

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	29	Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Ephesians 4:7; I Peter 3:19	
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He Descended Into Hell

16. Lord's Day

Question 42. Since then Christ died for us, why must we also die?

Answer: Our death is not a satisfaction for our sins, (a) but only an abolishing of sin, and a passage into eternal life. (b)

(a) Mark 8:37 Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Ps. 49:7 None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: (b) John 5:24 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Philip. 1:23 For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Rom. 7:24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

Question 43. What further benefit do we receive from the sacrifice and death of Christ on the cross?

Answer: That by virtue thereof, our old man is crucified, dead and buried with him; (a) that so the corrupt inclinations of the flesh may no more reign in us; (b) but that we may offer ourselves unto him a sacrifice of thanksgiving. (c)

(a) Rom. 6:6 Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. (b) Rom. 6:6 Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. Rom. 6:7 For he that is dead is freed from sin. Rom. 6:8 Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Rom. 6:11 Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Rom. 6:12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Col. 2:12 Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. (c) Rom. 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

Question 44. Why is there added, "he descended into hell"?

Answer: That in my greatest temptations, I may be assured, and wholly comfort myself in this, that my Lord Jesus Christ, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agonies, in which he was plunged during all his sufferings, (a) but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torments of hell. (b)

(a) Ps. 18:5 The sorrows of hell compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me. Ps. 18:6 In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears. Ps. 116:3 The sorrows of death compassed me, and

the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow. Matt. 26:38 Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. Heb. 5:7 Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; Isa. 53:10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Matt. 27:46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (b) Isa. 53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

“The next major new religion,” observes Gene Edward Veith, “will probably not be one of the old forms of overt paganism, but rather a syncretic hybrid. In a postmodernist and increasing by consumer-centered world in which truth is relative, people will pick and choose various aspects of the different faiths according to what they *like*.”¹ Veith is not describing the distant future. Large segments of self-professed Evangelicals have adopted a consumer mentality when it comes to interpreting the Christian faith. I recently ran across a poster in a Christian bookstore that read: “God is like GE; He brings good things to light. God is like AT&T; He reaches out and touches people. God is like DIAL SOAP; He gives ‘round the clock’ protection. God is like COCA-COLA; He is the real thing. God is like PAN AM; He makes the going great. God is like HALLMARK CARDS; He cares enough to send the very best. God is like LIFESAVERS; He is a part of living.” I could go on with this kind of stuff. Perhaps you have seen T-shirts with catchy little slogans (designed to provoke inquiries that will lead to “sharing” your faith) like the one that says “This Blood is for You!” – a take-off from a well known beer commercial.

What are we to make of this? Should we be freely borrowing the language of a consumer-oriented society when we speak of God and the Christian faith? We run the risk not only of misrepresenting the claims of the gospel when we do this, but also, in the process, of distorting our Christian distinctives. This is not to say that the language we use must always be specifically Scriptural (or even theological). But we must be careful in our desire to communicate to our culture that we don’t end up accommodating our message in a way that empties it of its real meaning.

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. In fact, the Latin expression DESCENDIT AD INFERNA was not in the creed originally but was added at a later date.² Douglas Kelly notes that, “Over the ages, true theologians of the Church have rendered very different accounts of the credal phrase ‘he descended into hell.’ Part of the issue is that, as Bavinck pointed out, the word ‘Hades’ changed its meaning: ‘...the word “Hades” gradually changed its meaning. The statement that Christ had descended into Hades could only emerge at a time when this word still denoted the “world after death” in general and had not yet acquired the meaning of “hell.” For the idea that Christ descended to the place of torment, the actual hell, is nowhere to be found in Scripture, nor does it occur in the most ancient Christian writers. This change of meaning that the word “Hades” underwent, however, and that had been prepared here and there in the Old and the New Testament (e.g., in Isa. 14:11; Luke 10:15; 16:23), continued in the later church literature and increasingly led to the identification of Hades with Gehenna (hell, place of torment). This, in turn, prompted the rise of the conception that believers at the time of their death went to paradise, not to Hades; that though the idea of Christ’s descent into Hades was retained, it was understood in the sense that he went to a specific division of Hades, the later so-called limbo of the fathers, and had moved the devout of the Old Testament from there to paradise or heaven...’

“The phrase ‘he descended into hell’ seems to have been added to the Apostles’ Creed in the fourth century. ‘[T]hese words already occurred in the confession of the synods of Sirmium (359), Nice (359), and Constantinople (360) and gradually passed from there into all the readings of the Apostles’ Creed.’

“The Westminster Confession of Faith takes ‘Hades’ in its original sense: ‘the world of departed spirits,’ when it states that he ‘was buried and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption’ (Ch. VIII, par. 4). Certainly that affirmation is in line with the clear teaching of Scripture.

“Yet at the same time, this is not to deny that in his infinite sufferings for us, he endured the pains of hell (in its second sense). As we have seen, John Calvin understood it to mean the pains of God-forsakenness that Christ endured on the cross, especially after his cry of dereliction. Certainly Calvin is aware that the order of the Creed places Christ’s descent into hell *after* his physical death, but considers it inconsequential, since it is a way to look at the invisible reality from the human viewpoint: ‘The point is that the Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and then appositely speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he underwent in the sight of God in order that we might know not only that Christ’s body was given as the price of our redemption, but that he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man.’”³

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. In the New Testament, *Hades* is the interim place of the dead between death and resurrection (cf. Luke 16:23; I Corinthians 15:55; Revelation 6:8; 20:14). 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. I 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 I 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.”⁴ 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.⁵ 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.”⁶ 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 G. Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Crossway, 1994), p. 200.

² 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 with 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.

³ D.F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology II* (Mentor Books, 2014), p. 417.

⁴ W. Grudem, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Peter* (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 220. Grudem has a very extensive discussion of the various interpretations of this passage.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Berkouwer, op. cit., p. 179.