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The Hades Gospel

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the spiritual treasures of the Church as a guest, especially for attendance at the Lord's Table — mandatory imposition of dues on church members, requiring the same amount from all — or coercive taxing of the individuals — use of church discipline as a measure against matters which are not evident, mortal sins, or even against self-provoked sins — to consider a person as convicted in his own mind or as opposing maliciously because he is not able to reply to the arguments and charges uttered against him, or even assents — to lay more weight on the correct form of the proceedings than on the achieving of the purpose of the discipline — to demand the same form and the same degree of publicity for all confessions of sins which may have to be made — the endeavor to make the chasm between those who are in and those who are outside the congregation really large, instead of building bridges for the opponents and for those who are on the outside.

The Hades Gospel

The Gospel of a second probation, of salvation in Hades, of the possibility of conversion after death, is very popular today. Most of the modern theologians, liberals and conservatives, have become its heralds. It has found its way into the Reformed churches.¹⁾ It has found its way into the Lutheran Church.²⁾ Statements like these: "The purpose of the descent of Christ into Hades was to preach to the spirits in prison, 1 Pet. 3:19; those who disobeyed in the past were now to have the Gospel preached to them, 1 Pet. 4:6, and to receive the benefit of the propitiation" (J. A. W. Haas, *The Truth of Faith*, p. 95) are being repeated in many Lutheran pulpits, magazines, and theological handbooks. P. Althaus is glad to record that "modern theology (with but a few exceptions) has swept away the limitations set by the old Protestant teaching which restrict

1) On the trial of Professor Charles Augustus Briggs, who taught that in the intermediate state certain unbelievers will be given another opportunity for conversion, see *Lehre und Wehre*, 1893, p. 162. The Presbyterian General Assembly called this teaching a dangerous hypothesis.

2) "Schleiermacher postulated in his *Glaubenslehre* (paragraph 161, 1) a continued probation after death. . . . This view became normative for many others. . . . The doctrine of the *descensus* also underwent a significant change. In contrast to the seventeenth century view, it was now regarded as a means of offering grace to those who are held in the infernal prison, and this redemptive work of the Savior was said to extend through all ages. The *locus classicus*, 1 Pet. 3:18-20, was interpreted as teaching the universal scope of salvation. Thus the doctrine of a future probation made its way into Lutheran theology" (O. W. Heick, in *The Lutheran Church Quarterly*, Oct., 1944, p. 432).

the preaching of salvation to man's life on earth" (*Die letzten Dinge*, p. 181).³⁾

This is the Hades gospel: "Christ passed into the unseen world and delivered His message to . . . souls that were awake to hear the glad tidings He brought them. . . . Christ went forth into another sphere to bear the message of glad tidings to the departed spirits of men who were there detained. . . . If the spirits to which He preached were the spirits of men who had died impenitent, it cannot be but that He preached repentance and offered them salvation" (H. M. Luckcock, *The Intermediate State Between Death and Judgment*, pp. 52, 140). They call it the Gospel of the Hereafter. J. Paterson-Smyth: "Christ the triumphant victor 'descended into Hades' (Apostles' Creed) to proclaim the glad news to the dead (1 Pet. 3:18), to unfurl His banner and set up His Cross in the great world of the departed. . . . This was one of the gladdest notes in the whole Gospel harmony of the early Church. It told of the universality of Christ's Atonement. It told of victory, far beyond this life. It told that Christ, who came to seek and save men's souls on earth, had continued that work in the world of the dead. . . . Said I not well it was a Gospel of the Hereafter, a good news of God?" (*The Gospel of the Hereafter*, pp. 53, 61, 157.)

Which classes of men are made the object of the Gospel of the Hereafter? First, the heathen and all those in Christian lands to whom the Gospel was not preached in this life. P. Althaus: "In the future world Christ will come to all of those whom the Gospel did not reach in this life; there the decision will be made" (*op. cit.*, p. 181). A. Koeberle: "Christ can reveal Himself to the captive, troubled souls, and spirits, who heard nothing of Him here on earth, as their Judge and Savior, as their Lord and Redeemer" (*Das Evangelium und die Raetsel der Geschichte*, p. 71). Theodor Traub: "Those who were not called in this life enter the realm of the dead, Sheol, Hades, the prison (1 Pet. 3). . . . We are not ready to say that the New Testament knows nothing of the possibility of conversion in yonder world. According to 1 Pet. 3:18 f., salvation is offered to the spirits in prison" (*Von den letzten Dingen*, pp. 34, 83 f.). *The Pulpit Commentary*: "I cling to the hope that the preaching of the Savior on the other side of the grave will bring multitudes to heaven who died without a Gospel. . . . The myriads in the Roman empire who died without a single note of the evangel falling on their ears, may, if they will yet receive the Gospel preached to them, if they will read its blessed writing in the lurid light of the very flames of hell, yet be trophies of its

3) Stoeckhardt: "Most modern exegetes hold that Christ's $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ in hell offered salvation to the spirits in prison" (*Kommentar ueber den Ersten Brief Petri*, p. 158).

unspeakable grace and live to God in the Spirit" (On 1 Peter, pp. 158, 196). J. Paterson-Smyth: "But what of the souls who had gone out of the earth from the beginning of the world without knowing Him? The Church replies through her Bible, and through her Creed and through her early teachers, that the Lord was not forgetting them. He was about to go forth in a few moments, 'quicken in His Spirit,' to bring this glad Gospel to the waiting souls. That was the first great missionary work of the Church" (*op. cit.*, p. 63).

Among "the spirits in prison" there is a second class which is entitled to hear the Hades gospel. Among those who *heard the Gospel in this life* and did not accept it there are many who will be given another opportunity after their death. There are those who for one reason or another could not come to a full decision in this life. Kahnis: "We have reason to assume that in yonder world there is an intermediate state in which those who remained undecided in this world may make their final decision" (*Lutherische Dogmatik*, III, p. 553). H. Cremer "insisted that in the intermediate state such may yet be converted as died before they could fully accept the Gospel" (see W. Oelsner, *Die Entwicklung der Eschatologie von Schleiermacher bis zur Gegenwart*, p. 87). The Hades theology finds that there are three classes of men on earth. First, the believers; their salvation is assured. Second, those who have definitely rejected Christ, have hardened themselves against the Gospel, have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost; for them there is no hope. Third, a class in between; for them there is hope. S. Baring-Gould describes the three classes thus: "We see in this life the three classes, shading imperceptibly one into the other. . . . The first will be the saints of God. The last (those who love evil) will be cast into outer darkness. But the intermediate mass of mankind may surely be regarded as saved by Christ. God will bring the prisoners out of captivity, that is, those here described who were overcome of evil, not willingly, but through weakness. I think we are justified in holding that salvation will be for all but those who have sold themselves to work iniquity" (*The Restitution of All Things*, pp. 40, 152). The "Gospel of the Hereafter" has the same three classes. "There is no evading the thought that between these (who died in the fear and love of God) and the utterly reprobate there are multitudes of Christians and heathen in that Unseen Life today who belong to neither class, mixed characters in all varying degrees of good or evil. But it could not be said that they had consciously and definitely chosen for Christ. What of their position in the Intermediate Life? Our Christian charity prompts us to hope the best for them. . . . Those men that St. Peter thinks of had perished in God's great judgment,

but it would seem in their terrible fate they had not hardened themselves irrevocably against God. Those who do that on earth seem to close the door forever. That is the sin against the Holy Ghost. But these evidently had still their capacity for repentance. In the terrible fate which they had brought on themselves they had not utterly hardened their hearts—and Christ had not forgotten them in their misery. . . . Celsus laughs at the Christians: 'I suppose your Master when He failed to persuade the living had to try and persuade the dead?' Origen meets the question straight out: 'We of the Church assert that the soul of the Lord, stript of its body, held converse with other souls that He might convert those *capable of instruction*'" (pp. 59, 66, 136). Archdeacon F. W. Farrar has the same three classes (*Eternal Hope*, p. 100 ff.).

In order to impress the point that the Hades gospel teaches that salvation is offered in Hades not only to those who never heard the Gospel, but also to many who did hear it in this life, we submit a few additional statements to that effect. Otto von Gerlach says in his commentary on 1 Pet. 3:18 ff.: "Among the dead there are many who are not irretrievably hardened; these may yet be saved in yonder life. . . . For them the possibility of conversion does not end with this life." Dorner is sure of it. "Dorner regards the intermediate state as one, not only of moral progress, but of elimination of evil and holds the end of probation to be, not at death, but at the judgment, at least in the case of all non-believers *who are not incorrigible*" (see A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 385). And the *Pulpit Commentary* asks: "Is it not possible that one of the effects of that suffering might have been 'to bring unto God' some souls who once had been alienated from God by wicked works, but had not wholly hardened their hearts; who, like the men of Tyre and Sidon, Sodom and Gomorrah, had not the opportunities which we enjoy, who had not been once enlightened and made partakers of the heavenly gift, and the powers of the world to come?" (On 1 Pet. 3:20.)

The Hades theologians feel that certain considerations must move God to give some of those who have heard the Gospel, may have been under its influence for years and yet died in unbelief, another opportunity for conversion in Hades. They say that these men may not have had the benefit of the *full* influence of the Gospel; the force of their sinful habits, of the influence of their environment, of the strong temptations surrounding them kept them from embracing the Gospel. Ludwig Schneller declares: "Uncounted millions within Christendom have died who, indeed, heard the Gospel but never realized its full import and glory. They did not heed the call of Jesus; they have deserved their punishment, and they will undergo it. But for them there is a

gleam of hope in the fact that in yonder life the preaching of the Gospel still goes on, 1 Pet. 3:19." ⁴⁾ Luckcock unfolds this thesis thus: "There are a thousand reasons which may obstruct the admission of the truth into a man's heart. It may not be offered for his acceptance in an adequate manner; it may be stopped at the very door by invincible ignorance or innate incapacity and want of apprehension; or it may be placed at a disadvantage by falling upon prejudiced ears, or, as is very often the case, it is met by an inherited antagonism. As Julius Mueller says: "The same opportunity is open to those to whom, although belonging to the outer sphere of the Christian Church, the real nature of the Gospel has nevertheless not been presented; indeed, we may venture to hope that between death and the judgment many deep misunderstandings, by which numbers are withheld from the appropriation of the truth, will be cleared away.' . . . Till those gracious influences, which God exerts, have been brought into full and complete operation, the judgment is suspended, and it will surely not be delivered in any case before this has been fulfilled" (*op. cit.*, pp. 188—190).

Is there, then, no hope for those who have in this life definitely rejected Christ? Some of the heralds of the Gospel of the Hereafter, as we have seen, exclude these from its benefits.⁵⁾ But there are those who preach the universality of the Gospel of the Hereafter. Martensen uses a general term: "the unconverted"—"Conversion must still be possible for the unconverted in Hades" (*Christian Dogmatics*, p. 463). So also the catechism of the Evangelical Synod: "Jesus went to the place of the departed spirits and brought them the message of salvation" (Question 67). And Irion's *Ev.*

4) Quoted from the article by Dr. J. H. C. Fritz in *Concordia Theol. Monthly*, VII, p. 436 ff.: "Eine Gnadenzeit nach dem Tode, die Vernichtung aller Gottlosen and andere Irrlehren."

5) Luckcock states emphatically: "For all those whose circumstances are such that the offer of salvation has been fully and adequately presented in this life, the time of probation is limited; and there is nothing in Holy Scripture to induce even a hope that it can ever be extended beyond the grave" (*op. cit.*, p. 198). He is, however, disturbed about the matter. He says: "There is, however, one ray of consolation in the midst of so much that is dark and overwhelming. No human being can tell exactly what constitutes an adequate presentation of the truth to any man; God alone will be the Judge of that. . . . Ask any priest in charge of a town parish, say, of 20,000 souls, whether he can conscientiously say that the choice between God and Satan has been put before them in anything like an adequate manner. If not, then justice demands that, if not in this life, yet in the next they should have a proper trial" (*op. cit.*, pp. 188, 208). To be sure, God alone knows who has come under the judgment of obduration; we dare not be too positive about that. However, Luckcock's presentation may easily cause those who have rejected the Gospel to hope, if worst comes to worst, for a second chance and to make the plea that the Gospel has not yet been presented to him adequately. We would say that Luckcock is *practically* extending the Hades gospel to all men.

Fundamentals state that "the spirits in Hades can be saved if they now wish to accept the Gospel" (see *Popular Symbolics*, p. 315). C. M. Jacobs: "Christ descended into Hades, the place of the departed, that He might be their Savior, too" (*The Faith of the Church*, p. 62). Others use the emphatic terms "all," "everyone." The *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*: "Christ went to the realm of the dead and preached the Gospel to *all the dead*" (italics in original; s. v. Hell). K. Hase: "In the future life, in the life beyond the grave, the real, the full call will come to every single one" (*Lutherus Redivivus*, p. 320). The *Pulpit Commentary* introduces its statement with a "perhaps": "The Gospel was preached to the dead, perhaps to all the vast population of the underworld" (p. 171). But Kuehl speaks categorically: "The purpose of Christ's preaching was to offer salvation to all the spirits without exception" (translation of the *Third Edition of Meyer's Commentary*, p. 752). And R. Rothe makes the sweeping statement that "in the land of the dead (*Totenwelt*) the offer of salvation will once more be made, in a most persuasive way, to those who remained unconverted during their earthly life" (see Oelsner, *op. cit.*, p. 32).

Th. Traub proves the universality of the Hades gospel in this way: "Since salvation was preached to the antediluvians, who in the days of Christ were considered with the people of Sodom the worst sinners, then it will certainly be offered also to all the others who are with them in the land of the dead" (*op. cit.*, p. 87).

Yes, indeed, declares Swedenborg, the future life is rich with opportunities for the unrepentant sinners. There is, he teaches, salvation after death, the spirits being "led from one society to another and explored whether they are willing to receive the truths of heaven; if not, they are sent into societies which have conjunction only with hell" (*Arc. Coel.*, p. 549. See *Popular Symbolics*, page 394).

A few statements to show how these men glory in the Gospel of the Hereafter. E. H. Plumptre, castigating "the narrower thoughts of a later, less loving and less hopeful time," sets forth how Jesus "passed into that unseen world as a mighty King, the herald of His own conquests"; the men of Noah's age "had perished in God's great judgment, but they had not hardened themselves against His righteousness and love, and therefore were not shut out utterly from hope"; "Zechariah 9:11, 12 speaks of the 'prisoners of hope.'" "It is clear that the whole current of thought thus suggested sets in the direction of wider hopes than that which has been almost the stereotyped belief of most Protestant Churches during the last three centuries." "That larger hope — call it, if you will, that glorious dream — has never been without its witnesses. The noblest, loftiest, most loving of the teachers of the ancient Church (I am not afraid to speak thus of Origen) embraced it almost as

the anchor of his soul." ⁶⁾ "I have thought it right, friends and brothers, to bring these thoughts before you. For one who has been led to apprehend what seems to him a priceless but forgotten truth . . . it was a simple duty to utter the truth according to his power — to endeavor at least to comfort others with the comfort wherewith he himself has been comforted of God" (*The Spirits in Prison*, pp. 4—28). Bishop Gore's *A New Commentary*: "The Lord went to proclaim His Gospel in the realms of the dead (1 Pet. 3:19; 4:6). . . . Old words, such as those of Zech. 29:11, 12 ('prisoners of hope') probably acquired a new meaning. The teaching here given suggests a 'larger hope' than the Church has generally recognized." The *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*: "Hades is a temporary jail or prison house. . . . But Christ's descent into Hades no doubt created a revolution in that dreary abode" (s. v. Hades). The *Pulpit Commentary*: "May we not venture to believe that even in that dreary scene the Savior's eye reached the thronging band of souls, and that His cross and Passion, His agony and bloody sweat might (we know not how or in what measure) 'set the shadowy realms from sin and sorrow free'?"

To sum up: "Our modern Origenists would convert Hades into a land of evangelization." ⁷⁾ "Nach der neueren Hadeslehre soll es ja auch noch im Jenseits eine von Christo bei seiner Hoellenfahrt errichtete Heilsanstalt fuer ohne Busse verstorbene Suender geben" (*Lehre u. Wehre*, 1874, p. 81). "Hades ist eine Art Wartesaal bis zur vollen Entscheidung" (see *L. u. W.*, 1871, p. 321). "Some of these men even go so far as to claim that all men have a second chance after death, that while they exist in this *Totenreich*, this Valhalla, they have time, during this waiting period, to repent. . . . They contend that Christ would never have preached to these souls in Hades if they were not to have a second chance to have their souls saved" (*The Pastor's Monthly*, 1934, p. 516). Is this a correct summary of the Gospel of the Hereafter? One of their own men summarizes it thus: "The unequivocal sense (of 1 Pet. 3:19) is: Jesus proclaimed to those spirits in the prisons of Hades *the beginning of a new epoch of grace*, the appearance of the kingdom of God, and repentance and faith as the means of entering into the same. . . . On Christ's appearing in the realms of death the declaration that was to be published to them was, as it were,

6) Dr. Plumptre does not teach the full apocatastasis of Origen. He says: "There is one sin only which 'has never forgiveness, neither in this world nor in the world to come.'" But he does consider Origen an authority on the Gospel of the Hereafter.

7) Quoted from H. Constable, *Hades*, p. 261. — These men will hardly take umbrage at the term "Origenists." Some of them like to quote Origen, and all of them operate with the principles which he applied in order to establish apocatastasis. — We shall discuss apocatastasis (Restorationism, Universalism) in a subsequent article.

thus: 'You have merited death both as to the body and to the soul; because of your disobedience you perished in the flood and were brought to this subterranean place of confinement; but a way of salvation has now been opened for you.' . . . This declaration encouraged them to accept the offered salvation" (J.P. Lange, *Bibelwerk*. Schaff edition).

Now, Scripture knows nothing of these things. Scripture explicitly tells us that at death men enter either heaven or hell. Man's life here on earth terminates, says Jesus, Matt. 7:13, 14, either in eternal life or in eternal death. He does not indicate that there is a third way of life which leads into "Hades" and via "Hades" into heaven. No, man's eternal fate is decided in this life. Men will be judged, on the Day of Judgment and in the hour of their death, according to the things done in the body. 2 Cor. 5:10: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive the things done in the body." Men will not be judged according to what their souls did in "Hades," while their bodies lay in the grave. At his death man's eternal fate is already decided. Heb. 9:27: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the Judgment." It is not appointed unto men to die and after death another probation and after a second probation the Judgment. The time of probation is this life. "Behold, now is the accepted time, behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2), and this "now" does not embrace the future life; Heb. 9:27 and 2 Cor. 5:10 do not permit the extension of the period of grace beyond the grave. There comes an hour in man's life when "the door is shut" (Matt. 25:10), and Heb. 9:27 and 2 Cor. 5:10 say that that is the hour of his death. There is no passage in Holy Scripture which makes the exception: At death all men will be judged with the exception of those who never heard the Gospel or of those who were not in the right frame of mind when grace was offered them. Or: At death some men will enter heaven, some will be cast into hell, and a third group will be kept in "Hades" for further probation. No, when Lazarus died, his soul was received into heaven. And when the wicked man died, the judgment of God consigned him to hell, the place of eternal torments, Luke 16:23.—It is the clear teaching of Scripture that "at death the Christian immediately enters into eternal bliss, but the wicked is cast into the abyss of hell" (Luther, VII:1629). "Scripture declares that he that believeth not is condemned already; *item*, everyone will receive according as he has believed and lived" (Luther, IX:1245).

The Hades theologians, however, insist that they have Scriptural grounds for preaching the gospel of the hereafter. Their arguments will be examined in a subsequent article.

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