



Did Jesus "Descend Into Hell"?

Its History in the Apostles' Creed and an Assessment

The Apostle's Creed is one of the most cherished creeds of the church and is considered one of the finest examples of articulating the core beliefs of Christianity.¹ Indeed, it is universally accepted by those who hold to an orthodox theology, and some form of it has been recited each week by millions of people in a wide variety of denominations worldwide for over 1500 years. Yet one of its lines has been the source of confusion for many people: "He descended into Hell." But did Jesus really descend into Hell? Why was

this phrase included in the creed? What does it mean? Does it have any scriptural support? And, in light of the answers to these questions, what should be done with this phrase?

THE HISTORY OF THE APOSTLES' CREED

The Apostle's Creed arose as a statement of faith recited by candidates for baptism, and, according to Philip Schaff, grew "out of the inner life and practical needs of early Christianity."² Justo Gonzalez notes that part of this practical need was "to combat heresy by identifying people who rejected the Creed as heretical."³ At the time of the Creed's development, this meant the Marcionites in particular.⁴ In support of the view that the Creed originated as a baptismal confession, John Leith argues that "its early form is likely preserved in the Interrogatory Creed of Hippolytus's Apostolic Tradition (c. 215)."⁵ Leith goes on to say, "The Creed does have a legitimate claim to its title on the basis of the fact that all of its articles are to be found in the theological formulas that were current around A.D.100."⁶ Kenneth Scott Latourette agrees, saying, "...the Apostles' Creed had as its nucleus words going back to the first century and first explicitly

¹ C.f. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol 1, *The History of the Creeds*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 14-15.

² *Ibid*, 16.

³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1984; reprint Peabody, MA: Prince, 2005), 63, 64.

⁴ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol.1, (Peabody, MA: 1953, 2005), 136.

⁵ John Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1963, 1977), 22, 23.

⁶ *Ibid*, 14

stated in the post-resurrection command of Jesus to the apostles.”⁷ Schaff locates its origin even earlier in the confession of Peter in Matthew 16:16, that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.”⁸

Apostolic Authorship(?)

Although the Creed traces its routes back to the first century and the time of the Apostles’, its origin cannot be ascribed to the Apostles themselves. Nevertheless, the idea that the Apostles were in fact the authors of the Creed was widely held until the mid-seventeenth century.⁹ Apparently a legend arose that the Creed was composed on or around the day of Pentecost before they separated to preach the Gospel to the world. The oldest record of the legend is found in Rufinus’ commentary on the Creed (c.307-9).¹⁰ According to Rufinus,

“Being on the eve therefore of departing from one another, they first mutually agreed upon a standard of their future preaching, lest haply, when separated, they might in any instance vary in the statements which they should make to those whom they should invite to believe in Christ. Being all therefore met together, and being filled with the Holy Ghost, they composed, as we have said, their brief formulary of their future preaching, each contributing his several sentence to one common summary: and they ordained that the rule thus framed should be given to those who believe.”¹¹

By the Middle Ages the legend had expanded to include a designation of which apostle contributed each phrase. Jacobus De Voragine attributes the phrase “He descended into Hell” to Phillip.¹² In the mid-fifteenth century, however, the legend was demonstrated to have no ground in fact and it began to be abandoned.¹³ Gonzalez states, “The notion that the apostles gathered before beginning their mission and composed this creed, each suggesting a clause, is pure fiction. The truth is that its basic text was put together, probably in Rome, around the year 150.”¹⁴ J.N.D. Kelley does make an interesting point that the reason the legend was so widely accepted for so long speaks to its ancient authority and grounding in apostolic doctrine.¹⁵

Forms of the Creed and the Insertion of the Phrase “He Descended Into Hell”

⁷ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol.1, (Peabody, MA: 1953, 2005), 659.

⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol 1, *The History of the Creeds*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 16.

⁹ *Ibid*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 3, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 542.

¹² Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, Vol .7. Available online at www.ccel.org.

¹³ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol.1, (Peabody, MA: 1953, 2005), 659.

¹⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1984; reprint Peabody, MA: Prince, 2005), 63.

¹⁵ J.N.D. Kelley, *Early Christian Doctrines*, (Peabody, MA: Prince, 1960, 2004), 44.

The whole of the components contained in the creed in the form in which we now know it can be traced back to the sixth century,¹⁶ though its final form is attributed to Pirminius in A.D. 750.¹⁷ Prior to that a number of variations existed. At its core was the creed developed by the Roman church. But as it became adopted more widely it was augmented with other phrases. One of these phrases was "He descended into Hades."¹⁸

According to Wayne Grudem, "the phrase 'descended into hell' was not found in any of the early versions of the Creed...until it appeared in one of two versions from Rufinus in A.D. 390. Then it was not included again in any version of the Creed until A.D. 650."¹⁹ Rufinus' commentary on the creed, the oldest commentary we have,²⁰ notes where the Creed of his local church in Aquileia varied from the Old Roman version.²¹

THE MEANING OF "HE DESCENDED INTO HELL"

The crux of the issue is the meaning of the word "Hell." Rufinus' creed was written in Latin where the word in question is *inferos* (or *infernos*, *inferus*) which has the meaning of "under" or "lower."²² Jerome's Vulgate uses this word when translating the Greek word *hades*. The King James Version translated the Vulgate's *inferos* as "Hell" in almost all cases, but in one case referred to simply being dead. Although we employ it in different ways, our English word "Hell" refers to a place of punishment. But *inferos* and *hades* have a wider range of meaning than that. As shown above, *inferos* is not a place of punishment by definition, though it obviously can have such connotation given Jerome's use of it. Likewise, *hades* can mean, "the invisible abode or mansion of the dead; the place of punishment, hell; the lowest place or condition."²³ In fact, as Donald Bloesch points out, we are not pressed into seeing the biblical word *hades* as referring to punishment at all. "Hades as the intermediate state of the dead is to be distinguished from Gehenna, the future abode of the damned, the eschatological hell, as well as from Tartarus, the realm of darkness inhabited by the devil and his angels, though these distinctions were not always made by the early church."²⁴ Bloesch goes on to say, "It was believed that upon death both good and bad

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Vol 1, The History of the Creeds*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 19.

¹⁷ Henry Bettensen, *Documents of the Christian Church*, (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1963, 1967), 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 586.

²⁰ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Vol 1, The History of the Creeds*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 18.

²¹ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 3*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 541.

²² *Junior Classic Latin Dictionary*, "infern(Chicago: Follett, 1938).

²³ William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 52-53.

²⁴ Donald Bloesch, "Descent into Hell," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edition, ed. Walter Elwell, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984, 2006).

go to Hades, though in later biblical thought the good are seen to be in a higher compartment of Hades called Paradise."²⁵ Charles Hodge notes that if we take hell in the sense of hades,

Both mean the unseen world...All the dead, the righteous and the wicked, alike to into the invisible world, or, in this sense, "descended into hell." Hence to be buried, to go down to the grave, to descend into hell, are in Scriptural language equivalent forms of expression.²⁶

Rufinus himself seemed to share this understanding. In his commentary on this passage he wrote, "it should be known that the clause, 'He descended into Hell,' is not added in the Creed of the Roman Church, neither is it in that of the Oriental Churches. It seems to be implied, however, when it is said that 'He was buried.'"²⁷ Thus, the person who preserved its earliest inclusion in the Creed held that Jesus did not descend to a place of punishment, but merely to the realm of the dead, the unseen world. The phrase, therefore, does not really add any information to the Creed; it is not intended to tell us Jesus' location. Rather, it serves to reinforce the point that Jesus actually died. In the words of Alister McGrath, "It is a statement of the belief that Jesus really did die...In other words Jesus shared the fate of all those who have died."²⁸

JUSTIFICATIONS, MISUNDERSTANDINGS, AND EXPLANATIONS

In Favor of Christ's Descent into Hell

It is interesting, given the meaning of the words, how Christians have tried to understand this phrase. Many theologians have taken the Creed at face value. Thomas Aquinas defended Christ's descent into Hell, saying, "The name of hell stands for an evil of penalty, and not for an evil of guilt. Hence it was becoming that Christ should descend into hell, not as liable to punishment Himself, but to deliver them who were."²⁹ On this point, Martin Luther appeared to agree to some extent. In his Small Catechism, Luther wrote, "The Scriptures teach that Christ, after He was made alive in His grave, descended into hell, not to suffer punishment, but to proclaim His victory over His enemies in hell."³⁰ Schaff also holds that Christ did descend into Hell, contending that "Rufinus himself...misunderstood (the words) by making to mean the same as buried."³¹

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 616-17.

²⁷ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 3, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 550.

²⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *I Believe*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 81.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3.53.1.

³⁰ Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, Q. 143.

³¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol 1, *The History of the Creeds*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 20, 21n6.

The primary scripture relied upon to justify this position is 1 Peter 3:18-20: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, 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, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water..." (ESV). Those who hold Christ descended into Hell see this scripture as indicating that Jesus preached to those who died before his incarnation and/or to fallen angels.

Criticisms Against Christ's Descent into Hell

Calvin points out, however, that Peter mentions Christ's spirit, not his soul and that "Peter expressly mentioned the Spirit, that he might take away the notion of what may be called a real presence."³² Additionally, Calvin notes that "...it is an indubitable doctrine of Scripture, that we obtain no salvation in Christ except by faith; then there is no hope left for those who continue to death unbelieving."³³

Grudem agrees with Calvin's rejection of the passage as affirming Christ descended into Hell. Because of the larger context of the passage, Grudem takes the phrase, "Christ preached to the spirits in prison," to mean "Christ preached to people who are now spirits in prison when when they were still spirits on earth."³⁴ Thus, "This refers to 'what he did 'in the spiritual realm of existence' (or 'through the spirit') at the time of Noah. When Noah was building the ark, Christ "in spirit" was preaching through Noah to the hostile unbelievers around him."³⁵ Hodge also holds this view, adding, "As the words stand in our Bible they afford no ground for the doctrine that Christ after death went into hell and preached to the spirits there confined."³⁶

Alternate Understandings of the Christ's Descent Into Hell

In an attempt to do justice to the Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism explains the phrase as meaning, "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, but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torments of hell."³⁷ Calvin also saw Christ's descent into Hell as referring to the wrath incurred on the cross. The ordering of the phrase after the mention of his burial is not really a problem, says Calvin, since the lines can be seen in apposition or parallel. Thus the

³² John Calvin, Commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter, in Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 22, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 113.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 591.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Vol. II, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 619.

³⁷ Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 44.

Creed speaks of Christ's visible sufferings and then his invisible ones; there is no temporal separation between them.³⁸ Michael Horton defends this view, saying, "Our peace required his chastisement, and in order for use to be accepted by God in heaven's court, he had to experience the anguish of hell, which is God's rejection...This is what the Creed means when it affirms, 'He descended into hell.'"³⁹

The Westminster divines went out of their way to remove any opportunity for confusion on this issue. In the section of their Confession of Faith explaining the Apostle's Creed, they rendered the phrase as "He was buried, and remained under the power of death for a time."⁴⁰ Robert Shaw notes in his exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith on this point, "Therefore, to prove the reality of his death, upon which the hopes and happiness of his people depend, he was laid in a sepulcher, and continued under the power of death for three days and three nights. He was buried, also, to sanctify the grave to his followers, that it might be to them a place of repose, where their bodies may rest till the resurrection."⁴¹ Hodge also held this view of the phrase: "Under the clause, 'He continued under the power of death for a time,' is intended to be expressed all that is meant by ancient creeds which asserted 'He descended into hell.' Such at least is the view presented in our standards in accordance with the teachings of the majority of the Reformed theologians."⁴² Interpreting the Creed in this way demonstrates a respect for the earliest understanding of the phrase, an allegiance to the meaning of the terms, and a desire to conform our understanding of the Creed to scripture.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of factors that should compel us to think of this phrase in a way other than Christ's actually going to Hell. Perhaps the most important point to keep in mind as we evaluate the phrase is that the Apostles' Creed does not hold the authority of scripture in and of itself. Its authority is derived only from its accurate articulation of scripture, and it binds our theology only to the degree that its teachings can be demonstrated in scripture. As such, we must not try to accommodate scripture into the Creed, but rather the Creed to scripture.

In light of that note of caution we must reject an interpretation of scripture teaches that Christ descended into Hell in the sense of it being a place of punishment given that the interpretation is, at best, dubious. There is no violence done to scripture in rejecting this view, and, in fact, the whole of scripture is far more coherent and less troublesome if we avoid it. Thus, we can affirm with Rufinus that the inclusion of the phrase in the Creed is simply

³⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.10.

³⁹ Michael Horton, *We Believe*, (Nashville: Word, 1998), 100.

⁴⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith, 8.4.4.

⁴¹ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Publisher unknown, 1845; reprint Fearn, U.K.: Christian Focus, 1973, 1998), 146.

⁴² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 616.

an elaboration on the death of Christ that indicates he really did die. This interpretation is justified both by the Latin word referring to Hell in the oldest form of the Creed, and by the Greek word for Hell that the Latin refers to.

Thus, it seems the best way to deal with the issue is to agree with the good thinking of the Westminster divines and correct the language to avoid misunderstanding, or remove the phrase altogether as many forms of the Creed pre-A.D. 750 did. Either solution results in a Creed that is no less apostolic, no less traditional, and no less authoritative than the Creed as is now stands. Furthermore, both solutions are arguably more apostolic in the sense that the clear meaning of scripture would be less obscured. And that, after all, is the intention of the Creed in the first place.

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Doug Powell is the author and designer of "The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics," a contributor to "The Apologetics Study Bible," and the forthcoming "Apologetics Study Bible for Students." He is currently writing and designing a book on Christianity, pop culture, and the arts. Doug holds a Masters degree in Christian Apologetics from Biola University.

Both an accomplished musician and producer, Doug has released seven solo albums, received numerous awards, performed on Late Night with Conan O'Brien and done all manner of other cool stuff for a forty-something husband/father/Bible-believer and defender. You can learn more about Doug, his ministry and artistry, contact him for conducting an apologetics seminar, interview, etc. through www.selflessdefense.com and www.dougpowell.com.