

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

AN OVERVIEW OF THE WORK OF CHRIST:
DID JESUS DESCEND INTO HELL AFTER THE CRUCIFIXION

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO
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I. Introduction

Within the traditional wording of the Apostles Creed there is one statement, which has been recited by millions of believers for centuries, that says, “Jesus descended into Hell.”¹ This one statement, which was not in the original version, and a few select expositions of Scripture, has become the basis for the relatively undeveloped doctrine “Jesus Descended into Hell.”² This doctrine, which resides within the greater systematic theology of “The Work of Christ,” has been controversial for centuries, but yet is generally accepted by the lay faithful without much investigation into its credibility.³ The understanding of this doctrine comes from a handful of various Scripture references between the Old and New Testaments, five specific verses anchored on 1 Peter 3:18-20, and the long history of the Apostles’ Creed. While the Apostles’ Creed has a history going back to the early church, “we must seek for a surer exposition of Christ’s descent to hell.”⁴ This paper will argue that the doctrine “Jesus Descended into Hell,” when viewed through a proper exegesis of Scripture, is not sufficient to confirm the belief that Jesus did spend three days in the torments of Hell.

II. Scripture Supporting “Jesus Descended into Hell”

The controversy concerning the descent into Hell doctrine, and whether it even warrants the term “doctrine,” comes from “the fact that there is no single Biblical text that treats the doctrine clearly and unambiguously.”⁵ There are many Scripture references used to provide evidence that Jesus did in fact descend into Hell after he died on the cross, but in fact Scripture,

¹ Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, *The Apostles’ Creed*, http://www.reformed.org/documents/apostles_creed.html.

² R. C. Sproul, *1&2 Peter: St. Andrew’s Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 125.

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 791.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1st Edition, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 2.16.10.

⁵ Erickson, 791.

as a whole, gives us very few details about how Jesus spent the time after he died on the cross. To piece together the doctrine, scholars must take a compilation of Scriptures from the Old and New Testaments, where each piece then is assembled, and interpreted as a whole.

The five most commonly used Scripture references arguing for Jesus' descent into Hell come from Acts 2:27, Romans 10:6-7, Ephesians 4:8-10, 1 Peter 3:18-19, and 1 Peter 4:4-6.⁶ Other lesser used Scripture interpretations that support a descent into hell include, Job 38:17, Psalm 16:10; 49:14-16; 68:18-22, Matthew 12:38-41, Hebrews 9:27, 1 Timothy 3:16, and Revelation 20:11-15, most of which look at the confluence between death and judgment.⁷

Examining Acts 2:27

First, starting with Acts 2:27 "for you will not abandon my soul to Hades," (ESV) or as rendered in the KJV "soul to Hell," is a reference to Psalm 16:10 from within Peter's sermon at Pentecost.⁸ When looking at Psalm 16:10, both "Paul and Peter interpreted Psalm 16:10 as meaning the Father wouldn't leave Jesus under the power of death" where his body would decompose.⁹ The reference to Hell in the KJV comes from the NT Greek term *Hades*, and the OT Hebrew term *Sheol*, both of which can, and are, used to represent physical death in general, in addition to a place of eternal torment.¹⁰

As such a definition is probable, several translations, such as the NIV, render the terms of Acts 2:27 as the grave, and are speaking about a physical decay. In contrast, Psalm 16:10 refers to David's body, which did die, and did decay, unlike what Peter is stating in Acts that Jesus'

⁶ Donald G. Bloesch, "Descend into Hell (Hades)," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 338-340 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 339.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, 1991 March: 107.

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV). *Holy Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

⁹ Erickson, 792.

¹⁰ James Strong, *The Strongest Strong's: Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 21st Edition, ed. John R. Kohlenberger III and James A. Swanson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001) 1717, 1792.

body did not decay. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that “rather than teaching that Jesus would descend into [Hell], the Psalmist was stating,” along with Peter, that death had no permanent hold on Jesus’ physical body.¹¹

Examining Romans 10:6-7

Romans 10:6-7, “who will descend into the abyss? (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)” is possibly a weaker reference of the five, and is often cited as the origin for the line in the Apostles’ Creed “Jesus descended into Hell.”¹² In this section of Romans, Paul is using a literary function of asking “two rhetorical questions,” OT references from Deuteronomy 9:4 and 30:13, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is to bring Christ up from the dead).¹³ Paul’s statement, being rhetorical, refers to a lack of faith, since Christ is very near, but notice Paul refers to Christ’s incarnation in verse 6 ‘to bring him down’ and refers to his resurrection in verse 7 ‘to bring Christ up from the dead.’¹⁴ While this passage is not the easiest to understand, “Paul, as though there was some spiritual mystery concealed under these words, applies them to the death and resurrection of Christ,” not to that of the descent of Christ into Hell.¹⁵

Examining Ephesians 4:8-10

Next, in Ephesians 4:8-10, Paul is in the middle of a section on the unity of the Church body when he says in verse 9, “Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?” (KJV), bringing some to conclude Christ descended to the

¹¹ Erickson, 792.

¹² David P. Scaer, “He Did Descend to Hell: In Defense of the Apostles’ Creed,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, 1992 March: 99.

¹³ Bloesch, 107.

¹⁴ John Piper, *The Word of Faith that We Proclaim, Part 1*, May 18, 2003, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-word-of-faith-that-we-proclaim-part-1> (accessed February 29, 2012).

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), Romans 10:5-10.

‘lower parts’ or Hell. In determining Paul’s contextual meaning in verse 9, the contention can be traced to a matter of translation from the Greek to the KJV, and the translators use of the Greek definite article *Tῆς (tis)*.¹⁶ As translated into English, the phrase “lower parts of the earth” makes use of the English preposition “of,” which means something contained from within the earth. A more proper etymology for *Tῆς* comes from only the use of the definite article, which translated into English is simply “the,” making Paul’s statement “he also descended first into the lower parts, the earth,” which is how the ESV renders verse 9. Another translation, the NIV, says “he also descended to the lower, earthly regions,” both of which leave out the preposition “of” making Paul’s meaning such that Christ descended from Heaven, to Earth, then from Earth, he ascended back to Heaven (Acts 1:9). In verse 8, Paul refers to Christ’s ascension, as also stated in Acts 1:9, and makes his remarks parenthetical in verses 9 and 10, because in order to ascend, you must first have descended.¹⁷ When taken in context, Paul’s words refer to the Incarnation of Christ and subsequent ascension back into Heaven after the resurrection, not to a descent into the lower regions of the earth such as *Hades* or Hell. Therefore, in reference to Ephesians 4:9, the modern exposition by scholars today examining “the *descensus ad inferos* is almost without exception,” rejected.¹⁸

Examining 1 Peter 3:18-20

Perhaps the most difficult passage to understand in context would be 1 Peter 3:18-20 when the text says that Christ, “being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, went and proclaimed [the Gospel] to the spirits in prison.” Some views conclude that Christ’s

¹⁶ United Bible Society, *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*, Fourth Corrected Edition, ed. J. D. Douglas, trans. Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990), 676.

¹⁷ Dallas Seminary Faculty, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Vol. 2, 2 vols. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1983), 634.

¹⁸ H. Beitenhard, *He Descended into Hell in the Apostles' Creed*, Vol. 2, in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986).

proclaiming the Gospel to the spirits in prison meant that Christ descended to Hell and preached to those in Hell, giving a basis for the doctrine called *apokastastasis*, or Universalism.¹⁹ This doctrine, was seen as early as Cletet of Alexandria in A.D. 300, who “postulated the thesis that Jesus went to hell to preach the Gospel to sinners held captive” so they might repent of their sins and be saved.²⁰ This preaching by Christ showed that the intermediate state offers fresh opportunities for attaining salvation after physical death has taken place.²¹ This view, in part, was held by Luther at one point, when in an April 1533 sermon on 1 Peter, Luther referred to Christ’s preaching in Hades, and “how it might effect the more nobler heathen.”²² This second chance for salvation was likewise rejected by Augustine in reference to Hebrews 9:27-28, which states “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,” but this view still endures today in light of Hebrews. In current day discussions it has been stated that, “Christian tradition since the first church insisted hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God.”²³

These views generally do not take into account the context of the passage, which includes verse 20, “because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waiting in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared in which, a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through water.” This statement shows that Christ did not go and preach to everyone, let alone everyone in Hell, but only to those “who formerly did not obey” during the time of Noah. If Christ gave a second chance to sinners in Hell, why would he only give a second chance “to

¹⁹ Richard Bauckham, "Universalism: a historical survey," *Themelios* (University of St. Andrews) 4, no. 2 (September 1978): 47-54.

²⁰ Sproul, 127.

²¹ Bauckman, 52.

²² Bloesch, 339.

²³ Rob Bell, *Loves Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), 109.

these sinners” and not to all who had died in their sins (John 8:24) up to this point in history?²⁴

Other interpretations of 1 Peter 3:18-20 include the Roman Catholic view where Christ went to the division of *Hades* where the saints reside, leading them out of that place and into Heaven.²⁵ There is also the traditional Anglican view that Jesus descended into *Hades*, on the paradise side, and preached the gospel to the righteous.²⁶ None of these explanations fully explain why Jesus would be preaching to the saints in Hell, or why the saints would be “in prison.”²⁷ According to verse 20, Christ was “made alive in the spirit.” That is the same spirit that was alive during the time he preached to the lost during the days of Noah.

One possible explanation for this verse is that Jesus was preaching as the reincarnate Christ, either in his own capacity, or “in the spirit” through the preaching of Noah. While there is no specific reference in the Old Testament (the days of Noah) to Jesus preaching in his own capacity, there are concrete examples of teaching “in the spirit,” such as when Jesus explained the transfiguration to the disciples. Jesus said “Elijah has already come but they did not recognize him... then the disciples understood he was speaking to them about John the Baptist” (Matthew 17:11-13). Just as John the Baptist preached “in the spirit” of Elijah, even though he was not an incarnate Elijah, Noah could have preached repentance “in the spirit” to those “spirits in prison,” the lost, while he was building the ark. A Second example comes when Paul is speaking to the Galatians saying “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham” (Galatians 3:8-9).

Another possible explanation of 1 Peter 3:18-20 comes in taking the passage figuratively,

²⁴ Grudem, 109.

²⁵ Joseph Pohle, *Eschatology, The Catholic Doctrine of the Last Things: A Dogmatic Treatise* (St Louis, MO: Herder, 1917), 27.

²⁶ Edgar C. S. Gibson, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London, England: Methuen, 1906), 159.

²⁷ Erickson, 793.

as a narrative illustration saying “Jesus had preached in the power of the spirit to the sinners of his day,” not necessarily meaning he literally preached to the lost of Noah’s day, either in Hell or during Noah’s time in history.²⁸ Although the passage in 1 Peter 3:28-20 is one of the more difficult passages to explain with definitive results that also properly aligns with all of Scripture, it also does not definitively explain that Christ descended into Hell. There are several possible and likely explanations, but to “conclude from it that the souls of the dead are in prison is immature, and [on] what occasion was there that the soul of Christ” should descend into Hell and “set them at liberty?”²⁹ Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that, while the passage is difficult, it also does not constitute a logical explanation that Christ did indeed descend into Hell.

Examining 1 Peter 4:4-6

The final passage to look at is 1 Peter 4:4-6, where Peter says in verse 6 “for this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead.” This passage, if interpreted literally, would indicate that Christ went to Hell and preached to those who had already died. If this is the case, it would be the “only passage in the Bible that taught a ‘second chance’ for salvation after death,” and would further conflict with Luke 16:19-31 and Hebrews 9:27.³⁰ While some today would use the connection with 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 4:4-6 as proof for the doctrine of Universalism discussed earlier, it seems to be the most unreasonable explanation for either verse. Some say this literal descent for the purpose of redemption “does not imply Universalism,” but a “universality of a first chance opportunity” for those who have never heard the gospel message, even after death.³¹ Another view, though less viable, comes from Thomas Aquinas, who

²⁸ Erickson, 794.

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.9.

³⁰ Grudem, 111.

³¹ Bloesch, 340.

contended that “Christ descended to the underworld not to convert unbelievers but to put them to shame for their unbelief and wickedness,” though we see no where else in Scripture that would support this view, and it would even seem to counter the nature of Christ.³²

A more reasonable explanation, which requires little work to reconcile to the rest of Scripture, would be that “those who are dead” refers to those who are spiritually dead, which has many examples throughout Scripture (cf Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13). Once again, it seems unlikely that, through a reasonable view of 1 Peter 4:4-6, Christ descended into Hell to preach to the dead.

III. Scripture Supporting Jesus Did Not Descend into Hell

While there are numerous interpretations of the five commonly used Scriptures in support of the descent, there are just a few Scriptures, all spoken by Jesus himself on the cross, which definitively refute the doctrine alone, that of Luke 23:43, 46, and John 19:30.³³ Of the five most important Scriptures used to affirm that Christ did descend into Hell, none specifically state that Christ did actually descend to Hell. All five passages need further evaluation and explanation to come to the conclusion affirming the doctrine, yet the sayings on the cross can stand on their own, without much interpretation, confirming that Christ did not descend into Hell.

Jesus, in Luke 23:43, while on the cross, says to the thief being crucified with him “truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” While this account was only recorded in the book of Luke, it is reasonable to accept this statement of Peter’s, being that he was an eyewitness, having followed all this closely, so that we might have certainty concerning these things (Luke 1:1-4). The Greek word here for Paradise (or also translated as “Abraham’s bosom”) is *παράδεισος* and is used only once by Jesus, but “denotes the place of blessedness,” as

³² Bloesch, 339.

³³ Sproul, 125-126.

was found in the Garden of Eden before the fall.³⁴ This term is used in the New Testament to describe the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:4), and it was also used to give the location of the promised tree of life (Revelation 2:7).³⁵ In all instances in the New Testament, this refers to the “dwelling place of God,” or heaven, and in this case that means Jesus “promised to the thief the bliss of heaven on that very day,” not three days later.³⁶ There are some who speculate Jesus could possibly be “in Paradise” in *Hades*, descended into the “good” side of *Hades* (Hell), but this would conflict with Luke 23:46, since Scripture does not indicate the Father ever being in *Hades*.³⁷ No reasonable interpretation of Luke 23:43, therefore, concludes Jesus’ words meant anything other than the thief, and Jesus himself, would be in heaven with the Father, the very moment they died on the cross.

A few moments later, while still on the cross, in John 19:30, and then in Luke 23:46, Jesus makes the concluding statements confirming he does not have to descend to Hell to complete the work of redemption, or anything else, but will be once again reconciled to the Father immediately upon his death.³⁸ In John 19:30 Jesus says, “it is finished,” (*Τετέλεσται*) which is commonly explained as the end of “Christ’s suffering” and his “alienation from the Father” for taking on our sins.³⁹ This means that “the whole accomplishment of our salvation, and all the parts of it, are contained in his death” on the cross, at that very moment.⁴⁰ Lastly, Luke 23:46 says “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” indicating that Jesus was at that moment, knowing his work was finished, expecting to be reunited with the Father in heaven.

³⁴ H. A. Kent Jr., “Paradise,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 891.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Grudem, 113.

³⁹ Grudem, 112.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Vol. 2, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), John 9:30.

Jesus, in his last few comments before he died, recalled these words of Psalm 31:5 that David spoke giving his spirit to the Father, and Stephen spoke in Acts 7:59, which Jesus then applied to his immediate, and present circumstance.⁴¹ These passages show that Jesus did experience physical death, just as each “believer in the present age [will] experience when they die: His dead body remained on earth, but his spirit passed immediately into the presence of God in heaven,” at the moment he died on the cross.⁴²

IV. An Assessment of the Apostles’ Creed

One of the hinging elements of the doctrine of the descent into Hell resides with affirming the statement in the Apostles’ Creed that says, Jesus was “buried, and descended into Hell”. The Apostles’ Creed is arguably one of the most well known Christian creeds, much as the Lord’s Prayer is perhaps the best-known prayer, even by those outside the faith, and the doctrine found within the creed is simple, precise, and easily understood.⁴³ The popularity of the creed is almost unparalleled among other documents, outside the Bible, to the point whereas the “Lord’s Prayer is the Prayer of prayers, the Decalogue is the Law of laws, so the Apostles’ Creed is the Creed of creeds.”⁴⁴ Part of its popularity comes from the Creed’s simplicity in the fact that it “contains all the fundamental articles of the Christian faith necessary to salvation, in the form of facts, simple Scripture language, and is [presented] in the order of revelation.”⁴⁵ This statement proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ started out of a practical need within Christianity, as a

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelist, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, Vol. 3, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), Matthew 27:45-56; Mark 15:33-41; Luke 23:44-49.

⁴² Grudem, 113.

⁴³ Rick Brannan, ed., *Historic Creeds and Confessions*, ed. Rick Brannan (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1998), 5.

⁴⁴ Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes: The History of the Creeds*, 6th Edition, Vol. 1, 3 vols. (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1919), 14-15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

way to have candidates for baptism affirm their faith by asking them three simple questions.⁴⁶ Eventually it became used as a way to “distinguish true believers from those who followed various heresies,” such as Gnosticism and Marcionism, which were circulating at the time.⁴⁷

The popular notion that the Apostles’ Creed was somehow comprised, or authored, by the Apostles, each of them contributing a line while they met, “is pure fiction.”⁴⁸ The genesis of the text appeared in Rome sometime around A.D. 150 and was called the “symbol of faith.”⁴⁹ It eventually became known as the Roman Creed around the second century, and was in its closest completed form that we know today.⁵⁰ Approximately A.D. 700, it took the form and name we know today, and had wide “liturgical use by the time of Charlemagne” in A.D. 800.⁵¹ Since then has been “recited by millions of people in wide variety of denominations over the last 1500 years,” confirming its important and antiquity.⁵²

While the Apostles’ Creed was developing into its present day form, it took on slightly different wording or phrasing, but there is no record of it containing the phrase “he descended into Hell” until approximately A.D. 700.⁵³ Since then, determining what Hell represented in the clause was difficult. Scholars often tried to decide whether it was to connote physical death upon the cross, an actual torment in *Hades* and separation from God, “the collective abode of the dead, divided into Paradise or Abraham’s Bosom, the state of God-fearing souls and *Gehenna*,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁷ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, 1st Edition, Vol. 1 (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1984), 63-64.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ O. G. Oliver Jr, "Apostles' Creed," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 87.

⁵¹ Scaer, 93.

⁵² Doug Powell, “Did Jesus “Descend Into Hell”? Its History in the Apostles’ Creed and an Assessment ,” *The Apologetics Group*, 2008, <http://www.vorthosforum.com/export/Articles/Did%20Jesus%20Descend%20Into%20Hell.pdf> (accessed February 15 2012).

⁵³ Oliver Jr., 87.

[or] the state of ungodly souls.”⁵⁴ Without a clear collective understanding, controversies about the “descent clause” have been noted for more than 500 years going back to when Calvin examined reasons for and against the descent’s inclusion in the creed after reading Erasmus’ *Explanation of the Apostles’ Creed* (1533).⁵⁵ Calvin argued that while the descent phrase was “inserted after a time, [it] did not become customary in the churches at once, but gradually.”⁵⁶ Calvin’s discussion on the use of the descent phrase is admirable, but perhaps somewhat inconsistent when looking at his overall conclusion in the descent doctrine. Calvin, while he tends to disagree with the overall conclusion that Christ descended into a Hell of torment for three days, accepts the descent phrase in the Apostles’ Creed to say it “matters little at what time the clause was inserted,” but that if it is “left out, much of the benefit of Christ’s death will be lost.”⁵⁷

Controversy surrounding the descent clause did not end with Calvin, it was continued by Luther, and is still discussed within the modern Lutheran Church.⁵⁸ Even beyond the Lutheran Church, many different denominations “consider it optional or refuse to include it at all,”⁵⁹ and some, when the clause is used in the church liturgy, remain silent when it is being read.⁶⁰ Modern day preachers and theologians, like John Piper, who normally agree theologically with Calvin, have concluded, “it seems best to omit from the Apostles’ Creed the clause, ‘he descended into Hell,’ rather than giving it other meanings that are more defensible, the way

⁵⁴ Bruce Lockerbie, *The Apostle’s Creed: Do You Really Believe It* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1977), 54.

⁵⁵ John T. McNeill, ed., “Christ’s Descent into Hell: Footnotes to Calvin’s Institutes,” *Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics*, ed. John T. McNeill, http://www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/documents/Christ_in_hell/index.html (accessed March 2, 2012), f431.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.8.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Scaer, 92.

⁵⁹ Lockerbie, 53-54.

⁶⁰ John Piper, *Did Christ Ever Descend to Hell?*, March 3, 2008, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/did-christ-ever-descend-to-hell> (accessed March 2, 2012).

Calvin does.⁶¹ Still, opposition to changing the Apostles' Creed remains strong when the "proposed alteration has to do with what has been considered an article of the faith for centuries, and differing historical interpretations do not change this."⁶² With controversy surrounding the descent clause for centuries, which still exists today, "whatever interpretation one accepts, the [S]criptural passages upon which this teaching is based must be studied closely" before coming to any conclusion about its use.⁶³

It must be noted that, while the Apostles' Creed is mostly derived from Scripture, it remains apart from Scripture, and should never be given the same weight and authority as the inspired Word of God. The descent phrase is not directly found in Scripture, but instead is concluded through various Scripture reference interpretations, and then added some six to seven centuries later. Even when the Apostles' Creed includes this line today it is often notated with an asterisk, as the Westminster Confession of Faith does, where they explain the meaning of the descent clause to be that Jesus merely "continued in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day."⁶⁴ Though the Creed has a long outstanding history, going back to the early church, it is reasonable to conclude the descent phrase was not a part of the original wording, and therefore should not be considered when determining the overall authenticity of the descent into Hell doctrine.

V. Conclusion

The descent into Hell doctrine is based almost exclusively on one statement in the Apostles' Creed that says, "Jesus descended into Hell," and often the validity of the descent

⁶¹ John Piper, "Did Jesus Spend Saturday in Hell?," *Desiring God: God Centered Resources from the Ministry of John Piper*, March 22, 2008, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/did-jesus-spend-saturday-in-hell> (accessed March 2, 2012).

⁶² Scaer, 92.

⁶³ Lockerbie, 54.

⁶⁴ General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, ed., *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3rd Edition, ed. General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (Atlanta, GA: Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990), 36.

phrase is based on what the word Hell represents to the reader.⁶⁵ Development of the Creed into its present day form, and the use of the Creed throughout most of church history, should not be completely discounted, especially when it is one of the most important creeds of the Christian faith. The inclusion of the descent clause today is “at best confusing and in most cases misleading for modern Christians.”⁶⁶ Although Calvin would disagree, the exclusion of the descent clause would not diminish or demean the remaining statements and what they represent. History’s account has shown that the Apostles’ Creed has no true “apostolic claim,” and existed for almost 700 years without the descent phrase.⁶⁷ Even though it is important, no scholar would argue the Apostles’ Creed resides on the same authoritative level as inspired Scripture, and no doctrine should be developed on the basis of a creed over Scripture. Therefore, it is more than reasonable to conclude its authority in determining if Christ spent three days in the torments of Hell, should be limited, not exclusive.

Any Christian doctrine should be developed around sound Scriptural exegesis. In a close examination of the most prominent Scripture references used to support the descent doctrine, it has been shown that they often have widely varying interpretations. Each of the five most commonly used Scriptures to support the descent doctrine have other very reasonable explanations besides an actual descent into Hell by Christ, while several verses can be shown that would contradict a descent into Hell such as Jesus’ statements on the cross. When Christ exclaimed “*Τετέλεσται*” on the cross (John 19:30), he told history’s past, present, and future, that his work was complete and fulfilled; payment for the sins of the world was paid in full at that very moment. In conclusion, this paper has argued that the decent doctrine, when viewed

⁶⁵ Lockerbie, 53.

⁶⁶ Grudem, 113.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

through a proper exegesis of Scripture, is not sufficient to confirm the belief that Jesus did spend an actual three days in the torments of Hell.

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