

THE DESCENT INTO HELL¹

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I. The Biblical Basis for this Doctrine

The doctrine of the descent into hell is no common subject matter for sermons. It is given its ten minutes each year in confirmation class and that about does it. When someone in Bible class asks about the descent and when it happened, one tends to quickly stumble over the answer and then continue. This is not a teaching that should be pushed under the rug. It is a very comforting doctrine for the Christian.

For this doctrine to be the comfort that God intended, it must be properly understood. Even in Lutheran circles today there are a variety of ideas as to the meaning of the descent into hell. Helmut Thielicke, a German Lutheran theologian, discussing the descent writes,

By means of such suggestive, parabolic language, the New Testament goes on to point out one last idea which lies right at the limit of those things that can still be said at all. That is, it says that the gospel is proclaimed even to the inhabitants of the realm of the dead (1 Peter 4:6) and that Jesus Himself presses this far with the liberating word.²

To bring this confusion closer to home, *The Lutheran Book of Worship* has an asterisk printed following the phrase "He descended into hell" in the Apostles Creed. The asterisk is explained in the middle of the page, "Or, He descended to the dead."³ Thus two different understandings of this doctrine are allowed to stand side by side.

What is meant when we confess, "I believe in the descent into hell?" To answer this question one must look at the *sedes doctrinae* of this doctrine and other related passages. The *sedes doctrinae* for this teaching is found in 1 Peter 3:18-20.

¹⁸ ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς ἅπαξ περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἔπαθεν, δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων, ἵνα ὑμᾶς προσαγάγῃ τῷ θεῷ θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκὶ ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι· ¹⁹ ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν, ²⁰ ἀπειθήσασιν ποτε ὅτε ἀπεξεδέχετο ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ μακροθυμία ἐν ἡμέραις Νῶε κατασκευαζομένης κιβωτοῦ εἰς ἣν ὀλίγοι, τοῦτ' ἔστιν ὀκτῶ ψυχαί, διεσώθησαν δι' ὕδατος. ²¹ ὃ καὶ ὑμᾶς ἀντίτυπον νῦν σώζει βάπτισμα, οὐ σαρκὸς ἀπόθεσις ῥύπου ἀλλὰ συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς ἐπερώτημα εἰς θεόν, δι' ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ²² ὃς ἔστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ [τοῦ] θεοῦ πορευθεὶς εἰς οὐρανόν ὑποταγέντων αὐτῷ ἀγγέλων καὶ ἐξουσιῶν καὶ δυνάμεων.

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² Helmut Thielicke, *I Believe the Christian Creed*, p. 131

³ *The Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 65.

18. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh (in the sphere of His fleshly life), but made alive in the spirit (in the sphere of the new spiritual glorified life of the resurrection body):
19. in which (spiritual existence) also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,
20. who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark in which a few, that is, eight persons were brought safely through the water.
21. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you - not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience - through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
22. who is the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. (NASB)

According to this Scripture passage the descent is the first step of the Lord's exaltation, for while verse nineteen speaks of the descent, verse twenty-one speaks of the resurrection, and verse twenty-two of the ascension. The Just One, Who died for all having been put to death in the body, became alive with a glorified body; and in this existence descended into hell, arose visibly from the dead, and ascended into heaven. The first four steps of the Lord's exaltation are presented in this context.

Now a closer look at the descent must be taken. Verse eighteen states that Christ was put to death in the flesh. *θανατωθεῖς* is an aorist passive participle. *σαρκὶ* is a dative of reference. He was put to death with respect to, or in the sphere of His fleshly life. This ends the state of the Lord's humiliation. The next phrase which closely corresponds to the foregoing begins the exaltation, "but made alive in the spirit". Because of the parallelism in these two clauses, it is best to understand *πνεύματι* as a dative of reference like *σαρκὶ* and not consider it a dative of instrument referring to the Holy Ghost as is done by the New International Version. "Flesh" and "spirit" each without an article in the Greek show the successive conditions of our Lord's human nature in humiliation and exaltation (Rom. 1:3-4, 1 Tim. 3:16). Jesus was put to death with an earthly body like our body, but He became alive in the grave on the third day with a spiritual, glorified body.

It should be noted that many of the Lutheran dogmaticians and even Stoeckhardt understood "flesh" here as Christ's human nature and "spirit" as His divine nature. This is a possible interpretation, but one harder to maintain on the basis of the exegesis. This view demands that the parallel datives here be two different kind of datives, the first a dative of reference, and the second a dative of instrument.

The next clause, "in which also He went", refers to the new spiritual existence of the vivification. Then according to verse nineteen, with His new spiritual existence, that is, His glorified body, He went and made the proclamation to the spirits now in prison. Obviously this proclamation did not occur through the pre-incarnate Christ in the days of Noah as St. Augustine taught. Rather it is a going and proclaiming which took place after the vivification in the tomb. Also the Biblical teaching of the descent is not just a figurative way of saying that Christ endured the pain of hell on the cross as Calvin implied. It was a real happening which took place after He became alive.

φυλακῆ is an important word in this verse. It means “a place of guarding, a prison”. In Rev. 20:7 and 18:2 it is used for the place where the Devil and his angels are held until judgment. “It is used to denote a place of punishment also in Matt. 5:25. Luke 22:23, etc. Cf. 2 Pet. 2:4, and Jude 6, where it is written that the evil angels are ‘committed to pits of darkness’ and ‘kept in everlasting bonds under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.’”⁴ Because this prison is a place of punishment, it is not a *limbus patrum* where the Old Testament saints were to have awaited the Savior’s coming. Nor can “prison” here be equated with “*sheol*” in its general significance referring to the grave, meaning that Jesus went to the grave or He simply died. This is the implication of the alternative reading of the Creed in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Such a view is impossible because φυλακῆ, “prison,” can not have the meaning “grave” or “death”. Here it can only refer to that place of punishment prepared for Satan and his cohorts.

Christ descended to the prison-house of hell and made proclamation to the spirits bound there. These spirits were those who were disobedient or unbelieving in the days of Noah when he preached repentance. ἀπειθήσασίν can have the meaning “unbelieving” which best fits this context. Stoeckhardt translates, “*Die einst nicht geglaubt hatten.*”⁵ Peter is not saying that Jesus preached only to the unbelieving at the time of Noah, but they are representative of all the damned.

It is to be observed that ἀπειθήσασίν ποτέ κτλ., is not added attributively by means of a repetition of the article τοῖς, but predicatively without the article.... This is speaking grammatically; but it brings out the thought that Peter intends to say that Christ did not make herald proclamation to those only who were disobedient at the time of the flood, which thought would require τοῖς ἀπειθήσασιν (the article repeated), but to all the spirits in prison, all these being such as were disobedient (the participle is merely qualitative) when (to instance a notable case) the longsuffering of God waited no less than 120 years, waited in vain, before sending the judgment.⁶

Now what kind of proclamation did our Lord make to the damned in hell? Some believe He descended to preach the gospel giving the damned another chance to be saved. This is based on the fact that the word κηρύσσω is used at times in the New Testament for preaching the gospel. It is based also on a misunderstanding of ancient tradition, but most of all on the pious hopes of theologians.

While κηρύσσω is frequently used in connection with gospel preaching, it is not used in this manner to the exclusion of others (Rom. 2:21, Gal. 5:11, Acts 15:21). The basic meaning of this word is “announce, make known, proclaim aloud”. Those who believe this is gospel preaching feel they have a clinching argument in 1 Peter 4:6, “For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead” (NASB). However no time is specified as to when this preaching took place. It could have just as easily occurred while the individuals were still alive, and this must be the meaning of the passage for it to be in harmony with the rest of Scripture

⁴ S.C. Ylvisaker, “The Idea of a Probation After Death” *Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 23, p. 217

⁵ G. Stoeckhardt, *Kommentar über den Ersten Brief Petri*, p. 156.

⁶ R.C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude*, pp. 163-164.

truth. All that can be concluded from κηρύσσω is that Jesus descended into hell to make proclamation. What is proclaimed is not stated.

The whole context of this section in 1 Peter, on the other hand, points to a proclamation of condemnation. Peter admonishes the believers to suffer patiently as Christ did and thus they will also enter into His glory. They are to await His coming, when God's righteous judgment will come upon believer and unbeliever. Then the believer will go to glory while the unbeliever ends in destruction. A type of this judgment is the flood which the disobedient at the time of Noah endured (Matt. 24:38-39, Luke 17:26-30, 2 Peter 2:5). Now if they received a second chance in the descent, Peter has lost his basis for urging the Christians to be prepared for the judgment. Why should the Christian be so concerned about keeping his faith alive, if he too will have another chance to be saved in the next life. "The Apostle contradicted himself if he desired to make an earnest warning concerning the judgment, and still at the same time taught reassurance for all unscrupulous flesh, that a conversion was possible in the next life for those who were unrepentant here.⁷

Finally a preaching of salvation to the damned is contrary to what the Scriptures teach elsewhere about our time of grace and the judgment. No where is a chance for conversion after death spoken of in the Bible. Rather the Scripture declares, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27, NASB). Such an interpretation of this passage is opposed to the analogy of faith. Therefore we must conclude that Jesus here proclaimed condemnation and victory over Satan and his cohorts.

A number of related passages allude to this victory theme. In Ephesians 4:8-9 partially quoting Psalm 68:18, St. Paul writes, "Therefore it says, 'When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives and He gave gifts to men'. Now this expression, 'He ascended', what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?" (NASB) Many commentators understand this descent as the incarnation. But why then does the text say, "He descended into the lower parts of the earth". The incarnation does not fit. Here the Apostle uses figurative Old Testament terminology to say Christ descended into hell.⁸ Christ descended to hell as the Victor Divine, as the Triumphant One, in order to take possession of the keys of hell and death, leading captivity captive. In triumphant procession He made a public spectacle of the evil ones, triumphing over them by the cross (Col. 2:15). Death, hell, and Satan, He vanquished His foes. The descent confirms that He is *Christus Victor*, Conqueror of the Universe, Lord of Lords, and King of Kings.

II. This Doctrine as it has been Confessed by the Church

This second part of this paper will consider how the Church confessed this teaching drawn from the inspired Scripture. The earliest formal creedal confession of the descent is found in the Fourth Formula of Sirmium written in A.D. 359. It states that the Lord had "descended to the underworld [hell] (εἰς τὰ καταχθόνια κατελθόντα), and regulated things there, Whom the gatekeepers of hell saw and shuddered."⁹ According to historian Socrates its author had been

⁷ A. Hoenecke, *Dogmatik*, Vol. III, p. 135.

⁸ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians*, pp. 521-524.

⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, p. 378.

Mark of Arethusa, a Syrian. It seems then that the descent figured very early in Eastern creedal material, for it is also found in the doxology of the Syrian *Didascalia*. At the end of the fourth century it was part of the baptismal confession at Aquileia. It appears that only at the beginning of the seventh century was the descent accepted generally in the Apostle's and Athanasian Creeds of the West.

While the Sirmium statement is the first formal creedal confession of the descent, it is quite common in the personal writings of the apostolic and early church fathers. For example Polycarp of Smyrna martyred around A.D. 155 writes, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who endured to face even death for our sins, Whom God raised, having loosed the pangs of hades."¹⁰ Justin Martyr declares, "The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves: and He descended to preach to them His own salvation."¹¹ Irenaeus says, "He also descended into the lower parts of the earth to behold with His eyes the state of those who were resting from their labours, in reference to whom He did also declare to the disciples, 'Many prophets and righteous men have desired to see and hear what ye do see and hear.'"¹²

The church fathers of the first four centuries were united in their acceptance of Christ's descent into hell. They were, however, at variance as to the manner in which it occurred and the purpose which prompted it. Part of this problem can be traced to an intertestamental Jewish influence on the teachings of the apostolic fathers, as was the case with the millennialism of some of the early fathers. What especially caused havoc in doctrine of the descent was the confused ideas the fathers had regarding the period of time intervening between a person's death and judgment day, and the location where that time was spent. It was believed that all souls of those who died before the death of Christ were kept in the underworld. The pious as well as the evil had to live there, although not in the same manner. Even the patriarchs had not entered glory.

As a result of this false teaching, two different interpretations of the descent developed in the Early Church.

According to one, Christ was active during the mysterious three days preaching salvation or else administering baptism to the righteous of the old Covenant, according to the other, He performed a triumphant act of liberation on their behalf. The former found representatives in the author of the *Gospel of Peter*, St. Justin, St. Irenaeus, and Origin.¹³

The main difficulty facing the first line of thought was that the Old Testament faithful hardly needed to be converted, since they had foreseen Christ's coming. Also it was contrary to the Scriptures that the evil have a second opportunity for repentance in the otherworld. Hence the second view became established doctrine in the West. Christ descended into hell to defeat Satan and deliver the Old Testament saints. However during the period of the Ancient Church and Medieval Church there was always a few, especially in the East, who believed that the descent simply meant that Jesus was buried.

¹⁰ *Epistle Of Polycarp* 1.

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho* 72.

¹² Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 22:1.

¹³ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, pp. 380-381.

St. Augustine especially opposed the idea that unbelievers have another chance to be saved in the afterlife. From the time of St. Augustine, the doctrine of the descent was not materially altered until the dawn of the Reformation. What did develop was a trend toward greater departmentalization in the afterlife. It was divided thus: 1) *Limbus patrum* which was the abode of the Old Testament believers who were released by Jesus' descent into hell. 2) *Limbus infantum*, the abode of infants who died without baptism. 3) *Purgatorium* where the believers awaited final and complete cleansing.¹⁴ The basic error of the Ancient and Medieval Church regarding this doctrine was that they did not understand, that the soul of the believer both in the Old and New Testament went directly to be with the Lord in heaven as Jesus' words to the thief on the cross show, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43, Eccl. 12:7, NASB).

With the Reformation there was a renewed study of this doctrine. Calvin, the chief representative of Reformed theology, taught that the descent into hell was merely symbolic language meaning that Christ endured the suffering of hell on the cross. Speaking of this phrase in the Creed he writes,

After explaining what Christ endured in the sight of man, the Creed appropriately adds the invisible and incomprehensible judgment which He endured before God, to teach us that not only was the body of Christ given up as the price of redemption, but that there was a greater and more excellent price - that He bore in His soul the tortures of condemned and ruined man.¹⁵

This view of Calvin finds expression in the Heidelberg Catechism, the basic teaching manual of the German Reformed Church. Interestingly enough, one of the composers of this Catechism was Zacharias Ursinus, a student of Melancthon. Question forty-four of the Catechism asks, "Why is there added: 'He descended into Hell.'" It is answered, "That in my severest tribulations I may be assured that Christ my Lord has redeemed me from hellish anxieties and torment by the unspeakable anguish, pains, and terrors which He suffered in His soul both on the cross and before."

This figurative view of the descent into hell has no foundation in the Creed or the Scripture. Christ indeed endured the pain of hell on the cross, but this has nothing to do with the descent. 1 Peter 3:19 speaks of a real going to the spirits in prison just as verse twenty-one speaks of a real resurrection and verse twenty-two speaks of a real ascension. One of these can not be taken figuratively without implying that the other two are also figurative.

The Reformation centered in Wittenberg was also interested in the doctrine of the descent into hell. Yet there is a confusion about what Luther actually taught concerning this doctrine. For example Luthardt, a member of the Erlangen school, implied that Luther continually fluctuated in his teaching concerning the descent. This, however, can not be proven from the facts. Rather we see a change in Luther's view from his earliest years to that of his later years. This same progression can be seen in many of his other teachings. He did not come to a clear

¹⁴ G. Struck, "Christ's Descent into Hell" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 57, p. 186.

¹⁵ J. Calvin, *Calvin's Institutes*, Vol. II, Chapter 16, par. 10.

understanding of every doctrine over night. It took time to grow in the knowledge of the Scripture.

The young Luther saw the descent as part of Jesus' suffering. In "A Sermon on Preparing to Die" (*Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*) in 1519, Luther writes,

So then, gaze at the heavenly picture of Christ, who descended into hell for your sake and was forsaken by God as one eternally damned when he spoke the words on the cross, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani! - My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?' In that picture your hell is defeated and your uncertain election is made sure."¹⁶

Luther is here saying that the descent into hell is Christ enduring the punishment of hell in our place. It is difficult to say whether Luther at this time believed in a literal descent into hell. This statement could certainly be understood as saying that the descent is Christ suffering the pains of hell on the cross. From Luther statements like this one, Aepinus later developed the idea that the descent is part of Jesus' humiliation.

In both of Luther's commentaries on 1 Peter, he sees no connection between 1 Peter 3:19-20 and the Lord's descent into hell.¹⁷ He says that this passage is difficult and obscure. If someone chooses to hold that after Christ's death on the cross, He descended to the souls and preached, he (Luther) would not stand in his way. Luther himself, however, would rather hold that these passages refer to Christ preaching through the office of the public ministry after His ascension. Jesus is proclaiming even now through the preaching of the gospel to the souls dead in trespasses and sins. This view obviously, does not take 1 Peter 3:19-20 as a literal going down to hell. Yet this is the only way 1 Peter 3:19-20 can properly be understood.

In all fairness to Luther, there are statements in his writings where he makes the connection between the 1 Peter passage and the descent. Veit Dietrich, in his 1545 edition of Luther's commentary on Hosea, has him say,

It appears that Peter explains this descent when he says in 1 Peter 3:18ff. that Christ died for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order that he would bring us to God. He was, indeed, put to death according to the flesh but made alive according to the spirit. In the same, He in spirit, came and preached to those who were in prison, who were once unbelieving when one waited on the patience of God at the time of Noah, while the ark was being constructed. Here Peter clearly says that Christ appeared not only to the dead fathers and patriarchs, some of whom Christ, as He arose, no doubt raised with Himself to eternal life; but that He also preached to some who at the time of Noah did not believe and waited on the patience of God, that is, who hoped God would not deal so harshly with all flesh. He (Christ) did this preaching in order that they might know that their sins were forgiven through the sacrifice of Christ.¹⁸

¹⁶ LW 42, 105. St. L. X, 1991-1992. Also see W. Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, p. 249.

¹⁷ The first commentary on 1 Peter 3:19-20, written in 1523, is found in LW 30, 112-114. St. L. IX, 1077-1080. The second commentary on 1 Peter 3:19-20, written in 1539, is found only in St. L. IX, 1243-1246.

¹⁸ St. L. VI, 1224.

This quote shows that Luther eventually saw the connection between the 1 Peter passage and the descent. Concerning the second half of this quote, however, there is a certain amount of confusion. There are some who see in this statement a reverting to Medieval theology. Luther is supposed to be saying that Jesus descended to release the Old Testament saints from *limbus patrum* and that He gave the unbelieving before the flood another chance to be saved. Yet this statement can just as easily be understood as Jesus taking bodily to heaven those who became alive at His death. Notice not all are raised only some. Also the soul is not mentioned in this context, but the terminology implies a resuscitation of the body (*zum ewigen Leben erweckte*). Jesus, then according to Luther, did not take the souls of the Old Testament saints to heaven, but some Old Testament believers who were already in heaven were united with their bodies and raised to eternal life. His appearing to all the saints took place in glory.

In the same way, to imply that the last part of this quote is teaching another chance of salvation for the unbelieving at Noah's time seems to be reading more into the context than Luther says. It is simply stated that Jesus proclaimed to the damned that their sins were forgiven through His sacrifice. It does not say that they were saved. Rather Jesus shows them the utter stupidity of their unbelief. Now He had won salvation for them but it would do them no good.

The teaching of the mature Luther concerning the descent into hell centers in his Torgau Sermon of 1533.¹⁹ Here he states his beliefs about this article of faith which remained his confession for the rest of his life. It is this sermon that Article IX of the *Formula of Concord* uses to settle the controversy that later developed among Lutherans. Luther says,

I believe in the Lord Christ, God's Son, dead, buried, and descended to hell, that is, in the whole person God and man, with body and soul, undivided, born from the Virgin Mary, suffered, died, and buried. Thus I should not divide here either, but believe and say that the same Christ, God and man in one person, descended to hell. He did not however remain there as Psalm 16:10 says of Him, 'You will not leave my soul in hell, nor let it happen that Your Holy One sees corruption'. He does not mean by the soul, according to the language of the Scripture, as we do, a being separated from the body; but the entire man, as He calls Himself the Holy One of God. How this may have happened that the man lies there in the grave and still descends into hell; that we should and must leave unfathomed and unexplained.²⁰

Luther confesses that the entire person of Christ descended into hell and not just part of Him, but how that occurred he leaves a mystery. The final sentence of this quote could be understood as saying Jesus descended into hell while His body remained in the tomb, but earlier in this quote Luther says that Jesus descended with both soul and body.

Luther, likewise, clearly expresses the purpose of the descent:

¹⁹ "Eine Predigt über den zweiten Artikel des christlichen Glaubens von Jesu Christi", St. L. X, 1088-1139.

²⁰ St. L. X, 1128-1129.

The simplest manner of speaking of this article is to adhere to the words and remain with this chief part, that for us hell was torn to pieces through Christ, and the kingdom and the power of the devil completely destroyed; for which purpose He died, was buried, and descended, that it should no more harm us or overcome us as He Himself says in Matthew 16:18. For even though hell in itself remains hell and holds the unbelieving prisoners, as does death, sin, and all misery, so that they must remain therein and perish, and we ourselves, also, according to the flesh and the outer man fear and are hard pressed so that we must fight and bite such things; still in faith and the Spirit are all such things destroyed and torn up, that they can no more harm us.²¹

According to Luther, Jesus descended into hell to proclaim His complete victory over the forces of hell. Here is the comforting assurance that Christ tore hell apart for us. We are free from the terrible grasp of the Old Evil Foe who now means deadly woe.

Shortly after Luther died, controversy concerning this doctrine broke out in the city of Hamburg. It centered in Johann Aepinus who was born in Ziesar, Brandenburg and educated in Wittenberg. In his position of ecclesiastical superintendent at Hamburg, he presented the view that Christ completed His suffering for mankind by bearing the ultimate to which sinners are condemned, when He descended into hell and suffered in agony. For Aepinus the descent was part of Christ's humiliation rather than exaltation. He believed that Jesus descended to suffer for sin. The argument against his view was that it conflicted with Christ's words from the cross, "It is finished." The work of salvation was completed on the cross, therefore no more suffering for sin was required. The city council asked the advice of certain northern German theologians concerning this matter and when still no agreement could be reached, they called on the opposing parties to desist from public controversy. The controversy was suppressed in Hamburg, when Aepinus died in 1553.

The controversy also carried over to other parts of Germany. In Pomerania it centered in Jacob Thiele. "A synod held in July 11, 1554, at Greifswald made it a point expressly to deny that the descent of Christ involved any suffering of His soul, or that it was of an expiatory nature, or that it was identical with His burial."²² In southern Germany, Parsimonius, the court preacher in Stuttgart, denied that hell was a definite physical locality and that the descent involved a local motion of the body. He was opposed by John Matsperger of Augsburg.

With this situation in the Lutheran Church, it was considered necessary to clarify this doctrine in the *Formula of Concord*. Article IX of the Formula, which speaks of the descent, simply reiterates what Luther taught in the Torgau Sermon of 1533. The fathers confess,

We simply believe that the entire person, God and man, after the burial descended into hell, conquered the devil, destroyed the power of hell, and took from the devil all his might. We should not, however, trouble ourselves with high and acute thoughts as to how this occurred; for with our reason and our five senses this article can be comprehended as little as the preceding one, how Christ

²¹ St. L. X, 1130.

²² F. Bente, *Historical Introduction to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, pp. 194-195.

is placed at the right hand of the almighty power and majesty of God; but we are simply to believe it and adhere to the Word in such mysteries of faith.²³

The Epitome of the *Formula* raises a series of questions,

When and in what manner the Lord Christ, according to our simple Christian faith, descended to hell; whether this was done before or after His death; also whether it occurred according to the soul alone, or according to the divinity alone, or with the body and soul, spiritually or bodily; also, whether this article belongs to the passion or the glorious victory and triumph of Christ.²⁴

The purpose of formulating these questions was not a caution against engaging in unnecessary disputation concerning such matters, but to present the *status controversiae*. These questions the writers of the *Formula* hoped to answer in a God-pleasing manner.

They declare that the entire Christ, God and man, after the burial descended into hell. Here they explain when and in what manner Jesus descended. It was the entire Christ, humanity and divinity, soul and body. Not just a part of Christ descended. Since it was the total Christ who was active, the descent had to have occurred after the vivification. The authors of the *Formula* show that the descent is part of Jesus' exaltation and not the passion when they state, "We know that Christ descended into hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and delivered them from the power of death and the devil, from eternal condemnation and the jaws of hell."²⁵ Finally the *Formula* shows, that this doctrine is not just the hair splitting of ivory tower theologians, for it gives us the comfort that hell and Satan can no longer take us captive or harm us.²⁶

Robert Kolb in *A Contemporary Look At the Formula of Concord* implies this. Luther is to have taught, that Christ in the descent, suffered hell for sinners and that He triumphed through His suffering for them. Melanchthon, on the other hand, stressed only one part of Luther's understanding and excluded the other. He saw the descent only as a triumphant victory march and separated Jesus' victory from any thought of suffering. It was this view of Melanchthon that found its way in the *Formula*.²⁷ On the basis of the Torgau Sermon, where the mature Luther presents his doctrine concerning the descent, there seems no reason to make the rift between Luther and Melanchthon that Kolb implies. In the Torgau Sermon, Luther made no connection between the descent and Christ's suffering. He speaks of it as a victory march like Melanchthon.

Today this article of faith is still being attacked. There is the view of individuals like Thieliicke who believes that the descent implies a preaching of the gospel to those in the realm of the dead. But far more dangerous is the rationalistic Reformed view lurking behind the ambiguous phrase, "He descended to the dead". Using this phrase nothing is stated about the literal going to the place of the damned. Rather it merely speaks of Jesus' condition after His death, the fact that He died. Such an interpretation is quite acceptable to those who have already rejected the

²³ FC SD IX, 2-3.

²⁴ FC Ep IX, 1.

²⁵ FC Ep IX, 4.

²⁶ FC SD IX 3.

²⁷ R. Preus and W. Rosin, *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, p. 56-57.

doctrine of hell or at least have a hard time swallowing it. Yet, not only does this view make the Creed redundant, for then He died means the same as the descent, but it is also totally contrary to the exegesis of 1 Peter 3:18-20.

III. The Importance and Comfort of this Doctrine

This doctrine taught in Holy Scripture and confessed by the Church is indeed an important and comforting doctrine for the Christian. One thinks of the Easter Hymn:

“Welcome, happy morning!” Age to age shall say;
 “Hell today is vanquished, Heaven is won today!”
 “Lo, the Dead is living, God forever more!”
 Him, their true Creator, All His works adore.
 “Welcome, happy morning!” Age to Age shall say;
 “Hell today is vanquished, Heaven is won Today!”
 (TLH: 202 vs. 1)

Luther says, “Through Christ, hell has been torn in pieces and the Devil’s kingdom and power utterly destroyed, for which purpose He died, was buried, and descended, so that it should no longer harm or overcome us.”²⁸

The descent assures us that our redemption is complete. Not only did Jesus crush the power of Satan on the cross, but as the Conquering One, He even entered hell, the very capital of the Evil One, showing that He was completely victorious.

Christ descends to hell as Victor, as the Triumphant One, in order as it were, to take into His possession the keys of hell and death, to disarm the principalities, powers, and dominions, to make a show of them openly, and to organize a triumphant procession with them as captives (Col. 2:15), to take captivity captive (Ps. 68:18), to set the seal on man’s redemption from hell and his salvation from death, to be a poison for death and a plague for hell (Hos. 13:14). In short, to show Himself as Victor and Conqueror of death, Satan, and hell.²⁹

As the ancient generals would parade through defeated capitals dragging their enemies behind them in chains, so the Victor Divine marched victorious through hell having made a public spectacle of His enemies, triumphing over them by the cross. Death, hell, and Satan, He vanquished His foes. Now we know that the power of Satan is crushed and our salvation is certain. Nothing further is needed for our redemption.

This does not mean the Devil is completely powerless today. He is still a force to be reckoned with in the Christian’s life. The Scripture states, “Your enemy, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8 NIV). That wounded Lion still walks today. But no longer are we defenseless before him. Because we have shared in Jesus’ victory through baptism, we have the God given power to overcome the Old Evil Foe who madly seeks

²⁸ St. L. X, 1130.

²⁹ G. Doehler, “The Descent Into Hell” *The Springfielder*, Vol. 39 p. 9.

our overthrow. As we strengthen our baptismal faith through regular use of Word and Sacrament we are able to resist the temptations of the Devil. Satan indeed rages and the Christian may fall many times, but as certainly as Christ conquered hell so we may be certain that Jesus will give us the power to overcome through the means of grace.

Here there is comfort also for our last hour. At that time hell will make the last great attack. It places before the Christian's eyes the multitude of his terrible sin so that he will despair and be swallowed up forever. Yet as the Christian closes his eyes in death he has confident hope, because Jesus in the descent tore hell apart and crushed the kingdom of darkness so that it can no longer hold us.

The victory and triumph of the Lord Christ in hell was the subject of the last words of Elector Joachim II of Brandenburg in the night before his death in January of 1571. The Elector spoke much concerning this matter. In it he found comfort and joy in the face of all attacks (*Anfechtungen*) and accusations of the conscience.³⁰

This comfort and assurance of the Elector is offered to every Christian. Christ descended into hell proclaiming his redemptive victory which destroyed Satan's power over us. He disarmed the powers and authorities and made public spectacle of them. By unity with this great Victor, through Word and Sacraments, the Old Evil Foe can harm us none in this life and at our last hour the dark jaws of hell will be closed, for heaven is our Fatherland, heaven is our home!

³⁰ K. Göschel, *Die Concordien Formel*, p. 125.

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