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HE DESCENDED INTO HELL: THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE
DESCENSUS AD INFEROS

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Abstract

The Descensus Ad Inferos, the theological doctrine of Christ's descent into Hell is a controversial doctrine that has been with the church nearly since its inception. This paper highlights the theological tenets of this doctrine as well as outlines the significant theological history that this doctrine has in the church. Once this doctrine is defined and placed in context, a detailed scriptural analysis is conducted in order to identify key problems that result from this doctrine and ultimately identify it as heresy. This paper makes apparent the theological implications of accepting this doctrine as truth by utilizing certain modern movements, specifically the "Word of Faith" movement as espoused by E. W. Kenyon and followers, as a case study.

The problem providing the impetus for this paper revolves around the need for the church to understand how allowing even the slightest non-scriptural doctrine to prevail can ultimately lead to heresy and loss. This paper uses the problem/solution research methodology. A thorough review of the relevant

literature was conducted. Further, short case studies or vignettes are used to highlight key points.

The findings conclude that the church must approach all aspects of its doctrine from a systematic theological perspective. The theology must be consistent and coherent throughout its entirety. The doctrine of the Descensus Ad Inferos does not meet that requirement.

Introduction

"Honey, what does that mean, He descended into Hell?" A question posed by my wife as we attended Church one Sunday. It was a bright spring morning right around Easter and the congregation had risen together in order to proclaim our faith and to recite the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed is the ecumenical symbol most often used by the historic church to summarize and confess their Christian faith. This creed however has one particular clause that has been much debated throughout its history and that statement is known as the Descensus Ad Inferos. It is that portion of the creed that states in no uncertain terms that Jesus Christ "was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into Hell."

"I don't know dear, but I will see if I can find you an answer," was sufficient for the moment. A phrase many men who have been married more than seventeen years may be familiar with. Yet, that answer proves to be much more than a mere Google search away and thus provides the impetus for this paper.

This paper will highlight the theological history of this doctrine as well as outline the significant theological tenets that this doctrine espouses. Once this doctrine is defined and placed in context, a detailed scriptural analysis is conducted in order to identify key problems that result from this doctrine and ultimately identify it as heresy. This paper makes apparent the theological implications of accepting this doctrine as truth by utilizing certain modern movements, specifically the "Word of Faith" movement as espoused by E. W. Kenyon and followers as a case study.

Ultimately this work makes the argument that church doctrine must be approached from a systematic theological perspective. In other words, all tenets of the doctrine must be in concert with all other tenets of the faith so that a coherent and consistent, scripturally sound, statement of faith is established. The doctrine of the Descensus Ad Inferos does not meet that requirement.

Historical Considerations

The descensus doctrine has a clouded history at best. The earliest referent to the doctrine makes its appearance around the second century in the pseudapigrapha. In it Christ is said to identify himself as one who is a, "doer of heroic deeds in the underworld." The early creeds are silent on the descent until approximately 390-400 AD. In fact the most influential early text that deals with the descent is from an apocryphal work known as the Gospel of Nicodemus. Alan Bernstein states that...

the apocryphal gospel attributed to this Nicodemus relates that after the Resurrection of Christ, rumors circulated in the Jewish community that others had been resurrected too. Temple authorities delegated Nicodemus, Joseph, and other rabbis to inquire specifically about Karinus and Leucius, the twin sons of Simeon, who were said to have returned from the dead. The brothers' account of what they saw in Hades after they died, when Jesus broke down the gates of Hades

and resurrected them along with other righteous men forms the basis for [this] descent narrative.

It is quite possible that the early history of this doctrine has its roots in a work of fiction.

As mentioned above the early creedal statements of the church do not espouse this doctrine. The "Old Roman Creed" delivered to Julius, Bishop of Rome in 340 AD, was believed to be the rule of faith composed by the Apostles at Jerusalem. This creed makes no mention of a descent by Christ into Hell. This original creed developed over time and eventually the clause, "He descended into Hell" was added. Williams states that, "Unlike the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition, the Apostles' Creed was not written or approved by a single church council at one specific time."

The last addition to our present creed was the descent statement. This clause was added to the Aquileian Creed as it appeared in the Exposition of the Apostolic Symbol by Rufinus around 400 AD. This creed however did not include the statement, "and was buried," that statement had been replaced by the descent clause. It was initially thought that the descent clause was meant to replace the burial statement. Rufinus had no real explanation for the omission of the burial other than it was possibly switched out for polemical reasons. The bottom line is that the real intention behind the descensus statement was lost. It most likely was a substitute for "and was buried."

The historical problem revolving around this controversy is that once introduced, this statement began to make its way into the creed not only as a substitute for "and was buried," but in addition to it. Finally, in the sixth century, we find the statement "He descended into Hell," as a somewhat formal element in the creed, specifically as extracted from a sermon by Caesarius, Bishop of Arles (503-543). The final formula does not actually get established, as Williams states, "until somewhere between 650 and 700, and by then both clauses were included, establishing the reading we have today:

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

It took roughly seven hundred years for this statement to make its way formally into the creedal doctrine of the Christian faith. A possible substitute for a phrase used to spice up the original creed ends up being established in doctrine as something that actually happened. There is a valuable lesson for us in this that we will return to later. For now, what are the theological implications of this doctrine? If this doctrine stood up to scriptural scrutiny, what would be the outcome?

A Weekend in Hell

The basic theological tenets that this doctrine offers deal specifically with the time period between Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection three days later. It is an attempt to answer the question, what did Jesus do in the time between his death and resurrection?

Early Theologians

The early church fathers, going as far back as the second and third centuries, did mention the descent of Christ. Fathers such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Tertullian all understood a tradition that Jesus descended to the underworld

between His death and resurrection. The context of that understanding is very ambiguous and it is very likely that they understood the descent in terms of death and burial. In other words they understood it to mean that Jesus suffered everything that man would suffer including death. It is not until the Alexandrian church fathers that a literal view of the descent is espoused. That literal view is also quite ambiguous and it ranges from a literal journey to Hell to a trip to the underworld or various nether regions of the earth.

Reformed Theologians

Martin Luther's followers actually espoused the most common view of the literal interpretation of Christ's descent into Hell. He only went to Hades in this view and not the very center of Hell. There in the last act of His humiliation, His descent, He claimed the victory over Satan and began His first act of exaltation. He in effect took care of sin where it started. This view just could not stand up to scriptural scrutiny and as Williams says, "Martin Bucer and Theodore Beza rejected the idea of a literal descent, and on the basis of the Biblical connection between hades and the grave, both men thought of the descensus as a repetition of "died and was buried.""

Ultimately from Calvin all the way through Packer the idea of a literal descensus has been hard to marry up with sound Biblical exegesis. Calvin labels his interpretation of the descent as, "The "Descent into Hell" as an expression of the spiritual torment that Christ underwent for us." He outlines in this document that, "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." Williams labels this a "metaphorical" interpretation of the clause.

The reformers in effect then grappled with this issue and ultimately could not come to a consensus as to whether there is a literal interpretation of this doctrine based in scripture or a metaphorical view, or whether the term Hell used in the creedal context simply means "grave."

Modern Doctrinal Assertions

In the 20th Century there has been a large movement that has taken the doctrine of the descensus, and as Charles T. Buntin states, "has mutated [it] into a form which is of concern because it has serious implications for the most vital doctrine of the Christian faith, the person and work of Christ (Christology)." This doctrine is sometimes referred to as the "Weekend in Hell" doctrine and according to Buntin it has the following two tenets:

1. Preliminary to the entire idea of the "Weekend in Hell" is the idea that Old Testament believers were held captive in Hell, and could not be let loose until Jesus came and got them.
2. The second part of the "Weekend in Hell" doctrine is that Satan owned "the keys" to Death, Hell, and the Grave, and that Jesus had to go win them from him.

These tenets are critical to the movement who advocates this doctrine. That movement is known as the "Word of Faith" movement. This doctrine was initially espoused by the "grandfather" of the "Faith Movement" E. W. Kenyon.

Word of Faith Movement and the Doctrine of the Descensus

There are many "Word of Faith" preachers, some of the more famous consist of Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Frederick K. C. Price, and the list goes on. The founder of the movement as mentioned above is said to be E. W. Kenyon (1867-1948). E. W. Kenyon was an independent evangelist and Bible teacher. He unsystematically synthesized the teachings of the Higher Christian Life segment of the Holiness Movement, Pentecostalism, and New Thought Metaphysics. These cultic seeds of thought pervaded the doctrine of the descensus and allowed for his followers to expand on the subject to fantastic proportions.

Kenneth Copeland's view of the descensus involves Satan conquering Jesus on the cross and taking His spirit to Hell. Once in Hell every demon therein came down upon Him in order to torture and annihilate Jesus. The torture was worse than anything that one could possibly imagine. Because Jesus was taken to Hell illegally God was able (through a spiritual loophole) to send His "word" to recharge Jesus with resurrection power. Jesus' spirit came back to life and He was able to defeat Satan there in Hell. His spirit through the word was "born again." That idea is critical to their overall concept and belief system.

Because of this foundational view of Christ's work, they believe that when one is born again that one takes on the very essence and nature of Jesus, identical to Him. Copeland even states that, "You don't have a God in you; you are one." Because you are just like Jesus you as a believer have the ability, if you have enough faith, to speak things into existence. This theology is often referred to as "name it, claim it" theology.

Scriptural Analysis

There are two major passages in the Bible that those who support the doctrine of the descensus refer to as scriptural proof of this doctrine. Those passages are 1 Peter 3:18-20, and Ephesians 4:8-10. I have often read these passages and wondered exactly what they meant. To the untrained reader, it would be easy to see how the descensus doctrine could be extrapolated from them. However, as these passages are unpacked in context they do not reveal the descensus. Instead, they reveal a consistent Christological theme that runs from Genesis to Revelation.

1 Peter 3:18-20 states:

18. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but being quickened by the spirit:

19. By which he also went and preached to the spirits in prison;

20. Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.

The descensus position is that this verse refers to Jesus' descent into Hell and ministering to the spirits that are there in prison.

This doctrine would assert that after the death of Christ those Old Testament souls who had not had a chance to know Jesus were locked up in Hell and after the cross Christ descended to them to preach the gospel. Once hearing the gospel then they are saved and removed to the safety of heaven. There are differing versions of this theory that involve either the spirits residing in actual Hell, or in a second compartment of Hell that was like a prison.

Some would say that this passage should be taken metaphorically and that it is a symbolic depiction that should not be taken literally. I agree with Erickson when he states, "This [metaphorical view] involves a more spiritualized hermeneutic than usually practiced by evangelicals." The other option is the literal translation and I also agree with Erickson that, "This interpretation seems to conflict with the rest of Jesus' life and ministry - and with the context of the passage, which emphasizes a faithful, gentle witness, giving a reason for one's faith, even in the face of opposition (vv 15-17)."

How then should one determine this passage? There is no doubt that there have been numerous disagreements on its interpretation however, I think Charles T. Buntin provides a valuable and lucid interpretation that reasons well with a well founded Christology.

Buntin breaks down his argument by asking four distinctive questions. 1. Who are the "spirits in prison?" 2. How did Christ preach to them? 3. What did He preach to them? 4. How did the message get there and to what were they disobedient? The answers to these questions reveal a lot.

First, if the passage is taken literally then the "spirits" are those, and only those, who were disobedient during the days of Noah, not the righteous dead. Second, Jesus preached to those spirits through the Spirit. Third, He did not offer them a second chance at salvation, nor did He go there to gloat, this question is unanswerable via the context of the passage. Finally, the last question really reveals what the overall answer to how to interpret this passage.

The message Christ preached to the ante-deluvian spirits was preached through the Spirit. It is referring past tense to the people in the days of Noah. This passage is comparing the time of Noah to Peter's time. Another way to read this passage that would assist in its understanding utilizing modern language would be: but being quickened by the Spirit, (19) the same Spirit that He also worked through in Noah's time and preached to the people (whose spirits are now in prison) who were disobedient back then, when God was being patient with them while the ark was being built, which by the way only eight souls were saved in.

Matthew Henry examines this passage in the light of an example. Jesus is set before us as an example of suffering, it follows that the reference to the old world is also used as an example for us to understand. Using this passage as an example he says, "They had now an offer of mercy, those that accepted of it should be saved, but those who rejected Christ and the gospel should be as certainly destroyed as ever the disobedient in the times of Noah were."

The second passage that is used to support the doctrine of the descensus is Ephesians 4:8-10:

8. Wherefore He saith, When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

9. (Now that He ascended, what is it that He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?)

10. He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things.)

This passage is equally disputed as to its meaning. Buntin argues that those who advocate the descensus would say that 1. "He led captivity captive" is referring to Jesus leading the souls that were in prison out of Hell and into Heaven. 2. The section speaking of a descent to the lower parts of the Earth refers to Christ's descent to Hell.

First, Matthew Henry shed's light on the Christ's leading captivity captive. He relates how King David in Ps. 68:18 prophesied concerning Christ's ascension. It is related to how in times of old a conquering victor would have a parade after a victorious battle and parade the spoils and captives through the square. He states, "As great conquerors, when they rode in their triumphal chariots, used to be attended with the most illustrious of their captives led in chains, and were wont to scatter their largesses and bounty among the soldiers and other spectators of their triumphs, so Christ, when he ascended into heaven, as a triumphant conqueror, led captivity captive."

Who then were His captives? Was it only the spirits in prison from the days of Noah? No, as Henry again states, "He conquered those who had conquered us; such as sin, the devil, and death. Indeed, he triumphed over these on the cross; but the triumph was completed at his ascension, when he became Lord over all, and had the keys of death and hades put into his hands." This passage refers to the bigger picture. It refers to Jesus' descent to Earth, His entire humiliation, His victory on the cross, and the ascension to Heaven. In other words it speaks to the whole story not just the time period between His death and resurrection.

Theological Implications

What are the theological implications then of espousing the doctrine of the descensus? As shown above this doctrine can be taken to fantastic proportions because it preaches well. The "Word of Faith" movement has created the "name it claim it" theology and at its foundation it hinges on this doctrine. I submit that the "Word of Faith" theology is harmful to the Christian.

This doctrine places the Christian co-equal with God in that one could speak things into existence. There is no doubt that as heirs according to the promise that the Christian can do all things through Christ. The problem lies in the shift from God doing things through you to you doing things as a God.

This doctrine also deals mainly with material wealth. Most of the "name it claim it" televangelist's main thrust is that the Christian is already wealthy and they just have to accept their material wealth. This in the notion is a play on social stratification and as Harrison points out, "By embracing the notion that poverty is a "curse" with a spiritual origin and affirming that prosperity is attainable and accessible to anyone who would only apply certain immutable laws, or the "formula," the Message challenges the limitations imposed by socioeconomic location at the same time that it "sanctifies" the attainment of wealth by those who have done so."

The "Word of Faith" doctrine is the doctrine of the descensus taken to the limit of human imagination while still trying to stay under the auspices of Christianity. At the heart of the descensus doctrine though is the question of who Christ really is.

Conclusion

Millard Erickson defines Theology in the Christian context as, "a discipline of study that seeks to understand the God revealed in the Bible and to provide a Christian understanding of reality." Systematic Theology draws from the entire Bible. Instead of using the biblical texts in isolation, it relates the various portions to one another in order to coalesce the teachings into a harmonious and coherent whole. That requires that there be a close relationship to Biblical Theology, and as Erickson point out, "The systematic theologian is dependent on

the work and insights of the laborers in the exegetical vineyard. As Christians we must look to the scripture when we attempt to understand God. Those who advocate the "Weekend in Hell" theory lack a coherent picture of Christ Jesus.

Buntin truly sums up the doctrine of the descensus when he says, "The heart of this entire myth of the "Weekend in Hell" is a misunderstanding of who Jesus is." Dr. Dan Mitchell when speaking of Christology emphasizes that Christology is the central theme of systematic theology and if we as Christians do not get that correct then that failure will permeate the rest of our theology. There could be no clearer example of that consequence than the doctrine of the descensus.

Ultimately this doctrine fails to understand that Jesus is God. His deity, according to Erickson, "sits at the pinnacle of controversy and belief concerning the Christian faith." Jesus was both God and Man. If Jesus is God then to assign the doctrine of the descensus to him we strip him his deity for those three days in the tomb. That is not possible and as Buntin argues, "While His body lay in the tomb..., you can be sure of one thing His deity was not veiled in flesh for those three days." Without the flesh Jesus is God, this doctrine would purport that God, the Holy God, the omniscient, omnipotent, master and creator of the universe, who humiliated himself to take on flesh to complete the work of the cross was subject to Satan for those three days?

Jesus told us where He would be after the completed work of the cross. In Luke 23:43 Jesus told the penitent thief that "today" he would be with Him in paradise. In verse 46 He commits His spirit to the father as He breathed out His last.

Finally, to espouse the descensus doctrine is to deny the work of the cross. Jesus stated emphatically in John 19:30 that "It is finished!" It is at that point that the curtain in the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom. At that point the work was complete. At that point Satan and his minions were defeated forevermore. To argue otherwise is not scriptural.

This paper has highlighted the insidious nature of non-scriptural doctrine being introduced in the church. The insidious nature of an incorrect doctrine can lead to incorrect belief and ultimately heresy. It is the responsibility of us as Christians to approach our theology systematically and biblically in order to ensure a coherent message. If a doctrine does not stand up to that measure of truth then like a cancer it must be cut out. The doctrine of the Descensus Ad Inferos does not meet that requirement.

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