

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE JUDGMENT OF GOD: A MOST INCONVENIENT TRUTH (PART V)

Roman Catholic apologist Peter Kreeft's book Ecumenical Jihad: Ecumenism and the Culture War may well serve to destroy any sense of evangelistic or missionary effort. Why take the gospel to people who hold different religious beliefs if they are going to end up in heaven when it's all said and done? If Confucius, Buddha and Muhammad (and their followers) are in heaven, what about Joseph Smith and his Mormon followers or Charles Taze Russell and his devoted Jehovah's Witnesses? If all that matters is religious sincerity (which is what Kreeft seems to be concerned with) then three cheers for the Heaven's Gate crowd that followed their leader in mass suicide (you can't question their sincerity).

I mentioned last week, Kreeft's book carries the glowing endorsement of two highly respected evangelicals: Chuck Colson and J.I. Packer. This is baffling. Why would these two men want to give anyone the impression that Kreeft's thesis had the least bit of credibility? It should be condemned, not praised by every biblically informed Christian. I would certainly describe Colson and Packer as biblically informed Christians (and in Packer's case, theologically learned), so the big question—why would they give Kreeft's book any credence? I can only surmise, but I think it is another aspect of co-belligerence (this was Packer's defense for signing the Evangelical and Catholics Together accord¹).

Co-belligerence is an expression that goes back to the late Francis Schaeffer, who used the term to describe the joint effort of Catholics, Mormons, Evangelicals, et. al. in opposition to social issues like abortion. Schaeffer certainly never implied that these kinds of joint efforts should spill over into legitimate theological concerns that would end up blurring important doctrinal distinctives key to understanding the gospel. But this is exactly where Kreeft's book leads.

Evangelicals (I find the term to be so vague today that the label is categorically useless) are at times so pre-occupied with fighting "Culture Wars" that they have a tendency to lose sight of the real war--the spiritual war for men's souls that can only be won with the gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ alone through grace alone. Kreeft's book renders this gospel totally meaningless.

Now I have opened myself up to charge that my criticisms are harsh and unloving. No doubt a lot of people, even people who claim to be bible-believing evangelicals, will agree with that assessment. Theology to them is not very important in light of the great moral issues confronting us today (i.e., abortion, euthanasia, Gay-rights). I disagree. Listen to these words of biblical wisdom, "A love for biblical truth—a love for God—demands that we reject as false any system that places a trust in the sacramental efficacy of the ordinances, the completion of required acts of penance necessary for satisfaction, or one's own acts of obedience as meritorious. These are slanderous to the completed work of the person and work of Christ, whose perfect righteousness and propitiatory death forms the sole ground of the sinner's right standing before God. In this work, we hope to expose any system that teaches other than 'justification by faith alone' as unbiblical and, therefore, fatal. Love is not easy; tolerance can be the easier journey. To recognize and expose fatal error is not judgmental; it is discerning. To communicate contrasting truth graciously, seasoned with salt, is not vindictive; it is loving. It demonstrates the ultimate love for God and mankind, for the proclamation of His truth is 'the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes' (Romans

1:16). To uncover error and rescue someone from its destructive clutches demonstrates a love that is stronger than fear. It seeks the good of the one who is loved."² Of course, as a Roman Catholic, Kreeft stands in opposition to the Reformation's understanding of the Gospel. The Council of Trent which was convened by the Roman Catholic Church (1545-63), officially condemned the gospel as understood by the Reformers, but Trent did at least seek to maintain the exclusiveness of Christianity when it came to understanding salvation. I am convinced that had Trent come up against a thesis like that put forth by Kreeft, they would have not only pronounced it anathema, they would have burned Kreeft at the stake as a heretic if they could have got their collective hands on him!

I POSTMORTEM EVANGELISM

Language can, at times, be misleading. An example of this is the phrase in the Apostles' Creed that says that Christ "descended into hell." This particular phrase is not found in Scripture.³ In fact, the Latin expression DESCENDIT AD INFERNUM was not in the creed originally but was added at a later date. Calvin acknowledged this but went on to declare: "Nevertheless, in setting forth a summary of doctrine, a place must be given to it, as it contains the useful and not-to-be-despised mystery of a most important matter."⁴

I. CHRIST IN THE NETHER WORLD?

How are we to understand the creed at this point? What does "hell" refer to? There are three major positions:

- A. Hell is a reference to the grave. The Greek word usually translated *hell* is *HADĒS* and often this word is used to signify the grave or the place of the dead. The term *Hades* is derived from the infinitive *IDEIN*, "to see," and the alpha privative [A] which makes the idea negative, "not to see." Hades, then, means the *unseen* world as compared to this *visible* one. It meant for those who first used it, the unseen world inhabited by the spirits of dead men--good or bad. The ancient pagan writers divided Hades into two parts: Elysium, the abode of the righteous, and Tartarus, the abode of the wicked. The translators of the Septuagint used Hades to translate the Hebrew "Sheol," a word meaning "the grave." Generally no distinction was made between righteous and wicked. They were spoken of as entering Hades, the region of the dead, at the time of death. The term "Hades" is used eleven times in the New Testament:
- (1) Matthew 11:23; Luke 10:15—Capernaum was to be brought down to Hades because she rejected the offer of God's mercy extended through his Son. She was compared to Sodom, which was brought to death—destruction—because of her wickedness.
 - (2) Matthew 16:18—The gates of Hades will not be able to withstand the attack made by the church.
 - (3) Luke 16:23—In Hades the rich man lifted up his eyes.
 - (4) Acts 2:27—The psalmist believed that God would not leave his soul in Hades.
 - (5) Acts 2:31—This is Peter's statement of his assurance that God did not leave the soul of his Son in Hades nor permit his holy One to experience decay.
 - (6) I Corinthians 15:55—"O death, where is your victory? O Hades, where is your sting?" Many ancient manuscripts do not use "Hades" in this passage, repeating THANATA, "death," instead, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" Such usage indicates that death and Hades were synonymous in the thinking of many.
 - (7) Revelation 1:18—Jesus the risen Christ has the key to death and Hades.
 - (8) Revelation 6:8—Death and Hades follow the rider on the pale (corpse-colored) horse.
 - (9) Revelation 20:13-14—death and Hades deliver up the dead that were in them. Then they are cast into the lake of fire.

Careful analysis of the above passages will indicate that Hades seems to be used in the following ways:

- (1) As a general reference to the grave—Acts 2:27, 31; 1 Corinthians 15:55; Revelation 1:18; 6:8.
- (2) As a specific reference to the place of the departed wicked—Luke 16:23; Revelation 20:14.
- (3) As a general reference to death or extinction, or as a specific reference with the evil sense of “hell” implied—Matthew 11:13; Luke 10:15; Matthew 16:18; Revelation 20:13.

These passages may be interpreted as general or specific according to the context.⁵ If this is the case, then the meaning is that Christ descended into the state of the dead. The context of the creed, however, does not favor this interpretation. We have been told that Christ *suffered, was crucified, dead and buried*; i.e., the state of the dead. There is no need to repeat the obvious.

B. Hell is the abode of departed spirits. According to Roman Catholicism, Christ manifested Himself to all the dead who were being kept in what is called LIMBUS PATRUM. Here He went and announced to all the demonic host His victory and so delivered the fathers from limbo. 1 Peter 3:19 is cited in support of this position. Although popular, this view has a number of serious weaknesses. To begin with, the appeal to 1 Peter 3:19 warrants attention.

1. WHO ARE THE SPIRITS IN PRISON?
 - a. Unbelievers who have died?
 - b. Old Testament believers who have died?
 - c. Fallen angels?
2. WHAT DID CHRIST PREACH?
 - a. Second chance for repentance?
 - b. Completion of redemptive work?
 - c. Final condemnation?
3. WHEN DID HE PREACH?
 - a. In the days of Noah?
 - b. Between His death and resurrection?
 - c. After His resurrection?

Peter’s language strongly suggests that when Noah was building the ark, Christ “in spirit” was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to unbelievers who were on the earth then but are *now* “spirits in prison” (they are now being kept, awaiting the final judgment). “This conclusion,” notes Wayne Grudem, “can be avoided only by disregarding the crucial defining phrases in 1 Peter 3:20.”⁶ This text, therefore, provides no support for the Roman Catholic position.

C. Hell is a reference to the spiritual torment that Christ underwent for us. This does *not* refer to the heretical teaching advocated by the likes of charismatic preacher Kenneth Copeland who proclaims that Christ was dragged down to Hell itself by Satan and his demons and took upon Himself the nature of Satan and had to be *re-born* in Hell before His resurrection.⁷ A. A. Hodge gives this helpful summary, “The English word Hell, by which Hades is represented in the ordinary versions of the Creed, translated that term accurately when first used, but has now come to be used exclusively in the restricted sense of Gehenna, the place of the damned. But the phrase in question, in its true historic sense, expresses a plain and important truth. “Hades” is the Old Testament designation of the spirit-world, to which all men went at death, the good being separated from the lost by an impassable gulf, in a region corresponding to their redeemed and spiritually elevated condition. Yet during the residence of their souls in Hades, separate from their bodies, even believers remain partially under the power of

death. The disembodied state is so far a consequence of sin and a condition of incompletely realized redemption. Now Christ must need "taste death" to the dregs for us. His vicarious suffering includes the following stages: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate—was crucified—dead—buried—descended into *Hades*." So all his redeemed had gone before him. He went precisely where Abraham and all the true Israel were waiting for him, and in so going he changed the redeemed side of Hades from being, as hitherto, the vestibule of heaven, into heaven itself for Old and New Testament saints alike."⁸ Christ's descent is to be understood in connection with His sufferings. Christ had to undergo the full severity of God's wrath. He had to experience *eternal* death. This is the meaning of words Christ cried from the cross--*Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani* (Mark 15:34)--Christ was undergoing the terrible forsakenness on the cross. Our Lord was subjected to *hellish anguish*. He did not merely *feel* forsaken; He *was* forsaken. The descent, therefore, was not a local or spatial one but a reference to the state of death in which Christ was between death and resurrection. It is part of His bearing the punishment of our sins.

CONCLUSION: Christ's descent into Hell as the Creed has it, is not a powerless, inactive humiliation. "The great turning," declares Berkouwer, "in Christ's life lies between humiliation and exaltation. Yet his humiliation is full of the power of his death."⁹ It is in this light that we understand the cross. All of Christ's sufferings, beginning with His birth and culminating with his death, were at the same time a battle with Satan. Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us that Christ came to annihilate the works of the devil and this glorious victory begins already in the very depths of His humiliation. Our redemption and salvation in all its full-orbed glory were accomplished by His anguish--by His descent into Hell.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. J.I. Packer, "Why I Signed It," Christianity Today (Dec. 12, 1994), pp.36-37.

² Justification by Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by Which the Church and the Individual Stands or Falls, edited by D. Kistler (Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), pp. X, XI.

³ It is not exactly certain when this phrase entered the Creed. According to the fourth century monk and translator Rufinus of Aquileja, the confession of the church of Aquileja contained this addition, but it cannot be traced back earlier than the middle of the fourth century. Cf. The discussion of G. C. Berkouwer, Studies In Dogmatics: The Work of Christ (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 174. It is interesting to note that Augustine in his treatment of the creed omits any reference to the phrase.

⁴ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (The Westminster Press, 1975), Bk II, Ch. XVI, Sec. 8.

⁵ Ray Summers, The Life Beyond: An Interpretation of New Testament Teaching on Death, The Resurrection, The Second Coming, and Eternal Destiny (Broadman Press, 1959) p. 28

⁶ W. Gruden, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: I Peter (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 220. Gruden has a very extensive discussion of the various interpretation of this passage.

⁷ Other charismatics like Fred C. Price, Kenneth Hagin and TBN President Paul Crouch, also teach this heresy. Cf. H. Hanegraaff, Christianity In Crisis (Harvest House, 1993), pp. 163-174 for documentation.

⁸ A. A. Hodge, introduction to H. Cremer, Beyond The Grave (Harper & Bros. 1886) p. XXXII. Hodge adds in a footnote, "The present writer has preferred to speak as if the advent of Christ merely changed the *condition* rather than the *locality* of his waiting Old Testament saints. It is by no means intended to deny the opinion of many that Christ did change the locality and take his people *out of* Hades into another place called Heaven. The Scriptures always represent Heaven as high, and Hades as deep. 'It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? Deeper than Hades; what canst thou know' (Job xi. 8). It is certain that the Old Testament saints before the death of Christ waited in Hades. It is certain that Christ is now sitting at the right hand of God in heaven, and that all his people who have departed this life are with him there."

⁹ Berkouwer, op. cit., p. 179.