



In Defense of the Descent

**Explorations in
Reformed Confessional Theology**

Editors

Daniel R. Hyde and Mark Jones

Daniel R. Hyde, *In Defense of the Descent: A Response to
Contemporary Critics*



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A Response to Contemporary Critics

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Series Preface

The creeds of the ancient church and the doctrinal standards of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed churches are rich theological documents. They summarize the essential teachings of Scripture, express biblical doctrines in meaningful and memorable ways, and offer pastoral guidance for the heads and hearts of God's people. Nevertheless, when twenty-first century readers pick up these documents, certain points may be found confusing, misunderstood, or irrelevant for the church.

Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology intends to clarify some of these confessional issues from four vantage points. First, it views confessional issues from the *textual* vantage point, exploring such things as variants, textual development, and the development of language within the documents themselves as well as within the context in which these documents were written. Second, this series views confessional issues from the *historical* vantage point, exploring social history and the history of ideas that shed light upon these issues. Third, this series views confessional issues from the *theological* vantage point, exploring the issues of intra- and inter-confessional theology both in the days these documents

were written as well as our day. Fourth, this series views confessional issues from the *pastoral* vantage point, exploring the pressing pastoral needs of certain doctrines and the implications of any issues that cause difficulty in the confessions.

In exploring our vast and deep heritage in such a way, our ultimate goal is to “walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10).

—Daniel R. Hyde and Mark Jones

Author's Preface

I am delighted that Joel Beeke and Jay Collier of Reformation Heritage Books have invited me to print this manuscript. Since it has come together after several years of study and after presenting it in several ways, let me give you a little of that background.

First, as a minister in the Dutch Reformed tradition, the Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America requires that every Lord's Day I "ordinarily preach the Word as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity, with special attention given to the Heidelberg Catechism" (article 40). That means I must regularly deal with the Heidelberg Catechism's (1563) exposition of the phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into hell," in my preaching ministry (Q&A 44).

Second, as a pastor I am called to catechize children in my congregation and those who seek membership in a Reformed church for the first time. This means I must regularly explain the Apostles' Creed to various levels of learners and be prepared to answer many questions about it.

Third, early in my ministry I gave two lectures at a conference on the benefit of Christ's descent into hell for

believers. I engaged in a period of serious study so that I could competently handle the topic as well as respond to questions from listeners.

Fourth, for several years after that conference, I continued to study the issue of Christ's descent into hell. That led to a short journal article, "In Defense of the *Descendit*: A Confessional Response to Contemporary Critics of Christ's Descent into Hell," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007): 104–117.¹ I am thankful this article was well received. The book that follows is an expanded version of that journal article. I pray this book, though only a short introduction to this large subject, may prove fruitful as you read, meditate, and interact with it on the wonderful topic of the descent into hell of Jesus Christ, whether you are a minister, a seminary student, a member church education program, or at home.

Assist us mercifully with thy help, O Lord God of our salvation; that we may enter with joy upon the meditation of those mighty acts, whereby thou hast given unto us life and immortality; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (1928 Book of Common Prayer)

— Good Friday 2010

1. For more information on this journal, see <http://www.cpjjournal.com>.

Abbreviations

Bastingius, *An Exposition* — Jeremias Bastingius, *An Exposition or Commentarie Upon the Catechisme of Christian Religion Which Is Taught in the Schooles and Churches both of the Low Countryes, and of the Dominions of Countie Palatine* (Cambridge: John Legatt, 1589).

BC — Belgic Confession (1561)

Calvin, *Institutes* — John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

Creeds — *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, 3 vols. (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

de Witte, *Catechizing* — Petrus de Witte, *Catechizing upon the Heidelberg Catechism, of the Reformed Christian Religion* (Amsterdam: Gillis Joosten Saeghman, 1664).

Ecclesiastical Manual — P. Biesterveld and H. H. Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual Including Decisions of the Netherlands Synods and Other Significant Matters Relating to the Government of the Churches*,

trans. Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Richard R. De Ridder, 1982).

HC — Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations* — Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on What is Commonly Called the Apostles' Creed*, trans. Donald Fraser, 3 vols. (1823, repr., Phillipsburg: P&R, 1993).

WCF — Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

WLC — Westminster Larger Catechism (1647)

WSC — Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)



Introduction

Descendit ad inferna
He descended into hell

The clause in the Apostles' Creed, *He descended into hell* (*descendit ad inferna*), was rejected as early as 1440 by the English bishop Reginald Peacock (1395–1460) in his revised version of the Apostles' Creed.¹ A century later, among the Reformed churches of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, Walter Deloenus, a minister of the German-speaking congregation in London, expressed doubts about this clause. One of Deloenus's colleagues in London, Martin Micronius (1523–1559), wrote to Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) of Zurich in a letter dated

1. *Reginald Peacock's Book of Faith*, ed. J. L. Morison (Glasgow, Scotland: J. Maclehose and Sons, 1909), 304ff. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co. Inc., 1950), 5. On Bishop Peacock see John Lewis, *The Life of the Learned and Right Reverend Reynold Pecock* (Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press, 1820).

May 20, 1550, “The churches of Bremen and the rest are strengthening themselves; but are far more injured by their private disagreements in matters of religion, than by any external violence. They are disputing about the descent of Christ into hell.” Micronius saw this internecine dispute as the work of the antichrist among the Reformed churches: “Marvellous [*sic*] is the subtlety of antichrist in weakening the churches of Christ.”² Three years later the leader of Reformed refugees in London, Johannes à Lasco (1499–1560), wrote to Bullinger about this affair and said that Deloenus’s rejection of the descent into hell clause was “a plant that the Lord hath not planted”; he was then rebuked, whereupon he acknowledged his fault.³

Yet these arguments were peculiar then as they are now. The fact is that in the churches of the West, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, the descent into hell clause has been defended, included, recited, and believed. This is evident, for example, in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), which expounds of the Apostles’ Creed, including its clause *He descended into hell*, as our “*undoubted Christian faith*” (HC, Q&A 22; emphasis added).⁴ Jesus Christ’s descent into hell is part of our inheritance of catholic Christianity.

2. *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation: Written During the Reigns of King Henry VIII., King Edward VI., and Queen Mary: Chiefly from the Archives of Zurich*, ed. Hastings Robinson, 2 vols. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1847), 2:560–561.

3. Cited in Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:513 n17.

4. *Creeeds*, 3:314.

As such, this phrase is confessed time and time again throughout the life of a Christian. In the churches of the Dutch Reformed tradition, the Apostles' Creed is part of the church's life in the following ways.⁵ First, it is mentioned in the church's public confession of faith in the Belgic Confession (1561). At the conclusion of a section on the Holy Trinity, the Confession says,

This doctrine of the Holy Trinity hath always been defended and maintained by the true Church, since the times of the Apostles to this very day, against the Jews, Mohammedans, and some false Christians and heretics, as Marcion, Manes, Praxeas, Sabellius, Sarnosatenus, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. Therefore, in this point, we do willingly receive the three creeds, namely, that of the Apostles, of Nice, and of Athanasius; likewise that which, conformable thereunto, is agreed upon by the ancient fathers (BC, art. 9).⁶

5. Historically this was true of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and Christian Reformed Church (CRC), but today this can also be said of their confessional and conservative cousins such as the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC), Free Reformed Churches (FRC), Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC), Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), and United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA). For an accessible history of the Dutch Reformed Church, see Karel Blei, *The Netherlands Reformed Church, 1571–2005*, trans. Allan J. Janssen, The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, No. 51 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

6. *Creeds*, 3:392–393.

Second, the preaching ministry in churches that trace their roots to the Netherlands Reformation is charged with working through the Heidelberg Catechism and its exposition of the Apostles' Creed on a regular basis. This is seen in the Church Order of the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), which says,

The Ministers shall on each Lord's Day, ordinarily in the afternoon sermons, briefly explain the sum of Christian doctrine contained in the Catechism which at present is accepted in the Netherlands Churches in such a way that it may be finished annually, following the division of the Catechism itself made for that purpose (art. 68).⁷

Third, the Creed is part of the Reformed churches' historic form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper.⁸ At every celebration of the Lord's Supper, the minister reads the following words that lead into the recitation of the Creed: "May we by this holy supper also be strengthened in the catholic, undoubted, Christian faith, of which we make profession with heart and mouth, saying...."⁹

7. *Ecclesiastical Manual*, 172. On the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism, see Daniel R. Hyde, "The Principle and Practice of Preaching in the Heidelberg Catechism," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 1:1 (January 2009): 97–117.

8. See the historic liturgical form in "Celebration of the Lord's Supper: Form Number 1," in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, Inc., 1976), 143–148; *The Psalter, with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section* (1912, repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 136–140.

9. *Psalter Hymnal*, 146; *The Psalter*, 139.

Fourth, the Creed is part of the Dutch churches' singing. Article 69 of the Church Order of the Synod of Dort says, "In the Churches only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Twelve Articles of Faith [Apostles' Creed], the Song of Mary, that of Zacharias, and that of Simeon shall be sung."¹⁰

Fifth, the Creed is part of the Reformed churches' weekly liturgy. As early as 1574 at the Provincial Synod of Dort, the Dutch churches included in their Church Order the following: "On Sundays, after the second prayer of the early noon sermon, one shall begin with the words: 'Strengthen us in the true faith, of which we [make profession], etc., according to the Articles of the Faith'" (art. 44).¹¹ This custom of reciting the Creed in the second Lord's Day service continues today.¹²

The above shows that people in the churches of the Dutch Reformation know Jesus Christ's descent into hell is a vital part of their personal faith as well as their church's collective identity. This sentiment is not peculiar to that tradition, though. In 1642 the English theologian, Thomas Hayne (1582–1645), wrote a brief treatise entitled, *Of the Article of Our Creed: Christ descended to Hades, or ad Inferos*.¹³ In that treatise he wrote: "It doth

10. *Ecclesiastical Manual*, 172.

11. *Ecclesiastical Manual*, 67.

12. For a faithful and singable rendition, see *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988), 519.

13. Thomas Hayne, *Of the Article of Our Creed: Christ descended to Hades, or ad Inferos* (London, 1642).

much concern us Christians to understand aright, what is meant by Christ's soul going *ad Inferos*, to *Sheol*, or *Hades*." His reasoning was that this phrase is found in Scripture and the Creed and that it has brought great confusion into the church.¹⁴ In the book that follows, my purpose is to defend the inclusion of *He descended into hell* in the Apostles' Creed, to survey its historical roots, to expound its theological significance, and to offer some practical uses of the doctrine it teaches for Christian faith and experience.

14. Hayne, *Of the Article of Our Creed*, 2.



Contemporary Critics

Despite the historicity and the aforementioned ongoing use of the words *He descended into hell*, some Reformed and evangelical authors and even denominations today believe this clause is either dubious or an embarrassment to the Christian and Reformed faith.

Three Authors

The most substantive response to this clause is a journal article by a Presbyterian, Randall Otto, who wrote the following about the descent clause:

Reformed churches have from their inception generally accepted only doctrine and forms of worship which have clear substantiation in Scripture. Because the view of Sheol and Hades as a netherworld is incompatible with the Reformed view, and because there is no truly sensible or widely acceptable meaning for the clause, the descensus should be omitted from the liturgical use of the Apostles' Creed. The doctrine and practice of the Reformed faith, recognized for their consistency with Scripture, cannot but

be confused by the use of such a problematic article. Let the Reformed congregation rather undertake to know and make Christ known as he is clearly revealed in the gospel.¹

Otto concluded that Reformed churches should not include this clause in the Apostles' Creed. It should be omitted from the Creed altogether because of the Protestant doctrine of Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) and because there is no consensus within western Christianity on its meaning.

Michael Williams, professor of Systematic Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis (the theological seminary of the Presbyterian Church in America) also argued for the removal of the descent clause. While agreeing with Otto that Reformed churches should not be reciting this clause and that it should be deleted altogether from the Creed, Williams's main ground for his assertion is what he called "confessional integrity."² He said, since "by their very nature the creeds set forth that which is essential and binding," *He descended into hell* does not belong in the Apostles' Creed.³ Williams pushed the argument further than Otto. He did not set *sola Scriptura* over against the Creed as Otto but argued that the very nature

1. Randall E. Otto, "Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52:1 (Spring 1990): 150.

2. Michael Williams, "He Descended Into Hell? An Issue of Confessional Integrity," *Presbyterian* 25:2 (Fall 1999): 80–90.

3. Williams, "He Descended Into Hell?" 89.

of the Creed demands our refusal to recite this phrase: "Refusing to confess that which we do not believe is not only biblical, but it is also fully creedal," since the creeds stand under the Word of God.⁴

To these arguments can be added those of Wayne Grudem, Research Professor of Bible and Theology at Phoenix Seminary. Grudem's argument against the descent clause is encapsulated in the subtitle of his article on the subject: "A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed."⁵

In essence, the arguments of these three authors, Otto, Williams, and Grudem, are one: the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* necessitates that we remove this clause from the Creed and that we cease from reciting it in public worship. Simply put, since they believe the Bible does not say Jesus descended into hell, we cannot believe it.

Reformed Churches of Australia

Closer to home for members of Reformed churches was the discussion in the Reformed Churches of Australia (RCAU) in the mid-1990s. In 1994 the RCAU received a protest against the words *He descended into hell*. A study committee recommended several possibilities for how

4. Williams, "He Descended Into Hell?" 90.

5. Wayne Grudem, "He Did Not Descend Into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34:1 (March 1991): 103–113; cf. the language of the evangelical theologian Millard J. Erickson who neither rejects nor accepts the truth of the phrase in "Did Jesus Really Descend to Hell?" *Christianity Today* 44:2 (February 7, 2000): 74.

the RCAU could respond. It could modify the language (changing *descended to the dead* to *suffered the pains of hell on the cross*), delete the descent language altogether, or add an explanatory footnote. Recognizing the danger of changing an ecumenical creed of historic Christianity, the RCAU submitted its report to the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC) and asked for advice. The CRC commissioned its own committee, which included Henry Zwaanstra, Lyle Bierma, Richard Muller, and Ronald Feenstra. Their report was adopted at the CRC's Synod 2000. Among the CRC's recommendations was to add the following explanatory footnote:

The Christian church has never understood Christ's descent into hell as a literal descent into the place of eternal punishment. Some Christians, including some Reformed Christians, have interpreted it as the decent of Christ's soul into the realm or state of the dead (hades) between his death and resurrection (see the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. and A. 50). Others, including the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. and A. 44), have understood it as a reference to the hellish agony of eternal punishment that Christ suffered, especially on the cross but also earlier.⁶

6. For the entire text of this report, including the proposed explanatory footnote, see "Appendix B: Report of the Committee to Study the Materials from the Reformed Churches of Australia re Christ's Descent into Hell," *Agenda for Synod 2000* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2000), 212–228.

Conclusion

In contrast to the conclusions of a few Reformed theologians and the Reformed Churches of Australia, I am convinced that the descent into hell clause *does* belong in the Apostles' Creed because it is an essential part of the doctrine and spiritual life of the Christian church and its members. Cornelis P. Venema expressed this well when he wrote,

There have been some in the history of the church, even in Reformed churches, who have argued that this article should be deleted from the Creed, simply because it is subject to misunderstanding or even, as we have seen, unbiblical interpretation. It must be admitted, of course, that no article in the church's Creed is exempt from "critical" scrutiny by the standard of the written Word.... Yet, it would constitute a great loss were this article removed from the Creed solely because it has often been understood in an unbiblical way. It would be a loss because, as the Reformed churches have understood it, this article expresses an (if not, *the*) essential dimension of our Lord's suffering and atoning work.⁷

He descended into hell is vital to understanding our Lord's work for us in His life and death and to our appropriating that work for our spiritual comfort. This is why the seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Witsius (1636–1708), said Christ's descent into

7. Cornelis P. Venema, *What We Believe: An Exposition of the Apostles' Creed* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1996), 67.

hell was “one of the most mysterious, essential, and useful doctrines of our holy Religion” and even though the exact phrase cannot be found in Scripture, “We sincerely believe and assert it, when rightly explained.”⁸

8. Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations*, 2:148, 141.