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BULLINGER AND THE *DESCENDIT* CLAUSE

JOE MOCK

I. INTRODUCTION

This article examines how Heinrich Bullinger's (1504-1575) understanding of Christ's *descensus* developed over the years from his time in Kappel am Albis (early 1520s) till the 1560s when he was the established *Antistes* or chief minister in Zurich. This provides a window into how he interpreted the whole biblical canon, critically read what was written by the church fathers and evaluated church tradition. Bullinger's wrestling with the *descendit* clause in the Apostles' Creed must be viewed in the context with what the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) wrote against the view of the *descensus* held by the reformers John Calvin (1509-1564), Martin Bucer (1491-1551), Johannes Brentz (1499-1570) and Theodore Beza (1519-1605) in his *De Controversiis*.¹ Bellarmine particularly took issue with Calvin's interpretation which he regarded as a most offensive heresy.²

There is no *descendit* clause in the Westminster Confession of Faith. However, in the *Larger Catechism*, in response to Question 50 'wherein consisted Christ's humiliation after his death?' the answer is:

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*.³

The Westminster Assembly took the view that *descendit* clause was a rephrasing of the Creed's statement that Christ was buried. This understanding of the clause has been taken by Jeffrey Hamm to be that of the Zurich reformers, Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) and Bullinger, who in turn, he argued, were influenced by Desiderius Erasmus's (1466-1536) errors. That is, firstly, mistaking Cyprian (died 258) for the author of Rufinus' work on the Creed and, secondly, for misinterpreting what Rufi-

¹ Robert Bellarmine, *Disputationes de Contraversiis Christianae Fidei adversus hujus temporis Haereticos*, 3 vols (Ingolstadt: ex officina typographica D. Sartorii, 1586-93).

² Russ Leo, 'Jean Calvin, Christ's Despair, and the Reformation *Descensus ad Inferos*', *Reformation*, 23 (no. 1, 2018), 56; 75-78.

³ *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Together with the Larger and Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs* (Atlanta, GA: Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990), p. 96.

nus actually meant.⁴ Thus, the Assembly decided against Calvin's understanding of the clause.⁵ According to Calvin, Christ essentially experienced the terrors of hell on the cross and, in doing so, interpreted the clause metaphorically.

Hamm has, in fact, inadvertently misunderstood Bullinger. He correctly cites Bullinger on the clause from Sermon I.7 of *The Decades*, but he has not, however, adequately grasped the significance of this section in its context. Hamm's citation reads as follows:

Bullinger explains: "Cyprian saith thus: 'It is to be known verily, that in the creed of the Latin church this is not added, 'He descended into hell;' nor yet is this clause received in the churches of the east but yet the sense of the clause seemeth to be all one with that, where it is said, 'He was buried.'" Then obviously following Erasmus' exposition, Bullinger adds the former's proof text from Jacob, "So then Cyprian's opinion seemeth to be, that to descend into hell is nothing else but to be laid in the grave, according to saying of Jacob: 'Ye will bring my grey hairs with sorrow to hell, or the grave.'" ⁶

In the very next sentence, however, Bullinger pointed out that to interpret the clause in terms of Christ's burial is 'without justifiable proof.'⁷ He then proceeded to offer his own insight. Furthermore, this particular section of *The Decades* needs to be read and understood alongside what he wrote about the clause in Sermon III.8. To grasp Bullinger's understanding of the *descensus* it is imperative to read widely into Bullinger.

This article examines how, from the early 1520s, Bullinger initially understood the *descendit* clause in terms of synecdoche and metonym mirroring the view of Zwingli who understood the clause as the benefits of Christ's death reaching down to the righteous dead. After wrestling with the matter for many years, by the time he wrote *The Decades* (1549-1551)

⁴ Jeffrey L. Hamm, 'Descendit: Delete or Declare? A Defense against the Neo-Deletionists', *Westminster Theological Journal*, 78 (2016), 101-03.

⁵ Calvin discusses the clause in the *Institutes* II. XVI, 8-12. For a recent study on Calvin and the *descendit* clause see Preston Hill, "'The useful and Not-to-be despised Mystery of a Most Important Matter': The Place of Christ's Descent into Hell in the Theology of John Calvin", in *Calvinus Frater in Domino: Papers of the Twelfth International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. by Arnold Huijgen and Karin Maag (Göttingen: V&R, 2020), pp. 243-56.

⁶ Hamm, 'Descendit', p. 102, fn. 41. The citation is from *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. by Thomas Harding (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), p. 137.

⁷ *Sermonum Decades quinque de potissimus Christianae religionis capitibus* (1552), ed. by Peter Opitz, HBTS, vol. 3 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2008), p. 88.

Bullinger had come to the view that Christ's soul did, in fact, descend to *inferos*. By this time Bullinger also understood *inferos* and heaven spatially. His fully developed view is reflected in his catechism of 1561. The progression of Bullinger's thought concerning the *descensus* will be discussed in this article through a close examination of his relevant treatises and commentaries.

II. BULLINGER AND ZWINGLI

The interactions and communications between Bullinger and Zwingli are important for understanding Zurich theology.⁸ Of the correspondence between Bullinger and Zwingli only three letters are extant: two from Bullinger to Zwingli and one from Zwingli to Bullinger. In 1526 Bullinger wrote a short letter to Zwingli seeking his understanding regarding the *descendit* clause:

I pray you sincerely, my dear Zwingli, that you be open and share a few words with me so that I can understand your position clearly concerning what it is that we confess when we confess that Christ descended into hell (*Christum ad inferna descendisse*). Today, there are a few learned who invent wonderful tales to stir up readers and in the meantime goad one another in their desire for a prize [for their inventiveness].⁹

Joachim Staedtke's opinion is that the dating of 8 November 1528 for Bullinger's letter to Zwingli by the editors of Zwingli's correspondence is probably incorrect.¹⁰ Rather, Staedtke takes the view that Bullinger wrote his letter to Zwingli in autumn 1526 straddling his *Quod animae a corporibus separatae non dormiant* ['That souls separated from bodies do not sleep'] published in the summer or autumn of 1526 and his *De articulo*

⁸ See for example Joe Mock, 'To What Extent did Bullinger Influence Zwingli with Regard to his Understanding of the Covenant and of the Eucharist?' *Colloquium* 49 (2017), 89-108.

⁹ Zwingli, *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*, vol. 9, *Corpus Reformatorum* 96 (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1925), p. 597. The editors of the collected works of Zwingli (Zwingli, *Werke*, IX (1925), 597) had thought that the letter was dated 8 November 1528. However, this date was revised to Autumn 1526 by Ulrich Gäbler and Endre Zsindely, *Heinrich Bullinger Brief Wechsel Band I* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), p. 123. English translation from Jim West, 'Zwingli and Bullinger Through the Lens of Letters', in *From Zwingli in Amyraut: Exploring the Growth of European Reformed Traditions* ed. by Jon Balserak and Jim West (Göttingen: V&R, 2017), p. 38.

¹⁰ Joachim Staedtke, *Die Theologie des jungen Bullinger* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag Zürich, 1962), p. 283.

fidei, descendit ad inferna [‘Concerning the article of faith “He descended into hell”] published at the end of the same year.¹¹ Nonetheless, Staedtke deems that there is no doubt about Zwingli’s influence on Bullinger with respect to the clause.¹² This conclusion has been taken up by Peter Stephens who stated, concerning Bullinger’s *De articulo*, that ‘On this occasion Bullinger consulted Zwingli and Bullinger’s reply reflects Zwingli’s exposition of the subject.’¹³

Stephens is referring to the letter that Zwingli wrote to Berchtold Haller on 6 November 1526 in which Zwingli addressed the *descensus*.¹⁴ In this letter Zwingli linked 1 Peter 3:19f with 1 Peter 4:4ff to understand *euangelisthē* as ‘proclaim’ as opposed to ‘preach the gospel.’ Zwingli’s point was that the efficacy of Christ’s death was proclaimed to the souls of the dead, both righteous and the unrighteous. However, judgment was proclaimed to the souls of the unrighteous. He affirmed that all flesh will be judged when Christ returns and that, in the interim, the spirits of the righteous live in God through Christ where they rejoice.¹⁵ Although Zwingli affirmed that the benefits of Christ’s death reached down to the dead, he did not express this in a spatial sense. The dead were not referred to at all as those in Hades (*inferi*) but always as the dead (*mortui*). Moreover, although Zwingli did refer to the dead being in Hades (*apud inferos*), he did not actually refer to Christ *descending* to the dead but, rather used the verb *coming* (*advenisse*). His understanding of the clause was subsequently reflected in Leo Jud’s catechism (1534).¹⁶

On 8 November 1528, Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531), the leading Protestant scholar in Basel, sent Zwingli a letter in which he also raised the question of the clause.¹⁷ In this letter, Oecolampadius referred to recent opposition in Schaffhausen to Erasmus’s understanding of the *descensus* and outlined his own understanding. However, there is no extant reply to either this letter nor Bullinger’s earlier letter to Zwingli.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 283.

¹² Ibid., p. 173, fn. 21.

¹³ W. Peter Stephens, *The Theology of Heinrich Bullinger* (Göttingen: V&R, 2019), p. 455.

¹⁴ Zwingli, *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*, vol. 8, *Corpus Reformatorum* 95 (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1914), pp. 759-63.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 762-63.

¹⁶ Leo Jud, *Catechismus brevissima Christianae religionis formula instituendae iuventuti Tigurinae catechizandisque rudibus aptata adeoque in commune omnium piorum utilitatem excusa* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1539), pp. 45-46.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 595-96.

Zwingli further wrote concerning the clause in his *Exposition of the Faith* (1531)¹⁸ which Bullinger published in 1536:

If he had not died and been buried, who would believe that he is very Man? And for the same reason the apostolic Fathers added to the Creed the words, "He descended into hell (*ad inferos*).” They used this expression periphrastically, to signify the reality of his death – for to be numbered amongst those who have descended into hell (*inferos*) means to have died – and also to make it clear that the power of his atonement penetrates even to the underworld (*ad inferos*). This is confirmed by St Peter when he says that the Gospel was preached to the dead, that is, to those in Hades (*eis inferis*), who from the beginning of the world had believed the divine warnings like Noah, even when the wicked had despised them.¹⁹

III. QUOD ANIMAE A CORPORIBUS SEPARATAE NON DORMIANT (1526)

In the first section of *Quod animae*, Bullinger discussed the nature of the soul, specifically the immortality of the soul. He did this not only from Scripture but also by citing certain classical scholars. The remainder of the letter is full of Scripture citations and allusions.²⁰

Bullinger explained that ‘sleep’ refers to the death of the body whereas ‘souls that have been separated from bodies are not sleeping but live with Christ in heaven.’²¹ Alluding to Genesis 1:7 and Acts 17:28 Bullinger emphasized that it is ‘by the breath of the living God by whose power we live, move and are.’²² From the Scriptures Bullinger showed that souls live

¹⁸ *Christianae fidei brevis et clara expositio ad regem Christianum*, Zwingli, *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6.5, *Corpus Reformatorum* 93.5 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991) Heinsius, 1914), pp. 50-167.

¹⁹ G. W. Bromiley, *Zwingli and Bullinger* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), p. 252.

²⁰ See Stephens, *Theology of Henrich Bullinger*, p. 454, fn. 19, for a helpful comparison between Zwingli and Bullinger on the topic of soul sleeping. A study of Zwingli’s writings against soul sleeping is to be found in Gergely Juhász, *Translating Resurrection: The Debate between William Tyndale and George Joye in its Historical and Theological Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 193-226.

²¹ Bullinger, *Quod animae non dormiant* in Hans-Georg vom Berg, Bernhard Schneider and Endre Zsindely (eds.), *HBTS Band 2 Unveröffentlichte Werke der Kappeler Zeit* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1991), p. 128.

²² *Ibid.*

on after death because believers have eternal life.²³ Thus, in the *peroratio*, Bullinger concluded by stating that, on death, souls do not sleep but live with Christ in heaven.²⁴

Significantly, Bullinger referred to both 'Abraham's bosom' and 'paradise.' Bullinger was emphatic that 'Abraham's bosom' was not a place for sleeping.' He stated that, at death, bodies 'sleep' and are subsequently resurrected whereas souls neither die nor 'sleep' but are consciously in the presence of Christ while waiting for glorification to take place when body and soul are reunited.²⁵

What is noteworthy in this early work of Bullinger is the linking of the reference of the discussion of Abraham's bosom with the covenant. Anticipating what he would later expound in his treatise on the covenant (1534)²⁶ and *The Old Faith* (1539),²⁷ Bullinger pointed out that those in Abraham's bosom are reached, through faith, by the power of the covenant as they are in the covenant with the faithful Abraham.²⁸ The use of *testamentum* here for 'covenant' indicates Bullinger's intention to affirm that both believers in the new covenant as well as believers in the old covenant are redeemed through Christ's death as both sets of believers are the seed of Abraham.

IV. DE ARTICULO FIDEI, DESCENDIT AD INFERNA (1526)

This work was written in 1526 in reply to a communication from Rudolf Weingartner.²⁹ At the very beginning, Bullinger declared:

We confess, therefore, that Christ descended to the place of the dead, that is, the virtue of his death and the price of redemption was actually made known to them. He also liberated from prison those to whom in the place of the dead from the time of Adam was revealed the coming of the future Messiah. Therefore, you should realize that 'through Christ' refers neither to the body nor to the soul of Christ, but the whole matter of redemption understood by means of synecdoche. Thus also, you should take by the noun 'those in the

²³ Ibid., p. 129.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 133.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 132.

²⁶ Heinrich Bullinger, *De testamento seu foedere Dei unico & aeterno Heinrychi Bullingeri brevis expositio* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1534).

²⁷ Heinrich Bullinger, *Der alt gloub* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1539).

²⁸ Bullinger, *Quod animae*, p. 131.

²⁹ Weingartner was a minister in Zug who had exchanged letters with Bullinger since 1524. Bullinger was responding to a letter in which Weingartner had asked for clarification about the *descendit* clause as well as Acts 15:29.

place of the dead (*inferorum*),’ who were kept in the place of the dead, to be a metonym.³⁰

This understanding of the *descendit* clause indicated that Bullinger clearly distanced himself from the determination of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) which took the view that, after his death, the soul of Christ (but not his body) truly descended to the place of the dead. He also distanced himself from the view of the Anabaptists who understood the descent in a literal sense. Bullinger was aware of Peter Lombard’s discussion about the *descensus* that was the basis for the understanding of the Fourth Lateral Council.³¹ Before he embraced a reformed faith Bullinger had carefully studied Lombard’s *Sentences* as a young man in 1520.³² In particular, Bullinger would have known Lombard’s well-known statement *Quod Christus ubique totus est, sed non totum; ut totus est homo vel Deus sed non totum* (‘That the whole Christ is everywhere, yet not wholly, just as he is whole man or God, yet not wholly’).³³ Following John Damascene³⁴ Lombard used the *totus/totum* distinction to explain that, during the three days (*triduum*), Christ could be in the grave and also in the place of the dead. Lombard said that Christ was in the grave and in the place of the dead according to his humanity and everywhere according to his divinity.

In the *confirmatio*, which follows immediately after he outlined the *scopus*, Bullinger acknowledged that it is indeed a difficult topic and that he planned to substantiate his own understanding from the Scriptures. As might be expected, Bullinger commenced with a discussion of the relevant pericope in 1 Peter 3:18-4:6. Bullinger pointed out that the difference between them is that Weingartner understood the passages of Scripture in terms of a literal descent to the place of the dead.³⁵ In the *scopus* Bullinger had already stated that neither the soul nor the body of Christ descended to the place of the dead and that the passages that discuss the *descensus* should be read in terms of synecdoche and metonym.

³⁰ The marginal note indicates that this is the *scopus rei et sensus articuli* – Bullinger, *De articulo fidei «Descendit ad inferna»* in Hans-Georg vom Berg, Bernhard Schneider and Endre Zsindely (eds.), *HBTS Band 2 Unveröffentlichte Werke der Kappeler Zeit* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1991), p. 174.

³¹ Peter Lombard, *Sententiarum Libri Quattor*, III, 22.1-3.

³² Emil Egli, *Heinrich Bullingers Diarium der Jahre 1504-1574* (Basel: Basler Buch und Antiquariatshandlung, 1904), pp. 5-6.

³³ This is the sub-heading to chapter 3, Distinction 22 of Book 3 of the *Sentences*.

³⁴ John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, III, 7.

³⁵ Bullinger, *De articulo fidei*, p. 175.

Apart from citing its use in the Creed, Bullinger did not once use the verb 'to descend' (*descendisse*) to refer to Christ's 'descent' to the place of the dead. Rather, he chose to use the verb 'to flow down' (*demanasse*) to point out that the power and the merits of Christ's death 'flowed down' to the saints. This is linked to Bullinger's understanding of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6 where 1 Peter 3:18 and 1 Peter 4:6 function as an *inclusio* which Bullinger understood as explaining how the elect are saved in both the old covenant and in the new covenant. The frequent use of 'believers' (*credentes*) in this work points to Bullinger highlighting the salvation of the elect both before Christ and after Christ. Thereby, Bullinger dismissed any hint of universalism in understanding the import of the *descensus*.

The markers of the *inclusio* in 1 Peter are: 'For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God' and 'For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to the dead, so that they may be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.' Just as the unrighteous in Noah's time refused to listen to God's voice and mocked Noah and his family, Bullinger explained that Peter points out that, in a similar way, the recipients of his epistle are living in the midst of the unrighteous with their ungodly lifestyle who heap abuse on them. The *descendit* clause means that the certainty and the hope of salvation was announced to the righteous who died before the coming of Christ while damnation was proclaimed to the unrighteous. At the *eschaton* both the righteous and the unrighteous shall be judged.

Bullinger also turned his attention to where Christ was during the *triduum*. In response to the question 'surely he could not have been in the place of the dead?' Bullinger replied emphatically, '*Non, Hercule*.'³⁶ He referred to the trichotomy of Christ as spirit, soul and body. The soul and the body are circumscribed by space whereas the spirit is his divine nature which, appealing to 1 Corinthians 15:28, can be both in the upper heavens as well as always present with those who have died.³⁷ During the *triduum* the body of Christ was in the grave and his soul was in the hands and glory of God.

As in *Quae animae*, Bullinger had a brief explanation about Abraham's bosom.³⁸ This is a place for the repose of the souls of the faithful after death where they enjoy eternal life in the presence of God. Bullinger appears to consider that *hades/sheol* could be understood as having

³⁶ This expression is taken from Cicero's *De republica*, *Oratio pro Quinctio* and *Epistulae ad Atticum*. A contemporary expression might be 'no way, Jose!'

³⁷ Bullinger, *De articulo fidei*, p. 178.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

two ‘compartments,’ one for the righteous who were not in prison, but in Abraham’s bosom, and one for the unrighteous who suffered punishment in ‘prison’. However, for Bullinger, Abraham’s bosom was not spatially ‘below the earth’ but, rather, ‘up above’ (*ad superos*) where God is. Because Bullinger made no reference to Luke 23:43 and the promise that the thief would be in paradise with Jesus that day, no comment was made on the relationship between Abraham’s bosom and paradise. Furthermore, Bullinger repeated from *Quae animae* the fact that those in Abraham’s bosom were reached, through faith, by the power of the covenant as they are in the covenant with the faithful Abraham.

V. BULLINGER’S COMMENTARIES

Bullinger’s commentaries on Acts (1533) and 1 and 2 Peter (1534) reveal developments in his understanding of the *descendit* clause. In his comments on 1 Peter 3:19-20 the reader is referred to his Acts commentary written about seven months before the 1 Peter commentary.³⁹ The comments on Acts 2:22-32 emphasized both the true humanity as well as the deity of Christ. In particular, Bullinger referred to the Hebrew word (*‘ish*) for ‘man’ to describe Christ’s humanity.⁴⁰ He underscored that Christ’s body would not experience decay.⁴¹ However, he indicated that he was aware of Augustine’s comment in *De praesentia Dei ad Dardanum* (417) [‘Concerning the Presence of God: To Dardanus’] on this very sermon of Peter stating that Augustine ‘reckoned that the soul of Christ actually descended to the place of the dead, but he suffered nothing.’⁴² Furthermore, Bullinger indicated that he knew of many who had genuinely laboured to understand this difficult clause of the Creed but that very few had made use of what Augustine had written to Dardanus.

Bullinger recognized that *inferos* could be taken as referring to the grave in passages such as Genesis 44 which, in fact, represented his understanding of the *descendit* clause in 1533. However, he underscored that *sheol* is not the same as hell (*tartarus*). It is not ‘the place of punishment but the grave and the pit.’ In other words, he wanted it to be made

³⁹ *Kommentare zu den neutestamentlichen Briefe Hebräerbrief – Katolische Briefe*, ed. by Luca Baschera, HBTS, vol. 9 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2019), p. 245.

⁴⁰ Heinrich Bullinger, *In Acta Apostolorum Heinrychi Bullingeri Commentariorum libri VI* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1533), p. 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*

absolutely unequivocal that for Christ to descend⁴³ to *inferos* indicated that Christ truly died like all men and experienced all that human death entails. Yet his death was not because of any sin in him. Moreover, Christ did not suffer at all. This may be contrasted with the view of Calvin who understood Christ to have *suffered* the pains of *inferos* while on the cross *before* his actual burial. Furthermore, Bullinger's view was diametrically opposed to any concept of the harrowing of the place of the dead. He was adamant about affirming Christ's finished work of salvation for the elect, from Adam onwards, through his death on the cross. Bullinger declared that a proper understanding of the 'descent' of Christ was essentially the power of his redemption reaching down to the faithful patriarchs. He underlined that Christ descended 'in power, especially, not in person.'⁴⁴ Bullinger based this on his understanding of the *en ho* of 1 Peter 3:19 where he pointed out 'what truly is the spirit of Christ unless it is the power, life and evidence of the merit of Christ?'⁴⁵ Because Bullinger did not consider a literal descent to the place of the dead he twice mentioned that speaking of the descent *ad inferos* was speaking by means of rhetorical devices. Hence, he regarded proclaiming or preaching to the dead is the gospel 'that is the power of the redemption of Christ that profits the dead holy patriarchs.'⁴⁶

Bullinger was clearly not comfortable with a spatial descent according to the accepted cosmological world view of the time. This might account for his preference for 'to the dead in Hades' (*ad inferos*) rather than 'to Hades' (*ad inferna*) with a focus on Christ reaching the dead saints rather than the place of the departed. He said that 'we would understand *inferos* to refer to those who are dead just as we understand *superos* to refer to those who are alive.'⁴⁷ Lest he be misunderstood, Bullinger wrote:

Thus, it is not necessary for you to inquire, "Could it be that the soul of Christ (which however was in the hands of the Father) would have descended all the way to *inferos*, to *limbum* or to *tartarum* to the point of resurrection? What did he do there? And what did he suffer there?" These questions are truly unnecessary.⁴⁸

⁴³ Unlike his *De articulo fidei* Bullinger was comfortable to use *descendisse* of Christ in his commentary on Acts.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Bullinger referred to the fact that Cyprian was of the opinion that the clause was not in the original Roman Creed but that it was added from that of the Eastern Church in order to oppose the Valentinians by affirming the true death of the body of Christ. Hamm may well be correct to suggest that Bullinger had been influenced here by Erasmus's work on the Creed (1533).⁴⁹

In his commentary on 1 Peter 3:18-4:6 Bullinger took 'but was vivified in the spirit in which' (*sed vivificatus spiritu in quo*) in 3:18-19a to refer to the power of Christ's passion. He pointed out that Peter understood 'spirit' here to refer to 'the divine and life-giving power of Christ, beautifully stating what the spirit is in the death of Christ, that is, that it consists of life of the mortals.'⁵⁰ As in his earlier works, Bullinger emphasized that it was the vivified power of Christ that reached to the saints who are dead. He stated that 'It was life and also redemption that was gained through the death of Christ that was proclaimed to those who have died or are in the place of the dead, that is, what profited the dead who formerly were the holy patriarchs.'⁵¹ The proclamation of the gospel to the saints in the place of the dead 'is none other than to announce redemption.' Based on his understanding of 1 Peter 4:6 Bullinger revealed that his exposition of this exegetical crux was by ethiology or personification (*per ethiologiam sive prosopopoeiam* (from the Greek *prosōpopoiia*)). This second term refers to a rhetorical device that was often used by Cicero and Quintilian to ascribe human characteristics to a non-person. For Bullinger, to state that Peter understood the power and merit of Christ's death as proclaimed to the saints in the place of the dead can be spoken of as Christ descending to the place of the dead. Thus, unlike in *De articulo*, the verb *descendere* was used several times by Bullinger of Christ with this qualification.

It seemed that by the time Bullinger penned his commentary on 1 Peter he was more open to the possibility that Christ's soul descended to the place of the dead as he was less strident in opposing this understanding. He graciously and humbly wrote:

However, if anyone contends at all that it was actually the soul of Christ that descended to the holy patriarchs, we do not exceedingly cry out in protest (as we have testified in our commentary on Acts 2). Meanwhile, I propose that

⁴⁹ This work was written at the request of Thomas Boleyn, 1st Earl of Wiltshire, and had the title *A plain and godly Exposition or Declaration of the Commune Creed*. See Hamm, *Descendit*, 101-103 for a discussion that Erasmus mistook Rufinus' work on the Creed to have been written by Cyprian and that he misunderstood Rufinus because the section was not properly read in context.

⁵⁰ Baschera (ed.), *HBTS*, vol. 9, p. 244.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

such an opinion that is seen to be elicited from the words of Peter be weighed up by impartial readers.⁵²

Nonetheless, in the very next sentence, Bullinger wondered how it could be possible for such impartial or fair readers not to know that the soul of Christ was in the care of the Father throughout the *triduum*.

Although the text of Peter's epistle mentions that the disobedient dead are in a 'prison,' Bullinger was aware that, over the centuries, it was generally understood that the righteous dead were kept in a sort of 'prison'. For Bullinger, this is neither the limbo of the patriarchs (*limbus patrum*) nor purgatory. There is a marginal note, 'The prison of the saints' (*Carcer sanctorum*), alongside the comment that the locality of the prison (for the holy patriarchs and the elect) is unknown but that it is a place of consolation which he identified as the bosom of Abraham. Furthermore, he cited Tertullian from his *Adversus Marcionem* ['Against Marcion'] to indicate that the bosom of Abraham is an elevated section of *inferos*.⁵³ Because there can be no certainty concerning the 'spatial' perspective of *inferos*, Bullinger reiterated that the souls of the saints who have died before Christ are indeed purified by Christ's death and added the comment, 'I do not know whether in uncertain things which God keeps to himself he thus permits to be the subject of conjecture.'⁵⁴

One significant feature on the comments on Christ's *descensus* in the 1 Peter commentary of Bullinger is his citing of Zechariah 9:11 in which God refers to 'the blood of my covenant with you.' This verse is part of a section of messianic prophecy in Zechariah which links salvation of the nations with the covenant. Bullinger constantly emphasized that both the elect of the old covenant and the elect of the new covenant are saved through Christ's sacrifice of blood on the cross.

As reflected in his earlier works, Bullinger understood 1 Peter 4:6 as stating that the *descensus* affirms the salvation of the souls of the saints who have departed who are now living in the spirit with Christ where they are rejoicing. But, together with the whole of humanity, they will be judged at the *eschaton* when all will be judged according to the flesh or corporeal existence. This is when the souls of the righteous will be joined to their resurrection bodies. In the meantime, the bodies of the righteous do not resurrect while waiting for the Day of Judgment and for their glo-

⁵² Ibid., p. 251.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 245.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 245.

rification. On that day, the souls of the righteous will be clothed with a resurrected body and 'surely not with the pure substance of the spirit.'⁵⁵

Bullinger made no reference to the *descensus* in his discussions in his commentaries on Matthew 12:4, Romans 10:6, 7 or Philippians 2:10. In his commentary on Ephesians (1537) he understood the reference to *descendit* in Ephesians 4:7 to refer to Christ's incarnation and passion.⁵⁶

In his commentary on Luke (1557) he has a marked different text at Luke 16:22-23 from that of the Vulgate. Bullinger used the translation: *Mortuus est autem & dives, ac sepultus est. Atque in tartaro sublati oculis suis, cum esset in tormentis videt Abraham eminens & Lazarum in sinu eius.*⁵⁷ The main difference is that Bullinger used 'hell' (*tartaro*) rather than Hades (*inferno*). Significantly, Bullinger refers here to the rich man to be in hell (*tartarus*) after death while Lazarus was in the bosom of Abraham. This reflects Bullinger's understanding that the place of the dead is divided into two compartments.

VI. THE DECADES (1549-1551)

Bullinger wrote *The Decades* from 1549 to 1551. His discussion about the *descendit* clause is found in both Sermon I.7 and Sermon III.8. The passage from Sermon I.7 (see above) that is referred to by Hamm is followed by Bullinger doubting that 'he was buried' and 'he descended into hell' to be a hendiadys. This is because the second phrase is both vague and obscure rather than clear and straightforward which would be expected in a hendiadys.⁵⁸ Thus, Bullinger referred to Augustine's letter to Eводius in which he 'tortured himself' over the clause. Furthermore, he cited Augustine's letter to Dardanus, 'Concerning the presence of God' (*De Dei Praesentia*), where he wrote that 'the Lord entered hell (*tartarum*) but experienced no suffering.'⁵⁹ Having reconsidered what others, in particular Augustine, had written on the topic Bullinger proceeded in the following section to set before his readers his own present understanding. Because this section is critical to correctly understand Bullinger's thought

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 252. Here Bullinger is echoing what Zwingli wrote to Haller – Zwingli, *Werke*, VIII (1914), 762.

⁵⁶ *Kommentare zu den neutestamentlichen Briefen: Gal – Eph – Phil – Kol*, ed. by Luca Baschera, *HBTS*, vol. 7 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2014), p. 170.

⁵⁷ Heinrich Bullinger, *In luculentum et sacrosanctum Evangelium domini nostri Iesu Christi secundum commentariorum lib. IX* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1557), p. 91v.

⁵⁸ A similar point was made by Calvin, *Institutes*, II.16.8.

⁵⁹ Opitz, *Decades*, p. 88.

and since the English translation in the Parker edition is somewhat free and, at times, a paraphrase, the following translation is given:

For a long while it seemed to us to understand this article more simply, as follows: if we realize that the virtue of the death of Christ actually flowed to those who have departed and benefited them, that is, on account of Christ, all the dead patriarchs and the faithful men before the coming of Christ were saved from eternal death. Just as Saint Peter mentioned that the Lord went in the spirit and proclaimed to the disobedient spirits and those held back in prison. Certainly, he made known to them the just sentence of damnation because of the death of Christ for, when they were living, they did not believe with Noah himself and those with him in the coming of the Messiah. Certainly, concerning both *inferos* or *inferna* we understand that it is not the place of punishment determined for the wicked but the faithful who have departed just as by *superos* we signify those presently alive thus far. Consequently, the soul (*anima*) of Christ descended to those who are dead (*inferos*), that is, those who have been carried to the bosom of Abraham where all the dead faithful are gathered. Thus, when the thief was crucified with him, he said, 'Today, you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43) he promised him the shared inheritance of life and of the blessed spirits. Concerning the bosom of Abraham our Lord discussed this fully in Luke 16:19-31. One may truly say that the Lord descended, however, this is in a manner of speaking. Otherwise from Luke, it is clear that the bosom of Abraham is far separated from *tartarus* and certainly situated in a lofty position. However, to inquire inquisitively concerning these things and examine them is to be curious people rather than pious people. We confess in this article that souls are immortal and that immediately after corporeal death pass over to life and that all the saints, in fact, from the beginning of the world are by faith sanctified through Christ and in Christ and through Christ receive the inheritance of eternal life.⁶⁰

The discussion commences with the comment that, for a long while, Bullinger held the view that the *descensus* concerned Christ's virtue and not his person. But he is now willing to assert that the *anima* of Christ descended to *inferos*. He no longer referred to Christ *descending* as being by way of a rhetorical device. Bullinger clarified the use of the terms as he understood them. He did not equate *inferos* with *hades* or *sheol*. *Inferos* referred to the saints or the elect who are dead whereas *inferna* referred to the place of the dead. That is why Bullinger preferred *ad inferos*. *Superos*, on the other hand, referred to those who are living. From a spatial perspective, he equated *inferos* with the bosom of Abraham which is the place where the departed saints experience joy *in the presence of God*. In Paul-

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 88-89.

ine terminology, for Bullinger, for the faithful who have died to be in the bosom of Abraham means to be 'in Christ.' This is clearly enunciated in Chapter XXVI of *The Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) which states '... we believe that the faithful, after bodily death, go directly to Christ.' This enabled him to deal with the conundrum he had grappled with concerning Luke 23:46. He further equated it with paradise. Moreover, spatially he regarded *inferos*/the bosom of Abraham/paradise as separated very far from *tartarus* and high and lofty. Although he did not specifically unpack it in detail, Bullinger was effectively indicating that *hades/sheol* has two compartments, one for the saints who experienced joy in God's presence and one (*tartarus*) for the wicked who suffered torture. As Bullinger understood it, the moment a person dies he or she goes either to *inferos*/bosom of Abraham or to *tartarus*. The souls of the elect are joined to their resurrected bodies, which are spiritual bodies, after the judgment of the living and the dead on the Day of Judgment. Since the souls of the righteous are waiting for the Day of Judgment it may be said that they are in a 'prison' whereas the 'prison' that Peter mentions is for the disobedient, that is, *tartarus*. According to the convention of the time Bullinger was satisfied to use *descendisse* to refer to Christ going to the saints who are dead.

VII. BULLINGER'S LATER WORKS

Bullinger's work *Resurrectio* (1545) is primarily about the resurrection of Christ and the bodily resurrection of believers. Although there is no comment on the *descensus*, the section on heaven gives a window into his thinking that is relevant to the *descendit* clause.⁶¹ This is particularly the case as this work was written just prior to *The Decades*. In this section, Bullinger acknowledged that Scripture speaks of heaven from several perspectives. Nonetheless, from a spatial perspective, heaven is a place. Heaven is God's habitation above us as well as the habitation for the blessed souls. Bullinger pointed out that 'although God is infinite and not circumscribed by place' it is valid to refer to heaven as a certain, particular place. He further asserted that the human nature of Christ is circumscribed and localized in heaven. He regarded heaven as having 'a certain locality' which 'is above us.'⁶² Just as Bullinger wrestled with understand-

⁶¹ Heinrich Bullinger, *Resurrectio de gloriosa domini nostri Iesu Christi nostrorumque corporum resurrectione & vita sanctorum perpetua libellus* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1545), pp. 16r-18r.

⁶² 'This heaven, I say, is the residence of the blessed. It has a certain locality in which was received Jesus when he ascended to heaven,' Ibid, p. 17v; 'Accordingly, the Lord Jesus is in heaven which is above us,' Heinrich Bullinger,

ing heaven as a localized place he was also wrestling prior to *The Decades* with understanding the nature of *inferos/inferna* as a localized place.

In *Compendium christianae religionis* (1556) ['Summary of the Christian Religion'] Bullinger discussed the articles of the Creed. The wording of the Creed has 'he descended to Hades' (*descendit ad inferna*) but the marginal note for this discussion has 'he descended to the dead' (*descendit ad inferos*) which indicates Bullinger's focus on the *descensus*. Bullinger pointed out that, firstly, the *descensus* demonstrated Christ experienced the full extent of human death. This was an affirmation of his true humanity. Secondly, Bullinger stated that 'his soul was separated from the body and accepted into the bosom of Abraham, that is, into the peace and comfort of all the holy patriarchs who have now departed from the living.'⁶³ He further reiterated the finished work on the cross for salvation. This meant that the purpose of the *descensus* was not to provide salvation. The death and passion of Christ was 'sufficiently efficacious for the redemption of all the holy patriarchs and, for that matter, all who at any time after Adam onwards obtained salvation through Christ.'⁶⁴

As might be expected, Bullinger's catechism (1561) has questions and answers on the articles of the Creed. The answer to the question concerning *descendit ad inferna* is as follows:

I believe concerning Christ, that at his corporeal death his soul went to the souls of the departed but that he himself, through his death, made salvation for all the holy patriarchs who have died since the foundation of the world. Furthermore, I believe that, through his death for all of us who believe in him, he shattered eternal death and freed from all the terror of *tartarus*.⁶⁵

VIII. CONCLUSION

Bullinger's interest in the *descendit* clause was related to his oft repeated declaration that the reformers had rediscovered the 'old faith' that is expressed in Scripture and expounded by the early church fathers as opposed to the 'new faith' introduced by Rome. That is why *The Decades* commences with a discussion of the four general synods or councils of

Compendium christianae religionis, decem libris comprehensum (Zürich: Froschauer, 1556), p. 76v.

⁶³ Heinrich Bullinger, *Compendium christianae religionis decem libris comprehensum* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1556), p. 76v.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Heinrich Bullinger, *Catechesis pro adultioribus scripta de his potissimum capitibus* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1561), p. 37r.

the church to underscore the orthodoxy of Zurich. This is followed by sermons on the word of God, true faith and justification by faith. Then Bullinger successively gives an explanation of each of the articles of the Apostles' Creed.

When Bullinger first wrote on the *descensus* it was in terms of the power or the merit of Christ's death reaching down to the righteous dead. It was a *descensus* by way of a rhetorical device for the person of Christ did not actually descend. By the time of his commentary on 1 Peter (1534) he still maintained this perspective but would not argue with those who taught that the body of Christ was in the tomb during the *triduum* while his soul descended to the dead. However, in *The Decades* (1549-1551) Bullinger began to take the view that the soul of Christ *descended ad inferos* during the *triduum*. This understanding was more clearly enunciated in his *Compendium* and his catechism.

Bruce Gordon has pointed out that Bullinger devoted more attention in his works in the 1550s and the 1560s to death and the afterlife.⁶⁶ He acknowledged the three-tiered world of the biblical times and of the church fathers and, therefore, viewed 'descending' as anthropomorphic language to describe Christ's going to the place of the dead. For Bullinger, therefore, the *descensus* was spatial but not a literal descent to the underworld. Referring to Bullinger's tract *Concerning Heaven and the Right Hand of God* (1561),⁶⁷ Gordon noted that, for Bullinger:

Christ has revealed that there is another life after this one and, further, that God has created a particular place ('*ein gewüß ort*') for the blessed. These two statements belong together: heaven is a real and circumscribed space where God, Christ and the blessed dwell.⁶⁸

The development of Bullinger's understanding and conviction concerning the *descensus* illustrates his attempt to correctly interpret the whole canon, judiciously assess what was written by the church fathers and evaluate church tradition. In particular, he constantly affirmed the full divinity and full humanity of Christ and the sufficiency of Christ's death for the salvation of the elect in both the old and new covenants.

⁶⁶ Bruce Gordon, "In my Father's house there are many mansions": Henrich Bullinger on Death and the Afterlife', in *A Linking of Heaven and Earth: Studies in Religious and Cultural History in Honor of Carlos M.N. Eire*, ed. by Emily Michelson, Scott K. Taylor and Mary Noll Venables (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 159-73.

⁶⁷ Heinrich Bullinger, *Von dem Himmel un(d) der Grächten Gottes* (Zürich: Fro-schauer, 1561).

⁶⁸ Gordon, 'Death and the Afterlife', p. 168.

Hamm's article has done a great service in stimulating further discussion and research amongst Reformed scholars on the *descensus* as he considers the contributions of the patristics, the Reformers, the discussions at the Westminster Assembly and provides an overview of key exegetical cruxes of 1 Peter 3:18-22. This present article is a modest contribution to this discussion. It has pointed out that Hamm made conclusions about Bullinger's understanding of the *descensus* by inadvertently not reading him in full context. For Bullinger, the *descendit* clause was an article in its own right in the Creed and not a rephrasing of Christ's burial. By studying Bullinger's *oeuvre* as a whole it can be seen that, although his view did develop with time and further reflection, he never doubted that this particular clause is integral to the Creed. For Bullinger, it is biblical, is catholic because it is attested by the church fathers and is important for fully understanding the person and work of Christ.