

The confusion posed by the Apostle's Creed Did Jesus descend into Hell?

The Apostles' Creed, though not directly authored by the Apostles, is the most widely accepted creed among various denominations of Christianity, because of its proximity to the time of the Apostles and its reflection of their teachings. During that time, the oral tradition was the main method of teaching.

The problem with the Apostles' Creed is the phrase "he descended into hell." Did Jesus Christ descend into hell after He was crucified? A portion of the Apostles' Creed can be seen here to examine this confusing phrase:

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
he descended into hell;

Unlike the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed was not written or approved by a single church council at one specific time; instead, it took shape over some 550 years, from 200 A.D. to 750 A.D. The phrase "he descended into hell" was not found in any of the early versions of the Creed (Rome, Italy and Africa).

The earliest version of the Roman church, known by scholars as "The Old Roman Form," comes from Bishop Marcellus of Ancyra (337 A.D.), which lacks the phrase "he descended into hell".

Rufinus of Aquileia (Tyrannius Rufinus or Rufinus Aquileiensis), a translator of Greek patristic material into Latin, was the only one to include the phrase before 650 A.D. (390 A.D.). Rather than understanding the phrase to mean Christ "descended into *hell*", Rufinus himself understood it to mean "He descended into the *grave*," and this phrase was not found in the Roman form of the Creed that he preserved. Church fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian did not have this phrase in their writings either.

Without older versions to trace the historical development of the Creed, to determine whether there was an error of transmission or translation, the addition of this phrase to the Creed will continue to be a mystery.

By 750 A.D., the Roman church officially included the phrase "He descended into hell" in the Apostles' Creed.

Since then many Christians have accepted the phrase and attempted to understand what it meant through Scripture, and there has been a variety of interpretations.

The Anglican church understood the phrase literally:

Thirty Nine Articles

III. Of the going down of Christ into Hell.

As Christ died for us, and was buried, so also is it to be believed, that he went down into Hell.

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The Presbyterian church understood the phrase symbolically as Christ "continuing in the state of the dead."

Westminster Larger Catechism

Q. 50. Wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after his death?

A. 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; which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, *He descended into hell.*

The Reformed church founded by John Calvin understood the phrase symbolically as Christ suffered the pains of hell while on the cross.

Heidelberg Catechism

44. Q. Why is there added: He descended into hell?

A. In my greatest sorrows and temptations I may be assured and comforted that my Lord Jesus Christ, by His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which He endured throughout all His sufferings but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.

The Roman Catholic church understood the phrase literally; however, through their oral tradition, they developed an extrabiblical understanding of the phrase.

Augustine believed that Jesus did indeed descend into hell; but, he was unable to find biblical support for it. He had difficulty understanding 1 Peter 3:18-20 where it referred to Jesus "preaching to the dead" who were presumably in hell.

Thomas Aquinas, in an attempt to understand 1 Peter 3:18-20, developed the idea that Jesus descended into hell and purgatory. Hell was for unbelievers and purgatory was for believers awaiting righteous deliverance.

The Catechism of Pope St. Pius X (1908), designed for the general church so that they may find clear and complete answers to their questions, develop their extrabiblical understanding further as exemplified by the Fifth Article of the Creed.

The Fifth Article of the Creed

1 Q. What are we taught in the Fifth Article: He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead?

A. The Fifth Article of the Creed teaches us that the Soul of Jesus Christ, on being separated from His Body, descended to the Limbo of the holy Fathers, and that on the third day it became united once more to His Body, never to be parted from it again.

2 Q. What is here meant by hell?

A. Hell here means the Limbo of the holy Fathers, that is, the place where the souls of the just were detained, in expectation of redemption through Jesus Christ.

3 Q. Why were not the souls of the Holy Fathers admitted into heaven before the death of Jesus Christ?

A. The souls of the holy Fathers were not admitted into heaven before the death of Jesus Christ, because heaven was closed by the sin of Adam, and it was but fitting that Jesus Christ, who reopened it by His death, should be the first to enter it.

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Of this controversy regarding the Apostles' Creed and the phrase "He descended into Hell", the following observations can be made:

1. The origin of the phrase "He descended into Hell" is unknown, and the phrase is absent in the earliest versions of the Creed.
2. Biblical support for the idea that Jesus descended into Hell after His crucifixion is lacking (see www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/7Humans/DeathUnderstanding1Peter3_18.aspx).
3. Subsequent theologians, in the development of their catechisms, had difficulty understanding this phrase.