

Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

**Francis Turretin and the Doctrine of Christ's Descent: A Comparative Analysis of  
Reformed Scholastic Diversity in Zanchi, Vermigli, and Others**

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## *Introduction*

The Apostles' Creed is universally accepted by Christians as the irreducible minimum of doctrinal agreement—all except for one troublesome phrase: *He descended into hell*. The interpretation—as well as the inclusion—of this statement has been varied through church history. The Reformed Orthodox and their descendants hold to a consistent official stance: the human soul of Christ did not locally descend into hell. This paper examines the origins of this position and questions whether it was consistently accepted among the Reformed.

The Reformed scholastics held a unique position by interpreting the descent as referring to either (1) Christ's spiritual suffering in his passion and death or (2) his bondage to death while being three days in the tomb. As Richard Muller wrote, "The Reformed deny...the idea of a local descent of Christ's soul into a place called hell or Hades."<sup>1</sup> This denial of a local descent also rules out the possibility of liberating the pious patriarchs of the Old Testament from the upper level of hell, known as the limbo of the fathers. "The *limbus patrum* is explicitly rejected in the orthodox Protestant treatment of the descent into hell."<sup>2</sup>

Standing in contrast to the Reformed Orthodox, most other Christian traditions have held that Christ's descent, also known as the *descensus*, involved a real post-mortem event where "his soul departed to the place of the dead. And because he is God in the flesh, he defeated the place of the dead and the grave by descending into them and then rising again on the third day."<sup>3</sup> Even though the formal addition of the *descensus* clause to the Apostles' Creed did not occur until

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1. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 89.

2. Muller, 203.

3. Matthew Emerson, *He Descended to the Dead: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2019), xi.

after the middle of the fourth century, the doctrine has long been held as a part of Christian thought.<sup>4</sup> “Many of the Fathers refer to the descent, some briefly, others at length. All take it as a given doctrine, part of Christ’s salvific act.”<sup>5</sup> The question is how to interpret the descent: concretely (as the descent of his human soul) or symbolically (with descent as a metaphor).

Summarizing the Reformed scholastic position well, Francis Turretin (1623-1687) wrote, “Was the soul of Christ, after its separation from the body, translated to paradise immediately? Or did it descend locally to hell? The former we affirm; the latter we deny against the papists and Lutherans.”<sup>6</sup> Local descent, therefore, is a position not held by the Reformed, according to Turretin. He could only recognize that position as being held by papists or Lutherans. Turretin cited several Reformed scholastics, including Jerome Zanchi (1516-1590), as evidence for those who aligned with him, refuting any local descent.

More recent examples of Reformed theologians who have denied local descent as part of the Reformed interpretive tradition include Joel Beeke. He outlined six possible interpretations for the *descensus* clause: Jesus descended into hell in order to (1) Rescue the ancient fathers from limbo, (2) Give the unconverted dead a second chance, (3) Suffer in hell for our sins, (4) Conquer Satan after dying on the cross, (5) Suffer spiritual anguish on the cross, or (6) Die and dwell in the state of death. After evaluating the six positions, he finds the first four insufficiently grounded in Scripture, as also did Francis Turretin. Also, like Turretin, Beeke believes positions

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4. Richard Muller and Ronald Feenstra, “Appendix B: Report of the Committee to Study the Materials from the Reformed Churches of Australia Re Christ’s Descent Into Hell.” In *Agenda for Synod 2000*. (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 2000), 218.

5. Preston Hill and Catherine Laufer, “Jesus’ Descent into Hell.” *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, August 15, 2024, 9.

6. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 2:13.15.

five and six could be synthesized without difficulty, and those positions are “both accepted by Reformed theologians.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, by implication, Reformed theologians do not accept the other four. As Daniel Hyde, in evaluating the history of Reformed interpretation of the descent, wrote, “other than [Peter Martyr] Vermigli, Reformed theologians from the sixteenth century till today have rejected the first four views of *He descended into hell* in favor of a literary or symbolic view of Christ’s descent into hell.”<sup>8</sup>

However, this confidence in the lack of Reformed sources is not warranted. There were indeed more Reformed scholastics than Vermigli who held to a local descent of Christ’s human soul into hell. **As a comparative analysis of Zanchi, Vermigli, and other Reformed scholastics shows, Francis Turretin oversimplified the early Reformed Orthodox understanding of Christ’s descent into hell; earlier Reformed authors evidenced a broader variety of thought on this doctrine than was assumed by Turretin, who favored a later, more unified position.**

This paper will first review the Reformed Orthodox position on the descent, showing the unified Calvinian position among the later scholastics. Then, Turretin’s writings will be examined, showing his alignment with the scholastics. Next, Turretin’s sources will be scrutinized, which include Calvin, Ursinus, and Zanchi, which will, upon examination, show discordant notes that do not align with Turretin’s claims for a unified “Reformed” position. Finally, other early Reformed scholastics will be explored, including Aretius, Bullinger, and Buchanus, whose positions differ from the later, unified Calvinian position on the descent.

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7. Joel Beeke, “He Descended into Hell.” *Reformed Systematic Theology: Volume 2: Man and Christ*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 912-925.

8. Daniel R. Hyde, *In Defense of the Descent: A Response to Contemporary Critics*. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 43.

## A Comparative Analysis of Reformed Scholastic Diversity on the *Descensus* Clause

The existence of the *descensus* clause in the Apostles' Creed continues to be a source of contention and suspicion within Christian circles. Some believe the Gordian knot should be simply cut by removing the phrase from the Creed altogether.<sup>9</sup> Others wish to embrace the strangeness of the descent, affirming ties to nonbiblical literature as part of the universal truth embedded in the human soul.<sup>10</sup> Still others respond by wishing to mute the mythology of Christ's descent, thinking these fancies are "overloaded with the mythical imagery of a hero triumphantly conquering the underworld."<sup>11</sup>

Belief in the literal descent of Christ's human soul also comes with the challenge of accepting a three-story cosmology of (1) the Heavens, (2) the earth, and (3) under the earth. If one accepts the descent as part of the liberation of the patriarchs, then one must also accept three compartments for the realm under the earth: the place of the righteous dead, the place of the unrighteous dead, and the prison for fallen angels (also called Tartarus).<sup>12</sup>

Even if one does not affirm *limbus patrum*, some view the idea of Jesus descending to proclaim victory over the damned as conflicting with Jesus' life and ministry, which emphasized a faithful, gentle witness.<sup>13</sup> In this vein, some see the descent as grounds for universalism.<sup>14</sup> The

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9. Wayne Grudem, "He Did Not Descend Into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34:1 (March 1991): 103-113.

10. Emerson, xi. Examples include Hercules and Orpheus venturing to Hades, Harry Potter going down into the Chamber of Secrets, and Gandalf descending into Moria, defeating the Balrog, and returning to life

11. Rodney Howsare, "Christ's Descent into Hell." In *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*. (London, 2021), 257.

12. Emerson, 33.

13. Millard J. Erickson, "Did Jesus Really Descend to Hell?" *Christianity Today* 44, no. 2 (Feb. 2000): 74.

14. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama-Theological Dramatic Theory*. Vol. 5. (Ignatius Press, 1983), 268. As cited by Howsare, 274.

asymmetry of God's judgment and grace in the New Covenant "means that God wills no one to end up in Hell."<sup>15</sup> The gospel being preached to the dead (as seen in 1 Peter 3:19) means that "we humans can be saved and brought into the life of God even after we have died. This is a supreme consolation to those...who died outside the embrace of the church."<sup>16</sup>

In light of all these challenges, one can agree with Edward Leigh, who wrote, "Now for Christ's descending into Hell, there is a deal of quarreling about it, insomuch that one said, It is a kind of descent into Hell to read the controversies about it."<sup>17</sup> And yet, despite these challenges, the Reformed tradition, generation after generation, has decided to keep the *descensus* clause, noting that it "occupies a significant place in Reformed theological tradition. Furthermore, these Reformed theologians, assuming the doctrine to be biblical, worked to explain how a confession of Christ's descent to the realm of the dead can be taught in the context of a theology that denies both purgatory and the *limbus patrum*."<sup>18</sup>

### Overview of the Reformed Position of Christ's Descent into Hell

The later Reformed scholastics affirmed a unified position on the descent, stating that Christ did not make a local descent of his human soul into hell, but his descent was only (1) the wrath of God before his death and (2) his human body being placed in the grave.

For example, Amandus Polanus (1561-1610), in his *Syntagma theologiae*, wrote that "Christ descended into hell the moment when in the garden he struggled with the judgment and

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15. Howsare, 274-275.

16. Martin F. Connell, "Why Did Jesus Descend into Hell?" *U.S. Catholic* 66, no. 11 (November 2001): 43.

17. Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity*. (London: A. M., 1662), 604. As cited by Samuel D. Renihan, *Crux, Mors, Inferi: A Primer and Reader on the Descent of Christ*. (Seattle: KDP, 2021), 106.

18. Richard Muller and Ronald Feenstra, *Agenda for Synod 2000*, 225.

wrath of God and the horror of eternal death...and was made a curse for us on the cross...Whence we understand that Christ descended into hell not locally.” He argued that the *descensus* clause in the Apostles’ Creed is located after Christ’s burial because the Creed describes first what happened to his body and then what happened inwardly to his soul.<sup>19</sup>

Petrus van Mastricht (1630-1706), in his *Theoretico-Practica Theologia*, wrote that “the Reformed deny all local descent,” in part because the human soul of Christ was commended “into his Father’s hands, and since it ascended that very day to Paradise.” Furthermore, “a local descent is quite useless and superfluous.” Christ did not suffer for sins there, nor did he bring the patriarchs of the Old Testament out of hell, nor “to triumph over the devils; that was already done on the cross...and afterwards also in the ascension.”<sup>20</sup>

The Leiden Synopsis considers how some interpret the descent into hell as simply burial into the grave, while others interpret it as hellish agonies premortem. The authors concluded: “the descent into hell means hellish agonies, the weight of God’s anger like the forsakenness that Christ experienced in his soul, as we have explained above. Joining these two descents...would make a good fit, as indeed some explainers do. For both pertain to Christ’s final humiliation.”<sup>21</sup>

The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 44, affirms Christ’s descent into hell as “unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, on the cross but also earlier,” by which the Christian can be assured that Christ “has delivered me from hellish anguish and torment.”<sup>22</sup> In reviewing many of

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19. Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma Theologiae*. (Basel, Switzerland: Conrad Waldkirch, 1609), VI.21.

20. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretico-Practica Theologia*. (Utrecht, Netherlands: Franciscus Halma, 1699), V.xiii.12.

21. William den Boer and Riemer A. Faber, eds. *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*. Vol. 1. (Landrum, South Carolina: Davenant, 2023), 313, 315.

22. Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, *The Heidelberg Catechism*. 1563; repr. ed. (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 2013).

these Reformed sources, Hyde summarizes nicely: “As to the body of Jesus Christ, He descended into the state of death, as to the soul of Jesus Christ, He suffered the agonies of hell.”<sup>23</sup>

#### Turretin on the Unified Position

When Turretin examined the doctrine of Christ’s descent, he established a position in line with the Reformed Orthodox, seeing no local descent of Christ’s human soul but only a descent into the agonies of hell and a bodily descent into the grave.

Like Beeke above, Turretin examined the six interpretations for the *descensus* clause in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. He found the first four insufficiently warranted from Scripture and out of step with the Reformed tradition. Regarding the idea of Christ’s descent as a proclamation of victory, Turretin said the “descent ought to be penal, not triumphal and belongs to the state of humiliation, not of exaltation.”<sup>24</sup> He saw the preaching of Christ to the spirits in 1 Peter 3:19 solely as a reference to the preaching of repentance, which would make no sense for spirits in hell since “there is granted no exit from” that prison. Therefore, it can only refer to Christ preaching through Noah to men of his time. In examining Ephesians 4:9, Turretin said the lower parts of the earth into which Christ descended refer to the lowest parts *of* the earth, not a realm *under* the earth.<sup>25</sup>

Turretin accepted only two positions regarding the descent of Christ, namely “spiritual anguish and hellish torments which he suffered” or “burial and three days’ detention in the sepulcher.” For the former, he cited “Calvin, Beza, Danaeus, Ursinus and others, even various

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23. Hyde, 51.

24. Turretin, *IET*, 2:13.15.7, 359.

25. Turretin, *IET*, 2:13.15.7, 359-360.

confessions of the churches,” and for the latter, “Zanchius, Piscator, Pierius and others.”<sup>26</sup>

Like Beeke and the Leiden Synopsis, Turretin believed that these two positions could be synthesized:

If it is asked which of these two opinions ought to be retained, we answer both can be admitted and be made to agree perfectly with each other. Thus by the descent into hell may be understood the extreme degree of Christ’s suffering and humiliation, both as to soul and body; and as the lowest degree of humiliation as to the body was its detention in the sepulcher, so as to the soul were those dreadful torments he felt.<sup>27</sup>

Turretin referenced the effects of Christ’s death and descent into the grave several times in his preaching. In his sermon, “The Happiness of the People of God” from Psalm 33:12, Turretin gave examples of how Christ triumphed over the devil, albeit this is a victory achieved through his cross, not by local descent. Christ “destroyed the devil’s empire” so that he no longer has dominion over us. Christ “makes the devils tremble at their abyss” and has “the keys of death and hell.” All of a Christian’s foes “are vanquished Enemies who are no longer capable of frightening or harming us.” This is all because the penalty of death was paid by Christ on the cross, so that “Death itself—the king of terrors and the last enemy we have to fight—becomes ...rather the door of heaven, the entrance to Paradise, the passage to immortality.”<sup>28</sup>

In another sermon, on 1 Corinthians 15:55-57, entitled “The Triumph over Death,” Turretin said the terms ‘Hell’ and ‘the grave’ can be synonymous in the Bible, as Paul wrote, “O grave (ἀδης, *hades*), where is thy victory?” Turretin admitted that this word, “which we have reduced to that of ‘grave,’ can also be understood at times as hell and the place of the damned.”

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26. Turretin, *IET*, 2:13.16.1, 362.

27. Turretin, *IET*, 2:13.16.8, 363.

28. Francis Turretin, “Sermon I: The Happiness of the People of God. Psalm 33:12.” *Sermons on Various Passages of Sacred Scripture*. Translated by Ronald Geer and Frederick Wright. (Unpublished, 2025), 20-21, 23.

Therefore, some have taken this as Christ's victory over hell due to his descent. However, Turretin said this term, in the context of 1 Corinthians 15, should not be mistaken for the underworld or the place of the damned “since it is clear that the Apostle has no other aim than to speak of the last resurrection.” Although the “hades” mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor. 15 refers to death and its consequences due to sin, Turretin comfortably expanded these implications to include the devil and demonic principalities. Christ destroyed sin, death, and hell because he is the one who has the keys to hell and death. “It was a question of overcoming the principalities and the powers, and the spiritual evils that are in the celestial places (Eph 6:12), and who could do it, but he who is the Master of them, who holds them all in the chain of his Providence?”<sup>29</sup>

Further still:

This is the blessed ‘seed of the woman,’ who was to break the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). This is the excellent ‘Michael who fought against the dragon with his angels and defeated them’ (Rev 12:7–8). He is the one who came down from Heaven to fight the battles of the Lord. Having seen all this black and frightful army that the devil had arrayed against us, he entered the fray and took all the blows we had to bear.

Yet Christ achieved this victory by the “grief to the point of death in which he was seized, these drops of blood which he sweated, these cries and tears and ardent prayers.”<sup>30</sup> Local descent was not the means by which the devil was disarmed and humiliated, since the power of the devil was through the law, and “it was by this torture [of the cross] that he put to death the law, that he disarmed it of all that force which it naturally had against us.”<sup>31</sup>

Echoing Emerson, Turretin similarly embraced the idea of “mythologizing” Christ's triumph and acknowledged connections to nonbiblical literature, comparing Christ to “the

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29. Turretin, “Sermon X,” 182.

30. Turretin, “Sermon X,” 183.

31. Turretin, “Sermon X,” 183.

fabulous Hercules” who “tamed monsters with other monsters, made weapons from their spoils, and completed his last works with the help he had drawn from the first.” Ultimately, Turretin claimed, “this fable finds its truth in Jesus Christ...It is the Lord Jesus who has genuinely destroyed the terrible monsters of hell by himself.” Still, it was not through local descent. “He destroyed the sin ‘by being made sin’ (2 Cor 5:21). For us, he abolished the curse of the Law ‘by being made a curse’ (Gal 3:13).”<sup>32</sup>

Although Turretin denied local descent, there are instances when he appears to affirm that in Christ’s descent into the grave, a real victory was achieved by descending into the stronghold of death itself. Christ faced death and “enters its fortress, disarms it of its power, and removes from it that mortal sting which made it so dreadful.” Like Samson having once removed the gates of Gaza, “he was seen to remove the gates of death...When we saw him gloriously emerge from the dark mansions of the grave to return to the light of the living, was this not an incontestable proof of his victory?”<sup>33</sup>

In addition to his cross, death, and resurrection, Christ’s triumph over the devils is also part of his ascension. When the Lord Jesus “ascended to heaven on the clouds, which are the chariot of God, he presented the demons with all their army to our eyes. Demons with all their army, sin, death, and hell, bound and tied to his triumphal chariot, stripped of all their strength, defeated, and destroyed without deliverance.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite the many references that Turretin made in his sermons to the triumph of Christ, he assigns this victory over the demons, death, and hell to only one of four locations: (1) Christ’s

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32. Turretin, “Sermon X,” 184.

33. Turretin, “Sermon X,” 184.

34. Turretin, “Sermon X”, 185.

suffering, (2) the fact of Christ’s death, (3) the resurrection, or (4) his ascension. Turretin did not associate Christ’s victory with a local descent to hell, where he defeated the place of the dead through the presence of his human soul.

### Examination of Turretin’s Sources

In his *Institutes*, Turretin referenced seven men whose writings will be considered below. He cited the first four as representatives of descent-as-spiritual-anguish and the latter three as representatives of descent-as-physical-burial. While many support his arguments, Turretin misunderstood the arguments of a few men, and an examination will show a greater diversity of thought among the early Reformed on the descent.

The first name mentioned by Turretin is John Calvin (1509-1564). In his *Institutes*, Calvin affirmed the significance of the *descensus* clause in the Apostles’ Creed, believing it to be a “useful and not-to-be-despised mystery of a most important matter.” He believed it contained “nothing...except what has been derived from the pure Word of God.”<sup>35</sup>

The location of the *descensus* clause in the Creed, which occurs after the burial and before the resurrection, meant it could not be a repetition of the body of Christ descending into the grave, which would “obscure rather than clarify it.”<sup>36</sup> It also could not be a liberation of the fathers from limbo since the *limbus patrum* is “nothing but a story,” and “childish.”<sup>37</sup> Although Calvin did not affirm a local descent of Christ’s human soul into hell, he was willing to affirm that 1 Peter 3:19 references a kind of preaching that was extended to the dead by the spirit of

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35. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by John Baillie. Vol. 2. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), II.XVI.8, 512.

36. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.XVI.8, 513.

37. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.XVI.8, 514.

Christ, and it was not given to men who were alive to hear Noah preach.

For Peter extols the power of Christ's death in that it penetrated even to the dead; while godly souls enjoyed the present sight of that visitation which they had anxiously awaited. On the other hand, the wicked realized more clearly that they were excluded from all salvation. Now, while Peter does not clearly distinguish between the godly and the ungodly, we are not therefore to understand that he mixed them indiscriminately. He only means to teach that both groups have a common awareness of Christ's death.<sup>38</sup>

Calvin was willing to believe in a post-mortem descent of Christ to the righteous and unrighteous dead—yet it was not Jesus' soul that descended but his power. The righteous and unrighteous dead were aware of the death of Christ, and that awareness was a “preaching” that consoled the godly dead while also terrorizing the wicked.

Regarding the *descensus* clause, Calvin taught that it was a description of the human soul of Christ while still alive, under the wrath of God: “Surely no more terrible abyss can be conceived than to feel yourself forsaken and estranged from God; and when you call upon him, not to be heard.”<sup>39</sup> In light of the history of interpretation on the descent, Mary Rakow calls this view a “radically new interpretation.” In Calvin’s view, “Christ does not go anywhere at all. He makes no journey. There really is no underworld into which he enters. Spatially, Christ makes no descent.”<sup>40</sup> Instead, “Christ descended into an experiential hell, an abyss of despair, fear, and God-forsakenness, where his soul was tormented by the pains of eternal death.”<sup>41</sup>

In fact, this view is not entirely innovative. Preston Hill has demonstrated that Calvin received this view from French humanist Jacque Lefèvre d’Étaples (c. 1455-c. 1536) and

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38. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.XVI.9, 515.

39. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.XVI.11, 516.

40. Mary Rakow, “Christ’s Descent into Hell: Calvin’s Interpretation.” In *Religion in Life*. 43, (1974): 222. As cited in Robert M. Brenton, “Calvin’s Confession of Christ’s Descent into Hell in the Context of the Doctrine of Redemption: An Historical and Hermeneutical Inquiry.” (Calvin Theological Seminary, 1993), 9.

41. Brenton, “Calvin’s Confession of Christ’s Descent into Hell,” 9.

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464).<sup>42</sup> Although this pushes the date of innovation back by nearly a century, it is still a novel view. Calvin also held this view early on. Heiko Oberman taught that “the descent of Christ into hell as the extreme experience and exposure of the Son of Man to the wrath of God was already part of the earliest stage of Calvin’s thought.”<sup>43</sup> The first instance of Christ’s descent is in *Psychopannychia*, his first theological treatise, initially penned in 1534.<sup>44</sup> In that work, Calvin wrote, “would you know what the death of the soul is? It is to be without God—to be abandoned by God, and left to itself: for if God is its life, it loses its life when it loses the presence of God...Then, such death as the soul endures Christ underwent on our account.”<sup>45</sup> In this way, “Hell,” as understood by Calvin, “signifies not so much the locality, as the condition of those whom God has condemned and doomed to destruction.”<sup>46</sup>

Calvin was also aware that his position was out of step with many of the Church Fathers. In his commentary on the book of Psalms (1563), Calvin viewed Psalm 16:10, “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell,” as referring to corruption of the body in the grave, not the soul in hell. “Both the Greek and Latin Fathers, I confess, have strained these words to a meaning wholly different, referring them to the bringing back of the soul of Christ from hell.”<sup>47</sup>

The second name mentioned by Turretin is Theodore Beza (1519-1605). As John

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42. Preston Hill, “The Death of the Soul: Christ’s Descent into Hell in the Thought of Calvin, Lefèvre, and Cusa.” *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 24, no. 3 (2022): 141.

43. Heiko Oberman, “*Initia Calvini*: The Matrix of Calvin’s Reformation.” In *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 134–135. As cited by Hill, “The Death of the Soul,” 143.

44. Hill, “The Death of the Soul,” 142.

45. John Calvin, “*Psychopannychia*.” In *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958). As cited by Hill, “The Death of the Soul,” 145.

46. Joe Mock, “The Reformers and the *Descendit Clause*.” *Westminster Journal* 83 (2021): 286.

47. John Calvin, “Commentary on Joshua, Psalms 1-35.” In *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, edited by Wilhelm Baum, Vol. 4. (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1866). As cited by Mock, 289.

Calvin's successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza's interpretation of the descent had a highly leveraged effect on the Reformed tradition. Beza went so far as to remove the *descensus* clause from his version of the Creed.<sup>48</sup> The Geneva Bible's marginalia included many notes directly contradicting a literal descent of Christ's human soul. Although authorship of the marginalia cannot all be located with Beza, and the study of authorship is complicated by the fact that the "Geneva Bibles" (para-)textual apparatuses existed in multiple unstable forms across the life of the translation," still the influence of the book as emblematic of the Beza-Geneva tradition should be considered.<sup>49</sup> This paper will review the English 1599 version.

*1 Peter 3:19.* Departing from Calvin, Beza believed that it was by Christ's "divine virtue," he preached "repentance even by the mouth of Noah himself who then prepared the Ark, to those disobedient spirits which are now in prison." It was not the human soul of Christ that preached, but "the divinity: therefore this word, Spirit, cannot in this place be taken for the soul." The subjects in prison are called "spirits, in respect of his time, not in respect of the time that they were in the flesh." That is, they are *now* spirits, but were merely men in the time of Noah.

*Acts 2:27.* Agreeing with Calvin, Beza said the quoted verse from Ps. 16:10 "thou wilt not leave my soul in the grave [ἄδου, *hades*]" does not refer to a descent of the human soul of Christ into hell, but should be interpreted as "Thou wilt not suffer me to remain in [the] grave."

*Eph. 4:9.* Like Calvin, Beza taught that Christ's descent "into the lowest parts of the earth" is not a reference to the realm under the earth, but "down to the earth, which is the lowest part of the world."

*Mark 15:34.* On the cross, Christ's "soul [was] plunged in the depth of hell." *Matthew*

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48. Mock, 275.

49. Alexander Hardie-Forsyth. "Towards a Marginal History of Reading the Geneva Bible." *Forum (Edinburgh)*, no. 23 (2016), 4.

27:45-46. “Heaven itself is darkened for very horror, and Jesus crieth out from the depth of hell,” feeling “the wrath of God which is due to our sins.”<sup>50</sup>

The third name mentioned by Turretin was Lambert Daneau (c.1530-1595), a French theologian trained in Geneva and taught at the University of Leiden. Daneau developed a few simple syllogisms: “In the underworld, there is no redemption nor confession of the name of God (Psalm 6:6). Christ, however, continually praised God. Therefore, he was not in the underworld (*Ergo non fuit in inferno*).” He also taught that those who descend to the underworld are not in paradise, yet Christ “was immediately in paradise (Luke 23:43). Therefore, he did not descend to the underworld (*Ergo non descendit ad inferos*).”<sup>51</sup> Daneau, however, departed from Beza and Calvin by saying the biblical image of descent into the dead in Psalm 16:10 is an unmistakable description of the human soul descending into hell, and the Creed uses this phrase because “the greatest torments of the soul are described,” citing Acts 2:24, 27 (the agony of death... You will not forsake my soul to Hades); Psalm 55:15 (Let them go down alive to Sheol); Prov. 9:18 (That those she called are in the depths of Sheol).<sup>52</sup>

The fourth man Turretin cited was Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583), completing the quartet of those who held to descent-as-spiritual-anguish. Ursinus’ *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* provides another significant contribution to our study, since his position is not as firm as Turretin claimed.<sup>53</sup> “Neither did the soul of Christ descend,” Ursinus taught, because first, the

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50. Theodore Beza, *The New Testament...Translated out of Greeke by Theod Beza*. (London: Christopher Baker, 1599), 1 Peter 3:19, 105; Acts 2:27, 48; Eph. 4:9, 86; Mark 15:34, 23; Matt. 27:45-46, 15.

51. Lambert Daneau, *Symboli Apostolici Explicatio*. (Geneva: Haeredes Eustachii Vignon, 1592), 134.

52. Daneau, 115.

53. Perhaps, it would be more accurate to call it the “Ursinus’ tradition on the Catechism,” since his authorship is not direct. Special thanks to Damian Domke for highlighting the disputed nature of the authorship of *The Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*. He prefers the term “Quasi-Ursinus-Commentary.”

Scriptures do not teach it, second, Luke 23:46 teaches that Christ's soul was given to the Father, and third, the reasons for Christ's descent to liberate the patriarchs or to suffer in hell are not true.<sup>54</sup> However, Ursinus contemplated another reason for Christ's descent: "There are some who believe that the soul of Christ descended into hell after his death, not to suffer, nor to liberate the fathers, but that he might there make an open display of his victory, and strike terror into the minds of the devils." Ursinus did not find Scriptural evidence for this view.<sup>55</sup> Yet this view "of Christ's descent into hell has nothing of impiety in it, and has been approved of and held by many of the fathers." He concluded therefore that "it is not proper that we should contend strenuously with any one in regard to it." Ursinus' only two objections were, first, the lack of obvious Scriptural evidence and, second, a belief that Christ's triumph over hell and the devils should be located at "the commencement of his glorification." Although, Ursinus agreed "that Christ struck a great terror and dread in the devils. But this he did by his death." He defined the descent, therefore, as "those extreme torments, pains, and anguish, which Christ suffered in his soul, such as the damned experience."<sup>56</sup> But Ursinus left the door open about a literal descent of Christ's human soul to display his victory: "Should any one, however, be able to defend, and establish the fact that he descended in a different sense, it is well. As for me, I cannot."<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that Ursinus believed this position was not unsound and only thought it had not yet been satisfactorily proven from Scripture. The fact that he did not wish to dispute with one who held to a local descent for the purpose of Christ's proclamation of victory leads one to think

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54. Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*. Translated by Rev. G. W. Williard. 3rd ed. (Cincinnati: T. P. Bucher, 1851), 229.

55. Ursinus, 229-230.

56. Ursinus, 231.

57. Ursinus, 232.

that he found it an allowable position within Reformed orthodoxy.

The fifth name mentioned by Turretin was Johannes Piscator (1546-1625), a Reformed German theologian who taught at Strasbourg, Heidelberg, and the Casimirianum at Neustadt. Piscator is the first of the three men cited by Turretin as Reformed examples of the descent-as-physical-burial position. Piscator held that the burial of Christ's body into the grave "was the final state of His humiliation...hence it is also called the descent into hell, and the bonds of the pain of death [*descensus ad inferos, & vincula sive dolores mortis*], Acts 2:24."<sup>58</sup> Piscator believed that 1 Peter 2:19 is a reference not to local descent but to "the spirits of men who lived in the ancient world, in the days of Noah" and that Christ "preached to them, namely through Noah, that herald of righteousness," which is in agreement with Beza and contrary to Calvin.<sup>59</sup> Turretin correctly stated that Piscator affirmed descent-as-physical-burial.

The sixth name mentioned by Turretin was Urban Pierius, aka Birnbaum (1546-1616), who served as a Protestant theologian of Germany. While professor of theology and general superintendent at Wittenberg, he was imprisoned under suspicion of crypto-Calvinism, being finally released at the intercession of Queen Elizabeth of England.<sup>60</sup> Turretin incorrectly attributed the position of descent as burial and three days' detention in the sepulcher to Pierius. Pierius wrote, instead, that "the descent into hell is the greatest torment of Christ's soul and an infernal anguish, by which, being crushed by God, he abolished the sting of hell."<sup>61</sup>

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58. Johann Piscator, *Analysis Logica Sex Epistolarum Pauli, Videlicet Ad Galatas, Ephesios, Philippenses, Colossenses Utriusque Ad Thessalonicenses Alonicenses*. 2nd ed. (Sigenae Nassoviorum: Christophori Corvini, 1596), 158.

59. Johann Piscator, *Commentarii in Omnes Libros Novi Testamenti*. (Herbornae Nassoviorum, 1638), 745.

60. John McClintock and James Strong, "Pierius, Urban." In *McClintock and Strong Biblical Encyclopedia*. (NY: Harper and Brothers), 1880.

61. Urban Pierius, *Brevis Repetitio Doctrinae Orthodoxae De Persona Et Officio Christi*. (Witebergae, 1591), 14-15.

The seventh and final theologian Turretin cited in his *Institutes* is Girolamo (Jerome) Zanchi (1516-1590). Turretin likewise misattributed Zanchi's position, who affirmed a local descent of Christ's human soul. In his *Compendium*, Zanchi faithfully summarizes Calvin's *Institutes* regarding the descent, repeating some paragraphs word-for-word. Zanchi prepared the work for private use while still in Italy.<sup>62</sup> It was published posthumously by his heirs and was not intended as "a work to be published but rather as a set of working notes to draw from."<sup>63</sup> The significance of the *Compendium* is that it gives a rare look at 'early Zanchi.' His section on the descent repeats Calvin's three possible interpretations: either a descent bodily into the grave, a local descent to free the patriarchs from limbo, or an experience of hell while still alive. Calvin, of course, believed the third interpretation was correct. Zanchi, however, seemed undecided. He introduced each interpretation in a detached fashion: "Some say this, others say that" (*Quidam sic...Alij sic...Alij sic.*) In the end, Zanchi came to no conclusion and simply wrote, "but let a pious and Christian mind judge which of these interpretations is more fitting."<sup>64</sup>

'Early Zanchi' may have been undecided, but in his *Commentary on Colossians*, he affirmed a local descent of Christ's human soul for the proclamation of triumph. In the section on Col. 2:15, he wrote that some believe "the triumph was actually accomplished when Christ, victorious and glorious, penetrated the infernal realm with His soul. (For this is how they interpret the article, *He descended into hell*)." The Apostle Paul further supports this in

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62. Christopher Burchill, *An Annotated Bibliography of the Works of Girolamo Zanchi*. (Unpublished), 10. Further work needs to be done to determine if the *Compendium* is "little more than a paraphrase of the first part of the 1545 edition of Calvin's *Institutes*."

63. Private correspondence with Patrick O'Banion, March 25, 2025.

64. Girolamo Zanchi, "Locus 8: De Symbolo Apostolico. Descendit ad inferos." *Compendium Praecipuorum Capitum Doctrinae Christianae*. Vol. 8. *Omnium Operum Theologicorum*. (Geneva: Samuel Crispin, 1619), 748.

Ephesians 4, according to Zanchi, when Christ led captivity captive,

just as the victorious Romans used to lead their conquered enemies, their hands bound behind their backs, into public view for their perpetual humiliation and for the glory of the victors—so too could the soul of Christ, having been separated from His body, have done the same to the Demons. That is, he could have led them forth from the infernal kingdom and paraded them through the entire Aerial realm, in the sight of all the Angels and the blessed spirits.

Zanchi believed that this was the natural reading of the Apostle's words. Furthermore, he concluded that this interpretation “is especially plausible since nearly all the fathers have always explained it in this way, as do many of our own, including some of great renown.”<sup>65</sup>

In his *Commentary on Ephesians*, Zanchi denied a local descent of Christ into the *limbus patrum*. In his section on Eph. 4:9, he wrote, “this interpretation about limbo, I say, which the Papists defend, was long ago refuted by our people: since it is based on no firm reasoning.” Therefore, there remains four possible interpretations of “the lower parts of the earth” into which Christ descended: the virgin’s womb, the earth itself by the incarnation, his bodily descent into the grave, or his human soul into hell; “that just as Christ was in the sepulcher in body, so in soul he penetrated to this hell.” But to what end would Christ’s human soul descend into hell? Zanchi denied the possibility of suffering in hell, and earlier denied *limbus patrum*. Therefore, the only other reason would be a proclamation of victory:

The Fathers are generally of this opinion, that Christ came in his soul to the place of the damned, not with words, but with his presence to signify that the justice of God had been satisfied through his death and blood, that Satan no longer had any power over the elect whom he held captive: that he had been made Lord of all: that he had been given all power in Heaven and on earth, and given a name above all names...and not only did he come there to signify these things to them in the way that was said, but also to lead all the Devils with him in triumph: to which they refer that passage in Colossians 2.

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65. Girolamo Zanchi, *In d. Pavli Apostoli Epistolas Ad Philippenses Ad Colossenses Ad Thessalonicenses, Commentarij.* (Neustadt an der Haardt: Harnisch, 1595), Col. 2:15, 59.

When considering this position of the Fathers, Zanchi wrote: “I do not dare to condemn this opinion of the Fathers, since it does not conflict with the Holy Scriptures and has probable arguments. The consensus of the Fathers, when it does not manifestly conflict with the Sacred Scriptures, holds great weight for me.”

Zanchi believed it was possible to synthesize all four of the above positions:

I embrace all these four interpretations because I understand them all to be true and to agree with the words of the Apostle. For just as the term “ascending” encompasses everything that pertains to the glorification of Christ—among which is also His triumph over the devils from hell—so too the term “descending” must be understood to include everything that pertains to His humiliation.<sup>66</sup>

In summary, when examining Turretin’s sources to defend the unified Reformed position on the descent, we see Calvin appears willing to say that the power of Christ penetrated into hell, Ursinus believed that descent-as-triumph was not unsound, and Zanchi affirmed local descent.

#### Comparative Analysis of Earlier Reformed Sources

Beyond Zanchi, several Reformed theologians affirmed local descent, including his colleague and mentor in the faith, Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562), who perhaps helped to influence his position. Vermigli wrote, “As for His soul itself, as soon as it departed from His body, it did not remain idle but descended to the underworld.” Yet departing from Zanchi, Vermigli affirmed *limbus patrum*. “For the spirits of the faithful, who, as Christ says in Luke...rested in a place of peace, which is aptly called Abraham’s bosom, were there awaiting salvation through Christ...These spirits were filled with great consolation and rejoiced.” Other spirits, however, “also perceived the arrival of Christ’s soul. For, as it is written in 1 Peter 3 to

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66. Girolamo Zanchi, *In d. Pauli Epistolam Ad Ephesios Commentarius*. (Neustadt an der Haardt: Harnisch, 1594), Eph. 4:9, 271-272.

them, the spirit of Christ preached.” Vermigli was even willing to see this preaching as giving a second chance to the damned. Yet they, “remaining ever the same, [having] persistently rejected it and retained the same unbelief in death that they had in life, bore the clearest testimony against themselves to their own just condemnation.”<sup>67</sup>

Another Reformed voice worth considering is Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563). Musculus was a Reformed theologian who studied under Bucer and taught at Bern, Switzerland. Affirming *limbus patrum*, he wrote, “And so he was to descend to hell; not that his soul should be subject to any infernal power, but that subduing the gates of hell he might deliver over souls from that tyranny.”<sup>68</sup>

Another teacher at Bern was Benedictus Aretius (1505-1574), who taught at Strasbourg and Marburg earlier in his career. Affirming local descent, Aretius wrote, “Christ descended into hell after he yielded his soul on the cross to the hands of God his Father.” He defined hell as the “certain place appointed for the damned, even for Satan and his members.” Yet this did not contradict Christ’s promise to the thief on the cross, “For Christ was in Paradise with the thief according to his divinity, in the grave according to his body, in hell according to his soul.” The purpose of local descent was three-fold. First, for the reprobate to know Him whom they “neglected with great contempt,” second, for the “devils of the deep of hell to know,” and third, for the elect, “that Satan might see how he should have no right on their bodies, since Christ hereafter would raise them to life.”<sup>69</sup>

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67. Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Loci Communes*. (London: Thomas Vautrolleris, 1583), 428.

68. Wolfgang Musculus, *In Davidis Psalterium Sacrosanctum Commentarii*. Translated by Thomas Bilson. (Naustadt: Harnisius, 1594). As quoted by Renihan, 157.

69. Benedictus Aretius, *S. S. Theologiae Problemata Hoc Est: Loci Communes Christianae Religiones, Methodice Explicati*. Trans. Thomas Bilson. (Lausanne: Isayas Le Preux, 1617). As quoted by Renihan, 158-159.

Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) held a view on 1 Peter 3:19 that was similar to Calvin's, in that he believed the proclamation of Christ's victory became known to the godly and ungodly dead. He is careful to say that it was the power and merits of Christ that "flowed down" and not the human soul of Christ that descended *ad inferos*. "Bullinger explained that neither the soul nor the body of Christ descended *ad inferos*, for the passages of Scripture that refer to the *descensus* should be read by means of synecdoche and metonym."<sup>70</sup> Yet later in his life, Bullinger was open to the idea that Christ's human soul descended to the realm of the dead. "However, if anyone contends at all that it was actually the soul of Christ that descended to the holy patriarchs, we do not exceedingly cry out in protest... I propose that such an opinion that is seen to be elicited from the words of Peter be weighed up by impartial readers."<sup>71</sup>

Gulielmus Bucanus, aka William Buchanus (d. 1603), was a Swiss-French Reformed theologian who taught at the Lausanne Academy. He rejected *limbus patrum*: "for such a place cannot be proved by any testimony of Scripture."<sup>72</sup> Bucanus acknowledged that the Church Fathers held to a local descent, whereby "Christ did present himself alive to them in hell, and showed himself not so much in words as indeed Conqueror of death, and of the Prince of darkness, and that Satan had no more power over the elect." After considering this historic position, he answered, "I dare not condemn it, seeing it is not against the holy Scriptures, and has in it no absurdity." Similar to Zanchi, he believed that "the consent of the Fathers (when as it manifestly does not disagree with Scriptures) is not lightly to be accounted of." Also following

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70. Mock, 292.

71. Heinrich Bullinger, *Kommentare zu den neutestamentlichen Briefe: Hebräerbrief-Katholische Briefe*, in HBTS, vol. 9, ed. Luca Baschera (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2019). As quoted by Mock, 293.

72. William Bucanus, *A Body of Divinity, Or: Institutions of Christian Religion*. Translated by Robert Hill. (London: Daniel Pakeman, 1659). As quoted by Renihan, 169-170.

Zanchi, he believed that Eph. 4:9 confirmed this, when Christ descended to the lowest part of the earth, and “there is no part of the earth lower than hell, which is the place of the damned.” In addition, Bucanus was willing to synthesize many positions, excepting *limbus patrum*. Regarding descent-as-physical-burial, with descent being an “allegory of humiliation,” Bucanus stated, “I do not dislike it.” He thought Calvin’s view of Hell as “those great torments of mind, which Christ in his agony and upon the cross sustained,” was “agreeable” to the truth.<sup>73</sup>

### Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated through a comparative analysis of Zanchi, Vermigli, and other Reformed scholastics, Francis Turretin oversimplified the early Reformed Orthodox understanding of Christ’s descent into hell. Calvin was willing to admit that the power of Christ penetrated into hell and interpreted 1 Peter 3:19 in this way. What is more, earlier Reformed authors evidenced a broader variety of thought on this doctrine than was assumed by Turretin, with Vermigli and Musculus affirming *limbus patrum*, in addition to affirming descent-as-triumph alongside Zanchi, Aretius, and Bucanus. Even Bullinger and Ursinus did not think that a local descent of Christ’s human soul for the purpose of proclamation was unsound, saying that this view had nothing of impiety in it, nor was it absurd. Space does not permit an investigation into the beliefs of Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531) and Oswald Myconius (1488-1552), who also affirmed local descent.

This misunderstanding on the part of Turretin is not due to any bad motives or attempt at historical revisionism. Instead, it serves as evidence of the successful hegemony of the Calvinian position of descent. The cohesion of the later Reformed Orthodox uniting around a single

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73. Bucanus, as quoted by Renihan, 170-171.

position has led even well-read scholars of the post-Reformation scholastics, like Muller, to broadly conclude that “the Reformed deny...the idea of a local descent of Christ’s soul.”<sup>74</sup> In light of the diversity of early Reformed scholastics on the descent, the scholarly consensus needs to be reviewed. At the very least, the consensus needs to become more nuanced to say that later Reformed scholastics were united on the position of the descent, and in contrast, the early Reformed scholastics held a greater variety of thought.

Future studies should trace the reasons for unifying the Reformed position around Calvin. The influence of Johann Grynæus (1540-1617), for example, on the 1598 synod regarding the Basel Confession should be investigated, where non-Calvinian positions on the descent were heard but ultimately rejected. It may be that increasing Lutheran-Catholic polemics forced an oversimplification of positions to maintain clear doctrinal boundaries among the Reformed.

Further areas of study should also include the Westminster standards.<sup>75</sup> In speaking of the state of man after death, the divines included 1 Peter 3:19 as a proof text. This inclusion is “flirting with controversy,” yet it shows the divines held “the prerequisite belief behind the descent, which is that there is a place for the rebellious dead, who are conscious” and in prison.<sup>76</sup> It may be that several of the Westminster divines believed the human soul of Christ visited these souls in prison. It would be appropriate to investigate their individual teachings. Recent teaching on the Westminster standards affirms local descent: “Hell...denotes the invisible world of departed spirits. Hence...during the period between his death and his resurrection Christ’s

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74. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 89.

75. See WCF 32.1 (1 Peter 3:19), WCF 8.4, and WCFLC 50; WCFSC 24

76. Jared Hood, “Eternal Torments in the Westminster Confession.” *Reformed Theological Review* 81, no. 3 (2022): 184-185.

human spirit, or soul, was in the region of departed disembodied souls in the unseen world.”<sup>77</sup>

In summary, there is enough evidence to show that early Reformed orthodoxy was not unified around Calvin’s interpretation of the *descensus* clause. It was not until later that the “Reformed” position crystallized into a single definition, as outlined by earlier scholars like Turretin, Polanus, and van Mastrick, and by more recent scholars like Beeke, Muller, and Hyde. But given the variety of thought, especially the willingness of many early Reformed scholastics to see the position on local descent for the purpose of proclamation as sound, as well as given the vagueness of the Westminster standards, it is worth further discussion about the range of acceptable positions among the Reformed on the descent.

Bucanus and Zanchi can serve as models of synthesis. Just as the Reformed were willing to accept that descent-as-spiritual-anguish and descent-as-physical-burial were compatible, Bucanus and Zanchi also embraced descent-as-victorious-proclamation. Bucanus said Calvin’s position was agreeable to the truth and was also willing to embrace the view of the Fathers on the descent. Zanchi was willing to embrace four different positions on the descent: as being born in the virgin’s womb, as the incarnation generally, as burial in the grave, and as local descent into hell, seeing each one as a further step in Christ’s descent. In this way, the Apostle’s Creed is like the curve of a parabola, starting with the heavens above, going down to the lowest parts of the earth, and then returning to the heavens.<sup>78</sup> In this way, one can embrace local descent as the final and deepest phase of Christ’s humiliation—the lowest arc of the pendulum swing—and the beginning of his exaltation and proclamation tour, culminating in his ascension to the heavens.

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77. Francis Beattie, “The Presbyterian Standards: Chapter XII. The Humiliation and Exaltation of Christ, i.4.” In *Westminster Shorter Catechism Project*, February 12, 2018.

78. Johan Buitendag. “John Calvin’s Understanding of Christ’s Descent into Hell.” In *Restoration through Redemption : John Calvin Revisited*, edited by H. van den Belt. (Boston: Brill, 2013), 140.

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