

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

DESCENDIT: DELETE OR DECLARE? A DEFENSE AGAINST THE NEO-DELETIONISTS

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The *Westminster Theological Journal* played no small role in reviving a historic debate with its publication of “*Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum*.”¹ The exciting discussion immediately attracted widespread interest among theological readers, prompting other publications to weigh in on the contest with similar sounding articles.²

Obviously discernible from the titles, the center of the argument revolves around the campaign to delete from the Apostles’ Creed the clause, “He descended into Hell.” Although proponents on both sides of the issue have written extensively in support of their positions, one basic fact that fundamentally restructures the debate and five centuries of tradition has ironically remained overlooked. The purpose of the present study is to draw attention to this now obscure detail and thereby defend the article’s patristic placement in the Creed against the new generation of critics who would otherwise delete it.

Leading the crusade against the clause, to banish it from the land once and for all, is popular evangelical Wayne Grudem, who claims it to be “a late intruder into the Apostles’ Creed that really never belonged there in the first

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¹ Randall E. Otto, “*Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum*,” *WTJ* 52 (1990): 143–50.

² On one side of the debate are *ibid.*; Wayne Grudem, “He Did Not Descend Into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles’ Creed,” *JETS* 34 (1991): 103–13, an article incorporated into Grudem’s bestselling *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1994), 582–94; Michael Williams, “He Descended Into Hell? An Issue of Confessional Integrity,” *Presb* 25, no. 2 (1999): 80–90. On the other side are David P. Scaer, “He Did Descend to Hell: In Defense of the Apostles’ Creed,” *JETS* 35 (1992): 91–99; Daniel R. Hyde, “In Defense of the Descendit: A Confessional Response to Contemporary Critics of Christ’s Descent into Hell,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007): 104–17; see also Millard Erickson, “Did Jesus Really Descend to Hell?,” *Christianity Today* 44, no. 2 (Feb. 7, 2000): 74.

place and that, on historical and Scriptural grounds, deserves to be removed.”³ This scathing censure naturally raises the question of the phrase’s “intrusion” into the credal formula. Is there any validity to Grudem’s claim? Was the article’s integration into the Creed illegitimate, such that we ought therefore to delete it now?

I. *History of Descendit*

The first known copy of the Latin text of the Creed comes from Tyrannius Rufinus (AD 345–410). This monk and presbyter, famously known for his once close companionship and later fierce rivalry with Jerome,⁴ was a member of the ascetic community in Aquileia. As a highly esteemed scholar, Rufinus was asked by Bishop Laurentius to compose something for him “concerning the faith, in accordance with the traditional and natural meaning of the Creed.”⁵ Regardless of the hagiographical account of the Creed’s origin, Rufinus’s commentary provides an invaluable service to humanity in revealing the state of the canon at the time. It also demonstrates unequivocally the prominent use of the Creed in early Christian worship, revealing its various forms at the close of the fourth century. Specifically, Rufinus glosses the baptismal confession of his church in Aquileia,⁶ in which surfaces the disputed clause, *descendit ad inferna*.⁷

³ Grudem, “He Did Not,” 103.

⁴ Unfortunately, the reputation of Rufinus was unfairly tarnished by the perpetual enmity of Jerome, still venting at news of the former’s death, “The Scorpion lies beneath the ground with Enceladus and Porphyriion” (*Preface to Ezekiel* 1 [NPNF² 6:500]). Moreover, the translation of the Vulgate uncritically favored many toward Jerome. On the other hand, Augustine, who had great respect and affection for both Jerome and Rufinus, held a more balanced view. Grieved by their quarrel, he replied to Jerome, “I expressed indeed my sorrow that so great discord had arisen between you and Rufinus, over the strength of whose former friendship brotherly love was wont to rejoice in all parts to which the fame of it had come” (*Letters of St. Augustine* 82.1 [NPNF¹ 1:350]).

⁵ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed* 1 (NPNF² 3:542).

⁶ The Creed was originally used as a profession of faith given at the baptism of new converts. As there was no regulated form, each congregation developed its own creed according to its situational context. Though the creed of each church varied in shape and length, they were similar in their core elements. Due to the evolving predominance of the church in Rome, various articles from provincial congregations were added to its formula, the *Romanum*, the forerunner of the Apostles’ Creed. The present *textus receptus* did not emerge before the sixth or seventh century (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, 3 vols. [New York: Harper & Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 1:14–23).

⁷ Hereafter, *descendit* is used to refer to Christ’s descent into hell. The Latin *inferna* corresponds to the Greek *Hades*, which in turn is used to translate the Hebrew *Sheol* (Acts 2:27, 31). Although in the Gospels *Gehenna* is the place of punishment in the next life (Matt 5:22; Mark 9:43; Luke 12:5), *Sheol* or *Hades* is also a place of torment where God’s anger burns (Deut 32:22; Luke 16:23). More indefinitely, *Sheol* or *Hades* can refer to the realm of the dead, the state of death, or the grave. In the three-tiered cosmology of the ancient world, the location of *Sheol* or *Hades* is under the earth. Therefore, its direction descends: *Her house is the way to Sheol, Descending to the chambers of death* (Prov 7:27 NASB; cf. Matt 11:23).

1. *Grudem on Rufinus*

The crux of Grudem's argument turns on what he takes to be Rufinus's understanding of *descendit*. "Rufinus, the only person who includes it before 650, did not think that it meant that Christ descended into hell but understood the phrase simply to mean that Christ was 'buried.'"⁸ Grudem believes that Rufinus views the phrase as a simple repetition that Christ "descended into the grave." He concludes that the phrase is far from apostolic and has no legitimate place in the *Apostolorum* because "until AD 650 no version of the Creed included this phrase with the intention of saying that Christ 'descended into hell.'"⁹

Unfortunately, in taking this position Grudem has unwittingly placed himself in the awkward situation of quoting an error and mistakenly, though honestly, disseminating it. The neo-deletionist does not seem to be familiar with Rufinus. His view of the Aquileian monk is apparently based on that of the preeminent historian, Philip Schaff.¹⁰ The unpeered Schaff—who himself defends a literal descent of Christ into hell—discusses Rufinus's understanding of *descendit* not only in his encyclopedic *Creeds of Christendom* referred to by Grudem,¹¹ but also in his colossal *History of the Christian Church*. There he states, "Rufinus says expressly that this clause was not contained in the Roman creed, and explains it wrongly as being identical with 'buried.'"¹² In short, Schaff contends that Rufinus runs against the position that Christ's descent into hell was unquestionable.

Incredible as it seems, in spite of Schaff's towering prominence in patristic history, he misreads Rufinus's view of *descendit*. Commenting on the article's absence within the baptismal formula of the Roman congregation, Rufinus writes, "'He descended into Hell,' is not added in the Creed of the Roman Church, neither is it in that of the Oriental Churches. It seems to be implied however, when it is said that 'He was buried.'"¹³ According to the church father, the descent is implicit in the burial. The word "buried" contains the idea of Christ's descent. As it was in the early church, some creeds used "buried" in which the thought is implied, and other formulas articulated the concept more explicitly with "descended." Therefore, to say the "burial" of Christ was the

⁸ Grudem, "He Did Not," 103; Grudem, *Theology*, 586.

⁹ Grudem, "He Did Not," 105; Grudem, *Theology*, 586.

¹⁰ See Grudem, "He Did Not," 103–6, where Grudem refers to Schaff (*Creeds*, 2:52–55); Grudem, *Theology*, 583–86.

¹¹ Grudem, "He Did Not," 103n2; Grudem (*Theology*, 586n22) quotes Rufinus as found in Schaff: "*vis verbi eadem videtur esse in eo quod sepultus dicitur*" (Schaff, *Creeds*, 1:21n6). He also correctly provides Schaff's perception of Rufinus, "Rufinus himself, however, misunderstood it by making it to mean the same as *buried*" (*Creeds*, 1:21n6).

¹² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1858; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 2:532n3. Schaff also clearly defines Rufinus's understanding of the *descendit* in very precise confessional language, "'continued in the state of death and under the power of death' till the resurrection (Westminster divines)" (*Creeds*, 2:46n2).

¹³ Rufinus, *Commentary* 18 (*NPNF*² 3:550).

same as saying the “descent” of Christ.¹⁴ The clauses are synonymous and therefore it appears were used interchangeably. This is also seen in the Athanasian Creed, produced around AD 430, which in distinction from the Roman Creed, includes *descendit* but leaves out reference to Christ’s burial.¹⁵ For the ancients, therefore, to say that Christ “descended” was just a different way to say that Christ was “buried.” However, this would be a far cry from saying that the location of Christ’s descent ended in the tomb. Undeniably, Rufinus does not take the destination of *descendit* to be literally coterminous with the grave; instead, he understands it to have extended to the deeper region of the underworld.

2. *Rufinus on Rufinus*

That Rufinus truly believes in an actual spatial descent into hell is clear. He glosses the clause in this way:

HE WAS CRUCIFIED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE AND WAS BURIED: HE DESCENDED INTO HELL.... Since then Christ, when He came, brought three kingdoms at once into subjection under His sway (for this He signifies when he says, “That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth” [Phil 2:10]) ... by that part which is sunk under the earth, He signified His bringing into subjection to Himself the kingdoms of the nether world.¹⁶

In the view of Rufinus, Christ descended into hell to conquer the underworld and thereby compel its inhabitants to kneel before him. Later the presbyter of Aquileia explains exactly how this task was accomplished: “Whence also Peter says that ‘Christ ... descended to the spirits who were shut up in prison, who in the days of Noah believed not, to preach unto them [1 Pet 3:18–22];’ where also what He did in hell is declared.”¹⁷ Preaching is not performed in the tomb. Yet Rufinus believes that is exactly what Christ did in the underworld where he descended.

He even depicts the manner of Christ’s descent into hell. Providing as a proof text Ps 88, he stresses, “It is not said ‘a man,’ but ‘as a man.’ For in that He descended into hell. He was ‘as a man.’”¹⁸ And what is the point of this

¹⁴ Cf. Peter King, *The History of the Apostles’ Creed: with Critical Observations on Its Several Articles*, 2nd ed. (London: Golden Lion, 1703), 266, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, University of Aberdeen, <http://find.galegroup.com/>; John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1797), 1:343; Otto, “Creedal Conundrum,” 143; Hyde, “In Defense,” 105.

¹⁵ The descent clause in the Athanasian Creed is *descendit ad inferos* in contrast to the Aquileian version, *descendit ad inferna*.

¹⁶ Rufinus, *Commentary* 14 (NPNF² 3:548–49).

¹⁷ Rufinus, *Commentary* 28 (NPNF² 3:554). This reference and the previous do not escape Kelly’s attention, who correctly notes the connections to Rufinus’s understanding of Christ’s mission in the netherworld (John N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. [New York: Longman, 1972], 378, 381).

¹⁸ Rufinus, *Commentary* 30 (NPNF² 3:554). It should be noted that the textual reference to Ps 88:4–5 is mistakenly printed as Ps 87, although the corresponding n. 10 provides correction.

nuance? To emphasize that Christ descended incarnate: “And therefore in the one nature the power of human weakness, in the other the power of divine majesty is exhibited.”¹⁹ In contrast to other church fathers such as Tertullian, who pictures Christ’s literal excursion to the netherworld as the human soul disjoined from the Lord’s body, or Athanasius, who describes a disembodied Logos, Rufinus asserts that Christ descended into hell “as a man,” that is, as “God-Man.”²⁰ This focus on the incarnate Christ magnifies what Rufinus mentions elsewhere about the bodily descent. In commenting on the goodness of God, which is not limited to the hell where he “descended” to rescue the reader, Rufinus explains:

We speak of infernal and supernal, because we are bounded by the definite circumference of the body, and are confined within the limits of the region prescribed to us. But to God, Who is present everywhere and absent nowhere, what is infernal and what is supernal? Notwithstanding, through the assumption of a body there is room for these also.²¹

According to Rufinus, the assumption of the body does not restrict the incarnate Christ from the infernal region to which he descended, nor the supernal region to which he ascended. Furthermore, these comments on the “in the flesh” descent obviously harmonize with Rufinus’s basic understanding of the incarnation as a “baited hook.”²² Christ’s divinity was disguised by his flesh like a fishhook concealed by bait, the purpose of which is to “lure on the Prince of this world to a conflict.”²³ So as a fish seizes a baited hook, the devil “having swallowed it he was caught forthwith, and the bars of hell being burst asunder, he was drawn forth as it were from the abyss.” Correspondingly, for the devil in hell to “swallow” the bait, the Son of God had to descend into hell in “the form and fashion of human flesh.”²⁴

In addition to these statements reflecting the task and manner of *descendit*, the monk does not fail to state clearly the outcome of Christ’s triumphant tour,

¹⁹ Rufinus, *Commentary* 30 (NPNF² 3:555).

²⁰ According to Tertullian, “He fully complied, by remaining in Hades in the form and condition of a dead man; nor did He ascend into the heights of heaven before descending into the lower parts of the earth, that He might there make the patriarchs and prophets partakers of Himself [1 Pet 3:19]” (*A Treatise on the Soul* 55 [ANF 3:231]). In a letter to Epictetus combating christological heresy about the hypostatic union, Athanasius states, referring to Peter’s prison passage, “And this above all shews the foolishness of those who say that the Word was changed into bones and flesh. For if this had been so, there were no need of a tomb. For the Body would have gone by itself to preach to the spirits in Hades. But as it was, He Himself went to preach, while the Body Joseph wrapped in a linen cloth, and laid it away at Golgotha” (*Letters* 59.6 [NPNF² 4:572]). H. B. Swete confirms the manner of Christ’s bodily descent, “The Incarnate Son consecrated by His presence the condition of departed souls” (Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apostles’ Creed: Its Relation to Primitive Christianity*, 2nd ed. [London: C. J. Clay, 1894], 63).

²¹ Rufinus, *Commentary* 29 (NPNF² 3:554).

²² Rufinus, *Commentary* 16 (NPNF² 3:550).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

“He returned, therefore, a victor from the dead, leading with Him the spoils of hell.”²⁵ And if this is still not perspicuous enough, Rufinus happily repeats the success of Christ’s mission, “For having consummated what was to be done on earth ... recalled souls from the captivity of hell.”²⁶ In his descent, Jesus plundered hell of prisoners.

Concluding his commentary, Rufinus summarizes, in his own words, his view of *descendit*, “The purpose of our Lord’s descent into hell ... [was] the delivery of souls from their captivity in the infernal regions.”²⁷ For the presbyter, Christ’s descent into hell was purposeful.²⁸ Of course, it could be said that a grave has a purpose, but usually for the buried there is no simultaneous mission within the cemetery to free other souls from entombed imprisonment. Furthermore, the purpose of burial normally extends no deeper than the boundary of the grave. In contrast, in the view of Rufinus, the purpose of Christ’s descent reached unto regions “infernal.”

Rufinus’s view of *descendit* is unambiguous. The Aquileian theologian explains that in different regions, from Rome to his own locale, various versions of the Creed were recited. Some formulas used “descended,” others “buried.” The clauses were interchangeable since “buried” implied “descent.” In no way, though, does this mean that the location to which Christ descended is confined to the grave plot. For Rufinus, Christ’s descent into hell was a literal spatial journey to the netherworld. Surprisingly, the great Schaff is mistaken about Rufinus’s understanding of the descent. However, Schaff is not at all to be ungraciously singled out in this omnipresent error. Essentially, the Reformed world is wrong on Rufinus—a subject to which we shall return below.²⁹

Regrettably for Grudem, nevertheless, his argument for the omission of *descendit* on historical grounds fails. Long before AD 650, there was a version of the Creed that included the clause, which furthermore was believed by those who recited it to mean, “HE DESCENDED INTO HELL.” Nor was it likely a recent addition to the Aquileian formula (AD 390) since we would expect Rufinus to comment on its sudden inclusion. Instead, by the time Rufinus composes his

²⁵ Rufinus, *Commentary* 29 (NPNF² 3:554).

²⁶ Rufinus, *Commentary* 31 (NPNF² 3:555).

²⁷ Rufinus, *Commentary* 48 (NPNF² 3:562).

²⁸ This answers Williams’s complaint that “Rufinus could not explain the purpose for this change in the Aquileian Creed ... thus the original intention of the clause has been lost” (“Confessional Integrity,” 82); cf. Otto, “Creedal Conundrum,” 144–45; Arthur C. McGiffert, *The Apostles’ Creed: Its Origin, Its Purpose, and Its Historical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 193. To the contrary, Rufinus never intends to explain the purpose of the clause. For him, it is self-explanatory: to chronicle the *purpose* of Christ’s actual postmortem journey to hell.

²⁹ Cf. Herman Witsius, *Apostles’ Creed*, trans. Donald Fraser (Glasgow: Kuhl, 1823), 2:140; William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 838–39; McGiffert, *Apostles’ Creed*, 195; William Barclay, *The Apostles’ Creed for Everyman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 122; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 150; Otto, “Creedal Conundrum,” 143, 149; Williams, “Confessional Integrity,” 81–82; Hyde, “In Defense,” 111.

commentary, any such insertion of the article has vanished from the memory of the Aquileian community.³⁰

Despite his failure to prove that *descendit* deserves to be deleted on historical grounds, Grudem's claim inadvertently raises a significant point regarding the late emergence of creedal manuscripts. As expected, it would be easy to appeal to the commonly known problems of textual transmission and preservation in the ancient world. However, it must not be overlooked that although the ante-Nicene fathers refer to various articles of the Creed and write descriptions and explanations, none provides the full text of the *Apostolorum*. Rufinus plainly states the simple reason, "The Creed is not written on paper or parchment, but is retained in the hearts of the faithful."³¹ The Creed was memorized to keep it from being compromised. He explains the fact from the safety measures of the early church. In order to guard the church against possible persecutors, the *Apostolorum* was used as a code word to verify identity: "So that if one is met with, of whom it is doubtful to which side he belongs, being asked the symbol (watchword), he discloses whether he is friend or foe."³² The Creed itself was a password; the articles functioned as a series of security questions. So, out of fear of persecution communicants kept the Creed secret, as part of the baptismal ordinance, until after the conversion of Constantine. The late date for creedal texts is thus due to the fundamental fact that the Creed was not recorded in order to protect the church. After Christianity prevailed in the Roman Empire during the fourth century, the creeds were finally committed to writing, from which time *descendit* is found in both Western and Eastern manuscripts.

3. *Patristics on Rufinus*

Finally, in view of the history of *descendit*, there yet remains the most monumental justification for the clause's inclusion in the Creed. That is, Christ's

³⁰ Rufinus mentions that he is not the earliest to write on the *Apostolorum*, rather before him "eminent writers have published treatises on these matters," nor does he exclude a heretic by the name of Photinus (*Commentary* 1 [NPNF² 3:542]). Lord Peter King shows that there were commentaries prior to that bequeathed by the church father which contained *descendit*. Specifically he refers to that of Epiphanius, "where, after the Death and burial of *Christ*, it follows, That his Godhead '*accompanied his holy soul into Hell, and by his own power loosened the Pains thereof*'" (King, *History*, 261). Swete maintains that the article "points us to the early days of the Aquileian Church. We shall perhaps not be wrong if we assign the clause to the end of the second century or the beginning of the third" (*Creed*, 61). Scaer also makes a case for an early date from 1 Pet 3:18–22 ("He Did Descend to Hell," 94). The wide consensus among scholars is that the passage "has been pieced together out of liturgical, hymnic or catechetical material" (John N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, BNTC 17 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999], 146). Bultmann concludes that vv. 18, 19, and 22 of 1 Pet 3 originate from a single traditional piece which was creedal, not hymnic, as mentioned in Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on I Peter*, ed. Ferdinand Hahn, trans. and aug. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 248.

³¹ Rufinus, *Commentary* 2 (NPNF² 3:543).

³² Rufinus, *Commentary* 2 (NPNF² 3:542–43).

descent was indisputably and unanimously believed in the ancient church. Ubiquitous among the works of the church fathers, in addition to Rufinus, Tertullian, and Athanasius, referred to above, it is found in the second- and third-century writings of Polycarp, Ignatius, Hermas, Justin, Melito of Sardis, Hippolytus, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.³³ From the fourth century following, it is seen in the writings of Socrates, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, Eusebius, John Chrysostom, Evodius, and Augustine³⁴—which Bishop of Hippo adds the warning, “who, therefore, except an infidel, will deny that Christ was in hell?”³⁵ Incredibly, Grudem fails to mention this important fact of faith in *descendit* on the part of the fathers. This omission of historical record leaves the misleading impression that *descendit* had been completely unheard of until AD 390 and remained yet unbelieved until 650, which is completely inaccurate.

³³ Polycarp, *The Epistle to the Philippians* 1 (ANF 1:33); Ignatius, *The Epistle to the Magnesians* 9 (ANF 1:62); Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 72 (ANF 1:235); Hermas, *Similitudes* 3.9.16 (93.16) (ANF 2.49); Melito of Sardis, *From the Discourse on Soul and Body* 2 (ANF 8:756); Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* 45 (ANF 5:213); Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 27.2 (ANF 1:499); Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* 6.6 (ANF 2:490); Origin, *Against Celsus* 2.43 (ANF 4:448).

³⁴ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.37 (NPNF² 2:61); Basil the Great, *Letters* 210.3 (NPNF² 8:249); Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 14.18, 19 (NPNF² 7:99); Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 45.1, 24 (NPNF² 7:423, 432); Eusebius, *Church History* 1.13.19 (NPNF² 1:102); Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 2.1 (NPNF¹ 10:9); Evodius, *Letters of St. Augustine* 163 (NPNF¹ 1:515).

³⁵ Augustine, *Letters* 164.2.3 (NPNF¹ 1:516). Surprisingly, Augustine’s belief in *descendit* seems to be overlooked by neo-deletionists who actually appeal to him in order to argue against *descendit*; cf. Grudem, “He Did Not,” 110; Grudem, *Theology*, 591; Otto, “Creedal Conundrum,” 146; Williams, “Confessional Integrity,” 86; and, ironically on the other hand, Hyde who argues for *descendit* (“In Defense,” 111). Yet Augustine devoutly believes, “It is established beyond all question that the Lord, after He had been put to death in the flesh, ‘descended into hell,’ the support for which he finds in the psalmist’s prophecy expounded by Peter, “*Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell* [Ps 16:10; Acts 2:27]” (*Letters* 164.2.3 [NPNF¹ 1:515–16]). He even reserves the label of “infidel” for anyone rash enough to deny *descendit* (ibid). Nor is he in any way skeptical that Christ rescued from the infernal region. Instead of basing his understanding of that event from Peter’s prison passage (1 Pet 3:18–22) as the other church fathers, the bishop draws insight from the apostle’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, affirming that the Lord “*loosed the pains of hell, in which it was not possible for Him to be holden* (Acts 2:24)” (ibid). As a huntsman loosens a snare, likens Augustine, so Christ loosed the pains of hell which were “holding those to whom He had resolved to grant deliverance” (ibid.), such as the OT patriarchs: “For it does not seem absurd to believe that the ancient saints who believed in Christ and His then future coming, were kept in places far removed indeed from the torments of the wicked, but yet in hell [*apud inferos*], until Christ’s blood and his descent into these places delivered them” (*The City of God* 20.15 [NPNF¹ 2:435]). So Augustine, troubled at the idea of the gospel being preached in hell and possibly smuggled with it a chance of conversion, rejects the understanding of the prison passage held by the ancient church in order to interpret it allegorically (*Letters* 164.4.15–16 [NPNF¹ 1:519–20]). However, as shown, to state that Augustine rejects Christ’s *preaching* in hell is not to say that he likewise denies Christ’s *descent* into hell. Unfortunately, for the uninformed reader, the uncontextualized reference to Augustine’s “traditional” interpretation of Christ’s preaching gives the false notion that he rejects the idea of Christ’s excursion into the underworld, although he condemningly protests otherwise.

II. Reforming the Reformation

Rufinus's true belief in Christ's local descent to the underworld has indeed been widely ignored. Yet what is all the more surprising is that the confusion about Rufinus's understanding of *descendit* can even be traced back to the Protestant Reformation, where it seems to appear first in the writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam—specifically in his 1533 commentary on the Creed written at the request of Lord Thomas Erle of England.³⁶ One will vainly search Erasmus's treatise, however, for any reference to Rufinus or his exposition of the Creed. For in an unfortunate case of mistaken identity, Erasmus attributes the Aquileian's work to Cyprian.³⁷ Nevertheless Rufinus's fingerprints are certainly all over Erasmus's source document and his voice clearly echoes within the quotations.³⁸

Erasmus's misunderstanding of Pseudo-Cyprian's view of *descendit* is seen in the discussion of his own firm belief in a local descent, which notably does not allow for a journey to the *limbus patrum*—the underworld abode of OT saints in patristic and medieval theology. The reason for this exclusion, he explains, is the fact that the Hebrew *Sheol*—Greek *Hades* or Latin *inferos*—in Scripture is often taken to denote the “grave.” As proof text, Erasmus advances the forecast fate of Jacob were mishap to come upon his beloved: “If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol” (Gen 42:38 ESV). So Erasmus concludes, “By this word *inferos* [*Sheol*], he meant the sepulture or grave.”³⁹ To marshal further support for his position, he then appeals to “Cyprian”:

And this thing doth Saint Cyprian in few words in a manner show, when after that he had said before that this particle is not had neither in the churches of the west, nor in the churches of the east, he addeth afterwards these words. *Vis tamen verbi videtur eadem esse in eo quod sepultus dicitur* (that is to say). How be it there seemeth to be the same strength of the word: in that, that he is said to have been buried. As who should say, that *descendere ad inferna*, were naught else: but to be buried in the grave.⁴⁰

³⁶ Desiderius Erasmus, *A Playne and Godly Expositon or Declaration of the Commune Crede*, trans. William Marshall (London: Redman, 1726?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, University of Aberdeen, <http://find.galegroup.com/>.

³⁷ Ford Lewis Battles confirms that Rufinus's *Commentary* “was published as a work of Cyprian in Erasmus's edition of Cyprian” in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 679n20, and refers to Rufinus as “Pseudo-Cyprian” (1013n5).

³⁸ Erasmus begins his creedal exposition by acknowledging the famous doctors of the church who have already written on the *Apostolorum*, among whom “Cyprian” took “this matter in hand first of any Latin man” (*Crede*, 1). Yet it is universally recognized that Rufinus holds that honor. This initial reference to Pseudo-Cyprian is no typographical error, as Erasmus continues to draw from Rufinus's creedal commentary, even mentioning the two features peculiar to the Aquileian creed—*invisible* and *impassible* in the first article, and *this* with *flesh* in the article on the resurrection (*ibid.*, 23).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 81–82. The Latin quote is identical to Rufinus's statement, cf. n. 11 above. This is the third time that Erasmus mentions this “article, which (as I said before) Cyprian saith not to be had in the Roman symbol, no neither yet to be added in the Churches of the East” (pp. 79–80).

Erasmus clearly believes that Pseudo-Cyprian holds the view that Christ's descent to hell is nothing but his burial. Unfortunately, what he does not realize is that these are not the words of Cyprian, but instead the exact words of Rufinus—as is evident from our first Rufinus quotation—whom he totally misinterprets. For the Aquileian theologian devoutly believes in a spatial excursion of Christ to the netherworld.

1. *The Influence of Erasmus's Error*

Given Erasmus's early role in the Reformation, it is not surprising that his treatise on the Creed is followed by others, who in turn propagate the error about Rufinus's understanding of *descendit*. In fact, direct references to the above quote of Pseudo-Cyprian are contained in the works of Henry Bullinger—Zwingli's assistant in Zurich—and Martin Bucer—Calvin's colleague in Strasburg.⁴¹ A modern comparison of the similar statements reveals the identification of the real author, and in the reflection of Pseudo-Cyprian, Rufinus comes into focus. Though regrettably, in Erasmusian fashion, the Reformers follow his claim that Pseudo-Cyprian understands Christ's descent into hell to only end in the tomb.

Calvin also “follows Erasmus's *Explanation of the Apostle's Creed*” in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁴² However, as the keen analyst is thoroughly acquainted with Cyprian, he rejects Erasmus's false attribution of Cyprian authorship to Rufinus's commentary since it is nowhere in Cyprian's corpus.⁴³ Instead, the Reformer remains agnostic about the true identity of its author, “that ancient writer (whoever he was) whose treatise *On the Exposition of the Creed* bears Cyprian's name.”⁴⁴ Moreover, just as Calvin is unwilling to follow Erasmus in

⁴¹ Bullinger explains, “Cyprian saith thus: ‘It is to be known verily, that in the creed of the Latin church this is not added, ‘He descended into hell;’ nor yet is this clause received in the churches of the east: but yet the sense of the clause seemeth to be all one that, where it is said, ‘He was buried.’” Then obviously following Erasmus's exposition, Bullinger adds the former's proof text from Jacob, “So then Cyprian's opinion seemeth to be, that to descend into hell is nothing else but to be laid in the grave, according to that saying of Jacob: ‘Ye will bring my grey hairs with sorrow to hell, or to the grave.’” (*The First and Second Decades*, vol. 1 of *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. by Thomas Harding [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849], 137). Likewise Bucer finds support for his view in the erroneous claim that “Cyprian bears witness that this article ‘descended into hell’ did not exist either in the Roman creed, nor in the creed of the eastern churches, and it is not found in Tertullian, so there is no doubt that it was added as an explanation of the previous article, as was the case on the article of the communion of the saints” (Martin Bucer, *Enarrationes in Evangelia*, trans. Nicholas Thompson [Basil: 1536], 794, Universitätsbibliothek Basel, http://e-rara.ethz.ch/bau_1/ch16/content/titleinfo/1678362: *Haec confirmat, quod hunc articulum, descendit ad inferno, non fuissenc in symbolo Romano, nec in symbolo Orientalium Ecclesiarum Cyprianus testatur, & apud Tertullianum non recesetur quare adiectum tanq explicationem superioris, sicut & illum communionem sanctorum, nihil ambigendum est*). Here Bucer is also wrong on Tertullian; cf. n. 20 above.

⁴² Battles in *Institutes*, 512n15.

⁴³ Calvin repeatedly refers to Cyprian throughout the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* (ibid. [“Author and Source Index”], 1609–10).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1013. Elsewhere Calvin disregards Cyprian authorship of *On the Exposition of the Creed* (p. 679).

ascribing authorship of Rufinus's Creed to Cyprian, so too he remains unconvinced that the original author—unknown to Calvin—would have understood *descendit* as “buried.”

Nevertheless, what begins as a mistaken view of *descendit* continues to be disseminated and eventually becomes urban legend among the Reformers. Some, convinced by the pervasive cultural mindset that thinks “descent” is simply “burial,” launch a campaign to delete it from the Creed in order to distance themselves all the more from Rome and its doctrine of purgatory. As early as 1553, Walter Deloenus, pastor of the London congregation of German refugees, fights for its omission as “a plant that the Lord hath not planted.”⁴⁵ Though his venture proves unsuccessful, the outcome is inconsequential. For what had become urban legend about *descendit* is now accepted as history.

2. Calvin on Descendit

In the context of this creedal criticism, the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* is released with Calvin on the defensive. He begins his treatment of *descendit* with the opening salvo, “But we ought not to omit his descent into hell.”⁴⁶ The reason is because “if it is left out, much of the benefit of Christ's death will be lost.”⁴⁷ In the mind of Calvin, *descendit* contains a mystery of most importance. Moreover, it would not have found its way into the formula were not something vital intended by it. Given its pervasiveness among the patristic writers, the article must evidently convey a critical component of the salvation wrought by Christ.

Calvin militantly disagrees with his colleagues who are convinced that “hell” is to be understood as “grave”: “How careless it would have been, when something not at all difficult in itself has been stated with clear and easy words, to indicate it again in words that obscure rather than clarify it!”⁴⁸ Moreover, he asserts, “It is not likely that a useless repetition of this sort could have crept into this summary, in which the chief points of our faith are aptly noted in the fewest possible words.”⁴⁹ *Descendit* must mean something more than Christ's mere entombment, yet Calvin cannot accept it as a harrowing of Hades in order to release OT captives.

Instead of granting either of these two options, Calvin determines that “we must seek a surer explanation, apart from the Creed, of Christ's descent into hell.”⁵⁰ Where else would the Reformer look for an explanation but to

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 513n17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 512. Though the 1541 edition opens similarly, Battles believes that a defensive edit to the 1559 edition “may have been occasioned by a revival of criticism of the article” (513n17). Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition. The First English Version*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 232.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 513.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 513–14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 515.

Scripture, where he finds ground to interpret the phrase metaphorically. That is, Christ did not literally descend into hell, but the fury of hell was poured out upon him while on the cross. Since Christ suffered the infinite wrath of God on the cross, eliminated is any need of further suffering in hell after his death.⁵¹ The meaning of Calvin's doctrine of *descendit* is most clearly heard during the crucifixion, as Christ collides head on with the furious wrath of God, when in great spiritual anguish he cries out, *My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?* (Matt 27:46 NASB). This cry of dereliction is the interpretive key for *descendit*. The wail is one that rises from the depths of agony, resonating the spiritual torment of Christ, as he experiences the isolating terror of utter God-forsakenness and God-abandonment. The reverberating silence of God only serves to amplify the location of the haunting cry from the cross. Jesus *descended into hell*. Therefore Calvin keeps and defends *descendit* since it distinctively expresses the gravity of Christ's spiritual anguish and the terrible price of our redemption.

The Reformer's explanation does not escape criticism. In so interpreting the article, Calvin inverts the chronological order of events within the Creed. The *Apostolorum* plainly records the natural flow of events, "He was crucified, dead, buried," and after that "He descended into hell." But Calvin shifts the descent back two places in the sequence of events to place it between "crucified" and "buried." The reverse order is not lost upon the Reformer who dismisses any objection as "trifling and ridiculous."⁵² He defends its awkward placement analytically:

The point is that the Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and then appositely speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he underwent in the sight of God in order that we might know not only that Christ's body was given as the price of our redemption, but that he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man.⁵³

According to Calvin, *descendit* highlights the distinction between the visible and invisible sufferings of Christ in the last stage of his state of humiliation.

3. *The Continental Reformed on Descendit*

Casper Olevianus, coauthor of the Heidelberg Catechism, also seems to be influenced by the revisionist history of *descendit* which began with Erasmus's Pseudo-Cyprian. In his 1576 commentary on the Creed, when explaining the

⁵¹ This opposes the position of Hugh Latimer, who held that Christ suffered postmortem agony while in hell. The bishop was influenced by a Lutheran theologian, Aepinus, who was charged with heresy for this view (Dewey D. Wallace, "Puritan and Anglican: The Interpretation of Christ's Descent into Hell in Elizabethan Theology," *ARG* 69 [1978]: 259).

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, 516.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

descent into hell, he confirms the false notion that “the ancient fathers ... concluded that hell should be understood here simply as ‘the grave.’”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, he too refuses to delete *descendit* from the Creed and instead follows Calvin’s innovative interpretation. Olevianus maintains that *descendit* is a gloss on Jesus’ passion expressing his spiritual torment and anguish, which begins in Gethsemane and continues through his crucifixion and death. Heidelberg Catechism, Question 44, asks, “Why is it added: ‘He descended into hell?’” The authors answer, “That in my greatest temptations I may be assured that Christ my Lord, by His inexpressible anguish, pains and terrors, which He suffered in His soul on the cross and before, has redeemed me from the anguish and torment of hell.”⁵⁵

Though it is theologically vital to maintain that Christ suffered the infinite agony of hell on the cross for his people, and as accurate as Olevianus is in following Calvin’s profound view of *descendit*, he is still susceptible to the same criticism as the Genevan regarding the unnatural sequence of events within the Creed. As Calvin himself realizes, his reading of the *Apostolorum* does not respect the syntactical sequence and disregards what would have been originally intended by the authors of the Creed. In view of the fact that his explanation reacts to the credal confusion sparked by Erasmus’s false narrative, one cannot but wonder how Calvin would have treated *descendit* outside of the myth that “Cyprian” (i.e., Rufinus) understood “hell” to be the “grave.” Unfortunately, that was not the case. Grudem gives voice to the objection that Calvin feared: “The placement of *descendit* after ‘was crucified, dead, and buried’ makes this artificial and unconvincing as an interpretation.”⁵⁶

4. *The British Reformed on Descendit*

In the British Isles, the Westminster Assembly distances itself from Calvin on *descendit*. The Larger Catechism, Question 50, asks, “Wherein consisted Christ’s humiliation after his death?” The divines answer, “Christ’s humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day; which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, *He descended into hell.*”⁵⁷ Though Calvin’s interpretation was debated, the Westminster divines chose to focus on Christ’s actual death in order to steer further away from the papal dogma of purgatory. The Assembly’s position is mostly that of William Perkins and James Ussher, although John Lightfoot relentlessly argued to add the clause “in the state of the dead” to the

⁵⁴ Casper Olevianus, *An Exposition of the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2009), 87.

⁵⁵ *Heidelberg Catechism*, rev. ed. (Carbondale, PA: F & L, 1986), 54.

⁵⁶ Grudem, “He Did Not,” 106; Grudem, *Theology*, 587.

⁵⁷ *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: CCE & P, 1990), 26.

explication.⁵⁸ The concern was “to teach the continued existence of Christ’s soul after his death, as opposed to Apollinarian Christology which denied that Jesus Christ had a human soul at all.”⁵⁹

Of course, it is proper to emphasize that in the hypostatic union the eternal Logos did not replace Christ’s human soul. Furthermore, to protect the church against any hidden docetism, it is right to stress that Christ really died physically and remained dead until rising. On the other hand, after a century of an interpretive trajectory based on flawed *descendit* history, one must question to what extent the Assembly would have been drawn into its vortex. For in the first English treatment of the matter, a 1552 *descendit* debate at Cambridge, Christopher Carlisle ironically offers Rufinus as proof that Christ did not make a journey to the underworld. He argues that such an idea is “neither in Cyprian, though hath this addition, notwithstanding he saith it signifieth no more, but that he was dead, and buried.”⁶⁰ Carlisle had cracked the case of identity theft—still unsolved in Geneva—in which Rufinus’s name was taken for Cyprian.⁶¹ Yet Carlisle fails to untangle Rufinus from Erasmus’s spin that puts him teaching Christ’s descent is nothing but his burial. So in England, a rumor about Rufinus spreads.⁶² Indeed it is repeated by Cambridge theologian William Perkins, who states that Rufinus “saith directly, that these words, *he descended into hell*, are not found in the Creed of the Roman Church, nor used in the Churches of the East: & if they be, that then they signify the burial of Christ.”⁶³ Meanwhile the erroneous understanding of Rufinus is also broadcast through the kingdom via Bucer and Bullinger who are followed, for example, by Henry Jacob. The Puritan leader points to Rufinus to show the descent clause signifies no more than “buried.”⁶⁴ It was added “for emphasis sake to shew more plainly that

⁵⁸ Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, “New Taxonomies of the Westminster Assembly (1643–1652): The Creedal Controversy as Case Study,” *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 6 (2004): 95n67.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁰ The debate with Richard Smith of Oxford was published 30 years later (Christopher Carlisle, *Touching the Descension of our Savior Christ into Hell* [London: Roger Ward, 1582], 83–84, Early English Books Online, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>). To proof text his position, Carlisle adds Erasmus’s example of Jacob, “So is descended used in Genesis 44 where Jacob is said to descend into Sheol, meaning, that he was laid in his grave” (p. 84). That Carlisle follows Erasmus’s creedal exposition is easily seen in the capital letters bearing his name (p. 87).

⁶¹ Bishop Alley of Exeter in 1563 confirms the riddle’s answer when referring to the “Symbol of Cyprian, or rather Rufinus,” quoted in John Strype, *Annals of the Reformation ... during the first twelve years of Queen Elizabeth’s happy reign* (London: John Wyat, 1709), 309, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, University of Aberdeen, <http://find.galegroup.com/>.

⁶² For the influence of Carlisle, see Dewey, “Puritan and Anglican,” 279.

⁶³ William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles* (Cambridge: John Legatt, 1595), 296, Early English Books Online, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/>.

⁶⁴ Henry Jacob, *A Treatise on the Sufferings and Victory of Christ ... That Christ after his death on the crosse, went not into Hell in his Soule* (London: 1598), 167, Early English Books Online, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/>. Jacob draws from Bullinger (p. 102) and especially Bucer (pp. 101, 119, 123, 127).

he was truly dead in deed.”⁶⁵ The significance of the latter two becomes clear in the Assembly. Jacob’s perspective of *descendit*, in conjunction with that of Perkins, is that which was championed by Archbishop Ussher.⁶⁶ A case study of Westminster’s *descendit* debate shows that “the First Committee appears to have advanced the Jacob-Perkins interpretation which Ussher continued to popularize.”⁶⁷ Westminster, it seems, was misinformed.

Nevertheless, given the real Rufinus’s genuine belief in a spatial descent, one again wonders about the original intention of the Creed’s authors. It is hard to imagine that its early architects merely meant, “He was crucified, dead and buried; he descended to the grave.” Such rendering does nothing but reduce the article to an unnecessary repetition, which would have been far from the mind of the ancient editors of the *Apostolorum*. Grudem complains, “This interpretation is not an explanation of what the words first meant in this sequence but is rather an inaccurate attempt to salvage some theologically acceptable sense out of the words.”⁶⁸

5. *The Question of Catholicity*

This reflection on the Reformation brings the discussion back to its starting point regarding Rufinus’s—and the church fathers’—unquestionable belief in *descendit*. Given the theological resistance of Scripture, that there can be no second chance for salvation in hell, nor any necessity of Christ’s postmortem suffering in hell, one begs to know if the church fathers are entirely wrong on *descendit*. But then as soon as the question is put, immediately upon second thought it must be asked if this is even a safe inquiry, theologically. For how can those so distantly removed from the apostolic era by fifteen centuries or more genuinely believe with any confidence that those so near to the age are entirely

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 167. Jacob later amends his Rufinus comments; see Henry Jacob, *A Defense of a Treatise ... That after his death on the Crosse he went not downe into Hell* (London: 1600), Early English Books Online, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/>. This time Jacob reads Erasmus on the Creed (pp. 199, 200) and acknowledges that Rufinus actually believed in a local descent to the *limbus patrum*, but not to the “hell” of torment. Yet carried away in the context of a bitter ecclesiastical and political battle for the Church of England, Jacob refuses to admit his misquotation and instead insists that it is Rufinus who is wrong. The latter’s opinion is based “upon other reasons (namely certain mistaken Scriptures)” which was “nothing else indeed but the common error of those times.” He then asserts that Rufinus really understands the descent to mean, “He died like other good men, and was buried” (p. 200). Where Rufinus includes the divine nature in the descent, Jacob explains, “but he meaneth it *improperly* and ... of the very death of his manhood, and nothing else” (p. 201).

⁶⁶ Disputing about *descendit*, Ussher confirms the mistaken view of that which he had “heard delivered by Rufinus ... that the substance thereof seemeth to be the same with that of the *burial*. For what other *hell* can we imagine it to be, but the *grave*?” (James Ussher, *An Answer to a Challenge Made By a Jesuit in Ireland*, 4th ed. [London: Benjamin Tooke, 1686], 246, Early English Books Online, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/>).

⁶⁷ Van Dixhoorn, “New Taxonomies,” 93.

⁶⁸ Grudem, “He Did Not,” 106; Grudem, *Theology*, 587.

mistaken about *descendit*? Instead, might the situation reasonably be reversed, as in the case of Erasmus—the mistaken ones being those who so remotely stand from the time of the ancient church, and furthermore in utter opposition to her pervasive view of a spatial descent? That the church fathers are so universally agreed in their core belief of a literal descent should cause theological pause. For moderns to abandon catholicity with them and their collectively held faith in *descendit*, does it seem more theologically insightful or rather insane? Alas, one no longer begs, but panics to know, is there any interpretation whatsoever that would provide the theological safeguard of catholicity with the early church and at the same time answer Grudem’s criticisms of the Reformed views; that is, to seriously respect the syntactical structure of the Creed reflecting the sequential order of events, and yet not reduce *descendit* to mere tautology?

As most who are familiar with the debate already know, the most common biblical proof text for *descendit* is the prison passage of 1 Pet 3:18–22. Does the long-neglected passage provide the answer? Grudem says no. To his argument, we now respond.

III. 1 Peter 3:18–22

Peter addresses his letter to “strangers in the world” (1 Pet 1:1 NIV), suffering believers dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, who are persecuted by antagonists hostile to the faith (1:6; 3:13–17; 4:12–19; 5:9–10). The apostle writes to encourage these afflicted and confused Christians to hold fast to the faith and nobly persevere through their various trials. In the immediate context of the prison passage, Peter exhorts these early believers to be faithful witnesses in the face of hostility (3:13–17), which then leads to the text in focus:

¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Pet 3:18–22 ESV)

1. Grudem’s Interpretation

The view of the passage offered by the neo-deletionists, and quite common among the Reformed, is a modification of that originally offered by Augustine.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ As seen above, Augustine was disturbed at the idea of the gospel being preached in hell and possibly imported with it a second chance of conversion. So he rejected the understanding of Peter’s prison passage held by the ancient church in order to interpret it allegorically (*Letters*

Though instead of allegorizing “prison” in v. 19 to mean the “darkness of ignorance” in which unbelievers were held captive, a view doubtfully intended by Peter, it is taken to mean plainly “hell.” However, that is not to suggest that Christ actually “preached” in the underworld. Rather, like Augustine, the prison proclamation does not refer to an activity of Christ between his death and resurrection, but something he did “through the Spirit” during the flood age. While the ark was being built, Christ “in spirit” was preaching through Noah to the unbelieving and defiant human race.

This interpretation is supported by appealing to Peter’s earlier statement about Christ speaking through the OT prophets, *inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted...* (1 Pet 1:11 ESV). This freshly on Peter’s mind would seem to indicate that the “spirit of Christ” preached likewise through Noah. So when Christ preached to the spirits in prison, it was proclamation that Noah made as Christ preached through him. Those to whom Christ preached were the unbelievers on earth at the time of the flood, though in the apostle’s day they are “spirits in prison,” since from his vantage point they are currently dead and as spirits detained in hell. Grudem illustrates the view by saying, “Queen Elizabeth was born in 1926,” which is a true statement although she was not Queen when she was born. It means, “She who is now Queen Elizabeth was born in 1926.”⁷⁰

Further support for this view of Christ’s pre-flood evangelism is found in Peter’s reference to Noah as “a herald of righteousness” (2 Pet 2:5 ESV). Here the apostle uses the noun *κηρύξ*, a cognate of *κηρύσσω* found in 3:19, which is commonly used for “preached.” This strengthens the idea that Noah preached to his generation the need for repentance in order to be saved from the coming destruction. The disobedient audience to whom Noah preached then, and Christ through him, are the spirits in the prison of hell at the time Peter writes.⁷¹

Respect is due this interpretation if for no other reason than it draws attention to the vital subject of Christ’s presence within the phenomenon of preaching. Yet, as valuable as that feature may be, the view remains problematic. Basically, Augustine’s “allegorization is contrary to the scope of the context, which does not point, like 1:11, to prophecy, but to the saving effectiveness of Christ’s suffering unto death.”⁷²

2. *The Time of Christ’s Proclamation*

Critical to the interpretation is the contextual time of Christ’s preaching. Verse 18 clearly connects it to the period after the crucifixion, *being put to death*

164.4.15–16 [NPNF¹ 1:519–20]). However, it must be stressed, to maintain that Augustine rejected Christ’s *preaching* in hell is not to claim that he likewise denied Christ’s *descent* into the underworld. For his devout belief in *descendit* see n. 35 above.

⁷⁰ Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, TNTC 17 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 159.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 256.

in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. The [on the one hand] ... but (μέν ... δέ) construction, lost in most English translations, draws a contrast between the passive aorist participles *put to death* (θανάτωθείς) and *made alive* (ζωοποιήθείς) which are clearly in parallel position and set against each other. So the time in which he was *made alive* to preach was some period after he was *put to death*, needless to say not in Noah's day. This is emphasized in the heightening contrast that includes yet another parallelism, *flesh* (σάρκι) compared to *spirit* (πνεύματι). The latter refers to Christ's existence, after his death, in the spiritual realm. The lexical definition cites this instance to mean "πνεῦμα is that part of Christ which, in contrast to σάρξ, did not pass away in death, but survived as an individual entity after death."⁷³ Immediately following πνεύματι is ἐν ᾧ in v. 19, which refers back to *spirit* as antecedent showing that it was *in which* or *as which* Jesus went to preach. This could denote that Christ went "in spirit," after his death and prior to the resurrection, to likewise bodiless spirits. Or this mode of existence could mean Christ's "spiritual body" in the Pauline sense of resurrection life (1 Cor 15:44–49): "He, the God-man Christ Jesus, body and soul, ceased to live in the flesh, began to live in the spirit; ceased to live a fleshly, mortal life, began to live a spiritual resurrection life."⁷⁴ In either case, the time of Christ's preaching is not connected, exegetically at least, to a time prior to his incarnation. This is obscured by the unfortunate NIV translation *made alive by the Spirit*, which allows for Augustine's interpretation of Christ preaching "in the spirit" through Noah. Certainly the third person of the Trinity was economically operative in the resurrection of Christ; however, in the Greek text there is no modifier for *spirit* to indicate that "the Spirit" is here in view. What seems to be the focus, rather, is Christ's spiritual mode of existence.

3. Christ's Audience

That Christ went to an actual location to preach, and not "in the spirit" through Noah, is strengthened when one considers the audience to whom he preaches, *the spirits in prison*. Though *spirits* (πνεύμασιν) can refer to the human spirits in general, it would be a wild stretch to link its use here to the people of the flood age. In the NT, plural πνεύματα usually refers to nonhuman beings in the spiritual realm, whether good or evil. When used absolutely or without qualification it is normally rendered as "evil spirits."⁷⁵ Human beings are simply not the focus here. This is further indicated in the reference to those people saved by the ark. In v. 20, there is a change from *spirits* to *persons* (ψυχαί), also

⁷³ BAGD 675; italics mine.

⁷⁴ Henry Alford, quoted in Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1946), 197; cf. also Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 137; Kelly, *Peter*, 151.

⁷⁵ BAGD entry for "πνεῦμα" (4.c) defines as *demon* in the instance of absolute plural. After listing Matt 8:16; 12:45; Luke 10:20; 11:26 as proof texts, it adds "1 Pt. 3:19 ... belongs here if the πνεύματα refer to hostile spirit-powers, evil spirits, fallen angels" (p. 676).

rendered as *souls*—a clear distinction between demons and people. Moreover, this usage perfectly harmonizes with the rest of the NT in which the human dead are usually called *souls* and not *spirits* (Rev 6:9). That Christ preached to evil spirits is the reason that their incarceration is located in prison (φυλακῆ). In prison, even the Apostle Peter is occasionally found “in the flesh” (Acts 5:17–21; 12:4–11). But with respect to the spiritual realm, φυλακῆ is the prison of unclean spirits in fallen Babylon (Rev 18:2), as well as the bottomless abyss where Satan will be bound and locked away during the millennium (Rev 20:7).⁷⁶ Therefore, in light of the exegetical evidence, Peter’s use of φυλακῆ in v. 19 is cited to define the location of Christ’s preaching as “the underworld or the place of punishment in hell.”⁷⁷ Where would be a more appropriate location to preach to an audience of fallen spiritual beings than the prison of hell?

4. *The Connection to the Flood Age*

If Christ went to preach to the evil spirits and demons in hell, the critical question still remains, what connection does this have with the deluge of Noah’s day? Is there, in Peter’s time, some known occurrence of demonic activity from the flood age? A reading of Gen 6:1–4, the dovetailing introduction to Noah and the flood narrative, is interpreted to suggest so. The “sons of God” (Gen 6:2) were fallen angels who disobediently intervened “in human history, which incited the escalating wickedness that earned the diluvian judgment. Regardless of the arguments against this interpretation provided by modern exegetes, that it is indisputably the common view of antiquity is proven by Josephus: “For many angels of God coupled with women and begat sons that proved unjust . . . whom the Grecians called giants.”⁷⁸ Unquestionably, Peter’s first-century readers, quite familiar with Jewish tradition, would naturally link the cause of the flood with the disobedience of fallen angels.⁷⁹

Another argument in favor of this angelological interpretation is the background of this passage in the extra-biblical book of 1 Enoch. In Jewish tradition, after God mysteriously took Enoch, the great-grandfather of Noah, he sent the patriarch to a fiery abyss. “This place is the prison of angels, and here they

⁷⁶ Selwyn notes that “similar conceptions underlie the *verbum Christi* in Matt. 16:18, *the gates of Hades will not prevail against it*, and the description of Christ Himself in Rev. 1:18, *I have the keys of Death and of Hades*” (*First Peter*, 200).

⁷⁷ BAGD, 867. It is therefore unnatural to take φυλακῆ as “the Law, according to Paul (Gal. 3:23) was a sort of prison in which they were kept,” or as the “anxiety of expectation was to them a kind of prison,” as suggested by Calvin (*Catholic Epistles*, vol. 45 of *Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. and ed. Rev. John Owen [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], 114).

⁷⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.73 (Whiston).

⁷⁹ Kelly calls for a renaissance of this interpretation, “There is a growing conviction among scholars that, if the obscurity of the passage is to be cleared up and its relevance appreciated, the key must be sought in the myth of the sin and condemnation of the rebellious angels of Gen. vi. 1–4” (*Peter*, 153).

will be imprisoned forever.”⁸⁰ For what reason were they bound? They had “transgressed the commandments of the Lord.”⁸¹ Enoch journeyed there to proclaim a message of condemnation to the defiant angels. The allusion would not be lost upon the apostle’s early readers, who would intuitively picture Christ as one greater than Enoch who went and triumphed over the demonic realm by pronouncing upon it everlasting doom.⁸²

Appeal to the 1 Enoch context is not undermined by the objection that Peter’s original audience would be unfamiliar with the apocryphal legend, and consequently, because of its ineffective vagueness, would not be referenced by the author. To the contrary, the Enoch tradition is well-known to Jude when he writes his letter. Furthermore, Jude assumes that it is well-known to his readers in that he quotes what appears to be a commonly known passage, *It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying...* (Jude 14 ESV).⁸³ Obviously, Jude does not think that referring to 1 Enoch is counter-productive. Nor apparently does Peter, who in his second letter so clearly uses Jude, who appeals to 1 Enoch (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6). Knowledge of the Enochian narrative was so widespread within early Christianity that “Peter could point to it in formulaic brevity, ‘He preached to the spirits in prison.’”⁸⁴

Interestingly, Grudem uses 1 Enoch against the angelological interpretation to show that the sin of the angels could not be directly connected to the flood. For within the book, the disobedient angels are said to have sinned, not in the days of Noah, but “in the time of Jared, four generations before Noah.”⁸⁵ However, nothing is undermined in this small detail, since the aorist participle ἀπειθήσασιν in v. 20 can be translated *who had been disobedient*. This verb form indicates that angelic disobedience inciting human rebellion and anarchy occurred before the construction of the ark, not simply during it. In addition, while the ancient Jews were notorious for keeping genealogical records, this matter is quite insignificant because of the incredibly vast life spans of Noah’s ancestors (Gen 5:18–27; 7:6). Jared died when he was 962 years old. He lived, after the birth of his great-great-grandson Noah, for another 366 years. Jared’s grandson, Methuselah—the grandfather of Noah—died in the year of the flood after the latter two had enjoyed six hundred years together. The ark builder

⁸⁰ 1 En. 21:1–2 as quoted in Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 161.

⁸¹ 1 En. 21:6 as quoted in Davids, *First Peter*, 140.

⁸² Kelly refers to Enoch as a “type of Christ” (*Peter*, 156).

⁸³ Grudem believes that this quotation disproves familiarity with Enoch since Jude must provide the content to his first-century readers, content that otherwise would have remained unknown (*1 Peter*, 221). However, this seems to be the biblical practice, as seen in Peter’s quotation of Scripture in his epistle to primarily Gentile recipients (1 Pet 1:24–25; 2:6–8), as well as his sermon to devout Jews on Pentecost (Acts 2:17–21, 25–28). Perhaps the interpretive problem lies not in the unfamiliarity with Enoch for first-century readers but rather for the modern reader.

⁸⁴ Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 257.

⁸⁵ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 213.

and the generations of ancestors before him lived not at different times, but within the same era. What disobedience occurred in their lifetimes occurred in Noah's, and that over the course of centuries.

This leads to a related objection regarding *when God's patience waited* (ὅτε ἀπεξεδέχετο ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ μακροθυμία) in v. 20, which rightly suggests that God was awaiting repentance. Grudem protests that since the Bible nowhere teaches that fallen angels will ever have opportunity to repent, then the disobedience at the time of the flood must have been that of the human population.⁸⁶ Therefore supposedly disproven is the idea that the disobedient spirits at the time of the flood were fallen angels and instead must have been Noah's neighbors. But why force the false assumption upon the text that God would ever wait for evil spirits to repent? Naturally, the awaited repentance was directed at humanity.⁸⁷ Peter explains the delay in God's judgment as the result of his patience, *not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance* (2 Pet 3:9 ESV). However, this does not at all discount the reality that the antediluvian human defiance, for which God expected repentance, was instigated by the diabolical activity of evil spirits. Indeed this seems to be evil's standard mode of operation, as it has been since the beginning of the world (Gen 3:1–7). Behind all world upheaval is the unseen demonic realm (Dan 10:13). There is no incongruous dichotomy within the text. The sinister disobedience of evil spirits led to the exponentially increasing lawlessness of humanity, of such proportion that nothing less than global catastrophe was warranted.⁸⁸ Certainly, repentance would have been requisite for such astounding human defiance. To be sure, the pressing need for human repentance was why Noah, while building the ark, so urgently preached (2 Pet 2:5).⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid., 217.

⁸⁷ Selwyn clarifies, "If any object of God's expectant waiting is to be understood, it would be men's repentance" (*First Peter*, 201).

⁸⁸ The focus on the evil spirits during this pivotal time has caused some to wonder, of all the demons of the netherworld, why are these the targets of Christ's proclamation of doom? The answer lies in v. 21 in the typological significance of the flood reflected in *baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you* (ἀντίτυπον νῦν σώζει βάπτισμα). Just as salvation through the flood waters is a type of Christian baptism, so the flood age is related to that of the church typologically. According to Christ, the defiance of the antediluvian era typifies the rampant unbelief that will characterize the world's end (Luke 17:26). Correspondingly, the demonic activity of the pre-flood age symbolizes unbelief throughout the ages. The evil spirits of the deluge are the iconic representation of the demonic realm.

⁸⁹ As mentioned above, Grudem connects the κήρυξις here with the κηρύσσω of the prison preaching to prove that Christ was preaching through Noah to his generation. However, although within the NT κηρύσσω most frequently refers to the gospel message of salvation, it is also used in the general meaning of "declare" or "proclaim" (Luke 12:3; Rom 2:21; Rev 5:2). Moreover, Peter clearly alludes to the preaching of the gospel four times, but never using κηρύσσω; rather he uses εὐαγγελίζω (1:12, 25; 4:6) and εὐαγγέλιον (4:17). Davids claims that the supposed evidence of Grudem "vitiates" the latter's argument since 2 Peter shows full awareness of the Enochian writings and thus the narrative of the angels' imprisonment (*First Peter*, 141).

5. *Christ's Victory Tour*

The immediate context of the prison passage solidifies the angelological view. It ends in v. 22 with Christ's ascension into heaven, *with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him*. The terms *authorities* (ἐξουσιῶν) and *powers* (δυνάμεων) have secular meanings, but taken with *angels* (ἁγγέλων), the three refer in the Pauline sense to the unseen spiritual realm (Eph 1:21; Col 1:16; 1 Cor 15:24). That the angelic beings in this invisible sphere are *subjected* (ὑποταγέντων) suggests they are evil spirits like those that *are subject* (ὑποτάσσεται) to the disciples (Luke 10:17 ESV), and in league with Satan. Jesus' session *at the right hand of God* fulfills the psalmist's prediction of the Messiah (Ps 110:1), sitting in the position of supremacy, enthroned above his enemies, exercising authority and dominion. The glorious picture of Christ's exaltation stunningly portrays his conquest of the demonic realm.

It is this triumph that was initially proclaimed in the prison of hell, which victory tour is reflected in the verb of motion *has gone* (πορευθείς) describing his ascension *into heaven*. For the same aorist passive participle is used earlier when *he went* (πορευθείς) and *proclaimed to the spirits in prison*.⁹⁰ The contrasting parallelism only serves to underscore the direction of Christ's trip to the prison. As *πορευθείς* is used to portray Christ's journey into heaven, its preceding parallel use would likewise depict an excursion of Christ to another region, indeed, a contrasting spiritual realm. Since *πορευθείς* is used to indicate "he ascended," its counterpart would demand "he descended."⁹¹ Not surprisingly, the creedal article naturally fits within the text in the chronological order of events; death (v. 18), descent (v. 19), resurrection (v. 21), and ascension with session (v. 22).⁹²

⁹⁰ If the idea conveyed here is that of Grudem's "Christ preaching through Noah," it would seem a little clumsy to employ a verb used to describe locomotion. In reply, Grudem points out that God's actions in the OT are often couched in terms of his "going" or "coming" (1 Peter, 237). Yet this remains unconvincing, especially since these are significant "events" in redemptive history and not "preaching." Furthermore, the direction is usually that of "descent" (Gen 11:7; 18:21) which does not at all strengthen Grudem's case. In addition, the presence of Christ in preaching is usually described not as a "going" but a "being" (Matt 18:20; 28:20).

⁹¹ Selwyn explains, "As the word there connotes a definite 'going' of Jesus to heaven after His resurrection, so it must connote here an equally 'going' to Hades at the time of His death" (First Peter, 200). This seamlessly harmonizes with other journey passages describing the polar opposite directions: ⁶ *But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)* ⁷ or *"Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)* (Rom 10:6–7 ESV); ⁹ *Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?* (Eph 4:9 NAS).

⁹² Grudem objects, "The idea of sequence in the aorist participles should not be seen as a strong argument against the 'Christ preaching through Noah' view, but as an argument that may carry weight for readers who somehow 'see' the passage in that perspective" (1 Peter, 238). In so resisting, Grudem properly raises the critical point of presupposition within interpretation. If theology since Kant has taught anything about view point, it is that every interpreter has one, he is usually unaware of it, and his presupposition affects how he "sees" the evidence. The question

To be sure, the clear sound of creedal clauses echoing within the text has led to the conclusion that “nowhere else are so many aspects of the second article of the Apostles’ Creed found in a preliminary stage of development.”⁹³ It is this creedal order of articles, perfectly corresponding to the pivotal events surrounding Christ’s death and resurrection that conclusively proves that the prison preaching refers to Jesus’ literal descent into hell instead of to an awkwardly placed, parenthetical reference to a vague, antediluvian, evangelistic rally. At least to the question raised; it is the only interpretation that provides the theological safeguard of catholicity with the ancient church in her pervasive belief in Christ’s spatial descent into hell, observes the theological resistance of Scripture, yet respects the Creed’s sequential structure and does not reduce *descendit* to needless repetition. Undoubtedly, the theological reader will recognize this as Luther’s view.⁹⁴ But with a correct Rufinus narrative that contextualizes the sixteenth-century *descendit* detour, perhaps there is reason for even the most inflexible Calvinists to include in their doctrine this most vital facet of *descendit* in order to develop a more robust theology of Christ’s descent. For it does not exactly contradict the two Reformed interpretations. Rather they are more accurately seen as complementing each other. Like adjacent sides of a jewel, they allow *descendit*’s meaning to shine forth in all its brilliance and fullness.

Within the mind of Peter’s primitive readers, the awe-inspiring thought of a victorious Christ proclaiming a message of doom to the imprisoned evil spirits of the demonic realm—triumphing over a conquered hell—would certainly instill great hope and confidence, for this original audience was suffering the persecution common to first-century believers. They were the objects of insults (4:4, 14); slandered of criminal activity (2:12; 3:16; 4:15); beaten (2:20); and in view of the tradition regarding Peter’s inverted crucifixion, these trials were yet only to intensify. Their understanding of the demonic activity stimulating the godlessness of the flood age would cause them to see that behind their human oppressors, stirring up persecution against Christianity, is the vanquished diabolical realm. Indeed the dominion, authority, and salvation proclaimed in *descendit* is still an amazingly powerful encouragement to downtrodden believers now, like the few in Noah’s day, who are surrounded by a world that is hostile to their faith.

then is not whether presupposition influences perspective, but rather which presupposition is most consistently coherent with the data.

⁹³ Goppelt, *I Peter*, 247; cf. n. 30 above.

⁹⁴ In Luther’s famous sermon at the castle of Torgau, the Reformer—in characteristic fashion—humorously preaches that in the descent Christ “went in and captured the colors like a conquering hero, flinging open the doors and rummaging around among the devils so that one fell out through a window and another through a hole in the wall” (Helmut Thielicke, *I Believe: The Christian Creed*, trans. John W. Doberstein and H. George Anderson [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968], 131). For the influence of Luther’s view on the English Reformation, see Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican.”

IV. *Conclusion*

The critical background of Peter's first-century audience of suffering Christians fast-forwards to the twenty-first century and the lingering "God is dead" experience of modernity predicted by the prophet of the Next Atheism, Friedrich Nietzsche. Since Christ's cry of dereliction (Matt 27:46), more than any other expression, so closely resembles the *Zeitgeist* of God-forsakenness peculiar to the Secular Age,⁹⁵ then Christ's proclamation of evil's doom in his descent into hell is precisely what needs to be declared in the hell-on-earth absence of God.

The abandoned, "death of God" world most desperately needs, not a church with an anemic Christology, itself the result of continual post-Enlightenment accommodation, but rather a vigorous doctrine of Christ most dominantly and uniquely contained in *descendit ad inferna*. Therefore this vital article of the Apostles' Creed cannot be deleted, but must boldly and unapologetically *remain* prevailing in place to declare the triumph of God in the hell-on-earth silence of God.

⁹⁵ Cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).