



Monte Vista Presbyterian & Reformed Church

Position Paper on the Apostle's Creed

The following statement expresses the position of the Session regarding the clause traditionally translated as 'he descended into hell' in the Apostles' Creed. It was adopted on 13 November 2007.

Introduction:

At various times when the Apostles' Creed has been recited in services, the clause 'he descended into hell' has raised pastoral concerns. This clause is often misunderstood as teaching that Christ descended into hell after his suffering and death on the cross. In seeking to understand this clause, the following bears consideration:

1. The Meaning of the word 'hell' in English:

The meaning of the word 'hell' has changed with time. Most contemporary Christians understand 'hell' to mean only the place of eternal torment. But the word has not been restricted to this singular meaning in history or in theology. In earlier English usage the word referred to, and translated, both Greek words 'gehenna' (place of eternal torment), and 'hades' (place of the dead). cf. the way the KJV translates both 'gehenna' (e.g. Mt 5.22, 29, 30) and 'hades' (e.g. Acts 2.27, 31) by 'hell' (1 Cor 15.55 is the one exception, but note the marginal reference).

2. The original Wording in the Apostles' Creed:

2.1 The original Greek wording in the Apostles' Creed in Latin is 'descendit ad inferos/inferna' and in Greek 'κατελθόντα εἰς τὰ κατώτατα', (katelthonta eis ta katôtata), or 'εἰς τὸν ᾄδην' (eis ton hade).

2.2 When Rufinus first included the phrase 'descendit ad inferna' in AD 390 in the Apostle's Creed, he dropped the phrase 'sepultus' ('was buried'). It seems he basically saw the two as synonyms. The reality of Christ's death is simply emphasised with this phrase. It had no connotations of hell. Only since AD 750 were the two phrases found together in the creed.

2.3 The Greek 'τὰ κατώτατα' ('the lowest'), 'ᾄδην' ('hades') and the Latin 'inferos' ('those below') may also be translated as 'underworld' or as 'realm/abode of the dead.' This wording does not refer to the place of eternal torment ('hell'). The reference to the descent into hades is here to make it clear that the death of Jesus was not just a swoon or a coma, but death in every sense of the word. He was not merely unconscious – his spirit left his body and went to the place of the dead. Today this clause is often translated as 'he descended to the dead, or realm/place of the dead.' In 21st century English usage this reflects the original wording better than the word 'hell'.

3. Historical Reformed Interpretation of the Clause:

3.1 Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism

3.1.1 To both it signifies the intensity of Christ's sufferings on the cross, where he tasted the pain of hell for sinners. While we wholeheartedly agree with the glorious truth that Christ on the cross experienced the full pain of hell on behalf of, and in place of, sinners, we note that this explanation of the clause in the Apostles' Creed:-

- is inconsistent with the placement of the clause between the death and resurrection of our Lord. (Calvin maintains the order is irrelevant.), and
- is not consistent with the meaning of the original wording of the clause.

3.2 Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) Q.50

3.2.1 The WLC understands the phrase 'descended into hell' as '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'.

- This has nothing to do with 'gehenna', or 'hell' in modern day usage.

4. What the Bible teaches:

4.1 The sufferings of Christ ceased the moment he died on the cross. cf. Jn 19.30, '*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished'. With that, he bowed his head, and gave up his spirit.*' This is generally admitted.

4.2 Christ was in heaven during the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection, according to his own declaration to the penitent thief. cf. Lk 23.43 '*Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*', and according to his own hope, cf. Lk 23.46 '*Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father into your hands I commit my spirit.'* When he had said this, he breathed his last.'

5. The Way forward?

At least four options present themselves: One is to retain the status quo, two is to move, and/or modify, the clause to its proper position, three is to retain the clause in it's correct translation, and four is to remove the clause from the creed.

5.1 Retaining the status quo is problematic because this clause is often misunderstood; in modern English it is an incorrect translation. It is not sufficient to explain the theological meaning of this clause metaphorically, as it is seeking to explain something the clause was never intended to mean in the original (contra Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism).

5.2 Moving and modifying the clause to its correct theological position. e.g. 'was crucified for our sins, bearing the punishment of hell for us, he died and was buried', is an attractive option at first sight, but we have then modified the creed so that it becomes a local creed which is no longer universally accepted, i.e. it is no longer the Apostles' Creed.

5.3 Many churches have opted for a modern translation of the clause, i.e. 'he descended to the place of the dead'.

5.4 Many churches have opted to remove the clause entirely. By removing the clause nothing is lost doctrinally. The creed would then read, '*was crucified, died and was buried. The third day he rose again from the dead.*' This correlates well with -

- Paul's summary of his preaching – cf. 1 Cor 2.2 '*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*', 1 Cor 15.1-4 '*I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,*' as well as,
- the Nicene Creed. '*For us he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures.*'

Summary and Conclusion:

In many ways option four, the removal of the clause, is the most simple and attractive. Nothing doctrinally is lost by removing the clause and no further explanation is required. However due to the universal and ancient status of the Apostles' Creed in the church, we should be careful to tamper with it. Session has thus decided to implement the modern translation of the clause (Option 3 above). The reading of the Apostles' Creed we will thus use, is as follows:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;

he descended to the place of the dead.

The third day he arose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven

and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy universal church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

Amen.