

## The Larger Catechism

### Questions 49-50

49. **Q. How did Christ humble himself in his death?**  
**A.** Christ humbled himself in his death, in that having been betrayed by Judas,[193] forsaken by his disciples,[194] scorned and rejected by the world,[195] condemned by Pilate, and tormented by his persecutors;[196] having also conflicted with the terrors of death, and the powers of darkness, felt and borne the weight of God's wrath,[197] he laid down his life an offering for sin,[198] enduring the painful, shameful, and cursed death of the cross.[199]
50. **Q. Wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after his death?**  
**A.** Christ's humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried,[200] and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day;[201] which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, He descended into hell.

#### Scriptural Defense and Commentary

[193] **Matthew 27:4.** Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. [194] **Matthew 26:56.** But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled. [195] **Isaiah 53:2-3.** For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. [196] **Matthew 27:26-50.** Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified, etc. **John 19:34.** But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. [197] **Luke 22:44.** And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. **Matthew 27:46.** And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? [198] **Isaiah 53:10.** Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. [199] **Philippians 2:8.** And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. **Hebrews 12:2.** Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. **Galatians 3:13.** Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree. [200] **1 Corinthians 15:3-4.** For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures. [201] **Psalms 16:10.** For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. **Acts 2:24-27, 31.** Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.... He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. **Romans 6:9.** Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. **Matthew 12:40.** For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

#### *Humiliation: Circumstances Surrounding Jesus' Death*

We must include the circumstances surrounding our Lord's death as being part of His estate of humiliation. The first thing we see is the way he was delivered up — *having been betrayed by Judas*. That Judas was one of the twelve apostles made his betrayal that much more poignant and painful. He was personally chosen by Christ and ended up betraying our Lord with a kiss (Lk.

22:48). This betrayal was foretold (Jn. 13:18; Ps. 41:9; cf. 55:12-14) but that does not lessen the humiliation involved. “And providence permitted his betrayer to be a part of his sufferings, that we may learn from it, that hypocrites sometimes mix themselves with his faithful servants, and that, notwithstanding the mask of disguise of religion which they affect, their hypocrisy will, one time or other, be made manifest. This was a wound given, not by an open enemy, but by a pretended friend, and therefore was the more grievous.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to being betrayed, he is also *forsaken by his disciples* (cf. Mt. 26:31 and 26:56, “But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled.”). We forget how much this would pain us. But our Lord takes comfort in His heavenly Father and not in his own beloved disciples (Jn. 16:32): “Behold, an hour is coming, and has *already* come, for you to be scattered, each to his own *home*, and to leave Me alone; and *yet* I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.” All the time and energy invested in them seem to disappear at the hour of His greatest need. They will forsake Him while He remains faithful. The humiliation is so easy to see. Most of us would hold a strong bitter grudge against our friends who failed and disowned us in our great time of need. Jesus felt the humiliation and pain of this but did hold it against them. Quite often we think of the wonder of grace in restoring Peter after his denial but we must also recognize that all his disciples forsook Him and all of them received much grace in being reinstated as His disciples and apostles. In addition, we read of a similar circumstance in the life of Apostle Paul, “At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed...” (2 Tim. 4:14:16-17).

Our Lord was also *scorned and rejected by the world*. The catechism cites Isaiah 53:2-3, “For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” Similar language is used in Ps. 22:6-7, “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads...” If anyone had a reason to be paranoid, our Lord did. Yet, He handled Himself with grace and humility while the world raged against Him.

Christ’s own creation rejects Him; the world rejects her own creator and Lord (a point highlighted by Vos). But even as the incarnate Son, as the Messiah, he was rejected. The religious leaders plotted against him (Lk. 22:2) and frequently tried to entrap him by their questions (Lk. 20:20). While praised by some men, he also knew what was in them (Jn. 2:25). They could find no sin against Him (Jn. 8:46) but they despised Him. Those who sang hallelujah as He entered Jerusalem did not come to his aid when He went to the cross.

Just before his death, we are told that he was *condemned by Pilate, and tormented by his persecutors*. Pilate condemned him (Mt. 27:26-50; Acts 13:28; 1 Tim. 6:13). The Apostle’s Creed states that our Lord “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Why is that so important? Is it just a mere historical detail? It is explicitly

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<sup>1</sup> Ridgeley, 1:594.

pointed out in all the Gospels and mentioned four times after. To suffer under Pilate indicated that Jesus was *unjustly* condemned by a public human court which God appointed to administer justice. Jesus suffered under Pilate's unjust ruling who cared little about the injustice he was carrying out. He said that he found nothing wrong with him: "I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ...I have found in him no guilt deserving death." (Lk. 23:14, 22) So our Lord suffered injustice in the hands of Pilate. In addition to this, our Lord's death would become a public act as opposed to some private lynching. This is a point brought out on the road to Emmaus: "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" (Lk. 24:18) Paul says, "...for this has not been done in a corner." (Acts 26:26) The third reason Pilate is explicitly mentioned is to indicate how Pilate fulfilled the prophecy of Ps. 2: "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed..." and the disciples refer to that Psalm to indicate how Herod and Pontius Pilate fulfilled it. They said, "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." (Acts 4:25-28)

Condemned by Pilate, he also suffered under his persecutors who mocked and hurt Him; He was *tormented by his persecutors*. They mocked him with a crown of thorns. They stripped him (Mt. 27:31), struck him (Mk. 15:19), and spat upon him (Mk. 15:19). The scribes and chief priests also mocked him (Mk. 15:31). He suffered all this not for Himself but for us in obedience to His heavenly Father.

The circumstances surrounding His death were not the worst there ever was. They were frighteningly painful and traumatic but men have suffered worse physical pain. Yet, we are not like our Lord. The indignities we suffer as sinful human beings are understandable. But for the holy innocent God-man to suffer such humiliation is astounding. Even His closest friends forsook Him and one close to Him betrayed Him. His enemies mocked and taunted Him. All these things are unbecoming of one like our Lord but He willingly took upon Himself this role as the suffering servant for our sake and salvation. He could have fought back but He did not: "and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously..." (1 Pet. 2:23) Remember, we deserve our sufferings. But none of these humbling acts done against Him were necessary, righteous, or fitting. He voluntarily underwent the humiliation surrounding His death because of His willingness to obey the Father and secure our salvation.

#### *Humiliation: On the Cross*

We have looked at the circumstances surrounding our Lord's sufferings. These afflictions came to him from the hands of men. But there were personal struggles as well — that is, the sufferings he endured in his soul. The catechism states: *having also conflicted with the terrors of death, and the powers of darkness*. In the Garden of Gethsemane our Lord wrestled with terrors of death awaiting him (Lk. 22:44, "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was

as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”) and some think Satan’s hand was particularly involved in bringing to mind the horrors of death to Christ (cf. Ridgley). In Luke 22:53, Jesus said, “But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.” The powers of darkness were in full display; they were poised against our Lord.

Turretin points out that the Papists deny the spiritual suffering of our Lord.<sup>2</sup> Catholic theologians have traditionally maintained that Christ had instant perfect knowledge since his birth and that he always possessed the perfect beatific vision of God. They recognize that this conflicts with his sufferings at Gethsemane and on the cross.<sup>3</sup> John 12:27 says, “Now is my soul troubled (ἡ ψυχὴ μου τετάρραται). And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.” Jesus said, “‘My soul is very sorrowful (περίλυπός ἐστιν ἡ ψυχὴ μου), even to death...’ (Mt. 26:38). What do we make of our Lord weeping over Jerusalem or at Lazarus’s death? This is a ridiculous error on their part; they should have dispensed with it and accept the plain testimony of Scripture on this matter.

His sufferings also included suffering God’s wrath - *felt and borne the weight of God’s wrath*.<sup>4</sup> The cry on the cross came from God’s judicial separation from our Lord. Mt. 27:46 reads, “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Jesus was “smitten by God, and afflicted” and he was “crushed for our iniquities” (Is. 53:4, 5) on the cross. His humiliation was not just from men – He was treated (judicially) as a vile sinner by His heavenly Father.

An aspect of his humiliation we often fail to recognize is that *he laid down his life an offering for sin*. Remember, Isaiah 53:10 speaks of the Lord crushing him and putting him to grief “when his souls makes an offering for sin...” Jesus “died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). Though Jesus was Holy, He nonetheless took upon Himself our sins in order to pay the penalty for them. Christ was the *sinless sin-bearer*. Murray says that Christ “came into the closest relation to *sin* that it was possible for him to come without thereby becoming himself sinful....Sin involves guilt and the death of Christ as sacrifice is

<sup>2</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 13.14.3 (2:353). Cf. Bernard J. Otten, *A Manual of the History of Dogmas*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1918), 178-179, 193-194.

<sup>3</sup> Pohle and Preuss resort to Melchior Canus’s solution. Joseph Pohle and Arthur Preuss, *Christology: A Dogmatic Treatise on the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1916), 258: “Canus draws a real distinction between the action of the intellect (*actus intellectus* = *visio*) and the action of the will (*actus voluntatis* = *gaudium*) in the *visio beatifica*, and holds that Jesus on the cross continued to enjoy the vision of God, though without the beatitude ordinarily attending it.” That is, Jesus never ceased to possess the beatific vision though he did not consciously feel it. They admit that this is a very difficult conundrum, Joseph Wilhelm and Thomas B. Scannell, *A Manual of Catholic Theology* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1909), 2:149. Pohle and Preuss called it “a most difficult problem in Christology.” Most catholic theologians try to explain this problem by distinguishing between the senses of Christ and his soul. See also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:416-417.

<sup>4</sup> See our study on LC #38 where we develop the doctrine of propitiation and the satisfaction of divine justice on the cross. We will assume that study in this question.

the provision for our guilt."<sup>5</sup> So Christ was real sin - "Him who knew no sin, he (i.e. the Father) made to be sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21).

He endured much on the cross — *enduring the painful, shameful, and cursed death of the cross*. He was cursed on the cross to redeem us from the curse of the law: Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." (Gal. 3:13) The shame involved on the cross (as if he were a vile criminal), the jeers he received, the misunderstanding, etc. were all part of painful and shameful experiences of our Lord (Heb. 12:2, "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.").

#### *Humiliation after His Death*

Our Catechism says, "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."

Christ's burial and death further expressed the state of humiliation our Lord underwent in our behalf. The burial and death were clear indications that he really and truly died and that he truly paid the penalty of sin since the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). There is one marvelous observation brought out by James Fisher on this theological point, "Q. What may we learn from Christ's begin buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time? A. That the grave being 'the place where the Lord lay,' Matt. 28:6, it cannot but be sweet to a dying saint, to think that he is to lie down in the same bed; and that, in like manner, as 'Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus, will God bring with him,' 1 Thess. 4:14."<sup>6</sup>

#### *Did Jesus Descend into Hell?*

In the so called Apostles' Creed, there exists a controversial phrase "he descended into hell."<sup>7</sup> What does that mean? Is it a biblical doctrine? What is the point in affirming such a view? If we omit this phrase from the creed, do we lose anything valuable?

The Westminster Larger Catechism #50 asks, "Wherein consists Christ's humiliation after his death?" To which it answers, "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*." This answer is the Reformed response to the Apostles' Creed's phrase "He descended into Hell." The Larger Catechism represents the traditional Reformed interpretation of the phrase.

The last phrase was not always in the Creed. Rufinus (c. 390) argued that the phrase was not found in the early Roman editions though it existed in the Greek text. It eventually did find official recognition around 700 AD. Yet,

<sup>5</sup>John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 1:38. "Strictly speaking, then, the guilt of sin as liability to punishment was imputed to Christ; and this could be transferred, because it did not inhere in the person of the sinner, but was something objective" (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 377).

<sup>6</sup>James Fisher, *The Assembly's Shorter Catechism Explained, By Way of Question and Answer. In Two Parts.*, New ed. (U.K.: Berith Publications, 1998), 149.

<sup>7</sup>The Latin reads: *crucifixus, mortuus, et sepultus; descendit ad inferna*.

Rufinus believed the phrase in the Greek meant "descended into the grave."<sup>8</sup> In the popular evangelical culture, Christians have done much to interpret this phrase to mean that Christ entered into Hell and combated the Devil. Lutherans seem to teach that Christ literally descended into Hell.<sup>9</sup> Many interpretations have been offered to square this phrase with the Bible.

Calvin believed that the phrase meant that Christ suffered the pains of Hell while on the cross (*Institutes*, 2.16.10); it did not mean that Christ literally descended into Hell; rather, He underwent the torments of Hell on the cross (a metaphorical interpretation), "he bore in his soul the tortures of condemned and ruined man." For Calvin, if Christ did not undergo this, then He would have only suffered physically.

Nothing had been done if Christ had only endured corporeal death. In order to interpose between us and God's anger, and satisfy his righteous judgment, it was necessary that he should feel the weight of divine vengeance. Whence also it was necessary that he should engage, as it were, at close quarters with the powers of hell and the horrors of eternal death (2.16.10).

It appears that the Heidelberg Catechism (#44) sustains a similar interpretation. Our Shorter Catechism (#27) avoids this language and says that Christ's humiliation consisted "in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time." Grudem rightly believes that these are "unconvincing attempt[s] to salvage some theologically acceptable sense out of them."<sup>10</sup> The Apostle's Creed never had the notoriety and recognition that the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds did in the early church. It is best to take the Larger Catechism's interpretation of the Creed's clause if one wants to use this phrase (Witsius says, "...we sincerely believe and assert it, when rightly interpreted").<sup>11</sup> However, the literal word "Hell" never means "being dead" in the English language.

Some scriptural passages seem to support a literal descent into hell. Ps. 16:10 says, "because you will not abandon me to the grave (*sheol*, לְשֵׁאוֹל), nor will you let your Holy One see decay."<sup>12</sup> In the NT, Acts 2:27 translates it (*sheol*) as *hades* (ᾗδην). The Acts passage teaches that the purpose for citing Ps. 16:10 was to compare David's situation (v. 29, "his tomb is here to this day" or Acts 13:36, "he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed") with Christ's resurrection. In v. 31, Peter says that Jesus "was not abandoned to the grave (*hades*, ᾗδην), nor did his body see decay." The contrast is between David's

<sup>8</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 586-587; Smith, *Systematic Theology*, I:416.

<sup>9</sup>In the *Formula of Concord*, Article IX: "For it ought to be enough for us to know that Christ descended into hell, that he destroyed hell for all believers, and that we through him have been snatched from the power of death and Satan, from eternal damnation, and even from the jaws of hell" (cited in Smith, *Systematic Theology*, 417). See also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:414-15.

<sup>10</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 587.

<sup>11</sup>H. Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed*, translated by Donald Fraser (Glasgow: Khull, Blackie & Co., 1823; reprinted, Escondido, CA: P&R Pub. Co., 1993), 2:141.

<sup>12</sup>Dabney seems to believe this supports something like a descent: "Protestants, by *hades* of Ps. xvi:10, now understand simply the invisible or spirit world, to which Christ's soul went while disembodied" (*Systematic Theology*, 546).

death and Jesus' resurrection. Besides, it is certain that *sheol* at times simply means "the grave" or "death."<sup>13</sup>

Rom. 10:6-7 has been used by some to support the view that Christ descended into Hell. Rom. 10:6-7, "But the righteousness based on faith speaks thus, " Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), or ' Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). " First of all, the meaning of this passage is not immediately clear. We need to be careful to deal with the text in its context. Secondly, Paul's interpretation of "Who will descend into the abyss (τίς καταβήσεται εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον)" pertains to the resurrection. In this particular context, Paul is addressing the matter of justification by faith and how this has been revealed to all of us. "Their import is that the things revealed for faith and life are accessible: we do not have to ascend to heaven nor go to the utmost parts of the sea to find them...We do not need to go down to the abyss to find the truth any more than we need to ascend to heaven for the same purpose."<sup>14</sup> In verse 8, we are taught that "the word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart." So this passage does not support the claim that he descended into hell; Paul says that the phrase means Christ was brought up from the dead.

Eph. 4:8-9 has also been used by some to suggest that Christ went into Hell. In verse 9, Paul says Christ descended into the lower parts of the earth. What does that mean? One commentator says that the "contrast here in Ephesians 4:9, 10 is between an ascent to heaven and a descent from there.... Paul's contrast is 'not between one part of the earth and another, but between the whole earth and heaven', and this fits with the twofold cosmology of the letter, where 'all things' is made up of 'heaven and earth.'"<sup>15</sup> The context suggests that Paul is simply stating that Christ came down to the earth (technically, it could be argued that the phrase could be translated as 'the earth below' as opposed to "the lower parts of the earth"; the genitive could be a genitive of apposition, 'the lower part which are the earth' — that the genitive further clarifies the previous noun, i.e., the city of Philadelphia could be said to be 'the city which is called Philadelphia').<sup>16</sup>

However, 1Peter 3:18-20 has been most used to support Christ's descent to Hell and His ministry to Christ preaching in Hell (or ministering to OT Saints or preaching to Angels). The phrase "he went and preached to the spirits in prison" (v. 19) has been used as a second chance for those in Hell. However, v. 20 teaches us that the audience in view were those "who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built." The reference to angels is foreign to the text — we have no record that specific angels disobeyed during the building of the ark. In regard to the OT saints, the text

<sup>13</sup>For a critique of Rom. 10:6-7 and Eph. 4:8-9, see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 588-589. The Romans passage is speaking about the accessibility of Christ and Eph., the NIV rendering suggests simply that Christ came down to earth (in his incarnation). Much of what follows in this section has been drawn from Grudem. Shedd disagrees and takes *sheol* to be a reference to a place of future punishment.

<sup>14</sup>Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:52-54.

<sup>15</sup>P. T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, ed. D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 294-295.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 589.

argues that the spirits in question are those who disobeyed and not the saints mingling in the nether world until Christ came.

Augustine's explanation seems to best make sense of the whole matter, namely, Christ, through His eternal Spirit, spoke to men in the time of Noah's building of the ark. In 1Pet. 1:11, we read of the "Spirit of Christ" speaking through the OT prophets.<sup>17</sup> In 2Peter 2:5, Noah is specifically labeled as the "preacher of righteousness." Christ, in effect, preached to Noah's contemporaries through Noah. They are considered "spirits in prison" because they are now imprisoned in Hell.

*Arguments against Jesus going into Hell*

We are told in Luke 23:43 that Jesus was going straight up to Paradise upon His death, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." (See 2Cor. 12:4 where paradise is equated with the "third heaven" in v. 2; also see Rev. 2:7). Also, our Lord exclaimed, "It is finished!" on the cross (Jn. 19:30) and during our Lord's crucifixion, he cried, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). All these passages teach us that our Lord immediately went into the presence of the Father.

Fisher's elaborations on the Catechism are helpful (question 27) in further analyzing what happened.

*Q. 32. Were the soul and body of Christ actually separated by death on the cross?*

A. Yes; for when he 'had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hand I commend my spirit; and having said thus, he gave up the ghost,' Luke xxiii. 46.

*Q. 33. Were either soul or body separated from his divine person?*

A. No; it is impossible they could, because the union of the human nature to his divine person is absolutely inviolable, 'Jesus being the same, yesterday, and to-day, and for ever,' Heb. xiii. 8.

*Q. 39. What do you understand by these words in the CREED, He descended into hell?*

A. Nothing else but his descending into the grave, to be under the power of death, as its prisoner, Psal. xvi. 10.

Should we have this in our Creed? Is it something we should assent to? We do not think it is all that helpful. If retained, it needs to be explained very carefully and guarded against confusion. Grudem's answer is compelling:

It has no clear warrant from Scripture and indeed seems to be contradicted by some passages in Scripture. It has no claim to being 'apostolic' and no support (in the sense of a 'descent into hell') from the first six centuries of the church. It was not in the earliest

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<sup>17</sup>1Pet. 1:10-11, "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow."

versions of the Creed and was only included in it later because of an apparent misunderstanding about its meaning. Unlike every other phrase in the Creed, it represents not some major doctrine on which all Christians agree, but rather a statement about which most Christians seem to disagree. It is at best confusing and in most cases misleading for modern Christians. My own judgment is that there would be all gain and no loss if it were dropped from the Creed once for all.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Conclusion*

The phrase "he descended into hell" is not all that beneficial if we interpret Christ's death to mean something more than mere physical death. Christ's death consumed the full requirements of the God's justice; God obviously was satisfied with it since Christ immediately went to the Father.

#### *Why?*

There have been some who have argued that this descent into hell gave those who are dead another chance. Early church fathers suggested that Christ preached the gospel to the OT saints – this was their chance to believe in the Messiah.<sup>19</sup> But the NT makes it clear that they were saved in hope of the Messiah (cf. Heb. 11). These days, men like Clark Pinnock have argued for a postmortem evangelism by appealing to the 1Peter passage: "Logic aside, does the idea of a postmortem encounter have scriptural support? It seems to have some in Peter's word about the Gospel being preached to the dead, where the text sounds as if the dead are being given an opportunity to respond to Christ (1 Pe 3:19-20; 4:6)."<sup>20</sup> We can see that there are problems associated with the phrase "descended into hell."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 594.

<sup>19</sup>Daniel A. du Toit, "Descensus and Universalism: Some Historical Patterns of Interpretation," in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1992), 73-92.

<sup>20</sup>Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 169.

<sup>21</sup>One wonders if the Roman Catholic denial of a rational suffering of Christ is not also the reason they maintain Christ's descent. A focus on physical suffering coupled with his descent into hell would be their way of making his death more unique.