The Timing of Christ's Descent to Hell in Relation to the Apostles' Creed

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The Timing of Christ's Descent to Hell in Relation to the Apostles' Creed is the title of this essay. The theme assigned to the essayist suggested the following questions: When did the descensus ad inferos, descent to hell, of Christ take place? Into what state of Christ's life does the descensus in the Apostles' Creed Belong? When was this article of faith incorporated into the Apostles' Creed? What controversy had the greatest effect on the tying of this article in the Creed?

The essayist does not intend to speak on all the aspects of Christ's *descensus* but only on those articles that may affect or may have affected the understanding of the timing of Christ's descent to hell in relation to the Apostles' Creed.

This presentation is divided into two sections although there may be some overlapping between them.

I. Exegetical - Dogmatical

II. Historical - Creedal

Caution! The timing of Christ's descent to hell approaches a gray area about which the *Formula of Concord* in its first and second parts gives warning:

Since this article (Christ's descent to hell), as also the preceding, cannot be comprehended by the senses or by our reason, but must be grasped by faith alone, it is our unanimous opinion that there should be no disputation concerning it, but that it should be believed and taught only in the simplest manner. — How this occurred we should not curiously investigate, but reserve until the other world, where not only this point, mystery, but also still others will be revealed, which we here simply believe, and cannot comprehend with blind reason.ⁱ

May the Holy Spirit guide us with the Word in the truths of Christ's descent to hell, keep us in its comforting message, and lead us to understand and teach its timing in the Apostles' Creed correctly unto the glory of God the Father:

Section I

The timing of Christ's descent to hell must first be gleaned from the inspired Word of God. The Apostles' Creed is subject to the Holy Scriptures. Let us then proceed to the *sedes doctrinae* of the above article of faith which we also confess in the apostles' Creed. It is recorded in I Peter 3:18ff. To check on the timing of the Apostles' Creed let us enter into an exegesis of I Peter 3:18&19.

ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς ἄπαξ περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν [ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν] ἀπέθανεν, δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων, ἵνα ὑμᾶς προσαγάγη τῷ θεῷ, θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκὶ ζωοποιηθεὶς, δὲ πνεύματι 19 ἐν ὧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν Φυλακῆ πνεύμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν ii

Translation

For Christ also died once for [our] sins, the Righteous One for the unrighteous, in order that He might bring us forward to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit ¹⁹ in whom He also went and preached to the spirits in prison.

We are jumping into the middle of Peter's first inspired address to Christians who were suffering many trials. The context, however, is not one of sorrow or just "keep a stiff upper lip" attitude, rather one of triumph. Peter assures believers that suffering for doing good is not intrinsically bad. In fact, he says that they are blessed (vl7). Because of Christ's triumph on the cross we with a clear conscience can glorify the Father unto eternal life even if that means suffering for doing good as our Savior once did (Rome 5:1, Mt. 5:16).

In verse 18 the Gospel brightly shines upon us, especially if we closely examine the Greek. The King Jams Version has followed the Textus Receptus which has $\xi\pi\alpha\theta\epsilon\nu$, from $\pi\alpha\sigma\chi\omega$, to suffer. The Nestle text has $\dot{\alpha}\pi\dot{\epsilon}\theta\alpha\nu\epsilon\nu$, "died," which the NIV, NASB, and the AAT also follow. The latter word seems to have the most textual support although there is no significant change in thought. In fact, $\pi\alpha\sigma\chi\omega$, according to Arndt and Gingrich, also carries the idea of suffering unto death. iii

The περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν gives the reason for our Savior's death. The implication of περὶ is substitutionary or vicarious after verbs that denote punishing. The words ὕπερ ὑμων, or "our," are added in the Clementine Vulgate (1592A.D.) and the Syriac Peshitto (fifth century A.D.) and may be considered a pious addition of a copyist.

The substitutionary idea is further intensified. by the next phrase: "the Righteous One for the unrighteous." Professor John Jeske recently commented on this phrase by writing:

Christ died unjustly because He was *dikaios*. But His suffering and death were not, let it be said, forced on Jesus against His will. Recall His words, "I lay down My life—No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself" (Jn. 10:17ff). And just because Christ's obedience was willing, the Father was pleased with it and accepted it as satisfaction for the accumulated guilt of a world of sinners. "

The next phrase describes the purpose of our Lord's sacrifice, "that He might bring you forward to God." "We are brought to God (aorist, effectively, actually) when we who are unrighteous are by faith in Christ's vicarious expiation justified and declared righteous." What a wonderful Savior we have! His perfect life and innocent death have conducted us into a friendship and fellowship with the almighty Father. The final phrase of verse 18, θανατωθείς μὲν σαρχὶ ζωοποιηθείς δὲ πνεύματι, is part of the key in understanding the timing of Christ's descensus in the Apostles' Creed. θανατωθείς, having been put to death, is an aorist passive participle as also is ζωοποιηθείς. The picture is one of completed action. These two participles are connected by μέν and δέ, which, however, do not mean "although" (concessive) and "but" (adversative), but: "on the one hand—on the other hand" (balance, correlation). The two participles are to be contrasted as sharply as possible with the same force. The same is true also for the two datives, σαρχί and πνεύματι, about which more must be said later. So 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, ζωοποιηθείς, in the New Testament refers to bringing a spiritual life and also a physical life. Verse 18 then, brings to our attention that there was a making alive or a "vivification" before the descensus. Hollatz therefore writes:

ζ ω οποίησις, or quickening, is Christ's liberation from death and the reunion of soul and body, by which Christ, according to His flesh, began to come again to life. xi

Someone might key off this word and say that the timing of Christ's descent to hell in the Apostles' Creed is wrong, for a reviving from the dead took place first. More will be stated on this thought after the exegesis.

The meaning and direction of the two above datives are the subject of much controversy and have proved themselves as a veritable *crux theologorum*. While the controversy on the interpretation of the datives

does not suggest any changes in the literal timing of the Apostles' Creed, it does raise a dispute as to whether the *descensus* belongs to Christ's state of humiliation or to Christ's state of exaltation. In this way then, the timing of Christ's descent to hell also comes under question.

The King James Version translates $\pi\nu\epsilon\dot{\nu}\mu\alpha\tau\iota$, "spirit," with a capital "S." However, as noted above, the force of the datives is the same. It would be poor exegesis to make one dative an agent and the other referential. Schaller follows that pattern with the KJV. He holds that the datives point out that Christ was put to death according to His human nature and revived by the virtue of the divine nature. Note how the force of the datives change! Lenski identifies $\sigma\alpha\rho\kappa\iota$ and $\pi\nu\epsilon\nu\mu\alpha\tau\iota$ as datives of means; "put to death by means of flesh, vivified by means of spirit." He talks about the vivification occurring by means of the human spirit reuniting with the body of Christ. While the KJV, Schaller, and Lenski do not create some false teachings with their interpretations, they do leave the door open to those who believe that the whole Person of Jesus Christ did not descent to hell. If the latter were true, as many do believe, then the timing of Christ's *descensus* in relation to our understanding and teaching of the Apostles' Creed would be affected, because the *descensus* would become part of Christ's humiliation.

The majority of the Lutheran theologians after the Reformation took "in the flesh" to mean "according to the human nature" and "in the spirit" to mean "according to the divine nature." However, how can one say that Jesus descended according to His divine nature when $\zeta \omega \sigma \pi \sigma \eta \theta \epsilon i \varsigma$ clearly shows that the human nature also shared in the descent?"

Differently, Luther, Thomasius, Hofmann, Pieper, and others have understood σ αρχί in I Peter 3:18 as it is used in Hebrews 5:7, where "In the days of His flesh" designated Christ's mode of subsistence during His earthly life. ^{xvi} In correlation, they then understand $\pi \nu \epsilon \dot{\nu} \mu \alpha \tau \iota$ as a designation of Christ's spiritual life in a glorified body to which ζ ω οποιηθείς belongs. ^{xvii} Thomasius thus writes:

Put to death according to the flesh, that is, according to His earthly, physical mode of subsistence; quickened according to the spirit, that is glorified according to the spiritual mode of subsistence: thus, in the might of His life, taken out of death He went to preach to the spirits in prison. This is the sense of our passage. xviii

Of course, the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ enables us and directs us to follow this last interpretation of the datives in this passage. Those who rationalize the hypostatic union of Christ often stray from the Bible's simple statements. Quenstedt follows the antirationalism of the hypostatic union as any Bible reader should, and therefore he writes this for us:

"Christ, the God-man, and therefore His entire person (and hence not only according to His soul, or only according to His body), after the reunion of soul and body, descended to the very place of the damned, and to the devils and the damned manifested Himself as conqueror. For the descent, since it is a personal action, cannot be ascribed otherwise than to the entire person of the God-man. And, as in the Apostles' Creed it is said of the entire God-man that He suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, so also it is said of the same that He descended into hell." The descent is, very naturally, predicated of Christ, the God-man, i.e., it is taught that Christ, the God-man, was for a time in hell; but the descent itself is predicated only of the human nature of Christ. "Christ descended into hell, not according to His divine nature; for, according to this, He was in hell before, filling all things through His dominion... Therefore, Christ descended, according to His human nature. For the predications $\theta avat \omega \theta \epsilon i \varsigma \sigma apx i$ and $\zeta \omega \sigma \omega \eta \theta \epsilon i \varsigma$, belong to the human nature alone. six

It seems preferable then not to refer πνεύματι as the divine nature of the God-man, because divine nature cannot die and does not need any quickening. Rather it speaks of Jesus' true humanity in reference to which He really was made alive. ** Christ 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. ** Indeed, when the passage of the *descensus* is understood in this consistent manner, the timing of Christ's descent to hell in the Apostles' Creed properly begins His state of exaltation.

Contrary to the above, many Romanists follow Bellarmin's (ca. 1400 A.D.) interpretation that "flesh" means "body" and that "spirit" means "soul." This limited interpretation stems from paralleling verse 18 with Psalm 16:10. For them the *descensus ad inferos* in the Apostles' Creed is timed as the end of Christ's suffering and pain. But the next verse (19) and. Colossians 2:15 give no such indication that we should time the *descensus* with Christ's suffering.

Verse 19, as just noted, also has something to say for our understanding of the timing in the Apostles' Creed. The verse begins with ἐν ῷ to tell us that Jesus descended in His glorified state. It is a dative of circumstance. πορευθείς is an aorist participle pointing out that Jesus really completed His act of going. Where did He go? φυλακῆ means "prison," and it is another word for hell as noted in Matthew 5:25 and II Peter 2:4&5. It is also a very real place and not as many of the Reformed teach. They claim that Christ's *descensus* is only to be taken in a figurative sense and time it as part of His humiliation. This is still their understanding as many others do with the timing of the *descensus* in the Apostles' Creed. Rufinus (ca. 390 A.D.) timed the *descensus* of the Apostles' Creed in apposition to the burial. He talks as if the *descensus* is an unnecessary redundancy in the formula. *xxiii*

What did Jesus do in hell? He went to μηρυσσείν or to proclaim or to herald. Colossians 2:15 clearly describes how Jesus preached. He did not go to preach the Gospel and give the spirits' another chance to be saved as some interpret (Origen, Marcion). Rather, Jesus went to publicly shame hell. The Lord triumphed over them in the ancient manner. He paraded the defeated enemies of God and man before Himself. Paul's comments on Christ's *descensus* are important. He talks about a time of triumph and glory and not one of suffering and pain. Paul, then, as also Peter, by inspiration directs us to time Christ's descent to hell with the Lord's exaltation when we confess the Apostles' Creed.

Before summarizing the conclusions of the first section, it was stated above that more should be said on the timing of the *vivificatio* of the Savior. When was Jesus made alive in His glory to descend is the question. The Bible points out that Jesus' spirit at the time of His death went into the hands of His Father (Lk. 23:46). It also declares that on the same day of His death Jesus was in paradise (Lk. 23:43). In addition, we have every reason to claim that Jesus lay in the grave for the full time He predicted (Mt. 12:40, 26:61, 27:40&63; Mark 8:31; Jn 2:19&20). Finally, there is Peter's record that makes it clear that Jesus was vivified and descended for a very short time before he appeared to man. Does this mean then, that we should change the Apostles' Creed to proclaim "on the third day He arose again from the dead; He descended into hell?" Indeed, there is no need for such a radical change. But we should remember that the term "resurrection" is used either restrictedly or comprehensively. The Apostles' Creed uses the latter. Quenstedt comments to this point as he writes:

The moment of time of the descent is according to I Peter 3:19, the time that intervened between the quickening and the resurrection of Christ, properly so called. To the assertion, that the descent preceded the resurrection, and therefore did not succeed the vivifying, Holl, (668) replies: "A distinction must be made between an outward and an inner resurrection. The former is the going forth from the sepulchre, and the outward appearance to men, and is described in the Apostles' Creed; the latter is the quickening itself." xxvi

In conclusion to the first section from the above thoughts, it seems that the timing of Christ's descent to hell in relation to the other articles in the Apostles' Creed is Scriptural and proper. Likewise, it is Scriptural and

proper to teach the timing of the *descensus* in the Apostles' Creed with Christ's state of exaltation because our Lord had finished His atoning work (Jn. 19:30, Lk. 24:26) and His descent was one of triumph (Rev. 1:18, Col. 2:15).

Section II

The second section of this presentation has been categorized as the historical-creedal part. In considering the timing of the *descensus* in relation to the Apostles' Creed so far we have answered only the first two of the introductory questions, but now lot us consider the next two. When was the *descensus* incorporated into the Apostles' Creed? When did the controversy on the timing of this article in the Apostles' Creed reach its peak?

The article of Christ's descent to hell in the Apostles' Creed has a very unusual history. The timing of its entrance into the Apostles' Creed is somewhat uncertain. We do know that the *descensus* of Christ was recognized very early in the congregations. Irenaeus (ca. 170 A.D.), a disciple of Polycarp, a disciple of John, mentions the descent. Clemons Alexandrinus (ca. 202 A.D.), distinguishes it from the suffering, death, and burial of Christ. Augustine (ca. 400 A. D.) says "*Qui nisi infidelis negaverit apud inferos fuisse Christum*?" (Who but an infidel would deny that Christ was in hell?)^{xxvii} Although we would disagree with their teachings on the subject, Marcion (ca. 150 A.D.) and Origen (ca. 230 A.D.) also preached about Christ's descent to hell.

However, if we would consider the historical development of the Apostles' Creed formula, we would note that the *descensus* was more commonly omitted than mentioned. Dr. Bente's historical introduction to the *Triglotta* recognizes that the confession of Bishop Marcellus of Ancyra is the oldest extant (ca. 337 A.D.). Yet it does not contain the confession of Christ's descent to hell. **xxviii** The following early formulae in the development of the Apostles' Creed also make no mention of Christ's descent to hell: the creeds of Irenaeus of Gaul (ca. 170 A.D.), Tertullian of North Africa (ca. 230 A.D.), Origen of Alexander (ca. 230 A.D.), Cyrian of Carthage (ca. 250 A. D.), Novatian of Rome (ca. 250A. D.), Gregorius Thaumaturgis of Neo-Ceasarea (ca. 270 A.D.). **Xxix** While we wouldn't agree with all the doctrines presented in these creeds and while many are fragmentary, yet their statements about the Savior seem intact. Some *formulae* even appear in several different forms and still do not mention the *descensus*. Furthermore, we should also remember that today's accepted text of the Nicene Creed along with the post-Nicene creeds of Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 350 A.D.) and Epiphanius (ca. 374A.D.) also make no mention of Christ's descent to hell.

According to Schaff, *descendit ad inferna* was first found in the Arian Creeds of the East, about A.D. 360; then in the Creed of Aquileja, about A.D. 390; then in the Creed of Venantius Fortunatus, about A.D. 590; then in the Sacramentarium Gallicanum, about A.D. 650, and finally, in the ultimate text of the *Symbolum Apostalicum* of the Benedictine missionary Pirminius in Rome, about A.D. 750. **xx**

Contrary to all above, Paul E. Kretzmann states that the final accepted form was that of Bishop Faustus of Reji (ca. 460A.D.) who included the article, "He descended into hell." Paul Koenig brings forth even another viewpoint. He states that it was bout 359 A.D. when the *descensus* was incorporated into the accepted from. This is the date of the Arianic Council of Sirmium where the church confesses its faith in "the only-begotten Son of God,—who suffered, was crucified, and descended into the underworld, or hell, causing the door-keepers of hell to tremble at His sight." Viewpoint in the confesses its faith in "the only-begotten Son of God,—who suffered, was crucified, and descended into the underworld, or hell, causing the door-keepers of hell to tremble at His sight."

It appears that this article of faith was not in contention, or it was at least very quietly debated as the creeds were formulated. However, the timing of its entrance into the formula is surrounded by the Arian controversy. Perhaps, its entrance may have been encouraged by the Arians, rightly or wrongly, for they were confessing the *descensus* in some of their creeds.

Indeed, the timing of when the *descensus* became incorporated into the accepted formula of the Apostles' Creed has an interesting history. Nevertheless, its history of being omitted and reappearing brings forth no evidence that its very literal position in the Apostles' Creed was ever shifted from its present location. Its placement within the various Christian *formulae* and the now *forma recepta* of the Apostles' Creed has constantly and properly appeared after the death and burial of Christ and before the resurrection from the dead.

Finally, the timing of Christ's descent to hell in relation to the Apostles' Creed reached its greatest controversy and turning point during the Reformation era. While there are only hints of differences on the

descensus in the early Christian congregations, and while most medieval theologians regarded the *descensus* as an act by which Christ with His soul only, entered the abode of the dead, and while according to Calvin and the Reformed generally the descent into hell is but a figurative expression for the sufferings of Christ, particularly of His soul on the cross, xxxiv Luther is said to have vacillated on the thoughts of this article as early as 1517 in a sermon on being prepared for death. XXXV However, in 1533, especially in a sermon at Torgau, Luther from his studies of Ps. 16:10, Acts 2:24&27, and other passages taught that Christ, the God-man, body and soul, descended into hell as Victor over Satan and his host. XXXVI Luther clearly puts the *descensus* into Christ's state of exaltation.

In addition, we should also note that Luther still had some uncertain thoughts on this article of faith and therefore writes: "How it may have occurred that the man dies there in the grave and yet descends into hell - that, indeed, we shall and must leave unexplained and uncomprehended." This is also exactly where he left this article of faith. In his *Large Catechism* on the Apostles' Creed he only indirectly refers to the *descensus* in connection with the resurrection of the Lord. Luther did not become as definite as later theologians and as I have in this presentation, yet he was the turning point in leading us to teach from the Bible that the *descensus* as confessed in the Apostles' Creed properly belongs to Christ's state of exaltation.

Nonetheless, in 1544 John Aepinus (1499-1553), a pastor at Hamburg, denied in his lectures that Christ descended to hell, body and soul and as a triumphant Victor. This triggered a controversy on the timing of Christ's *descensus* and debates began. Aepinus' ideas are summarized as follows:

He taught that Christ's descent is a part of His suffering and atonement. While the body was lying in the grave, His soul descended into hell in order to suffer the qualms and pangs required to satisfy the wrath of God, complete the work of redemption, and render a plenary satisfaction. *xxxix*

This controversy was very brief and practically was confined to the city of Hamburg and therefore, also called the Hamburg Church Controversy. When Aepinus died on May 13, 1553, the immediate debate also withered. Nevertheless, the theological questions involved were not settled. Some Lutheran pastors took the road of compromise and stated that the *descensus* should be timed with both states of Christ. Others took a rational stand on some points only to fall into error and found themselves deposed of their positions and imprisoned. Such was the confusion on many of the issues that the Diet at Augsburg in 1555 was advised by Imperial Instruction to pass on the matter by simply reproducing what Luther had taught in his sermon at Torgau of 1553. Thus the *Formula of Concord* in its IX Article of the Thorough Declaration reads in this manner:

And since even in the ancient Christian teachers of the Church, as well as in some among our teachers, dissimilar explanations of the article concerning the descent of Christ to hell are found, we abide in like manner by the simplicity of our Christian faith (comprised in the Creed), to which Dr. Luther in his sermon, which was delivered in the castle at Torgau in the year 1533, concerning the descent of Christ to hell, has pointed us, where we confess: *I believe in the Lord Christ, God's Son, our Lord, dead, buried, and descended into hell.* For in this (Confession) the burial and descent of Christ to hell are distinguished as different articles; and 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 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). Thus we retain the substance (sound doctrine) and (true) consolation that neither hell nor the devil can take captive or injure us and all who believe.

The results of the Hamburg Controversy and the *Formula of Concord* have aided pastors and laymen to avoid the many pitfalls in searching out the Holy Scriptures for the proper timing of Christ's descent to hell. Tashackert describes the results and rightly comments: "Ever since (the adoption of the ninth Article of the *Formula of Concord*) Lutheran theology has regarded the descent of Christ as the beginning of the state of exaltation of the human nature of the God-man." xliii

Conclusion

Are there any practical applications to the proper timing of Christ's descent to hell in relation to the Apostles' Creed? Are there any important lessons to teach from the timing of the *descensus* in the Apostles' Creed? What bearing on our personal faith and life does the timing of the *descensus* have?

Yes, there are practical and important administrations in properly understanding this article of faith. First of all, when we confess the Apostles' Creed and time the descent with the exalted God-man, our Lord, we should receive a solemn warning. The victorious Son of God judged the devil and his workers. He also shamed the damned and sealed their doom. He climaxed their suffering by showing them the Savior whom they had rejected and by forever reminding them that no one was to blame but themselves. Indeed, let us not neglect our time of grace and reject the Gospel lest we, too, "come into this place of torment."

On the other hand, when we confess the Apostles' Creed and time the descent with the glorified Savior, we should be filled with comfort, joy, and triumph. Up to this point in the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed, we can only hang our heads in regard to what Jesus volunteered, to go through for us. But, the *descensus* is a turning point in the Second Article. It reminds us how thoroughly Christ fought to be our victorious General. He first made a public show of His triumph to the damned before He appeared to men. If there was ever any doubt about the demands of hell toward the believer, it should be dispelled as the *descensus* is triumphantly confessed. If the patrons of hell seem to be gaining inroads into our congregations, mission fields, or personal lives, here, in the Apostles' Creed, is the time to remember that we have an exalted Savior who has triumphed over hell and forever closed its jaws for His people. Indeed, Jesus has kept His promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against us. Let us share this great comfort, joy, and triumph with all nations to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, the heavenly Father, and the Holy Spirit, ever one God whose world is without end.

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