

Christ's Descent into Hell as Christological Locus in the Era of the »Formula of Concord«

(/ Luther's »Torgau Sermon« Revisited

By Robert Kolb

In his thorough review of the historical background and theology of article IX of the »Formula of Concord«, on Christ's descent into hell, Gunther Wenz states that this article functions as a supplement or appendix to article VIII, on the person of Christ.¹ This judgment echoes that penned into a manuscript of the »Torgau Book« in 1576.² Wenz goes on to repeat the judgment of previous scholars that several relatively minor controversies over the subject within Lutheran ministeria – above all, that around 1550 in Hamburg – induced the authors of the »Formula of Concord« to insert a discussion of the *Descensus ad infernum* into their work at a rather late stage of the document's development, in the composition of the »Torgau Book« in June 1576. However, these controversies focused on the significance of Christ's descent into hell for the atonement of sinners. If the primary concern of the Formulators in this article had rested on soteriological grounds, positioning it following article III, on the justification of the sinner before God, would have made more sense than connecting it with the discussion of the person of Christ and the relationship between his two natures. For, as Wenz notes, the »Formula of Concord« did not attempt to set forth the significance of the *Descensus* for deliverance of sinners from sin but instead counseled avoidance of speculation regarding this topic and restated a simple confession of the Formula's doctrine of the person of Christ.

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Ep Epitome articulorum

FC Formula concordiae

SD Solida declaratio

¹ Gunther WENZ: *Theologie der Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*. Vol. 2. B; NY 1997, 714. This understanding of article IX was found in early seventeenth century commentaries on the »Formula of Concord«, e.g. in that by Petrus PISCATOR (1571-1611): *Commentarius in Formulam concordiae ...* Jena 1610, 375 f.

² Inge MAGER: *Die Konkordienformel im Fürstentum Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel: Entstehungsbeitrag – Rezeption – Geltung*. GÖ 1993, 277; the manuscript she cites is Cod. Guelf. 110 Helmst., 380^r.

By far the briefest of the twelve articles of the »Formula of Concord«, article IX handed over its treatment of the subject completely to Luther. The reformer's rejection of speculation regarding Christ's descent into hell provided an echo of the Concordianists' rejection of speculation in regard to Christology in article VIII, where it was admonished that conjecture beyond the biblical text be avoided regarding Christ's sitting at the right hand of almighty power and majesty.³ Article IX then commended Luther's sermon »held at Torgau in the castle 1533 on Christ's descent into hell« for the adjudication of all questions in regard to this teaching. Four principles were to guide all discussion of the Descensus:

1. Christ's burial must be differentiated from his descent into hell;
2. his entire person, God and human creature, went to hell;
3. this descent took place after his burial;
4. in the descent into hell it becomes clear that he conquered the devil, destroyed hell's power, and deprived the devil of all his power.⁴

This treatment of the topic reproduces the principles of the Mansfeld ministerium's rebuttal of the Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of Christ's descent into hell, which that ministerium formulated a decade before the composition of the »Formula of Concord«.

I Controversies over Christ's Descent into Hell within Lutheran Ministeria

There are indeed good reasons to read article IX in terms of the intra-Lutheran disputes over the topic. The occasion for the article, according to Jakob Andreae's (1528-1590) »A Summary Epitome ...«, was controversy among »certain theologians committed to the Augsburg Confession«;⁵ the full committee mentioned that »ancient teachers of the church as well as ours« had explained this article »in different ways«. ⁶ Traditionally these comments have been explained with reference to three controversies in the quarter century before the »Formula of Concord« was composed. The first of these had taken place in Hamburg, between Johann Aepinus and a small group of opponents within the ministerium of the city in the decade following the onset of the dispute in 1544. The second occurred in 1554 when a Pomeranian pastor, Jacob Tiele, raised questions similar to those discussed in Hamburg. A decade later a deacon in Augsburg, Johannes Matsperger, had fallen

3 FC, SD VIII, 96 (BSLK, 1048, 37 - 1049, 13 - BC, 634).

4 Wenz: AaO 2, 712-714; cf. FC, SD IX, 1-3 (BSLK, 1049, 17 - 1053, 21 ≙ BC, 634 f).

5 FC, Ep IX, 1 (BSLK, 812, 38 f ≙ BC, 635).

6 FC, SD IX, 1 (BSLK, 1049, 20; 1052, 1-3 ≙ BC, 634).

into conflict with Andreae's colleagues in Württemberg over the position of Johannes Brenz and Andreae himself, opposing their interpretation of Christ's descent into hell as simply his suffering God's wrath while on earth.⁷ The involvement of Andreae's ministerium in the last of these disputes certainly does provide a basis for the judgment that this controversy lay behind the decision to include Christ's descent into hell among the topics treated in the »Formula of Concord« so late in the process of its development; Martin Chemnitz's involvement in the doctrinal discussions of the Lower Saxon ministeria over the years might point to his interest in the topic although the Hamburg dispute had been settled before he came to Braunschweig at the end of 1554.⁸

Furthermore, Luther's »Torgau sermon« had been used in its published form to summarize the reformer's convictions regarding the topic of the descent into hell at least since Melanchthon and Bugenhagen cited it in 1550 when they offered a formal opinion in the controversy over the doctrine in Hamburg.⁹ There the two Wittenberg professors emphasized that whatever other explanations for the pains of hell which Christ suffered, for instance, as he felt the fury of God's wrath on the cross – »sorrows beyond human understanding« –, the descent into hell was to be understood as »the Son of God conquer[ing] the sorrows of hell«.¹⁰ The Wittenberg theologians had not always agreed on the interpretation of this article of the Creed. In 1531 Melanchthon had written to Georg Spalatin (1484-1545) that he could not explain 1 P 3, 18 but that Bugenhagen was arguing »vehemently« that it referred to the Gentiles to whom the apostles preached the Gospel after Christ's resurrection. Melanchthon added: »He has almost persuaded Luther of this opinion.« Luther apparently saw the letter before it was sent and wrote in the margin (according to another note on the manuscript »with his own hand«): »This is not true.«¹¹ However, in 1550 the two remaining members of the Leucorea trio believed

7 On these controversies, see David G. TRUEMPER: *The descensus ad inferos from Luther to the Formula of Concord*. Chicago 1974, 218-291 (Chicago, The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, S.T.D. thesis); Erich VOGELSANG: *Weltbild und Kreuztheologie in den Höllenfahrtsstreitigkeiten der Reformationszeit*. ARG 28 (1941), 107-123; Franz Hermann R[einhold] Frank: *Die Theologie der Concordienformel historisch-dogmatisch entwickelt und beleuchtet*. Bd. 3. Erlangen 1863, 397-423.

8 However, it must be conceded, neither of these cases provides an explanation why the topic surfaced for the first time in 1576.

9 CR 7, 666-668 (4800) ≅ MBW 6, 97 (5911), a memorandum addressed by Melanchthon and Bugenhagen to the Hamburg senate, September 1550.

10 CR 7, 667 (4800).

11 CR 2, 490, (971) ≅ MBW 2, 26 (1138), Melanchthon to Spalatin, March 20, 1531.

that the three of them had been of one mind in viewing Christ's descent into hell as a part of his victory over Satan and death, and they referred to Luther's so-called »Torgauer Predigt« as proof.

This interpretation was reflected in the discussion of the descent into hell in Nikolaus Selnecker's (1530-1592) treatment of the Apostles Creed, a part of his »Paedagogia Christiana«, first published in 1565. Selnecker also drew the discussion of the descent into the doctrine of the person of Christ as well as of his work. He inserted into his commentary on the Creed, between »and was buried« and »descended into hell« a section »on the doctrine of the communication of attributes«, some thirty-five octavo pages in length.¹² In the following chapter, on the Descensus, he reviewed various interpretations of 1 P 3, 19, there addressing the question of how Christ descended into the »lower regions«. Selnecker explicitly posed the possibility, since Christ's body lay in the grave, that only his spirit had gone to preach to the devils and their captives in hell. He rejected this position with a reference to Augustine's view that the whole Christ descended into the demonic realm.¹³ Selnecker did not mention any who held contrary positions, however; his work is free from polemic.

II The Descent into Hell as a Controverted Issue between Calvinists and Lutherans

That was not the case with a contemporary confessional document, however. Not only from Selnecker's instructional material but also from the anti-Calvinist polemic of the theologians of Mansfeld county it becomes clear that the occasion for adding a treatment of the locus on the descent into hell to the »Formula of Concord« and for placing that locus as an appendix to its article on Christology arose not only out of contention among Lutheran theologians. A decade before the composition of the »Torgau Book«, the ministerium of the county of Mansfeld had publicly rejected the interpretation of the Descensus in the Heidelberg Catechism, placing on the agenda of argument between Reformed and Lutheran theologians the proper definition of this teaching. The Mansfeld ministerium used Luther's »Torgau sermon« as one part of an extensive critique of the Catechism's answer to

12 Nikolaus SELNECKER: *Paedagogia Christiana: continens capita et locos doctrinae Christianae, forma & serie catechetica uerè / perspicuè explicata ...* Frankfurt/Main 1567, 570; VD16 19, 59 f [S 5623; vgl. S 5622-5629].

13 Selnecker: *Paedagogia Christiana*, 573: »Totus filius fuit apud Patrem, totus in utero uirginis, totus in coela, totus in terra, totus in cruce, & totus in inferno.«

the question »Why are the words, ›descended into hell‹ added [in the Creed]?« In view of the fact that article VIII of the »Formula of Concord« deals with »Calvinist« as well as »Crypto-Calvinist« views of the person and natures of Christ, it is probable that Andreae, Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), and their colleagues at Torgau in May and June 1576 were reaffirming the Mansfeld rejection of the Heidelberg definition of the Descensus, for the Formula's statement focused on the significance of the doctrine for a proper understanding of Christology.

It is indeed true that most of the argument of article VIII was aimed against the electoral Saxon theologians, designated »Crypto-Calvinists« by their opponents even though they were actually working out implications of Melanchthon's theology – albeit along lines closer to Calvin and his Heidelberg followers than to some other Lutherans, such as Chemnitz or Tilemann Hesshus (1527-1588).¹⁴ But these electoral Saxon »crypto-Philippists« had avoided the subject of the descent into hell in their primary public statements of the early 1570s; the topic had not become a critical issue in the disputes between the Wittenberg faculty of the time and its opponents.¹⁵ Nevertheless, although the crypto-Philippists were the primary

14 The variety of formulations of sacramental and christological doctrine that sprang from those who believed they were faithfully extending the teaching of their common preceptor, Philipp Melanchthon, is presented by Irene DINGEL: *Concordia controversa: die öffentlichen Diskussionen um das lutherische Konkordienwerk am Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts*. GÜ 1996. The issue of the soteriological significance of Christ's descent into hell cuts across the usual »party lines« of the period; Melanchthon, his Philippist disciples, as well as Gnesio-Lutheran students of his like Chemnitz, interpreted it as part of Christ's triumph; Johannes Brenz (1499-1570) and Andreae shared a position similar to that of their Calvinist opponents in viewing it as a part of his suffering; see Truemper: AaO, 152-217.

15 Perhaps the most important statement of the Crypto-Philippist position of the Wittenberg faculty was issued in *VON DER PERSON VND MENSCHWERDUNG VNSERS HERRN JHESU CHRISTI/ DER WAREN CHRISTLICHEN KIRCHEN GRUNDFEST/ ...*, Wittenberg 1571; VD16 22, 317 f [W 3768-3771]. It seldom mentioned the descent into hell, and when it did, did so in a way that avoided the points of controversy identified by the Mansfeld theologians in their critique of the Heidelberg Catechism. On the Grundfest and the role it played in shaping the agenda of the »Formula of Concord«, see Robert KOLB: *Altering the agenda, shifting the strategy: the Grundfest of 1571 as Philippist program for Lutheran Concord*. SCJ 29 (1999): 405-426. The Wittenberg Catechism, published earlier the same year, did pose the question, »How do you understand the article regarding Christ's descent into hell?« The answer emphasized that the descent is to be understood »simply and without allegory«, as the destruction of the tyranny of the devil and hell and the liberation of believers. The Catechism avoided any discussion of the mode of presence of Christ in hell or when his victory was accomplished: *CATECHESIS CONTINENS EXPLICATIONEM SIMPLICEM ET BREUEM, DECALOGI ...* [Wittenberg 1571], 75 f: »Quomodo intelligis articulum de Descensu Christi ad inferos? Simpliciter &

opponents envisioned in the Formula's discussion of the Lord's Supper, the »Sacramentarians who had presented their own confession at Augsburg« (the Zwinglians – and by extension the adherents of the »Consensus Tigurinus« of 1549 from Geneva and their followers) came under the Formula's scrutiny along with »those who had tried to hide under the cover of the »Augsburg Confession«. In beginning its treatment of Christology the »Solid Declaration« noted that the dispute over this issue had come from other Sacramentarians into the churches of the »Augsburg Confession«. In the Epitome Andreae attributed the necessity of the Christological discussion to dispute between »the pure theologians of the Augsburg Confession and the Calvinists«, noting at the same time that certain others had followed in their error.¹⁶ On the basis of the evidence presented below, the Calvinist theologians in Heidelberg indeed seem to have provided the primary occasion for the ninth article's concern.

III The Mansfeld Confutation of 1565

That Christ's descent into hell had implications for the debate over the person of Christ between Lutherans and Calvinists in the minds of the contemporaries of the Concordianists is to be seen in the »Book of confutation« published in 1565 by the ministerium of Mansfeld. Confuting error had formed a significant part of the public confession of the Lutheran churches from 1530 on, but a new genre of published confession, the »Book of confutation,« was devised in 1559 by the ducal Saxon government of Johann Friedrich the Middler (1529, 1554-1567, 1595).¹⁷ Based

sine allegoria intelligendus est hic articulus, sicut Paulus ad Ephes. 4 interpretatur, Descendit ad inferiores partes terrae. Fatemur autem hoc articulo, destructam esse tyrannidem Diaboli & inferorum, hoc est, liberatos omnes, qui credunt in Christum, a potentia Diaboli & inferis, vt Oseae 13. Ero pestis tua inferne, Et hanc victoriam certo modo Filius Dei Diabolis ostendit. Nec dubium est Diabolos sensisse suam potentiam ab hoc victore fractam esse, Et vere caput serpentis a semine mulieris sed contritum esse. Et igitur simplicissima sententia: Quod Christus ostendit suam victoriam Diabolis & eos terruerit. Sed quomodo hoc sit factum, non scrutimur ...«

¹⁶ FC, SD, VII, 1; VIII, 1; FC Ep, VIII, 1 (BSLK, 971, 7 - 972, 13; 1017, 3-7; 804, 3-10 ≅ BC, 592. 616. 508 f).

¹⁷ DES DURCHLEUCHTIGEN ... HERRN JOHANS FRIDERICHEN DES MITTLERN ... IN GOTTES WORT/ PROPHETISCHER VND APOSTOLISCHER SCHRIFT/ GEGRÜNDETE CONFUTATIONES/ WIDERLEGUNGEN VND VERDAMMUNG ETLICHER ... CORRUPTELN/ SECTEN VND IRRTHUMEN ... [Jena: Thomas Rebart, 1559]; ILLVSTRISSIMI PRINCIPIS ... IOHANNIS FRIDERICI SECVNDI ... SUMPTA CONFUTATIO & CONDEMNATIO PRÆCIPUARUM CORRUPTELARUM, SECTARUM, & ERRORUM ...; Jena 1559; VD16 17, 695 f [S 1096].

on the ancient Christian practice of condemning false teaching,¹⁸ the »confutation« of specific false teachings and false teachers now became a form for confession, a representation of the official position of a church. Only months following the appearance of the Saxon Confutation, the ministerium of Mansfeld had composed a similar work, examining the errors of eleven foci of false teaching, including the Jesuits, Anabaptists, Michael Servetus' († 1553) followers, the Schwenckfelder, the Zwinglians, and six heresies that had arisen within the Lutheran churches.¹⁹

Five years later, the Mansfeld theologians drafted a second confutation, which addressed six problems within the Evangelical churches, including the errors of the Heidelberg Catechism, recent Wittenberg publications by Paul Eber (1511-1569) and Georg Major (1502-1574), synergism, antinomianism, and disparate views of the ascension of Christ. The first two theologians who subscribed this confession were the county's ecclesiastical superintendent, Hieronymus Menzel (1517-1590), and Cyriakus Spangenberg (1528-1604). More than one hundred other clergymen also signed the Confession. It is indeed possible that Menzel and Spangenberg had composed the text.

The Mansfeld theologians included a treatment of Christ's descent into hell as a part of their critique of the recently issued Heidelberg Catechism. The issues challenging Lutheran theology in that Catechism had been discussed in April 1564 at the colloquy held at Maulbronn, where representatives of the Palatine theology had engaged the Württemberg ministerium's leading thinkers, above all their spokesman, Jakob Andreae.²⁰ The definition of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper and related Christological questions were among the public issues which the Mansfeld ministerium felt compelled to address. In regard to the Descensus its confession treated the four topics which would later be incorporated into the summary position of the »Formula of Concord«:

1. that Christ's burial and descent into hell must be distinguished;
2. that the entire person, God and human creature, descended to hell;
3. that the descent took place following his burial; and

18 Hans Werner GENSICHEN: *Damnamus: die Verwerfung von Irrlehre bei Luther und im Luthertum des 16. Jahrhunderts*. B 1955, 11-28, on the ancient church.

19 BEKENDTNIS DER PREDIGER IN DER GRAFFSCHAFT MANSFELD/ VNTER DEN JUNGEN HERREN GESESSEN. WIDER ALLE SECTEN/ ROTTEN/ VND FALSCHER LEREN/ WIDER GOTTES WORT/ DIE REINE LERE LUTHERS SELIGEN/ VND DER AUGSPURGISCHEN CONFESSION/ AN ETLICHEN ORTEN EINGESCHLICHEN/ MIT NOTWENDIGEN WIDERLEGUNGE DERSELBIGEN. Eisleben 1560, dated August 20, 1559, 1. ed., 1559; VD16 2, 228 [B 1519 f].

20 Ernst BIZER: *Studien zur Geschichte des Abendmahlsstreits im 16. Jahrhundert*. GÜ 1940, 300-362.

4. that Christ thereby conquered the devil, taking away his power, and destroyed hell's might.²¹

Like Melanchthon and Bugenhagen in 1550, the Mansfelder used citations from Luther's homiletical treatment of the subject to oppose a false understanding of Christ's descent into hell. They did so, however, with only incidental and secondary reference to the soteriological concerns which had stood at the center of the Hamburg controversy fifteen years earlier. They were countering the errors regarding the relationship of Christ's two natures which they believed inherent in the Heidelberg Catechism's presentation of the subject.

The second Mansfeld confutation began its chapter »on the errors of the Palatine Catechism« with the affirmation that God had sent Luther to Germany and the entire world as his special prophet to give correct and beneficial instruction on all the articles of faith. Following the example of the ancient church, Luther had drawn together material on all doctrinal topics into a brief catechism for the instruction of the young and simple people. This simple form of instruction had presented the fundamental principles which all Christians must know in a form most appropriate for children and common people. But the Palatine theologians had introduced a new, peculiar form of the catechism. The Mansfeld theologians were convinced that Satan, with his unsurpassed ability to deceive and his bitter hatred of revealed truth, stood behind the Heidelberg project. They began with a methodological concern, heavily freighted with theological consequences: the Palatine Catechism changed the order of instruction as Luther had set it forth, for its authors presupposed that the content of the faith – the Creed – should be taught before the decalog's prescriptions for the Christian life. This change of order reflects the Heidelbergers' rejection of Luther's law / gospel understanding of the catechism and his desire to employ the ten commandments in their theological use, for the accusation and condemnation of sinners, before the learners received the gospel in the Creed. The Mansfeld confession rejected this challenge to the reformer's authority.²²

21 CONFESSIO DE SENTENTIA MINISTRORUM VERBI IN COMITATU MANSFELDENSEI, DE DOGMATIS QUORUNDAM PROXIMO TRIENNIO PUBLICE EDITIS. Eisleben 1565; VDI6 4, 558 (C 4823). The confession was composed in 1564.

22 On the conflicts between the Heidelberg theologians and Lutherans over the authority of Luther, see Irene DINGEL: Ablehnung und Aneignung: die Bewertung der Autorität Martin Luthers in den Auseinandersetzungen um die Konkordienformel. ZKG 105 (1994) 35-57, and idem: Concordia controversa, 610-616.

In addition, the new catechism introduced errors on a number of teachings, but above all it »insidiously crept in and defended the most pernicious error of the Sacramentarians, denying the true, bodily presence of Christ in the Supper«. ²³ In spite of the fact that these errors could be refuted and repudiated by turning to Luther's writings, the »Augsburg Confession«, the »booklet sent to the church in France«, ²⁴ the works of Hesshus against the Sacramentarians, ²⁵ Brenz's against Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), ²⁶ and Christoph Irenaeus' (1522-1595) commentary on the Apostles Creed, ²⁷ as well as others, the Mansfeld pastors wished to offer their own brief confession and confutation. ²⁸ The first of the catechism's positions which their »Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...« refuted was its definition of Christ's descent into hell as his horrible sufferings of soul, his torture and terrors into which he was submerged before and during his crucifixion.

23 *Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...*, 47^{r-v}: »... sed etiam perniciosissimum illum Sacramentarium errorem, negantem veram Christi in Coena, & corporalem praesentiam, insidiosè immiscet & immunit.«

24 It is unclear to what »in libello ad Ecclesiam in Gallia misso« might refer; no publication fitting this description can be definitively identified. Particularly the church in Württemberg had had contacts with the French church in the years preceding the composition of the Mansfield confession; see Hans Christian BRANDY: *Die späte Christologie des Johannes Brenz*. Tü 1991, 24-28, but no work of its theologians matches this description. Melancthon's »*Consilium ad Gallos*« of 1534 comes to mind, particularly since this work follows the »Augsburg Confession« in this list. However, the treatment of the mass in the »*Consilium ad Gallos*« does not address questions at issue here; see CR 2, 751-775 (1205) ≙ MBW 2, 145 f (1467).

25 Tilemann HESSHUS: *Bekandtnuß vom heyiligen Nachtmal des Herrn Jesu Christi ...* Nürnberg 1560; VD16 9, 68 (H 3001); IDEM: *Das Jesu Christi warer Leib vnd Blut/ im heiligen Abendmal gegenwertig sey/ wider den Rottengeist zu Bremen/* Doc. Albert Hardenberg ... Magdeburg 1560; VD16 9, 71 (H 3026); IDEM: *De praesentia corporis christi in coena domini*. Jena 1560; VD16 9, 80 (H 3102); IDEM: *Responsio ... ad praeiudicium Philippi Melanthonis, de controversia coenae domini*. s. l. 1560; VD16 9, 83 (H 3130).

26 Johann BRENZ: *De maiestate domini nostri Iesv Christi ad dextram dei patris, et de vera praesentia corporis & sanguinis eius in coena*. In hoc scripto respondetur Petro Martyri, & Henrico Bullingero, Cingliani dogmatis de Coena Dominica propugnatoribus. Frankfurt/M. 1562; VD16 3, 302 (B7783); IDEM: *De personali unione duarum naturarum in christo et ascensu Christi in coelum ... item Ioannis Brentii Sententia de libello Henrici Bullingeri ...* Frankfurt/M. 1563; VD16 3, 309 (B 7841); IDEM: *Sententia, de libello D: Henrici Bullingeri ...* Tü 1561; VD 16 3, 314 (B 7868).

27 Christoph IRENAEUS: *Symbolvm apostolicvm: das ist, die Artickel unsers Christlichen Glaubens/ ausgelegt ...* Eisleben 1562; VD16 10, 7 (I 301).

28 *Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...*, 48^{r-v}.

The Mansfeld theologians reprinted the Catechism's »Question 44: Why are the words, »descended into hell« added?« The Heidelbergers' answer, »So that in my greatest sorrows and most severe temptations I may be sustained with the consolation that my Lord Jesus Christ freed me from the distress and sorrows of hell through his unspeakable distress, sufferings, and terrors of soul, into which he was plunged already before but especially while hanging on the cross.«²⁹ This demonstrated to the Mansfelder that the »Sacramentarians« were determined not to concede the true presence of the entire person of Christ, in both natures, in more than one place – the grave and hell – after his death. The »Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...« drew the parallel with the »Sacramentarian« belief that after Christ's death and ascension to the right hand of God in heaven he could not reveal himself visibly on earth or be present bodily or truly. The Mansfeld theologians challenged the opponents' hermeneutical procedure. »They nervously mustered interpretations of every kind, transforming very clear and simple statements of scripture into allegories, metaphors, and other similar figures of speech«³⁰ in order to defend their opinions by referring them to the spiritual Christ. This desire to deny the true, bodily presence of Christ, which is presented and consumed in the Supper, led the Heidelberg theologians to deny that Christ actually descended into hell in his own person, the Mansfelder charged.

The Mansfeld document enumerated three fundamental errors in the Palatine doctrine of Christ's Descensus. First, this doctrine denied the confession of the catholic church of Christ that Christ not only suffered horrible sorrows and tortures of soul in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, but that he also died and truly descended into hell, not just in effect, but in his person, and that he conquered hell, overpowered Satan and death, rose on the third day after he had left hell and death behind, and bestowed his victory on the whole church. Secondly, according to the Mansfeld Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism's position called into doubt whether hell is truly a specific place in which the impious and damned suffer

29 DIE BEKENNTNISSCHRIFTEN DER REFORMIERTEN KIRCHE/ hrsg. von Ernst Friedrich Karl Müller. Leipzig 1903, 694. The Mansfeld confession cited the Latin text: »Vt in summis doloribus & grauissimis tentationibus, me consolatione hac sustentem, quod Dominus meus Iesus Christus, inerrabilibus animi sui angustiis, cruciatibus & terroribus, in quos cum antea, tum maxime in cruce pendens fuerat demersus, me ab angustiis & cruciatibus inferni liberauerit.«

30 Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ..., 49: »Hic omnis generis interpretationes anxie corradunt, in allegorias, metaphoras, atque alias eiusdem generis figuras, apertissima & simplicissima scripturae dicta conuertunt ...«

eternal punishment with the devils and evil spirits, thus rendering null and void the warnings concerning future punishment of the impious which Christ, the prophets, and the apostles had issued. Third, the Palatine teaching inclined toward the »absurd opinion« that the words »descended into hell« could refer simply to Christ's burial.³¹ Behind all these objections clearly stood the denial of the ability of the divine and human nature to share the characteristic of presence in varying modes. Although the Mansfeld document does not use the term »communication of attributes«, its authors believed that the Heidelberg Catechism's definition of the descent into hell reflected and was shaped by the presupposition that the human nature of Christ, and thus his body and blood, could not be sacramentally present in the Lord's Supper. For its drafters could not believe that Christ's divine nature shared the ability to be present with the human nature in any other way than the single mode of human presence.

The Mansfeld theologians attempted to analyze why the authors of the Catechism had »fallen prey to Satan's beguiling« on this point. Instead of simply addressing the sacramental issues on the surface, the Mansfeld theologians examined the philosophical framework underlying the dispute. They found that their opponents' teaching rested upon the presupposition of their physics: Christ was dead and could not set foot outside his grave because the »penetration of dimensions« (*penetratio dimensionum*) by the human nature is impossible.³² The rules of physics governing human bodies would not permit Christ's descent into hell. Against this argument the Mansfelder asserted that the Creed presents infallible axioms which are based upon the whole of Scripture and are to be held in their clear and simple sense. When the Creed states that Christ descended into hell after he died and was buried, then it must be believed that this refers in each case to the entire person of Christ and dare not be twisted to a matter of what Christ effected or merited. Secondly, the consensus of Scripture confirms that Christ truly and really descended into hell. The Confession cited three passages: Ps 16, 10, »For you do not give me up to hell, nor let your holy one see corruption;« Hos 13, 14, »I will be your death, o Death; hell, I will be your destruction;« and E 4, 9 f, »When it says, he ascended, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who

31 »Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...», 49^v-50^r.

32 Although this phrase is not to be found in Aristotle's discussion of dimension (*Physica* 4, 4 f) nor in Philipp MELANCHTHON: *Initia doctrinae physicae*. Vuitebergae 1549 (VD16 13, 412 [M 3469] ≙ CR 13, 365-367), the principle may easily be deduced from the Stagarite's argument.

ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.« The Mansfeld argument rested particularly upon the last passage. To deny that Christ descended into hell in his whole person would lead to the conclusion that he had ascended and filled the heavens only in his spirit, in effect but not really.³³

The Mansfeld theologians turned to a linguistic argument advanced by their opponents: the word »Scheol« in Hebrew refers to the grave. The Mansfeld rejoinder: faith and the analogy of faith determine teaching, not knowledge of the meaning of words in and of itself. Conceding that the word sometimes does denote the grave, the Mansfelder argued that »Scheol« also refers to hell, where the impious and damned receive eternal punishment. The Confession cited Nu 16, 30-34; Dt 32, 22; Job 10, 21; 38, 17; Ps 21, 9; 49, 14; 55, 15; 63, 9; 68, 2; Prv 15, 11; Is 5, 14; Mt 18, 9; 25, 30. 41; Mc 9, 43; L 16, 23; E 4, 9; Ph 2, 10; 1 P 3, 19; 2 P 3, 7; Ap 9, 2; 19, 20.³⁴ In each case the Mansfeld confession asserted that the Hebrew and Greek words under discussion referred to hell itself, whatever other usage they might have in other passages.

The »Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...« then returned to Luther and appealed to the reformer to make two points: that believers remain faithful to the Creed as the analogy of faith, and that they believe that Christ descended into hell with his entire person. The Mansfelder recommended following the reformer's principle in his »Torgau sermon«, the document to which the »Formula of Concord« would also appeal. The first citation from that sermon in the Mansfeld document insisted that believers should stand fast on the Creed and believe that Christ descended into hell while his body lay in the grave. Luther had rejected rational speculation over this doctrine. Many questions would not be answered, such as what really happened in the Garden of Gethsemane when Christ sweat drops of blood. Luther expressed his wish simply to remain with the Creed into which he had been baptized.³⁵ To that citation the »Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...« added words from Luther's letter of 1532 to Duke Albrecht of Prussia, which also affirmed that believers should remain faithful to the witness, faith and teaching of the entire Christian church over fifteen hundred years.³⁶

33 *Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...*, 50^r-51^r.

34 *Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...*, 51^r-52^r.

35 *Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...*, 52^{r-v}; citation in WA 37, 55, 10-16. This quotation comes from the second part of the booklet, not from the third part, which deals directly with Christ's descent into hell and resurrection. The »Torgau Book« cited the third part from the Jena edition's reproduction of the original printing; WA 37, 62, 30 - 67, 2; cf. BSLK, 1049-1052 = SOURCES AND CONTEXTS OF THE BOOK OF CONCORD/ ed. by Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen. MP 2001, 246-255.

Following this citation, the Mansfeld theologians turned to a longer quotation from the alternate printed version of the sermon on the descent into hell contained in the sermon ascribed to Torgau, that found in the Jena »Hauspostille«.³⁷ Although the citation is not as long as that from the »Torgau« rendition which Andreae originally had planned to include in the »Torgau Book«,³⁸ it contained its core. The citation began with the axiom that the five senses and human reason could not

36 *Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ...*, 51^v; citation in WA 30 III, 552, 12-15.

37 EA¹ 3, 279 f. 280 f. 284 f. Although the sermon to which the Formulators referred is easily identified, its composition and dating were at one time the source of some perplexity among scholars. It formed the third part of »Von Jesu Christo eine Predigt D. M. Luthers, zu Hofe zu Torgau gepredigt. Wittenberg 1533, published in two editions; VD16 12, 511 (L 7270-7271), and is a polished version of the sermon found in the notes of Georg Röer (1492-1557) from March 31, 1532; WA 36, 159-164. The text of the sermon as published in 1533 is edited in WA 37, 62-72; its text in the Jena »Hauspostille« is found in EA¹ 3, 279-296. The title of the collection of three sermons published together as a catechetical commentary on the second article of the Creed, on »Jesus Christ,« declared that the contents had been preached in Torgau, and the heading of the third sermon in the series announced that it had been preached on Easter. The WA editors of this short volume performed some sleight of hand in trying to find a place for the sermon in Luther's calendar for 1533, the year in which the sermon was published, at Torgau around Easter; Luther's schedule at that time makes it difficult to construct a credible chronology. All three sermons in the collection were falsely attributed to April 16 and 17, 1533; see WA 37, XXI. Erich Vogelsang (1904-1944) solved that problem by demonstrating that while the first two sermons in the publication may have been preached in Torgau (probably in February or July 1532), the one entitled »the third sermon on Easter Day«, was in fact preached in Wittenberg, on Easter 1532; see Erich VOGELSANG: *Luthers Torgauer Predigt von Jesu Christo vom Jahre 1532*. LuJ 13 (1931), 114-130; cf. Truemper: AaO, 95-III.

The entire work was republished by the Leipzig professor Bernhard Ziegler in 1551: [Martin LUTHER]: *Zwo Predigten des Ehrwürdigen herren Doctoris Martini Lutheri. Die Erste von Jhesu Christo/ darin der heubtartickel vnsers heiligen Christlichen glaubens ... erkleret wird*. L 1551; VD16 12, 511 (L 7272). The marginal notations and Ziegler's involvement in the dispute with Andreas Osiander (1498-1552) at the time suggest that the occasion for this publication was the Osiandrian controversy and not that over the descent into hell in Hamburg, even though the latter controversy had not been fully resolved at the time and was still of interest to Ziegler's electoral Saxon colleagues, including Melanchthon.

The third sermon, on the descent into hell and the resurrection, was incorporated with very little editorial revision into the Jena »Hauspostille«. The parallels between Georg Röer's notes on the sermon as preached in 1532 and the two printed versions, that of the booklet published in 1533 (reproduced in the Ziegler edition) and that of the »Hauspostille«, demonstrate beyond any doubt that the former served as the basis for both of the latter (although preparation for printing required editorial emendations); see below page 122 f.

38 BSLK, 1049-1052 = Sources and contexts of The Book of Concord, 246-255.

fathom how Christ descended to hell while he lay in the grave. According to the »Hauspostille« version of the sermon, Luther conceded that there are two possible interpretations of this article of faith: the first claims that it refers to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, to his heart's love and fire, expressed in prayer and supplication, with anguished cry and tears. The reformer preferred the simple meaning, grasped through child-like words and pictures; that is the best and most certain interpretation, understood in the light of Ps 16, 10 and E 4, 9 f. How the descent took place, Luther insisted, could not be grasped or explained. »I believe in Jesus Christ« means that »I believe in the whole man, that he is truly God and truly human creature, with body and soul, undivided, descended into hell and broke hell. The entire person, that is, Jesus Christ, truly God's Son and truly human creature born of Mary, did it. This very God and human creature descended into hell in one person, but he did not remain there. His soul was not left in hell, as Psalm 16 says of him. But where the soul is, there the body belongs as well, according to the language of Scripture, which calls the entire human creature »soul.«³⁹ With this citation the Mansfeld ministerium rested its case against the Heidelberg Catechism. Luther's affirmation that Christ had descended to hell in his entire person, God and human creature, sufficed to repudiate the Heidelberg Catechism on this point. In so doing it repudiated an attempt to repudiate the Lutheran understanding of the ability of the whole Christ to be present, body and soul, human and divine nature, in more than one place at one time.

The Mansfeld theologians continued with an extensive assessment of the biblical term »hell« [infernium], offering many examples of each of the four definitions exhibited in the usage of Scripture:

1. »Hell« designates sin itself, which accuses Christians in their consciences and causes them to fear.

2. »Hell« can also refer to the sorrows of the dying.

3. »Hell« may indicate the fear and sorrow of souls of the impious after separation from the body.

4. Finally, »hell« signifies »the real, eternal, and terrible hell, into which the impious are cast, soul and body, after the last judgment.«⁴⁰

»Together with the catholic church of Christ« the Mansfeld theologians confessed their belief that Christ not only suffered hell in the first and second senses but that he also went to hell in the fourth sense as Jesus Christ, Son of God

39 Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ..., 54^r; see below page 122.

40 Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi ..., 54^v-58^b.

and Son of Man, and destroyed its defenses, broke down its doors and gates, shattered its powers, so that he could bestow upon and communicate to his whole church this victory which he had won.⁴¹

The Mansfeld treatment of Christ's descent into hell demonstrates that this teaching had gained Christological significance within the theological discussion of the 1560s and 1570s. Thus, it casts doubt on Vogelsang's judgment that the ninth article of the »Formula of Concord« was »unquestionably directed entirely against Aepinus«.⁴² Although it is likely that Andreae, Chemnitz, and their colleagues were unable to forget the disputes in Hamburg, Pomerania, and Augsburg as they inserted article IX into the »Torgau Book«, the placement of its discussion of the descent into hell following its Christological article indicates that the Torgau committee was moved to follow the pattern of the Mansfeld Confession of 1565 in bolstering in one more small way its understanding of the communication of attributes between the two natures within Christ's person even as that document had countered the ideas advanced regarding Christ's descent into hell in the Heidelberg Catechism.

IV Luther's »Torgau Sermon«

The Mansfeld theologians had found it natural to appeal to Luther's authority for support in their argument, and the Concordianists did the same, turning to the same source, the »Torgau sermon«, albeit in a different printed version, to secure their position with Luther's words. The Mansfelder use of Luther's Easter sermon of 1532 in the form it found in the Jena »Hauspostille« therefore compels us to recast the judgment that the »Formula of Concord« »decided against Luther and for Melancthon« because it taught that Christ's descent into hell expressed and completed Christ's victory over the devil and hell.⁴³ It is indeed true that Luther

41 *Confessio de sententia ministrorum verbi* ..., 58^v.

42 Vogelsang: *Weltbild und Kreuztheologie* ..., 126.

43 Paul ALTHAUS: *Niedergefahren zur Hölle*. *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 19 (1942), 383, as cited in Wenz: *AaO* 2, 714, Anm. 165. The argument that the 1532 sermon does not truly represent Luther's view of the Descent because it was edited by a »Melancthonian« hand is a twentieth century attempt to impose uniformity on Luther's expression of his own thought, an impossible and inappropriate effort. It presupposes that Luther permitted the printing of ideas to which he objected under his name, in Wittenberg, and never got around to clarifying his position in the remaining thirteen years of his life. A more sober assessment of the reliability of works edited by Luther's students than that in some earlier twentieth century evaluations of such works is found in Bernhard KLAUS: *Die Lutherüberlieferung Veit Dietrichs und ihre Problematik ZBKG* 53 (1988), 33-47.

often accented Christ's emotional sufferings as the suffering of hell,⁴⁴ an interpretation of the Descensus which the Mansfeld theologians likewise acknowledged as one of the biblical meanings of the concept. However, their purpose in citing the text was to affirm that the whole person of Christ, both natures, did descend into hell while Christ was also buried, thus demonstrating that the whole Christ, God and human creature, could be present in different modes after his ascension as well. However offensive to theories of physics and principles of philosophy that conclusion might be, it conformed to the confession of the ancient church and to biblical teaching regarding the person of Christ. This point, cited from Andreas Poach's (1515-1585) edition of the sermon, based upon Georg Rörer's (1492-1557) notes, in the »Hauspostille«, does indeed expand slightly what is explicitly recorded in Rörer's notes recorded during the preaching of the 1532 Easter sermon, but the Mansfeld ministerium, many of whom had studied with Luther, believed that it faithfully reproduced their mentor's teaching on the person of Christ.⁴⁵

The preparation of the sermon for publication, in 1533, took place two years after Ulrich Zwingli's (1484-1531) death and possibly reflects Luther's concern over the Christological issue that had grown out of their dispute five years earlier. The sermon certainly repeats his position in that dispute, expressed, for example, in his »Vom Abendmahl Christi. Bekenntnis« of 1528.⁴⁶ It is not impossible that Rörer himself had edited or helped edit the 1533 printing of the sermon. Rörer bequeathed much of his manuscript material to Poach – at the time he prepared the »Hauspostille« pastor in Erfurt –, who apparently used Rörer's notes but probably also consulted the 1533 published version of the sermon. The two published versions of Rörer's notes expand and emphasize but do not substantially alter Luther's fundamental concern in the original notes, that the simple faith in the descent of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, into hell be believed without speculating about how it happened. Luther's recorded comment on Ps 16, 10, »da gehort der leib auch zw«, confirmed the point Rörer noted with his note: »Credo an Christum, an den gantzen man, leib, seel, qui descendit ad inferos, dic: Iesus Christus,

44 See Truemper's extensive discussion of Luther's view; aaO, 91-151.

45 Cf. Vogelsang: *Luthers Torgauer Predigt ...*, 122: »Man kann nun in diesen Sätzen einen starken Ausdruck der seit dem Abendmahlsstreit ausgebildeten Christologie Luthers finden, der gegen Zwinglis ›Allöosis‹ die Einheit der beiden Naturen Christi betont (communicatio idiomatum).« Cf. also the general comment of Georg Buchwald (1859-1947) in his introduction to the postils, »Poach hat das Bestreben, auf Grund der Nachschriften Rörsers möglichst genau Luthers Predigt wiederzugeben«, WA 52, XI.

46 WA 26, 315, 1 - 349, 34 ≙ LW 37, 204-236.

filius dei, qui? qui est verus dei filius et verus homo ex virgine ec. der hats gethan.« This is the basis of the specific interpretation in both published versions that »[der] gantze(n) Mann ... wahrhafter Gott und wahrhafter Mensch mit Leib und Seele, ungetheilet, zur Hölle hinunter gefahren ist«. This Christological consideration, like Luther's concern in the entire sermon to assure his listeners that Christ had overcome all their enemies, even the devil, death, and hell, corresponds to the teaching of the reformer in the 1520s and 1530s.

Although the Mansfeld confutation did not claim a special authority for Luther's words, as did some of contemporary Lutheran theologians, including the document's signer Cyriacus Spangenberg,⁴⁷ it is clear that Luther's opinion was considered to be an affirmation and explanation of the true biblical teaching on the descent into hell and the person of Christ. The Concordianists, too, did not claim a special authority for what Luther had written, but with their appeal to the »Torgau sermon« they commended his words as the formulation of the authoritative approach to the doctrine of the descent into hell. Luther functioned for both as a teacher of the faith, whose words were to be heeded as an expression of God's teaching for his people.

The Mansfeld critique of the Heidelberg Catechism's doctrine regarding Christ's descent into hell forms a vital part of the historical setting for the ninth article of the »Formula of Concord«. That locus was not added incidentally to the »Formula of Concord« in order to settle controversies which had essentially burned themselves out a decade and more before the composition of the »Torgau Book«. The Descensus ad infernum took its place among the issues addressed there primarily because of its Christological significance, specifically because it provided one more way to affirm the unity of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ. The interpretation of Luther's comments on the descent into hell according to his Christological position enunciated in his conflict with Zwingli made his words in the »Torgau sermon« of 1533, as edited for the »Hauspostille«, an effective affirmation of the position that the Mansfeld ministerium defended against the Heidelberg Catechism and also of the Christological teaching of the »Formula of Concord«. As had been the case in the Mansfeld Confutation, his heirs gathered at Torgau in 1576 turned to Martin Luther to provide the formulation for the proper confession of the biblical faith for their generation of his followers.

47 Robert KOLB: Martin Luther as prophet, teacher, and hero: images of the Reformer, 1520-1620. Grand Rapids 1999, 46-62.

Appendix

Rörer's notes on the sermon
as preached, March 31, 1532;
WA 36, 160, 22-26.

Ideo haltt dich an deinen
glauben, quae dicit: Credo
an Christum, an den gantzen
man, leib, seel, qui descendit
ad inferos corpore et anima
et destruxit inferos, dic:
Iesus Christus, filius dei,
qui? qui est verus dei filius
et verus homo ex virgine ec.
der hats gethan.

Ipsius anima non
deserta est in infernis,
da gehort der leib auch zw.

Dic: quomodo
zugangen ist, nescio, ...

Published version of 1533;
WA 37, 65, 1-15.

Wir aber sollen solch
unnötige frage lassen faren
und schlecht einfeltiglich
unser hertz und gedancken
an die wort des Glaubens
hefften und binden, Welcher
sagt: Ich glaube an den
HERREN Christum, Gottes
Son, gestorben, begraben und
zur Helle gefaren, Das ist:
an die gantze person, Gott
und mensch, mit leib und
seele ungeteilet von der
Jungfrawn geboren, gelidden,
gestorben und begraben ist,
Also sol ichs hie auch nicht
teilen, sondern gleuben und
sagen, das der selbige Christus,
Gott und mensch jnn einer
person zur Helle gefaren, aber
nicht darinne blieben ist.

Wie der sechzehende
Psalm von jm sagt: »Du
wirst meine seele nicht jnn
der Helle lassen noch
zugeben, das dein Heiliger
die verwesung sehe«, »Seele«
aber heisset er nach der
Schriftt sprache nicht wie wir
ein abgesondert wesen vom
leibe, sondern den gantzen
menschen, wie er sich nennet
den Heiligen Gottes.

Wie aber solchs möge zu
gangen sein, das der mensch
da im grabe ligt und doch
zur Helle feret, das sollen
und müssen wir wol
unergründet und
unverstanden lassen ...

The Hauspostille version
of the sermon,
EA¹ 3, 284 f.22-26.

Darum halt dich an deinen
Kinder glauben, der also lautet:
»Ich glaube an Jesum Christum,
Gottes einigen Sohn, unsern
Herrn, empfangen von dem
heiligen Geist, geboren aus
der Jungfrauen Maria«, das ist:
Ich glaube an den gantzen
Mann, daß er wahrhafter
Gott und wahrhafter Mensch
mit Leib und Seele,
ungetheilet, zur Hölle hinunter
gefahren ist, und die Hölle
zerbrochen hat. Die gantze
Person, das ist Jesus Christus,
wahrhafter Gottes Sohn
und wahrhafter Mensch
aus Marien geboren,
der hat's gethan. Derselbige
Gott und Mensch, in einer
Person, ist zur Hölle gefahren,
aber nicht darinne blieben.

Seine Seele ist in der Hölle
nicht gelassen, wie der 16.
Psalm von ihm sagt. Wo aber
die Seele ist, da gehöret auch
der leib zu, nach der
Schriftsprache, welche den
gantzen Menschen
heißet Seele.

Wie es aber zugangen ist,
daß der Mensch da im Grabe
gelegen, und doch zur Hölle
gefahren ist, da sprich: Das
weiß ich nicht, werde es auch
nicht erdencken noch ausreden
können. ...