

“HE DESCENDED TO THE DEAD”:
A PHRASE ALL CHRISTIANS SHOULD CELEBRATE

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While the Apostles’ Creed continues to provide a solid foundation and helpful parameters for orthodox Christian theology, one statement contained in the creed that often makes modern evangelical Christians uncomfortable is the phrase "*descendit ad inferos*" (often translated “He descended into hell” or “He descended to the dead”).¹ While many Christian traditions and denominations continue to recite this phrase without much objection, it has often come under scrutiny in recent years, particularly in low-church, contemporary evangelical settings, and treated with discomfort if not outright disdain.²

Questions about its veracity arise. *Is such a statement biblical? If we choose to incorporate the creeds in our corporate worship, should this phrase be ignored or omitted altogether?*

¹ This phrase is also found in the Athanasian Creed, though its usage among evangelicals is much less frequent. There is also a textual variant "*descendit ad inferna*," though as Emerson notes, the meaning between the two was virtually synonymous up until the time of the Reformation. See Matthew Y. Emerson. *He Descended to the Dead: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019, xiii, 3-4. As I will argue in this paper, I believe the translation “He descended to the dead” is a better English rendering of the biblical and historical articulation of this phrase and should be the preferred translation in any English-speaking church choosing to incorporate the creeds.

² *Ibid.*, 5. In particular, several voices, often referred to as “neo-deletionists,” have argued either to omit the phrase, or remove the creeds from corporate worship altogether. See especially: Wayne A. Grudem. “He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles’ Creed.” *JETS* 34.1 (1991): 103-13.; Michael Williams. “He Descended into Hell? An Issue of Confessional Integrity.” *Presbyterion* 25.2 (1999): 80-90. In truth, Hill notes that consistent debate over this phrase has been seen over the years all the way back to the Reformation. See Charles E. Hill. “He Descended Into Hell.” *RFP* 1.2 (2016): 3-10.

Recent scholarship by Bass, Bird, Emerson, and Hamm among others has sought to revive the doctrine of Christ's *descensus* and its implications.³ They argue that this doctrine holds many theological and practical ramifications, affecting areas such as Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the history of this phrase, along with its various interpretations, and evaluate its validity based on the biblical and historical evidence. Additionally, this paper will explore some of the practical theological implications and applications of this doctrine.

This paper argues that not only is this statement biblically and theologically sound, but also it is one in which all Christians should rejoice together. Rather than avoiding this phrase, Christians should be encouraged to understand it and embrace it wholeheartedly as a part of the biblical expression of Christ's triumph over death.

The Doctrine of Christ's *Descensus*: What Happened Between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday?

The doctrine of Christ's *descensus* helps us to answer the question: *What happened between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday?* Emerson summarizes it this way: "The *descensus* is a thoroughly biblical doctrine, which teaches that Jesus experienced human death as

³ In addition to Emerson, see Justin W. Bass. *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ's Descent into the Underworld*. Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2014; Michael F. Bird. *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to the Apostles' Creed*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016; and Jeffrey L. Hamm. "Descendit: Delete or Declare? A Defense Against the Neo-Deletionists." *WTJ* (2016): 93-116. Hamm (93) notes that much of the current revival of this debate can be traced back to an article by Randall E. Otto, "Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum," *WTJ* 52 (1990): 143-50. Earlier rebuttals of Otto and Grudem include, for example, David P. Scaer, "He Did Descend to Hell: In Defense of the Apostles' Creed," *JETS* 35 (1992): 91-99.

all humans do - his body was buried, and his soul departed to the place of the dead - and in doing so, by virtue of his divinity, he defeated death and the grave.”⁴

As such, the *descensus* serves not as a statement of additional torment that Christ endured, but rather is truly the beginning of Christ’s victory. As Bass states, “The doctrine of Christ’s descent into the underworld between his death and resurrection was not the last step of his humiliation, but instead the first step of Christ’s victorious conquest of the powers of evil.”⁵

One would think such a doctrine, thus defined, would indeed be worth championing. Yet several prominent voices have led the charge against this phrase’s inclusion in the creed. In particular, Wayne Grudem among others has advocated for the omission of the *descensus* clause altogether.⁶ Grudem is absolutely correct that we must always look to Scripture first and foremost and allow it to inform our beliefs, and thus any creed worth stating should accurately reflect what the Bible teaches.⁷ Which brings us once again to the question: *Is the descensus clause biblical?*

In general, there are two main biblical arguments that have been made against this. First, some would argue that the biblical basis for the descent rests solely upon one’s exegesis of 1 Pet. 3:18-22, which, in some scholars’ estimation, does not lend sufficient support. Second, some have stated that the descent teaches that Jesus entered hell in the sense of a place of torment and then emptied hell, which they rightly argue does not have any biblical basis.⁸

⁴ Emerson, 23-24.

⁵ Bass, 115.

⁶ Grudem, 93.

⁷ Indeed, virtually all authors in recent years who have defended the inclusion of the *descensus* in the creed would advocate for the primacy of Scripture as well.

⁸ Emerson, 22-23.

In light of this, Emerson notes two main initial responses to these charges. First, do these objections accurately reflect what the church has affirmed and confessed over the years about the descent's meaning? And second, we need to clarify that the concept of Jesus entering the place of torment as well as releasing those in it, is not a necessary part of the confession, nor is it ubiquitous or even in the earliest writings about the descent.⁹

Along with this, the other main argument against this phrase's inclusion is that some view it as essentially a needless repetition of the burial clause ("was crucified, died, *and was buried*"), and thus should be omitted because it is essentially redundant.¹⁰ Which begs a further question: *Is this truly a superfluous statement? Or is there something more that is clarified here that would be missing if we simply omitted the phrase altogether?*

The Place of the Dead in NT Thought

Before we look at the biblical evidence and the articulations of this doctrine throughout church history, let us first examine what is known about how the place of the dead would have been understood by the original readers of the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, the main word used for the place of the dead is Sheol.¹¹ While we do not know its original etymology, we do find that Sheol is seen as the common destiny for both the righteous and the unrighteous, unless, like in the case of Enoch and Elijah, God

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 10-11. Emerson notes how this thinking can be traced back to Martin Bucer's explanation of the *descensus* (94).

¹¹ Bass (21-22) notes how the LXX translates this as Hades over 100 times, and thus is seen as synonymous. He suggests that John in Revelation is alluding to this in his usage of Hades as well.

miraculously intervened.¹² Thus, in the OT, Sheol is seen as the realm of the dead where all go at death, though the righteous have hope that God would one day rescue them out of Sheol.¹³

Along with this, in Second Temple literature, we see the dead within Sheol/Hades “compartmentalized, or separated, between the righteous and unrighteous and experiencing a foretaste of their eternal fate, whether punishment or reward.”¹⁴ This concept of compartmentalization is particularly pertinent for this discussion. Bass describes how there were three main compartments presented in the New Testament: Paradise, or Abraham’s bosom, which was the dwelling place of the righteous;¹⁵ the abyss, or Tartarus, which can refer to the general place of the dead, or for the prison containing fallen angels awaiting judgment;¹⁶ and Gehenna, or the lake of fire, which is “not...a compartment of the underworld, but instead the future, eternal destiny of the wicked.”¹⁷ Thus, as Emerson states, “When the New Testament speaks about ‘the dead,’ it has a specific background, one that affirms ‘the [place of the] dead’ as a location containing the disembodied souls of both the righteous and unrighteous (albeit in separate compartments).”¹⁸

Another important point is that for NT readers, the location of the place of the dead (both for the righteous and unrighteous) was conceived of being located *below* the earth, not

¹² Ibid., 22-23.

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Emerson, 28.

¹⁵ Bass, 47-56.

¹⁶ Ibid., 56-9; Emerson, 29; It is used exclusively in the latter meaning in the NT except for Rom 10:7. According to Bass, “The Abyss is also predominantly understood as the dwelling place of fallen angels (demons) in the underworld throughout the intertestamental literature” (56-57).

¹⁷ Bass, 59.

¹⁸ Emerson, 30. See Luke 16:19-31, for example. Emerson also goes into more depth in his chapter on the descent and creation, 122-43.

above it.¹⁹ Thus, any language of Christ *descending* to the dead does not inherently imply that this location was a place of torment. Both Sheol and Hades can be used either to refer to both a general location for all the dead, or as a place of torment or consignment for the unrighteous.²⁰ In fact, the idea that Christ “descended into hell” did not come to mean “descended to the place of torment” until Calvin.²¹

This cosmography is important to keep in mind because the New Testament authors and their audiences likely would have understood it this way. As we will see, this understanding is helpful in clarifying that that when Jesus died, He experienced death in His humanity the same way all humans do. As Emerson states, “His body was buried, and his human soul went (“descended”) to the place of the dead. He descended to the righteous compartment of the dead (“paradise,” Lk 23:43), but he could also communicate with all the dead. And thus, in the *descensus*, he proclaims his victory to those “under the earth” (Phil 2:10).”²²

Key Passages in Scripture

With this background in mind, let us now examine the potential biblical evidence for the *descensus*. While some have often treated 1 Pet. 3:18-22 as the *sine qua non* for biblical

¹⁹ Ibid., 27-33.

²⁰ Ibid., 31.

²¹ Ibid., 3-4. Emerson notes as well that it was understood that these compartments, while separated, were still understood to be located in the same general vicinity, and thus there could be communication between them, such as in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Lk 16:19-31 (31-33).

²² Ibid., 31-33. For a couple of incredibly helpful visuals of Hebrew and NT understanding of the place of the dead, see Figures 2.1 and 2.2 in Emerson, 32-33.

evidence, in reality, there are a number of passages to which scholars have pointed that potentially contain descent language or allusions.²³

Matthew 12:40

In Matthew 12:40, Jesus compares Himself with Jonah. He says to the scribes and Pharisees, “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”²⁴

Some have taken this simply to mean that Jesus was buried for three days. However, others would argue that there is something more going on here. In this view, just as “Jonah’s body is in the fish (grave) while his soul, metaphorically, is in Sheol, [so also] Jesus’ body is in the heart of the earth (grave) while his soul, literally, is in the place of the dead.”²⁵ In this sense, Bass notes that “the origin of the doctrine of the *Descensus* may be able to be traced to very *ipsissima verba* of Christ.”²⁶

²³ The importance placed on 1 Pet. 3:18-22 can be seen in the relatively lengthy treatments on the exegesis of this passage from both sides of this discussion compared to other passages of Scripture. See, for example, Grudem (109-11) on the neo-deletionist side, and Hamm (108-115) on the inclusion side. Following Emerson’s lead, I believe it may be most helpful to address each of the other potential descensus passages in Scripture first and what each teaches concerning the descent before examining 1 Peter. In his article, Grudem (107) addresses 5 main passages as possible support for the descensus: Acts 2:27; Rom. 10:6-7 Eph. 4:8-9; 1 Pet. 3:18-20; and 1 Pet. 4:6. I will address each of these passages and briefly address each of his critiques as we examine the potential biblical evidence.

²⁴ All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

²⁵ Emerson, 38.

²⁶ Bass, 66.

Luke 23:43

Jesus says to the thief on the cross, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Many have been quick to observe that this seems to contradict the idea that Jesus could have been in Hades when He died, since He would have been in paradise.²⁷ However, as Bass notes, this instead could be seen as some of the firmest evidence that Christ descended to the underworld if we understand that “Paradise” is located within Hades.²⁸ Thus, one of the greatest problem passages for the *descensus* could on the other hand be seen as one of the strongest teachings on it.

Acts 2:27, 31

Perhaps the strongest evidence for the *descensus* in the NT comes from Peter in Acts chapter 2. In Acts 2:25-28, Peter quotes from Psalm 16:8-11 in reference to Christ: “For David says concerning him, “ ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’ ” Peter explains this further in verse 31, that David “foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.”

Peter is demonstrating that Christ’s resurrection was prophesied beforehand. The language Peter uses fits quite well considering the NT understanding of death and the afterlife.

²⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996, 124-125; Grudem, 112.

²⁸ Bass, 72.

Christ's soul was previously in Hades, while His body was in the grave. At His resurrection, Christ's human body was raised and was reunited with His human soul.²⁹

Grudem appeals to the fact that both Hades and Sheol can simply mean “the grave” or “death.”³⁰ But based on our earlier discussion of both Hebrew and Gentile understandings of the afterlife, would not “the place of the dead” perhaps be a more natural reading? Indeed, Bass notes that this interpretation of the passage is seen as early as Polycarp, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Cyprian.³¹

Thus, it seems entirely plausible, if not probable, that this passage is a very clear reference to the temporary separation of Christ's human soul in Hades while His human body was in the grave. As Emerson states, “At minimum, then, this text affirms that Jesus experienced human death as all humans experience human death, in body and soul. His body was buried, and his soul went to the place of the (righteous) dead.”³²

Romans 10:7

Along with this, Romans 10:6-8 provides another strong potential *descensus* reference: “But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ”

²⁹ Emerson, 34.

³⁰ Grudem, 107.

³¹ Bass, 71. Pol. *Phil* 1:2; Irenaeus *Haer.* 5:31.1-2; Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* 6.6; Origen *Comm. John* 6.18; Cyprian *Test* 2.24-27

³² Emerson, 34-35. Emerson notes as well that This fits with common Jewish conceptions of the afterlife, both in the Psalm's historical and literary contexts, and in Acts. Further, one should not assume that “Hades” means “place of torment”; rather, in this instance, it is probably a reference to the common fate of all people, the place of the dead, which is further compartmentalized between (at least) the righteous and the unrighteous. (Footnote 38 on pg. 35)

(that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).”

Again, while there are multiple interpretive options, several scholars take this to be another clear reference to Christ’s descent.³³ Grudem as well admits that the term *abyssos* can refer to the general realm of the dead. In fact, his main objection is that it must not refer to a place of punishment for the dead, which again is solved if we understand Paradise or Abraham’s bosom to be contained within Hades.³⁴ Thus, this passage as well serves as one of the stronger evidences for the *descensus*.³⁵

Ephesians 4:9

Ephesians 4:7-10 says, “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)”

The primary debate in this passage is how we should understand the genitive τῆς γῆς in verse 9. Is it to be understood as a genitive of apposition (“the lower regions, namely, the earth”), referring to Christ’s coming to earth from heaven?³⁶ Or is it better understood to be a partitive

³³ William Bales. “The Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2010): 84–100, 99; Bass, 74-7; Emerson, 47-50.

³⁴ Grudem, 108.

³⁵ Bass (77) notes that in his estimation both Acts 2:27, 31 and Romans 10:7 serve as the two strongest passages that one must deal with if they believe this doctrine is not taught in the New Testament.

³⁶ The ESV translation quoted above reflects this view. Grudem takes this phrase appositionally as well (108).

genitive (“the lowest parts of the earth itself”) or genitive of comparison (“the regions below the earth”), referring to Hades?³⁷

While this interpretation is debatable, many throughout church history have understood this passage as referring to Christ’s descent and liberation of the righteous OT saints, including as early as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen.³⁸ Likewise, many scholars today would continue to point to this passage as evidence of the descent. In this case, the “lower regions of the earth” should be understood as Hades, the place of the dead. Thus, once again, a reference to the *descensus* in this passage is a possible, if not preferable, interpretation here.³⁹

Revelation 1:18

In Revelation 1:17-18, Jesus Himself says: “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” In Bass’s study, this is the primary passage he explores as a basis for the *descensus*.⁴⁰ Bass notes that this coupling of “Death and Hades” are seen multiple times throughout Revelation and consistently in that order (Rev. 6:8; 20:13, 14).⁴¹ As he states, “The primary interpretive crux of this passage is whether Death and Hades are places or personified entities.”⁴² Here, Bass quotes Aune and agrees that Death should be understood as the ruler of the realm,

³⁷ These are not the only interpretive options. Harris, for example, also takes it appositionally but makes a compelling case that Eph. 4:9 refers to Christ’s descent (via the Holy Spirit) at Pentecost. See W. Hall Harris. 1994. “The Ascent and Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9-10.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (602): 198–214. EBSCOhost.

³⁸ Bass, 77; see Irenaeus *Frag.* 42; *Haer.* 4.22.1; 5.31.1-2; Tertullian *An.* 55; *Adv. Prax.* 30; Origen *Hom. Exod.* 6.6; Cf. *T. Dan.* 5:10-12; *Odes of Sol.* 22:1.

³⁹Bales, 97-99; Emerson, 44.

⁴⁰ See especially Bass’s exegesis in 97-114.

⁴¹ Bass, 106

⁴² *Ibid.*, 106-7

Hades.⁴³ He concludes that Revelation 1:18, then, should be seen as another passage that teaches or implies the descent in the New Testament. As he states, “If Christ will ‘harrow hell’ of the wicked at his second coming (Rev 20:13-15), then why not see a similar harrowing of Death and Hades of the righteous at his first coming (Rev. 1:18)?”⁴⁴

1 Peter 3:18-22

Having seen the numerous verses throughout Scripture that use language seeming to allude to Christ’s descent, let us now set our sights on perhaps the most well-known (and hotly contested) verse regarding the *descensus*.

In 1 Peter 3:18-22, Peter says: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”

Grudem devotes the most extensive part of his discussion to this particular passage. He posits that while many purport that Peter’s audience would be able to “read between the lines” and see how this connected with his previous charge to urgently preach the Gospel and not

⁴³ Ibid., 106. D.E. Aune. *Revelation 17-22*, WBC, ed. D.A. Hubbard, B.M. Metzger, and G.W. Barker, vol. 52C. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998, 1103.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 109.

fear their persecutors, such assumptions appear rather unlikely. He suggests that perhaps the preferred view should be that of Augustine, who viewed this verse not as something Christ did between his death and resurrection but rather how when Noah was building the ark, Christ in a spiritual sense was preaching through Noah to the hostile unbelievers around him.⁴⁵ He rejects the unbiblical suggestion that this passage implies a “second chance” of salvation to those who have already died.⁴⁶

On the other hand, other scholars suggest that, particularly in light of the other biblical evidence, this passage cannot be read as referring to anything but Christ’s descent to the dead.⁴⁷ Hamm notes how the language concerning the timing of Christ’s proclamation is crucial. If one takes the phrase ἐν ᾧ as a conjunction (“during which time”), then verse 18 seems to very clearly place it after Christ’s crucifixion, and thus an allegorized interpretation of Noah seems out of place.⁴⁸ Emerson as well argues that a *descensus* reference would seem to be the most natural reading in light of the other biblical evidence. The “preaching tour” in this sense would not refer to a second chance for salvation, but rather a declaration of Christ’s victory.⁴⁹

At the same time, Emerson makes the point that even if one were to dismiss this particular passage as referring to the *descensus*, the testimony from other passages of Scripture would be sufficient to provide ample biblical rationale to support this doctrine.⁵⁰ In other words,

⁴⁵ Grudem, 109-11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 111-12. See, for example, Luke 16:19-31 and Heb. 9:27.

⁴⁷ Emerson, 59.

⁴⁸ Hamm, 109-110; Bass, 89; Emerson, 60-1.

⁴⁹ Emerson, 59.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Christ's descent does not hinge solely upon one's interpretation of 1 Pet. 3.⁵¹ Emerson notes that even Augustine affirmed the doctrine of descent but did not see 1 Pet. 3:18-22 as a supporting text for it.⁵² Thus, while this passage is in many ways a key support for the *descensus*, this doctrine is not solely based on this passage, but is consonant with a number of passages throughout the NT containing descent language and allusions.

Having seen this, let us examine as well how these verses have been understood and interpreted throughout church history. Is the articulation of this doctrine presented in this paper a novel re-reading of how it has been presented over the centuries? Or are there even early historical roots that would suggest that this is a faithful rendering of how this doctrine has been consistently articulated and understood from the beginning?

Descensus and Church History

It is true that the *descensus* clause was not included in some of the early versions of the Apostles' Creed and did not appear in any iteration until 390 AD.⁵³ Some, like Grudem, have appealed to such evidence to warrant its removal from the creed, characterizing the phrase as a "late intruder...that really never belonged here in the first place."⁵⁴ But is this an accurate reflection of the church's confession and teaching?

Some scholars have noted that the descent of Christ into Sheol was a widely attested belief as early as the 2nd century AD, referenced by Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Justin,

⁵¹ Ibid., 24-25.

⁵² Ibid., 60.

⁵³ See the chart by Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1931]), 2. 52-55. Reproduced in Grudem, 104-105.

⁵⁴ Grudem, 93.

Iranaeus, and Tertullian.⁵⁵ As Bass states, "Even among modern scholars who deny that the doctrine of the *Descensus* is found in Scripture, there is virtual unanimity that from Ignatius to the medieval period, this doctrine was believed and affirmed by the church."⁵⁶

From these writings, we learn that from the beginning, there were consistently three main features at the core of the *descensus*. First, as we have already noted, there is an understanding that during the time between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday, Jesus' body was in the grave, while His soul descended to the place of the (righteous) dead, where He preached His victory over death and Hades, as good news to the righteous saints who had believed in their lifetime, and as news of defeat and judgment to the unrighteous.⁵⁷ Second, in his descent, Christ liberated those who had awaited him in faith (i.e. Old Testament saints).⁵⁸ Third, there is a consistent connotation of victory attached with Christ's descent. As Emerson states, "Because Jesus is the God-Man, his death is a victorious one in the sense that he descends to the dead not only qua human but also with the hypostatic union still intact and thereby defeats Death and Hades as God the Son incarnate."⁵⁹ Bass also states, "Regardless of how imaginative the understanding of the *Descensus* becomes in the later centuries, the historical core of threefold

⁵⁵ Emerson, 74.

⁵⁶ Bass, 7.

⁵⁷ Emerson, 74.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 75; As Bird notes, citing Eph. 4:8-10, "The chief idea is that when Jesus rose and ascended to heaven, he took with him departed saints, bringing them out of the bondage of death, and ever since then believers who die go directly to heaven to be with Christ and to join the church triumphant (Acts 7:59; 2 Cor. 5:1-4; Phil. 1:23; Rev. 6:9-11)."

⁵⁹ Emerson, 81-82.

purpose of Christ's descent: preaching, releasing the saints of the OT, and triumphant defeat of Death and Hades is one of the best attested Christian doctrines from the second century."⁶⁰

Along with this, it is worth considering the historical context in which the phrase is first clearly stated in the creeds. As Schaff notes, the two earliest inclusions of the phrase happen in 390 AD by Rufinus and in 650 AD by Sacramentarium Gallicanum.⁶¹ Emerson notes how in both instances, the church at those times was dealing with Apollinarianism.⁶² As Emerson notes, "the descent is the perfect doctrine for which to combat that heresy."⁶³ Thus, the reason the phrase was likely included during these particular times (but not others) was to further clarify what was already initially implicit in the burial clause.⁶⁴

While this main core of the descent confession continued to be widely attested through the Middle Ages, divergent views began to spring up as time progressed. In Roman Catholicism, we begin to see the "Harrowing of Hell" articulation of the doctrine take shape. Perhaps surprisingly, most often the way it was stated remained very similar to what we have described already. However, while the overall articulation remains fairly consistent, the emerging emphasis on souls in limbo and purgatory began to cloud the previously clear, biblical teaching.⁶⁵

In Eastern Orthodoxy, the *descent* began to imply that there was a second chance for salvation for those who had died. Included in this were both subtle and overt implications of

⁶⁰ Bass, 11.

⁶¹ Schaff, 2.52-55 (also reproduced in Grudem, 104-5).

⁶² Emerson, 71.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 88-90.

universalism. These particular leanings have consistently remained a part of Eastern Orthodox teachings throughout the centuries.⁶⁶

After the Reformation, further descriptions and explanations began to emerge. Martin Luther viewed Christ's descent as essentially a part of His victory over death and the devil, destroying their power in the process. One somewhat odd detail is that Luther places Christ in Hades *after* His resurrection, which was new in terms of timing.⁶⁷

John Calvin also offered a new understanding of the *descensus*. He interpreted the descent clause to be a reference to Christ's substitution for sinners on the cross rather than a victorious descent in his human soul to the place of the dead.⁶⁸ In Calvin's words, not only did Jesus die a bodily death, but also "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."⁶⁹ Thus, in his view, the descent clause was essentially saying that Christ experienced hell on the cross for sinners.⁷⁰

Calvin's view was unique in other ways as well. No one up until this point had placed Christ's descent on a Friday. Additionally, no one before Calvin had suggested it to be something involving torment.⁷¹ Thus, Calvin's explanation of the doctrine essentially opened the door to

⁶⁶ Ibid., 82-85. Emerson notes how the only theologian in whom it is close to explicit, Origen, was condemned for exactly that universalist tendency in his explication of apocatastasis.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 90-1.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 91-2.

⁶⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.515 (2.16.10)

⁷⁰ Grudem (106) notes how the Heidelberg Catechism follows suit as well (question 44). Emerson attempts to harmonize HC44 with a better historical understanding of the *descensus* by highlight how HC44 primarily highlights the penal substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement and suggests using it in concert with the Westminster Catechism (questions 27 and 50), with WSC serving as the primary teaching on the descent. See Emerson, 214-7.

⁷¹ Emerson, 92.

understanding this expression as one of suffering rather than victory. Emerson notes that after the Reformation, three main options or tracks of interpretation emerged: Calvin's penal substitutionary view; Luther's victorious view; and Eastern & Roman versions of the liberating victorious view.⁷²

One other major development that should be mentioned that broke ranks from these three main tracks was expressed in the 20th century by the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar posited that the Christ's atoning work did not end on the cross but actually reached a climax on Holy Saturday. Christ's descent is thus an instance of suffering, either as part of Christ's substitutionary atonement or at the very least an act of solidarity with mankind. Along with this, Balthasar suggests that during this, Jesus was temporarily separated from the Father, not only in His human spirit but in His divine nature as well.⁷³ Thus, in Balthasar, we find the first overt expression of the common misunderstanding that Jesus literally went to hell in the sense of the place of torment, as well as further theological ramifications that many would consider radical and unorthodox at best.⁷⁴

Evaluating the Evidence and Seeking to Articulate a Biblical, Evangelical Position

While certainly by no means exhaustive, this summary is representative of the biblical and historical patterns that have emerged in the treatment of the *descensus* doctrine and how it has progressed over the years. With this in mind, how ought we to evaluate the doctrine of Christ's *descensus* and, if appropriate, articulate a biblical, evangelical position of it?

⁷² Ibid., 94.

⁷³ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁴ See Table 3.1 in Emerson, 98, for a helpful summary of the various views and key points of each.

Emerson presents an excellent summary of this doctrine and confession as follows:

Christ, in remaining dead for three days, experienced death as all humans do: his body remained in the grave, and his soul remained in the place of the righteous dead. He did not suffer there, but, remaining the incarnate Son, proclaimed the victory procured by his penal substitutionary death to all those in the place of the dead—fallen angels, the unrighteous dead, and the OT saints. Christ's descent is thus primarily the beginning of his exaltation, not a continuation of his humiliation.⁷⁵

Perhaps somewhat ironically, Grudem seems to articulate much of a similar position as he concludes his exploration of what God's Word teaches on the subject:

These texts indicate, then, that Christ in his death experienced the same things believers in this present age experience when they die: His dead body remained on earth and was buried (as ours will be), but his spirit (or soul) passed immediately into the presence of God in heaven (as ours will). Then on the first Easter morning Christ's spirit was reunited with his body and he was raised from the dead, just as Christians who have died will (when Christ returns) be reunited to their bodies and raised in their perfect resurrection bodies to new life.⁷⁶

Practical Applications

With this in mind, it seems appropriate to ask the question: *So what? What would we be losing if we were to, as some have suggested, omit this phrase altogether? Conversely, what is to be gained by further study and teaching regarding this doctrine?*

First, based off the articulation presented in this paper and the evidence that supports it, I believe that churches should be encouraged to continue using the Apostles' Creed as a part of their corporate worship (or perhaps introduce the use of the Apostles' Creed if that is not already a regular practice). We understand that Scripture should always take precedence over creeds, and that any creed we utilize must be faithful to what God's Word teaches.⁷⁷ However, the Apostles'

⁷⁵ Emerson, 103.

⁷⁶ Grudem, 113.

⁷⁷ Emerson, 213-14.

Creed has served faithfully over the centuries in this regard, and as we have seen in this study, that includes the *descensus* clause. Thus, churches should be encouraged to utilize the Apostles' Creed (with the *descensus* clause) as a part of their corporate worship.

Along with this, another practical application comes in the context of when we or others are facing death or have lost loved ones.⁷⁸ As believers, we can find comfort in the fact that Jesus became fully human to the point where he experienced the fullness of death.⁷⁹ Not only that, but He defeated death. Thus the *descensus* adds to the already true hope that we have in the Resurrection of a Savior who empathizes with us and has emerged triumphant.

Finally, I believe more intentional emphasis should be given to the teaching of this doctrine in the local church. One pressing point that Grudem brings up is that many modern English readers of the phrase “he descended into hell” will naturally take this at face value and understand it as a statement implying Christ’s further suffering rather than the first fruits of His victory.⁸⁰ However, rather than omit the phrase altogether, this author would suggest that in order to avoid unnecessary confusion, a better rendering of “he descended to the dead” or “he descended to the place of the dead” should be utilized, and regular, proper catechesis and

⁷⁸ Again, perhaps somewhat ironically, while arguing against the inclusion of the *descensus* clause, Grudem expresses a similar sentiment in his conclusion: “We need not fear death, not only because eternal life lies on the other side but also because we know that our Savior himself has gone through exactly the same experience we will go through. He has prepared (even sanctified) the way, and we follow him with confidence each step of the way.” (113)

⁷⁹ Emerson, 219-21.

⁸⁰ Grudem, 113. As Grudem states, the statement “He descended into hell” is one that “is at best confusing and in most cases misleading for modern Christians.”

discipleship on this point must be encouraged and practiced in any church choosing to incorporate the creeds as a part of their corporate worship.⁸¹

Conclusion

The doctrine of Christ's *descensus* is one worth understanding and affirming by all believers in Christ. Rather than express a reticence and aversion toward this doctrine, it is one that - when properly understood in its biblical and historical expression - should be championed in our churches today. Christ has the victory! He holds the keys to death and Hades! Indeed, this is a victory worth celebrating.

⁸¹ Bird, 145. Bird and Bass suggest that there rendering "He descended *to the place of the dead*" rather than just "He descended to the dead" perhaps best captures the original intent. However, due to its wordiness, perhaps the pithiness of the latter is preferable. Whichever translation a church chooses, I believe the consistent teaching of this doctrine is most imperative to avoid unnecessary confusion.