Word & World
Volume 31, Number 1
Winter 2011

He Descended into Hell

JAMES F. KAY

For Christopher Morse on the occasion of his 75th birthday

As a young pastor in a Minnesota village, I received a phone call from a woman telling me her father had died, felled unexpectedly by a heart attack. Such calls are not uncommon for pastors, but what made this one especially memorable were her words, "I hope he made it." In that terse sentence are gathered up both our hopes and our fears about hell. For many, perhaps most, the Christian faith is about "making it" to heaven and avoiding an eternity in hell. This sentiment is not simply an aspect of American Protestant folk piety or a theme of revivalism and enthusiasm animating the real religion of many Americans. It also accurately mirrors what the ecumenical church and many of her great theologians have taught the faithful through the centuries. This boilerplate doctrine that we might style—borrowing a term from another discussion in a different context—"the two ways"[1] holds that there is a postmortem human destiny in which one joins a relatively few in the blessed realm of the eternally redeemed while the great mass of humankind is consigned to punishment in the hell of the eternally rejected. The only way to escape this fate is through faith in Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose to life for our salvation. When one believes in him and trusts in the merits of his unmer-

[1]See J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Doubleday: New York, 1997) esp. 324–334.

Jesus' descent into hell has been interpreted in many ways, sometimes related to the crucifixion and suffering, sometimes to the resurrection and victory. For preaching and teaching, the descent emphasizes the universal scope of salvation, God's solidarity with suffering humanity, and the subjection by God of sin, death, and evil.

ited grace, one is transferred by God from the damned column to the saved column. (Infants are covered by baptism or divine clemency.)

Where this standard account governs the meaning of salvation, it also determines the essential purpose of preaching. Hell bespeaks the typical destiny of human beings as sinners. Preaching must make this point, and sometimes rather graphically, as in the rhetorical strategies of revivalism. The preacher "moves" folks to a decision to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Turning up the heat in the pulpit becomes a surefire way to rescue souls for heaven. Lacking this decision or conversion experience by the time of one's death is tantamount to not "making it." Given these stakes, every sermon should focus on "the one thing needful." Even the funeral sermon becomes evangelistically enlisted either by reciting the deceased's virtues as evidence of making it, or by spinning a cautionary tale of "too late" in which mourners are solemnly warned lest they, too, perish.

this "prophetic" or "justice" preaching, as with the revivalism it would replace, also revels in making final judgments on others

Another version of this standard account is more typical in "progressive" circles. In this version, the world is also divided up between the many and the few. But here, the damnable turn out to be only the relatively few but powerful oppressors while the blessed are the millions who are oppressed. In this reversal, God's judgment, wrath, and moral outrage will be visited on the powerful, unless they change their ways, repent, and receive the stamp of approval from their victims. Preaching becomes the task of throwing the book at these oppressors, which usually means the bourgeoisie who continue to sit in mainline pews and pay the bills. The preacher is also charged with comforting the afflicted, as the saying goes, but they are frequently and conveniently nowhere in sight. This is often styled "prophetic" or "justice" preaching, but as with the revivalism it would replace, it also revels in making final judgments on others. High-minded preachers are not always beyond their own atavistic impulses in wanting to see people getting smoked. Don't we want to watch while the bad guys get it? We want them locked up and the keys thrown away; we want them squirming and cowering before the families of their victims. And for those who planned and manned the transatlantic slave trade, gas chambers in Auschwitz, carpet bombing in Vietnam, genocide in Rwanda, "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia, the airborne massacres of September 11, 2001, or who covered up child sexual abuse "to protect the church," or armed Ugandan children for some "Lord's army," then why not hell? If God is just, where else could God put them? "See you in hell," says Clint Eastwood, as he blows away Gene Hackman, the crooked lawman in *Unforgiven*. Right on, Clint. Give 'em hell!

Despite its acknowledgment of hell as a place of death and punishment, what the Scriptures proclaim as the final reality is not hell—but Jesus Christ, the Alpha

and the Omega. They announce the news that humanity's real life is in Jesus Christ so that what became of him will become of us: "For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor 15:22). They proclaim that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16) and that the Lord is "not wanting any to perish" (2 Pet 3:9). But how can we understand the scriptural teaching of hell with its forceful language of judgment, condemnation, and damnation in light of the final victory of Jesus Christ? For preachers who still take seriously the scriptural witness and the dogmatic traditions of the church, and therefore cannot simply remove hell from its reflection and vocabulary, a helpful orientation may be found in taking our bearings from the Apostles' Creed.

The Place of the Dead and the Damned

Our first evidence in the Roman West for a creedal, "He descended into hell" (*descendit ad inferna*), as distinct from the teaching of individual church fathers, comes from the creed used in Aquileia and taken up by Rufinus (ca. 345–410) in his *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* (ca. 404).[2] Here are found several recurring themes and motifs on the descent into hell that remain influential to this day.

First, Rufinus notes that "its meaning…appears to be precisely the same as that contained in the affirmation BURIED."[3] In defense of this view Rufinus appeals especially to Pss 16:10; 22:15; 30:3, 9; and 69:2. By a christological reading, they are heard as the Lord's prophecies regarding his own death.[4] Taking two for closer examination, the NRSV rendering of Ps 16:10 simply transliterates the Hebrew word *she'ol*:

> For you do not give me up to Sheol,
> or let your faithful one see the Pit.

The AV renders this Sheol as "hell," while the Old Latin text used by Rufinus employs the term *inferna*. The pattern of Sheol being rendered by the Old Latin as *inferna* also holds with Ps 30:3, which the NRSV again translates by transliterating *she'ol*:

> O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
> restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

As the Hebrew parallelism suggests, Sheol can denote a "grave," and is so rendered here by the AV, as it is in one other context by the NRSV (Song 8:6). At the most literal level, then, the descent *ad inferna* means that Jesus Christ went to his grave like any other child of Israel. Thus the descent into hell, in reinforcing the creedal "was buried," underscores that Jesus Christ was truly dead.

Nevertheless, hell becomes more than a gloss on the burial of Jesus Christ, expanding into a scene of its own in the drama of salvation. This takes place because

[2]Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, trans. and ed. J. N. D. Kelly (New York: Newman, 1978). For patristic background and developments, see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (1972) 378–383.

[3]Rufinus, *Commentary*, 52.

[4]Ibid., 61.

Sheol represents in Hebrew and Jewish traditions "the place of the dead." It is cryptically and variously depicted in the Old Testament as a dark, lower world where the dead linger as shadows of their former selves, cut off from the living, and oblivious to (the praise of) God (Ps 88). As such, it functions analogously to the "hades" of Hellenistic mythology. Indeed, hades is frequently used in the Greek Septuagint and New Testament (e.g., Acts 2:27, 31) as a synonym for Sheol. So Rufinus can allude to 1 Pet 3:18–20 to characterize the activity of Jesus Christ in this netherworld, namely, "*to preach to those spirits which were shut up in prison, who had been incredulous in the days of Noe.*"[5]

Significantly this saving scene sketched by Rufinus expands as elsewhere he portrays the activity of Jesus Christ among the dead not only in terms of proclamation, but in terms of liberation:

> It was in order to accomplish salvation through the weakness of flesh that His divine nature went down to death in the flesh. The intention was, not that He might be held fast by death according to the law governing mortals, but that, assured of rising again by His own power, He might open the gates of death. It was as if a king were to go to a dungeon and, entering it, were to fling open its doors, loosen the fetters, break the chains, bolts, and bars in pieces, conduct the captives forth to freedom, and restore *such as sat in darkness and in the shadow of death* [cf. Ps 107:10] to light and life. In a case like this the king is, of course, said to have been in the dungeon, but not under the same circumstances as the prisoners confined within it. They were there to discharge their penalties, but he to secure their discharge from punishment.[6]

Here the descent into hell is transposed by Rufinus from the gloss on the burial of Jesus Christ to a thematic scene of his resurrection—and in direct relation to human redemption. Jesus Christ follows humanity's descent into death and the grave so that humanity may then follow his lead in rising up to freedom, light, and life. He is not only the victim of death; he is the victor over death.

Thus several lines of patristic interpretation converge in Rufinus. The affirmation of hell refers to Jesus Christ as "dead and buried." He went to Sheol, both in going to his grave and going to the place of the dead. In this realm Jesus Christ savingly acts both as proclaimer and as liberator. Thus the descent into hell can also be read as an interpretation of what it means to confess that Jesus Christ "rose from the dead." Rather than the final act of the passion, the descent into hell can be taken as the first act of the resurrection. With the vivid imagery of loosened fetters, broken chains, and captives led to their freedom, we find in Rufinus the familiar features of the "harrowing of hell," so prominent in later Western art, literature, and hymnody. While Rufinus clearly associates these images with liberation from Sheol, they also—insofar as they suggest the subjugation of the place of punishment—intimate aspects of gehenna.

[5]Ibid., Kelly's emphasis.

[6]Ibid., 51–52, Kelly's emphasis; cf. 49, 62–63.

Originally a geographical term, gehenna literally referred to what in Hebrew was called the Valley of Hinnom, a ravine south of Jerusalem. Here fiery human sacrifices were once offered under Judah's apostate monarchs (2 Chron 28:3; 33:6; Jer 7:31; 32:35), leading Jeremiah to prophesy the divine wrath in store for that site (Jer 7:30–34; 19:1–15). These associations of Hinnom with fire, divine judgment, and destruction coalesced so that, by metaphoric extension, gehenna commonly came to refer to "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41). Here is where the final punishment of the wicked takes place (e.g., Matt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). Thus the perennial challenge for the church's teaching about the descent into hell is how to relate the respective scriptural traditions about Sheol, as the abode of the dead, to those about gehenna, as the place of divine punishment, and to connect them to the saving work of Jesus Christ.

the descent primarily serves to provide Luther with the metaphors of victory by which to interpret the resurrection

Reformation Reflections

At the time of the Reformation, when everything was up for grabs in the church, both the Lutheran and Calvinist traditions reaffirmed the descent into hell as an article of faith. Calvin sets out to make "plain how important it is to the sum of our redemption."[7] As we have seen in Rufinus, hell can be taken as one of the discrete scenes in the drama of redemption or as an interpretive gloss on the other scenes of the drama. In the case of Calvin, and for the Reformed tradition more broadly, hell characterizes what befell Jesus Christ in his crucifixion. Paul Althaus contends that Luther anticipates Calvin's understanding of Christ's descent into hell as his bearing of God's eternal wrath toward sin culminating with the cross.[8] While Luther also retains the descent as a discrete scene following the death of Christ in which the unjustly held are freed and the devil is bound, it primarily serves to provide Luther with the metaphors of victory by which to interpret the resurrection.[9] Similarly, but conversely, Calvin applies the combat metaphors of the harrowing of hell to the ordeal that Jesus Christ underwent on the cross. In this way, the metaphors of the descent into hell are used to interpret the saving significance of the cross and resurrection.[10]

Indeed, in Calvin's view the real referent for the "descent into hell" is not a

[7]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1:513 (2.16.8).

[8]See Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 204–208.

[9]For Luther's influential 1533 sermon at Torgau, in which the descent into hell is expounded integrally with Christ's resurrection, see the translation by Robert Kolb in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 245–255.

[10]Today's proliferating theologies of "Holy Saturday" inspired by Balthasar seek to reinvigorate the descent into hell as a distinct scene in the drama of salvation. In contrast to Luther and Calvin's "demythologization" of the descent to interpret either Good Friday (Calvin) or Easter (Luther), Balthasar's mythopoetic theology employs the language of suffering, godforsakenness, and loss to prolong and intensify the hopelessness of Good Friday through an

port of call in a postmortem netherworld, but the sufferings of Christ on the cross: "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."[11] Hell is a theological gloss on the cross, not a mythological scene that follows after the crucifixion.

Christ died in the place of sinners (cf. Isa 53:4–6). As such, he suffered in body and soul the torments of damnation, of God's severity, wrath, and judgment. "No wonder, then, if he is said to have descended into hell, for he suffered the death that God in his wrath had inflicted upon the wicked!"[12] In this sense the imagery of gehenna replaces that of Sheol as more adequate in describing the depths of anguish that the Son of God endured for the sake of sinners. This atoning work, framed in terms of substitution of the sinless Son of God in our sinful place (2 Cor 5:21), rings its own "incomprehensible judgment" into the very heart of God. This is shown in the "cry of dereliction" from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). Calvin comments, "And surely no more terrible abyss can be conceived than to feel yourself forsaken and estranged from God, and when you call upon him, not to be heard." In other words, hell in the Creed is defined by the cross of Jesus Christ. Hell is god-forsakenness. To enter into this state is what it means to descend into hell.[13]

Since hell is now defined by our Savior's cross, Calvin also proceeds to demythologize the "harrowing of hell" by transferring its traditional and picturesque language of plundering the devil's kingdom to the victory that took place in the struggle at Golgotha (cf. Col 2:15). Here we step onto the apocalyptic battlefield and in the person of Jesus Christ discover not only its first casualty, but its decisive victory. For it is here that our Savior grappled, according to Calvin, "hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death." On the cross Jesus Christ faced down "the fear of death" that subjects everyone to "lifelong bondage," and on the cross "death has been overcome." Its "pangs," Calvin declares with reference to Acts 2:24, were real, but they could not hold him: "For feeling itself, as it were, forsaken by God, he did not waver in the least from trust in his goodness….For even though he suffered beyond measure, he did not cease to call him his God, by whom he cried out that he had been forsaken." As a cry from hell, this terrifying lament uttered by Jesus is simultaneously his cry of victory. On the cross he kept faith with God unto the very end.[14]

---

imaginative narrating of Christ's Saturday journey to the realm of the dead. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1979), and *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000).

[11]Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:516 (2.16.10).

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., 1:515–517 (2.16.10–11).

[14]Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:517–520 (2.16.11–12); cf. 1:511 (2.16.6).

The Sum of Our Redemption

As our forays into the history of interpretation suggest, the descent into hell is the place in the Creed where the cross and the resurrection rendezvous in their significance for salvation. It is also the place in the Creed where the dead and the damned encounter their Savior and Lord. Here we see that the salvation occurrence is not simply a linear progression moving step by step, or scene by scene, toward the consummation of all things, but it is also the vertical, eschatological event breaking into human history and constituting a new state of affairs that is cosmic in its scope and reach. We now conclude by offering some lines of interpretation to guide the preaching and teaching of the church. They focus on three themes entailed by the belief that Jesus Christ descended into hell. These themes are the universal scope of salvation, the solidarity of God with a suffering and sinful humanity, and the subjection by God of sin, death, and evil.

If death were an impenetrable barrier for God's redeeming grace, then death would be God. Christ's descent into hell, as descent to the dead, disputes this claim of death to absolute lordship.

The Scope of Salvation

In the patristic period, the descent into hell was primarily understood as the journey of Jesus Christ to Sheol or hades as "the place of the dead." While this is only one thread in the tapestry of interpretation, it retains continuing significance for the Christian message.

If death were an impenetrable barrier for God's redeeming grace, then death would be God. Death would have the final word, and death would have the final victory over life. Christ's descent into hell, as descent to the dead, disputes this claim of death to absolute lordship. "For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living" (Rom 14:9). In Jesus Christ there is constituted "the communion of saints" by virtue of his descent to the dead. The church is not simply defined by its empirical existence in the world, but it also exists eschatologically as embracing both the living and the dead.[15]

Moreover, in confessing that Jesus Christ "descended to the dead," the church simultaneously disavows that Jesus Christ and his gospel are confined to the realm of the empirical church. Since the efficacy of his cross and resurrection extends far beyond the bounds of any particular historical period or geographical place, it cannot be restricted to "Christianity" or "Western civilization." By breaking any monopoly of the visible church on the gospel of Jesus Christ, the affirmation of the descent into hell frees its members from either triumphalism or defensiveness in mission. The gospel has already gone ahead of its earthly wit-

[15]See further Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990) 189–192.

nesses, so that the reality of Jesus Christ and his salvation reach far beyond those who knowingly give thanks for them.

Solidarity in Suffering and Sin

What is the death of one man by crucifixion? Many Jews were executed by the Romans, perhaps more than one of them named Jesus. This is not to say that crucifixion was not a ghastly affair. As an instrument of torture, crucifixion brought its victims unimaginable agony, for which the word "hell" is not too strong. What makes the crucifixion of this one man significant for "all" is that this Jesus, without ceasing to be fully human, was also the eternal Son of God. However we understand the atonement accomplished on the cross of Jesus Christ, the reconciliation of the world was only wrought through a complete identification by God with a suffering humanity in the clutches of hell.

And here is where matters become even more shocking. For though he died as an innocent victim of torture, Jesus Christ died the death worthy of the godless, of those who themselves torture the helpless and the innocent, or who otherwise stoke the fires of hell. "[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor 5:21), so that the solidarity with sinners we find in Jesus Christ is not only with those who are victims of the power of sin, but also with those who are in its grips as victimizers, as the perpetrators of evil. Jesus Christ took upon himself freely this vocation, to become what he was not, and in so becoming, he entered into that abysmal experience of rejection by God.[16]

Here we stand before an incomprehensible mystery where the Father and the Son, joined by a mutual Spirit of love and freedom, take into the very dynamics of their relationship the ravages of sin in order to destroy its dominance over the human creature. In the cry of the Crucified we are compelled to rethink the usual notions of God's "almightiness" as arbitrary or tyrannical power. In light of the cross, divine power is now seen as that which comes all the way down in suffering love to the depths of depravity and estrangement to bring forth eternal life. By descending into hell, God in the person of Jesus Christ places the worst that can befall human beings within the redeeming embrace of the cross.

The Subjection of Sin, Death, and Evil

As we have seen in the history of its interpretation, the descent into hell has been a way for the Creed to speak of the work of Jesus Christ in terms of "God's ultimate rejections."[17] The descent into hell has been understood as subjecting the devil and his kingdom, and thereby similarly sealing the fate of the eternally lost. This rhetoric of rejection is often eschewed in today's churches as incompati-

[16]"To be excluded from God's nearness in spite of clear consciousness of it would be hell. This element agrees remarkably with the situation of Jesus' death: as the one who proclaimed and lived the eschatological nearness of God, Jesus died the death of one rejected." Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus–God and Man*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 271.

[17]Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2009) 335.

ble with a loving God. The question thus arises how the church can speak of God's ultimate rejections of evil in ways consistent with God's unfathomable love.

One way to adjudicate the conflicting scriptural evidence on election and reprobation is to place the testimony of individual damnation into a wider cosmic and apocalyptic framework within which Christ subjects every enemy power in a universal victory of life over death. In this way eternal rejection becomes understood as "subject to the eternal life that is Christ," who will come, in the words of the Creed, "to judge the living and the dead" (cf. 1 Cor 15:20–28). "What the coming judgment eternally rejects may be said to be not the creature 'made in the likeness of God' [James 3:9]…but the creature as cursed or accursed by all that stands in opposition, including self-opposition, to the creature's own good."[18]

"What the coming judgment eternally rejects may be said to be not the creature 'made in the likeness of God'…but the creature as cursed or accursed by all that stands in opposition, including self-opposition, to the creature's own good."

In this sense the message of the gospel is that our real life and true destiny are to be found only in Jesus Christ, so that what became of him will become of us. This coming subjection of death to eternal life calls into judgment and subjects every future that is projected apart from the will and way of Jesus Christ. Every future projected apart from him is doomed, and it is damned. It is in fact this hellish "future" of opposition to the love and freedom of God that Jesus Christ overcame on his cross, storming into it, eradicating its power, and ending its reign. The "harrowing of hell" is nothing less than the subjection of every power in us and in our world "which denies, betrays, and crucifies the love that comes to set us free."[19] This harrowing becomes the symbol of the final judgment by which our true freedom will be ratified.

For all who proclaim the gospel guided by the rule of faith, it is noteworthy that the Creed speaks of hell only with reference to Jesus Christ. It is he and he alone, as the only Son of the Father, "who descended into hell." Hell only appears in relation to him. Whatever hell may turn out to be, and whatever metaphors we may use to speak of it, from "fire and brimstone" to "outer darkness," it cannot be confessed independently of Jesus Christ. It is inextricably linked to his name. He did not evade hell. He entered into it. Hell is now defined by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He determines it. He holds its keys. He "made it" to hell and back. And because he did, and thereby did for all what they could not do for themselves, we can firmly hope that all will "make it" together with him. That Jesus

[18]Ibid., 340.

[19]Ibid.

Christ "descended into hell" is thus "the sum of our redemption." There is absolutely no possibility for us and for all creation that is beyond the reach of the Triune God's unfathomable, unquenchable, and irresistible love. ⊕

JAMES F. KAY is dean of academic affairs at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, and the author of Preaching and Theology *(Chalice, 2007).* *Portions of this article originally appeared as "He Descended into Hell," in* Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed, *ed. Roger Van Harn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 117–119, and are gratefully used with permission.*