

JOHN CALVIN: INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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CHRIST "DESCENDED INTO HELL"

But we ought not to omit his descent into hell, a matter of no small moment in bringing about redemption. Now it appears from the ancient writers that this phrase which we read in the Creed was once not so much used in the churches.^{f431} Nevertheless, in setting forth a summary of doctrine a place must be given to it, as it contains the useful and not-to-be-despised mystery of a most important matter, at least some of the old writers do not leave it out. [f432](#) From this we may conjecture that it was inserted after a time, and did not become customary in the churches at once, but gradually. This much is certain: that it reflected the common belief of all the godly; for there is no one of the fathers who does not mention in his writings Christ's descent into hell, though their interpretations vary. But it matters little by whom or at what time this clause was inserted. Rather, the noteworthy point about the Creed is this: we have in it a summary of our faith, full and complete in all details; and containing nothing in it except what has been derived from the pure Word of God. If any persons have scruples about admitting this article into the Creed,^{f433} 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. On the other hand, there are some who think that nothing new is spoken of in this article, but that it repeats in other words what had previously been said of his burial, the word "hell" often being used in Scripture to denote a grave.^{f434} I grant that what they put forward concerning the meaning of the word is true: "hell" is frequently to be understood as "grave." But two reasons militate against their opinion, and readily persuade me to disagree with them. How careless it would have been, when something not at all difficult in itself has been stated with clear and easy words, to indicate it again in words that obscure rather than clarify it! Whenever two expressions for the same thing are used in the same context, the latter ought to be an explanation of the former. But what sort of explanation will it be if one says that "Christ was buried" means that "he descended into hell"? Secondly, it is not likely that a useless repetition of this sort could have crept into this summary, which the chief points of our faith are aptly noted in the fewest possible words. I have no doubt that all who have weighed this matter with some care will readily agree with me.

9. CHRIST IN THE NETHER WORLD?

Others interpret it differently: that Christ descended to the souls of the patriarchs who had died under the law, to announce redemption as accomplished and to free them from the prison where they were confined.^{f435} To back up this interpretation, they wrongly adduce evidence from a psalm: "He shatters the doors of bronze and the bars of iron" [Psalm 107:16]. Likewise, from Zechariah: "He will redeem the captives from the waterless pit"

[Zechariah 9:11 p.]. But the psalm foretells the liberation of those who are cast into bondage in far-off countries; Zechariah, moreover, compares the Babylonian disaster, into which the people had been cast, to a deep, dry pit or abyss, and at the same time teaches that the salvation of the whole church is a release from the nether depths. Thus, it has happened in some way or other that later generations thought it to be a place under the earth, to which they gave the name "Limbo."^{f436} But this story, although it is repeated by great authors, and even today is earnestly defended as true by many persons,^{f437} still is nothing but a story. It is childish to enclose the souls of the dead in a prison. What need, then, for Christ's soul to go down there to release them? I readily admit that Christ shone upon them with the power of his Spirit, enabling them to realize that the grace which they had only tasted in hope was then manifested to the world.^{f438} In this way the passage in Peter can probably be explained wherein he says: "Christ came and preached to the spirits were in a 'watchtower — commonly rendered 'prison'" [1 Peter 3:19, cf. Vg.]. The context leads us to suppose that believers who died before that time shared the same grace with us. For Peter extols the power of Christ's death in that it penetrated even to the dead; while godly souls enjoyed the present sight of that visitation which they had anxiously awaited. On the other hand, the wicked realized more clearly that they were excluded from all salvation. Now, while Peter does not clearly distinguish between the godly and the ungodly, we are not therefore to understand that he mixes them indiscriminately. He only means to teach that both groups have a common awareness of Christ's death.

10. THE "DESCENT INTO HELL" AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE SPIRITUAL TORMENT THAT CHRIST UNDERWENT FOR US

But we must seek a surer explanation, apart from the Creed, of Christ's descent into hell. The explanation given to us in God's Word is not only holy and pious, but also full of wonderful consolation. If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. No — it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment. For this reason, he must also grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death.^{f439} A little while ago^{f440} we referred to the prophet's statement that "the chastisement of our peace was laid upon him," "he was wounded for our transgressions" by the Father, "he was bruised for our infirmities" [Isaiah 53:5 p.]. By these words he means that Christ was put in place of evildoers as surety and pledge — submitting himself even as the accused — to bear and suffer all the punishments that they ought to have sustained. All — with this one exception: "He could not be held by the pangs of death" [Acts 2:24 p.]. No wonder, then, if he is said to have descended into hell, for he suffered the death that, God in his wrath had inflicted upon the wicked! Those who — on the ground that it is absurd to put after his burial what preceded it — say that the order is reversed in this way are making a very trifling and ridiculous objection.^{f441} The point 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 in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man.

11. DEFENSE OF THIS EXPLANATION FROM SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

In this sense Peter says: "Christ arose, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held or conquered by them" [Acts 2:24 p.]. Peter does not simply name death, but expressly states that the Son of God had been laid hold of by the pangs of death that arose from God's curse and wrath — the source of death. For what a small thing it would have been to have gone forward with nothing to fear and, as if in sport, to suffer death! But this was a true proof of his boundless mercy, that he did not shun death, however much he dreaded it. There is no doubt that the apostle means the same thing when he writes in the Letter to the Hebrews: Christ "was heard for his ... fear" [Hebrews 5:7 p.]. (Others render it "reverence" or "piety," ^{f442} but how inappropriately is evident from the fact itself, as well as the form of speaking.) Christ, therefore, "praying with tears and loud cries, ... is heard for his ... fear" [Hebrews 5:7 p.]; he does not pray to be spared death, but he prays not to be swallowed up by it as a sinner because he there bore our nature, and surely no more terrible abyss can be conceived than to feel yourself forsaken and estranged from God; and when you call upon him, not to be heard. It is as if God himself had plotted your ruin. We see that Christ was so cast down as to be compelled to cry out in deep anguish: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" [Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46]. Now some would have it that he was expressing the opinion of others rather than his own feeling. ^{f443} This is not at all probable, for his words clearly were drawn forth from anguish deep within his heart. Yet we do not suggest that God was ever inimical or angry toward him. How could he be angry toward his beloved Son, "in whom his heart reposed" [cf. Matthew 3:17]? How could Christ by his intercession appease the Father toward others, if he were himself hateful to God? This is what we are saying: he bore the weight of divine severity, since he was "stricken and afflicted" [cf. Isaiah 53:5] by God's hand, and experienced all the signs of a wrathful and avenging God. Therefore Hilary reasons: by his descent into hell we have obtained this, that death has been overcome. In other passages he does not differ from our view, as when he says: "The cross, death, hell — these are our life." In another place: "The Son of God is in hell, but man is borne up to heaven." ^{f444} And why do I quote the testimony of a private individual when the apostle, recalling this fruit of victory, asserts the same thing, that they were "delivered who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage"? [Hebrews 2:15 p.]. He had, therefore, to conquer that fear which by nature continually torments and oppresses all mortals. This he could do only by fighting it. Now it will soon be more apparent that his was no common sorrow or one engendered by a light cause. Therefore, by his wrestling hand to hand with the devil's power, with the dread of death, with the pains of hell, he was victorious and triumphed over them, that in death we may not now fear those things which our Prince has swallowed up [cf. 1 Peter 3:22, Vg.].

12. DEFENSE OF THE DOCTRINE AGAINST MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND ERRORS

Here certain untutored wretches, impelled more by malice than by ignorance, cry out that I am doing a frightful injustice to Christ. For they hold it incongruous for him to fear for the salvation of his soul. Then they stir up a harsher slander: that I attribute to the Son of God a despair contrary to faith. ^{f445} First, these men wickedly raise a controversy over Christ's fear and dread, which the Evangelists so openly relate. For before the hour of

death approached, "he was troubled in spirit" [John 13:21] and stricken with grief, and when it came upon him, he, began to tremble more intensely with fear [cf. Matthew 26:37]. To say that he was pretending — as they do — is a foul evasion. We must with assurance, therefore, confess Christ's sorrow, as Ambrose rightly teaches, unless we are ashamed of the cross. ^{f446} And surely, unless his soul shared in the punishment, he would have been the Redeemer of bodies alone. But he had to struggle to lift up those who lay prostrate. His goodness — never sufficiently praised — shines in this: he did not shrink from taking our weaknesses upon himself. Hence, it in nowise detracts from his heavenly glory. From this also arises the comfort for our anguish and sorrow that the apostle holds out to us: that this Mediator has experienced our weaknesses the better to succor us in our miseries [Hebrews 4:15a].

They claim that it is unworthy to attribute to Christ something evil of itself. As if they were wiser than God's Spirit, who harmonizes these two things! "Christ in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning." [Hebrews 4:15b.] There is no reason why Christ's weakness should alarm us. For he was not compelled by violence or necessity, but was induced purely by his love for us and by his mercy to submit to it. But all that he voluntarily suffered for us does not in the least detract from his power. These detractors are, moreover, deceived in this one point: they do not recognize in Christ a weakness pure and free of all vice and stain because he held himself within the bounds of obedience. Our fallen nature, whose violent and turbulent emotions know no bounds, is without moderation. Hence, our opponents wrongly measure the Son of God by that standard. But since he was uncorrupted, a moderation that restrained excess flourished in all his emotions. Hence, he could be like us [cf. Hebrews 2:17] in sorrow, fear, and dread, yet in such a way as to differ from us by this characteristic.

Our opponents, refuted, jump to another misrepresentation: although Christ feared death, he did not fear God's curse and wrath, from which he knew himself to be safe. But let godly readers consider how honorable it would be for Christ to have been more unmanly and cowardly than most men of the common sort! Thieves and other wrongdoers arrogantly hasten to death; many despise it with haughty courage; others bear it calmly. What sort of constancy or greatness would it have been for the Son of God to be stricken and almost stupefied with the dread of death? Something commonly considered miraculous was related about him: from the fierceness of his torment, drops of blood flowed from his face [Luke 22:44]. And he did not do this as a show for others' eyes, since he groaned to his Father in secret. This banishes all doubt: he had to have angels descend from heaven to encourage him by their unaccustomed consolation [Luke 22:43]. What shameful softness would it have been (as I have said) for Christ to be so tortured by the dread of common death as to sweat blood, and to be able to be revived only at the appearance of angels? What? Does not that prayer, coming from unbelievable bitterness of heart and repeated three times — "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" [Matthew 26:39] — show that Christ had a harsher and more difficult struggle than with common death?

From this it appears that these quibblers with whom I am contending boldly chatter about things they know nothing of. For they have never earnestly considered what it is or means that we have been redeemed from God's judgment. Yet this is our wisdom: duly to feel

how much our salvation cost the Son of God.

Suppose someone should now ask whether Christ descended into hell when he prayed that death be averted.^{f447} I reply: this was the beginning from which we may gather what harsh and dreadful torments he suffered, when he knew that he stood accused before God's judgment seat for our sake. Although the divine power of his Spirit remained hidden for a moment to give place to weakness of flesh, we must know that the trial arising from the feeling of pain and fear was not contrary to faith. And in this way the statement in Peter's sermon was fulfilled: "He could not be held by the pangs of death" [Acts 2:24 p.]. For feeling himself, as it were, forsaken by God, he did not waver in the least from trust in his goodness. This is proved by that remarkable prayer to God in which he cried out in acute agony: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" [Matthew 27:46]. For even though he suffered beyond measure, he did not cease to call him his God, by whom he cried out that he had been forsaken. Now this refutes the error of Apollinaris, as well as that of the so-called Monothelites. Apollinaris claimed that Christ had an eternal spirit instead of a soul, so that he was only half a man.^{f448} As if he could atone for our sins in any other way than by obeying the Father! But where is inclination or will to obey except in the soul? We know that it was for this reason that his soul was troubled: to drive away fear and bring peace and repose to our souls. Against the Monothelites,^{f449} we see that he did not will as man what he willed according to his divine nature. I pass over the fact that, with a contrary emotion, he overcame the fear of which we have spoken. This plainly appears to be a great paradox: "Father, save me from this hour"? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name" [<431227> John 12:27-28]. Yet in his perplexity there was no extravagant behavior such as is seen in us when we strive mightily to control ourselves.

Footnotes

ft431 Calvin here follows Erasmus' *Explanation of the Apostles' Creed* (1533), published with the Basel edition of his works, *Omnia Opera D. Erasmi* (Basel, 1540). V. 967 f. On the late appearance of this doctrine and its incorporation in the Creed, see especially A. Vacant and E. Mangenot, *Dictionnaire de theologie Catholique*, article "Descent de Jesus aux enfers," Vol. IV. One of the earliest references to it is in the unorthodox "Dated Creed" of the synod held at Nice in Thrace 359, as given by Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2. 37 (MPG 67. 280; tr. Ayer, *Source Book*, p. 318; H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 60).

ft432 The topic is omitted by Augustine in his sermon to catechumens on the Creed (*De symbolo ad catechumenos*) (MPL 40. 627-656; tr. NPNF III. 369-375). The descent into hell had been called in question or rejected by some bold theologians before Calvin. Reginald Pecock presented a revision of the Creed in 1440, omitting this article. Cf. J. Lewis, *Life of the Learned and Right Reverend Reynold Pecock*, pp. 210, 221-225, 316, 325.

ft433 The insertion of this sentence in 1559 may have been occasioned by a revival of criticism of the article. In a letter written by John a Lasco to Bullinger, June 17, 1553, it

is stated that Walter Deloenus, a minister of the church of the German refugees in London, had proposed its omission as "a plant that the Lord hath not planted" (cf. Matthew 15:13). Though under rebuke he had acknowledged his fault, harmful discussion had arisen (A. Lasco, *Opera*, ed. A. Kuyper, II. 677 f.). Cf. OS III, *Addenda*, p. 517, and on Deloenus (Devlin or Delvin), see *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation*, edited for The Parker Society II. 575, 588.

ft434 This view was held by Bucer (*Enarrationes in Evangelia*, 1536, pp. 511 f., 792 ff.) and apparently by Beza.

ft435 Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* III. 52. 5: "When Christ descended into hell, by the power of his Passion he delivered the saints from this penalty whereby they were excluded from the life of glory...."

ft436 Aquinas, in *Summa Theol.* III. Supplementum lxxix. 4-7, examines questions on the *limbus patrum*, distinguishing it (Art. 6) from the *limbus puerorum*. The fathers were detained *in limbo* until delivered by Christ, and were thus in hope and in a state of rest, while the children in limbo "have no hope of the blessed life." Cf. A. Vacant and E. Mangenot, *Dictionnaire de theologie Catholique*, article "Limbes."

ft437 Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV. 2; V. 31 (MPG 7.976 ff., 1068 ff.; tr. ANF I. 463 f., 504 f.). Servetus, *Christianismi restitutio*, pp. 621 f. (first letter of Servetus to Calvin, also in CR VIII. 682 f.); Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Loci communes* III. 16. 8.

ft438 Perhaps a reference to Zwingli, *Exposition of the Faith*, section on "Christ the Lord" (Zwingli, *Opera*, ed. M. Schuler and J. Schulthess, IV. 49; tr. LCC XXIV. 252). Cf. the treatment of the descent into hell by Peter Martyr, *Loci communes* III: "Simple Exposition of the Articles of the Creed" 20 and III. 16. 8-25 (1576 edition, pp. 476, 814-815).

ft439 Cf. sections 8,9, notes 17 and 20, above. Calvin first suggests this conception of the descent into hell in *Psychopannychia* (1534, published 1542: CR V. 224; tr. Calvin, *Tracts* III. 628). The prevailing interpretation of this article of the Creed was that of Aquinas, who gave some firmness to this doctrine after the rather unsystematic treatment of it by Lombard and Albertus Magnus. See *Summa Theol.* III. 52. 2,4-6,8. Calvin's explanation is not, as Pannier states, "entirely original" (Pannier, *Institution* II. 883, note a on p. 107). Nicolas of Cusa (e.g., in Sermon on <193011> Psalm 30:11), followed by Pico della Mirandola, had similarly explained the *descensus* in terms of Christ's agony. Luther adopted the view that Christ, as God and man, literally entered into hell. The Catechism of the Council of Trent, section 49, following Aquinas, states that Christ liberated the (Old Testament) fathers and other pious men from imprisonment in limbo. For the complicated history of discussions concerning this article, see J. A. Dietelmeier, *Historia de descensu Christi ad inferos literaria*, esp. pp. 160-191, and the sources there cited.

ft440 Section 5, above.

ft441 Calvin's explanation of the descent into hell as consisting of Christ's redemptive

agony on the cross had been ridiculed by SebastianCastellio, as is indicated in a letter of Calvin to Viret, March, 1544 (CR XI. 688; tr. Calvin, *Letters* I. 409), Apparently Castellio held the view here rejected. Cf. CR XI. 675; Herminjard, *Correspondance* IX. 158,185.

ft442 Vulgate: "*Exauditus est pro sua reverentia.*"

ft443 Cyril, *De recta fide*, Oratio 2. 18 (MPG 76. 1555 ff.).

ft444 Hilary, *On the Trinity* IV. xlii ("*mortera in inferno perimens*"); III. xv ("*Dei filius in inferis est; sed homo refertur ad coelum*") (MPL 10. 128, 24; tr. NPNF 2 ser. IX. 84,66).

ft445 See section 8, note 17; section 10, note 25, above. Barth and Niesel hold it improbable that in this passage Calvin is refuting a criticism by Castellio. Although they know of no explanation in opposition to Calvin's view other than Castellio's, they would not exclude the possibility that the charges here dealt with were those of some Lutheran critic. (OS III. 497, note 1.) The topic had come into discussion in England through the rejection of the article in a disputation at Cambridge by Christopher Carlisle, 1552 (Dietelmeier, *op. cit.*, pp. 205 ff.). Carlisle's discourse was published in 1582: *Touching the Descension of Our Savior Christ Into Hell*. A year later, as we have seen, the German refugee church in London was disturbed by the similar views of one of its ministers (section 8, note 17, above). See also Herminjard, *Correspondance* IX. 158, note 3; CR XI. 675. Later Robert Parkes resumed the attack with reference to Article 3 of the Thirty-nine Articles, calling forth a reply by the Calvinist Andrew Willet (*Limbomastix*, 1607).

ft446 Ambrose, *Exposition of Luke's Gospel* 10. 56-62 (MPL 15. 1910 ff.).

ft447 The reference is apparently to an opinion of Castellio's: cf. section 10, note 25.

ft448 Apollinaris of Laodicea taught (ca. 360) that the divine Logos "dwelt as soul in the body received from the Virgin Mary" (Lietzmann). See C. E. Raven, *Apollinarianism*, and H. Lietzmann, *From Constantine to Julian (A History of the Early Church, Volume III)*, pp. 209 f.

ft449 The Monothelites arose in the seventh century in attempts to resolve the Monophysite schism. Whereas Monophysites taught one nature only in Christ, thus rejecting the definition of Chalcedon (451), the Monothelites, on the basis of the compromising Ecthesis of the Emperor Heraclius (638), admitted two natures but only one energy or will ([]). Their doctrine was explicitly rejected in the Third Council of Constantinople, 681, session 13. (Mansi XI. 1054; Ayer, *Source Book*, pp. 671 f.; Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 130.)

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