

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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. . . AND WAS BURIED

“The next major new religion,” observes Gene Edward Veith, “will probably not be one of the old forms of overt paganism, but rather a syncretic hybrid. In a postmodernist and increasingly consumer-centered world in which truth is relative, people will pick and choose various aspects of the different faiths according to what they *like*.”¹ Veith is not describing the distant future. Large segments of self-professed Evangelicals have adopted a consumer mentality when it comes to interpreting the Christian faith. I recently ran across a poster in a Christian bookstore that read: “God is like GE; He brings good things to light. God is like AT&T; He reaches out and touches people. God is like DIAL SOAP; He gives *round the clock* protection. God is like COCA-COLA; He is the real thing. God is like PAN AM; He makes the going great. God is like HALLMARK CARDS; He cares enough to send the very best. God is like LIFESAVERS; He is a part of living.” I could go on with this kind of stuff. Perhaps you have seen T-shirts with catchy little slogans (designed to provoke inquiries that will lead to “sharing” your faith), like the one that says, “This Blood is for You!” – a take-off from a well-known beer commercial. What are we to make of this? Should we be freely borrowing the language of a consumer-oriented society when we speak of God and the Christian faith? We run the risk not only of misrepresenting the claims of the gospel when we do this, but also, in the process, of distorting our Christian distinctives. This is not to say that the language we use must always be specifically Scriptural (or even theological). But we must be careful in our desire to communicate to our culture that we don’t end up accommodating our message in a way that empties it of its real meaning.

Language can, at times, be misleading. An example of this is the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed that says that Christ “descended into hell.” This particular phrase is not found in Scripture. In fact, the Latin expression *descendit ad inferna* was not in the creed originally but was added at a later date. Calvin acknowledged this but went on to declare: “Nevertheless, in setting forth a summary of doctrine, a place must be given to it, as it contains the useful and not-to-be-despised mystery of a most important matter.”² Benedict Pictet (1655-1724), one of Calvin’s successors in Geneva (and a very accomplished theologian) makes a compelling case, writing: “As to the *descent of Christ into hell*, mentioned in the Apostles’ Creed, it must be remarked *first*, that this article is omitted in almost all the ancient Creeds. Hence Ruffinus, in the beginning of the eighth century, testifies that this article is not read in any creed of the Eastern churches, or in that of the Roman church, but only in the creed of the Aquileian church. It is found, indeed, in what is commonly called the Creed of Athanasius, but it is very doubtful whether Athanasius was the author of it, and whether this Creed was known to the church before the sixth century. Some creeds, which entertained this article of Christ’s descent into hell, altogether left out that of his *burial*. It is not, however, to be denied that the creed of Aquileia contained both articles, and that the Arians, as Socrates relates, composed a creed at Constantinople, in which they profess their belief in Christ as dead and buried, and also as having penetrated the places under the earth, an object of terror to the infernal regions. It was believed by many of the fathers that Christ really descended into hell, as Justin Martyr, Clemens Alexandrinus, Iranaeus, Origen, Eusebius; and perhaps their opinion was the cause of this article being inserted in the Creed. It is, however, not true that Christ descended into the place of the damned, whatever those fathers believed; for the soul of Christ,

immediately upon its separation from the body, went into paradise, according to his promise to the penitent thief, *Today shalt thou be with me in paradise* (Luke 23:43). For what reason should he have gone down into hell? Was it that he might there suffer anything? But he finished everything on the cross. Was it to deliver the ancient fathers? They had been already received into paradise. Was it to preach to departed spirits? Preaching belongs only to the state of this life, not to the state of the next. Was it to bring the condemned out of hell? But, according to the scripture, their torment will have no end. Was it to display his victory in the sight of devils? In this case his descent into hell would rather be a part of his exaltation, than of his humiliation; and, besides, there was no need to descend thither to make his victory known to devils, for they could not be ignorant of it. But there is no occasion to contend much about the meaning of this article; everyone can interpret it as he pleases, either of the spiritual torments of Christ, with Calvin, Beza, and others, or of his lowest condition under the dominion of death in the grave, and in this sense there will be a striking antithesis between his *death* and *his resurrection to life*, between *the grave* and *his ascension to heaven*. Lastly, we must here greatly adore the love of Christ, who was pleased to continue for a time in the deepest humiliation, that he might exalt us to the highest glory.”³

- I. **THE BODY OF JESUS.** John 19:31-42 provides the context for what happened after Jesus died. “The Jews had a deep respect for death, like all the nations of the ancient world; but perhaps theirs was still more profound, since for them man’s body was so very directly the work of God, and made in His great image. The Bible laid it down rigidly that no dead body was to be left unburied, even those of the worst enemies, as Ezekiel had said, nor even, according to the commandment of the Mosaic Law, those of men who had been executed. In order to describe the horror of the state to which the heathen had reduced God’s people, Psalm 78 uses the strongest words that were to be found: *They have thrown the corpses of thy servants to feed all the birds of heaven; wild beasts prey on the carrion of the just.* And the worst malediction that Isaiah could hurl against the King of Babylon was: *Thee the grave itself rejects, like a withered root, like a thing unclean. Rots thy corpse unrecognized, beneath yonder coverlet of men slain, that went down to the deep pit together.* The dead man therefore had a right to ceremonial treatment that was laid down by the texts and by custom.”⁴ The Jews came to Pilate asking that he apply the so-called *crurifragium*. What was this? Schilder explains: “This in a few exceptional cases was the method applied in order to put someone to death quickly or in order to punish him very brutally. By means of heavy instruments the bones of the victims were then broken, probably by means of heavy hammers. Sometimes this *crurifragium* was applied after a crucifixion in order to put a sudden end to the suffering. At other times it served as the sole and direct means of punishment itself. The *crurifragium* did not always follow the crucifixion. In connection with this some suppose that the Jews by asking that this particular action be applied to the Saviour were intentionally asking the government to inflict every imaginable form of penalty upon the Nazarene. But we may not infer more than is warranted. Even though an evil passion was at work here, we know that it really was of importance to them that the crucified person should be buried before sunset even though this desire was prompted by nothing more than the outer forms of religion and the fear of a people whose temper could never be accurately guessed. The quicker everything was done the better. Now if it were historically accurate that in those days two official methods were employed for the purpose they have in mind, namely, the *crurifragium*, or the thrust of a lance or spear, we should indeed in brutality. But that historical accuracy is not ours in this respect. . . . Pilate is willing to grant the request. The servants who are to carry out the brutality are quickly named. The two murderers still manifest some signs of life, and it does not take long before these are put to death by means of the brutality inflicted upon them. But when they approach Jesus, they immediately see that He has already died. In His case the brutal instrument was no longer necessary. However, they had to have official evidence to show that He actually was dead; after all, it was just possible that a breath of life still stirred in Him. Hence, in order to put an end to all uncertainty, one of the soldiers take a spear, and thrusts it into Jesus’ side.”⁵

II. **THE BURIAL, OR MAYBE HE NEVER DIED.** In 1965, Hugh Schonfield, a British Biblical scholar, published his highly-controversial *The Passover Plot*, which became a bestseller. Schonfield resurrected an old theory that Jesus did not actually die on the cross, but fell into an unconscious state (swooned) and was later revived in the tomb. We are supposed to believe that Jesus deliberately feigned his death using drugs provided by Luke the physician and was later resuscitated by Joseph of Arimathea, who, like Luke, was in on the ruse. The swoon theory, as it has been called, has never gained any support from the vast majority of Biblical scholars, but that has not stopped it from remaining extremely popular in works of pseudo history, i.e., Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's 1982 book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Barbara Thiering's 1992 *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, and Michael Baigent's 2006 *The Jesus Papers*. This hypothesis, as Thomas Oden has pointed out, "is deficient on several grounds: (1) The evidence of his death seemed sufficient to his enemies and to civil officials. The centurion reportedly assured Pilate that Jesus was dead, in effect officially verifying the death (Mark 15:44-45). The reason the soldiers did not break Jesus' legs is that they *found that he was already dead* (John 19:33). It was after this that *the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear* (v. 34). (2) Joseph of Arimathea *asked Pilate for the body* (John 19:38). *With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away* (John 19:38). He was accompanied by Nicodemus. If he were still alive, no one would have described him as *the body*. (3) His body had gone through a complex burial process: *Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen* in accordance with *Jewish burial custom*, and there was *in the garden a new tomb* in which Jesus was laid (John 19:40-42). Hence it is implausible to imagine that all during this time Jesus was not dead. Surely his heartbeat or breath would have been noticed. It is implausible that he could have survived being wrapped in linen and then had strength to remove the boulder that had been set to seal the tomb precisely to prevent any loose talk about a possible resurrection or that he could have done all this and still not disturbed the Roman guard."⁶

CONCLUSION: "The grave," wrote Abraham Kuyper, "is the sinner's deepest humiliation."⁷ According to Kuyper, Christ would not be a complete Savior for us if He had not descended into the grave. Christ's burial is an important aspect of his vicarious suffering and death. "It is," says Berkouwer, "considered the decisive final phase of his sin-bearing, and as the wages of sin unto death."⁸ Christ became a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). Part of the punishment of the broken Law is physical death, and the Lord Jesus had to fully "taste death" (Hebrews 2:9). This included His being buried. "Therefore, as the resurrection of Christ from the grave is part of his glory, so his burial, and interment among the dead, by which he was placed in the same condition with them, is a part of the humiliation and ignominy which he rendered on our account; for he was not unwilling to become a corpse for our sake."⁹ Christ's burial was both *predicted* and *prefigured*. It was *predicted* in Psalm 22:15 where the expression "dust of death" is a reference to the grave (cf. also Psalm 16:9, 10). It was *prefigured* in the Old Testament prophet Jonah (cf. Matthew 12:40). William Perkins (1558-1602), in his masterful exposition of the Apostles' creed, makes the following observation on the burial of Christ: "The use and profit which may be made of Christ's burial is twofold. First, it serves to work in us the burial of all our sins. *Know ye not*, says Paul, *that all who have been baptized into Christ, have been baptized into his death, and are buried with him by baptism into his death?* (Rom. 6:3). If any shall demand how any man is buried into the death of Christ, the answer is this: every Christian man and woman are by faith mystically united unto Christ and made all members of one body, whereof Christ is the Head. Now therefore, as Christ by the power of His Godhead when He was dead and buried did overcome the grave and the power of death in His own person, so by the very same power by means of His spiritual conjunction does He work in all His members a spiritual death and burial of sin and natural corruption. When the Israelites were burying a man, for fear of the soldiers of the Moabites they cast him for haste into the sepulcher of Elisha (2 Kings 13:21). Now the dead man, so soon as he was down and had touched the body of Elisha, he revived and stood upon his feet. So let a man that is dead in sin be cast into the grave of Christ – that is, let him by faith but touch Christ dead and buried – it will come to pass by the virtue of Christ's death and burial that he shall be raised from death and bondage of sin to become a new man. Secondly, the burial of Christ serves to be

a sweet perfume of all our graves and burials; for the grave in itself is the house of perdition, but Christ by His burial has as it were consecrated and perfumed all our graves and instead of houses of perdition has made them chambers of rest and sleep, yea, beds of down (Isa. 57:2). And therefore, howsoever to the eye of man the beholding of a funeral is terrible, yet if we could then remember the burial of Christ and consider how He thereby has changed the nature of the grave, even then it would make us to rejoice. Lastly, we must imitate Christ's burial in being continually occupied in the spiritual burial of our sins."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ G. Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Crossway, 1994), p. 200.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (The Westminster Press, 1975), Bk. II, Ch. XVI, Sec. 8.

³ B. Pictet, *Christian Theology* trans. F. Reyroux (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1853), p. 261.

⁴ Henri Daniel-Rops, *Daily Life In The Time of Jesus* (Servant Books, 1962), p. 328.

⁵ Klass Schilder, *Lenten Trilogy: Christ Crucified* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 546.

⁶ T. C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology II* (Harper Collins, 1989), p. 484.

⁷ As cited in G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 169.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁹ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (rpt. Presbyterian & Reformed, 1985), p. 225.

¹⁰ *The Works of William Perkins V* (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), p. 229.