

History and Survey of the Westminster Confession of Faith

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Part 1: History, Context, and Rationale

Class 4: Early Historical Practice in the Church Appendix:

“He descended into hell” in the Apostles’ Creed, Part 2

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Introduction:

Modern-day opposition to this is based
on interpreting it according to one’s own day and understanding
& asks why this should not be taken out
as being a simple corruption of the truth.
As a result, this feeds an overall opinion of creeds and confessions
that they should not be regarded or trusted,
and are not needed in the church
and that they should be put aside altogether.
We will not start with the question: “why not take it out”;
we will start with the question:
“why was this ever put here in the first place?”
and why was it important enough
to be a part of a summary of belief
taught to new believers?
& we will end up with the Reformers
who, with few exceptions, have chosen
to retain this phrase in the Apostles’ Creed.

There are three components to the biblical teaching
regarding Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

Physical (Jesus’ body)

Strong defense of Jesus’ literal death & entombment

Sabellianism (Docetism) -

only the appearance of suffering and death.

Monophysitism (Adoptionism) -

Divine Logos inhabited but then abandoned the man Jesus.

just as there was for Jesus’ literal bodily change and resurrection.

Spiritual (Jesus' soul)

Jesus experienced true death –

the unnatural separation of body and spirit
as part of the curse of God upon man (cf. Gen. 3:19b)

So, the question is raised:

where was Jesus' soul between death & resurrection?

Lk. 23:46 – “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”

What does Scripture teach on the subject of death?

Old Testament – *Sheol* – the place of the dead, the power of death

The Septuagint translates *Sheol* as *Hades* 61 out of 65 times
(cf. Ps. 16:9-10 and Acts 2:31)

Lk. 16:19-30 – The rich man and Lazarus

“That souls are even now susceptible of torment and of blessing
in Hades ...is proved by the case of Lazarus.”

Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*

Lk. 23:43 – Jesus' words to the thief on the cross

“Paradise” is left undefined.

It is only used once prior to the resurrection of Christ
and only twice after.

None are clearly understood as to the location to which they are
being referred.

Theological (Jesus' accomplishment)

Jesus' active obedience (cf. Jn. 19:30)

Jesus' humiliation – from conception on through the tomb –

“continuing under the power of death for a time” (WSC #27, WLC #50)
receiving the full wrath of God in the sinner's place (HC, Q. 44)

So the question is raised:

what was Jesus meaning when he said “It is finished.” (Jn. 19:30)

Jesus' passive obedience

The distinction is part of understanding Jesus' obedience
as being active as well as passive.

What is left to be done?

He must submit to the power of death for a time. (Rom. 6:9)

He did not preach to (mock or “harrow”)

the doomed waiting judgment.

He did not go to the realm of the dead in order to rescue
the OT saints, ... although ...

Death, itself, must be conquered.

Jesus' exaltation begins with his resurrection.

In his humiliation, he died in our place,

but in his exaltation, Jesus conquered death (Jn. 17:20-24).

It is in the victory of Jesus

that Jesus, himself, prayed for and anticipated (cf. Jn. 17:20-24),

that Paul writes of as no OT writer could do

(Rom. 8:38-39; Phil. 2:23; 2 Cor. 5:8).

that NT writers affirm in Jesus' title of “firstborn”

(Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 12:22-24; Rev. 1:5).

that fits the explanation

of uniting and perfecting OT saints with NT saints

(Heb. 11:13-16; 39-40)

The issue of the English Translation

The last thing to add to the mix of the discussion is translating the word(s) into English.

Earliest probable effort: Book of Common Prayer (1662)

which translates the line from the Creed: "he descended into hell".

"Hell" has been the select English word almost universally in Scripture.

Gehenna - "Valley of Hinnom" (Jer. 7:31; 19:2-6)

Mt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33

Hades - primary OT vocabulary for the place of the dead

but also used in other cultures/languages (Greek mythology)

Mt. 11:23; 16:18; Lk. 10:15; Rev. 1:18

Tartarus - another word found only in 2 Pet. 2:4

speaks of judgment, of chains and gloomy darkness

also used in Greek mythology

Relevant examples:

Lk. 16:23 - ἀλ' ἐν τῷ ᾗδου (Hades)

The Geneva Bible (1559): "and in hell"

the King James Bible (1611): "and in hell"

Ps. 16:10 - כִּי לֹא־תַעֲזָב נַפְשִׁי לְשֵׁאוֹל (Sheol)

The Geneva Bible (1559): "in the grave"

King James Bible (1611): "in hell"

Acts 2:31 - ὅτι οὐ κατελείφθη ἡ ψυχὴ αὐτοῦ εἰς Ἄδου, (Hades)

The Geneva Bible (1559): "in grave" (sic)

The King James Bible (1611): "in hell"

Other terms used in the New Testament

"unquenchable fire" - Mk. 9:43

"lake of fire" - Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15

"eternal destruction" - 2 Thess. 1:9

"eternal judgment" - Heb. 6:2

"eternal chains" - Jude 1:6

"eternal fire" - Jude 1:7

"Eternal" must be understood not to be absolutely literal with regard to the past. Only God is absolutely eternal. "Eternal" must be regarded as being from the point of judgment forward as a result of God's decree and providential will.

The fire of Hell awaits judgment.

Mt. 22; cf. 10:28; 18:9

Mt. 23:33

Rev. 20:14-15