

DESCENDIT AD [IN] INFERNA:

'A MATTER OF NO SMALL MOMENT IN BRINGING ABOUT REDEMPTION'

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ABSTRACT

This article endorses Calvin's conviction that the '*descendit ad inferna*' of the Apostles' Creed is part of the 'summary of doctrine' and a matter of 'no small moment in bringing about redemption' (Calvin 1960:Inst. II, xvi, 8). The reason for this role, however, is not Calvin's metaphorical interpretation of the clause. Instead, the author tries to argue that a scientific theological approach will maintain the clause because of its transcendence of finitude and the proclamation of Christ's victory. The whole of creation is delivered from sin. Proper hermeneutics will take the original socio-historical environment into account and make one suspicious about certain ecclesiastical biases. Spatial terms in the Creed should therefore not be demythologised, but rather be transformed in accordance with the insights of the contemporary physics of time and space.

INTRODUCTION

John Calvin (1509–1564) had the ability in his theology to catalogue new horizons – some of whose implications he apparently did not necessarily fathom or even understand personally. This is clear, for example, from his reflection on the phrase 'descended to hell', which, by means of Rufinus (c. 345–410), found a place in the 4th century in the *Symbolum Apostolorum*, and which was accepted at the Council of Ariminum in 359. For Calvin (1960:512, 1964:375), this article was part of the 'accomplishment of redemption' (*in quo ad redemptionis effectum*) and therefore also part of the 'summary of doctrine' (*doctrinae summa*) of the redemption. Consequently, he steadfastly wanted to maintain this particular article in the *Apostolicum*. But what is particularly striking is the almost intuitive subtext and attunement which Calvin allows to filter through in his discussion of this. Christ's descent (hereafter *descensus*) was to him a profound 'mystery' (*mysterium*), but at the same time a matter which spelled out the redemption through the cross (*ex mortis Christi fructus depereat*).

By now discussing the impression that Calvin formed of the importance of this phrase for salvation in a slightly creative way and trying to develop it along the lines of the contemporary Systematic Theological debate, I wish to attempt to show that Calvin's intuition about the special meaning of this article was indeed right on target. That is why I do not wish to follow Van Rensburg's (2000:419) solution of regarding the article as tautological and therefore simply to be scrapped.

I wish to highlight two matters pertinently, matters which Calvin had already handled embryonically almost 500 years ago and which seem to hold enormous meaning for theology today. On the one hand, it concerns the role that time and space play in this argument about the *descensus* and, on the other, the cosmic victory of Christ which is expressed through this. By appreciating the data through a temporal-spatial lens, the topicality of the *descensus* is realised anew. I therefore plead, in effect, for both a socio-historical reading of the text and for a post-Newtonian interpretation of space-time.

In building my argument, I first examine the background and intention of this addition to the *Apostolicum*, then briefly indicate the *Wirkungsgeschichte* – in particular Calvin's interpretation thereof – and, in conclusion, I place it within a Systematic Theological cadre which takes into account insights gained from, among others, the views of contemporary physics concerning time and space. The essay concludes that this article in the *Apostolicum* can, indeed, catalogue special contours in theology and therefore ought justifiably to be part of the summary of doctrine – as Calvin felt, but did not effectively demonstrate – and about which note ought to be taken increasingly.

But the topicality of this phrase also lies in the need for an appropriate translation. In past decades, particularly in Reformed circles, a continuous debate has been dealing with the translation of the *descensus*. The Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA), for example, have had problems with the translation of the 'underworld' reflected by the Latin word *inferna* since 1964 (Van Rensburg & Cornelius 2000:398). Different reports also indicate that many Reformed churches worldwide have the same problem with the translation. In South Africa, the RCSA therefore entered into discussion with the other Reformed churches to bring the translations of the *Apostolicum*, the *Athanasium* and the *Heidelberg Catechism* in line with Calvin's interpretation.

In the midst of objections to the article, especially such as concerning the defective Biblical substructure (Grudem 1991:103–113), or it being too strongly mythological (Otto 1990:143–150), my assessment, given my chosen view, supports maintaining the article as a function of the following dogmatic challenge:

- A linear understanding of time compels the question about what happened to Jesus from the Friday afternoon of the crucifixion up to and including the Sunday morning of the resurrection (Küng 1982:163). This, in turn, leads to the issue of the so-called intermediate state and of purgatory (Kelly [1960] 2006:382), as also interpreted later, by Pope Benedict XII, in 1336 (Moltmann 2000:247). Is it at all possible to speak of the course of time after death? The issue of time, and eternal time in eternity (Augustine 2007:XI), will therefore have to be reconsidered.

- Calvin and the *Heidelberg Catechism* (Question & Answer 44) avoided this spatial aspect of the term 'underworld' by substituting the anachronistic concept of 'hell' for it. As such, 'hell' is seen as the *Gehenna* that, according to Matthew 25:41, for example, is the place of the accursed, the place of the 'eternal' fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels. The *descensus* is, in other words, interpreted figuratively and is taken merely as an experience of Godforsakenness. If this would be the case, a translation such as 'He suffered the torment of Hell' becomes a passable translation. Spatiality also concerns physicality. Did the total person of Christ, God and man, as Luther judged, then descend into the underworld or was it solely the *Logos* (Scaer 1992:97–98)? And then, thirdly, is the temporal able to contain the eternal (*finitum capax infiniti*)? Could God have entered the underworld at all? Had God then died, as Nietzsche did, in fact, ask?

The above-mentioned temporal-spatial interpretation means, on the one hand, that a linear view of time is replaced by a punctual one, where sequence or course is drawn into one existential point and, on the other hand, again, that the topography of the underworld was subsumed into abstraction and what could be seen as a Platonic recognition of the Ptolemaic world view with its 'concept of separation' between the 'sensible world' and the 'intelligible world'.

Although this is no exegetical study, a comment about hermeneutics should be made, as regards the understanding of both the *Apostolicum* and the Bible. The important issues are, on the one hand, whether people should dare to ignore the socio-historical context of a text and, on the other, whether we may apply the church's doctrines prescriptively to determine the exegesis of a Bible verse and prescribe a translation. Biblical scientists deem these options unacceptable. A hermeneutics of suspicion is necessary, moreover, to deconstruct any interests in the process of understanding.

The importance of the *descensus* in the *Apostolicum* is that it can offer certain contours to the Systematic Theological debate, in that it can be the catalyst for the limitations to which we can so easily subject God. By relinquishing a 'receptive concept' of space and, instead, turning it around and understanding space as a predicate of the occupant in accordance with his/her nature, we demystify the problematic of Christ's presence in the underworld. Spatial terms are therefore to be retained in the interpretation of this article.

THE APOSTOLICUM

Origin

The text of the *Apostolicum* has its origins in the *Roman Creed* which, as the name indicates, originated in Rome and was already in use in the year 150 A.D. It undoubtedly grew out of the confession of Peter (Matt. 16:16), which formed the nucleus for the article on Jesus Christ, as well as out of the old baptism liturgy, which gave the text its Trinitarian foundation (Schaff 1931:16). The *Apostolicum* had no individual author, nor is it the collaboration (*symbolum*) of the twelve apostles, but is the product of an organic process (Kelly [1960] 2006:23–29) of the Western church (as opposed to the *Creed of Nicea*, which originated in the Eastern church). For this reason it is also not as much 'apostolic' as ecclesiastical, which bears testimony to the church's understanding of the Scriptures (Scaer 1992:92). The pre-Nicene patristic fathers esteemed it highly and also regarded it as 'the rule of faith', 'the rule of truth' and later called it 'the symbol of faith' (Schaff 1931:17).

What is also important, however, is that no single text prevailed initially. The respective churches in Aquileia, Milan, Ravenna, Carthage and Hippo each used different texts – some were longer and others, again, were shorter. Each church therefore did as it liked with the text, without prejudicing the nucleus of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, or the Trinitarian foundation of

the baptismal formula. The creeds were committed to memory, but not to writing. The first writer in the West who gives us the text of the Latin creed, with a commentary, is Rufinus, towards the close of the 4th century. Owing to the central role that Rome played in the West and its intrinsic excellence, Rufinus's text increasingly found general favour (Schaff 1931:19). Although the Greek version is older than the Latin one, the preserved Greek text nevertheless is a translation from the Latin (Schaff 1931:19). Amongst other additions ('catholic', 'the communion of saints' and 'life everlasting'), the article 'descended into *Hades*' equally was a later addition. Schaff (1931:19) dates the establishment of the text of the *Apostolicum* no further back than the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth centuries, and the present form probably first appeared in the 8th century. By the 9th century, the *Textus Receptus* had become established and by the 12th century it indubitably was the official creed of Rome itself (Kelly [1960] 2006:427).

As regards the *descendit ad inferna*, it is commonplace that it appeared for the first time in the West in the Aquileian text of 309 A.D., although it also appears in three other synodal resolutions, namely in Sirmium, Nicea and Constantinople (Briggs 1914:63; Harris 1996:2–3). The expression *descendit ad inferna* was derived from the Septuagint version of Job 38:17 (Otto 1990:144). We also probably find something of it in Ezekiel 37:7–12 (and to some degree also in Mt 27:52–53) where mention is made of a series of earthquakes, the opening of the graves and the resurrection of those who had been buried. There are variations of the expression, in that the preposition ('in' or 'ad')¹ of the singular and plural are interchanged. The *Athanasianum* rather refers, for example, to the *inferos* which indicates the denizens of the underworld. It is important to add that Rufinus initially saw the article merely as a replacement of *sepultus* (buried) (Otto 1990:143). The Aquileian Creed omitted the clause 'was buried' and substituted for it the new clause, *descendit in inferna*. Someone like Briggs (1914:66) has a different opinion, however, and thinks it is not a repetition of what is already said in *sepultus*. He points out, for example, that the Pastor of Hermas² states that the apostles and teachers continued their work in the underworld and baptised the converted there.

In summary, the following variant readings can now also be offered with regard to the addition of the *descensus*:

Absent	Forma Romana Vetus	< 341 A.D.
<i>Descendit in inferna</i>	Ecclesia Aquileiensis	± 390 A.D.
<i>Descendit ad infernum</i>	Venantius Fortunatus	± 570 A.D.
<i>Descendit ad inferna</i>	Sacramentarium Gallicanum	± 650 A.D.
<i>Descendit ad infer(n)os</i>	Athanasium	± 500 A.D.

Taxonomy

The *Apostolicum* has a most refined composition, even though it has more than one author and came into existence by an organic process extending from the third to the eighth centuries. Barth (1935:15–16) takes the first word, '*credo*', as the point of departure for the full exposition of the *Apostolicum*. It is the individual and ecclesiastic appropriation of the revelation of God in faith. By contrast, Du Toit (1971:195) wants to recover the basic forms of prayer, creed, doxology and learning in the *Apostolicum*.

As mentioned above, the Trinitarian foundation of the *Apostolicum* is the outstanding feature. The juxtaposition of 'believe in' (Father, Son and Holy Spirit [dative]) as opposed to the 'believe' without a preposition (the church [accusative])

1. In Latin, the ablative usually follows *in* to indicate place, but the accusative follows when there is movement in the verb itself. It is purely of semantic importance whether it indicates the direction ('to') or the arrival ('to, into').

2. These apostles and teachers, who preached the name of the Son of God, having fallen asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, preached also to those who had fallen asleep before them, and themselves gave them to them the seal of the preaching.' (Hermas 1959:263). See also Du Toit's (1971:94–95) discussion: The apostles who act as vicars and the baptism which is essential for salvation, and therefore the unbaptised first had to be baptised in the underworld. Regarding them: is this word quoted from the text, or is it accidental?

is an example of this. What is striking, too, is the mythological cosmology of the three-storey world view. One sees the course of the *Apostolicum*, almost like the curve of a parabola, being determined by beginning with the heavens above, going down to the earth and then returning to the heavens. The relevant phrase is also pivotal in the movement. The *descendit* therefore finds in the composition a pendant in the *ascendit* (in *coelos/coelum*). As the descent into Hell gives expression to a mythical cosmology, the same naturally applies to the ascension into Heaven (Scaer 1992:99).

The soteriological offer in the *Apostolicum* can consequently not be ignored. Together with creation, redemption must be confessed; together with the first coming is the second coming; with the crucifixion is the resurrection; with the humiliation is the glorification, with the curse is the exoneration. Article I confesses that God is 'the Father, the Almighty', a sequence which clearly gives precedence to the love of God. Briggs (1914:52, 65) also sees in the composition of the *Apostolicum* six clear successive redemptive acts or states of Jesus the Saviour and adds to this that the Creed undoubtedly means that Jesus Christ descended to *Hades* as an important part of his work of salvation; for all the acts mentioned in the Creed are saving acts. This is indeed what Calvin spotted too.

Wirkungsgeschichte

Kelly ([1960] 2006:382–383) argues that the insertion of this phrase was not motivated by an anti-Apollinarian bias. The only possible polemic motive was its opposition to Docetism, inasmuch as the reality of the death of Jesus is emphasised. This is confirmed by the origin of the article in the Syrian church. At the Council of Ariminum (359), the issue of the concepts of *homoousios* (one substance) and the Arian *homoiousios* (similar substance) came to a head (Otto 1990:144). The formulation *descendit ad inferna* was then proposed as a compromise by Marcus of Arethusa (Doekes 1975:17). It was also so accepted at the Council of Constantinople (360). Du Toit (1971:177) is emphatic that the dismissive attitude to the docetic and Platonic fields among some of the earliest patristic fathers led directly to the adoption of the *descensus* in the *Apostolicum*. This granted credibility to both the death and the resurrection of Jesus (Kelly [1960] 2006:383).

Rufinus plainly explains in his *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* (c. 404) that, as regards the *descendit ad inferna*, 'its meaning ... appears to be precisely the same as that contained in the affirmation buried' (cited by Kay 2004:119). For this he invokes Psalms 16:10, 22:15, 30:3, 9 and 69:2. This initially was meant to reinforce the meaning that Jesus did really die. But then Rufinus also added later that Christ was not just another deceased being, but also the conqueror of death. The *descensus* is then transposed by Rufinus from a gloss on the burial of Jesus to a thematic scene of his resurrection – and in direct relation to human redemption. Jesus is not only the victim of death, but also the victor over death. Jesus's presence in hell is meant to be understood from the outset as evidence of an already accomplished redemption. It is therefore, according to the one interpretation, identical to *sepultus* and according to the other, an actual self-manifestation of Christ after the crucifixion to all departed spirits. This in particular includes those who died without a body being found who, therefore, according to tradition, could have no hope of the resurrection. Kelly ([1960] 2006:243) regards this emphasis on the victory as a clear shift in meaning and that 'the doctrine was coming to be interpreted as symbolizing His triumph over Satan and death, and, consequently, the salvation of mankind as a whole'.

Van Rensburg (1989:51–53) is of the opinion that this shift in meaning is also specifically the reason why the article was incorporated in the *Apostolicum*. When the meaning was seen as simply another repetition, there was no need to incorporate it either, but the moment when it had something more to say, it was indeed incorporated in the *Apostolicum*. Not that

this new content had been merely grasped out of fresh air. It was based essentially on a particular tradition which, like a rivulet, was incorporated into a river (Harris 1996:2–3). So the perennial challenge about the *descensus* concerns how to relate the respective scriptural traditions about sheol to those about *gehenna* and to connect them to the saving work of Jesus Christ (Kay 2004:122).

Clement of Alexandria seems to be the first to have linked 1 Peter 3:19 with the descent of Christ and he interpreted it in such a way as to see this preaching as offering salvation to the souls of Noah's unbelieving contemporaries (Campbell & Van Rensburg 2008:75). Some authors broadened it to include other souls in prison. By the time of Augustine (354–430), the view that Christ had liberated from *Hades* any persons other than those who had foreseen his coming and kept his precepts by anticipation, was branded heretical (Augustine 1997). The possibility of a conversion after death was in total disapproval. It was, therefore, the pre-existent Christ who preached to these contemporaries of Noah during their lifetime. This standpoint waned in the course of time, until Grudem revived it again recently in certain circles: 'The verse does not refer to something Christ did between his death and resurrection but something he did 'in the spiritual realm of existence' (or 'through the Spirit') at the time of Noah. When Noah was building the ark, Christ 'in Spirit' was preaching through Noah to the hostile unbelievers around him' (Grudem 1991:110). However, the most popular line of interpretation of this verse, today, is that Christ proclaimed his ultimate victory to evil spirits in prison at some time between his death and his ascension (Campbell & Van Rensburg 2008:82–83).

Harris (1996) points to the use of the expression *descensus* among certain post-apostolic patristic fathers: Ignatius (110 CE), Polycarp (156 CE), Irenaeus (202 CE) and Tertullian (200 CE). Van Aarde (2008:541, 552) suggests that, historically and exegetically, traditions such as those in 2 Maccabees 7, 1 Enoch 51:2 and the Gospel of Peter 9:35–10:42, are probably the oldest roots of 1 Peter 3:19 and reflect its 'mythical motive'. Rowland ([1982] 2002:125), however, makes the important remark that the geography of the places visited by Enoch is presented in real terms and not in mythological contours. Apocalyptic literature had an interest in the world as it was. After Enoch ascended to heaven, he embarked on a journey which took him to the various parts of the world and at the end to the *gehenna* (1 Enoch 24–27). It was notorious as a place of punishment and torment.

In summary, it can be stated that, during the first centuries, there was no question of an extensive theory about the *descensus*. Nowhere does it appear as creed material or create the impression that it is material critical to faith (Du Toit 1971:97–121). Initially, therefore, it was only concerned with underlining the truth of Christ's suffering and death and thus emphasising his true humanness. The *descensus* was manifest in the liturgy of the church from the 4th century only; still not as a doctrinal precept, but as the affective experience of the greatness of Jesus's victory over death.

Cosmology

Wyatt (2001:76–77) points out that the world-view of people in antiquity basically comprised three main levels: heaven, earth and the underworld. The series of binary representations of the first story of the creation in Genesis eventually provides for a third, the inhabitable earth. Psalm 89:11–12 powerfully puts this triad into words. To people of antiquity, the underworld was simply a spatial concept. Everyone who died went to the bosom of Abraham or to the place of pain. Gemser (1944:117) is very emphatic that the underworld in the Old Testament is used only in a 'general sense' and the apocalyptic meaning of hell is completely excluded. Naturally, this also has a direct relation with the understanding of the word *inferna*. This word is taken from Ephesians 4:9 and corresponds to the Greek word *Hades*, which occurs eleven times in the New Testament and

is often incorrectly translated as 'hell'. *Hades* signifies, like the Hebrew word *sheol*, the unseen spirit-world, the abode of all the departed, both the righteous and the wicked.

Bousset, however, observed already a hundred years ago that Christian belief in the descent of Christ into the netherworld represents the assimilation and spiritualisation of a much more primitive myth (Hoffman 1981:42–45). The theological interpretation is therefore a spiritual elaboration of a popular and archaic myth. The more mythological emphasis, however, survives only in ambiguous allusions and apocryphal expansions of the *descensus* like those that occur in the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. Gemser (1944:122), among others, points out that an understanding of the Old Testament view of the underworld as a fortress, a town with portals and bars (Jes 38:10; Ps 9:14, 107:18; Job 17:16; and Mt 16:18) was based on an antique Babylonian myth. What are spoken of are seven portals or two times seven portals on the way to the underworld, along which the goddess Ishtar had to get rid of a piece of her clothing at every portal in order to meet death naked. Wyatt (2001:77–90) points out that parallels of this story also existed in Egypt and Sumeria. The number seven refers to the influence of the seven planetary spheres on human beings.

The people in Old Israel therefore had accepted a clear stratification of the supernatural reality: Deuteronomy 10:12 ('heaven of heavens'); 1 Kings 8:27 (plural); Psalm 148:4 (plural); 2 Corinthians 12:2 (at least three); Ephesians 6:12 (plural); and Hebrews 4:14, 7:26 (plural). Ephesians 4:8–10 also sheds special light on the stratification of the underworld.³ In non-canonical material the following examples exist: 3 Baruch (five heavens); Testament of Levi (seven); 2 Enoch 20:1, 28:1 (ten); 3 Enoch 19:7, 34 (seven); Ascension of Isaiah (seven); Chagigah 12 (seven). The same applies to the underworld. Wyatt (2001:76) indicates a very early adaptation of the *Enuma Elish* story of creation (11th century B.C.) which distinguished both three levels of heaven and three levels of the underworld: 'The upper heavens are of *luludanitu*—stone, of Anu. // He settled the three hundred Igigi therein. // The middle heavens are of *saggilmut*—stone, of Igigi. // Bel sat therein on the lofty dais in the chamber of // lapis lazuli. // He lit a lamp of *elmesu*—stone. // The lower heavens are of jasper, of the stars. // He drew the constellations of the gods thereon. // On the base of the upper-earth he made frail mankind // lie down. // On the base of the middle earth he settled his father Ea. // On the base of the lower earth he shut in // the six hundred Anunnaki.'

Greek allusions are evidently from the same conceptual background as the Mesopotamian material, with a mixture of Egyptian thought (Cooper 1989:55; Wyatt 2001:85). Du Toit (1971:49) also points out the duality in Greek mythology by which *Hades* was the opposite pole of *helios*, alluding to the darkness as opposed to the light. With Homer, a more complicated view of *Hades* comes to the fore (Du Toit 1971:50). Owing to Hellenism and the development of astronomy, the concept of the flat disc of the earth made way for the concept of a spherical universe in which the freely orbiting earth is encompassed by the seven planets. The souls of the dead were now to be found in the uppermost sphere of pure ether, light and fire. Only in the Greco-Roman time was *Hades* seen as a place of punishment (*tartaros*) and this was powerfully developed during the Middle Ages (Du Toit 1971:52–55). Hell signifies the state and place of eternal damnation, like the Hebrew word *Gehenna* (the dale of Hinnom), which occurs 12 times in the Greek New Testament (Schaff 1931:46). In 1 Enoch 22 one also encounters a clear stratification of hell. There are separate regions for the just, for martyrs, for sinners who were not fully punished on earth and for sinners who were fully punished. The locality of the underworld systematically became abstract as the place of punishment and fire.

Time and space

It is particularly important to highlight the spatial concepts of

3. For a very extensive handling of this, see Harris (1996).

the *Apostolicum*. We have already referred to the movement from heaven downwards to the earth and back again. What is also striking is the chronological order of the course of God's work. It begins at creation and ends with the recreation. The 'second' article dealing with Jesus's person and work in particular plainly follows this historical sequence of events. It applies to both his humiliation and his elevation. The relationship between Creator and creation is not, however, a spatial or temporal relationship. This mythological synthesis of God and cosmos, with its confusion between the presence of God and upper space, is to be found in the anonymous *De Mundo* (falsely attributed to Aristotle) that gained currency in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

Thomas Torrance especially is honoured for the pioneering work that he did in analysing the concepts of time and space in the Patristics and making them serviceable to a Christian natural theology (Torrance 2001:107). Torrance's (1997:5) analysis of Plato's spatial concept is important for our purposes. He shows that Plato's concept of space (*χώρα*) is a third aspect, along with archetype (*παράδειγμα*) and copy (*μίμημα*). It appears that Plato thought of space as helping in some way to bridge the chasm (*χωρισμός*) between the intelligible and sensible realms. Yet space is not the 'receptacle' of the archetype but of the copies. Were it not for space, we would not be able to penetrate to the rationality lying behind sensible events. Therefore spatial elements have to be used when we speak of what is beyond the separation, as if we could speak of there being a 'place' over there!

According to Torrance (1997:7), Aristotle misunderstood Plato in the sense that he misconstrued the Platonic separation (*χωρισμός*) as a local or spatial separation and mistook the Platonic 'receptacle' or 'matrix' for the substrate from which bodies are derived. Aristotle listed space among the categories, with the implication that space was regarded as the actual way in which things exist. Space then, is the vessel (*ἀγγεῖον*) in which things exist and which exercises a certain force or causal activity in relation to them. It is the immobile limit within which a body is contained. This demands a point of absolute rest as the centre of reference for an understanding of change and transition.

Torrance consequently opted for the approach of the Stoics in terms of space. The notion of space must be thought out, not as much from the side of any container as from the side of the body being contained (Torrance 1997:9). The principle is that the body opens space for itself. The concept of space must be formed in accordance with the nature of the occupying agent. The material universe is not held together, as Aristotle thought, by an upper sphere which forces the parts to stay together, but by immanent reason. In terms of creation theology, God is not contained by anything; rather He contains the entire universe, not in the manner of a bodily container, but by his power. Torrance paid tribute to Origen who was the first to discern the philosophical significance of this reversal of Aristotelian and Stoic concepts. This holds that God comprehends all things, giving them beginning and end, thus making them determinate and comprehensible. In short, 'space has become here an epistemological as well as a cosmological principle' (Torrance 1997:12).

DOGMA HISTORY

The Middle Ages and thereafter

The iconography of the *descensus* developed particularly strongly in the Eastern Church. Böcher (2000:1858–1860) states that the first relic of this in Syria dates from about 700 AD. It portrays the Christ, victorious over hell, with Adam and Eve following him. In approximately 800 AD the Western Church produced a fresco with a similar theme – probably due to the fact that the pope, John VII (705–707) came from the East. Since the 11th century, the victory motif has had the ascension motif added to it, namely the *ascensus*. John the Baptist and purgatory (*limbus*) also come to the fore as motifs and baptism is pertinently linked to hell (cf. 1 Peter 3:18–20). Albrecht Dürer

used the same theme in about 1515 in his series of paintings on the Easter cycle. Küng (1993:96) expresses appreciation for the German Renaissance painter, Matthias Grünewald, who depicted the resurrection as a cosmic event, not against a golden background, but against the black night sky with a few shining stars. The risen Christ does not dissolve, but remains a concrete, definite person. Dante Alighieri, in his *La Divina Commedia* (1319), also described hell imaginatively in the three poems (*Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso*) and relied very strongly on the post-exile apocalyptic tradition. He believed there were nine circles in hell, but the church recognised only three spaces in the underworld: purgatory (*purgatorium*), the foyer for the patristic fathers (*limbus patrum*) and for the unbaptised children (*limbus infantum or puerorum*) (Küng 1982:162).

Du Toit (1971:220–221) sees the thought complex against which the Reformers protested as being precisely in the locative aspect of the *descensus*. This encompasses a special theology of incarnation which used ontological concepts in an attempt to solve the different aspects of Jesus's *descensus*. He believes it congealed the homiletic and doxological character of the *descensus* in dogma. He also traces this argument back to Luther, who rejected such scholastic assumptions. In his preaching, Luther could aptly put into words the multicoloured images and dramatic scenes of the mediaeval artists to paint the victory of Christ over death. In his well-known Torgau sermon of 16–17 April 1533, to which Article IX of the *Formula of Concord* also refers, he states: 'That is the power and usefulness of this article, the reason for its happening, being preached and believed, namely, that Christ destroyed the power of hell and took away all power from the devil' (Otto 1990:146). What is remarkable is that Luther did not reach back to the classical verse in 1 Peter 3:19 in this sermon, but used the example of the strong man who is tied up by an even stronger man (Mt 12:29). 'It was not simply that Christ's soul left heaven to join his body in the resurrection but that he appeared in both body and soul in hell to announce victory prior to his resurrection appearances on earth' (Scaer 1992:97). This doctrine preserves, therefore, a double-sided view of Christ's glorification as not only involving our world, but also the supernatural world occupied by the souls of the deceased and the angels. On the basis of the Lutheran interpretation, Scaer (1992:99) concludes that, if we scrap the article about the *descensus*, the lowest and probably the base of the three-level world-view would be discarded. The descent, the resurrection appearances and the session at the right hand belong together as a unified proclamation of Christ's victory over hell, earth and heaven.⁴

Calvin

The most significant Reformatory interpretation of the *descensus* would only take place with the second generation of Reformers. Calvin's understanding then formed the point of departure for the Heidelberg Catechism (1559), Question and Answer 44. It offers no dogmatic explanation of the *descensus*, but, true to the point of departure of Question 1 ('What is the only comfort in life and in death?'), is presented as a comforting message of Christ's substitutive death: 'That in my greatest temptations I may be assured that Christ, my Lord, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, and terrors which he suffered in his soul on the cross and before, has redeemed me from the anguish and torment of hell' (Schaff 1919:321).

Althaus prefers to take note of the interfaces rather than of the differences between Luther and Calvin and thinks that, as regards this matter, they tend to agree rather than to differ (see Du Toit 1971:34). The paths of their respective traditions only diverged when the debate about the time of Christ's humiliation and elevation developed. Was the *descensus* the last

event of the humiliation (Calvinism) or the first of the elevation (Lutheranism)? The absolute suffering of Godforsakenness on the cross, however, is the point of departure for the confession of faith about the *descensus* for both. But as Küng (1982:165) rightly comments, the *descensus* is not needed to express this; the *mortuus* and *sepultus* already say it.

In spite of Calvin's⁵ statement that he takes cognisance of the sequence of events from *suffering* → *death* → *burial* → *descent*, and that he states roundly that this addition does say something new and is therefore essential, it carries little weight in the development of his argument. Nevertheless, to him the *descensus* shifts back two places in the continuum of events of the article of the *Apostolicum* and rightly comes between the events of suffering and death. The linearity in fact is elevated in terms of Jesus's suffering. Even the faithful Calvinist, Wayne Grudem (1991:106), concedes that Calvin's reasoning leaves him in the lurch here. But it does not bother Du Toit (1971:34) at all, although he immediately concedes that Calvin wants to present a material and not a chronological interpretation.

Calvin believed that the crucifixion events are for Jesus the culminating point of Godforsakenness. From the concept of the sovereignty of God, Calvin understood the atonement in terms of punitive judgement. Christ not only died a bodily death but it also 'was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his judgement'. The *sepultus* explains what Christ endured in the sight of man: his body was offered up as the price of redemption. With the *descensus*, however, the meaning of invisible and incomprehensible judgement which he endured before God, in order that we might know, not only that Christ's body was given as the price for our redemption, but also that he paid a greater price by suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man. With this, Calvin therefore offers a psychological explanation of Jesus's experience. 'But how do [Luther and] Calvin know that?' asks Hans Küng, 'There is certainly no scriptural evidence for it' (Küng 1993:98). As a result, Van Rensburg (1989:54) could say that Calvin 'interprets the clause purely dogmatically'. The real reference of the *descensus* is not to a mythological netherworld, but to the suffering of Christ on the cross. Hell is a 'theological gloss on the cross' (Kay 2004:125) and not a mythological scene following after the resurrection.

After his investigation of Thomas Aquinas's views on this, Calvin comes to the conclusion that it is 'childish' (*puerile*) to judge that 'the souls of the dead' are confined to a kind of limbo under the earth. Calvin therefore also invokes 1 Peter 3:19 and takes the trouble to read this verse in context, but nevertheless follows Aquinas's symbolic interpretation:

Peter extols the power of Christ's death in that it penetrated even to the dead; while godly souls enjoyed the present sight of visitation which they had anxiously awaited. On the other hand, the wicked realized more clearly that they were excluded from all salvation.
(Kay 2004:124)

In his commentary on 1 Peter 3:18–22, Calvin (1963:293) argues that there is no possibility of salvation after death. The spirit of Christ went, some time after his resurrection, to preach deliverance from the unbelievers to the souls of the faithful of the old covenant who were in their own confinement of anxiety. Only the confirmation of their judgement was proclaimed to the godless. In this sense the imagery of *Gehenna* replaces that of the Sheol as more aptly describing the depths of anguish. Hell in the *Apostolicum* is therefore defined by the cross. Hell is Godforsakenness. To enter into that state is to descend into hell. But it spells out victory too. Christ died on the cross and in this way brought us eternal salvation. Our Saviour grappled

4. Although the Lutheran tradition understood the *descensus* quite differently from the way Luther himself understood it, even as the opposite (Du Toit 1971:29) by seeing it, among other things, as real and not metaphorical and also only after death, I am content with these comments about Luther's interpretation.

5. Calvin deals fullest with the *descensus* in the 1559 edition of his *Institution* (II.xvi.7–12). In the 1556 edition, he handled it as still merely the satisfaction of the Divine penal justice. The rest of the paragraph is derived without reference from the said five chapters of the *Institution* (1559).

hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death. On the cross, death has been overcome. The cry from hell simultaneously is Jesus's cry of victory.

Calvin internalised Plato's dualism so uncritically that he did not spot the non-metaphysical nuances of the anthropological terminology of the Bible. In his *Institution* (I.xv.6), for example, he states as follows: 'Indeed, from Scripture we have already taught that the soul is an incorporeal substance; now we must add that, although properly it is not spatially limited, still, set in the body, it dwells there as in a house; not only that it may animate all its parts and render its organs fit and useful for their actions, but also that it may hold the first place in ruling man's life, not alone with respect to the duties of his earthly life, but at the same time to arouse him to honour God.' (Cited from Cooper 1989:13.) Soul/spirit and body are not two separate substances, but inseparable aspects or capacities. Someone such as Cooper criticises Calvin (see e.g. Inst. I.xv.2), who clearly interpreted texts such as Matthew 10:28 and Luke 23:46 dualistically, in that the soul/spirit is separated from the body at the time of death. In summary, therefore, it can be said of Calvin that he attributed an infinite meaning to the *descensus* which fundamentally underplayed both the temporal-spatial aspects and the inclusiveness of the redemption. For this reason, it can be deduced that Calvin inadequately showed his feelings regarding the contribution and central role that the *descensus* can play in salvation.

HERMENEUTIC POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Du Toit (1971) makes the following important statement in *Tenet VII* of his doctoral thesis on the *descensus*: 'The true responsibility for maintaining the continuity of the confession of faith in the church is not in the first place situated in taking over or rejecting certain formulas, but in a search for their sense in view of the original basic form and religious intention and content of each separate judgement about them.' It seems to me that the following perspectives are essential to the way a Biblical-Reformatory theology values a Bible text in general and the *descensus* in particular:

- *Respect for the original text.* This means that the most accurate reading will have to be found. This also encompasses appreciating the composition, genre and reference of a text (Ricoeur 1980:99–100).
- *Respect for the frame of reference of the people of that time.* Whereas the people of antiquity worked, for example, with a three-tiered world-view, we today do not even have a heliocentric understanding of reality and, according to astrophysics, do not even have a universe, but a multiverse.
- *Respect for the Scriptures as the normative norm.* To us, elevating the Scriptures above the confessions of faith it is an epistemological point of departure. Naturally, one is caught up in a kind of circular reasoning in that the Scriptures determine the confession of faith and the confession of faith conversely interprets the Scriptures, but this may never take place in such a way that we try to hear the message of the Scriptures impartially.
- *Respect for continuing tradition.* We may never have given, or may not give the impression that we can leap across two thousand years of wrestling today and can hear the 'actual message' of that time purely. God's revelation in Christ resulted in a tradition of events and interpretations which must be captured and translated. Tradition is never a source on its own, but always conveys other people's wrestling with Truth and therefore links back continuous with the *Sache Jesu*. Only in this way can the Scriptures be the explicans (the interpreter) and tradition be the explicandum (that which must be interpreted).
- *Respect for the global frame of reference of the recipients today.* The message should always be present, so that contemporary people with all their knowledge (including scientific knowledge) can address judgements and prejudices.

- *Respect for God's creation.* 'Heaven and earth' have intrinsic worth and all the earth's inhabitants are dependent upon specific biotopes. This leads to an interconnectedness of the whole of creation.

A fresh development is the Society of Biblical Literature's *Consultation on Ecological Hermeneutics* at their annual meetings. An 'ecological reading' of a Bible text involves a basic hermeneutic of suspicion, identification and retrieval. We approach the Bible as creatures of Earth, as members of the Earth community in solidarity with Earth (Habel & Trudinger 2008:3). The restoration of all things means all humans remain in the eternal memory of God and the whole of creation is preserved for its consummation in the eternal kingdom of his glory (Moltmann 2004:150).

CONTOURS OF CONTEMPORARY SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

It is worth mentioning that the theologians of the *Formula of Concord* could indeed have had an overview of the temporal-spatial aspects of the problematic of the *descensus*: 'When and how ... did Christ go to hell? Did it happen before or after his death? Did it occur only according to the soul, or only according to the deity, or according to body and soul, spiritually or corporeally?' (Tappert [1959] 2000:\$96). Nevertheless, these theologians flinched away from their own insights and eventually handled it as merely an issue of faith, and so they let it remain unreasoned: 'With our reason and five senses this article cannot be comprehended ... We must only believe and cling to the Word' (Tappert [1959] 2000:\$96). Although a contemporary Lutheran such as Pannenberg ([1972] 1976:91–92) is correct when he asserts that the underworld cannot be placed within temporal-spatial co-ordinates because of our modern experience of nature, it does not resolve the problem; instead, it avoids it. People of antiquity did think about the underworld in temporal-spatial terms. With our post-modern understanding of time and space, by which we have done away with Newton's (and Aristotle's) understanding of constants (absolute time and space), we can indeed make this article serviceable in theology without spiritualising it.

We know today⁶ that time is more than movement or certain courses of events which can be placed on a one-dimensional continuum. Time is understood rather as the horizon which surrounds all that is. All that is, is in time. 'For now it can be seen that time not only has a structure, but is itself the structure' (Link 1999:191). Because the past necessarily has been, the present really is and the future is possible, the future has precedence in time. It is not an extension of the past, but the origin or source of the past. Potentiality therefore has ontological precedence (Moltmann 1996:286–290). By contrast, space is a function of time and therefore a dimensional category (Heim 1980:78). Compare for this purpose the striking metaphor of a 'Flatland' (Abbot 1998) which indicates that perspective determines more or fewer dimensions: in one-dimensionality reality is to me a point, in two-dimensionality a line, in three-dimensionality a cube. Creation is aimed eventually at a cosmic Sabbath and does begin with time, but ends with space (Moltmann 1996:266). It is God who comes to stay with us.

Although Du Toit (1971:178) indicates that the intermediate state and purgatory cannot apply as the motif for incorporating the *descensus* into the *Apostolicum*, Briggs (1914:67) nevertheless asserts that it was precisely the formal beginning of the later Roman Catholic dogma about it. Dogmatics will have to consider the so-called intermediate state about time and space further, in view of the latest developments in Systematic Theology. Moltmann (2000:252) does want to make room for such a space: 'So I conceive of that 'intermediate state' as a wide space for living, in which the life that was spoiled and cut short here can

6. For this, see my article, Buitendag, J., 2008, *Binne of buite die blokkie? 'n Poging om iets oor tyd en ewigheid te sê*, in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29(2), pp. 320–344.

develop freely. I imagine it as the time of a new life, in which God's history with a human being can come to its flowering and consummation.' An ecological theory of creation together with a cosmic eschatology will have to form the contours of our reflections on God's salvation in Christ. After all, we are not redeemed from the earth, but with the earth. Put negatively, I think that the *descensus* is the overcoming of limitations, and put positively, it is the cosmic victory of Christ that is being proclaimed.

There are several manifestations of finitude (see Conradie 2000:41–86). We experience restrictions to the spatial territory on which we can have an influence and so, too, the restrictions of time, because we know our lives are limited. The sting of finitude is the impact of human sin (1 Cor 15:55). The most obvious one is that of mortality. Finitude implies a limited life span. For Moltmann (1996:276), the *eschaton* has to overcome not only the suffering caused by sin, but also the suffering resulting from the predicament of finitude. Only a radically new creation can provide a solution to the predicament of transience. However, Pannenberg (1993:561) distinguishes clearly between death and restriction. The finite life of creatures is a life in time. To be in time is to be a sinner. Death is not an implication of human finitude, rather sinners' non-acceptance of their finitude. The sinner's lack of recognition of his or her restrictions is what leads to death. For precisely this reason, our perspective on life after death is limited.

I want to endorse Volf (2000:272) who wishes to give up the notions of the end of time and the end of space. The world to come is not the 'fullness of time', but the 'reconciliation of times'. For joy to be complete, he argues, it cannot be possible to pursue total simultaneity and total possession. Joy lives from the 'movement in time' qualified by a reconciled past and future in all presents (Volf 2000:275). The following indicators derived from Conradie (2002:287–295) are worth noting:

- Eternity implies neither timelessness nor spacelessness;
- There is a stratification in our understanding of reality;
- Eternity is a 'depth' dimension beyond the edges of the space-time continuum;
- Heaven is a dimension of creation (not of God), a dimension that is open to God, where God dwells and where God's presence may be discerned;
- Nothing that is past can pass away (Georg Picht);
- If the whole history of the cosmos is materially inscribed, then every moment would be together in God's presence in the *eschaton*.

In short, 'afterlife' is not a property of humanity, as Plato thought, but is a divine gift, divinely enacted. Amid discontinuity, the continuity lies in a sort of 'relational ontology' (Green 2008:180) which is the reconciliation of all things grounded in Christ and accomplished by the Spirit.

What Calvin felt embryonically and Luther pointed out forcefully, is that the *descensus* clearly spells out the victory of Christ, too. Gemser (1944:120) still asks hesitantly whether we might not detect here, too, a universal concept of God of the prophetic religion 'which does not come to a halt before the portals of the underworld'. But it is Pannenberg ([1972] 1976:92–95) who sees the *descensus* as a 'demonstration of triumph' and, in fact, that it should be taken as a universal understanding of salvation. 'It asserts that men outside the visible church are not automatically excluded from the salvation' ([1964] 2002:307). Pannenberg ([1964] 2002:308) and Moltmann (1989:213) both see the *descensus* not as the lowest point of the humiliation, but as the first point of the elevation. I prefer Küng's (1993:99) view, however, who regarded this as a false question, since it makes too much of the linearity or succession of points. Conversion before or after one's death is not the point then, but the all-encompassing love of God for all the dead (Küng 1993:100). The words of Romans 14:9 are clearly applicable here, as is the last part of Psalm 139:8. Moltmann (1996:81) moreover reasons that

the Bible never gives the same quality to the 'eternal death' as to the 'eternal life' and that it is indeed the case that God will eventually and literally be everything in everyone. This applies to the whole of creation, yes, to the whole cosmos. Universal reconciliation is not a heresy. It is rather the expression of hope and trust in God's goodness (Moltmann 2004:150). In the so-called 'transitional state', Christ is therefore solidly with the dead, not in the sense that it is final, but in the sense that they are nevertheless with him (*Christologia Viae*) on the way (Moltmann 1989). Küng (1982:181) agrees and believes that the 'eternal' of the punishment '*auf keinem Fall absolut gesetzt werden*'.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the word *infernium* in the *Apostolicum* cannot be adequately reflected in the word 'hell'. The later apocalyptic tradition simply made it too heavily loaded. The word *Hades* used in the Greek version of the *Apostolicum* clearly does not contain the Hebrew meaning of *Gehenna*. A more neutral word such as 'underworld' therefore renders the historical meaning better. It naturally requires explanation in the church's preaching and catechism, but it will not serve now to want to adapt the *Apostolicum*, the *Heidelberg Catechism* and also the *Athanasium* to suit our reformed dogmatics.

A strong objection to Calvin's metaphor of the *descensus* is that he did not respect the syntactical sequence of the text. According to the wording of the *Apostolicum*, 'hell' after all occurred after his death, not before it. Using the *Institutes* of Calvin or the *Heidelberg Catechism* as a heuristic tool to interpret the *descensus* feeds at least the following fallacies:

- The socio-linguistic niche (Lindbeck) of the *descensus* is misjudged;
- The valuable Christian perspective on victory in 1 Peter 3:19, including victory in the underworld, is not seen;
- Contemporary scientific theological insights into time and space are ignored.

Together with Calvin we know that this phrase contains an important part of our 'summary of faith', without really differing from Küng (1982:166), who speaks of a 'hierarchy of truth' and thus does not place it at the centre. Something of this 'mystery' should be increasingly exposed by Systematic Theology. The *descensus*, asserts Van Ruler (1968:102), is indeed a 'multi-coloured palette'!

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