

The Apostle's Creed - Hell

QUESTION:

"Hi, I've been searching the web trying to locate any discussion on the section in the Apostle's Creed that says "He descended into hell". I am a Christian and was taught the Creed at an early age. I never really considered this line 'til it came up in a Sunday School class where a member of the class said that this was not scriptural. I have read some discussion that the reference in Ephesians 4:8 to 10 is used but at best everything seems muddy as to what this line means. I am only concerned for the fact that when new Christians hear this kind of discussion from someone who should be a mature Christian, they may also discount other parts of the Apostle's Creed which I think would be sad indeed. If you can shed any light on the matter, I would appreciate your comments."

ANSWER:

Dear Mr. -----,

I first of all must address your comments concerning the Apostle's Creed. I understand that your acceptance of the creed is in sincerity, however, I hope you will carefully consider the acceptance of this creed in light of the Scriptures. Please read and study the following with the understanding it is written in sincere love and concern.

The New Covenant (Testament), made valid by the death of Jesus Christ, is the one and only constitution of Christ's church. The New Testament is all-sufficient for our every need. "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2Tim. 3:15-16; also see 2Pet. 1:2-3). The warnings concerning additions or subtractions the Scriptures themselves give point to their all-sufficiency (Gal. 1:6-10; 2Jn. 9; Rev. 22:18-19).

The Apostle's Creed to which your refer, is a uninspired document. It is neither of apostolic origin, nor does it's existence agree with the apostolic teaching of the Bible. If the apostles had written such a document, it would have been carefully and accurately passed down without modification.

However, existing documents show that the creed has undergone gradual change. In fact the line "He descended into hell" was neither included in the Marcelli Ancyran (a Greek version of the creed, A.D. 340), nor even in some of the Latin versions of the creed (cf. Romana, from the 3d or 4th century) It was not until the later that this line and others appeared. (see History of the Christian Church, by Philip Schaff, Vol. 2, pp.535-536 for an example of these text).

Even if every line in a creed states truth, it is still a creed, simply a statement of conclusions made by men. A creed is a statement of belief. And even if that statement of belief is based on the Scriptures it is not the Scriptures. Creeds point men in the wrong direction. To find truth that one might obey and be acceptable to God one should not look to a creed, a statement of belief about the truth, one needs to look at the TRUTH; for statements made by men may or may not be true.

Many base the spiritual soundness of an individual upon how they accept or reject the articles listed in the creeds they cherish and publish. Spiritual soundness comes as a result of studying, believing and obeying what the Word of God says, regardless of what a creed says or does not say.

Many claim spiritual soundness, because they have accepted a particular creed to be truthful. Yet many have accepted the creed without knowing the Scriptures from which it is supposedly based upon. Thus, their faith and hope is based on a statement of men's belief and not on the Scriptures themselves. This is what you have implied in your comments to me concerning yourself. You no doubt accept the Apostles Creed as you stated that you "think it would be sad indeed" if someone were to "discount" a part of this creed. Yet, you have not closely examined the creed or the Scriptures from which it was produced; for you state, "I never really considered this line 'til it came up in a Sunday School class."

The answer is to turn from the creeds of men to the Word of God alone. It alone is the "power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). Consider this... If a creed has more than the Bible it has too much. If a creed has less than the Bible it does not have enough. If a creed contains the same as the Bible why do you need it! (cf. 2Jn. 9). In the judgment we will not stand before the Lord and be judged by any creed, it is the Word of God by which we will be judged (Jn. 12:48).

Now concerning whether or not Jesus "descended into hell." The statement "He descended into hell" is nowhere found in the Scriptures. However, it seems to be based upon two statements made by Peter; one in Acts 2:27 and 1Pet 3:18.

In Acts 2:27 Peter was quoting Psalm 16 to show that Jesus was not left dead but raised alive. Acts 2:27 of the King James Version reads "Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption." This translation has led some to conclude that Jesus went to hell only was not left there. The word "hell" here is an unfortunate and misleading translation. The term in the original is the Greek word "hades" which literally refers to the region of departed spirits. It is not "gehenna" the term Jesus used to describe as eternal punishment (Matt. 5:22) that we usually associate with the word "hell." Other versions of the Bible (NKJV, NASB, RSV, ASV, NRSV) translate with "hades" in Acts 2:27.

Men do not immediately go into their final state after death, but rather go to the hades realm to wait the resurrection and the judgment (cf. Matt. 5:28-29). This realm of the dead is separated into two parts by a great gulf. One part of the realm assigned for the wicked and their torment, the other for the righteous which is for them, a place of comfort (see Lk. 16:19-ff).

Jesus' died when His spirit left His body (Jn. 19:30). Where did it go? Not to "gehenna," the place prepared for the devil and his angels, but to "hades" the realm of the dead. What part of hades? To the part where the righteous dwell. Jesus said to the thief that hung beside him on the cross, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:43). Jesus however, was not left in this hades realm, but as Peter explained from Ps. 16 God did not abandon His soul to Hades, nor allowed His Holy One to undergo decay (Acts. 2:27). Jesus' spirit was reunited with His body on the third day, raised alive.

To conclude that Jesus went to hell, that is, the place of eternal torment, is a misunderstanding of the Scriptures.

Some may also conclude from Peter's statement in 1Pet. 3:18-19 that Jesus went to "hell." It states, "...He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient..." Jesus did not have to enter into the part of the hades realm where these spirits were, to make proclamation to them. Abraham did not have to leave from where he and Lazarus were to speak to the rich man who was in torment (Lk. 16). But even if Jesus did this is still not "gehenna," the place prepared for the devil and his angels that we usually associate with "hell."

As far as Eph. 4:8-10 the only similarity this passage has with the phrase in question is the word "descended." Nowhere in this passage does it mention in the English or the Greek anything concerning hell or hades. Here Jesus is said to have "descended into the lower parts of the earth," not hell.

The point the apostle is making in this passage is concerning pre-existence of Christ with God. When it is stated that Jesus has "ascended," Paul declares it is necessary to conclude that He "also had descended." This passage has nothing to do with Jesus going to hell, but rather with the ascension of Christ and His pre-existence from all eternity. The whole context deals with Christian unity and how that unity is attained by following what Christ has provided through those who proclaim and teach His truth.

Please consider these things carefully and examine them by the Scriptures. I hope this is helpful and I look forward from hearing from you after your study of these things.

Yours truly,

Paul Smithson
