



THE SPRINGFIELDER

January 1975
Volume 39, Number 1

The Descent Into Hell

GOTTHILF DOEHLER

This essay was read by the Reverend Gotthilf Doepler, pastor of Schoenfeld-Zschopau, (German Democratic Republic) on May 1973 in East Berlin before the General Pastoral Conference of the "Vereinigung selbstaendiger ev. luth. Kirchen in der DDR," consisting of the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church and Evangelical Lutheran Free Church. The essay was published in German in LUTHERISCHER RUNDBLICK, volume 21, number 4 (1973), pp. 210-230. It was translated and annotated by Reverend Walter C. Daib.

I. THE OLDEST WALL AROUND THE OLD FORTRESS: THE APOSTLES CREED AND THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES have been abandoned as God's error. Word, for some time now in the territorial churches surround us. Instead, false teachers have more and more been placed in positions of authority on the faculties of theology and in church administration. This same process of change has now been applied to the Apostles' Creed, the oldest creed of Christendom, in the same fashion as was done during the breakdown of Christian doctrine at the turn of the century, with this difference only, that this time uncertainty has been generated among average church people. If Holy Scripture has been considered the "Mighty Fortress" then the Apostles' Creed has heretofore served as the inner and most ancient wall around the "Mighty Fortress." Please note: no outside enemy has launched an attack against this ancient bastion, the Creed, and, in addition, the Creed, as well as the other revered symbols belong in some theoretical sense to the "stock-in-trade" of the churches surrounding us. But the thinking of those living under the Creed's protection, it has lost its real importance, since Holy Scripture itself has for some time now been in the process of being dismantled piece by piece. Where Holy Scripture no more serves as a secure place of refuge, one no longer needs anything to protect and defend it. Where the Bible itself is being destroyed, all measures to prevent its destruction are an illusion. For that kind of Christendom creeds are merely remnants of an older age.

Here in Europe the process of changing the Apostles' Creed began already in the last century, but now in the accelerated pace of our century, it has rapidly gathered momentum. The Creed was changed and altered first in Great Britain, then in Norway, and in the 1960's also in Denmark. Since 1966 an inter-confessional commission has been dealing with these matters in the German-speaking countries of Europe. It bears the simple name: "Arbeitsgemeinschaft fuer liturgische Texte des deutschen Sprachgebietes" (Working-group for Liturgical Texts in the German Language Area), abbreviated AL. It has the task of finding a common wording for the traditional part of the worship service. Representatives of the churches in Austria, the Federal German Republic, and the German Democratic Republic,

well as the German-speaking churches in France, Luxembourg and Switzerland are members of this committee.¹

The aim of this working group, according to *Der Sonntag*, is "to harmonize the liturgical texts of the Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, the Free Churches [not the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) and the Association of Independent Lutheran Churches in the German Democratic Republic] and the Evangelical Churches of various confessional standing."² Between 1968 and 1970 the common text of the Apostles' Creed with which we shall concern ourselves was worked out by this group.³

The first of the three so-called ecumenical creeds, the well-known Second Chief Part of our Lutheran Catechism, bears the name "Apostles' Creed," which points to its origin in the very early beginnings of the Christian Church. Even though it was not composed by the apostles, it deserves the name, nevertheless, because it is a short compendium of apostolic teaching, put together almost entirely from actual words and phrases of Holy Scripture. Moreover, its origin reaches back in fact to the later apostolic (Johannine) time. In its main features it was the baptismal creed of the ancient church. It contains a confession of faith in the Triune God and His great historic deeds of salvation, which it recounts in bold strokes of lapidary brevity. The content of the Apostles' Creed corresponds to the missionary proclamation of apostolic times about which Luke in particular informs us. Throughout the Middle Ages the Apostles' Creed was central in the task of Christian instruction; whatever existed of Christian understanding depended upon it and the Lord's Prayer. Luther then gave to the church his wonderfully deep explanation of it. Bonwetsch once said, "The Apostles' Creed looks back upon a royal history."

Primarily we are concerned here with the words "descended into hell" in the Second Article. In its place the ALT version substituted the words "went down to the realm of the dead" as more nearly corresponding to the conception of modern man. This formulation was introduced already in Denmark in 1960. Here the ALT has reluctantly admitted that this is not a translation from the Latin into German, but a modern exegetical explanation and interpretation; in plain words, the text has been changed.¹

For the church the issue here is not a matter of linguistic adaptation but of dogma. The new version "descended into the realm of the dead" corresponds neither to the New Testament nor to the teaching of the Lutheran Church concerning the descent into hell. We are here confronted with—we say it frankly—a decisive dissolution of church dogma. He who at first was merely surprised at the words of the new translation will become convinced that the above assessment is true, when he reads in its entirety the explanation of ALT which its members gave for their changes.

A preliminary observation: the Lutheran confessions defend themselves against Rome on the one hand, but also, particularly in the Formula of Concord, against Zurich and Geneva. The doctrine presented in the ALT commentary on the creedal text-changes corresponds almost exactly to the standpoint of the old-Reformed doc-

trine on this question and also of the newer Calvinistic and rationalistic teachers of the church. Who is surprised at this? Only a person who is unaware that the so-called Ecumenical Movement has in large measure been infiltrated by Reformed false doctrine, both old and new, as has also been true for some time now of the Lutheran World Federation. It is no accident that the ecumenical organizations, and also the LWF, have their headquarters in Geneva. Everyone knows that from this starting point of Reformed orientation unmitigated modernism has ceaselessly continued its advance. This advance arouses concern only when the small group of faithful Lutherans becomes painfully concerned lest it "miss the boat" with this "world-wide Christianity" which might better be called "world-conformed Christianity," even in liturgical matters.⁵ How dangerous this can become in the field of liturgy—which is often mistakenly looked upon as an *adiaphoron*—is shown in this debate about the Apostles' Creed. Let this controversy serve to our profit. We ought to make use of this debate to think through anew the comforting doctrine of the Lord's descent into hell. Perhaps the increased attention which has been directed by the new text to the old confession of Christendom is good and salutary for the Lutheran Church. We are in fact compelled from without to think through anew, not only the many idiomatic expressions, but more particularly the central doctrines of the Christian faith, including the exaltation and descent into hell of our Lord. Just recall how in Norway in the 1950's the great controversy regarding the punishment of hell sharpened the consciences of the faithful in the land. Gustav Plitt in his *Grundriss der Symbolik* expresses this point quite ably: "The old church developed the content of its faith in order to deepen the understanding of its adherents . . . as well as to respond to the errors and attacks from non-Christians. The church was confronted with doctrinal battles, which benefited her when she fought faithfully, by bringing her to a deeper understanding of those doctrines which were attacked by error. This new understanding she set down in sharply defined formulas, which became a symbol, a sign of recognition for those who remained with the truth of the church and a sign of distinction between themselves and those who clung to error."⁶

II. OLD AND NEW THEORIES OF THE DESCENT

It is evident that there have been differences of opinion concerning the dogma of the descent into hell from ancient times, always when the testimony of the Scriptures concerning it was neglected, changed, or not understood. Human reason cannot plumb this doctrine. But the words of Scripture to which the received text of the creed goes back should be left standing and be correctly heeded in their context through the Holy Spirit.

One party understands the statement in a purely metaphorical way, as a figure of speech concerning the tortures which Christ suffered in his soul. The expression "descended into hell" signifies merely the deepest degradation of Christ, his deepest and most painful suffering in spirit in Gethsemane and on the cross—or in his death and burial. That is precisely the view of Calvin and of the old

Reformed dogmaticians in general, that the descent into hell is a symbolic presentation of the pains of hell which Jesus suffered on the cross and already in Gethsemane. Thus Rufinus, Bucer, Beza, and Socinus identified the descent into hell with the burial of Christ. Others again have explained the descent into hell metonymically, i.e., as the power of the death of Christ as it was exerted upon the dead; this in contrast to the Scriptural orthodox view that Christ really descended to the place (Greek, *pou*) of the damned. Even those who represent the view that Christ really and factually descended ("went to") still differ widely in their opinions. Many claim that only the soul of Christ descended while his body lay lifeless in the grave (thus Thomas Aquinas and the Thomists). What was the purpose of the descent? Some predicate a suffering of Christ in hell and thus include it in the state of humiliation. Others claim that Christ descended in order to proclaim the Gospel as a saving message in the realm of the dead to the damned (including, significantly, Marcion and Origen). Many teach a continually functioning preaching office in the underworld until the day of judgment as instituted by Christ. This teaching is common in "soft" modern Christianity. Still others have throughout many centuries maintained that the purpose of the descent into hell was to redeem the patriarchs of the Old Testament from the *limbus patrum* (so the *Catechismus Romanus*). Finally, we ought to mention also those who totally ignore this doctrine, for example, the Scotists, the Methodists, the Mennonites, and others who omit this in the Apostles Creed. With so many different views of the doctrine of the descent of our Lord into hell we must, if we wish to arrive at an objective factual result, hold fast to the exact wording of the pertinent Bible passages and to the analogy of Scripture and of faith according to Romans 12:7.

III. CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HELL IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH AND ITS CREEDS

In view of the polychrome palette of doctrinal views it might be well to show first of all the historicity and age of the confessional statement "descended into hell" in order to disprove the view of those who, because they think that this phrase got into the Apostles' Creed, as it were, by accident, either omit it altogether or tend to explain it metaphorically or rationalistically. For them it is not of any importance in the creed to differentiate in the state of humiliation something besides the suffering, death, and burial. It is necessary to show here in a convincing historical proof that the descent into hell, since it is taught in Scripture, has always been confessed and taught by the church, in so far as the pure marks of the one holy Church (*notae purae*) never totally disappeared. Without departing from the framework of our essay we can answer the question, was this doctrine always confessed and taught by the church, with a decisive "yes."

It is true that the words "descended into hell" are missing from some of the older manuscripts of the creed. They are missing in the Old Roman and the Oriental symbols, as every current critical edition of the confessional writings will show. However, when one examines the scholarly creedal investigations (Hahn, Caspari and Katten-

busch), one notices quite soon that this phenomenon is of much less importance than one may at first believe. With reference to documents, Christ's descent is found in the formula of the Fourth Synod of Sirmium (359 A.D.), as well as in the formula of the Synod of Nike in Thrace (359 A.D.) and in that of Constantinople (360 A.D.) and in the baptismal creed of Aquileia (about 400 A.D.). In addition, it is found in the exposition of the creed by Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers (sixth century), in the creed of the Fourth Council of Toledo (633 A.D.), likewise in all three formulations of the Gallican Sacramentary (seventh century). Compare the voluminous collection of documents in August Hahn, *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der Alten Kirche*.¹ Even though the descent into hell, as well as other parts of the Apostles Creed, such as "creator of heaven and earth," "catholic," "communion of saints," and "eternal life" do not occur in all variants of the creed, yet that is not a proof that these parts were received into the faith-consciousness of the Christian Church much later. The explanation is rather this, that it was necessary to explain individual sentences of the baptismal creed over against current heresies. The general Christian baptismal creed, which at times because of persecution was a part of the "secret discipline," was everywhere in its general meaning the same in the older church, but for a long time was handed down in many congregations with small variations.

Even though one assumes that the descent into hell was incorporated into the Apostles' Creed at a later point in time, nevertheless the doctrine concerning it was represented in the church from the beginning. Augustine (died 430 A.D.) testifies: "The truth of this article is fixed beyond all controversy." For that reason he asks in his ninety-ninth epistle: "Who but an unbeliever will deny that Christ was in hell?" From such statements one realizes that this point of doctrine by no means took the last place in the creed of Christians, even though not all versions of the creed contain it. But other versions contained it, from which it was finally received into the *textus receptus* of the creed. It is worth noting in this connection that Cyril of Jerusalem (who died 386 A.D.) expressly deals with the descent into hell in his *Catecheses* which date from his younger years. Also Irenaeus (170 A.D.), Clement of Alexandria (200 A.D.), and Tertullian (200 A.D.) write about the descent into hell and distinguish it from the suffering, death, and burial of Christ. This article is missing in the Nicene Creed but not in the Athanasian (*quicunque*). As a result of his thorough investigation of the creeds F. Kattenbusch writes: "The descent into hell was on the one hand not such a remarkable fact or concept for the old church as it is for the modern church. On the other hand it had a very significant practical range in the faith of the ancient church. Both must be emphasized. In the final analysis, however, it must be emphasized that its history does not begin there where we first meet this teaching in the creed, but one could almost say that its history is completed there. There is no evidence of controversies or uncleanness with respect to the descent into hell in various formulations."² According to all this testimony, the assumption that the doctrine of the descent into hell

arose late and was then inserted into the Apostles' Creed must be rejected. The doctrine could not "arise," since the doctrine was already contained in the Scripture. But it could in the course of time be presented from Scripture in a clearer, plainer, more detailed and more precise manner.

IV. THE TRIUMPHANT DESCENT OF HIM WHO WAS MADE ALIVE IN THE GRAVE

The Apostles' Creed here as elsewhere presents a specific doctrine in a few words without mentioning any Scripture proof. Let us cast some light first of all on the question which is certainly of immediate concern to us: What is the specific content of this teaching according to the conviction of the Christian Church as cleansed in the Reformation? A. Hoenecke, following the old Lutheran dogmaticians, in his *Dogmatik* formulates its content thus:

The state of exaltation has four steps and they are: the descent into hell, the resurrection, the ascension, the sitting at the right hand of God . . . The descent into hell is a real descent into the *pou damnatorum* [the place of the damned] according to his exalted corporality . . . The *sedes classica* [the chief exposition of it in the Bible] is in 1 Peter 3: 18-19. According to this Scripture passage it is the first step of the exaltation, for while verse 19 speaks of the descent, verse 21 speaks of the resurrection and verse 22 of the ascension. The passage then relates the following sequence of events: descent, resurrection, ascension . . . According to 1 Peter 3: 19, the descent is preceded by the vivification, which is to be distinguished from the resurrection as a step in the exaltation. The resurrection is the visible coming forth from the grave of Him who was made alive and the manifestation on earth of Him who was exalted. Usually we designate the one as the external resurrection and separate from it the vivification as the internal resurrection . . . The essence of the descent, according to 1 Peter 3: 18-19, consists in this that the Lord in His glorified corporality actually went down to the abode of the damned, the *pou damnatorum*."

We immediately ask: is it scriptural on the basis of this striking proof-text to understand the descent of Christ metaphorically, or as a figure of speech, as though the words "descended into hell" designate the deepest humiliation of Christ, His most severe anguish or soul in Gethsemane and on the cross? This is the claim of the Calvinists, especially of the large Westminster Catechism.¹⁰ But it is inexplicable how one can arrive at this conclusion when in the creed itself the descent follows the burial and is clearly distinguished from the suffering and death and is confessed as a separate article of doctrine. Besides, not only the creed but Scripture itself in so many words maintains this order of events and distinguishes the descent from the suffering of Christ. This brings us to the consideration of Scriptural proof, and we are compelled to take seriously the text cited by Hoenecke.

Every reader of 1 Peter 3: 18-20 must admit that the words,

"He was put to death physically but made alive spiritually, and in his spiritual existence he went and preached to the imprisoned spirits" (TEV), not only distinguish the descent from His suffering, but also teach that the descent first took place after His being killed and after His vivification. In the Greek text this becomes particularly evident, because there co-ordinated participles are used, which describe not a simultaneous but a progressive action—different acts; Christ suffered or performed one after the other: having been put to death, having been made alive, having gone, *thanatōtheis*, *zōopoiētheis*, *poreutheis*. The descent, accordingly, as the terms used by Hoenecke show, is the first act of the vivified Lord in the state of exaltation, immediately before the external resurrection with the opening of the grave. In fact, it is a witnessing of the whole Christ, body and soul, before the damned, and naturally also before the evil spirits, to their judgment, as the Peter passage indicates in its context. This action is the proof of the royal glory into which Christ had now entered also according to His human nature. Christ descends as Victor, as the Triumphant One into hell with the keys of hell and death in His hand. (In our opinion the phrase from Rev. 1:18 is not a tautology but expresses two different concepts).

If one wished to understand the descent into hell (which in the Peter passage is expressly called a going to the imprisoned spirits) as spiritual suffering or something like it, some very curious results would follow. One would have to make Christ's spiritual suffering identical with his going to and preaching to the imprisoned spirits. It would furthermore mean that after Christ had once died, had once been buried, and had once been made alive, he would have to suffer again. It ought to be clear to everyone that the order of events in the Apostles Creed is strictly scriptural and that the "he went" in Scripture and the "he descended" in the creed are not a metaphorical but a real and true descent into hell and are taught as such.

Before we enter upon a detailed consideration of the Scripture passage, we want to listen again to our opponents, ALT, who do not or will not see it that way. The commentary furnished by this working group has come up with some real exegetical curiosities. According to them Christ must have, after his vivification, once again "experienced a complete death as physical destruction of his earthly existence"—"as total deprivation of power and total passivity." Thus argues Nagel in his commentary on the words "descended into the realm of the dead." That idea is exactly what Socinus (*nomen omen*) expressed in slightly different words in his superficial rationalistic view of the descent (with which most Reformed theologians unfortunately agreed), namely, that the descent of Christ into hell denoted only the condition of Christ after His death. ("Descensus Christi ad inferos aliud nihil significat, quam statum Christi post mortem.") Naturally, Socinus held that Jesus never existed as God-man. Does Nagel want to join the Reformed, despite the fact that the word "Christ" is the subject of the clause, in denying a divine-human act and thus separate the man Jesus from the eternal Son of God? Nagel claims that the part of the creed formerly designated as "the descent into hell" means something entirely different from what the words say. It

means "the full endurance of the dominion of the anti-godly powers in the destruction of his earthly existence. All of this the Crucified took upon himself and thus endured the full terror of death."¹¹ If one listens to the Scripture texts it should become clear to everyone that we are here dealing with an act of violence committed by man's own thoughts upon, not only the creed, but also the testimony of Scripture.

One cannot harmonize the ideas expressed above with the words which Christ spoke on the cross, familiar to all of us. First of all, there is His word, "It is finished!" If it is finished, then Jesus no longer has to endure "the domination of the anti-godly powers." Furthermore, one cannot harmonize these ideas with another word from the cross, "Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit." The soul of Christ was not in the realm of the dead, there to endure "the full terror of death," but in the hands of His Father. Finally, the words, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise," negates those ideas. According to this word Jesus was not in the realm of the dead after his death, not in a condition of "total powerlessness and passivity," but immediately and in person in a condition of highest bliss. Christ did not descend to the realm of the dead in order that there he might in some form or other suffer more, but the very opposite, as the Peter passage teaches in its context. Christ descends to hell as Victor, as the Triumphant One, in order, as it were, to take into his possession the keys of hell and death, to disarm the principalities, powers, and dominions, to make a show of them openly, and to organize a triumphant procession with them as captives (Col. 2:15), to take captivity captive (Ps. 68:18), to set the seal on man's redemption from hell and his salvation from death, to be a poison for death and a plague for hell (Hos. 13:14), in short, to show Himself as Victor and Conqueror of death, Satan, and hell. The simple fact, moreover, that Peter in his first letter, to which we will return, places the descent into hell *after* the vivification is a sufficient proof that the descent of Christ was by no means identical with "the destruction of his earthly existence" nor with "the full experience of death" nor with the "full terror of death." To this must be added that "the full experience of death as the destruction of his earthly existence" can in no way be harmonized with what the Scripture says elsewhere about the descent into hell, namely, that Christ in his descent into hell led captivity captive. Luther connects this act of Christ with His triumph over Satan, as he does in his special Torgau sermon of 1533, which is cited in Article IX of the Formula of Concord.

Nor can we ignore a further very direct testimony of Scripture, namely Ephesians 4:8 f.: "As the Scripture says [Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 in an emphatic New Testament application, as we see from the past tense of the verb "give"], 'When He went up to the very heights He took many captives with him; he gave gifts to men.' Now what does 'He went up' mean? It means that first He came down—that is, down to the lower depths of the earth. So He who came down is the same one who went up, above and beyond the heavens, to fill the whole universe with His presence" (TEV). We must in verse 9 also observe the exact order of events, the descent into hell before the ascension. The Biblical expression, "lower depths of the earth," with

its many Old Testament parallels can never designate the earth itself, as though Paul meant the incarnation of Christ, but always something which lies beyond it, *sheol* and *gehenna*. Paul wants to show the kind of victory which would create the environment for the work of the church and the gifts given to men, the teachers of the Gospel. For that purpose, after the saving sacrificial death, the triumphant procession and its prelude, the descent into hell, took place. The parallel passage in Col. 2:15 pictures the event in an exceptionally graphic way.

With such Scriptural presuppositions, how can one still manage to speak of the descent into hell as "the complete destruction of Christ's earthly existence," whatever that might mean beyond the simple word "dead" in the creed? The new Apostles Creed has not given "the words of the text their real value" as their intention proclaimed, but has in its counter-proposal of "descended to the realm of the dead" banished "What was really meant" from the creed. Wherever this new version is recited, there is no descent into hell in the creed, because a substitution of something entirely different has been made. At this point in the creed there is no longer a victory of Christ over Satan but at most a victory of Satan over Christ. The devil has accomplished much in these our times. We knew that long ago; but now the devil has even seen to it that the only reference to him and his realm has disappeared from the creed. Thereby the doctrine of the descent into hell is pushed aside in the faith-consciousness of those congregations who have permitted the new text to be imposed upon them, for this teaching will not be able to maintain itself or be found in the catechisms. This affects congregations in Saxony and elsewhere which, at least in the liturgical recitation of the creed in public worship, confessed the doctrine of the descent into hell and, despite everything, would like to remain true to the Lutheran Confessions. Under certain circumstances they knew that the descent into hell is taught in Article III of the Augsburg Confession and is also dealt with extensively in a special Article (IX) of the Formula of Concord (in close connection with the article (VIII) which deals with the Person of Christ as God and man). The new version has not "given the real meaning" of the text. Rather, the teaching of the old Reformed dogmatics—if not a much more radical denial—has been "clothed in the usage of today" and cleverly "pulled over the eyes" of Lutheran-oriented German-speaking congregations.

In an Easter issue of the Saxon Church periodical *Der Sonntag* the new version of the Creed is used as the basis for a devotion, "Living Easter Witness," written for Lutheran congregations, which unfortunately turns out to contain ideas ranging from Reformed to Roman Catholic.¹² At any rate, it has become clear how great an influence Reformed theology has achieved in all areas of the church as the appointed "doorman," as it were, for still further departure from the truth. Without investigating the exact exegetical results in Lutheran exegesis and dogmatics up to our day, many theological writers find the Reformed understanding of any doctrine much more sympathetic (because it conforms more to our fleshly reason) than one which sticks close to the text like the Lutheran. The theological

lecturer, Dr. Gert Wendelhorn, in the widely read periodical *Neue Zeit* has hit the nail on the head when he says: "Confessional Lutheran theology is to be found only in remnants and exists today in a defensive position as 'outsiders.'" ¹² Many Lutherans, we have noticed, are now fearful about the new text of the Apostles' Creed. But actually we should have been deeply fearful long ago about the change in attitude toward Holy Scripture which has taken place in the churches which surround us. For this dethronement of the divine Word as the norm of the faith-life is, in the final analysis, a much greater calamity and the cause of the other. It is true, however, that we become more conscious of Scripture in the act of confessing our faith, because the creed is a brief condensation of Scripture and it is part of the liturgy in public worship.

V. EXCURSUS REGARDING SYMBOLICS AND THE EXEGESIS OF 1 PETER 3

At this point we shall add to what we have stated previously only the most necessary remarks concerning (A) the position of the Lutheran Confessions and (B) the proper exegetical treatment of the 1 Peter passage.

A. Our Confessions "Set the Switch" for the Doctrine of the Person of Christ.

We have already mentioned various matters from Article IX of the Formula and other matters will be mentioned later. As a silent presupposition to our remarks, there is the protest of the Augustana's Article III against the tearing apart (or the mixing) of the divine and human natures of Christ, which most of us know almost by heart. But it is certainly proper to bring to the reader's attention the words of Article VIII of the Formula, which apply the Scripture doctrine of the undivided person of Christ to the steps of the humiliation and exaltation which were the background of the quotation from Hoenecke. In paragraph 8 of the Epitome we read: "Therefore we also believe, teach, and confess that it was not a plain, ordinary, mere man who for us suffered, died, was buried, descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and was exalted to the majesty and omnipotent power of God, but a man whose human nature has such a profound and ineffable union and communion with the Son of God that it has become one person with him."¹³ With the fathers we Lutheran Christians therefore believe, teach, and joyfully confess as follows:

According to the personal union he always possessed this majesty. But in the state of his humiliation he dispensed with it . . . for he did not always disclose this majesty, but only when it pleased him. Finally, after his resurrection he laid aside completely the form of a slave (not the human nature) and was established in the full use, revelation, and manifestation of his divine majesty. Thus he entered into his glory in such a way that now not only as God, but also as man, he knows all things, is present to all creatures, and has all things in heaven and on earth and under the earth beneath his feet and in his hands, as

he himself testifies, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," and, as St. Paul states, he ascended "far above all the heavens that he might fill all things."¹⁵

B. *Exegetical and Philological Clarifications of 1 Peter 3: 18-20.*

1. Concerning *zōpoiētheis de pneumati* we note, first of all, that this *pneumati* can designate only the unchangeably glorified and in no way spatially or temporally bound corporality of Jesus Christ; this corporality, despite its infinite superiority, does furnish a model for the future "spiritual" body which will be ours according to 1 Corinthians 15: 46ff. and Philippians 3:21.

2. Concerning *en hō* (in the body no longer limited by this-worldly or fleshly conditions) . . . *poreutheis ekēryxen*, we note that Christ showed himself "in this"—his preaching was done in word and deed in a bodily, physical presence. The question is: which word did He preach? Was it possibly the Gospel of forgiveness, in order to save souls in hell? The word *kēryssein* (to step forward with the message of a herald) is in itself a *vox media*, a neutral term, which, in addition to the preaching of salvation, can also refer to a proclamation which is exclusively law, as Romans 2:21 (with its message, "Do not steal") shows. Whether this usage can be established in the Gospels in regard to Christ does not affect the fact that it is in itself an ambivalent term. More than one hundred and twenty years ago Gottfried Thomasius in his *Christi Person und Werk* already showed in a convincing and versatile way that in this case a preaching of the Gospel is excluded.¹⁶ This case is demonstrated by means of the connection between the generation of the Flood era, which did not listen to Noah's preaching, and the despisers of the present preacher of repentance and salvation; neither of the generations will escape the final judgment. In view of the analogy of Scripture one must marvel at the constant and convulsive quoting of chapter 4:6, "that is why the Good News was also preached to the dead" (TEV). In previous chapters, as well as in the verses 1-6 of chapter 4, the persons who are being comforted with the prospect of the glorious final victory, which despite the circumstances of outward defeat is certain for them, are Christians and not unbelievers. Similar comfort is dispensed in 2 Thessalonians 1: 5-10 and Hebrews 11:7.

3. The phrase *tois en phylakē pneumasin . . . apeithēsin pote*, elicits this comment: *phylakē* is not a good place, but the habitation of the devil, as one can see from Revelation. Simply and unconcernedly to make *phylakē* a synonym of the Hebrew *sheol*, with the sense of the condition of being dead, that is really making black white. It is clear that with death our bodies disintegrate, as we can see and as Scriptures testify, but the *ruach*, the *pneuma*, remains in existence according to Scripture (something already plain and clear in Ecclesiastes 12:7) and it goes immediately to its proper place (Heb. 9:27). Here *phylakē* denotes the place of torture in which the consciousness of their rejection of Noah's preaching evidently still accompanied those now long dead spirits. The patriarch had presented to them the coming salvation in one fashion or another, whether we can conceive of it or not. Now He who from the beginning had

been promised to them stands before them in the flesh, but for them He is only the Judge and in this unique confrontation is his own precursor with respect to that final verdict on Judgment Day.

One should not overlook the context of the whole passage from verse 18 on ("For Christ himself died for you, once and for all he died for sins, a good man for bad men, in order to lead you to God," TEV), which is parenetic; its purpose is to comfort the congregations which had come under the first persecutions. Those who are in peril, particularly the believing slaves, are to comfort themselves with the Gospel promise of the baptismal waters, which will carry them aloft as the waters of the Flood carried the ark aloft, being made certain in faith of their claim and covenant of grace, behind which stands the infinitely glorified Substitute (v. 21 f.). It is an additional comfort to them that in the face of the onrushing storm-waves of rejection and abuse, the Holy Spirit reports the descent of Christ to hell, the appearance of the One who was exalted above all things to these notorious rejectors of former days. That act too is supposed to serve as a guarantee that, in Christ alone and without contradiction, the persecuted Christians have been given the goodly inheritance and that the victory will belong to every believer who endures suffering patiently.

Regarding *sheol* and *gehenna* as the two Hebrew expressions (they were current also in Aramaic) which are to be considered as the background for *phylakē*, only *sheol* comes into consideration in those cases where the time *before* Judgment Day is referred to. Nevertheless, if the reference is strictly to unbelievers, *hades* (the usual Greek rendering of *sheol*) does not have an ambivalent sense, but only the negative sense, as, for example, in Revelation 20:13 compared with Luke 16:23. As is demonstrated by the context, that meaning matches the *phylakē* used here. What is determinative for the interpretation of a word in the congregation of God is not all kinds of studies of the environment, be it near or far, in the manner of the "history of religions" school. What is determinative is the linguistic usage of the New Testament, seen against the background of the Old Testament, which shows what the language of the Holy Spirit is. Do we foist upon the terms "heaven" and "hell" the Babylonian-Ptolomaic "three-story universe," as do the majority in post-prophetic Jewry and many others? Our very carefully defined "*pou damnatorum*" has nothing to do with that concept, as little as it did for the fathers who followed Luther. On the contrary, we call as a witness against every such unlutheran misconstruction Ernst Lerle, D. theol., D. phil., rector of our Ev. Luth. Free Church Seminary. In particular we call attention to his latest publication, *Das Weltbild der Bibel*, which shows the absurdity of Bultmann's accusation of a "three-story universe" as being essential for the "legitimate religion" not only of the New Testament but particularly of the Old Testament.¹⁷

With respect to the exegetes, the most careful exegesis of the whole passage, 1 Peter 3:19-4:6, which takes into consideration all interpretations up to 1912, is to be found on pages 140-203 of Georg Stoeckhardt's commentary on 1 Peter.¹⁸ As far as we know no later exegete has advanced beyond it. Schlatter, for instance, slides into error; Wohlenberg, who otherwise deserves our recognition,

becomes confused toward the end. Windisch, as a decided proponent of the "history of religions" school, does not rise above the evil confusion of myths.¹⁹ But this approach is ruled out (aside from a difference of levels) by the peculiar content of the preaching by Christ in this instance (exclusively law).

From the starting-point of an exegesis which stayed close to the text, Article IX of the Formula of Concord continued to have its effect in the following decades and supports the testimony for the truth also today. We can still agree with the opinion of the Wittenberg faculty in 1595 which said: "Because the article concerning the descent into hell is placed in the creed after the death and burial and before the resurrection, we believe, teach, and confess that because of the undeniable order of articles of our Christian faith, Christ, after he had died and was buried, truly descended to hell, exactly as the letter of this article declares, and therefore the said descent into hell is certainly an article of faith."²⁰ Skipping from 1595 to 1973, we compare what the Wittenbergers said with what Ingo Klaer says in words which have a different purpose but come to the same conclusion.

In the text of the Second Article as used by us up to now, the relative clause has a series of participles: born . . . , suffered . . . , dead and buried, descended . . . , resurrected, sitting at the right hand of God. The new formulation interrupts the chain of participles at one place, so that it now reads: . . . resurrected . . . , ascended . . . , he sits at the right hand of God, the almighty Father. How shall we judge this change? . . . It is not merely a matter of literary style. Also in the original Latin text the chain of participles is interrupted, but already three lines previous. A literal translation of the Latin text reads: "And in Jesus Christ his only (*unicum*) Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, and buried, (who) descended to hell, on the third day arose from the dead, ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of God, the almighty Father, from where he will come to judge the living and the dead." . . . The chain of passive participles describes throughout processes which Jesus endured, in which he was not active but passive. The first interval of his life's journey is described as a way of suffering up to his being killed and buried. But then there is a change in the situation. The chain of passive participles is relieved by active verb-forms. It is thereby made evident that, after the suffering, the way of dominance, of victory, of exaltation begins. He who up till then was the obediently suffering servant of God, now goes his way as Lord and takes his place beside God; as Lord and Judge he will come from there in order to judge all men. His first act of victory and dominance is the descent into hell; now even the place of final damnation stands under his dominion.²¹

VI. A NECESSARY REMINDER FROM ARTICLE IX OF THE
 FORMULA AGAINST HUMAN REASON: COMFORT OF
 FAITH THROUGH PURE DOCTRINE

The Lutheran Church declared its understanding of the descent into hell in Article IX of the Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration) in the words: "Hence we let matters rest on the simple statement of our Christian Creed, to which Dr. Luther directs us in the sermon that he held in the castle at Torgau in the year 1536, 'I believe in the Lord Christ, God's Son, who died, was buried, and descended into hell.' Herein the burial and the descent into hell are differentiated as distinct articles, and we simply believe that after the burial the entire person, God and man, descended into hell, conquered the devil, destroyed hell's power, and took from the devil all his might."²² That is exactly and remains exactly our confession of faith. In the territorial churches it was changed by the decision of an administrative body of the church. But a confession of faith cannot be changed by the machinations of a church leadership which today is everywhere intent upon the pseudo-ecumenical church. Here we see another example of the fact that the Lutheran Confessions are acknowledged in a merely formal way in many of the churches which call themselves Lutheran. An excellent *Exposition of Luther's Small Catechism*, worked out eighty years ago on the basis of the old Dieterich Catechism (1613 in Latin, 1864 in German) by H. Ch. Schwan and still in use everywhere in the congregations of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in the DDR, has as Question 161: "What does Scripture teach about the descent of Christ to hell?" The answer is "That Christ, after he became alive, again showed himself to hell as conqueror and triumphed over all hellish foes." This is a sentence which shows what the orthodox believers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church really believe about the descent into hell. It cannot be emphasized often enough that, here as always, the principle "Scripture alone" must prevail. We cannot comprehend anything with our reason. "We must only believe and cling to the Word" is the statement of Formula IX. The ALT thought that this was not sufficient, that something new had to be stated about the dimensions of the death of Christ, while the Confession, following in the footsteps of the Reformer, warns: "We are not to concern ourselves with exalted and acute speculations about how this occurred. With our reason and five senses this article cannot be comprehended" (IX, 3).

To summarize everything, the issue is the comfort of faith. Satan thought that he had conquered Christ when he brought him to the cross and the grave, but Christ prevails over the "god-opposing powers," not only as unconquerable, but as actual victor over its dominion, and takes from them all power and might, even over their realm of hell. But the new version of the creed, according to the ALT and according to the published comments of its authors, says the direct opposite. "Descended to the realm of the dead" is from now on to signify that Christ endures the dominion of the god-opposing powers and is destroyed by them in his earthly existence. No, the actual situation is entirely different. Since the vivification neither devil, nor death, nor hell, nor realm of the dead, nor *hades* has power

over Christ, but rather he over them. And all who believe in Christ share in this power. For his victory, his triumph is by faith also our victory and triumph. Yes, this victory took place only for our sake. That is the glorious fact which grows out of the descent of Christ to hell. Through his descent into hell, hell is completely conquered and our liberation from hell is accomplished and guaranteed. We can therefore derive this comfort from this doctrine: Neither the devil nor all the "god-opposing powers" put together can bring us or anyone who believes in Christ into their power or harm us. There has rarely been a time in which the congregation has needed this comfort more than now, when through outward danger of destruction and subjection and unparalleled ecclesiastical confusion the "little time" of Revelation 20:7 seems to be indicated. In his renowned sermon at the Castle of Torgau (1533) Luther says: "That is the power and usefulness of this article, the reason for its happening, being preached and believed, namely, that Christ destroyed the power of hell and took away all power from the devil. If I have that, I have its real heart and meaning."²³ How simple these things really are!

Let us allow this study to serve the purpose of reminding us of the rich comfort of this doctrine, in order that we might come to a deeper Scripture-oriented understanding of this section of the Apostles' Creed which has been attacked by false doctrine. The Bible also speaks of our complete liberation from hell in Hebrews 2:14-15: "so that through his death he might destroy the devil, who has the power over death, and so set free those who were slaves all their lives because of their fear of death" (TEV). Of this victory the Old Testament already prophesied: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave, I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction" (Hos. 13:14; cf. also I Cor. 15: 54-57). In this Easter security and certainty Luther exults: "That is the chief thing, usefulness and power, which we gain from it, that neither hell nor devil can imprison or harm me or any who believes in him."²⁴

* * * * *

CLOSING OBSERVATIONS OF THE TRANSLATOR

What a difference between the triumphant stance, on the one hand, of Luther and the Lutheran Confessors and, on the other hand, the wishy-washy commentary of the ICET in *Prayers We Have in Common* (see footnote 4)! We should like to subject that commentary to a short critique.

1. "It is a difficult line to interpret," says the ICET commentary. Perhaps the difficulty arises from its mistranslation of the Latin text which it purports to translate. If the ICET had left the text with the traditional wording, there might indeed have been a difficulty for those who wish to understand the words metaphorically, or even more so for those who deny the existence of hell as a place of punishment. But there would be no difficulty for those whose ecumenical understanding of these words is not horizontal (with present-day Christendom) but vertical (with the church of past centuries, going back to the Apostolic times).

2. "Some have understood it . . . Others, following I Peter 3:19, have thought . . . While others have thought." These statements of the ICET commentary are typical of a theology which has no final authority and for which various opinions are of equal value. But for a Lutheran who accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the sole source and norm of all doctrine such an attitude cannot be anything but abhorrent.

3. "Since all of these contain the idea of going to the place of the dead, the Latin *ad inferna* is translated 'to the dead.'" This sentence of the ICET commentary virtually makes all of the above opinions cited above of equal worth. If a Lutheran congregation accepts this compromising and ambivalent formula, it is, in effect, denying that the understanding of the Lutheran Confessions concerning the descent into hell is ultimately and exclusively Scriptural.

It is difficult for me to understand how it could happen that *Contemporary Services for the Word* went out under the authority of the Inter-Lutheran Commission of Worship (and thus, at least tacitly, of the Missouri Synod's Commission on Worship). For in this booklet the text of the ICET version was reprinted *in toto*, including "descended to the dead." I know at least one Missouri Synod Lutheran congregation which inadvertantly participated during the four Sundays in Advent in this denial of the article of its faith confessed in Article IX of the Formula of Concord. It is not too difficult to understand how the other two church-bodies involved in the Inter-Lutheran Commission of Worship could sanction such a translation. It was Fortress Press, associated with the Lutheran Church in America, which published *Prayers We Have in Common*. Then, in *A New Look at the Apostles Creed*, published in 1969 by an affiliate of the American Lutheran Church, Augsburg Publishing House, there is a commentary by Juergen Moltmann on "descended into hell" which reads as follows:

Let us check a few facts to find out what is really meant here. The Synod of Sirmium in 359 first added this article to the Creed. The Syrian theologian Marcus of Arethusa proposed it. He intended it to mean that Jesus, Son of God, really died. In his suffering, crucifixion, and burial he actually experienced in himself the absolute pain of abandonment by God. Christ's descent into hell indicates the depth of his suffering. It does not mean a journey through the mythical kingdom of the separated souls. "Suffered-crucified-died": what really occurred there was Christ's entry into the hell of guilt, of pain, of death and beyond. Christ was not so divine that all of this had no effect upon him. He is divine precisely inasmuch as, despite all these hells, he became our brother. This was the original significance of the faith in Christ's descent into hell.²⁵

Having read Doehler's article we recognize the spirit that is speaking through Moltmann. We can no longer disregard the warnings of our European brethren. *Sapienti sat.*

FOOTNOTES

1. *Prayers We Have in Common* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 4, reports that a parallel organization for the English-speaking world called the "International Consultation on English Texts" (ICET) has existed since 1969.
2. *Der Sonntag: Gemeindeblatt der Evangelischen Lutherischen Landeskirche Sachsens*, XXVII, 15 (April 9, 1972), p. 3. The first result of the collaboration was the common text of the Lord's Prayer, which brought about some confusion by its discrepancy with the text of Luther's Small Catechism, even though no divine truth was affected.
3. The Apostles' Creed was one of the two texts published by ICET in 1970 in the first edition of *Prayers We Have in Common*.
4. The ICET publication *Prayers We Have in Common* substitutes "descended to the dead" for the accurate translation of the Latin text, "descended to hell." The ICET explains its action this way: "Line 8. This line is made a separate theological assertion, independent of the assertions of lines 7 and 9. It is a difficult line to interpret. Some have understood it as underlying the assertion of death. Others, following 1 Peter 3: 19, have thought of our Lord proclaiming his victory to the souls of the departed. While others have thought of our Lord going to battle with Satan, and in so doing guaranteeing the deliverance of the saints. Since all these contain the idea of going to the place of the dead, the Latin *ad inferna* is translated 'to the dead.' The figure of descent has been retained, since it is part of the total metaphor used in the creed."
5. In the Foreword of *Prayers We Have in Common*, the Joint Chairmen of the ICET say: "It is our earnest hope that all the texts now available will be found acceptable for use both in public worship and in private prayer and that they will make a modest contribution to the cause of Christian unity." This expresses the modern ecumenical attitude which sees a contribution to Christian unity in outward and visible expression and acts (intercommunion and use of the same words in prayers) despite theological differences which fundamentally divide Christians. The outward appearance of unity is a kind of plaster to hide the existing cracks in the structure.
6. (Leipzig: Deichert, 1888), p. 2.
7. (Breslau: Morgenstern, 1897), p. 42.
8. Ferdinand Kattenbusch, *Das Apostolische Symbol, seine Entstehung, sein geschichtlicher Sinn, und seine unspruengliche Stellung im Kultus und in der Theologie der Kirche* (Leipzig, 1897), II, p. 895. On page 902 he says: "It was the general teaching of the Christian Church that Christ descended to hell." (Thus Tertullian taught at the end of his *De Anima*.) Page 907: "The idea that Christ also redeemed the believers of the Old Covenant is understandably not the basis for the teaching concerning his descent into hell, but a theory erected on the basis of this teaching."
9. Adolph Hoenecke, *Evangelisch-Lutherische Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1912), III, p. 132.
10. This view is also one of the options cited by the ICET-sponsored commentary in *Prayers We Have in Common*: "some have understood it as underlying the assertion of death."
11. *Der Sonntag*, XXVII, 15 (April 9, 1972).
12. *Der Sonntag*, XVII, 16 (April 22, 1973).
13. *Neue Zeit* (March 17, 1973).
14. Theodore G. Tappert, ed. and trans., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 488, 13.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 488-489, 16.
16. Gottfried Thomasius, *Christi Person und Werk. Darstellung der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Dogmatik vom Mittelpunkte der Christologie aus*. (Erlangen: A. Deichert, 1886-1888), II, par. 44.

17. Ernst Lerle, *Das Weltbild der Bibel* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1973).
18. Georg Stoeckhardt, *Kommentar ueber den ersten Brief Petri* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1912), pp. 140-203. Incidentally, in view of Ephesians 4:9, the other text considered by us, one should not overlook the exceptionally brilliant treatment of this passage in Stoeckhardt's *Kommentar ueber den Brief Pauli an die Epheser* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1910).
19. Hans Windisch, *Die Katholischen Briefe: Handbuch zum Neuen Testament XV* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1930).
20. Johann Benedikt Carpzov, *Isagoge in libros ecclesiarum Lutheranarum symbolicos* (Leipzig: J. Wettigau, 1665), p. 1586.
21. *Zeichen der Zeit* (January, 1973), p. 6f.
22. Tappert, *op. cit.*, p. 610, 1.
23. Johann Georg Walch, ed., *Dr. Martin Luther's Sammtliche Schriften, X* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1881-1900), p. 1127.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 1130.
25. Gerhard Rein, ed., *A New Look at the Apostles Creed* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), p. 41.

BOOK REVIEW

C. S. LEWIS—IMAGES OF HIS WORLD. By Douglas Gilbert and Clyde S. Kilby. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1973. 192 pages. Cloth. \$12.95.

Clive Staples Lewis, for many years a tutor at Magdalen College in Oxford and at the time of his death Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College, Cambridge, is known to most Christian readers as the author of *The Screwtape Letters*. In reality, this famous collection of correspondence between Screwtape and Wormwood represents but a morsel of C. S. Lewis' theological and literary work. Indeed, a rich and almost unending diet awaits the reader who wishes to learn more of this man's thought and life. In view of the intellectual timidity which currently marks so many clergy when they bump into our hedonistic and positivistic *Zeitgeist*, such staples should prove most invigorating, for Lewis repeatedly entered the academic area to defend the Christian faith against other world-views. The laments of his opponents are ample testimony to his effectiveness in knocking down the false, prideful props by which man seeks to position himself in God's seat.

The present volume can be heartily recommended for several reasons. First, the reader is given a brief biography which also includes the respective dates of his major literary works. Secondly, a brief account of Lewis' spiritual odyssey from atheist to Christian apologist is offered. Finally, nearly one hundred pages of both color and black-and-white photography introduce us to the places and persons which played a significant role in Lewis' life. This latter section is of particular interest due to the accompanying commentary which, whenever possible, comes from the subject's own pen. Thus, for example, the reader is presented with a beautiful photographic study of Cambridge and Lewis' own interpretation of its impact upon his life.

This volume will richly reward the reader who has been privileged to dine on the lucid prose of this great Christian apologist.

Dean O. Wenthe