



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 129

“He descended into hell” – Another area of misunderstanding with regards to Christ’s work of atonement is related to His death. Throughout church history some have held the view that after His death, Jesus’ body was placed in the tomb but His soul descended into hell, until His resurrection.

Nowhere in the Bible do we find the words “descended into hell” or any other similar phrase with respect to what happened to Jesus after His death. The actual phrase comes from the Apostles’ Creed. This is one of the oldest creeds of the church, going back to the middle of the 2nd century. It is called the Apostles’ Creed not because it is the direct work of the apostles, but because the articles found in the Creed can be traced to apostolic teaching. However, the phrase “He descended into hell” appeared in the Creed in 390 AD. And so throughout church history there have been many interpretations of this phrase, attempting to provide a theologically sound explanation, in line with the teachings of Scripture.

Some have taught that the Latin word “*inferna*,” meaning under or lower, referred to Christ’s body being placed in the tomb after His death. But this would be an unnecessary addition to the Creed as it already states that Christ was crucified, dead and buried. Calvin states that the phrase affirms that Christ’s suffering was not merely His physical death but involved His spiritual sufferings – the curse and punishment of hell that sinful man deserves. This view is also affirmed by the Heidelberg Catechism (Question 44). But such an explanation refers to hell not as a place, but as an experience of extreme agony and suffering, which Jesus endured on the cross and before His death; and though these are in line with the teachings of Scripture, they do not fit the order or purpose of the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed.

Others, referring to the Greek translation of “*inferna*” as “*hades*,” explain that it means the abode of the dead prior to the resurrection, distinct from the Greek word “*gehenna*” which refers to the final place of punishment for the ungodly; thus it is argued that the phrase means that after His death and burial, Christ’s soul continued “in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day.” This is the interpretation presented by the Westminster Larger Catechism (Question 50). Though biblically accurate (Luke 16:22-23) and plausible, it does not seem to add any significant meaning to the Creed.

Also others teach that after His death Jesus did descend into hell, but not as a continuation of His sufferings, but to declare victory and even preach the gospel to various groups. These will be examined in the next study. One thing in common about the views highlighted thus far is that none teaches that Christ had to go to hell after His death to suffer further punishment and finish the work of atonement.

There are, however, groups such as the Charismatic Word of Faith movement, which teach that in addition to His physical death, Jesus needed to also suffer spiritually in hell, being tormented by demons. Some even go further and teach that Jesus died spiritually, took on the nature of Satan, went to hell to suffer, and therefore after three days needed to be born again by God. Such teachings are heretical, contrary to the doctrines of Scripture, and are to be emphatically rejected.

The Bible teaches that to die spiritually means to become sinful in nature, to be a slave of sin, to desire evil, and to be in rebellion against God (Ephesians 2:1-3; John 8:32-34; Romans 5:10). On the cross, though Christ as our substitute was treated as a sinner, He was at no point a sinner, remaining sinless and perfectly righteous, and at all times desiring to do the will of His Father. If at any point Christ had died spiritually, He would have ceased to be our perfect sacrifice; and far worse, there would have been the union of a sinful human nature with the divine nature in the person of Christ; a totally absurd and unbiblical notion (Habakkuk 1:13a; 1 John 1:5). The Bible is clear that Christ completed all that was required to satisfy the demands of God for the salvation of sinners on the cross; and after His death on the cross His body was buried, and His spirit went to be with His Father (John 19:30; Luke 23:43, 46).