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Theological Refractions

HE DESCENDED TO HELL

In the December, 1969 issue of the *Springfielder* some of the general confusion associated with this phrase was discussed (pp. 34ff.) Various churches have given this phrase different meanings. The whole issue boiled up in the Missouri Synod when the *Worship Supplement* substituted the phrase "He went to the dead." This phrase has only increased the problems and has resulted in a retraction of it. With all the misunderstandings associated with the phrase, should it now be dropped from the Apostles Creed? Bringing in historical data at this point will hardly be helpful. Can the phrase stand up Biblically? What does it really mean? And if Christ really went to hell, when did it happen?

We believe that the substitute clause "He descended to hell to triumph gloriously over Satan" adequately reflects the intention of the Creed and carries through a legitimate Biblical thought. Gustav Aulen in his *Christus Victor* brought to the eyes of the church again the concept that Christ had overcome Satan. Unfortunately, he overstated his case, by disparaging the authentic Biblical concepts of "atonement", "ransom", "payment" and others. He confused the cause with the result. Christ by His death, offered as a ransom or payment, released man from Satan's grip. Aulen portrayed the conflict between Christ and Satan as a hand to hand battle where God with a show of force simply vanquished Satan. Christ's work has vanquished Satan, but this He did by fulfilling the legal demands against us and by nailing it to the cross (Col. 2:13ff.)

Aulen's enthusiasm for his own idea, which became indiscriminately contagious in Lutheran circles in our own country, should not prevent us from seeing that Christ did vanquish Satan. Jesus' healing ministry was directed to the demoniacs. (Of course, if Satan and devils are only mythological thought forms of the first century used to express what we call psychological disturbances, then Aulen has no truth at all and the concept of the descent into hell should be immediately and ingloriously dropped!)

The *locus classicus* for the conflict between Jesus and Satan is Matt. 12:22-32. The occasion is the healing of thrice plagued man. He is blind, dumb, and demon possessed. After Jesus defends Himself against the charge that He is in league with Satan, He tells the story of a strong man being plundered and robbed by another. The account appears in the synoptic parallels, so it does possibly belong to the earliest strata of preaching. It is quite clear that the stronger man (Luke 11:22) who conquers the strong man is Jesus Himself. After all, He describes Himself as casting out devils (Matt. 12:28)! The end of this fight with Satan comes with Jesus' death on the cross. The church's confession that Christ went to hell encompasses every conflict that God or Christ has with Satan. Involved is the Genesis 3 promise, the struggle between Yahweh and Baal, (Beelzebul, the name of Satan, seems to be etymologically related to Baal) the struggle between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness, and finally the

cross. If the phrase concerning the descent to hell were removed from the creed, there would be no reference to the struggles of the godly with Satan and a major portion of Bible would be without adequate testimony in the credal life of the people. The descent into hell is the proclamation of God's victory over Satan. Satan's claim that man must suffer the same fate in hell is broken, since Christ has offered His life as a ransom (*Matthew*) and nailed the penalty of our sins to the cross (*Colossians*).

Answering the 'how' and 'when' of the descent is a bigger problem than answering what it signifies. It signifies victory over Satan, a thought which Luther captured in the Small Catechism where he states that Christ frees us from the power of the Devil. The Formula of Concord sticks the questions of 'how' and 'when' under the rug. But do we have to?

Traditional Lutheran dogmatics have relied heavily on 1 Peter 3:18-22. Interestingly modern New Testament exegesis sees in this periscope the framework of an ancient creed. One of the marks of the early creeds in the apostolic period is the contrast between the periods of humiliation and exaltation in the life of Jesus. *Philippians 2* contrasts the death on the cross with the subsequent exaltation of Jesus. The first verses of *1 Corinthians 15* exhibit the same pattern. (Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, New York, 1966, pp. 18ff. and Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, Grand Rapids, 1963). 1 Peter 3:18-22 shows all the marks of a creed. A casual glance will show mention of Christ's death for sins, appearance in the prison, resurrection, ascension and session at the right hand of the Father. All are parts of our creeds. If the *locus classicus* for the descent into hell was originally a creed in the ancient church or reflects such creeds, then a clue is given to the 'how' and 'when' of our problem. "Being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" parallels what the New Testament creeds call in other places the death and resurrection of Jesus. In *Philippians 2* it is the contrast between humiliation and exaltation. It is in the resurrected or exalted state that Jesus goes and preaches to the spirits in prison. The word "prison" appears enigmatic only until it is realized that same word is used for hell in the pericope of the Unforgiving Servant (*Matt. 18: 30, 34*). In 1 Peter 3:21f. there is an explicit reference to the resurrection in connection with the ascension and session. The order in this Petrine confession seems to be thus: 1. Jesus was put to death; 2. Jesus entered the glorified state, which would include the revivification of His body; 3. Jesus appeared in hell, the prison; 4. Jesus appeared as resurrected to the disciples; 5. Jesus ascended; 6. Jesus sat down at the right hand. The order is virtually the same as what we have in the Apostles Creed.

The connection between the appearance in hell and the resurrection still remains unexplained. At the moment of resurrection (if we are permitted to speak this way), Christ appeared in the supernatural realm. Christ did not go from grave to earth to heaven, the supernatural realm, but He was transposed from the grave to the supernatural realm where angels dwell. Here we cannot use our patterns of space or time. At the moment of resurrection, Jesus went from time into eternity. There He

appeared as conqueror over Satan. Since sin first occurred in this realm, so God's victory was first proclaimed here. The directions of "up" or "down" are inconsequential here. But "down" is pejorative even in our language today. From this supernatural realm, Jesus then appeared to the women, the disciples, the five hundred, and then to Paul. The word for *appear* is the same in each case. Cf. 1 Cor. 15:5-8. The ascension means that Christ will no longer appear, except maybe in the case of Paul, until the Last Day. To recap the argument, at the moment of revivification, Jesus appeared in the supernatural realm and was recognized by Satan as conqueror. From this supernatural realm, He appeared on occasion during the forty day period on earth. It is clear that no one saw the resurrection as no one saw the incarnation. Just as the historical Jesus is the evidence that incarnation has taken place, so the appearances of Jesus indicate that He has been made alive and entered the state of glory.

Therefore the descent into hell and the appearances of the risen Jesus are two sides of the resurrection. It is one act that has effects in two different realms. In the angelic realm, He showed that He had conquered Satan who was the cause of death (Genesis 3) and on earth His rising showed that He had conquered death which had been caused by Satan.

C. S. Lewis has done much in our time to defend the existence of a personal Satan. The church through its Gospel pericopes, e.g. The Temptation of Jesus by Satan, Matt. 4, has always held this up before the people. As a part of the work of Jesus, His descent into hell should be proclaimed to the people and confessed by them in the creeds.

D.P.S.

WHAT ABOUT THE DEAD?: A STUDY IN PAUL'S THEOLOGY

In recent years the state or condition of the dead has been no small problem in the Missouri Synod. Human existence does not have to be taught to ask the question "Where are the dead?" There are only two possible answers. The dead are *somewhere* or they are *nowhere*. A doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Munich and later published in book form might shed some additional light on the issue. Paul Hoffmann in his doctoral dissertation, *Die Toten in Christus* (Munster: Ashendorff, 1966) discusses whether Paul's thought on the state of the dead reflects Hellenistic or Judaic thought. Dr. Hoffmann claims that there is no one Pauline way of speaking of the intermediate state. The Apostle looks at the conditions from different perspectives. Thus in 2 Cor. 12:1-4 death is referred as a sleep without any explicit reference to the condition of the dead. However in Philippians 1:23 his hope rests on being with Jesus in heaven between death and resurrection. The idea that the soul waits in heaven between death and resurrection, according to Dr. Hoffmann, is Judaic and not a Hellenistic influenced thought. Paul's con-

tribution to Christian theology is that he took the Jewish thought of the waiting soul and added "with Christ." This 364 page doctoral dissertation makes two things clear. 1. The concept that the soul after death waits with Christ for the resurrection is a definite Pauline thought. It is not something tacked on by the Church Fathers in the post-apostolic period. 2. The survival of the soul after death in Paul's theology did not come from his contact with Platonic and other Hellenistic philosophies. Those who have been engaged in the discussion will want to read the volume.

D.P.S.

IS A CONFSSIONAL APPROACH TO THE SCRIPTURES POSSIBLE?

A negative answer to this question is supplied by Dr. Klaus Haendler, assistant to Professor Ernst Kinder, in the December 1968 issue of the *Theologische Literaturzeitung*. Dr. Haendler finds the approach that Professor Ralph Bohlmann of the St. Louis faculty uses in his *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confession* severely out of date. According to Haendler, the Lutheran Confessions should in no way determine hermeneutical principles for today. At best they are representative writings of a given period of the church's development. Bohlmann's sin, according to the review, is canonizing the Lutheran Confessions as an authoritative norm for Biblical interpretation. The St. Louis professor's claim that the Lutheran Confessions take a unified approach to the Holy Scriptures is outmoded in the present theological climate that sees very little unity among the Biblical writings. To look upon the Confessions as normative is to give them a "superhistorical" quality.

Dr. Haendler's review clearly shows the two basically different approaches to the Lutheran Confessions. In the Lutheran oriented state related churches of Europe, the Lutheran Confessions are considered part of the religious and cultural development of the people. They are a part of history, but have no practical function or binding authority. The Missouri Synod from its very inception has claimed that all theological conclusions should agree or at least not disagree with the Lutheran Confessions. Haendler's acid attack on Dr. Bohlmann shows the impossibility of building a bridge between the two approaches. In the 1969-1970 issues of *The Lutheran Forum*, Dr. Horace Hummel, a former LCA clergyman at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, has been defending a stance similar to Bohlmann's. Hummel's articles should be read. Bohlmann's book is available from Concordia Publishing House at \$4.95.

D.P.S.

SHOULD THE CHURCH BAPTIZE CHILDREN OF NON-MEMBERS?

From time to time the church goes through emotional crises of reform when she deplores her own worldliness, lack of spirituality, and

her own godlessness. The solution often posed is to cut down church membership to a cadre of really committed persons. This theme can be found in the early monasteries where those inside the walls had an implicit better righteousness than those outside. During the period of Protestant Pietism little churches (*ecclesiolae*) were established within the larger and supposedly unregenerate congregations. The non-denominational Church of the Savior in Washington, D. C., has severe membership requirements in order to insure an elite, hard-working congregation.

One of the causes for this supposed lack of spirituality in the Christian congregation is the indiscriminate use of infant baptism. If the level of spirituality is to be higher in the church, then parents of children to be baptized must be examined to see if they are really believers. Children of non-believers or less than fully committed Christians would have to be refused baptism. In some Lutheran churches, the rite is so emphatically directed at what sponsors and parents are going to do that the child becomes incidental.

The motives of pastors who so scrutinize both parents and sponsors cannot be questioned. The pastor does have the responsibility to do all that is humanly possible to assure that what is given in baptism is further nourished. But the problem remains whether a pastor can refuse to baptize a child whose parents or sponsors do not meet his standards or those adopted by the local congregation.

I think that it is to be made clear that no congregational rules can supercede or annul what Jesus Himself says. The Church of the Savior in Washington might be admired by those of us who have sluggish congregations, but no church has the right to keep out those whom God wants. Legalism is made a substitute for the joyful acceptance of the Gospel. The attitude of Jesus to children is obviously indiscriminate. We are never told who those mothers were who brought the children to Jesus. As in most cases, they probably had a less than satisfactory attitude of what a blessing from Him really meant. When the disciples were arguing, Jesus simply took a child and put him in the middle. No reference is made to the child's parents or religious training. On Palm Sunday there is the pericope of the children spontaneously singing.

Every pastor in preparing for the baptism of a child uses the time with the parents to strengthen their faith or in the case of non-members to create it. But there is no adequate reason to refuse to baptize the children of non-members when requested. When non-members want to use this ceremony to mock God and His sacrament, then a pastor must refuse on the basis of conscience. God cannot be deliberately and knowingly made an object of public ridicule by His church. This does not mean that the church can baptize children where the parents have not requested it or at least given permission. The home is established by the will of God and is protected by the commandments. The Gospel is not to be spread by breaking the Law. Both Law and Gospel reveal God's will. Still in those cases where the pastor is requested to baptize children of non-members, he should not refuse. The question of which child will be given

a Christian education and which is not can never be known with certainty. Never should the impression be given that the validity of baptism rests on what the child will later learn. Baptism is itself the word of God and its validity does not rest on what happens later. Certainly the full effect of Baptism will rest on what later happens. The prayers of the church make this clear.

There is no reason to think that the church will be "purer" if we baptize less children. Can the church ever be pure in the sense that the reform minded desire? Isn't this a confusion between the church militant and triumphant? The safest course before the church is to baptize children, because Jesus did say something about letting little children come to him. Not even the zeal of well meaning Christians should prevent us from doing this.

D.P.S.

RUMBLINGS FROM BAVARIA

Another blow against the state related German Lutheran Churches (*Volkskirche*) was dealt by the *Landesjugendkonvent* of Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria. A meeting held in January of this year in Rummelsberg passed a resolution dealing with the following matters: women should be allowed to assume the pastoral office; the laity should be empowered to celebrate Holy Communion; infant baptism should be no guarantee of church membership and should not be considered as making its recipients members of the church; pastors should be relieved of administrative duties associated with the state; and congregations should have the power to choose and dispose their own pastors. This last resolution would permit congregations to dispose of pastors who no longer preached according to the Scriptures.

This resolution was undoubtedly passed out of the frustration that many Lutherans have within the state related churches where the congregations are regarded merely as tools of a larger administration. In this system, pastors are appointed for the people and not by the people. Congregations have virtually no control over themselves. Some of these suggestions are worthwhile. Ordaining women, denying the validity of infant baptism and letting lay people celebrate Holy Communion will hardly help the situation. Perhaps these beleaguered Christians feel that a pious layman or laywoman would be an improvement over a pastor without any biblical or confessional commitment. In any event they have our sympathy.

D.P.S.