# The Descent of Christ Into Hell
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## Introduction

The Scriptural stand that Lutherans take concerning the descent of our Savior into hell is one that sets us apart from all other churches that claim to be Christian. It is also one that cannot be relegated to the dead file of non-essentials, nor can it be reinterpreted in the questionable "light" of modern theological thinking. In this presentation, may God the Holy Spirit grant us new firmness in maintaining the plain and simple understanding of this doctrine, and may He grant us its wonderful comfort in a troubled and uncertain world.

The presentation is divided into three sections, and although there may be some overlapping between them, the essayist found this division the most helpful for his study of the material:

I. EXEGETICAL—DOGMATICAL
II. HISTORICAL—CREEDAL
III. COMPARATIVE —CONTEMPORARY

## Part I

This doctrine has its *locum classicum* in I Peter 3:18-20. In order to see the content of this teaching most clearly, we shall spend time on a detailed study of these verses.

In the immediate context of this chapter (vv. 13ff.), Peter is speaking by inspiration of the sufferings that Christians may have to endure for their trust in Jesus. After asking, "Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?" he proceeds to the comforting assurance that even when Christians are persecuted and suffer for doing good they are blessed. He urges dedication to the Lord Jesus, and that Christians be ready to give answer (KJV—but note: ἀπολογίαν —NASB!) by reason of the hope that is in them (v. 15).

He emphasizes the importance in all this of a clear conscience. The Christian's conscience is clear because his sins are washed away and the record is clean. This is a very important and wonderful part of our peace with God (Rom. 5:1). A clear conscience also implies walking carefully and avoiding what would again burden the conscience with guilt. Therefore Peter urges resisting sin, and conducting oneself with gentleness and reverence (vv. 15-16a). The result in life will be that those who revile the Christian's good behavior will be put to shame. The positive is also stated by our Lord Jesus, namely, that we through good works glorify our Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

Peter urges cheerful submission to God's will, for He may permit Christians to suffer in order to accomplish His gracious purposes (Rom. 8:28; 11:31-33).

This section (18-20) is part of a larger sentence, vv. 18-22. [1] It is connected to the context by ὅτι καὶ, here translated "for ... also" or "because ... also." This usage is the paratactic causal commonly found in Pauline writings. [2] Verses 18-22 are thus joined to verses 13-17. The powerful statements that follow have a causal relationship to the encouragements Peter offers in the preceding verses. What follows is ample motivation for cheerful submission to God's will, bearing troubles patiently and keeping a stout heart in Christ, our Lord, when troubles strike.

ἅπαξ here is an actual number, "once," though not necessarily in the "once for all" sense as in Heb. 9:23. The significance of the word in context is seen when it is connected with the third word following. The Nestle text has ἀπέθανεν "died," while the *Textus Receptus*, basis for the King James, has ἔπαθεν, from πάσχω, to suffer. The variant is understandable in view of the similarity between the words, but like other variant

readings of the New Testament, produces no change in thought. πάσχω, according to Arndt and Gingrich, [3] also carries the idea of suffering unto death (Luke 22:15; Acts 1:3; 3:18; I Cor. 12:26; Heb. 9:26). The other word is, of course, more direct, and has both textual and contextual weight for its use here.

The significance of the word, whether one chooses ἔπαθεν or ἀπέθανεν, lies in its aorist tense. This is the constative aorist and definitely connotes an end to that suffering before the event described in our text. All aorists are punctiliar in force, [4] but the constative aorist treats a past action as finished regardless of the length of time involved in that action. [5] The use of οἰκοδομήθη in John 2:20 is another example of such an aorist, where 46 years of work on the Temple are summed up in that tense. The importance of the aorist tease in the verbs here cannot be overstated, as will be seen in other parts of the presentation.

The reason for this suffering by the Savior was ἁμαρτῶν, sins, here in the genitive with περὶ. The connotation of περὶ is substitutionary or vicarious, after verbs that denote punishing, as well as several other uses. [6] This is especially true when used with ἁμαρτία (Rom. 8:3; Gal. 1:4; cp. also LXX Lev. 9:23; 14:19). The word "our" is added in the Clementine Vulgate (1592) and the Syriac Peshitto (fifth century A.D.), and may be considered the pious interjection of a copyist.

The substitutionary idea is further reinforced by a simple comparison of who was involved: The Righteous for the unrighteous. The preposition ὑπὲρ is here used with the genitive of person. There are abundant examples of this use in the very same thought in the New Testament (Mark 14:24; Rom. 5:6,8; I Cor. 1:13; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:25; etc.). The contrast here points out the innocence of the Lamb of God (John 1:29), who could not even justly be accused of sin (John 8:46), let alone proved guilty of it. He is also specifically called the "Righteous" (I John 2:1; cp. Jer. 23:5). This comparison also emphasizes the sin of the human race, for whom our Jesus died, bearing the very sins of the human race in His own body (I Peter 2:21-24). The ἄδικοὶ, human beings, are worthy of death and damnation (Rom. 6:23), but the Righteous One was delivered once for all the sins of men (Heb. 9:28; Rom. 4:25). This act of sacrifice was completed on the cross (John 19:30).

The next phrase, ἵνα ὑμας πρός ἀγαγη τῷ θεῷ, describes the purpose of that sacrifice, "that He might conduct you to God." προσάγω, also used in Ephesians 3:12, has the thought of being conducted into a royal presence. In this case, being conducted to the presence of the true and living God. The verb is an aorist subjunctive, the clause is a purpose clause. The verbal antecedent to this phrase is "died." There are no significant variants here. ὑμας "you," is written ἥμας, "us," in the Hesychian and other Mss., but the former is more consistent with the other pronouns used in this text. τῷ θεῷ is omitted in Codex Beza, but the thought would not be complete without it.

Peter is summarizing Jesus' atoning work, the result of His sacrifice for sinners. Since God declares the world righteous, the wall between God and man is removed (Rom. 4:5; 5:9; 8:30; I Cor. 6:11). This summary clearly closes the reference to the humiliation of the Savior. There is a definite break in thought, making this description separate from what follows, making the further description not part of the Atonement, but proof of its success.

Now Peter moves on, giving what follows in point of time. Again death is mentioned, but this time by way of sharp contrast to the miracle of revival. These words and the next verse form the heart of the text. θανατωθεὶς is an aorist passive participle, again denoting completed action. ζωοποιηθείς is also an aorist passive. The contrast is as sharp as possible, and is significant, as are the two datives, σαρκί and πνεύματι. On the one hand we have the passive obedience of Christ, even unto death (Phil. 2:8), and on the other, the reviving miracle of God (Acts 4:10). The word ζωοποινθείς is not rare in the New Testament, and refers to bringing spiritual life (John 5:21; 6:63; I Cor. 15:22,36,45; II Cor. 3:6; Gal. 3:21), and also physical life (Rom. 8:11— Abraham's body, though "dead" as far as bearing children was concerned, yet came to life and fathered Isaac).

The force of the datives are the subject of much controversy among commentators. Lenski [7] takes them as datives of means. Prof. Dau of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, has a different view. He takes them as datives of reference. The following paraphrase illustrates this: "He was put to death with respect to the flesh, and revived with respect to the spirit" (Note: not God the Holy Spirit).

This is Dau's comment (from classroom lectures):

> In the first place, we must know that the two datives are the same, have the same force in both cases; again, that they are not datives of instrument, but of reference. And secondly, σαρκί and πνεύματι cannot denote merely flesh and spirit, body and soul, not the two natures of the God-man as such, but they must denote the two modes of existence of the God-man, the former, His physical existence in a natural body, the latter, His spiritual mode of existence in a glorified body.[8]

Lenski speaks of the vivification as occurring *by means of* the human spirit which was reunited with the body of Christ in the tomb. No doubt he means that it was by means of the *reuniting* that Christ revived. We should also not translate "spirit" with a capital "S" because the force of the datives is the same, and one cannot be agent while the other is referential. The reference here is not to the divine nature of the God-man, which could not die and therefore would need no revival, but to His true humanity, with respect to which He really died and really revived.

Dau's view is clearly patterned after Luther, who had the same view of these datives.[9] Schaller takes the datives differently from the others, holding that Christ was put to death according to His human nature and revived *according to the strength of the divine*.[10] Both Lenski's and Schaller's views are not wholly satisfactory, for they leave room for the idea that the *Person* Christ Jesus did not descend into hell. In addition, those views do not take into account the fact that the two datives are the same.[11] It is preferable, therefore, to take the force of the datives consistently, for with this understanding it is clear that He descended into hell, not alone according to His divine nature, but whole and entire, the revived and glorified Savior, true God and true man in One Person.

The nature of the *communio naturarum* makes it possible to be definite on this point. So Hoenecke:

> *Die communio naturarum in der Person Christi is die innigste Gemeinscbaft beider Naturen, in welcher der λόγος mit seiner goettlichen Natur die menschliche Natur so vollstaendig durchdringt und sich aneignet, dasz die menschliche Natur ebenso vollstaendig seine menschliche Natur ist, wie die goettliche Natur seine goettliche Natur ist.*[12]

On this point, Hoenecke cites John 1:14 (The Word was made flesh—i.e. God *became* man, did not just unite Himself to some man); Col. 2:9 (For in Him dwells all the fulness of Deity in bodily form—NASB—note: *all* the fulness); Heb. 2:14 (Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself also partook of the same.)

The union of the two natures, intimate and complete, make it impossible for a fragmented Christ to have descended into hell.

Verse 19 gives the details of what the Savior did in this descent. ἐν ᾧ refers to His glorified state, and is a dative of circumstance. In this glorified mode of existence, He went and "preached to the spirits in prison." (τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν). πορευθεὶς is an aorist participle, a single act of going, not by a special method or operation, but locally going to a real place. The place is the "prison" of spirits, that is, hell (Matt. 5:25; 11 Peter 2:46). φυλακῇ cannot mean other than the eternal abode of the damned, who receive this as the reward for unbelief (Mark 16:16). The emphasis here is not upon the state of death into which He entered upon the cross, but His act of preaching to the spirits in hell.

What was the content of His message? κυρύσσειν means to proclaim, or herald, and is often used with εὐαγγέλιον, to "herald the Good News" (Matt. 4:23; Mark1:14; 13:10; Gal. 2:2; I Thess. 2:9), or to "herald the Christ" (Acts 8:5; 19:13; I Cor. 1:23; 15:12; II Cor. 4:5). But the word in and of itself does not mean to preach redemption through Christ. It is also used in other connections. Most often the object of heralding is named, and

in other cases the context determines the force of this verb. It also has as its object the Word (Mark 1:45); the "acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19); and the Law (Matt. 3:1; Acts 15:21; Rom. 2:21).

God's Word allows of no second chance after death, under any circumstances, at any time (Mark 16:16; Heb. 9:27; Luke 16:19-31). Therefore it could not be the Gospel that formed the content of the Savior's proclaiming to the spirits in prison. Noah (II Peter 2:5) is also spoken of as a herald, and the content of his proclaiming was surely the impending judgment of God upon unbelieving men. In addition, when Peter speaks of preaching the Gospel, he uses εὐαγγελίζεσθαι (I Peter 1:12; 4:6). The latter passage, by the way, cannot be used in this connection because it refers to the general proclamation of the Promise by Moses and the prophets. It does not refer to this proclamation.

It is clear that Peter's interest here is more the fact of Christ's proclamation than the content of it. Another passage that sheds light on the matter is Colossians 2:15, where Paul points out that our Savior publicly put to shame the forces of death and hell. He had a triumph in the ancient manner, as it were parading the defeated enemies of God and man before Himself. The statement of Paul is so significant because the Scriptures mention no other opportunity this side of His Second Advent that the Savior takes to do this.

Verse 20 names some of the souls that heard His glorious announcement of victory to their very great terror and consternation: "Such as were disobedient then when the long-suffering of God kept waiting in Noah's days while the ark was being constructed, in which few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through by means of water."

πότε ὅτε is not a limitation of τοῖς πνεύμασιν. To regard it as such raises unanswerable questions, such as "Why does the proclamation apply to them and not to others?" The Gospel message was plain to Adam and Eve. The opportunity to repent and believe the promise has always been before the human race. All are without excuse. If there were such a limitation, there would have to be a third dative article in this phrase. ἀπειθήσασιν is the aorist of ἀπειθέω, "disobey." The people of antediluvian times are excellent examples of unbelief, resistance to God the Holy Spirit. The length of time that God gave them from the announcement of the Flood to the execution of that judgment was 120 years (Gen. 6:3), during which time He eagerly waited (ἀπεδεχέτο, from, ἀπεδέχομαι, to await with eagerness and patience) for their repentance. The word itself expresses well God's earnest desire that all people should repent and believe the Gospel (Ezekiel 33:11; I Tim. 2:4). Examples of unbelief are used elsewhere in Scripture to illustrate the circumstances attendant to unbelief and its consequences, and to warn (Matt. 10:15; Rom. 9:29; Jude 7; II Peter 2:6—but note the weakness of this comparison with the text under discussion; Lot was saved *from* fire, not by means of it).

κατασκεναζυμένης is a present passive participle, the historic present.[13] This usage indicates the ark- was being built continually while the proclaiming of Noah was going on, leaving the unbelieving world wholly without excuse for rejecting the promise.

Peter says that "few" were saved, a thought that should greatly comfort the "little flock" of believers in this troubled and uncertain world. The contrast between the number saved in the ark and the number who perished is most striking in view of an assertion by Whitcomb and Morris that the world population was at least 1,030 millions when the Flood occurred.[14]

We note, too, the distinction made between ψυχαί who were saved by means of water and the πνεύματι in prison, hence the translation above for the former word, "persons." The former word refers to living people in this case, body and soul together, while the latter refers to the spirits in hell. The phrase is later used by Peter to point out the marvelous power of Baptism.

To sum up the thoughts of the text, we cite Kretzmann's comments:

> This quickening was made in the spirit, or with respect to the spirit, that is, in the new glorified state, in which Christ, in His transformed and glorified body, lived, acted, and moved about, came and went as a spirit. In this spirit, in this new spirit-life, glorified and exalted, Christ, the

God-man, according to His soul and body, retaining His flesh and blood in a glorified form, went forth, as our triumphant Champion, in to the abode of the damned and of the devils.[15]

The questions raised in studying this text may be grouped into the following categories:

1. As to the nature of the Descent—was it a deed of our Lord or further suffering? The Scriptural answer is that it was a deed. His work of atoning was finished (John 19:30; Luke 24:26), and His descent was a triumph (Rev. 1:18; Col. 2:15). His soul did not suffer in hell, for He committed it into His Father's hands (Luke 23:46), and like the souls of His believers, it entered Paradise (Luke 23.43). The devil could not in any way have claimed power to hold Him in his abode (I John 3:8), for his power was destroyed.

2. As to its proper place in His work—does it belong to His humiliation or exaltation? The way the matter is stated in I Peter 3:18, there is a clear separation and progression between the death of Christ and His revival. His humiliation ended with His death and burial. There is also no justification for holding that this was merely a transition between the two states.

3. As to time—when did it occur? The statement of Peter makes a clear list of events. The *vivificatio* of the Savior took place before His resurrection (the word used in the wider sense here including also appearances outside the tomb). He lay in the grave for the full time He predicted (Matt. 12:40; 26:61; 27:40,63; Mark 8:31; 15:29; John 2:19,20). It would seem, therefore, that it is proper to say, in keeping with Scripture, that the Savior revived, descended, and left the tomb in a very short space of time. It is certain that He did not spend any length of time in hell!

## Part II

The facts presented above are interpreted in many different ways, and it has ever been thus. The Descent into hell has been regarded by Lutheran teachers since Luther himself as the first step in Christ's exaltation. It has been said that Luther vacillated on this doctrine, an accusation that seems true upon examination of his writings. Around 1517, he admonished his hearers in a sermon on being prepared for death, "*dasz Christus um unsertwillen ist zur Hoelle gefahren und von Gott verlassen gewesen; und in dem Bild ist ueberwunden deine Hoelle.*" Later he spoke of the Descent into hell in the sense of the Second Article and included it with the Resurrection in the exaltation of our Lord. In expounding Psalm 56:5, he later made the comment *Christi anima post mortem inter daemones fuerit*. He says little about the Descent in the Large Catechism, but explained it at length in his Easter sermon of 1533.[16]

Luther's comments on this matter are interesting. Below are a few examples:[17]

The words sound first as if Christ preached to the spirits, that is, the souls who were unbelieving when Noah built the ark. Still, if anyone would hold that Christ, after He had died on the cross, had descended to the souls and preached to them, I would not resist. 1077 (65)

But the words may well also give such an understanding that the Lord Christ, after He ascended to heaven, had come in spirit and preached.... The text does not give the idea that He descended, when He had died, to the souls and preached to them. 1077 (66)

The meaning here is that Christ no longer preaches physically, but is present with the Word and preaches to the spirits spiritually in the heart. 1077 (68)

Upon careful second and even third readings, it will become clear that he is saying what he should be saying on the basis of Scripture. Elsewhere in this same area he makes the comparison between the preaching of the Apostles ("fleshly preaching") and Christ's spiritual indwelling following the coming to faith in the announcement of the Gospel, and that the descent of Christ must be understood in the same way as the preaching: spiritually. In spite of the ease with which these statements may be misunderstood, the Reformer reached the same conclusion on the basis of the text that we do:

... the entire person, God and man with body and soul, undivided, "born of the Virgin, suffered, died, and buried;" In like manner I must not divide it here either, but believe and say that the same Christ, God and man in one person, descended into hell, but did not remain in it."[18]

Later Lutherans were more definite. Quenstedt states it definitely and succinctly:

*Descendit Christus in infernum non secundum divinam naturam, secundum hanc enim jam ante in inferno per dominium omnia replens erat, et* πόρευσις *ista* I Peter 3,18 *praecise sumpta et ut est motus de* ποῦ *sepulcri ad* ποῦ *inferni, divinae naturae, quae per se est illocalis et immobilia, non convenit. Descendit ergo Christus secundum humanam naturam.*[19]

Among others of the Reformation era, Beza and Bucer took *descensus* as "burial," holding that as the Lord was physically in the state of death by burial of His body, so His soul entered into death by descending into hell. He was thereby brought under the Law of death (but cf. Luke 23:43—*Today* shalt thou be with Me in Paradise!). Aepinus, a pastor at Hamburg, held with Flacius that Christ descended into hell to suffer. Others, such as Schleiermacher, have held to a mystic interpretation, the figurative sense in which the Reformed Church takes it. [20]

The descent into hell was also present in early creedal affirmations of the early Church, although specific mention of it is not nearly so common as its omission. Dr. Bente's historical introduction to the Triglotta recognizes that the version of Bishop Marcellus of Ancyra is the oldest extant (ca. 337 A.D.) and that it does not contain the words, "descended into hell." [21] The following ante-Nicene formulae do not mention the *descensus* either: The creeds of Ignatius of Antioch (107), Irenaeus (180), Tertullian (200), Cyprian of Carthage (250), Novatian of Rome (250), Origen of Alexandria (230), Gregorius Thaumaturgus of Neo-Caesarea (270), Lucian of Antioch (300), and Eusebius of Caesarea (325). Admittedly, these are in some cases fragmentary, but in each case, their statements about the Savior, true and false, are intact. In addition, some of the short creeds appear in up to three forms, each omitting mention of the Descent. Post-Nicene creeds include those of Cyril of Jerusalem (350), and Epiphanius (374). The latter is in two forms, one of which is very much like our present Nicene Creed, with a number of additions. Neither of these, however, mention the Descent into hell.

It is most likely that this doctrine was not in dispute when these creeds were formulated. The present Nicene Creed was complete earlier than the Apostles', even though the nucleus of the Apostles' Creed dates from an earlier time than the Nicene. [22] The *forma recepta* of the Apostles' Creed, dating from about the time of Bishop Faustus of Reji (460), includes the statement of the descent. [23] The Old Roman form, coming from the time of the Council of Nicaea, 325, omits it. The forms of the Apostles' Creed according to Rufinus (ca. 390) and Fortunatus (ca. 570) contain this statement, but Rufinus adds the note:

*Sciendum sane est quod in Ecclesiae Romanae Symbolo non habetur additum "descendid ad inferna:" sed neque in Orientiis Ecclesiis habetur his sermo: vis tamen verbi eadem videtur esse in eo quod sepultus dicitur.*[24]

Schaff maintains that the *forma recepta* of the Apostles' Creed dates from the sixth century or later, in contradiction to the view mentioned above. [25] Another early reference comes from the Fourth Synod of Sirmius (359).[26]

The addition of mention of the *descensus* to the Apostles' Creed took place over a long period of time. What we are seeing in this, however, is not a formation of doctrine, but a growing awareness of the place and importance of the *descensus* in our Savior's life and work. It would not be amiss to point out that Christians then were moved to make the same defense of doctrine that we are in an age of heterodoxy.

Another point of view is represented in the following quote from Schaff:

*Descendit ad inferna*, first found in Arian Creeds about A.D. 360; then in the Creed of Aquileja, about A.D. 390; then in the Creed of Venantius Fortunatus, 590, in the Sacramentarium Gallicum, 650, and in the ultimate text of the Apostles' Creed in Pirminius, 750.... The article of the descent is based upon Peter's teaching, Acts 2:31 (He was not *left* in Hades, consequently He *was* there): I Peter 3:l9; 4:6; and the promise of Christ to the dying robber, Luke 23:43 ("today thou shalt be with Me in Paradise") and undoubtedly means a self-exhibition of Christ to the spirits of the departed. The translation, "descended into hell," is unfortunate and misleading. We do not know whether Christ was in hell; but we do know from His own lips that He was in Paradise between His death and resurrection. The term Hades is much more comprehensive than Hell (*Gehenna*), which is confined to the state and place of the lost.[27]

Especially interesting are Schaff's comments in his Creeds of Christendom, Vol. II p. 46. The use of Scripture in the portion quoted above shows how even learned men may misunderstand if their theological bent interferes with the simple reading of the text. In commenting critically on the text of the Apostles' Creed, he casts doubt upon the portion of Scripture from which the statement "He descended into hell" is taken.

The confusion regarding this doctrine is far from over; rejection of it, interpretation that obscures its plain meaning, and simple ignorance of it are as common today as ever. The final section of this paper will indicate how this is the case.

## Part III

The classic Reformed approach to this doctrine is best described as figurative. Calvin identified this descent with Christ's entire humiliation and suffering, especially with His great suffering in Gethsemane and on the cross. [28] This is also the Reformed position today. [29] The significance attached to these words is that Christ's suffering is great enough to atone for sins, and is therefore also a comfort in affliction and temptation. The proclamation mentioned in I Peter 3 is taken by many to refer to pre-incarnation preaching by the Logos in the days of Noah. This view is comfortable for the reason, as is so much in the Reformed system of doctrine, but it is definitely unscriptural, and must therefore be rejected as a denial of the plain Word of God.

The classic Roman approach to this doctrine has been that Christ descended to hell, [30] but according to His soul only, [31] in order to liberate the souls of Old Testament believers from the Church-fostered *limbo patrum*. [32] A new wrinkle, however, is given in the Authorized Edition of the *Dutch Catechism*. The following are excepts from that book of instruction for adults:

> "He descended into hell" ... is an affirmation on which we are not inclined to dwell nowadays. It is an article of faith which remains very much in obscurity. We should understand why this is so. The language used reflects a picture of the universe which is not ours. For the Jews, and also for the heathen Greeks, death meant disappearing in "*Sheol*," "Hades," "the underworld," "the realm of the dead." It is not the place of evildoers, but the realm of death where all are imprisoned, good and evil alike ... the expression "descended into hell" is obviously composed of elements which are no longer part of our world of thought ... by saying that he "descended into hell," Christians affirmed that he was really dead. It meant the humiliation of being dead, of being cut off from life ... it was thought that God no longer cared about those who were confined in *Sheol*. It is now revealed that the Lord is with us even in death ... that is the first meaning of "descended into hell," the mystery of faith of Holy Saturday. But there is another aspect to be considered.... Jesus ... joined the great mass of the dead ... the Church ... imagined (Jesus) as announcing the redemption, immediately after his death, to the mass of the dead.... The dead who "waited"

receive their salvation.... Having entered into death, our Lord stoops down to mankind's dead, to give them life for ever.[33]

Little could beat this interpretation for vagueness. In the total context of this article, it can easily be seen what an influence Neo-orthodoxy has had upon Roman doctrine. This new catechism presents both ancient Romanism and new ideas in parallel. The result is confusion.

In the preparation of this essay, the writer corresponded with several church bodies concerning this doctrine. This question was asked of them: "Do you accept the event described in I Peter 3:18-20 as literal, and what significance do you attach to the words?" The answers received were both interesting and perplexing; as expected in some cases and unexpected in others.

From Samuel W. Shane, Associated Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America:

> The United Presbyterian Church has actually not taken a position on the interpretation of First Peter 3:18-20. I am sure there are possibly a variety of interpretations by the professors of theology in our various seminaries.... Officially, to the best of my knowledge, we have no position on this passage. I agree with a sentence in the *Layman's Bible Commentary*, which reads, "However we may interpret this difficult passage, we must agree that it lies on the periphery of Christian truth."

Rev. Shane also mentioned that his seminary notes indicated an interpretation that is common to bodies with a Calvinist background. He said that some professors preferred the idea of a proclamation between the death of Christ and his resurrection, while his own professor preferred the Calvinist position, preaching done in the days of Noah by the pre-incarnate Logos, according to John 1:10.

From Rev. William P. Brink, Stated Clerk of the Christian Reformed (Dutch Reformed) Church, based in Grand Rapids, came this more definite statement:

> The Christian Reformed Church interprets Christ's descent into hell as a description of his agony on the cross. In this light the *Heidelberg Catechism* asks the question, "Why is there added 'he descended into hell'?" The answer is given, 'that in my greatest temptations I may be assured, and wholly comfort myself with this, that my Lord Jesus Christ, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agony in which he was plunged during all of his sufferings, but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell." (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 16, question 44).
>
> With respect to I Peter 3:18-20, we do not in any sense interpret these verses as referring to a descent of Jesus into hell. We rather consider this to be a statement referring to the pre-incarnation preaching of the gospel of redemption to people who in the days of Noah and other early times rejected these promises.

Matthew Henry, the Bible commentator, has a similar doctrinal bent, and calls the idea of a literal descent into hell by Christ the pretense of popish expositors.[34]

W. T. Purkiser, editor of the *Herald of Holiness*, official organ of the Church of the Nazarene, sent several copies of pages from H. Orton Wiley's *Christian Theology*, which that body regards as their definitive work in dogmatics:

> As through the incarnation, the Son of God took upon Him flesh and blood and thereby entered the state of human life, so in the *descensus* He entered triumphantly the hitherto unknown state of the dead.

In Wiley's work, the positions of the Reformed and Lutheran teachers are also presented. The brief comment above shows at least where the author stands on the matter. Whether there is uniform acceptance of what he says among the members of the Church of the Nazarene is questionable.

From George G. Beazley, Jr., President of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), comes this unique comment:

> Perhaps a slogan used by our early preachers, "No creed but Christ; no book but the Bible," may lead you to an understanding of the fact that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) does not have an official doctrinal statement to which members are expected to give allegiance. Therefore there is no Disciples doctrine on the descent of Christ into hell. It has not been customary in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to repeat a formal statement of faith, not even the Apostles' Creed, so that most of our people would be unacquainted with this doctrine, and, I think, would find it repugnant, unless it was explained to them in a rational fashion agreeable to their mindset.... It is my own personal opinion that the translation of this passage in the Apostles' Creed to read "he descended into hell" is a very misleading translation of the Greek, since Hades in the Greek Terminology merely means Death.... Each Disciple would be free to make his own interpretation.

Mr. Beazley maintained throughout his communication that since there was no official statement to which Disciples subscribe, what he was presenting was personal judgment, and could not be considered representative of his group.

From Myron F. Boyd, member of the Board of Bishops of the Free Methodist Church of North America:

> Our church has no official statement regarding the matter of Christ's descent into hell. We do take all matters pertaining to Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming as literal, so I infer that we take this Scripture literally. I know personally that is the way I believe it.

No doubt the press of time and work prevented Bishop Boyd from expanding upon his statement concerning the Free Methodist acceptance of these statements as literal. Such acceptance is heartening to hear, and one would expect that simple acceptance of the plain words of Scripture would lead their church to the same conclusion that we reach on this doctrine.

The United Methodist Board of Missions replied that there was no statement available of the type requested. The latest doctrinal statement will not be available until later this year. The United Methodist official quoted in a recent Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly gives what is probably their position on this doctrine: "United Methodism in doctrinal lockstep is unthinkable."

The well-known Armstrongs of Ambassador College and widespread radio exposure also take this literally, but hold that the preaching was done in the days of Noah. Mr. Wilbur Berg of their staff kindly offered to answer any questions I had in the future on this or other scriptures.

Prof. J. C. Wenger, who teaches Historical Theology at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, quoted a work that he has written:

> The present writer is inclined to hold that some of these passages from the epistles do teach that Jesus entered the State of the dead and established contact with those who were deceased, though for what purpose is not clear. There is of course no suggestion in this discussion that the Lord offered salvation in the afterlife to anyone who had died unsaved.

The Christadelphians do not believe in a literal hell, and so hold that the translation "hell" is incorrect, and refers only to the grave.

The Apostolic Overcoming Holy Church of God of Mobile, Alabama, sent no reply, which was disappointing. Not only are they one of the larger holiness groups, but people who put that much into the name of their church body must have some zeal.

The quotes above represent a cross-section of modern American theological thought. As you probably noticed, there is no such thing as a uniform approach to this doctrine, within individual church bodies, and between those bodies. Sometimes this is by accident; other times by design. They make it clear that there is an abundance of ways to read Scripture, but generally, the Lutheran-Reformed-Roman distinction holds true with only minor variations.

## Conclusion

Is the cosmopolitan approach to this doctrine permissible? Does it indeed lie on the "periphery of Christian truth?" When the Lord makes such a statement as He has concerning His descent into hell, we are bound to accept it. It is not in any way a development of Church-teaching in the human sense.

Shall we overlook this doctrine in preaching and teaching? Certainly it is to be included in Catechism instructions, for children and adults alike. This text appears in one text series, the *Hannover Pericopes*, on the Day of Ascension. But it would be very much in place in a series on the Catechism, or for comfort and encouragement in trouble. This doctrine, like that of eternal election, may be a difficult thing, but it, too, is beautiful.

It is in one way a stern warning against unbelief and opposition to the Lord Jesus. The foolish hope of the unbelievers is that somehow they can escape God's judging power, if indeed they recognize that authority. But hell itself saw the glorified Savior. He publicly put to shame all such who oppose and reject Him. He proved the foolishness and deadly character of their delusions. Truly the gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church built upon this almighty Cornerstone!

At the same time, this doctrine, accepted with child-like trust in Jesus, is a solid and wonderful comfort for believers. This mighty, conquering Lord Jesus is *our* Lord. For us in the ministry, when the minions of hell seem to be gaining inroads into our field of labor, we can look to Jesus, who put hell to shame. In our personal lives, troubles may increase; but Jesus put hell to shame. We can offer this comfort with great joy to our fellow believers. The Savior keeps His promises; He is almighty; He proved the success of His atoning work for us. That is the heart of this doctrine: Comfort and confidence. *Jesus put hell to shame!*

*Soli Deo Gloria*

## APPENDIX — Various translations of I Peter 3:18-20

*King James*:
18. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit;
19. by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison;
20. which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, what is, eight souls were saved by water.

*American Standard Version*:
18. Because Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God; being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;
19. in which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison,

20. that aforetime were disobedient, when the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.

*Revised Standard Version*:
18. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit;
19. in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison,
20. who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

*The New American Bible* (Roman):
18. The reason why Christ died for sins once for all, the just man for the sake of the unjust, was that he might lead you to God. He was put to death insofar as fleshly existence goes, but was given life in the realm of the spirit.
19. It was in the spirit also that he went to preach to the spirits in prison.
20. They had disobeyed as long ago as Noah's day, while God patiently waited until the ark was built. At that time, a few persons, eight in all, escaped in the ark through the water.

*Confraternity Version* (Roman):
18. Because Christ also died once for sins, the Just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God. Put to death indeed in the flesh, he was brought to life in the spirit,
19. in which also he went and preached to those spirits that were in prison.
20. These in times past had been disobedient when the patience of God waited in the days of Noah while the ark was building. In that ark a few, that is, eight souls were saved through water.

*The Jerusalem Bible* (Roman):
18. Why, Christ himself, innocent though he was, had died once for sins, died for the guilty, to lead us to God. In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life,
19. and, in the spirit, he went to preach to the spirits in prison.
20. Now it was long ago, when Noah was still building that ark which saved only a small group of eight people "by water," and when God was still waiting patiently, that these spirits refused to believe.

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[4] Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 832.

[5] *ibid.*

[6] Arndt and Gingrich, *op. cit.*, p. 650.

[7] Lenski, R. C. H., *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude,* Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1945, p.159.

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[13] Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 880.

[14] Whitcomb, John C. and Morris, Henry M., *The Genesis Flood,* Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1967, p. 26.

[15] Kretzmann, Paul E., *Popular Commentary of the Bible,* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, Vol. II, p. 533.

[16] Hoeneck, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 133.

[17] Walch, *op. cit.*, Vol. IX (precise locations given with each quote)

[18] Laetsch, Theodore, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 123

[19] Hoenecke, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 136.

[20] Meusel, Carl, *Kirchliches Handlexikon,* Leipzig: Verlag von Justus Naumann, Vol. III, p. 345.

[21] Laetsch, Theodore, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 122.

[22] cp. with n. 21.

[23] Kretzmann, Paul E. "Christ's Descent Into Hell with the Nicene Creed," *Concordia Theological Monthly,* Vol. VII, No. 1 (Jan. 1936), pp. 51-52.

[24] Rufinus is incorrectly explaining that *descendit ad interna* means "buried," an unnecessary redundancy in the Creed. Schaff, Philip, *Creeds of Christendom,* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, Vol. II, p. 50.

[25] Schaff, Philip, *History of the Christian Church,* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, Vol. II, p. 532.

[26] Meusel, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 344.

[27] Schaff, *op. cit.*, (*Creeds*) Vol. II, p. 532, n. 3.

[28] Calvin, Jean, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Vol. II, 16:8ff.

[29] *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 16, question 44

[30] See Appendix, Various Translations, fourth, fifth and sixth translations.

[31] So Bellarmin—Laetsch, Theodore, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 122.

[32] Roman Catechism, paragraphs 100-105.

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