

**Overture RSE 2024**

The overture was presented by the Ancaster CanRC to Classis Ontario West September 2024.

It was then presented by COW September 2024 to Regional Synod East 2024.

It is now being presented by RSE 2024 to General Synod 2025.

**Proposal to Append an Explanatory Footnote to “He Descended into Hell” in the Apostles’ Creed**

**Introduction**

It is no secret that the clause “he descended into hell” as found in the Apostles’ Creed has a long history of disputed interpretation. Also unclear is how and when this clause found its way into the Creed for it was not found in the earliest renditions of the Creed. Further, the precise meaning of this line as it was understood by the church at the time of its initial acceptance into the Creed has also been called into question. All of this was brought forward to the Canadian Reformed Churches by way of the reports of the Committee on Translation and Revision Confessional and Liturgical Forms to General Synod 1980 (see Appendix 1 and 2). It was also elaborated upon by Dr. Jelle Faber, member of this committee and the Professor of Dogmatics at the federation seminary at that time, in a series of articles in *Clarion* (see Appendix 3, the third article in particular). The Committee even proposed to change the translation of this line in the Apostles’ Creed (to: “he descended into the realm of the dead”) in part to help avoid the natural misunderstanding that Christ, after his death, descended into the physical place call hell.

However, GS 1980 did not see fit to accept this change (*Acts*, Art. 107 as found in Appendix 4).

We recognize that, in light of such a long history of dispute over this line in our most ancient ecumenical creed, a proposal to change the wording would be a very difficult path to travel. Instead, our concern at present is to help bring clarity to all members of our churches (and visitors) who can and do easily misunderstand the recitation or singing of this line to mean that the Lord Jesus Christ after he died immediately descended into the place of torment called hell. The word “hell” both in today’s common parlance and in our most widely used of the recommended English translations of Scripture refers not to the general realm of the dead but to the physical place where God’s wrath is poured out against all rebellious humans and angels (e.g. ESV, NIV84, and NASB of Matt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33 [and parallels]; 2 Peter 2:4; only the NKJV uses the word “hell” at times for the realm of the dead, e.g. Ps 55:15, Ps 139:8). Since as churches we confess our faith using the Apostles’ Creed in its prose or song form (Hymn 1) nearly every Sunday, the issue of its interpretation regularly faces all members and visitors.

Members of our congregation have brought this to the attention of our consistory and we share their concern that misunderstanding should be avoided as much as feasible. The concern is that a natural, simple reading of the Apostles’ Creed leads one to understand the line “he descended into hell” to mean in context that the Lord Jesus Christ, immediately after he died, went down into the place of eternal punishment called hell. For the average confessor of the Apostles’ Creed, that line is easily understood as the next in a chronological sequence, just as every other line in Section 2 of the Creed concerning God the Son is in chronological sequence (i.e. conception, birth, suffering, crucifixion, death, burial; and after the line in question also

## *Regional Synod East – Overture Re Footnote for Apostles’ Creed*

1 resurrection, ascension, session, and return). That this cannot be the case is known to all who  
2 study Scripture (see Luke 23:43 & 46) and who keep in mind what we confess about these very  
3 words in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 16.44. However, to our young people, visitors in  
4 the pew, new believers, or to those who simply have not made the connection to the explanation  
5 of this line in the Creed as found in Lord’s Day 16.44, they are left to think that Christ actually  
6 did descend into the physical place of eternal torment for some unspecified purpose. This is not  
7 only erroneous but it creates unnecessary confusion in the minds of many who instinctively  
8 wonder: why did Jesus Christ go into hell and what did he do there for three days?

9 We believe that we as churches can help all church members and visitors avoid such error  
10 and confusion by placing an explanatory footnote attached to this line both wherever the  
11 churches publish the Apostles’ Creed (in print or electronically) and its’ musical rendition in  
12 Hymn 1 where this same line occurs verbatim. We hope the following particulars will make our  
13 case clear:  
14

### **Observations**

- 15 1. The Apostles’ Creed is an ecumenical creed accepted and confessed by Christians and  
16 churches the world over. The last line of Article 4 of the Apostles’ Creed, “he descended  
17 into hell,” has a long history of both disputed origin and disputed interpretation. These  
18 disputes have been presented to and acknowledged by the Canadian Reformed Churches  
19 at GS 1980 (see Appendices 1–3).
- 20 2. GS 1980 stated that a change to the wording of this disputed line constitutes “a major  
21 change, which also affects the text of the Heidelberg Catechism, and should be adopted  
22 only if the reasons given prove fully sufficient” (Appendix 4). No change to this line was  
23 made then or since.
- 24 3. Part two of the Apostles’ Creed concerning God the Son (i.e. Articles 2–7) is indisputably  
25 laid out in chronological sequence prior to the line in question as well as after it. It is thus  
26 natural to understand “he descended into hell” as another action of the Lord’s within that  
27 chronological sequence.
- 28 4. The word “hell” as used in both today’s common parlance and in the most widely used  
29 recommended Bible translations within our federation of churches (ESV, NIV84, NASB)  
30 refers to the place of eternal punishment where rebellious angels and humans endure the  
31 wrath of God forever.
- 32 5. The Apostles’ Creed is read, recited, or sung virtually every Sunday in every  
33 congregation.
- 34 6. The Canadian Reformed Churches confess an understanding of “he descended into hell”  
35 in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 16.44 that is fully biblical.  
36

### **Considerations**

- 37 1. Out of respect for the history of Christ’s church gathering work of all times and places, it  
38 is fitting to be very cautious about changing the wording of an ancient ecumenical creed.  
39 At the same time, the clarity of confessing biblical truth must override concern for  
40 traditional statements of confession where those statements are lacking in either clarity or  
41 in biblical truth. At the very least, if there is perennial misunderstanding over the meaning  
42 of a point of confession, something should be done to clarify the matter.
- 43 2. In conjunction with the long-standing dispute over the interpretation of the line, “he  
44 descended into hell,” the context of this line in the midst of what is otherwise a series of  
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*Regional Synod East – Overture Re Footnote for Apostles’ Creed*

1 statements about Jesus Christ laid out in chronological sequence, creates for many  
2 readers, singers (Hy 1), and confessors of the Apostles’ Creed the erroneous impression  
3 that immediately after Jesus Christ died, he went into the physical place of eternal  
4 torment known in the Bible as hell. Most of the recommended and widely used Bible  
5 translations within our churches (ESV, NIV84, and NASB) restrict the usage of the word  
6 “hell” to refer to this physical place of punishment. Since the Apostles’ Creed is used so  
7 frequently, the churches ought to act in order to prevent misunderstanding and to promote  
8 the truth.

- 9 3. While a change in wording to the line “he descended into hell” may still be fairly  
10 considered by the churches in the future, there is nothing preventing the churches from  
11 immediately adopting an explanatory statement of clarification to be placed in a footnote  
12 beneath the Apostles’ Creed both in its prose format and in its musical rendition (Hy 1),  
13 wherever such are published by the churches.
- 14 4. If such a statement pointedly denies the error which the natural reading leads people to  
15 assume, as well as points to what the church already confesses about these words in  
16 Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 16.44, this would go a long way to dispelling both  
17 error and confusion among members and visitors alike while also promoting clear biblical  
18 teaching.

19  
20 **Recommendation**

21 That General Synod 2025 decide to place the following explanatory footnote beneath the  
22 Apostles’ Creed and Hymn 1 in future versions of the *Book of Praise* and on the federation  
23 website. Beyond this the churches can use the footnote in their own materials as they find it  
24 necessary and helpful.

25  
26 “These words are not to be understood as if Christ, upon entering death, went to the  
27 place of eternal torment called hell. See Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 16, Q/A  
28 44.”

1980  
209

THE APOSTLES' CREED  
(Revised Report)

Introductory Remarks

1. The Committee took as basis for a new translation the so-called Latin Textus Receptus, published by J.N.D. Kelly, Early Christian Creeds 2nd ed. 1960, p.369.

We compared the new Dutch texts, the text of the Committee - Dr. W.F. Dankbaar - a committee of "De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk", "De Gereformeerde Kerken" (Syn) and "De Christelyke Gereformeerde Kerken" - and the text provisionally adopted by the Synod of Groningen-Zuid 1978 of our sister churches in the Netherlands. Both texts are published in the Acts of this Synod, pp.214, 270. Also the very modern translation by Dr. L. Wierenga in De Heidelbergse Katechismus in het Nederlands Van Nu (Groningen: De Vuurbaak, 1978) has been taken into consideration.

After we had sent our provisional report to the churches in June 1979, we obtained the text prepared by the International Consultation on English Text' translation of the Apostles' Creed. This text has been recommended by the Synod 1980 of the Reformed Church in America as an alternative text. We give it in an Appendix.

In this revised report we first of all took into consideration the remarks made by Canadian Reformed Churches.

2. The Committee is aware of the value of maintaining the present English text of an ecumenical creed as much as possible and of following the International Consultation' Translation as closely as possible. We also considered the changes in the translation of the Apostles' Creed will cause changes in the text of the Heidelberg Catechism (L.D. 7-22) and of Hymn 45.

We propose the following changes:

- a. "Creator" instead of "Maker" in agreement with the Textus Receptus (TR) and with the International Consultation Text.
- b. "I believe" repeated in the second part in agreement with the International Consultation Text, in order to underline the trinitarian structure of the creed.
- c. "only" instead of "only begotten" according to TR ("unicus", not "unigenitus"). This is also in agreement with newer Bible translations of John 1:14, 1:18, 3:16 a.o. (RSV "only", NIV "one and only"), and with the International Consultation Text.
- d. "descended into Hades". The Committee originally followed the proposal already made by Ph.Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom, Vol.II, p.46, and translated by the Committee-Dankbaar by "het rijk van de dood". Some congregations had objections against the Greek word "Hades", although it is used in newer Bible translations of Matth.11:23, 16:18, Acts 2:31, Rev. 1:18. Because of this objection we now changed "Hades" into the English words "the realm of death". This translation is close to the text of the Committee-Dankbaar "het rijk van de dood" and the International Consultation Text ("He descended to the dead", in which translation the reading "ad inferor" must have been followed instead of "ad inferna"). The Committee is convinced that the early Christian Church here thought of Scriptural notions of Sheol or Hades or "the realm of death". The translation "hell" is open for misunderstanding; as explanation of "hell" as "hellish agony" breaks the chronological order in the Apostles' Creed and obscures the connection with the immediately following article



("On the third day He arose from the dead"). The translation "He descended into the realm of death" brings out that the catholic church confesses that the Son of man was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matth.12:40), in the grave, and among the dead, but now has the keys of Death and Hades, and will bring those who are His own out of their graves and into the new earth.

This translation, however, should not be recommended to the churches for tentative use before we have informed the sister churches abroad with whom the Canadian Reformed Churches live in correspondence.

- e. In the clause "I believe the holy catholic church" the Committee maintained the verb "to believe" of the present English text in order to prevent confusion with faith in the Holy Spirit. We trust in the Holy Spirit and we believe that God gathers His church.
- f. The definite article "the" was chosen because it expresses the unicity of the church of Christ. It is in agreement with the International Consultation Text.
- g. In its first proposal the Committee had returned to the translation "flesh" which was used before 1543, in agreement with 1543. Originally the term "flesh" had probably an Anti Gnostic tendency (Heid.Cat. - "ook dit mijn vlees").

In this revised report we propose to return to the term "body" in agreement with the International Consultation on English Text' Translation of the Apostles' Creed.

- h. Other changes are stylistic.

For the Committee,  
J. Faber, Reporter.

- Appendices: I. International Consultation on English Text' Translation of the Apostles' Creed.
- II. Revised Committee Proposal.

APPENDIX I: INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATION ON ENGLISH TEXT' TRANSLATION OF THE  
APOSTLES' CREED

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1. I believe in God the Father Almighty,
2. Creator of heaven and earth.
3. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
4. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit,
5. and born of the virgin Mary.
6. He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
7. was crucified, died and was buried.
8. He descended to the dead.
9. On the third day He arose again.
10. He ascended into heaven,
11. and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
12. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
13. I believe in the Holy Spirit,
14. the holy catholic Church,
15. the communion of saints,
16. the forgiveness of sins,
17. the resurrection of the body,
18. and the life everlasting. Amen.

(This text has been recommended by the Synod of the Reformed Church in America as an alternative text to the churches. If two third of the classes agrees, the text will have been accepted as such.) Courtesy Rev. Peter J. Yff, Hamilton.

APPENDIX II: REVISED COMMITTEE PROPOSAL

Apostles' Creed

I. I believe in God the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

II. I believe in Jesus Christ,  
His only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
and born of the virgin Mary.

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

He descended into the realm of death.

On the third day He arose from the dead;

He ascended into heaven,

and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;

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

III. I believe in the Holy Spirit;

I believe the holy catholic church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting.



1980  
16a

(18 pages)

## COMMITTEE ON TRANSLATION HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

To the General Synod of the  
Canadian Reformed Churches  
to be held at Smithville, Ont.,  
1980.

Hamilton, June 27, 1979

Esteemed Brethren:

1. The Committee on Translation Heidelberg Catechism received the following mandate:
  - a) to revise the second draft translation, taking into account the comments received, including those of the Advisory Committee for this Synod, and to use the following guidelines:
    - I. to adhere closely to the original German text (third edition, 1563);
    - II. replace difficult and archaic words and expressions if proper equivalents are available in today's English;
    - III. restructure sentences which are too complicated into positive, separate sentences which directly answer the question;
    - IV. provide reasons when deviation from the German text is necessary on theological grounds.
  - b) to submit this revised draft together with reference notes to the Churches and to invite comments to be submitted to the Committee by January 1980;
  - c) to submit their report with recommendations to the Synod 1980;
  - d) to arrange for publication of this revised draft without comments in booklet form for use in the Churches on a trial basis by November 1978;
  - e) to establish what the original proof texts are and to see whether the selection of Scripture references can be improved by replacing, deleting and/or adding to the original ones and to include them in the publication, if possible;
  - f) to provide an index to cross-reference the Three Forms of Unity.
  
2. The Committee is in the sad situation that it has to report that it was unable to fulfil its mandate. In order to explain this situation, we relate the history of our Committee. Two members had been involved with the preparation of the first draft, presented to Synod Toronto, 1974, one member had occupied himself with the second draft, prepared for Synod Coaldale 1977. The work method of the two drafts had been different, especially in two respects:
  - a) the basis for the new English translation;
  - b) the restructuring of complicated sentences into positive and independent (or separate) sentences which directly answer the question.

ad a. Synod Coaldale 1977 did not make an informed and well argued choice for the one or the other method, although it may be argued that, as far as the basis for the translation is concerned, it built on the second draft translation. Our mandate was "to revise the second draft translation" and "(to) provide reasons when deviation from the German text is necessary on theological grounds."

The members of the Committee who had prepared the first draft were not willing to carry out this mandate.

They refer to the following facts:

- i) Although the German text is the original and in its third edition of 1563 can be called the Textus Receptus, the Latin translation was already published before April 3, 1563, "op last van de keurvorst". When the National Synod of Dordrecht judged the contents of the Heidelberg Catechism (in the sessions 147 and 148), it used a Latin text.
- ii) As far as the Dutch text is concerned, the Synod of Dordrecht accepted in session 179 an Act of Approbation concerning Confession and Catechism. In the name of A. Kuyper, F. L. Rutgers, and H. H. Kuyper the most recent study of J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink remarks: "Alles wijst erop, dat de Nationale Synode met de Catechismus tekst van Richard Schilders, bezorgd door Herman Paukelius, 1611, heeft gewerkt . . . Hij is, als men zich zo kan uitdrukken, de meest authentieke van 1619 en neemt daarom zijn plaats in onze uitgave in." (De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften In Authentieke Teksten . . ., 2nd Ed. Amsterdam: Bolland, 1976, p. 40, see p. 56).
- iii) The Synod of Homewood-Carmen 1954 noted that the Dutch text is an authentic text in the Canadian Reformed Churches (see Acts Coaldale 1977, p. 27: "No General Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches has yet declared an English translation of the Doctrinal and Liturgical Forms adopted and the Churches are, according to Synod 1954, bound to the Dutch Texts.")
- iv) The present English text in our Book of Praise has been used for decades now and is the text that is used in Catechism preaching, teaching and often for the Form of Subscription for office bearers. Although it has not officially been adopted, it has by its use obtained an ecclesiastical character. This English text, like the Dutch text which the Synod of Dordrecht used (the text of 1611), is close to the Latin translation of 1563. Preference for the German text will, therefore, lead to an unnecessary deviation from the Latin and Dutch translations but also from the present English text.
- v) While the First Draft following the selective method is close to the new Dutch version, provisionally accepted by our sister churches in the Netherlands and based on the same method, the Second Draft gives a rather widely divergent rendition. This brings about an unnecessary chasm between the Dutch and the English text.
- vi) Although the mandate allows deviation from the German text when it is "necessary on theological grounds", it does not really do justice to the work method of the First Draft and to the character of the Latin, Dutch and English texts.

ad b. As far as the restructuring of complicated sentences is concerned, the Second Draft stated, "The question is not repeated in the answer as the first draft translation did in many cases. The reasons are as follows: - we have no mandate from Synod for this . . ."

The members of our Committee who wrote the First Draft are of the opinion that this mandate was implied in the guideline that spoke of "positive and independent (separate) sentences which form a direct answer to the question." To start long answers with 'that' is cumbersome and not according to (English) grammar. These members, however, are of the opinion that this guideline should be followed discriminately and not slavishly. Also in this respect Synod Coaldale 1977



did not make a clear and well argued choice between the two work methods.

Because our Committee did not want to do nothing, we accepted the following work method: We started from the Second Draft, compared it to the First Draft and to the present English text and tried to reach a compromise on the basis of the German and Latin texts of 1563 and the Dutch text of 1611 (1619). It means more deviation from the German text than is necessary on theological grounds. Therefore we decided not to finish this attempt, but give a proof of the result and to ask for a clearer mandate that can be carried out with good conscience by all Committee members.

4. The Committee would like to draw your attention to the following details:

When the text of the Apostles' Creed, proposed by the Committee on Translation and Revision Confessional and Liturgical Forms, is accepted by Synod, it will have consequences for the text of the Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 7 - 22. The most important material change will be the acceptance of "Hades" instead of "hell" (L.D. 16). In order to maintain the Scriptural content of A. 44 the churches could add a question to Lord's Day 15:

New Question 40:

What further comfort do you derive from Christ's crucifixion?

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.

A new question 42 could read as follows:

What do you confess when you say, He was buried and He descended into Hades?

A.: Christ had really died,

and He continued in the state of the dead,

under the power of death till the third day.

So He became the Victor of death and Hades,

in order that He might lead us through the grave

to the new earth.

The old Questions 40, 42, and 43 would become Questions 41, 43, and 44. In this manner the historical meaning of the clause of the Apostles' Creed "He descended into Hades" is honoured, while the Scriptural content of Answer 44 is kept and transferred to the place where it belongs.

The Committee on Translation  
Heidelberg Catechism

J. Faber, Convener

W. Helder

W. Huizinga

F. G. Oosterhoff

# “Descended Into Hell”

(New Dutch Confessional Texts)

**TRADITIONAL TEXT:**

*Waarom volgt daar: Nedergedaald ter helle?  
Opdat ik in mijn hoogste aanvechtingen  
verzekerd zij en mij ganselijk vertrooste,  
dat mijn Heere Jezus Christus  
door zijn onuitsprekelijke benauwdheid,  
smarten, verschrikking en helse kwelling,  
in welke Hij in zijn ganse lijden  
(maar inzonderheid aan het kruis)  
gezonken was, mij van de helse  
benauwdheid en pijn verlost heeft.*

**SYNOD GRONINGEN-ZUID (1978)**

*Waarom volgt er: neergedaald in de hel?  
Opdat ik in mijn felste aanvechtingen  
verzekerd ben en mij volkomen er mee vertroost,  
dat mijn Here Jezus Christus mij  
van de helse benauwdheid en pijn verlost heeft.  
Hij heeft deze verlossing bewerkt  
door zijn onuitsprekelijke benauwdheid,  
smarten, verschrikking en helse kwelling  
waarin Hij gedurende zijn gehele lijden,  
maar vooral aan het kruis, verzonken was.*

**DR. BAKHUIZEN VAN DEN BRINK (1966)**

*Waarom volgt daarop: nedergedaald in het rijk van de dood?  
Opdat ik in mijn hevigste aanvechtingen  
verzekerd en volkomen getroost moge zijn,  
dat mijn Here Jezus Christus  
door zijn onuitsprekelijke angst,  
smarten en verschrikking,  
waarin Hij gedurende zijn gehele lijden,  
maar in het bijzonder in zijn dood  
aan het kruis verzonken was,  
mij van de dodelijke angst en pijn verlost heeft.*

**DR. L. WIERENGA (1978)**

*Wat is dat: “tot in het dodenrijk is hij neergedaald”?  
Christus heeft aan het kruis, en daarvoor,  
onvoorstelbaar geleden; verdriet, martelingen  
en doodsangst heeft hij doorgemaakt.  
Daardoor heeft hij mij ervan bevrijd.  
Want al moet ik zelf nog wel sterven,  
angst voor de dood en voor de hel  
hoef ik niet meer te hebben: Christus  
heet die in mijn plaats gehad.  
En daar vertrouw ik helemaal op.*

Time flies. It is already two years ago that the Rev. G. VanDooren wrote two articles “The Old ‘Heidelberger’ in a New Dress” in which he compared the two drafts for a new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism. Our readers can find those articles in *Clarion*, Volume 26, Nos. 1 and 2. My colleague ended them by presenting what he called the “cruix” of Question and Answer 44, the familiar statement of the Catechism about Christ’s descent into hell, and asking publicly my opinion. The Frisian saying goes, “Better let as net,” (Rather late than never) and now that I am supposed to fill some pages in this volume, I gladly use the opportunity to comply with my colleague’s wish. The modernizing of the English text of our Heidelberg Catechism has not yet been completed. It will occupy a place on the agenda of the forthcoming General Synod of Smithville 1980. Therefore, we are not too late, if we give the topic our common attention.

Let me first make some general remarks. We live in a period of transition and change as far as confessional and liturgical language is concerned not only in North America but also in Europe. With respect to the text of the Heidelberg Catechism in our Dutch sister churches I may refer to *Gereformeerd Kerkboek uitgegeven in opdracht van deputaten van de generale synode van De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland te Kampen 1975*, pp. 357-394. This new translation is used in catechetical instruction, but is not yet released for the liturgy. The Synod of Groningen-Zuid 1978 gave deputies the mandate to examine this text for the last time and to devise a list of Scripture proofs in order that the next Synod can authorize the text for general use in the churches.

In the meantime, another translation was published within the circle of our sister churches in the old country: *De*

*Heidelbergse Katechismus in het Nederlands van nu vertaald door Dr. L. Wierenga* (Groningen, 1978). The author adheres to modern methods of translation and the result is a text that deviates far more from the traditional Dutch text than the draft of the Synod’s deputies. I am almost inclined to say that in the same manner as “Good News For Modern Man” differs from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible — or NASB or NIV for that matter — so the translation of Dr. Wierenga has a modern approach in translating the Heidelberg Catechism that is completely different from the method used by the deputies of the Reformed Churches for the Committee-Dankbaar.

What is the Committee-Dankbaar? The Netherlands Reformed Church, the (synodical) Reformed Churches and the Christian Reformed Churches — the counterparts of the Reformed Church in North America, the Christian Reformed and the Free Reformed Churches — established a committee for the Dutch text of the ecumenical creeds and the Three Forms of Unity. Chairman of this committee is Dr. W.F. Dankbaar at Groningen. This Committee was instituted because of the desire to come to one modernized Dutch text that would be the authentic or official text of several “Reformed denominations.” In 1966 this interdenominational Committee had finalized the texts of the ecumenical symbols and of the Belgic Confession, but had not completely yet finished the work on the Heidelberg Catechism.

In 1975 our Dutch sister churches instructed their deputies to scrutinize the texts of the Committee-Dankbaar. I was thankful for that decision: if there is no need to isolate ourselves as far as the *text* of historic creeds and confessions is concerned, we should never do so. Let us argue together, if need be, — and, alas, this need is there — about the *contents* of the confessions and their significance in our

twentieth century, but let us base our arguments, as much as possible, on the same text.

The Committee-R.H. Bremmer reported to the Synod of Groningen-Zuid 1978 that the Committee-Dankbaar "haar teksten met grote zorg (heeft) vervaardigd en zich daarbij nauw aangesloten (heeft) bij the authentieke teksten." The deputies of our sister churches thus praised the Committee-Dankbaar for their accuracy and close adherence to the authentic texts. Nevertheless, the Committee-Bremmer had sometimes to correct the texts of the Committee-Dankbaar.

From press reports I received the impression that in the meantime traditionalism within the Netherlands Reformed Church had blocked the acceptance of new authentic texts of Creeds and Confessions. It is possible that the work of the Committee-Dankbaar will find more official appreciation in the (synodical) "Gereformeerde Kerken" and the Free Reformed Churches than in the circles of Dr. Dankbaar himself.

The latest publication of texts of the Committee-Dankbaar at my disposal is *De Belijdenisgeschriften volgens Artikel X van de Kerkorde van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (second revised edition by J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, 's Gravenhage, 1966).

I mention these new Dutch texts for two reasons.

In the first place, I am convinced that we in the Canadian Reformed Churches, or broader, we on the American continent, should be aware of what happens to the creedal texts in Reformed communities in Europe and especially in our sister churches in The Netherlands. Our creeds and confessions are our common heritage and in our age of telecommunication there would be no excuse for neglect of each other and for lack of knowledge about each other's work in this respect. Here could even be found a stimulus for an international conference of the Reformed Churches with which we live in correspondence, but that is a different chapter.

The second reason is that these new Dutch texts remind us of the fact that we cannot discuss the text of the Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 44 without taking into consideration the translation of the Apostles' Creed, of which the Heidelberg gives an explanation. The Committee-Bremmer deviates from the Committee-Dankbaar already in the translation of the Apostles' Creed and this is reflected in a different text of the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Synod of Groningen-Zuid established a provisional text of the Apostles' Creed that is to be tested by the churches but is not yet released for liturgical use (*Acts*, Article 425). I could not yet consult these Acts, but I gathered from a press report in *Nederlands Dagblad* of September 28, 1978, that the clause "He descended into hell" had been the object of a discussion. Some members and advisers — among others Prof. Dr. L. Doekes and Prof. J. Kamphuis — wanted to maintain the traditional translation "nedergedaald ter helle." The Synod, however, decided to follow the Committee-Bremmer and to propose to the churches a more modern version "neergedaald in de hel." The opponents of this modernization were of the opinion that the new text is more easily misunderstood than the old version. Will some people not think that after His death the Lord Jesus Christ has gone to the place of the damned? In English we do not have a difference between an old-fashioned word "hell" and a more modern form. But misunderstanding can, nevertheless, raise its head. For the main question is, first of all, What is meant by the word "hell"? The place of the damned, the state of the departed, or what?

As far as I can see, our brothers in Groningen-Zuid did not discuss the reason why the Committee-Bremmer deviated from the text of the Committee-Dankbaar, "nedergedaald in *het rijk van de dood*." This expression reminds us of the Old Testament term *Sheol* or *the Pit*, and of the New Testament word *Hades*. Do we not sing in Psalm 16, "Thou wilt not leave me in the realm of death"?

Also Dr. L. Wierenga and Drs. J. Wiegel translate in their very modern new Dutch version, "tot in het *dodenrijk* is hij neergedaald." Dr. J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink defends this translation of the Committee-Dankbaar as follows: "In the realm of death" is as translation of *inferna* or *inferi* preferable above "hell," on the ground of the following article and of the now customary Bible translation in Psalm 16:10; Matthew 11:23, 16:18; Revelation 1:18 etc.

The Committee-Bremmer, however, rejected this translation "realm of death" on the basis of the arguments of Calvin. In the first centuries people thought of a sojourn of Christ in hell after His death, on the ground of a wrong interpretation of I Peter 3:19 e.a. Then the Apostles' Creed would have the chronological sequence in history. In order to avoid this opinion other people took the escape of "the realm of death." It does not satisfy, however, to formulate this in an ample manner after the burial has been mentioned already. In the line of Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 16) we should think rather of the extreme depth of Christ's suffering as the last mentioned element.

I must be honest that I was slightly disappointed by this reasoning of the Committee-Bremmer and by the fact that this main point was probably not discussed anymore in the Synod of Groningen-Zuid. Especially in The Netherlands several studies have been published in the last decade about the clause "He descended into hell." I think of the doctoral thesis of D.A. Du Toit "*Neergedaal ter helle . . .*" *Uit die geskiedenis van 'n interpretasieprobleem* (Kampen, 1971) and of essays by Dr. G.P. Hartvelt. I cannot elaborate on this point, but I may refer English readers to the standard work by J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans).

Calvin's explanation is Scriptural in contents, but it is not the historical exposition of the clause in the Apostles' Creed. As far as I know, we do not find his and our Heidelberg's explanation anywhere in the early Christian Church.

The first creedal appearance of the clause was in a confession of the year 359, where we read: "(He) descended to the underworld, and regulated things there, Whom the gatekeepers of Hades saw and shuddered." To say that Jesus Christ had died, or that He had been buried, was equivalent to saying that He had passed to Sheol. Kelly is of the opinion that the clause was regarded initially as no more than a more colourful expression of the ideas *dead and buried*. Our Lord Jesus Christ was truly among the dead.

The question, therefore, is whether the Committee-Bremmer gave a right survey of the history of this doctrine. It is clear that in the course of centuries wrong explanations have been given of the difficult text I Peter 3:19, but it is also evident that the early Christian Church had read the words of Holy Scripture about Sheol and Hades. They knew about the power of death and especially about Christ as the Victor over death and the grave, as the One Who at the third day rose again from the dead and Who leads us to the new earth.

I do not deny that the explanation by Calvin and our Heidelberg Catechism is completely Scriptural and I would not like to see the beautiful contents of Question and

*Continued on page 78.*

## “DESCENDED INTO HELL” — Continued.

Answer 44 disappear from the Confession of the church. Can we not confess these contents in an addition to Lord's Day 15 about the extreme suffering on the cross? But if it is true that the clause of our Apostles' Creed belongs in a chronological order that speaks of Christ Who died, was buried, and remained in the state of death between Good Friday and Easter; if that is also Scriptural in the light of Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2:31, and if this is the original, historical meaning of this expression, we should not hesitate to follow Dutch Christians who now speak of “nedergedaald in het rijk van de dood,” or to join the German proposal of a new text, “hinabgestiegen in die Tiefe des Todes” (descended into the depth of death).

One last remark: If we return to what probably is the early Christian interpretation, we would be in agreement with the Larger Westminster Catechism, Question and Answer 50:

Q.: 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.*

On the other hand, the Committee on Ecumenicity and Inter-church Relations of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

expressed the opinion that this church would not want to label as unScriptural the doctrine that “my Lord Jesus Christ, by His inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agonies, in which He was plunged during all His sufferings, but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torments of hell.”

Our Committee for Contact with the O.P.C. has agreed that the interpretation of the clause from the Apostles' Creed should not become a point of disunity between the Canadian Reformed Churches and the Orthodox Presbyterian Churches. This was in the line of the Synod of Dort 1618/19. But I wonder, whether we, in cooperation with our corresponding sister churches, could not go one step further and generously acknowledge that the original meaning of the clause is maintained in e.g. the churches of the English and Scotch Reformation. We accept then the new Dutch translation “nedergedaald (neergedaald) in het rijk van de dood” in the text of the Apostles' Creed, and we adjust the text of the Heidelberg Catechism accordingly. In the English speaking world we should promote the transition from the often misunderstood word “hell” in this context to the use of terms as *Sheol, Hades, the Pit, or the realm of death.* Then we show that we are no traditionalists or confession-  
alists, but Reformed and reforming according to the Scriptures. That is truly catholic.

J. FABER

# “Descended Into Hell”

*(New English Confessional Texts)*

## **TRADITIONAL TEXT**

*Why is there added,  
He descended into hell?*

*That in my greatest temptations  
I may be assured,  
and wholly comfort myself with this,  
that my Lord Jesus Christ,  
by His inexpressible anguish,  
pains, terrors, and hellish agony  
in which He was plunged  
during all His sufferings,  
but especially on the cross,  
has delivered me from the anguish  
and torment of hell.*

## **ANNIVERSARY EDITION (1963)**

*Why is there added:  
“He descended into hell”?*

*That in my severest tribulations  
I may be assured  
that Christ my Lord  
has redeemed me  
from hellish anxieties  
and torment  
by the unspeakable anguish,  
pains, and terrors  
which he suffered in his soul  
both on the cross  
and before.*

## **CHRISTIAN REFORMED TEXT (1975)**

*Why does the creed add:  
“He descended into hell”?*

*To assure me in times  
of personal crisis  
and temptation,  
that Christ my Lord,  
by suffering unspeakable  
anguish, pain, and terror of soul,  
especially on the cross  
but also earlier,  
has delivered me  
from the anguish  
and torment of hell.*

## **FIRST CANADIAN REFORMED DRAFT (1974)**

*Why does the Creed add:  
He descended into hell?*

*In my greatest sorrows and temptations  
I may be assured and comforted  
that my Lord Jesus Christ,  
by his unspeakable anguish,  
pains, terrors, and agonies,  
which He suffered  
during his whole life on earth,  
but especially on the cross,  
has delivered me from the anguish  
and torment of hell.*

## **SECOND CANADIAN REFORMED DRAFT (1977)**

*Why is there added  
He descended into hell?*

*So that in my greatest trials  
I may be assured  
that my Lord Jesus Christ  
has redeemed me from the anguish  
and torment of hell  
by his unspeakable anguish,  
pains, and terrors,  
which He suffered on the cross  
and beforehand  
in his soul.*

In the previous article about the explanation of the clause “Descended into hell” in the Heidelberg Catechism I dealt with some new Dutch translations. This time we stay closer at home and investigate some new English texts in order to gratify the desire of Rev. G. VanDooren for an explanation of the difference between the first and second Canadian Reformed draft.

Let me introduce these new English texts and again make some general remarks. The first new text is the 400th Anniversary Edition of the Heidelberg Catechism (1963). It is a translation from original German and Latin texts, by Allen O. Miller and M. Eugene Osterhaven. It was presented on behalf of the churches belonging to the North American Area of the World Alliance of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. Dr. Osterhaven represented the Reformed Church in America, the pendant of The Netherlands Reformed Church.

The second new translation was prepared by a committee appointed in 1968 by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church. The final text was adopted by the Synod of 1975. Synod requested the Committee to produce “a modern and accurate translation . . . which will serve as the official text of the Heidelberg Catechism and as a guide for catechism preaching.” Except in two instances, explained in footnotes to Questions and Answers 57 and 80, the translation follows the first German edition of the Catechism.

As far as our Canadian Reformed Churches are concerned, the Synod of New Westminster 1971 appointed a committee with the mandate to revise the text of the Heidelberg Catechism: a. by replacing difficult and anachronistic words and expressions, as far as proper equivalents can be derived from today’s English, b. by recasting sentences, which are too complicated, into positive and independent sentences, which form a direct answer to the question, in close adherence to the original German text.

A draft translation was presented to the churches and to the Synod of Toronto 1974. The Advisory Committee considered that the translators had, indeed, worked along the line of their mandate. In doing this they not only consulted the original German Text and the recently adopted version by the Dutch sister Churches, but also, in many cases, repeated part of the question in the answer. The Advisory Committee applauded this although it would have preferred to see more consistency in this.

The Synod 1974 appointed new deputies with the mandate to revise the first draft by evaluating and eventually incorporating the comments and suggestions that had been made, and thus to prepare a *second* draft. These new deputies reported to the Synod of Coaldale 1977 and made special mention of the changes which were necessary in order to adhere closely to the original German text (third edition, 1563).



At this moment I would like to insert the remarks of Rev. VanDooren concerning Answer 44. In *Clarion*, Volume 26, No. 2, he wrote:

The second draft leaves out the well-known words “during all his sufferings but especially . . .” and suggests to conclude the answer with the somewhat “lame” statement, “and beforehand in his soul.” (German: “auch an seiner Seele.”) It is indeed true that the words “during . . .” are not found in the original German. No explanation is given here. The first draft kept them; then one of the members was the professor of Symbolics. He should give us more light here, before we decide to leave this (as to its contents completely biblical) confession out, and replace it by the problematic “and beforehand in his soul.” No, that doesn’t click.

I will gladly comply with the wish of my colleague and try to shed some light. It will be clear that since I was one of the members of the first Committee on Translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, my judgment is biased. I see a difference in approach between the new Dutch versions and the first Canadian Reformed draft on the one hand and the Anniversary Edition, the Christian Reformed text and the Second Canadian Reformed draft on the other hand. It can be illustrated by the use of the expression “in his soul.” The reader will find this expression in none of the new Dutch translations (see the previous issue) nor in the first Canadian Reformed draft, while it shows up in the Anniversary Edition, the Christian Reformed text and the second Canadian Reformed draft. The difference can be easily explained. It is caused by the difference in emphasis on the original German text.

During the Synod of Toronto 1974 the right remark was made that the authors of the first draft had *consulted* the original German Text, and the recently adopted version by the Dutch sister Churches. They received the gratitude of the Synod in this respect.

On the other hand, the Synod of Coaldale 1977 considered that the second draft had indeed *adhered* closely to the mandate with respect to linguistics and the original German text. “In certain instances, such as Question and Answer 44 (Christ suffered in His soul) and Question and Answer 75 (Christ’s body broken on the cross), deviation from the German text is desirable. This was not done in the second draft. Much of the detailed criticism submitted to Synod 1977 . . . results from having compared this draft with the Dutch or Latin texts, which in several instances are different from the original German text.” The Synod appointed another two deputies who had worked on the first draft and one deputy who had been co-author of the second draft, and gave them the mandate “to revise the second draft translation . . . , and to use the following guidelines: I. adhere closely to the original German text (third edition, 1563); . . . IV. provide reasons when deviation from the German text is necessary on theological grounds.”

I am not too happy with this decision of our last Synod. There is its formulation: What are “theological grounds” when we deal with the Confession of the Church? Should it not have read “Scriptural grounds”? But more important is that the Synod, without thorough investigation, seems to have opted for “the original German text (third edition, 1563)” as the text to be translated into modern English. The Committee stated that “in certain circumstances,” such as Question and Answer 44 . . . deviation from “the German text is desirable,” but it doesn’t make clear why this is desirable. Is there a “theological ground” and is this sufficient reason to deviate from the chosen text?

When we think about the text of our Confessions, we should not follow the same reasoning and method we use for the text of Holy Scripture. With respect to the confessional texts we should make a distinction between the *original* text and the *authentic* text. The original text is the text as it was originally written by the author(s) of a confession. The authentic text is the text which has been accepted by the Churches as the text which has authority and validity. The authentic text often differs from the original text. Such a distinction we cannot make in Holy Scripture. There the original text is at the same time the authentic text; we should, in the way of legitimate text-criticism, try to go back to the original and authentic text.

Therefore, it may sound very familiar in Reformed ears, when they hear that our Synods spoke about “the original German text,” that the new Christian Reformed translation “follows the first German edition of the Catechism,” and that the 400th Anniversary Edition “is a translation from original German and Latin texts.” Do we not always here about “the original”? But as far as the Heidelberg Catechism is concerned, the questions then arise: only the German text of 1563, and if so, which German text, the first or the third edition? And what about the Latin text? This Latin translation was already published before April 3, 1563, “en op last van de keurvorst,” that is, by mandate of the Elector of the Palatinate. And what about the traditional Dutch translation by Dathenus? J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink in the second edition of his standard work *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften in authentieke teksten* (Amsterdam, 1976) publishes not only the German text — the so-called third edition, the text that is found in the

## PSALM 116

1. I love the LORD, the fount of life and grace:  
He heard my voice, my cry and sup-pli-ca-tion,  
In-clined his ear, gave strength and con-so-la-tion;  
In life, in death, my heart will seek his face.

2. The cords of death held me in deep despair;  
The pangs of hell, like waves by tempest driven,  
Rolled o'er my soul; by grief and sorrow riven,  
I turned in my distress to God in prayer.
3. I cried, Deliver thou my soul, O LORD!  
The LORD did hear! I pledge him my devotion.  
The LORD is just, his grace wide as the ocean;  
In boundless mercy he fulfils his word.
4. The LORD preserves the meek most tenderly;  
Brought nigh to death, in him I found salvation.  
Come, O my soul, relieved from agitation,  
Turn to your rest; the LORD has favoured me.
5. O righteous LORD, thou in thy sovereign grace  
Hast saved my soul from death and woe appalling,  
Dried all my tears, secured my feet from falling.  
Lo, I shall live and walk before thy face.
6. I have believed, and therefore did I speak  
When I was made to suffer tribulation:  
I said in haste and bitter consternation:  
All men are false, 'tis nought but lies they speak.

Church Order of the Palatinate — but also the Latin text of 1563 and the Dutch text from “Formulierenboek” of Richard Schilders (Middelberg, 1611). This Dutch text must have been at the disposal of the Synod of Dort 1619 and is at least to be regarded as basis for an authentic Dutch text. And what about our present English text? Does it have no ecclesiastical authenticity and validity at all? In passing I may remark that these traditional Dutch and English translations are often more in agreement with the Latin than with the German original text.

My position, therefore, is that the traditional Dutch and English translations which our readers find in their “psalmboek” or *Book of Praise* and which they have learned by heart in Catechism class has at least as much authenticity as “the original German text.” We should not adopt the method of the second draft that stated: “Since we have followed the mandate to adhere closely to the original German, minor changes have been necessary not in order to introduce changes but in order to carry out our mandate.”

One of these changes was that the familiar words from Answer 44 “during all His sufferings, but especially on the cross” disappeared, and the words “in his soul” showed up. Exactly because the Advisory Committee — had they read

the article by Rev. Van Dooren? — thought that deviation from the German text in this instance was desirable, the Synod of Coaldale 1977 should have made a clear choice between the method of the first draft and that of the second draft. Do we begin with the traditional English text as authentic and do we then consult the original and authentic German, Latin, and Dutch texts in original German text (third edition, 1563)? You cannot have your cake and eat it, too.

We are now in trouble. Either the new deputies do not adhere to their mandate, or if they adhere to it, they are bound to come up with a third draft, that like the second, in several cases will unnecessarily deviate from the traditional Dutch and English texts. I am afraid that this third draft therefore also will not find the approval of our church members. Lastly, it will broaden the difference between the new English translation and the new Dutch texts, for those new Dutch texts do not simply “adhere closely to the original German text” but take into consideration the confessional development in the history of the authentic texts. The Canadian Reformed Churches may expect that the third draft, at best, will be a compromise, but that does not really satisfy anybody.

J. FABER

## “Descended Into Hell”

### SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the two previous issues I published some new Dutch and English texts of Question and Answer 44 in the Heidelberg Catechism, the well-known question about Christ's descent into hell. For the Dutch texts we used the work of an interdenominational Committee-Dankbaar in a publication by Dr. J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, also the work of our sister churches in The Netherlands (lastly assembled in the Synod of Groningen-Zuid 1978) and the publication of a new Dutch text by Dr. L. Wierenga. The new English texts were the translations in the Anniversary Edition (1963), the new Christian Reformed texts, and the two Canadian Reformed drafts. I would now like to make some concluding remarks.

It has become clear that a new text of the Heidelberg Catechism of Question and Answer 44 brings us into contact with broader underlying issues, e.g., the original meaning of the clause in the Apostles' Creed, and the question of the original and/or authentic texts of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Another important issue in the question whether the churches should simply desire a new *translation* or at least leave open the possibility of a *change in content*. One may sympathize with those brothers and sisters who are deadly afraid of any change in the content of their creeds and confessions. We live in a period of the church history in which a second Enlightenment assaults the trustworthiness of Holy Scripture, attacks even the reality of the great events in the history of God's redemptive work, and therefore does certainly not have much regard for the creeds and confessions of the church. The undermining of the authority of the Bible leads to a renewed and reinforced attack on the confessions. In our age we witness a weakening of subscription forms for office-bearers even in formerly Reformed denominations. Therefore, would it not be good not to tamper with the contents of historic confessions at all?

Nevertheless, neither fear nor traditionalism should be our guides. The very fact that Reformed churches dare to change the content of their confessions, if obedience to the Word of God or other valid reasons compel them to do so, shows that they acknowledge Holy Scripture as the *norma normans* — the primary norm that governs the confessions as subordinate standards — and that they take their creedal statements seriously enough to improve them. Now that all over the world Reformed and Presbyterian churches update the language of their confessions, we should use the opportunities of the moment. Churches that live in “correspondence” or “ecclesiastical fellowship” and desire to walk in the truth, should feel themselves obliged to international consultation and cooperation, especially regarding creedal development.

Let me give a simple example. Our deputies will propose to change the wording of Article 4 of the Belgic Confession. Let us not speak of “the fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul” anymore, for almost all New Testament scholars are of the opinion that the letter to the Hebrews has not been written by the apostle Paul. In The Netherlands, however, the Committee-Bremmer still maintained the

expression “de veertien brieven van de apostel Paulus,” and this has led to some critical remarks about traditionalism during the discussion in the Synod of Groningen-Zuid. The issue is not very important; the article of faith is the canonicity rather than the authorship of the letter to the Hebrews. We do not confess that the apostle Paul wrote this letter; we believe and confess that this epistle belongs to the books, against which nothing can be alleged. Nevertheless, we should not leave statements in our confessions that almost nobody accepts anymore.

In my opinion, traditionalism was also noticeable in the fact that the Committee-Bremmer did not follow the new translation of the Apostles' Creed “descended into the realm of death.” They did not even respond to these arguments in Bakhuizen van den Brink's edition: “Realm of death” instead of “hell” is preferable because of the following clause “The third day He rose again from the dead,” and because of the modern Bible translation in Psalm 16:10; Matthew 11:23, 16:18; Revelation 1:18; etc. The Committee-Bremmer simply rejected the translation “realm of death” on the basis of the argumentation of Calvin. In these concluding remarks, therefore, we have to deal with Calvin's *Institutes* as the background of the Heidelberg Catechism's confession concerning Christ's descent into hell.

When we turn to Calvin's *Institutes* II, 16, 8-12, we see that he is aware of the different interpretations. According to Calvin, “it matters little by whom or at what time this clause was inserted.” We ask: Is this completely true? Sure, the church is comprised rather of believers than historians. But should we not investigate the history of a clause in the Apostles' Creed in order to find its original meaning and only then reject this meaning in the early church, when it has been proven to be contrary to Scripture?

Calvin mentions that “there are some who think that nothing new is spoken of in this article, but that it repeats in other words what had previously been said of His burial, the word ‘hell’ often being used in Scripture to denote a grave.” John T. McNeill remarks in the edition of *The Library of Christian Classics* that this view was held by Bucer and apparently by Beza. Also Calvin does not deny the possibility of this interpretation: “I grant that what they put forward concerning the meaning of the word is true: ‘hell’ is frequently to be understood as ‘grave.’ ” Nevertheless, he has two reasons to disagree with them. “How careless it would have been, when something not at all difficult in itself has been stated with clear and easy words, to indicate it again in words that obscure rather than clarify it! . . . . Secondly, it is not likely that a useless repetition of this sort should have crept into this summary, in which the chief points of our faith are aptly noted in the fewest possible words.”

Again we ask: Is this true? Would it be a useless repetition, if we confess that our Lord Jesus Christ was not only buried but also descended into the realm of death? Does the second clause not underline the state in which He was among the dead between Good Friday and Easter? There

was not only the moment of His burial, but our Lord Jesus Christ went down to the Pit, "like one forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom Thou doest remember no more, for they are cut off from Thy hand" (Psalm 88:3-7). In the humiliation of our Mediator also this maskil of Heman the Ezrahite had come to its fulfillment: "Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep."

It is not surprising to me that Calvin in his *Institutes* defends his explanation with a wrong exegesis of Acts 2:24. He sees in the order of the Creed that it first sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men and then speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which He underwent in the sight of God "in order that we might know not only that Christ's *body* was given as the price of our redemption, but that He paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering *in his soul* the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man." Calvin refers then to Acts 2:24. But before we deal with his exegesis of this text, I would like to make two remarks in passing.

First, this passage of Calvin (*Institutes*, I, 16, 10) is the background of the original German text of the Heidelberg Catechism. The second Canadian Reformed draft of a new translation followed it by speaking about Christ's "unspeakable anguish, pains, and terrors, which He suffered on the cross and beforehand *in his soul*." Also the Anniversary Edition and the Christian Reformed text bring this element of Christ's *soul* into their new translation. During our last Synod of Coaldale 1977, deviation from the German text in Answer 44 was considered to be desirable, *Acts*, page 46. But if we generally adhere to the original German text as several new English translations do (our readers know that I am not in favour of it), we should give good reasons for this deviation. Calvin's *Institutes* makes clear what the original text of the Heidelberg Catechism means here: While the previous clauses of the Apostles' Creed speak about what Christ suffered in the body, this clause "He descended into hell" indicates what He suffered in His soul on the cross and beforehand, e.g., in Gethsemane. Think of His complaint, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Matthew 26:38).

Calvin interprets the "descent into hell" as speaking of the fear, dread, and sorrow of Christ's soul and he uses this interpretation in a twofold manner. There is the motive of comfort and assurance: "Unless His soul shared in the punishment, He would have been the Redeemer of bodies alone." And there is the motive of refutation of heresy: Apollinaris had taught that in Christ the eternal Word had taken the place of the human soul. In Article 18 of our Belgic Confession we confess that the eternal Son of God did not only assume human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, that He might be a real man. Calvin mentions the heresy of Apollinaris also in his discussion of Christ's "descent into hell." He is rightly convinced that there could be no atonement for our sins but through the obedience of Christ. "But where is inclination or will to obey except in the *soul*? We know that it was for this reason that his soul was troubled: to drive away fear and bring peace and repose to our souls" (I, 16, 12).

My second remark can be short: If I attack Calvin's explanation of the "descent into hell," it is not because it is unScriptural, but because this explanation is unhistorical. It does no justice to the original meaning of the Apostles' Creed. However, Calvin, and our Heidelberg Catechism for that matter, beautifully expresses the extreme depth of Christ's suffering for us. We should not like to lose the

familiar words about Christ's inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agony. "By his wrestling hand to hand with the devil's power, with the dread of death, with the pains of hell, He was victorious and triumphed over them, that in death we may not now fear those things which our Prince has swallowed up" (I, 16, 11). The question is only whether this was meant by the early Christian creed, and whether Calvin's arguments for his new explanation were valid, e.g., his reference to Acts 2:24.

We come now back to this point of exegesis. After Calvin had stated that not only Christ's body was given as the price of our redemption, but that He suffered in His soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man, he continued: "In this sense Peter says, 'Christ rose, having loosed the pangs of death . . . .' Peter does not simply name death, but expressly states that the Son of God had been laid hold of by the pangs of death that arose from God's curse and wrath — the source of death. For what a small thing it would have been to have gone forward with nothing to fear and, as if in sport, to suffer death! But this was a true proof of His boundless mercy that He did not shun death, however much he dreaded it." It is remarkable that Calvin not only misinterprets Acts 2:24, but that he changes the text. For the apostle Peter does not say that *Christ* loosed the pangs of death, but that *God* did so. God raised Him up, having loosed the pangs of death. And these pangs were not the feelings of pain and fear or deadly dread, but either the bonds or ties of death itself or birth pangs: In the case of our Lord Jesus Christ the miracle happened that God made death bring forth life. God did not abandon His Christ to Hades, nor let His Holy One see corruption (Psalm 16, also quoted in Acts 2:27, 31). Calvin's misinterpretation of Acts 2:24 in the very context of his discussion of the "descent into hell" shows that he lacked a good insight into the Scriptural meaning of Hades as the realm of death.

It is evident that I am in favour of those new Dutch texts of the Apostles' Creed that speak of "the realm of death" instead of "hell." In order to prevent continuing misunderstanding and in order not to lose the Scriptural content of Answer 44, I am inclined to go even further than the Committee-Dankbaar and Dr. L. Wierenga. In their Catechism *Question 44* they use "the realm of death" or "the realm of the dead" in line with their rendering of the Apostles' Creed, but they keep the Calvinian structure of *Answer 44*. The Committee-Dankbaar, however, avoids words as "*hellish agony*" and "*torment of hell*" and speaks about the terror in which Christ was plunged during all His sufferings, but especially in His *death* on the cross; He thus delivered me from the *deadly* dread and pain. But the word "death" in the expression "His death on the cross" is different from the same word in "the realm of death." The first speaks of Christ's dying, the second of His being in the state of death. Especially in a Catechism we must use clear and unambiguous expressions and concepts. The dread of death ("doodsangst") of which Dr. Wierenga's answer speaks, was suffered by Christ *before* He went down to the Pit. The answers in these new Dutch texts are still not clear and they lose the Scriptural confession about Christ's *hellish* agony.

Coming to a conclusion, I do not find a better solution than the bold proposal to alter our Heidelberg Catechism. We could add a question to Lord's Day 15 after Question 39 about Christ's crucifixion:

New Question 40:

What further comfort do you derive from Christ's crucifixion?

Answer: 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,  
had delivered me from the anguish  
and torment of hell.

New Question 42:

Wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after death?

Answer: Christ's humiliation after death consisted in this:  
He was *buried*,  
and continued in the state of the dead,  
under the power of death till the third day;  
*He descended into the realm of death.*

The old Questions 40, 42, and 43 would become Questions 41, 43, and 44; the old Question 44 is to be deleted. In this manner the difficulties are taken away, the historical meaning of the clause of the Apostles' Creed is honoured, while the Scriptural content of Answer 44 is kept but transferred to the place where it belongs. In the meantime, the new formulation of Question 42 (old 41) would strengthen the conformity in doctrine between the Heidelberg Catechism and the Larger Westminster Catechism.

J. FABER

#### CORRECTION

*In the previous issue I wrote on page 96 in the second column that we should have made a clear choice between the method of the first and that of the second draft. The sentence should read as follows: Do we begin with the traditional English text as authentic, and do we then consult the original and authentic German, Latin, and Dutch texts in order to come to the best new translation in English, or do we "closely adhere to the original German text (third edition, 1563)"?*



**The Apostles' Creed**

Committee II presents:

- A. **Material** — Agenda VIII, B, 8 — Report from the Committee, June 1979, June 1980.
- B, 9 — Additional Report with corrections.
  - B, 10 — Letter from the Church at Carman re: The Apostles' Creed.
  - B, 11 — Letter from the Church at Barrhead re: The Apostles' Creed.
  - B, 12 — Letter from the Church at Watford re: The Apostles' Creed.
  - B, 13 — Letter from the Church at Cloverdale re: The Apostles' Creed.
  - B, 14 — Letter from the Church at London re: The Apostles' Creed.

**B. Observations:**

1. The Committee has presented General Synod with a proposed Revised edition of the Apostles' Creed on the basis of the mandate received from Synod Coaldale 1977, Acts, Article 60.

2. a) In its submission to Synod, October 30, 1980, the Committee proposes the following changes in the Apostles' Creed as it appears in our present *Book of Praise*:
  - "Creator" instead of "Maker";
  - "I believe" instead of "and (in Jesus . . .)";
  - "only" instead of "only begotten";
  - "died" instead of "dead";
  - "into the realm of death" instead of "into hell";
  - "arose" instead of "rose again";
  - "there" instead of "thence";
  - "the" instead of "a (holy catholic church)"
- b) It is to be noted that the numbering (I-XII) has been changed to I, II, III (Trinitarian Division).
3. a) Several of the churches submitted proposals which now agree with the Committee's Revised Proposal.
- b) The Church at Cloverdale proposes a comma after "God, (the Father)," but provides no reason.
- c) The Church at Watford prefers "only begotten" or "only born" to the suggested "only Son."
- d) The Church at Barrhead proposes, "He suffered, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, dead and buried."
- e) The Churches at London and Watford prefer "hell" to "hades."
- f) The Church at Carman proposes "realm of the dead." The Church at Cloverdale explains why the word "hell" should be discarded in favour of "the place of death."
 

The Church at Cloverdale seems to prefer "rose" instead of "arose" and "I believe in a holy catholic church" instead of the proposed "I believe the holy, catholic church."
- g) The Church at Watford prefers "a" instead of "the" (church), and also prefers "flesh" to "body."

### C. Considerations:

1. The Committee has not provided Synod with adequate reasons for all the proposed changes:
  - a) The change from the version "descended into hell" to "descended into the realm of death" is a major change, which also affects the text of the Heidelberg Catechism, and should be adopted only if the reasons given prove fully sufficient. The Committee is "convinced" but does not provide proof that the early Christian Church understood the word "Hades" only in terms of "the realm of death." There are Scripture passages which use the word "Hades" in the sense of "hell" (e.g. Luke 10:15; Luke 16:23).
 

Although the "Reformed" explanation of the term "Hades" may perhaps be historically doubtful (taking it as a summary of Christ's suffering rather than a chronological occurrence), the explanation of this article as found in the Heidelberg Catechism is Biblically sound.

Synod sees no reason to incorporate this change. If the version "realm of death" is not adopted, the word "died" is better rendered as previously "dead and buried."
  - b) The definite article "the" (with respect to the church) may be in the International Consultation Text, but is not found in the original manuscripts. It is not clear how the addition of the word "the . . . church" would more express the unicity of the Church.
 

Synod sees no reason to incorporate this change.

2. A change which may very well be adopted is the version "only Son" in accordance with the original Latin text (unicus) and various Scripture passages (e.g. John 1:14).

This change does not alter but gives even more emphasis to the explanation of Lord's Day 13, Question 33, "Why is He called God's only Son, since we are also children of God?"

3. The other suggested changes are not so much matters of revision but simply matters of translation and pose no problems for adoption.

4. The new numbering (I-III) is suitable in the light of Lord's Day 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism and may well be introduced.

5. a) The Church at Barrhead suggests placing a comma after "suffered." According to Barrhead, the "fact that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate . . . is corrected more or less in Answer 37 of the Catechism."

However, Barrhead overlooks the fact that, although Question 37 deals with the meaning of Christ's suffering, Question 38 deals specifically with His suffering under Pontius Pilate.

b) The Church at Cloverdale overlooks the fact that "to believe in" implies "to trust upon," which trust may only be in God (Jeremiah 17:5, 7).

c) The Church at Watford proposes to accept "flesh" instead of "body," whereas, Cloverdale proposes to retain "body" in the place of "flesh." Since the reasons given are not decisive either way, it is best to retain the existing version which is also in keeping with the International Consultation Text.

#### D. Recommendations:

Synod decide:

1. To adopt the "Revised Committee Proposal" of the Apostles' Creed as amended by Synod.

2. To accept the numbering I, II, III. ADOPTED

The adopted revision of the Apostles' Creed reads as follows:

- I. I believe in God the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.
- II. I believe in Jesus Christ,  
His only Son, our Lord.  
He was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
and born of the virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead and buried;  
He descended into hell.  
On the third day He arose from the dead;  
He ascended into heaven,  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;  
from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.
- III. I believe in the Holy Spirit;  
I believe a holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.