

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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Calvin on Christ's "Descent into Hell"

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The Apostles' Creed is perhaps the most regularly recited statement of basic Christian doctrine in the western Church of the last 1500 years. Of its twelve affirmations none has caused greater uncertainty and debate over the centuries than that declaring that Jesus Christ "descended into hell."

This affirmation, wedged between assertions that Christ "was crucified, died, and buried" and "rose again" on "the third day," received fundamentally different interpretations by Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians of the Reformation era.

The sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Church staked out its understanding of this affirmation in the Catechism of Trent, suggesting it named Christ's visit not to "hell strictly so-called," but to "limbo" where "the souls of the just before the coming of Christ the Lord were received, and where, without experiencing any sort of pain...they enjoyed peaceful repose." Christ, according to Rome, spent the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday – "Holy Saturday" as it is sometimes called – in this limbo, freeing the souls therein to enter into heavenly bliss.

The (arguably) inherent ambiguity of the Creed's claim regarding Christ's descent into hell, coupled with Rome's rather speculative interpretation (rooted in late-medieval Christian thought which, without clear biblical warrant, added purgatory and several limbos to heaven and hell in the landscape of the afterlife), has caused even some Reformed churches to revise the Creed's affirmation to something less confusing (namely, "he descended into the grave"), or to omit the phrase entirely.

John Calvin strongly warned against such tampering with the Creed, even before there were many noteworthy efforts to do so. "We ought not to omit [Christ's] descent into hell," the Reformer warned, calling that descent "a matter of no small moment in bringing about [our] redemption."

Calvin was decidedly keen not to deprive (Reformed) believers of the opportunity to confess their faith in the very words that Christians for centuries before them had used. He was quite sure that, properly understood, there was nothing in the words of the Creed – every last one of them – to cause genuine believers alarm. "We have in [the Creed] a summary of our faith," Calvin wrote, "full and complete in all details, and containing nothing in it except what has been derived from the pure Word of God."

Calvin was even more keen not to deprive believers of the opportunity, every time they recited the Creed, to reflect upon a very critical aspect of Christ's saving work which, in his judgment, is embodied in the affirmation in question: "If any persons have scruples about admitting this article into the Creed, it will soon be made plain how important it is to the sum of our redemption: if it is left out, much of the benefit of Christ's

death will be lost."

Calvin denied that Christ's descent into hell merely named his descent into "a grave," thus simply repeating "in other words what had previously been said of his burial."

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ
His only Son our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
Born of the virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended into hell;
The third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand
of God the Father Almighty;
From thence He shall come
to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost;
The holy catholic Church,
The communion of saints;
The forgiveness of sins;
The resurrection of the body;
And the life everlasting. Amen.

He argued, rather, that Christ's descent into hell complements the preceding clause which describes Christ's death, alerting us to the spiritual dimension – the sustaining of God's wrath on behalf of our sin – in Christ's suffering upon the cross.

God incarnate, after all, did not merely undergo physical torment and physical death upon the cross. Indeed "if Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual [for our salvation]." Upon the cross, rather, Christ endured "the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment." And this, according to Calvin, is precisely what the Creed's affirmation that Christ "descended into hell" describes. "Christ was put in [the] place of evildoers as surety and pledge – submitting himself even as the accused – to bear and suffer all the punishment that they ought to have sustained...No wonder, then, that [Christ] is said to have descended into hell, for he suffered [there] the death that God in his wrath [has] inflicted upon the wicked!"

Calvin has a ready answer for those who find it strange to find this affirmation of Christ enduring hell on the cross situated subsequent to the affirmation that Christ "suffered, died, and was buried." He argues that the Creed's affirmation constitutes *grammatical apposition* – a construction where some noun or clause restates an immediately preceding noun or clause, but adds something to it.

An instance of apposition is discovered in the sentence: "This is my daughter, Kaitrin." "Kaitrin" in that sentence (who, by the way, is my daughter, not Calvin's) renames or restates "daughter." Similarly, "he descended into hell" renames or restates what occurred when Christ "suffered" and "died," and adds significant detail. "The point," Calvin concludes, "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 [by] suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man."

No wonder, in short, that Calvin felt so strongly about retaining this affirmation of the Creed. Stripped of this affirmation, the Creed fails to speak meaningfully of what Christ actually suffered upon the cross, as his eternal Father – in light of our sins imputed to Christ – turned his back upon him. Indeed, provided we accept Calvin's interpretation of this Creedal statement, it becomes (arguably) the pivotal affirmation of the entire Creed, the hinge upon which

our salvation turns, the basis of the remarkable benefits, subsequently listed in the Creed, that belong to us ("the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting").

Of course, it takes some effort to educate believers about what Christ's descent into hell actually entails. But such teaching is a far better option than revising the Creed or simply omitting a statement which admittedly requires explanation (and by explanation, I mean opportunity to instruct others in the meaning of the cross).

An examination of Christ's suffering upon the cross under the rubric of "hell" also stands, incidentally, to help us understand hell itself better. Hell, like every other created reality (or perversion of the same), can only properly be understood in relation to the Creator. Our own thinking about hell should begin, not end, with attention to Christ's endurance of it upon the cross. Such is the proper path towards a theological rather than physical or metaphysical understanding of hell. Such is the proper path, in other words, towards properly understanding the horrible fate of irrevocable estrangement from God that awaits those who reject the grace of God that is offered to us in Christ Jesus.

In short, we should continue to confess that Christ "descended into hell" not only for the sake of theological unity (though certainly for that), but also in the interest of regularly affirming the profound reality of what Christ endured for us upon the cross. To steal and tweak a phrase from J. Gresham Machen, "I'm so thankful for Christ's descent into hell. No hope without it." Indeed, no description of Christ's person and work is complete without reference to the same – reference, that is, in some form at least to the reality that Christ has suffered hell itself on behalf of his people.

Christ inhabited hell. But not, as Rome would have us believe, on Holy Saturday in the liturgical calendar. He inhabited hell on Good Friday, when he drank the cup of God's wrath against our sin to the very dregs, and so freed us from ever having to down a single drop of the same. Praise be to God for Christ's descent into hell.



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