in death; when His lifeless body had been entombed; and when in due time He was quickened according to His spirit—then there was occasion for triumph, for jubilation and celebration, such as had never before occurred nor would ever again occur! The victory had been won; the prince of this world had been judged; he who overcame by a tree was now likewise by a tree overcome, through Christ our Lord! The voice of rejoicing and salvation could now be sounded in the tabernacles of the righteous.

What course of action and procedure was at this time more logical, more consequential than to descend into hell in order to triumph over those who had been forever humbled and crushed! That finds expression in the words: having disarmed the authorities and the ruling powers, He exposed them publicly, triumphing over them in Himself. The word ἀπεκδύομαι is very colorful and descriptive. It is used first of all in the sense of taking

off, stripping off, of clothing. In that sense it is also used figuratively in Colossians 3:9, where we are urged to strip off the Old Man with his deeds. The word is further used in the sense of disarming, and that is its most acceptable meaning here. We are immediately reminded of the prediction and comment which Jesus made in Luke 11:21, 22: When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace; but when one stronger than he assails him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. *Vae victis* has been customary usage ever since men began to fight among themselves. It was no different when Christ descended into hell.

Those who were stripped of power and armor are named as τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας, which is translated by the KJ as well as the RSV as principalities and powers. The expressions ἀρχὰς and ἐξουσίας are used in the familiar Ephesians 6 locus (v. 12) where Paul tells us that our struggle is not with flesh and blood, but against the authorities and the ruling powers—who are then further identified as κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκοτοῦ τούτου, world-rulers of darkness and as τὰ πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις, spirit-forces of evil in the heavens. Whereas our Lord was determined to conquer hell and its prince the devil; whereas He did that very thing by wiping out the Certificate of indebtedness against us, nailing it fast to the cross—we can with certainty say that the authorities and ruling powers which are here referred to as having been stripped of their power must be the powers of hell.

Having disarmed the authorities and the ruling powers, He exposed them publicly, triumphing over them in Himself. We have here, then, a reiteration of what was already set forth in our previous texts: the bodily appearance of our risen, glorified Lord in triumph before the inhabitants of hell. In this instance He is described as openly, publicly exposing them; making an example of them, even mocking them (all meanings of δειγματίζω) and triumphing over them in Himself. The verb θριαμβεύω may be rendered: 1) lead in a triumphal procession (hence, generally, triumph over, with the accusative); 2) cause to triumph over; 3) lead or exhibit in a public procession. We shall do best by accepting the translation “triumph over,” leaving each individual to his own imagination. And we dare not quarrel with those who refer ἐν αὐτῷ το τῷ σταυρῷ as though our Lord Jesus triumphed over hell by means of the cross. How could we fail to associate our Lord with the cross or the cross with Him, when it has for all the redeemed become the symbol of atonement and victory ever since He hallowed it by His crucifixion!

We do not consider it necessary to go any further except to express our conviction at this point that I Peter 3:18–20, Ephesians 4:8–10, Colossians 2:15, and Psalm 68:18 are Scriptural PROOF TEXTS of what we state in the *Apostles’ Creed*: He Descended into Hell.

We are now ready to take up the question, *What Does the Christian Church Mean When It Confesses: He Descended Into Hell?*

### **The Ancient Church Before the Reformation**

*The Apostles’ Creed*, in which the expression occurs (it also occurs in the much later *Athanasian Creed*), is a gradually developed confessional document which does not appear in its final form until the 6th or 7th centuries.

It is apostolic and Scriptural in its expressed truths, but was *not* composed by the apostles. “It was rather a spontaneous growth, springing from the palpitating life and the practical needs of the early Church. It grew out of the necessity of a short summary of faith for purposes of catechetical instruction and as a public confession of candidates for Holy Baptism” (*Concordia Cyclopedia*, 1927, p. 32).

Oriental forms of the Apostles’ Creed were generally longer and more philosophical than the western. The version of the Church of Rome eventually gained general acceptance and became known as the Apostles’ Creed. There is an earlier and a later form. The Greek text of Marcellus of Ancyra (ca. 340) is generally supposed to be the original, since Greek was the prevailing language of the Roman Church to the 3rd century. It may go back to the 2nd century. The longer Roman symbol, our present received text, contains various clauses which are absent from the older forms: “descended into hell;” “catholic” in the article of the Church; “the

communion of saints;” and “the life everlasting.” These must not be considered newly formulated additions, but parts of various local creeds, which were incorporated into the authorized Roman symbol.

While the doctrine, DESCENDIT AD INFERNA (Greek, κατελθόντα εἰς τὰ καταχθόνια or εἰς ἄδου κατάβασις was not, according to Koenig (p. 132)<sup>1</sup>, a part of any symbol of the Ancient Church until the 4th century, it was nevertheless well known to them and the subject of frequent and lively speculation. Koenig, whom we must certainly credit with a great deal of diligent research pertaining to this question, lists no less than 39 church fathers who refer to this doctrine in some way before it is finally accepted as part of the Apostles’ Creed. They include Ignatius of Antioch (1st century); Polycarp of Smyrna, Justin Martyr, Tertullian of Carthage, Clement of Alexandria (2nd century); Origen (3rd century); Hilary of Poitiers; Athanasius of Alexandria, Ambrosius of Milan, St. Augustine (4th century). He tells us that even the Arians accepted this doctrine into their symbols.

The church fathers of the first four centuries are united in their acceptance of Christ’s Descent into Hell. They are very much at variance, however, as to the *manner* in which it occurred and the *purpose* which prompted it. The problem can be traced, we believe, to the many and varied peculiar, weird, in certain instances even ludicrous conceptions the Fathers had regarding that period of time intervening between a person’s death and Judgment Day and the location where that time was spent.

Muenschler, in his *Handbuch der christlichen Dogmengeschichte* (Volume 2, p. 396) states: “The Christian teachers made this a basic assertion that the distribution of reward and punishment was not to be expected before the resurrection of the body at the universal Judgment, and therefore assigned a special abode to the departed for occupancy during the intervening time. This abode they located in the center of the earth, according to the popular belief of the ancient Hebrews and also on the basis of references in the Old Testament. They are agreed that souls do not immediately enter heaven after death.” On page 409 of volume 4 he says: “According to the common faith of the Church during the period 325–604, all souls of those who died before the death of Christ are kept in this underworld. The pious as well as the evil had to live there, although not in the same manner. Not even the patriarchs have entered Paradise.” He makes this statement on page 413: “Alongside the commonly accepted doctrine that all souls which departed before Christ had to enter the underworld, there was a great disagreement as to their status and manner of existence.”

P. King, the author of a history concerning the Apostles’ Creed, having shown on pages 160–169 of his work that the ancient Jews no less than the heathen accepted the word Hades (Hebrew, *Sheol*) or *Inferi* as designating a place at which *all* souls arrive after being separated from the body (there to lead a life in direct conformity with that formerly lived here on earth, either miserable because of torment and punishment, or blessed through joy and happiness), continues by showing (page 170) that even the early Christians considered the underworld (*inferos*) as the common abode (*receptaculum*) of *all* the departed, the good as well as the bad souls—this underworld being divided into two regions (*stationes*) one occupied by the souls of the wicked, subjected to punishments and torments, the other by the souls of the just (*proborum*), being in greatest bliss. Here both await the last day of Judgment. Then he draws the conclusion (page 180) that with the deteriorating use of the Greek and Latin language the words ἄδης and *inferi* were more and more used in an *evil* connotation (especially with the Latins), who to a great extent began to think of *inferi* as the location and condition of unclean souls separated from their bodies.

Dietelmaier<sup>2</sup> in his work on Christ’s Descent into Hell (1762) observes in paragraph 28: “I have no location of any author previous to the 4th century in which I have seen that the believers after Christ are free of the underworld (*ab inferno*).” In paragraph 33 he says of the 4th century: “Most ecclesiastical authors of this century and a few in subsequent time, still following in the footsteps of the Ancients, describe the underworld as a place where the souls of the pious await certain joy, which is to be consummated after their resurrection, meanwhile not experiencing any inconvenience due to pain, punishment, or sorrow.”

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, vol. 57, p. 105. [Page 4 of this document – WLS Library Staff]

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Koenig pages 94 and 101.

Just a few specific references: According to Hermas (1st century), all souls of the pious Israelites whose death antedates the coming of Christ, including those of the prophets, entered the underworld, where the apostles baptized them. Justin Martyr (ca. 163), attacking the Gnostics for maintaining that souls enter heaven immediately after death, says that persons who believe *that* cannot even be considered Christians. Tertullian (†220) maintains that every soul will wait in the underworld for the Lord's appearance, and that as long as the earth remains heaven is open to no one. Yet he excludes from this the martyrs who will immediately after death have the preference of living with the Lord. Lactantius (†325) postulates: No one ought to think that souls are judged immediately after death. All are kept in one and the same confinement (*custodia*: φυλακή) until the time arrives for the Supreme Judge to examine their merits.

Origen (†253) teaches: All souls of those who died before Christ, not excluding the prophets, patriarchs, and other pious persons, entered Hades. There they wait the time when Christ will open the way to another place. Before the Lord's coming no one was permitted to enter Paradise. At His descent into hell Jesus placed the pious there. Now all the pious may go there immediately through Jesus. If we die as righteous, we shall not enter Hades as they did, but shall immediately enter Paradise. Finally, St. Augustine (†430): The time intervening between man's death and the final resurrection confines souls in secret places (*abditis receptaculis*), depending on whether each is worthy of rest or torment.

Koenig, having shown how the ancient fathers pictured Hades, would now make the point that the expressions ᾠδης and especially *inferi* gradually became *bad words* due to the growing Christian consciousness that since Christ appeared in the underworld, the status primarily of the departed believers of the Old Testament was glorified, since they were released from Hades; that the frequent depressing descriptions of Hades in the Old Testament no longer are fitting for the believers who died awaiting the coming Christ; that it would be contrary to the Christian faith which accepts the fact that Christ annihilated the power of *Sheol* by His own resurrection to have this power continue over the Christian; that the Christian ought with his concepts and thinking be much less directed to the underworld than toward heaven where Christ sits at the right hand of the Father as our Advocate. If we keep in mind that Koenig has a very special axe to grind, namely that Christ's Descent into Hell was for the purpose of preaching repentance, we can well understand his horror at and his rejection of this development.

We plead that at this point to diverge into a discussion about SHEOL, HADES, and HELL would take us too far beyond the confines of our assigned work. Since we have already set forth the Scripturally correct truth about Christ's descent into hell in our various exegeses, we should like to go on now to show how the Ancient Church before the Reformation, because of its general false impression of the state of the departed and the place where they spent their time until Judgment Day, interpreted the purpose of our Lord's Descent into Hell. Again we feel compelled to abbreviate and summarize.

There seems to be general agreement that *only the soul* and *not the body* of Christ appeared in hell. *Theodotus* is *unique* in maintaining that the Descent did not occur until *after* the Resurrection. 1) By having His soul descend into Hades, Christ would also render satisfaction for this law imposed by sin upon the life of those living on earth (Irenaeus; Tertullian; Hilary of Poitiers; Ambrose). 2) Joined with the first purpose is the other, to annihilate the power of death, to release men of this power (Hippolytus; Origen; Eusebius of Caesarea; Firmicus Maternus; Amphilochios; Epiphanius), or, what is essentially identical, but differently stated, to conquer Hades (Origen; Lactantius; Eusebius of Caesarea), or, the triumph over Hades (Athanasius; Ambrose; Firmicus Maternus; Eusebius of Caesarea).

As to the relation between those confined to Hades and the announcement of deliverance, the fathers are not very clear—so that many unanswered questions arise and remain. 3) Christ wanted to be the first of those risen (Irenaeus). 4) Christ wanted to preach the Gospel in Hades, namely to a) The patriarchs and prophets (Tertullian, Epiphanius); b) the pious, righteous, saints, believers (Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Theodotus, Gaudentius, Philastrius, Firmicus Maternus, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, Augustine); c) to the Israelites, specifically (Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregorius Thaumaturgus (although not too certain), Pseudo-Ambrosius, Hieronymus, even St. Augustine seems to accept this in the case of a few); d) to all men generally, at least to those who loved and feared God and lived piously and righteously (Irenaeus, Gregorius

Thaumaturgus (not completely certain), Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, according to Hilary of Poitiers and Origen to those also who had died as unbelievers, yes, according to Origen not even excluding the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Under c and d are to be included the many teachers who were charged with heresy by Philastrius, Epiphanius, and Augustine because they taught that Christ preached the Gospel to all the inhabitants of hell, and that the believers among them were saved. Especially noteworthy is Augustin's rejection of the notion (how widespread it was we cannot tell) that in the underworld there exists an institute designed to save souls which is comparable to the church on earth.

Koenig, busily grinding his axe, is at the point of using it on Augustine and even more on Philastrius, of whom he has this to say: "He was the *first* to reject as *heresy* the opinion that Christ preached to all the souls in Hades for the purpose of saving them. In this way, together with Augustine, he prepares for all the Church of the West of later days the path which will be followed more and more. By this rejection he indicted not merely the majority of the Greek church fathers—the most pious, the most orthodox, the most spiritual—as heretics, but also, which is the greater evil, the Apostle Peter himself! How must this man have understood and interpreted I Peter 3:19 and 4:6?" According to Koenig, the doctrines of the Ancient Church regarding Christ's Descent into Hell were not materially altered during the more than ten centuries from the time of Augustine until the dawn of the Reformation. What did develop was a trend toward greater departmentalization of the underworld. Aside from the location and condition of the eternally damned, there were also these divisions:

1) the abode or the living place and region of the pious Israelites who had departed in the faith, known as the *limbus patrum* (strip, hem, belt of the Fathers, where they dwelt), also known as Abraham's Bosom and doubtlessly at times also place of cleansing or purification (*purgatorium*). According to Anselm of Canterbury (†1109), Christ destroyed the limbus by releasing the Fathers therefrom.

2) *Limbus infantum* or *puerorum*, the abode of infants who died without baptism. 3) *Purgatorium* or *ignis purgatorius* where the believers await final and complete cleansing.

Koenig, busily and consistently steaming along on his sidetrack of error, pontificates solemnly that he is unable to smile with those who poke fun at these *limbi* of the Scholastics. While he does not wish to join them in their idea of so *many separate* divisions, he is still sure that the original idea which prompted them was quite correct. He expresses amazement, not at the fact that there are so many divisions, but rather that there are so few!

The Church of the East simply retained its Hades without the divisions invented by the Scholastics. Together with the Church of the West, however, it agreed with the early, undivided church that: 1) only the soul of Christ, not the body, entered the underworld; 2) that it remained there for 3 days, during which interval the body of the Lord rested in the grave.

As to the *purpose* of His descent into the underworld, there was the greatest diversity of opinions. In the West the idea becomes more and more dominant, that the Descent concerned merely the pious, the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, or the Fathers. The East develops a growing universalism, with many divisions. The East is influenced by the Alexandrine opinion; the West by the North African (originated by Tertullian and Augustine, working with Philastrius, who branded the more liberal opinions as heresy).

Further, there is a continually growing tendency to set aside the preaching of the Gospel and to stress the sensual and physical conception of the fetters, bonds, bars, and locks of Hades or the underworld, with which the prisoners were held in bondage. In the long period leading up to the Reformation, three men are chiefly responsible for the later development of this dogma: 1) Duns Scotus (†1308) who was of the opinion "that Christ's Descent into Hell could not be proved from Holy Scripture, since not the remotest trace of it occurs in the Bible" (*Sententiae*. I. I. dist. XI); 2) John Picus of Mirandola (†1494) who maintained: Christ did not actually nor in His real presence descend into the underworld, but only in relation to the *effect* (*in Thess. Rom. affixis*); 3) Nicolaus Cusanus (†1465) who expressed the idea that Christ in the underworld suffered those eternal pains of hell which we had deserved (*Serm. in Ps. 30, 11*).

Our Lutheran Confessions state in Article 9 of the Formula of Concord: There has been controversy also among several theologians in agreement with the Augsburg Confession concerning this article: When and in what manner the Lord Christ, in harmony with our simple Christian faith, descended into hell; whether it

occurred before or after His death? For instance, whether this occurred as to the soul only, or as to the divinity only; or with body and soul, spiritually or physically? For instance, whether this article is part of the suffering or the glorious victory and triumph of Christ? Since, however, this article even as the preceding, cannot be comprehended with the senses nor with the intellect, but must be comprehended only by faith: it is our common opinion that this matter is not to be disputed, but rather to be believed and taught in the most simple manner, forasmuch as the sainted Dr. Luther, in the sermon at Torgau, 1533, has clarified this article in the most Christian manner, cutting off all unprofitable and unnecessary questions, and admonishing all pious Christians to Christian simplicity and faith. For it is sufficient for us to know that Christ descended into hell, thereby destroying hell for all believers and delivering them from the power of death, the devil, and eternal damnation of the hellish maw; as to how this occurred, we must postpone for the world to come, where not only this matter but also others will be revealed to us, which here we simply accepted, although we were unable to grasp it with our blinded reason.

The more extensive explanation (*Solida, plana, ac perspicua repetitio et declaratio*) has this to say: It is certain that this article of our faith regarding Christ's Descent into Hell has not been interpreted in the same manner, not merely by a few of the more recent, but also in time past by the orthodox, old teachers of the Church. We therefore consider it most safe to cling to the simplicity of our faith as it is summarized in the Symbol. It was to this that the sainted Luther referred in his pious sermon concerning Christ's Descent into Hell, held in the Castle of Torgau in the year of our Lord 1533, where we confess that we believe in Christ Jesus our Lord, the Son of God, who died, was buried, and descended into hell; in which confession we perceive that Burial and Descent of Christ are separated into two articles. Therefore we simply believe that the entire person, God and Man, descended to hell after the burial, overcame Satan, destroyed the power of hell, and deprived Satan of all power and might. Yet in what manner Christ accomplished this, there is no reason to fathom this with smart, high imagination. For this article cannot be understood with the human mind and senses, even as it is the case with the one previous, how Christ was set at the right hand of the almighty power and majesty of God; in these mysterious matters faith must be applied and the Word of God must be adhered to with firm agreement. In this way we shall obtain sure doctrine (*solidam doctrinam*) from this article (so that neither Satan nor hell itself is able to have power over or to harm us as well as any others who are believers in Christ). (Koenig, page 168.)

It would be highly interesting to put the spotlight on the difficulties this doctrine caused Martin Luther, as well as the various ideas he had concerning it at various periods of his lifetime. We shall confine ourselves to remarking that a man who was a son of the church which had been groping in blindness for so many centuries is not to be condemned for having some of the traces of that blindness clinging to him at various times and occasions of his busy, fruitful life! He was at his very best, nevertheless, on the doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell in the very famous sermon at Torgan! Here is a classic, indeed!

*Therefrom*<sup>3</sup> a few excerpts: "For before He rose and ascended into heaven, while He still lay in the grave, He also descended into hell, that He might rescue us therefrom who deserved to be kept there as prisoners; even as He went into death and the grave, that He might deliver therefrom those that are His." Speaking of a certain picture of his time which portrays the Lord descending into hell with a battle flag and there smashing and destroying the portals of hell, he remarks: "Such a portrayal presents well the power and benefit of this article, since it has occurred, is preached, and is accepted by faith how Christ has destroyed the power of hell and has robbed the devil of all his power. As long as I have that, I have the true essence and understanding of it; and I must no longer question and try to be smart as to just how it occurred and how it might be possible. Undoubtedly," he continues, "this story has come down to us from the ancient fathers, that they spoke and sang of it, even as the old songs still sound, and as we sing on the day of Easter: Who smashed hell, and bound the devils therein, and so forth—for if a child or a simple person hears that, he does not consider it otherwise but that Christ overcame the devil and deprived him of all his power."

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<sup>3</sup> *Concordia – Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche. Herausgegeben im Verlag vom Evangelischen Buecher-Verein. Fuenfte unveraenderte Auflage. Berlin 1862, pp. 551ff.*

Speaking of the unbelieving world, Luther judges: “Even so at this point, when it (the world) hears that Christ went to hell, it would immediately speculate about it as to just how it happened; and raises a lot of far-fetched, fruitless conjectures: whether the soul descended by itself, or whether the divinity accompanied it? Or, for instance, what He did down there and how He dealt with the devils, as well as much of the same sort, of which it must remain ignorant! Even so, I am not to divide matters up into various parts, but to believe and confess that the one Christ, God and Man, in one person descended into hell; yet did not remain there, as Psalm 16:10 tells us: Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt Thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption. Now, in the language of Scripture He does not refer to the soul as a being separate from the body, but the whole man, even as He calls Himself the Holy One of God. Yet how this all came to pass, that a man lies there in the grave, and still goes into hell, we shall and must consider as something unfathomable and inexplicable. Yet I may give you a rough sketch of it and draw you a picture in order to speak clearly and distinctly of hidden matters: that He went down there, taking His battle flag in the manner of a victorious hero, using it to knock down the door, and rampaging among the devils, so that one fell out of the window here and another out of a hole there! I also believe in this case that Christ Himself personally destroyed hell and bound the devil.

The simplest manner of discussing this article is to adhere to these words and retain this chief part, that for our sake hell has been torn to pieces through Christ and the kingdom and power of the devil completely destroyed; for the sake of which He died, was buried, and descended, that it might no longer harm us nor overcome us, as He Himself tells us Matthew 16, 18. For even though hell in itself remains hell, holding the unbelievers as prisoners, even as does death, sin, and all misery, so that they must be held by it and perish—and even we are ourselves terrified and hemmed in by it according to our flesh and our outer man, so that we are forced to battle and to bite such things—yet by faith and by spirit all such things are destroyed and torn up, so that they may no longer harm us! All this has been accomplished by this one Man, that our Lord Christ descended into hell; otherwise the world would never have been able to do it with all its powers to deliver any one from the devil’s bonds, nor to remove the pain and power of hell deserved by one single sin, even though all the saints went down into hell for even one person’s sin; rather all of them would have to remain there forever, whoever they might be that appeared on this earth, had not the holy, almighty Son of God in His own person descended thereto and by His divine power taken and destroyed it mightily! For to extinguish even a tiny spark of hell-fire is beyond the ability of Carthusian caps; the ropes of barefooted monks; or the sanctity of all monks; or the entire power and strength of all the world. But this takes care of it, that this man Himself comes down with His battle-flag. When that happens, an the devils must run and flee, as though death and poison were after them. All hell with its fire must be extinguished, so that no Christian need fear it further. At his death, he shall no longer suffer the pangs of hell, even as through Christ he no longer tastes death, but through death and hell passes to life eternal.”

### **The Teaching of the Reformed Church**

*Zwingli* seems to lean toward John Picus of Mirandola. Speaking of the Apostles’ Creed he says: “To be numbered with those of the nether regions means to have died, and that the *power* of His (Christ’s) redemption reached also to those in the nether regions. As St. Peter says: “to the dead, that is to those in the underworld, the Gospel was preached, who, following Noah’s example, have since the Creation believed God’s admonition, while the unbelievers rejected it.” He bases his contention also on John 3:13 and Colossians 1:18, maintaining that no one could have preceded Christ to heaven, since He has the priority in all things. He also simply declares the more noble infidels to be among those saved!

*John Calvin*, calling attention to the fact that none of the ancient fathers failed to refer to Christ’s Descent, however varied their interpretations of it were, insists on its importance relative to the whole act of Redemption, and that with its omission much of the fruit of Christ’s death would be lost. Unfortunately, he then falls into the error of saying that Christ, by descending into hell, also suffered the terrible soul-pangs of the damned and the lost. Quoting specifically: “Thus it occurred, as He grappled with the power of the devil, with

the terrors of death, with the pains of hell, that not only did He gain victory over them, but also celebrated a triumph, so that in death we need no longer fear what our Prince has destroyed.”

The great majority of the original symbols of the Reformed Church omit all reference to the Descent. Those few that do refer to it, do so only briefly. However, the *Geneva Catechism*, originated by Calvin in 1536, is extensive in its explanation of this doctrine. The essence of it is none other than the thoughts of our specific quotation above. *The 39 Articles of the Anglican Church* (1562) state in Article 3: “as Christ died for us and was buried, we must also believe that He descended into hell.” *The Heidelberg Catechism* asks in Ques. 44: “Why do we continue with DESCENDED INTO HELL?” and answers: “so that in my worst temptations I may be assured that my Lord Christ by His unspeakable fears, agony, and terror which also He endured in His soul on the cross and before that, has redeemed me from the fear and pain of hell.” *The Colloquium Lipsiacum* of 1631 has this in Article IX (Augusti, p. 395): “On either side, theology concedes the Descent of the Lord into Hell to be a difficult and serious article of faith, which may be grasped and understood by human reason as little as the article concerning His sitting at the right hand of God; and we confess that the whole Christ, God and Man, descended to hell, overcame the devil, destroyed hell’s power, and deprived the devil of all his might.” *The Greater Puritan Catechism* of 1648 answered the question “Wherein did Christ’s Humiliation after death consist?” in this manner: “Christ’s Humiliation after death consists in this that He was buried (I Corinthians 15:3, 4) and remained in the condition of the dead and the power of death to the third day (Psalm 16:10 with Acts 2:24, 25, 26, 27, 31; Romans 6:9; Matthew 12:40) which otherwise is expressed thus: He descended to hell (*ad inferos*).” We would note that the *Colloquium Lipsiacum* seems to agree with the Lutheran Confessions, if we are to judge it by its wording. Koenig points out, however that it has only inferior symbolic value for the Reformed Church. In general, the Reformed Church appears to be quite confused and vague about this doctrine.

Examining the doctrines of the Roman Church on this subject, we offer a few excerpts from the *Catechismus Romanus*, authorized by Pope Pius V. in 1566: “The descent was a triumph of Christ over devil and hell. After Christ died, His soul descended to hell (*ad inferos*) and remained there as long as His body was in the grave. Hell signifies those remote receptacles (*abditæ receptacula*) where those souls are kept (*detinentur*) which have not attained eternal salvation. The various places where souls are kept which after death have not attained salvation (no mention is here made of *Paradisus* and *Limbus Infantum*): 1) A horrible, dark prison (*Gehenna; abyssus inferum*) where the damned and unclean spirits are tormented; 2) *Purgatorii ignis*, where the souls of the pious are tormented for a time, that they may enter *aeternam patriam* where nothing unclean may enter; 3) Abraham’s Bosom, where the souls of saints before Christ remained in hope, without pain. There Christ liberated them when He descended into hell. Christ did not descend to suffer, but to liberate and to impart the fruit of His redemption. Before Christ died and rose, the portals of heaven were never open to anyone; rather the souls of the pious were after death dispatched either to Abraham’s Bosom, or purified by the fire of the place of cleansing, in case they had anything to reimburse or pay, even as it is the case at this time.”

Vincentius of Lerinum, that bellwether of Roman traditionalism and conformity, laid down the famous maxim: *Magnopere curandum est, ut id teneamus, quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.*

Thus, we are not at all amazed when we look into the fairly modern *Baltimore Catechism* and see the ancient errors perpetuated: Ques. 401: Whither did Christ’s soul go after His death? Ans.: After Christ’s death His soul descended into hell. Ques. 402: Did Christ’s soul descend into the hell of the damned? Ans.: The hell into which Christ’s soul descended was not the hell of the damned, but a place or state of rest called Limbo, where the souls of the just were waiting for Him. Ques. 403: Why did Christ descend into Limbo? Ans.: Christ descended into Limbo to preach to the souls who were in prison—that is, to announce to them the joyful tidings of their redemption. Ques. 404: Where was Christ’s body while His soul was in Limbo? Ans.: While Christ’s soul was in Limbo, His body was in the holy sepulchre.

We do suspect, though we are not able to put our finger on it, that the spirit of Nicolaus Cusanus is still at large in the Roman Church. It was he who maintained that Christ in the underworld suffered those eternal pains of hell which we had deserved. For, despite all appearance of conformity to the contrary, there are said to be more separate sects in the bosom of the Holy Roman Church than there are in all of Protestantism! The only real, serious mistake any Romanist can make is not to recognize the supremacy of *IL PAPA!*

## What Is the Importance of the Correct Understanding of Christ's Descent Into Hell?

Once we have grasped and accepted the *Scriptural* presentation of this doctrine, its value and importance to the Christian become overwhelmingly impressive. We cannot but call to mind here the line from the Easter hymn:

Now hell, its prince, the devil,  
Of all their power are shorn!

It is true that Satan and his forces are still very much to be reckoned with in the Christian's life. To ignore that fact could only contribute to spiritual somnolence and eventual disaster. Yet, in spite of his remaining great power; despite his wily, persistent temptations; despite the accusations which he raises against us continually before God—if only we adhere to Christ our Champion in true faith, we can be positive that Satan's designs on us are all futile; that there is ONE stronger than he, who is on our side and against whom he just cannot prevail! There, of course, is the whole secret of successful battle against the Prince of Hell.

No one knew and expressed that more clearly and forcefully than Luther. Stay with Christ, the devil's Master, and you are completely safe against the devil! Stray from Christ, either relying on your own spiritual strength, or following your evil lusts—and you have no adequate defense against the master strategist of evil! In the spiritual battles of the Christian life; in the massive, constantly recurring assaults of temptation; in the evil hours of depression and despair; in that last brief, decisive hour which precedes our entrance into eternity—there is nothing which furnishes us with such courage, such strength, such peace, such comfort—as the knowledge and conviction that Christ has taken the measure of the one who had sworn to see us body and soul in hell!

We believe that there is no clearer, better, more to the point presentation of the doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell than that of the *Concordia Cyclopaedia* of 1927. With a reading of it we should like to bring our efforts to a close: "A phrase, taken from the Apostles' Creed, by which the Scriptural teaching Col. 2, 16, Eph. 4, 9 and particularly 1 Pet. 3, 18–20 is summarized. The passage in First Peter is the *sedes* of this doctrine. It can teach us nothing less than that Jesus went into hell, the place of the damned. It was Christ, the whole Person, with body and soul, the same who (v. 22) 'is gone into heaven and is on the right hand of God,' that appeared in the prison-house. He had already been 'quickened by the Spirit,' had been made alive by virtue of His divine nature. Body and soul were reunited. He appeared in the prison-house after His quickening and before His resurrection, before His rising from the tomb. In this prison there were men like those who were disobedient in Noah's days, who would not listen to this preacher of righteousness. It was the place where lost and condemned spirits are. To them Christ preached. He could not have preached the Gospel of repentance to those lost spirits; for everywhere the Scriptures teach us that death ends the probation period of man. It was, then, the Law, the preaching of Judgment and eternal doom, that Christ proclaimed in hell. The preaching of Christ in hell was a triumphant proclamation of His victory over hell, over Satan, and over death. Cp Col. 2, 15. There is good ground for the Lutheran emphasis on the fact that Christ's descent into hell occurred after He had returned to life, body and soul again being united. If Christ had made the descent while His body was in the power of death, it could not have been a triumphant descent. But being made after His soul had returned to His body, His descent into hell proclaimed that the grave would not be able to hold Him, that He was the One who had the keys of death and hell and was alive forevermore" (Page 205).