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The Descent into Hell: Exinanition or Exaltation?

In a few short months, the graduates of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary will, God willing, be installed as pastors in the full-time ministry. At this installation they will be asked if they believe that the three Ecumenical Creeds are faithful testimonies to the truth of the Holy Scriptures and if the confessions in the Book of Concord are also in agreement with this one scriptural faith. In order to be installed into the public ministry, they will need to answer that they do believe that the creeds and confessions are a correct exposition of the doctrinal content of the Scriptures.¹ This requires a *quia* subscription to the confessions. One needs to believe that the doctrines found in the creeds and confessions are a correct exposition of the teachings of the Bible.

One of the doctrines that is found in the creeds and confessions is the *decensus ad inferos*. Christ's descent into hell is spoken of in the Apostle's Creed and in Article IX of the Formula of Concord. This doctrine has caused a large amount of discussion and dispute over the centuries. The dispute has centered around the question of whether the *decensus ad inferos* should be included as part of the exinanition or as part of the exaltation. The theologians are divided on this issue. While Scripture does not deal with this event extensively, it is clear from the *sedes doctrinae* that this doctrine must be included in the exaltation rather than as a part of the exinanition.

¹ <http://www.wels.net/worship/os-install-ordinstpastor-2002-03.rtf> (Accessed 1 May 2003).

The doctrine is spoken of in our current version of the second article in the Apostles Creed. “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead...”² The current text of the Apostles’ Creed did not come about until the eighth century. It is a slightly modified form of the Old Roman Creed, which was “composed” in Rome during the early third century. One of those slight modifications is the addition of the phrase in question: “He descended into hell.”

These words are lacking in the Old Roman Creed. They first appear in a formula from the fourth century. In the sixteenth century the phrase was universally understood as a designation for hell... In fact, this term, which literally means the world below, is a translation of the Greek for Hades, the place of the dead. Thus the text of the English Language Liturgical Consultation reads, “he descended to the dead.”³

The position of the phrase in question in the Apostles Creed is a bit precarious. There is little doubt that its placement reflects—to some degree—the confusion in those centuries on Christ’s descent. It has been placed right between the clear section on the exinanition (He “was crucified, died, and was buried”) and the clear section on the exaltation (“The third day he rose again from the dead”). Due to its unfortunate position, one can surmise that it would most likely belong to the humiliation, but one cannot make a clear case for it belonging to either side on the basis of its creedal position.

As a result there have been many controversies regarding this doctrine. Well-respected theologians can be found on both sides. It is said that even Luther changed his mind on the

² *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993) 19.

³ Robert Kolb ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 22.

issue.⁴ In the following article from the epitome of the Formula of Concord, some of the controversies are brought to light, and the “Lutheran” position is explained.

Among some theologians committed to the Augsburg Confession there has been some dispute regarding this article: when and in what manner the Lord Christ descended into hell, according to our simple Christian creed, and whether it took place before or after his death. Also, whether he descended only in his soul, or only in his deity, or with body and soul, bodily and spiritually. Also whether this article of faith belongs to the suffering of Christ or to his glorious victory and triumph. Since this article, as is true of the previous article, cannot be comprehended by reason or understanding, but must be grasped alone by faith: It is our unanimous counsel that there should be no dispute over this issue but it should be believed and taught on the simplest level as Dr. Luther of blessed memory explained this article in a most Christian manner in his sermon at Torgau in 1533. There he cut off all unprofitable, unnecessary questions and admonished all godly Christians to a simple Christian faith. For it is enough that we know that Christ descended into hell and destroyed hell for all believers and that he redeemed them from the power of death, the devil, and the eternal damnation of hellish retribution. How that happened we should save for the next world, where not only this matter but many others, which here we have simply believed and cannot comprehend with our blind reason, will be revealed.⁵

The wording of the article does not lead one to a clear conclusion as to whether one would take the descent into hell as part of the exinanition or the exaltation. The article itself is indecisive. It says that there should not be a dispute because this doctrine cannot be grasped by reason. It then references Martin Luther’s Torgau Sermon on Christ’s descent into hell and the resurrection. The Historical Introduction to the Book of Concord in the Concordia Triglotta sums up the Torgau sermon: “Luther, especially in a sermon delivered 1533 at Torgau, taught in accordance with the Scriptures that Christ, the God-man, body and soul, descended into hell as Victor over Satan and his host.”⁶ This is a correct summary. Luther stressed the fact that Jesus Christ had to be the entire person descending into hell in order to refute a heretical viewpoint of Aepinius, which stressed that the descent was a part of Christ’s suffering and atonement,

⁴ *The Book of Concord*, 634.

⁵ *The Book of Concord*, 514-515.

therefore, a part of the exinanition. He believed that while the body was still lying in the grave, Christ's soul descended into hell in order to:

suffer the qualms and pangs required to satisfy the wrath of God, complete the work of redemption, and render a plenary satisfaction, *satisfaction plenaria*. The descent is the last stage of Christ's humiliation and suffering, His triumph first beginning with the resurrection...On account of our redemption Christ descended to hell, just as he suffered and died for us...I believe that the descent of the soul of Christ to hell is a part of the Passion of Christ, i.e., of the struggles, dangers, anguish, pains, and punishments which He took upon Himself and bore in our behalf; for, in the Scriptures, to descend to hell signifies to be involved in the highest struggles, pain, and distress. I believe that the descent of Christ to hell is a part of His obedience foretold by the prophets and imposed on Him because of our sins. I believe that the descent of Christ pertains to His humiliation, not to His glorification and triumph.⁷

This was not an uncommon view. Aepinius had well respected friends. "Even such theologians as Westphal, Flacius, Gallus, and Osiander were partly agreed with him."⁸ Even Flacius who, as Dr. Oliver Olson contends, was the savior of Lutheran orthodoxy and of the reformation as a whole, fell prey to this error.⁹ Therefore it is a necessity for Luther to stress the point in the Torgau sermon that the whole body descended into hell. He does this when he says: "That means I believe in the entire person, God and human creature with body and soul inseparable, born of the virgin, suffered, dead and buried. Therefore I am not supposed to divide up his person but instead simply to believe and to say that this very Christ, God and human creature in one person, descended into hell."¹⁰

The Historical Introduction continues its summary of Luther's Torgau sermon: "The two outstanding features of Luther's sermon are that Christ descended into hell, body and soul, and

⁶ *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) 192.

⁷ *Triglot*, 193.

⁸ *Triglot*, 194.

⁹ Oliver K. Olson, *Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther's Reform* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002) 15.

¹⁰ Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen editors *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 248.

that He descended as a triumphant Victor, and not in order to complete His suffering and the work of atonement.” While it has been shown above that the first outstanding feature (that the whole person descended into hell) is a proper summary, the second is not. The Formula of Concord article is indecisive on the issue of how to take the descent into hell. The reason for this was that the early Wittenberg theologians did not agree as to which way to take the descent into hell. Neither Luther, Melanchthon, or Bugenhagen agreed on the explanation of the creedal phrase concerning the *descensus ad inferos*.¹¹ Luther was indecisive. The Formula of Concord is indecisive. In the above-mentioned Torgau sermon, Luther refused to take a side as to whether this was part of the exinanition or exaltation or even discuss how it could have possibly happened.

Therefore, even though we might formulate precise and subtle descriptions and definitions of the descent into hell and pose the questions certain teachers of the faith have disputed...Our thinking will not attain such knowledge or fathom it. These teachers did not understand it themselves. That I should be able to grasp how it actually happened in such a way that I can speak about it or perceive with my senses is far and above what is possible in this life. So I would simply set this subject aside since I cannot even grasp everything that takes place within this sphere of life—for instance, what Christ was thinking and feeling in the Garden when he sweat great drops of blood. This sort of thing must remain a matter of faith. How he descended into hell is much less a matter to be comprehended with words or thoughts.¹²

While Luther may not have had the clearest understanding of this issue, Melanchthon solidified our understanding of this Biblical dogma. “In distinction from Luther, Melanchthon understood the descent into hell as Christ’s triumphal victory march into hell. Christ terrifies the devils and the damned by showing them his power. Lutheran orthodoxy developed this idea.”¹³

Melanchthon’s view is based on the *sedes* of this passage, 1 Peter 3:18-19. □τι κα□
Χριστ□ς □παξ περ□ □μαρτι□ν □παθεν, δικαιος □π□ρ □δικων, □να □μ□ς

¹¹ *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, 245.

¹² *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, 247.

προσαγάγ□ τ□ θε□ θανατωθε□ς μ□ν σαρκ□ ζ□οποιηθε□ς δ□ πνεύματι· □ν □
κα□ το□ς □ν φυλακ□ πνεύμασιν πορευθε□ς □κήρυξεν, For Christ also died for sins
once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in
the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits
now in prison, (NASB)

This passage proves three points. This passage proves the descent into hell must be part of the
exaltation. It proves that he proclaimed his triumphal victory to the dead. It also proves that the
timing of the descent into hell must be after the vivification.

1 Peter 3:18-19 proves that the descent into hell must be part of the exaltation. The first
issue to handle is the usage of *sarki* and *pneumati*. When scripture uses the terms “flesh” and
“spirit” in reference to the Christian, it most often refers to one’s old man and the new man
created by the spirit. However, when one applies this reference to Christ, this presents a
problem. Christ did not have any sin at all; he did not have an old man. Hebrews 4:15 tells us
that he was like us in every way, yet was without sin. Therefore this usage of flesh and spirit
must be a reference to something else. Professor Becker explains to what these words most likely
refer:

Sarki is thus related to what we call the state of humiliation and *pneumati* to the
state of exaltation and in more dogmatic terms we might translate: Christ (was)
put to death in the state of humiliation and made alive in the state of exaltation. In
this new state, or mode of existence, he then descended into hell to preach to the
spirits in prison. That this interpretation is correct is substantiated by the words
that follow. Commentators have had difficulty in explaining what Peter meant
when he wrote, “in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison.” The
difficulty is compounded when we translate, as the KJV does, “by which he went
and preached to the spirits in prison.” As long as *pneumati* is viewed as a
reference to the Holy Ghost, those words will always be unclear. What would
Peter have in mind if he were saying that in (or by) the Holy Spirit Christ
descended into hell? But if *pneumati* is indeed a reference to the new spiritual state

¹³ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 207.

in which Christ now lives after his resurrection, all difficulties with this construction vanish.¹⁴

Professor Becker shares the same view as Francis Pieper, who also addresses this issue.

Pieper believes that the *sarki* presupposes the human nature and *pneumati* presupposes the divine nature. *Sarki* must presuppose the human nature.

Christ could not have been put to death according to His earthly life if He did not have a true human nature. For this reason the statement: “put to death according to the flesh,” is correctly used in the *genus idiomaticum* to prove that Scripture ascribes the suffering to the Son of God not according to the divine, but according to the human nature. Likewise *pneumati* presupposes the divine nature, since the heavenly, spiritual life, or the glorification, does not come to Christ “from elsewhere and from without,” as Chemnitz puts it, but through the personal union, that is, from the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Him bodily.¹⁵

Christ has been made alive in his state of exaltation. This passage also shows that it is in that state he went to proclaim to the spirits in prison. The verb *khrussein* does not necessarily mean to preach the gospel. That would not fit in this case, as he is “preaching” to the souls in hell. Their time of grace has ended. There is no scriptural basis or support for a *limbus patrum*.

This flies in the face of what the Roman Catholics state in their catechism. “It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham’s bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell. Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him.”¹⁶ Jesus says to the thief on the cross, “today you will be with me in paradise.” This rules out any thought of a *limbus patrum*.

Christ therefore proclaimed in a triumphal victory march to the souls/spirits in hell his complete victory over sin and death. “The word [*khrussein*] is used in the New Testament not

¹⁴ Prof. Siegbert Becker, “The Christological Flesh-Spirit Antithesis” *Our Great Heritage: Vol. 2* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998) 562.

¹⁵ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics: Vol. 2* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951) 319-320.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 180.

only of Gospel preaching, as, for example, in Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14, but also of Law preaching, as in Matt. 3:1; Acts 15:21; Rom. 2:21. The special meaning of *khrussein* in a given passage must be determined by the context.”¹⁷ The context in this case shows that it had to be law preaching. While the message that he proclaimed is gospel to those on earth, to those in hell it is pure law. Their time of grace has ended. It only condemns.

The use of the word *khrussein* in this case is much like what the Roman emperors used to do after a great victory. They would march down the streets and proclaim that they had won. This march was not part of the battle itself. It in no way earned their victory, but rather was a powerful strategic message to put fear in the hearts of enemies and confidence in the heart of their legions. Jesus went to hell to show off his victory to Satan and all those in hell. Mueller describes in vivid language of what the preaching to the spirits in hell consisted: “The preaching of Christ in hell was not evangelical, but legal, accusatory, terrifying, and that, too, both verbal, by which He convinced them that they had deserved eternal punishments, and real, by which He struck frightful terror into them.”¹⁸

This phrase “preaching to the spirits in prison” also proves that the descent into hell cannot be part of the humiliation. This removes almost any thought of him needing to suffer on our behalf. When one is proclaiming victory and the absolute annihilation of the enemy, most do not consider that to be something that would be part of suffering. If he is proclaiming his victory, there is no need for Christ to suffer to complete the victory.

1 Peter 3:18-19 also proves that the timing of the descent into hell must be after the vivification. This passage says that Christ was made alive, and then he went and preached to the spirits in hell. Quenstedt comments on the timing issue: “The exact time of the descent is

¹⁷ Pieper, 315.

according to the Petrine chain of events that moment which fell between the quickening and the resurrection of Christ strictly so called [the resurrection in the sense of appearance on earth].”¹⁹

This also proves that the descent was not part of the humiliation.

Pieper summarizes what this doctrine and passage means: “Christ was put to death according to His lowly, earthly mode of subsistence in the state of humiliation and quickened according to His glorious, heavenly mode of subsistence in the state of exaltation. In this glorified state, as the exalted Savior and Lord, He went and preached to the spirits in prison.”²⁰

For the seniors who will be ordained and installed into the office of the public ministry in a few short months, they will need to hold to a *quia* subscription to the confessions, and believe the creeds are also a correct exposition of what Scripture teaches. On the basis of 1 Peter 3:18-19, it is quite clear that the descent into hell was not part of the exinanition, but was part of the exaltation. While the creedal phrase, “he descended into hell,” may have an unfortunate placement, and one may wish there had been more decisive and precise language in the Formula of Concord, there is nothing in either that would necessitate one to put an asterisk on our subscription. Melancthon, who was a much better precisionist than Luther and clarified the orthodox position on the *descensus ad inferos*, says in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, “Nothing can be said so carefully that it can escape misrepresentation.”²¹ While the words of Scripture on the subject of the descent into hell may be few, they are clear. The descent into hell is part of the exaltation. Unfortunately, there have been some who have misrepresented the clear

¹⁸ John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics: A Handbook of Doctrinal Theology for Pastors, Teachers, and Laymen* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934) 297.

¹⁹ Pieper, 314.

²⁰ Pieper, 320.

²¹ *The Book of Concord*, 174.

words of scripture. The words clearly show: “After Christ had returned to bodily life in the tomb...he descended, in his glorified body, to the prison of the damned, and there preached.”²²

²² John Schaller, *Biblical Christology: A Study in Lutheran Dogmatics* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1981) 103.

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