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Christ's Descent into Hell

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Christ's Descent into Hell.

Christ's descent into hell is not a moot or undecided doctrine, upon which no clear light can be shed and which remains the subject for speculation indefinitely; nor is it one the correct or incorrect teaching of which is a matter of indifference. It is embodied in the Apostolic Creed, and with the Church of old we confess: "suffered under . . . He descended into hell." It thus becomes a part of our holy Christian faith and one to which we must subscribe as well as to the foregoing or the following. But while the words "descended into hell" are confessed by practically all of Christendom, yet the churches are by no means agreed on the interpretation of these words. There is, in fact, such a divergency of opinion on this subject, even among Lutheran theologians, that it is well worth while to inquire again into the teachings of Scripture on this doctrine.

Christ's descent into hell was not always confessed in the Second Article of the Creed. Ancient manuscripts do not record the words "He descended into hell." It was not before the year 359 that it became a part of the confession. This was at the Arianic Council of Sirmium, as Koehler tells us in his treatise *Zur Lehre von der Hoellenfahrt*. Here the Church confesses its faith in "the only-begotten Son of God, . . . who suffered, was crucified, and descended into the underworld, or hell, causing the door-keepers of hell to tremble at His sight." That this was now the doctrine of the Church we see from the Ninth Canon of the Council of Constantinople (391), in which the anathema is pronounced on him who denied that the incarnate Word of God, being made alive again, went into Hades. This doctrine, however, was not merely taught now and henceforth, but it was taught in the Church from the beginning. Augustine says: "*Veritas huius articuli extra omnem controversionem posita est.*" (The truth of this article is beyond all dispute.) Again: "*Qui nisi infidelis negaverit apud inferos fuisse Christum?*" (Who but an infidel would deny that Christ was in hell?) Besides, the following Fathers mention the descent: Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech.* (386), before 350; Irenaeus, 170, a disciple of Polycarp, a disciple of John; Clemens Alexandrinus (*L. u. W.*, 20, 17) mentions it and distinguishes it from the suffering, death, and burial of Christ. The doctrine of the descent into hell is therefore not a truth which originated later, which was not known to the ancient Church and was spuriously inserted into the Creed, but it is a doctrine which the Church of old always taught and which originated nowhere else than in Scripture. Let us see, according to the inerrant Word of God, what the Lord teaches concerning the descent of Christ into hell, and let us interpret Scripture by Scripture. We shall divide this study into three parts and consider first the fact, secondly the purpose, and thirdly the practical value of the descent into hell.

I

In searching Scripture for light on this doctrine, we must take the *sedes doctrinae*, the one and only passage which *ex professo* deals with the descent, 1 Pet. 3, 18—20. This passage will be referred to time and time again and explained in the course of our discussion. It is a *crux interpretum*, or a *crux theologorum*, but mainly because men do not take the words as they stand nor explain them in the light of Scripture, but in the light of their human reason.

Who is it that descended into hell? That is the first question we wish to answer. What is the *subiectum quod* of the descent? Right here we have two answers at least which are quite popular. Some teach that only the soul of Christ descended, while others teach that the whole Christ, according to body and soul, was the subject of the descent. The former view was held by many eminent theologians of the early Church and is still popular in the Roman Church, where the traditions of the Fathers are at least as authoritative as the Bible. Koenig, in his treatise *Die Lehre von der Hoellenfahrt*, quotes 36 Church Fathers, but only one, Theodotus, teaches a descent in the resurrection body; the rest held that only the soul of Christ descended. Of modern theologians such men as Delitzsch, Hofmann, Laible, maintain that view, Delitzsch describing Christ as descending *leiblos*. That this view is utterly false can readily be seen from the *sedes doctrinae*.

Here we see that Christ, the whole Christ, and not *pneuma*, is the subject of the statement. "Christ also hath once suffered, . . . by which also *He* went and preached unto the spirits in prison." The Christ who had suffered went down; that was the whole Christ, since the soul did not suffer alone, nor was the soul raised or made alive. From the English translation it ought to be plain to every unprejudiced mind of average intelligence that He who descended was Christ, the God-man, according to body and soul. "Christ, the entire God-man, was put to death; Christ, the entire God-man, was made alive and descended."

Whence do men get the idea that only the soul descended? From the *sedes doctrinae*, or rather from a wrong exegesis of it. We read: *θανατωθεις μὲν σαρκί, ζωοποιηθεις δὲ ἐν πνεύματι ἐν ᾧ καὶ . . . πορευθεις*. ("Being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the spirit, by which also He went," etc. "By which" (*ἐν ᾧ*) evidently refers to *πνεύματι*, which may be translated soul or spirit. But that is a wrong explanation of the words. If we look at the original, we find that each of the two participles, being put to death and being made alive (*θανατωθεις, ζωοποιηθεις*), both predicated of Christ, are qualified by a noun in the dative, *sarki* and *pneumati*. Here is the point where most interpreters have stumbled. What do *sarx* and *pneuma* mean in this case, and how must the datives be rendered? That is the

question on which everything hinges. "In the first place, we must know that the two datives are the same, have the same force in both cases; again, that they are not datives of instrument, but of reference. And secondly, *sarx* and *pneuma* cannot denote merely flesh and spirit, body and soul, nor the two natures of the God-man as such, but they must denote the two modes of existence of the God-man, the former, His physical existence in a natural body, the latter, His spiritual mode of existence in a glorified body" (Dau).^{*} We shall soon see that this is the only correct Scriptural and grammatical interpretation. The translation "Christ was put to death by the flesh and raised again by the spirit" is nonsense. If we render this passage: Christ was put to death according to the human nature and made alive according to the divine, then something was made alive that never died, and something died that was not made alive, as Dr. Dau says. Our English Bible translates: "Being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the spirit." This is inadmissible. The two nouns in the dative, both qualifying the participle, must have the same force, one dative cannot be a dative of reference while the other is a dative of instrument. For this same reason many of our own theologians are wrong who translate: "He was put to death according to the human nature and made alive according to the divine, in the strength of the divine." While this is not wrong in itself, while it is true that the divine nature could not die and that the human nature could not of itself rise again, yet there are two objections to be raised to this rendering of the words. In the first place, the datives would have different force, and that is not grammatically correct. And secondly, as Dr. Pieper says in his *Dogmatik*, Christ was not made alive according to the divine nature, just as He was put to death according to the human nature, but both, the putting to death and the making alive, happened unto Him according to the human nature, the divine nature of course concurring by reason of the personal union. Dr. Pieper (Vol. II, 378 f.) also calls attention to the fact that the following "in which," if *pneumati* would be rendered by "divine nature," would mean that He descended to hell in His divine nature, while quickened (*ζωοποιήθεις*) shows that the human nature also participated.

No, "*sarx* and *pneuma* cannot denote the natures of Christ, but must denote the two modes of existence through which the God-man passed. In His fleshly form of existence He lived a number of years; in that way He was put to death. In the grave Christ assumed life and also the body, but this body is now fitted for a new mode of existence, *viz.*, in the world of spirits. It is the resurrection body,

^{*} Lectures on *Outlines of Doctrinal Theology* by A. L. Graebner, delivered in his course in Dogmatics in Concordia Seminary by W. H. T. Dau. Quotations are from the author's classroom notes of these lectures.

which all flesh shall assume when this mortal shall put on immortality. In this new mode of existence the quickening (*ζωοποιήσις*) occurred. The quickening is an event in the new and glorified state. 'Εν ᾧ refers to *pneumati* and must be translated, 'in which glorified state,' in this new spirit-life, as a being which had now become a spirit, though retaining flesh and blood." (Dau.) Luther holds the same view when he says: "*getoetet nach dem irdischen, fleischlichen Leben, lebendig gemacht nach dem geistlichen, uebernaturlichen Leben, in welchem geistlichen, uebernaturlichen Leben er auch hingegangen ist,*" etc. (Quoted in Pieper, *Christl. Dogmatik*, II, 375.)

That is the *subiectum quod* of the descent, the entire God-man, Jesus Christ, in His glorified state. The *subiectum quo*, of course, is His human nature, since the acts of going, making alive, preaching, belong naturally to the human nature, the divine participating by reason of the personal union. This is also the teaching of Luther and our Confessions. Luther says with regard to the *subiectum quod*: "I believe in the Lord Christ, Son of God, who died, was buried, descended into hell, that is, in the whole person, God and man, with body and soul, undivided. He was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered, died and was buried. Therefore I shall also not part or divide here, but believe and say that this Christ, God and man, in one person, descended into hell, but remained not in the same." (Erl. 20—169.) The Formula of Concord (Article IX, Epitome) endorses this statement of Luther.

Having ascertained who descended into hell, our next question is as to the *terminus ad quem* of the descent. The question to be decided at this juncture is whether we shall, like some teachers of the old Church, identify the descent of Christ with death and its bonds or, like some of the Reformed, with His suffering, or whether we shall teach and hold a *vera et realis descensio ad inferos*.

Many ancient Fathers believed the descent to be identical with death, or the sojourn in the grave, while the Catholic Church teaches that Christ went to the *limbus patrum*, the place where the souls of the departed fathers dwelt. What does the Word of God say? "He went and preached unto the spirits in prison" (*τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεῖς ἐκζητεῖν*), and from the next verse we see that these were refractory, unruly spirits, *ἀπειθήσασιν ποτε*, "which sometime were disobedient," refused to accept and believe the Gospel. "The natural force of the word *φυλακή*, prison, or carcer, and every connection which this word holds with other terms in our text compels us to interpret it as denoting hell, or, as Quenstedt has it, *carcer infernalis seu receptaculum et ποῦ damnatorum spirituum*." "The claim that 'He descended into hell' means the same as 'He was buried' breaks down right here. For it stands to reason that no spirits are in the grave, but merely bodies, and Christ went to the prison of

spirits. Furthermore, such a meaning of Christ's descent would result in meaningless repetitions, and in a short, comprehensive statement such as the Creed there is no room for such tautologies." Nor can Christ have entered the *limbus patrum*, there to free the souls of the departed saints who had awaited the coming of the Messiah; for such a place is not in existence according to Catholic description of it, but it can be, aye, is, hell; for of hell we know that it is the abode of the damned spirits, that the devils are held in chains of darkness, reserved unto Judgment, 2 Pet. 2. Hence *φυλακή*, prison, dare not be confounded with Hades, is not identical with the place and state of the dead, but is the *pou damnatorum spirituum*. The *terminus a quo* of the descent is the grave; the *terminus ad quem*, hell.

What about the time of Christ's descent into hell? When did it happen? Before or after death, before or after vivification and resurrection? Much depends upon the answer. If it happened before His soul and body were reunited, then it took place during the state of death. Delitzsch, Laible and Hofmann hold that it occurred before vivification, and the Fathers all taught that Christ descended into hell while His body was still in the grave. According to this theory the descent is either nothing else than a sojourn in the grave, or it is the descent of the soul only, as the Roman Catholics claim. Both have been disproved above; therefore the time of Christ's descent cannot be before body and soul were reunited.

What does our *sedes doctrinae* say of this matter? We read: *θανατωθεῖς μὲν σαρκί, ζωοποιηθεῖς δὲ πνεύματι ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν παρενθεῖς*. "Being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the spirit; by which also He went." Here the descent is placed after the quickening. In v. 21 the resurrection of Christ is mentioned, and in v. 22 we read: "Who is gone into heaven and is on the right hand of God," and chap. 4, 6 reference is made to the return to Judgment. Clearly the individual stages of humiliation and exaltation are here enumerated in their historic order, just like in the Second Article of our Creed. Christ the God-man suffered, died, was vivified, went to preach to the spirits in prison, rose, ascended, sitteth at the right hand of God, and will return to Judgment. And thus we have the time of descent — between burial and resurrection. Mark well, however, the difference between *ζωοποιήσις* and *ἀνάστασις*, vivification and resurrection in the narrower sense (*ζωοποίησις simpliciter declarat animae corporisque coniunctionem*), union of body and soul and vivification. Peter plainly distinguishes between the two, and the vivification takes place in the tomb before His resurrection. That alone enables us to ascertain with certainty the time of Christ's descent: it took place after the vivification in the tomb, before His resurrection proper on Easter Sunday morning. This can be the only

time according to 1 Pet. 3. Quenstedt correctly says: "*Temporis articuli momentum illud, quod intercessit inter ζωοποίησιν et ἀνάστασιν Christi, stricto dictam.*" It is the moment which intervened between the vivification and the resurrection in the narrower sense, or His leaving the tomb on Easter Sunday. Just when it occurred within that space of time, we do not know. Quenstedt thinks it happened during the earthquake on that Sunday morning. It suffices to know that it occurred as our Creed puts it, in the same order, after the burial and before the resurrection, but, according to Peter, after the vivification in the tomb. The tomb was empty during the descent. The Formula of Concord says *post sepulturam*, and Luther, to whom repeated reference is made in Art. IX of the Formula of Concord, says: "Before He rose and ascended into heaven, while He yet lay in the grave, He also descended down into hell that He might deliver us therefrom who ought to lie captive therein."

It remains to be seen *how* the descent was performed, the manner of it, the *forma descensus*. "The verb *poreutheis* (went) denotes locomotion and states the *forma descensus*. At the time of His descent His body was not in the grave. But since the subject of this action is a person, existing in a glorified, spiritual body, and since He is the omnipresent God at the same time, *poreutheis* can only be manifestation of the reanimated Christ in a certain locality. The action expressed by it was just as instantaneous as the manifestation of the risen Christ to His disciples." Hollaz says on this point: "*Quamvis descensus . . . fuerit verus et realis, non tamen physicus aut localis, sed supernaturalis motus fuit.*" Luther warns against speculating too much on how this act was performed, and the Formula of Concord repeats this warning. "*Ich will diesen Artikel nicht hoch und scharf handeln, wie es sei zugegangen oder was da heisse zur Hoelle fahren, sondern bei dem einfaeltigen Verstande bleiben, wie diese Worte lauten und wie man's Kindern und Einfaeltigen vorbilden muss. Denn es sind wohl viel gewesen, die solches mit Vernunft und funef Sinnen haben wollen fassen, aber damit nichts treffen, sondern sind nur weiter vom Glauben gegangen und abgefuehrt.*" (Erl., 20, 166.) Though we cannot fathom it, yet we accept it, "that it was a true and real, aye, majestic, glorious, and triumphant manifestation or presentation of the God-man made alive according to the flesh." (Carpzov.)

So much for the fact of the descent. "We confess that the descent really took place, that it is not the act, metaphorically so named, whereby Christ suffered the pains of death, and the *derelictio*, nor the act metonymically so named, which exhibits to us the fruits of the Passion of Christ, but it is a *descensio vera et realis*, a glorious event, which occurred after Christ had all His work finished."

II.

Having seen what Scripture and our Church teach concerning the fact of the descent, we shall now turn to the purpose of the descent, the *finis* and *effectus*. It is here that we find the greatest divergency of opinion among the dogmaticians.

Again, this is due solely to the fact that Scripture is not interpreted according to Scripture, that reason is called upon to assist in explaining the passage in Peter. What, then, is the real purpose of Christ's descent into hell?

For one thing, Christ did not descend to suffer. This error was taught by one Aepinus, Pastor in Hamburg (died 1553), and it was this error which caused Art. IX to be added to the Formula of Concord. There is in our text and in all Scripture not one word indicating that Christ descended for such a purpose. Some one has said that the act was performed by Christ *ad redemptionis nostrae complementum*, for the purpose of completing our redemption; but we know that redemption had been completed when Jesus closed His eyes in death; for at the moment of death He exclaimed, "It is finished"; besides, He tells the thief He would be in paradise that very day; and furthermore He commends His soul into the hands of His Father. These words show that death and burial were the last stages of His humiliation, that redemption was finished for all times to come. Even our proof-text tells us that the state of suffering was over; for *ἐν ᾧ*, in which, was explained above as "in which glorified state" or "in which spiritual mode of existence." "Peter had shown till now that the path of glory leads through suffering and shame, that the crown follows the cross. This truth he now seeks to illustrate by an event in the life of the Lord Himself. *Ἐπαθε*, the aorist, shows together with three qualifiers (*ἄπαξ περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν, δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων, ἵνα ἡμᾶς προσαγάγῃ τῷ θεῷ*) that the state of suffering had become terminated and that what the apostle is now to relate no longer belongs to the state of suffering." Christ suffered, and when it was over, He descended into hell for a manifestation of His glory. That this is the only correct interpretation we shall presently see. Even Acts 2, 24 cannot be quoted in support of the above-mentioned wrong doctrine, or view; for this passage refers to the body of Christ only, which was held by the pains or bands of death until vivification. Of the descent, however, we know that it took place according to both body and soul.

Nor was the purpose of Christ's descent to preach the Gospel. This view is held by many, also in the Lutheran Church. How do they arrive at this unscriptural conclusion? Our text reads: "By which also He went and preached unto the spirits in prison," *ἐν ᾧ πορευθεὶς καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν ἐκήρυξεν*. According to this, the chief action about which the descent revolves is expressed by the verb

ἐκήρυσεν, preached. The correct interpretation of this word and its object will give us the correct teaching on the *finis descensus* and will at the same time stamp as false any other view, such as the one just mentioned, that Christ preached the Gospel.

What, then, is the exact meaning of *kerussein*? Does it mean to preach the Gospel? Or does it denote that in this case? "The original meaning of the verb is to make a solemn announcement, *cum dignitate et auctoritate clare publice praedicare*. The idea of authority and dignity and majesty is always connected with the word." True, that verb is frequently used in the New Testament in the sense of preaching the Gospel, but it does not necessarily have this meaning. We can gain positive information on this point by seeing how the word is used in the New Testament. Passages in which the verb *kerussein* occurs may be divided into three classes, to wit, 1) such as add the express object: *εὐαγγέλιον* or, similarly, *ἀφεσειν ἁμαρτιῶν*, forgiveness of sins, or more especially, *Χριστόν*; 2) such as expressly add, or at least demand, an object other than the Gospel; 3) such as speak generally, referring merely to preaching, regardless of the contents.

The first class is by far the largest, e. g., Matt. 24, 14: "And this Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world"; Matt. 26, 13: "Verily, I say unto you, Wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this that this woman hath done be told for a memorial of her"; Mark 16, 15: "Preach the Gospel to every creature"; Col. 1, 23: "If ye . . . be not moved away from the hope of the Gospel which ye have heard, which was preached to every creature"; 1 Tim. 3, 16: "Without controversy . . . God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles"; Acts 19, 13: "We adjure you by Jesus, whom Paul preached."

Why do we invariably find the object expressed? It would not be necessary if *kerussein* as such would mean "preach the Gospel." Is it not logical to infer that without the object the word would become ambiguous and another interpretation possible? To be sure. And this is true, even though, in some few instances, *kerussein* alone, without the object expressed, denotes Gospel-preaching: Mark 1, 7: "John preached, saying, There cometh one after me," etc.; 1 Cor. 15, 11-14: "Whether it were I or they, so we preached, and so ye believed. . . . 12. Now, if Christ be preached," etc. (the context shows that Gospel-preaching is meant). These passages really belong to class one.

We must distinguish between the last-named passages and those in which *kerussein* is used in a general sense, meaning to proclaim. Thus in Mark 7, 36: "The more He charged them, the more they published it" (healing the deaf-mute). Matt. 10, 27 Jesus commands His disciples to preach upon the housetops what they hear in the ear.

In this passage the manner, and not the contents or the object of preaching, is important. These *ad* 3.

In the above-named class the content of the preaching is judgment and mercy. But there is the second class we mentioned, those passages which add, or at least demand, an object other than the Gospel. Matt. 12, 41 the *kerugma* of Jonah is mentioned, the contents of which surely were Law and judgment as well as Gospel. In this connection we must also quote 2 Tim. 4, 2. In the first verse Paul says: "I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom." Then he proceeds: "Preach the Word." In view of the reference to Christ's Judgment we cannot conceive of a preacher preaching nothing but Gospel,—"preach the Word," the Word of grace and of judgment,—and we think of judgment also because these words follow: reprove, rebuke, exhort. In this case the context must show what is meant. *Kerussein* can mean to preach both Law and Gospel, and we know that that is the duty of the preacher.

Thus we have quoted examples for all three classes. From the examples adduced and from the common usage of the New Testament we find that *kerussein* is a *vox media*, the *terminus technicus* for *doctrina publica*. Most of the time it is used for preaching the Gospel, but not always; the object of the verb is either expressed or implied. Whenever it is not expressly stated, the context must shed light on the matter. Such a case we have before us right now, and we shall see that the verb demands an object other than the Gospel, as the context reveals.

Kerussein has no object. What did Christ preach when He descended into hell? That is not hard to determine if we remember that He actually went to hell to preach unto the spirits in prison. From among the damned spirits Peter singles out a class, *viz.*, those who once lived at the time or in the days of Noah. The Noachites are the representatives, are fair examples, of the class of men, or spirits, found in hell, refractory, disobedient, spirits who had spurned all warnings, rejected the proffered grace, and had not believed the message of the Messiah and Savior.

What do you think that Christ could possibly have preached to such men? Certainly not Gospel, as many would have it. There are those who refer to the prophetic office of Christ when He was still the *Logos asarkos*, the unincarnate Logos of the Old Testament. These people hold that this preaching was done in the days of Noah before the Flood. This is impossible, the whole context branding it as absurd. *Poreutheis* corresponds with v. 22. Still others believe He preached the Gospel unto all godless (Marcion) or to all unbelievers and devils (Origen) or at least to such people as had no opportunity of hearing the Word here on earth. This is a popular view; it suits the natural man, who ever seeks to measure God by his own imper-

fect standard. In an effort to save God's honor and defend His justice and to make the gracious God still more gracious, men have made this statement: He preached the Gospel to those who had no opportunity of hearing it in their lifetime. But such a thing is not possible; for our text is explicit in showing that the spirits in prison are there by their own fault, by reason of their disobedience; "which sometime were disobedient." *Ἀπειθήσασιν* emphasizes the undeniable guilt of the Noachites. 1 Pet. 4, 6: "For this cause was the Gospel preached also to them that are dead that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit" is often referred to in this connection in support of this teaching. But this is not a parallel text because it speaks of people to whom the Gospel was preached while they were still on earth and living. It has nothing whatever to do with preaching to the dead, the souls in hell.

No, Christ cannot possibly have preached the Gospel in order to save. If He had, we should at least expect a hint of the success which attended His efforts. But as it is, we only know from 2 Pet. 2 that God reserved the unjust unto the day of Judgment to be punished, and from Heb. 9, 27: "It is appointed unto men once to die and after this the Judgment." In short, Gospel-preaching at the time of Christ's descent "would contradict all those passages of Scripture which mark the doom pronounced upon the devils as final and which limit the time of grace to a sinner's natural life." Why emphasize the means of grace here if there is another way to heaven? *Was dem einen recht ist, ist dem andern billig*. If they heard the Gospel after death, why not we? Why say, "To-day, if ye hear His voice, harden not your hearts"? Why, if another chance is to be had in yonder world to rectify mistakes?

No, they are wrong who claim Christ preached the Gospel, either to those who did not learn and hear it here or to the heathen and infants or to the souls in Hades or in the *limbus patrum*. They are wrong, for Christ's preaching was a *concio legalis*, a preaching of the Law. Not perhaps in words, but in effect. Quenstedt correctly connects *kerussein* with the events mentioned in Col. 2, 15, where we are told that the exalted Christ spoiled principalities and powers and as a Victor over hell and its legions triumphed over them and made a show of them publicly. For this He did. He proclaimed to them, "I am He that liveth and was dead; and, behold, I am alive forevermore, amen, and have the keys of hell and of death." He spoke as a spirit to spirits, not necessarily in articulate words, but in such a manner as to make them understand His victory. He impressed upon the devils and evil spirits, who were celebrating a victory of evil, that grace had conquered over sin, that the foes were overcome, and that the Serpent's head was crushed. Baier paraphrased *ekeruzen*: "*coram et ipso opere ostenderit, se esse illum, qui iam contriverit*

caput serpentis ac dissolverit opera diaboli." From this it is clear that Christ did not preach the Gospel-message in order to save the damned, but preached "*ad eorum confusionem et refutationem.*" That was the effect upon the devils and the damned. They felt secure now that He was slain who was to be the Judge of the quick and the dead, He whom men had regarded as their Savior. But now that He lives, they see the hopelessness of their cause, find that for all future ages they must continue in this awful condition because of their unbelief. Terror seized hold upon them when Jesus stepped in and showed Himself, and fear and trembling when He proclaimed His victory. For in effect that meant: Your fate is sealed forevermore. "He that believeth not shall be damned." In his characteristic, unique way Luther drew a cartoon, a word-picture, of the event in its effects on the damned spirits. "*Darum sage nur einfaeltiglich, wenn man dich fraget von diesem Artikel, wie es zugegangen sei: 'Das weiss ich wahrlich nicht, werde es auch nicht erdenken koennen; aber grob kann ich dir's wohl malen und in ein Bild fassen, dass er hingegangen und die Fahne mitgenommen als ein siegender Held und damit die Tore aufgestossen und unter den Teufeln rumort, dass hie einer zum Fenster, dort einer zum Loche hinausgefallen ist.'*" (Erl., 20, 169.) Thus the preaching of Christ, in effect at least, was Law, and Luther is right, likewise the ancient Church, which speaks of Christ's descent as a victory over Hades and its doorkeepers, that He descended and that at His appearing the doorkeepers of hell were filled with terror. (Formula of Concord, Art. IX, 2. 3.)

That is the descent into hell according to Scripture. We cannot sum up what we have heard any better than in the words of Dr. A. L. Graebner in his *Outlines on Doctrinal Theology*: "Christ's descent into hell was that act by which the God-man, Christ glorified, according to His human nature, after its quickening in the tomb, appeared in the prison of the condemned spirits a herald of their judgment and His victory."

III.

But what about the practical importance of this doctrine? Is there none whatsoever? Has it no bearing on our faith and life? To be sure; it contains, in the first place, a *solemn warning*.

What else was Christ's descent into hell than a final victory over all the devils and the forces of hell? What else than a final confirmation of the judgment pronounced on the devil and his angels? The men at the time of Noah as well as the other damned had rejected the grace of God, spurned the Messiah, and now, when they least expected it, the Christ whom they had refused to accept, whose downfall and death they were now celebrating, not only lived and reigned, but appeared in person to them. That was in effect a *praedicatio damnationis*, as Stoeckhardt says. If He lives whom they rejected,

then their doom is sealed. And thus it is; and Christ's action has bearing on all the damned. Hell once heard a sermon by Christ, and through His manifestation He left forever His imprint in hell. Hell is decorated with pictures of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Crucified; in other words, the damned have ever before them this picture. That is the climax of all suffering, that the damned cannot lose sight of Jesus, and the sight of Him forever forces them to put the blame for their terrible loss on no one but themselves.

If this is true, as it is true; if the doom of all those is sealed who have rejected Christ in this life; if the descent, far from bringing comfort to the lost, far from being such as to give them another chance, forever excludes all hope of escape, then it surely is a solemn warning for us all, whoever we may be, to escape for our life lest we be consumed, to seek the Lord while He is to be found; a warning not to disregard the time of grace, not to reject the Word of God, lest we, too, "come into this place of torment."

But there is also *comfort* in this doctrine; for Christ conquered hell for us, for you and me. His descent makes that sure beyond all doubt. Christ descended into hell, triumphed over Satan and his hosts, took captivity captive, and like a triumphant general made a public show of the spoils of war and the vanquished enemies. If there was any doubt in the heart of man as to the final outcome of the battle with iniquity, this doubt has herewith been dispelled. Christ is the glorious Victor, and by faith His victory is counted unto us as our victory. Nevermore can the forces of evil have power over us, we are forever safe from hell's jaws and Satan's clutches, thanks to the work of Jesus Christ, thanks also to His descent. The effect of the descent is the same as that expressed Heb. 2, 14, 15 and Hos. 3, 14. Luther comforts himself in this wise: "*Also glaube ich auch hie, dass Christus selbst persoendlich die Hoelle zerstoert und den Teufel gefangen hat; Gott gebe die Fahne, Pforten, Tor und Ketten sei hoelzern, eisern oder gar keine gewesen, da liegt auch nichts an; wenn ich nur das behalte, so durch solche Bilder wird angezeigt, dass ich von Christo glauben soll, welches ist das Hauptstueck, Nutz und Kraft, so wir davon haben, dass mich und alle, die an ihn glauben, weder Hoelle noch Teufel gefangennehmen, noch schaden kann.*" (Erl., 20, 170.) And this statement of Luther is repeated in the Formula of Concord, and we are told: "Thus we retain the sound doctrine and true consolation that neither hell nor the devil can take captive or injure us and all who believe in Christ."

God grant that we may ever comfort ourselves against any accusation of devil and conscience with the thought of Christ's glorious victory over the forces of evil and that, trusting in the Savior, we may escape the wrath to come and spend eternity with our reascended Lord in bliss and glory forever!

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