

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	110		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 6:8; I Peter 3:19		
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The Sixth Petition (Part X)

Satan's hostility towards God is chiefly manifested in his efforts to sow doctrinal error and create doubt about the Gospel. He is especially active in his opposition to the Person and work of Christ.

- (1) This is to be observed in God's declaration: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed" (Gen. 3:15).
- (2) This is also evident from the names which are given him in light of this, such as, the enemy (Matt. 13:39), the tempter (Matt. 4:3), the wicked one (Matt. 13:19), and the adversary (I Peter 5:8).
- (3) It is conveyed by the description of his work among believers: "Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, who goes about, seeking whom he may devour" (I Peter 5:8). His works are called "the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:16), and beguiling (II Cor. 11:3).
- (4) Then there are the exhortations to arm ourselves against him and to resist him. "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:11); "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, who goes about" (I Peter 5:8); "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

Our adversary is described as being crafty, deceitful and coy. We are told he seeks to *blind* the minds of unbelievers (II Cor. 4:4; I John 2:11). Notice that this pertains to cognitive perception. Likewise, the devil seeks to address the mind of the believer by raising doubts and sowing doctrinal errors. Note carefully the various Apostolic emphasis here: Pay attention to your teaching (I Tim. 4:16); keep the form of sound words (II Tim. 1:13); an elder must continue in sound doctrine (Titus 1:9); speak what befits sound doctrine (Titus 2:1); nourished on sound doctrine (I Tim. 4:6); do not be carried away by strange teachings (Heb. 13:9). If anyone does not bring this teaching, do not receive him (II John 10); he who does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God (II John 9). Teaching as doctrines the traditions of men (Matt. 15:9); doctrines of demons (I Tim. 4:1). Satan's tactics have not changed. He still seeks to distort and pervert the message of the cross – and sadly many professing evangelicals are prone to fall into this snare by attempting to make the gospel more appealing by tailoring to suit the times. Warfield warned about this when he wrote, "Perhaps it may whisper to you only something about the narrowness of sectarianism within the limits of Christianity – of the folly of contentions over what we may at the moment be happening to call 'the truth.' Look, it may say – do you not see that under every faith the religious life flourishes? Why lay stress then on creed? Creeds are divisive things; away with them! Or at least let us prune all their distinctive features away, and give ourselves a genial and unpolemic Christianity, a Christianity in which all the stress is laid on life, not dogma, the life of the spirit in its aspirations toward God, or perchance, even the life of external activities in the busy fulfillment of the duties of life. This too, you observe, is 'deisidaimonism.' Embark once on that pathway and there is no logical and – oh, the misfortune of it! – no practical stopping-point until you have evaporated all recognizable Christianity away altogether and reduced all religion to the level of man's natural religiosity. A really 'undogmatic Christianity' is just no Christianity at all."¹ What concerned Warfield at the turn of the 20th century now sadly describes the views of a growing number of evangelicals.

"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 increasingly consumer-centered world in which truth is relative, people will pick and choose various aspects of the different

faiths according to what they *like*.”² 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 what 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.³ 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 HADES 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 Cor. 15:55; Rev. 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 I Peter 3:20."⁵ 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 reborn in Hell before His resurrection.⁶ 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. Calvin wrote, "The explanation given to us in God's Word is not only holy and pious, but also full of wonderful consolation. If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. No – it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment. For this reason, he must also grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death. A little while ago we referred to the prophet's statement that 'the chastisement of our peace was laid upon him,' 'he was wounded for our transgressions' by the Father, 'he was bruised for our infirmities' (Isaiah 53:5). By these words he means that Christ was put in place of evildoers as surety and pledge – submitting himself even as the accused – to bear and suffer all the punishments that they ought to have sustained. All – with this one exception: 'He could not be held by the pangs of death' (Acts 2:24). No wonder, then, if he is said to have descended into hell, for he suffered the death that God in his wrath had inflicted upon the wicked! Those who – on the ground that it is absurd to put after his burial what preceded it – say that the order is reversed in this way are making a very trifling and ridiculous objection. 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 than 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."⁷

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."⁸ 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 on His humiliation. Our redemption and salvation in all its full-orbed glory were accomplished by His anguish – by His descent into Hell.

ENDNOTES

¹ B.B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (P & R, 1973), p. 578.

² G. Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Crossway, 1994), p. 200.

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

⁶ 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.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk II, Ch. XVI, Sec. 10.

⁸ Berkouwer, op. cit., p. 179.