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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A match made in hell: Luther and Calvin on the *descensus ad inferos**

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Abstract

Contrary to longstanding opinion, it was Luther, not Calvin, who first interpreted Christ's descent into hell as an event of suffering and feeling forsaken by God. Though Lutheran tradition afterward emphasised a victorious interpretation taken from Luther's famous 'Torgau sermon', a more ambivalent legacy exists in his own writings. Sufficient attention is therefore warranted to view Luther as a forerunner to Calvin's use of the cry of dereliction to interpret the *descensus*. Understanding this nuance can smooth the edges of a myopic age-old debate between the two traditions, since the two Reformers have more in common than not on the doctrine.

Keywords: atonement; Calvin; descent into hell; Holy Saturday; Luther; Reformation theology

It has become commonplace in systematic and historical theology to summarise Luther's theology of the descent into hell as one of triumph that stands in contrast to Reformed theology's party line of interpreting the descent as a gloss on the crucifixion.[1] However, this longstanding impasse between Lutheran and Reformed theology rests on a reductive reading of the original Reformers. In fact, Luther and Calvin share more in common on their *descensus* interpretations than has often been reported. In what follows, I draw on important Lutheran scholarship that has largely escaped the attention of systematic theologians, an oversight that has significantly impoverished widespread understanding of Luther's teaching on Christ's descent into hell.

Luther interpreted the descent into hell primarily as Christ's despair at feeling forsaken by God. Though much of the Lutheran tradition after him emphasised the

[1]E.g., Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996 [1932, 1938]), p. 342; Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), pp. 89–90; Justin Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ's Descent into the Underworld* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), p. 17; Matthew Emerson, *'He Descended to the Dead': An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019), pp. 90–4.

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victorious interpretation found in Luther's famous 'Torgau sermon', a more ambivalent legacy exists in his own writings. In fact, the later Reformed interpretation of the descent as God-forsakenness did not originate with Calvin but with the very early Luther. Further attention should therefore be paid (and has yet to be properly given) to Luther as a forerunner to Calvin's focus on the descent to hell as signifying Christ's God-forsakenness.[2] Understanding that both Calvin and Luther saw the descent as a *victory over* hell through the *suffering of* hell can help smooth the edges of a myopic age-old debate between the two traditions, as the two Reformers have more in common on the doctrine that their heirs have often realised.[3]

This article proceeds in three sections. First, I outline Luther's theology of the descent into hell as it is found in his 'Torgau sermon' and then compare this with some other neglected writings that are more determinative for his interpretation of the descent into hell. Second, I compare Luther's *descensus* theology with that of Calvin, showing that they share more in common with one another than not. Third, I show how this consensus between Luther and Calvin was lost to their heirs due to sacramental polemics. I conclude that in light of his influence on Calvin, Luther warrants consideration as an important first-generation Reformer who significantly influenced the *descensus* interpretation for which Calvin in particular has become famous in the history of Christian theology.

Getting Luther right: Torgau sermon or God-forsakenness?

The typical position of Lutheran orthodoxy is to interpret Christ's descent into hell as a 'glorious victory and triumph'.[4] In making this claim, the writers of the *Formula of Concord* turned to Luther's famous 'Torgau sermon' (1532) for a definitive treatment of the doctrine, the result being a traditional view of Christ as mighty harrower of hell.[5] The emphases in this sermon of Luther's —and subsequently Lutheran orthodoxy—were on (1) the integrity of Christ's person descending into hell 'with body and soul undivided';[6]

[2]'Forerunner' in this article is employed in the sense advanced by Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought*, trans. Paul L. Nyhus (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966). Identifying 'forerunners' to Calvin can help avoid overstating Calvin's continuity/discontinuity with the pluriform movements of scholasticism and humanism preceding him, while still placing Calvin within the context of his world, which was no doubt affected by these movements. See Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 13–4.

[3]This research is given fuller expression in Preston McDaniel Hill, *Holy Saturday and Christ's Descent into Hell in the Theology of John Calvin* (New York: T&T Clark, forthcoming).

[4]*The Formula of Concord*, *Epitome*, IX.1, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore Gerhardt Tappert (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1959), p. 492.

[5]This sermon was wrongly thought by the Concordianists to have been preached at Torgau in Easter of 1533. While the sermon they thought they had can be found in *WA* 37:62–72, the so-called 'Torgau sermon' they referenced was actually preached at Wittenberg on Easter day (March 31), 1532; it can be found in *WA* 36:159–164. This reconstruction commands consensus today among Lutheran scholarship. See Erich Vogelsang, 'Luthers Torgauer Predigt von Jesu Christo vom Jahre 1532', *Lutherjahrbuch* 13 (1931), pp. 114–30. References to Luther's works in German are from the *Weimar Ausgabe* (*WA*), *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 120 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883-2009). References to Luther's works in English are from *Luther's Works* (LW), ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman, 55 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955–1986).

[6]Quotes from Luther's Torgau sermon (hereafter 'Torgau Sermon') in English are from the translation by Jayson S. Galler and Susanne Hafner, '*The Third Sermon, on Easter Day*', *Logia*, 12/3 (January 2003), p. 42.

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(2) a simple, child-like confession that this one divine-human Christ conquered Satan's demonic realm;[7] and (3) a staunch resistance to explaining how such things could have occurred.[8] Simply put, the *descensus* clause means what it says: Christ descends in the body by local motion in conquest of Hades.

While the simplicity and clarity of this interpretation is alluring, there is a more definitive minority report on Luther's theology of the descent into hell. David V. N. Bagchi has masterfully summarised this additional material for English-speaking Lutheran scholarship on the *descensus*. Despite the influence of Torgau and its 'consummatist' triumphal descent (from *consummatum est*, Christ's final words of *victory* from the cross in John 19:30), Luther actually more frequently reflects on the 'opposite' idea of the descent as referring to Christ's agony and suffering – the so-called 'infernalist' position.[9]

Bagchi garners evidence for this assessment from multiple sources in Luther across his career. First, the infernalist position can be detected in some of Luther's earliest christological reflections, his *First Lectures on the Psalms* (1513/1514). While considering Psalm 22, Luther says the following of Christ's 'cry of dereliction'[10] from the cross:

> Christ himself suffered the dread and horror of a distressed conscience that tasted eternal wrath . . . to be killed and damned, or to be in death and hell . . . To have the same consciousness as the damned–that is death, that is the descent into Hell.[11]

According to this passage, to descend to hell is simply to be God-forsaken. Some scholars have attempted to elide the tension this generates with the 'Torgau sermon' by asserting that Luther began with the suffering motif but progressed later in life to the triumph motif.[12] However, as Bagchi shows, the motif of suffering to interpret the *descensus* proved normative for Luther's thoughts on the topic throughout his career. Against the claim that Luther's views evolved over time from an immature infernalism to an orthodox consummatism, a remarkable quote may be provided from Luther's

[7]'All the devils must run and flee, as if to escape death and poison, and all hell with its fire puts itself out because of him.' Ibid., p. 43.

[8]'I do not want to treat this article in a high and mighty fashion, theorizing how it happened . . . For there have been many who have wanted to grasp the meaning with reason and their five senses, but with that approach they have reached or achieved nothing.' Ibid., p. 41.

[9]These labels come from the intra-Lutheran Hamburg controversy (1549–1551) which was a sort of precursor to the Mansfeld Confutation of 1565, in which Lutherans hardened further as 'consummatists' (triumph) about the *descensus* against the growing Reformed 'infernalist' (suffering) position reflected in the Heidelberg Catechism, paving the way for the definitive Lutheran statement in the Formula of Concord. See David Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther? The Problem of Christ's Descent into Hell in the Long Sixteenth Century', *Perichoresis* 6/2 (2008), pp. 181–90. The historical dichotomy between consummatism and infernalism epitomises a core thesis of this study, namely, that Christology and soteriology are simply too expansive to be conflated into either one of these reductions: Christ's victory is best understood as a victory-through-suffering, and his suffering a suffering-toward-victory.

[10]*Deus meus, deus meus . . . quare me dereliquisti* ('My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?').

[11]See *WA* 5:603–604. This lecture is not available in English (cf. *LW* 10: ix-xii). Bagchi has posited that the American edition of *Luther's Works* reflects a preference for the viewpoint of Lutheran orthodoxy on Christ's descent into hell. See Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther', p. 194.

[12]For example, Gayling Schmeling, 'The Descent into Hell', *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 25/3 (1985), p. 18. My heartfelt thanks go to Lyle D. Bierma for summarising much of this research in his unpublished paper 'Calvin, Luther, and Ursinus on Christ's Descent into Hell', (paper presented at the Sixteenth Century Society Conference, Bruges, Belgium, August 18, 2016).

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Lectures on Genesis (1544). According to this passage, in the garden of Gethsemane, 'Christ our Lord and liberator was in very Hell for all our sakes. For truly he experienced death and Hell in his body.'[13] It seems that the tension between Christ-as-harrower and Christ-as-sufferer persisted unreconciled in Luther's thought. These statements demonstrate the irony that 'in persecuting "Calvinist" interpretations [of the *descensus*], the theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy were in reality persecuting Luther'.[14]

This leaves the predictable problem of inconsistencies in Luther's thought. The quotations provided by Bagchi represent an infernalist impulse in Luther that is indeed a far cry from the triumphal assertions of his 'Torgau sermon':

> Christ has overcome the devil and taken all his power from him . . . through Christ hell is rent and the devil's reign and power are destroyed for us . . . Everyone who has ever been born into the world would have had to remain in hell eternally, if the holy, almighty Son of God with his own Person had not descended there and through his divine might powerfully conquered and destroyed it.[15]

How are we to make sense of this disparity in Luther? David Truemper suggests that the secret lies in Luther's *theologia crucis*, which demonstrates that triumph and defeat are not diametric opposites but dialectic counterparts.[16] This resembles the view of Paul Althaus, who held that these themes in Luther are unreconciled because unopposed: in his pains through hell Christ is conqueror of hell.[17] Bagchi finds this thesis wanting because 'it is clear from the sheer weight of evidence that, for Luther the descent into hell that had the most value to a believer was the conviction that Christ himself had experienced abandonment by God . . . however far someone might fall from God, God in Christ has fallen further'.[18] Although Luther felt perfectly free to affirm the victorious dimensions of the *descensus*, his theology of the descent into hell seems to have favoured the suffering of Christ at its most basic level.

Though Bagchi is convincing that the competing conceptions do not have equal weight in Luther (since Luther more frequently takes the infernalist position), Truemper does make a profound theological point about the false dichotomy behind an either/or approach to victory and suffering in one's soteriology. Summarising Truemper's thesis, Bagchi reports that these conflicting themes 'are not two incompatible interpretations of the *descensus*, but two sides of the same coin'.[19] T. H. L. Parker has made a similar

[13]*WA* 44:524.6–7; cited in Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther', p. 191. Bagchi also cites Luther's expositions of Ephesians 4 (*WA* 23:702.11–703.1) and Jonah 2 (*WA* 19:225.12–16, 28–29).

[14]Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther', p. 193.

[15]'Torgau Sermon', pp. 42–3.

[16]Truemper's dissertation turned the tide of English scholarship in recognising the lost gem of Luther's suffering motif. See David G. Truemper, 'The *Descensus ad inferos* from Luther to the Formula of Concord', STD diss. (Concordia Seminary in Exile [Seminex] in Cooperation with Lutheran School of Theology Chicago, 1974).

[17]Paul Althaus, 'Niedergefahren zur Hölle', *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 19 (1942), pp. 365–84; cited in Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther', p. 193, and Bierma, 'Calvin, Luther, and Ursinus on Christ's Descent into Hell', p. 7.

[18]Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther', p. 196. A remarkable recent study by Russ Leo concurs, seeing Luther 'emphasizing Christ's human agony as opposed to his glorious triumph'. Russ Leo, 'Jean Calvin, Christ's Despair, and the Reformation *Descensus ad Inferos*', *Reformation* 23/1 (2018), pp. 53–78.

[19]Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther', p. 194. Alan Lewis' theology of Holy Saturday, strongly influenced by Eberhard Jüngel, is constituted beautifully throughout by a similar thesis of God's presence-in-absence.

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observation about Calvin: he is neither solely a theologian of glory nor solely a theologian of the cross, but one of glory-through-cross.[20] In Calvin's own words,

> If it be objected, that never was there any thing less glorious than the death of Christ, which was then at hand, I reply that in that death we behold a magnificent triumph . . . for there we perceive that, atonement having been made for sins, the world has been reconciled to God, the curse has been blotted out, and Satan has been vanquished.[21]

As I hope to show, by recognising tension over the descent into hell in Luther's own mind, scholarship today can deepen its understanding of the *descensus* doctrine in Reformation debates. Such an understanding can temper overly tidy distinctions between a Lutheran descent-as-victory and a Reformed descent-as-suffering. In reality, these are two sides of the same coin that are already present in Luther himself. Remarkably, the tension can be felt in Calvin too.

So far, I have shown that Luther's *descensus* theology is more complex that tradition reports. For the remainder of this article, I want to make two further elaborations. First, I want to show how Luther and Calvin 'converge' in their understanding of the descent into hell, by which I mean that they both hold broad conceptual frameworks within which the *descensus* contains both infernalist and victorious accents, though ultimately favouring the infernalist position. Second, I want to demonstrate how subsequent Lutherans and Calvinists 'diverged' in their reception of their figureheads for the sake of intra-Protestant polemics.

Luther and Calvin: Convergence on descent

A helpful way to illustrate the complementarity between Luther and Calvin on this issue is by looking a key case of shared terminology between them. This can be seen in Luther's use of the term *Anfechtungen*. As has been indicated, Luther principally interpreted Christ's descent into hell as the divine damnation felt by Christ on the cross. Truemper notes that this sense of divine damnation and feeling forsaken by God falls under Luther's malleable category of *Anfechtungen*. For Luther, 'Christ's descensus is first and foremost his experience of the pangs and torments of death and hell on our behalf . . . the depths of *Anfechtung*, death, the nether world, and hell itself.'[22] *Anfechtung* (Latin *tentatio*) is a word covering a near indeterminate range in Luther's thought, including spiritual temptation, agonising struggle, demonic assault, and sheer emotional despair. But according to Luther '*die schwerste Anfechtung*' – the most severe turmoil – is

Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B, Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 234–60).

[20]T. H. L. Parker, 'Interlude: *Theologia Gloriae aut Crucis?*', in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Study in the Theology of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), pp. 57–8.

[21]John Calvin, *Comm.* John 17:1 (*CO* 47.375). Compare with *Comm.* John 12:23 (*CO* 47.288), 'The ignominy of death is no obstruction to his glory.' References to commentaries in English are from *Calvin's Commentaries* [*Comm.*], 22 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998 [1843-56]). References to Calvin's works in Latin are from *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia* [*CO*], 59 vols., ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss (Brunswick: Schwetske and Son, 1863–1900); and *Ionnis Calvini Opera Selecta* [*OS*], 5 vols., ed. Petrus Barth and Guilelmus Niesel (München: Kaiser, 1926–1962).

[22]Truemper, '*Descensus*'; also cited in Leo, 'Jean Calvin', p. 64.

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'the terror and fear of God's wrath' at the moment of death.[23] The worst hell for Luther, then, is the terror of feeling damned by God and forsaken by God.

It is this same term for terror (*Anfechtung*) that the distinctively Reformed Heidelberg Catechism deploys to summarise the Reformed view of the *descensus* typically associated with Calvin:

> Q. Why does the creed add, 'He descended to hell'?
>
> A. To assure me during my attacks of deepest dread and temptation [viz., *Anfechtungen*] that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from hellish anguish and torment.[24]

This exposition offered in the Heidelberg Catechism reflects well the teaching of Calvin on the *descensus*.[25]

For Calvin, the supreme experience of hell was when Christ cried out from deep agony within his own human heart that his God had forsaken him:

> There is no doubt that Christ, when he offered himself to suffer in our stead, had to contend with the power of the devil, with the torments of hell, and the pains of death . . . I cannot express it better than he himself did, in another form, when he exclaimed, 'Father, father, why has thou forsaken me?'[26]

The cry of dereliction so epitomises Christ's descent into hell for Calvin that he uses the cry, 'my God, my God', as shorthand to express his view: 'the descent of Christ to hell in the Creed . . . the confirmation of my own interpretation, that expression he uttered while handing on the cross–My God, &c.'[27] The link between dereliction and the *descensus* lasted to the final (1559) edition of Calvin's *Institutio*, where the cry proves not

[23]Paul Buehler, *Die Anfechtung bei Martin Luther* (Zuerich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1942), pp. 4, 58. See also M. Vernon Begalke, 'Luther's Anfechtungen: An Important Clue to His Pastoral Theology,' *Consensus* 8/3 (1982), pp. 3–17. David Scaer paints a vivid picture: 'In the *Anfechtung* of his death, the Christian is threatened by judgment, destruction, and hell. Here again the Christian sees God's wrath, views God as the hangman, and sees nothing by thunder and lightning.' David P. Scaer, 'The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought,' *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 47/1 (1983), pp. 15–30.

[24]Noted in Bierma, 'Calvin, Luther, and Ursinus on Christ's Descent into Hell', p. 4. For the English text, see 'The Heidelberg Catechism', Q&A 44, in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive, 2013), p. 83; for the German text, see *Der Heidelberger Katechismus und vier verwandte Katechismen*, ed. August Lang (Leipzig: Deichert, 1907), p. 19. See also *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology*, ed. and trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005). For a delightful summary of the theology of the Heidelberg Catechism, see Hendrikus Berkhof, 'The Catechism as an Expression of Our Faith', in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), pp. 93–122.

[25]Bierma, 'Calvin, Luther, and Ursinus on Christ's Descent into Hell', p. 1.

[26]John Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1958), 3:482–483; *CO* 5.225. It is remarkable that Calvin changes 'My God' to 'My Father' (*pater, pater, ut quid me dereliquisti?*), intensifying the relational fracture of dereliction. It is possible that Calvin inherited the exegetical shift from 'God' to 'Father' from a similar pattern detectable in the reformist Psalter of French humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples. See *Quincuplex Psalterium: Fac-similé de l'édition de 1513* (Geneva: Droz, 1979), pp. 31–4.

[27]John Calvin, *Letter CXV to Viret*, March 1544, in *Letters of John Calvin*, ed. Jules Bonnet, (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 1:409 (*CO* 11.688).

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only the pain of Christ's abandonment as humanity's substitute, but also the victory of Christ's obedience as humanity's Mediator: 'For feeling himself, as it were, forsaken by God, he did not waver in the least from trust in his goodness.'[28] Clearly, both Luther and Calvin understand the cry of dereliction as an expression of the pains of hell—the *Anfechtungen*—which Christ experienced on behalf of humanity.

This psychological (re)interpretation of hell as feeling forsaken by God raises questions about whether the Reformers agree on the metaphysics of hell, and, consequently, whether they interpret the *descensus* as (1) local and literal or (2) figurative and metaphorical. It may be too hasty to draw such a distinction for Calvin. He makes it clear in his first theological treatise, the *Psychopannychia*, that interpreting the *descensus* as a type of psychological condition manifest in Christ's agony on the cross is categorically not a metaphorical or figurative explanation: 'Lest they should cavil, and allege that we are having recourse to allegory, and figurative interpretations, I add, that the words [*descendere ad inferos*] may be taken without a figure.'[29] The *descensus* can be epitomised by the cry of dereliction without collapsing into mere metaphor for Calvin because of *how* hell is psychologically defined. Describing hell as a psychological condition is not secondary to a logically prior spatial definition. It is the other way around. For Calvin hell is 'not so much the locality as the condition of those whom God has doomed to destruction'.[30] Hell is thus not primarily a place but most fundamentally a type of experience relationship with God. In short, what makes hell what it is, is not *where* it is located but *what type of relationship with God* it signifies. If hell is a condition of soul rather than a physical place, then descending into hell is not a *metaphor* for feeling forsaken by God, but simply *is* that feeling.

For Calvin, then, hell is the experience of perceiving oneself in an adverse relation with God. Conditioning how hell is defined in terms of the individual's Godward relationship allowed Calvin to ridicule popular definitions that reverse the logical order by making hell an imagined place devoid of any qualitative content in relation to divine disposition. Thus, Calvin asserts that 'it is childish to enclose the souls of the dead in a prison [viz., the *limbus patrum*]'.[31] What is interesting is that comments from Luther can be found that concur with Calvin's assessment:

> But what Hell may be before the Last Judgment, I am not altogether sure. That it is some specific place where the souls of the damned already suffer . . . is nonsense . . . Everyone carries his own Hell with him, wherever he goes, while he endures death's last agonies and God's wrath . . . [32]

Here, Luther is interpreting hell in existential terms, such that hell literally becomes mobile, moving around within anyone who feels in an adverse relationship with God. Calvin also speaks of this kind of internal inferno: 'for where there is guilt before God, there immediately hell shows itself',[33] such that 'we find always a hell within us.'[34]

[28]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [hereafter *Institutes* 1559], 2 vols., ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.16.12 (*CO* 2.379; *OS* 3.499).

[29]Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, p. 485 (*CO* 5.227).

[30]Ibid., p. 480 (*CO* 5.224). Also, 'The grave is called *sheol* . . . these words, therefore, here denote not so much the place as the quality and condition of the place . . . ' Calvin, *Comm*., Psalm 16:10 (*CO* 31.157).

[31]Calvin, *Institutes* 1559, 2.16.9 (*CO* 2.376; *OS* 3.494).

[32]*WA* 19:225.12-16, 28–29. Cf. Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther', p. 192.

[33]Calvin, *Comm*. Hebrews 2:15 (*CO* 55.33).

[34]Calvin, *Comm*. 1 John 3:2 (*CO* 55.330). Calvin says that 'hell has opened to receive him' when one feels the 'protracted sorrow' and 'mental distress' of a 'terrorized conscience'. Calvin, *Comm*., Psalm 6:6–7 (*CO* 31.77).

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Despite their agreement on psychologising hell, there is a genuine difference in how each of the Reformers relate this theological move to their *descensus* interpretations. Overall, it seems that Calvin is more consistent than Luther in psychologising hell, since Luther can still interpret hell as a literal netherworld, as can be seen in the 'Torgau sermon'. This duality forces Luther to say that Christ descends into hell two times, the first time psychologically on Good Friday, and the second in his triumphant conquest on Holy Saturday. While holding two contradictory understandings of the descent as hellish sufferings (the infernalist position) and mighty harrower (the consummatist view) literally causes Luther to confess that 'Christ descended into hell a second time',[35] Calvin prefers to retain systematic coherence by dropping the limbo story (Luther's 'second' descent) altogether. For Calvin, there simply is no limbo and therefore there are no patriarchal prisoners to be released from it. 'What need, then, for Christ's soul to go down there to release them?'[36] Though it seems that Luther has more space for traditional depiction of Christ's work on Holy Saturday than Calvin, it still remains clear that they both tend to interpret hell (and therefore Christ's descent) more in terms of internal suffering than external location.

Having seen that Luther is more infernalist than consummatist, and therefore is closer to Calvin than the traditional story goes, I want to show how this theological complementarity is in certain respects also visible in Calvin. That is, in similar fashion to how Truemper and Bagchi have unearthed the neglected 'infernalist' dimension to Luther's thoughts on the descent, I would like to draw attention to a neglected 'consummatist' theme in Calvin.

It has become commonplace to recognise that Calvin rejects the traditional notion of Christ as harrower of hell.[37] While I have surveyed how this is partially true metaphysically, it is patently false theologically.[38] Bold assertions of triumph colour Cavin's descriptions of the *descensus*:

> Therefore, by his wrestling hand to hand with the devil's power, with the dread of death, with the pains of hell, he was victorious and triumphed over them, that in death we may not now fear those things which our Prince has swallowed up [cf. 1 Peter 3:22, Vulgate].

In the *Psychopannychia*, too, Calvin describes Christ as a ferocious leader (*dux*) and mighty prince (*princeps*) who stays the sting of death and guides his dear people safely

[35]The first descent by suffering on Friday's cross, the second descent by victory on Saturday's conquest (*WA* 46:308.15–17; trans. Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther', p. 197).

[36]Calvin, *Institutes* 1559, 2.16.9 (*CO* 2.376; *OS* 3.494).

[37]Rodney Howsare, 'Christ's Descent into Hell', in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), p. 270.

[38]Despite this quip, it is to be noted that Calvin maintained room for a bare-bones account of the old harrowing mythology in his exegesis of the infamous 1 Peter passage, wherein Christ shines his Spirit *post mortem* on the righteous and wicked, bringing joy to the former and dismay to the latter (see Calvin, *Comm.* 1 Peter 3:19; *CO* 55.265). Although Calvin states to those who think this passage refers to the descent into hell that 'these words mean no such thing; for there is no mention made of the soul of Christ', this reflects a self-correction Calvin made later in his career since in the first edition of the *Institutes* (1536), he called the Petrine passage a 'portion of the descent into hell . . . not at all superfluous, containing as it does the greatest mysteries of the greatest things'. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, ed. F. L. Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 56 (*CO* 1.70).

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through their many hells.[39] Calvin is able to liberally register the conquest of Christ because there simply is no zero-sum game between, in his words, *Christus triumphi* (i.e., his 'active' descent of triumph: consummatism) and *Christus damnati* (i.e, his 'passive' descent of suffering: infernalism).[40] That is because the logic of atonement for Calvin operates according to a soteriological principle that Christ's submission to the verdict of those condemned to hell is somehow the mechanism by which the condemnation and power of hell are exhausted. In his surrender to death, Christ wrestled death down.[41]

What is clear is that though Calvin harps daringly on the agonies of Christ in feeling forsaken by God, a decisive line is drawn where these sufferings are exhausted and give way to victorious life, thus clarifying that point that Christ's surrender to death constitutes his mysterious overcoming of death:

> He differed from us, however, in this respect: he let himself be swallowed up by death, as it were, not to be engulfed in its abyss, but rather to engulf it . . . to bear and suffer all the punishments that [we] ought to have sustained. All–with this one exception: 'He could not be held by the pangs of death' [Acts 2:24].[42]

A fresh recognition of this 'consummatism' in Calvin can illumine a nearness to Luther's ideas of a victorious descent, even if in a demythologised manner distinct to Calvin. Luther's alternation between suffering and victory can be detected in Calvin as well.

By tending to neglected themes in both Luther and Calvin (themes which, as will be shown below, their heirs polemically ignored for reasons of partisan ecclesiastical politics), it appears that these two Reformers have more in common in their understandings on Christ's descent to hell than has generally been assumed. Luther would have been a natural influence on a Calvin coming of age in the midst of the evangelical energy circulating in his youth in France.[43] Luther's early comments on a God-forsaken descent into hell help explain how Calvin's first theological tract, *Psychopannychia* (written in the youthful years of Lutheran upheaval), could contain

[39]'Believers in the midst of death acknowledge him as their leader (*dux*) . . . we have Christ as our leader (*dux*) and companion (*comes*).' Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, pp. 436, 483 (*CO* 5.191, 226); cf. p. 466 (*CO* 5.213): 'Christ is our Head (*caput*) . . . we shall follow our Prince (*princeps*) . . . '.

[40]'Condemned' and 'triumphant' are Calvin's own words for describing the state of Christ in his descent into hell: what kind of state it is (*damnati*) and what is obtained by it (*triumphum/victoriam*). Calvin, *Institutes* 1559, 2.16.10, 11 (*CO* 2.377, 378; *OS* 3.495, 497).

[41]'He couples human nature with divine that to atone for sin he might submit the weakness of the one to death; and that, wrestling with death by the power of the other nature, he might win victory for us.' Ibid., 2.12.3 (*CO* 2.342; *OS* 3.440).

[42]Ibid., 2.16.7, 10 (*CO* 2.374, 376; *OS* 3.491, 495).

[43]It is telling that Calvin and other French Evangelicals were simply labelled 'Lutheran' by Catholic authorities during the Placards of 1534 and the Decrees of the Sorbonne in 1543 (see Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000], pp. 73–88, 266–8). Incidentally, these were also the years when *Psychopannychia* was written (1534) and published (1542). See *CO* 5.165–6. It is this early French Lutheran milieu which Heiko Oberman labels 'the heartland of the *initia Calvini*', noting in particular of the *descensus* theology found in the *Psychopannychia* that 'Calvin did not learn this striking psychological interpretation of the abysmal Descent into Hell in a medieval school but in the school of life.' Heiko Oberman, '*Initia Calvini:* The Matrix of Calvin's Reformation', in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm Neuser (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994], pp. 135, 152.

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similar assertions.[44] Luther predates Calvin in locating the descent to hell in the agonising cry of God-forsaken abandonment from the cross.

Lutherans and Calvinists: Divergence on descent

If it is the case that Luther and Calvin converge in their understanding of Christ's descent into hell, how has it become standard fare to pit the Lutheran and Reformed positions on the doctrine as opposites? The answer is to be found in post-Reformation sacramental polemics of intra-Protestant debates.

The growth of the Lutheran orthodox insistence on a triumphal (and bodily) interpretation of Christ's descent can clearly be attributed to the sacramental polemics surrounding both the 'Torgau sermon' and the Mansfeld Confutation of 1565, both of which contributed significantly to the settlement of various doctrinal issues in the *Formula of Concord*. Bagchi suggests that a sacramental debate at the time of Luther's sermon heavily coloured his comments as to what occurred on Holy Saturday. Against the Reformed-minded sacramentarians who denied the corporeal presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Luther

> was keen to affirm that, by virtue of the *communicatio idiomatum*, the sharing of the properties of divine and human, it was perfectly possible for Christ's human body on Holy Saturday to be both lying in the tomb . . . and at the same time throwing its weight around in hell, breaking down bronze gates . . . [45]

Luther's affirmation of a body present in the *descensus* served to repudiate Reformed rejections of Christ's body as present in the Lord's Supper. The nub of the issue was how the *communication idiomatum*, or the communication of attributes between the divine and human natures in Christ, was to be understood – in particular to what extent Christ's humanity could be said to share in the superhuman properties of Christ's divine nature, specifically ubiquity. Can Christ's human body participate in divine ubiquity by virtue of the union of the natures, and so mysteriously be in several places at once? Motivated by attention to the unity of Christ's person, the Lutheran answer is yes. Motivated by attention to the integrity of Christ's human nature as spatially finite, the Reformed answer is no. This means that Lutheran sacramental theology can assert the physical presence of Christ's body both in heaven and in the Eucharist, while Reformed teaching asserts that Christ's body is only in heaven. One Lutheran strategy for refuting this Reformed restriction was to draw polemical attention to the ubiquity of Christ's body on Holy Saturday. If Christ's body can be both in the grave and harrowing hell on Holy Saturday, then it is reasonable to assert that Christ's body can be both in the

[44]It is possible that Luther's *descensus* theology was mediated to Calvin through the catechetical writings of Guillame Farel, in particular Farel's exposition of the Apostles' Creed in *Le Pater Noster et le Credo en françoys* (see Jason Zuidema & Theodore Van Raalte, *Early French Reform: The Theology and Spirituality of Guillaume Farel* [Abingdon: Routledge, 2016], p. 114), which was apparently a translation of Luther's *Betbüchlein* of 1522, itself an amended reprint of the 1520 *Eyn kurs Form* (see Francis Higman, 'Theology for the Layman in the French Reformation 1520–1550', *The Library* 9/2 [1987], p. 109). For further explanation, 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 Domino: Papers of the Twelfth International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Karin Maag and Arnold Huijgen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

[45]Bagchi, 'Luther versus Luther', p. 196.

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consecrated host and ascended in heaven on Sunday morning worship. The Christology of the *descensus* in this way can support one's preferred sacramentology, as can be seen in the 'Torgau sermon'.

Robert Kolb notes a similar polemic at play thirty years later in the Mansfeld Confutation of 1565.[46] While articulating their triumphant and bodily understanding of Christ's descent to hell, the Mansfeld theologians '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'.[47] According to the Lutheran position, the Heidelberg Catechism take on the *descensus* signaled a failure to understand how a human nature can be omnipresent when united with a divine nature, both in a consecrated host and in the descent into hell. In reprinting and repudiating the Heidelberg Catechism's take on the *descensus*, the Mansfeld theologians were polemically taking issue with a sacramental rejection of ubiquity. 'In doing so [the Mansfeld theologians] 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.'[48] Once again, the possibility of presence in both hell and the grave entails the possibility of presence in both heaven and the eucharistic bread. Though these polemics certainly skewed a fair and careful comparisons of the range of *descensus* interpretations across the two traditions, the Mansfeld theologians were certainly astute in their recognition that the sacramental apple does not fall far from the christological tree.[49]

Though the later Lutherans' polemical use of the *descensus* to assert sacramental doctrine effectively eclipsed similarities between Calvin and Luther, it also highlighted genuine difference between the Reformers. If both Luther and Calvin give voice to interpretations of Christ's descent into hell as both suffering and victory, they differ in how this ambivalence is cashed out with respect to the divine and human natures in Christ. While Luther's theology tends to a more porous communication of properties between the two natures, Calvin's theology is stricter in seeking to safeguard the integrity of each of the two natures as they are united in the one person of Christ. This difference can be detected in the rhetorical strategies deployed by the Reformers to teach the *descensus*. For example, Luther suggests that the humanity of the Son ('with body and soul undivided') shares in the divinity's mighty conquest of Hades, without ever answering 'how it might have happened that the man lies there in the grave and nevertheless descends into hell'.[50] For Luther, a body united to divine nature can share the property of omnipresence and inexplicably but truly be in two places at once.

[46]Robert Kolb, 'Christ's Descent into Hell as Christological Locus in the Era of the Formula of Concord: Luther's "Torgau Sermon" Revisited', *Lutherjahrbuch* 69 (2002), pp. 101–18.

[47]Ibid., p. 108.

[48]Ibid., p. 114.

[49]Lutheran and Reformed theologians recognised that the faulty Christology of their opponents was mirrored and multiplied in their conceptions of the sacrament. The result was that sacramentology inevitably sparked christological controversy. See Bruce L. McCormack, 'For Us and Our Salvation: Incarnation and Atonement in the Reformed Tradition', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 43/1–4 (1998), esp. pp. 282–4. The Lutheran desire for substantial presence in the Eucharist tends toward a neo-Eutychian Christology, while the Reformed desire for authentic humanity and spiritual presence in the Supper leaves open the charge of a quasi-Nestorian Christology. If the *communicatio idiomatum* is too strong, it dissolves into a static monotony of nature (*communio naturarum*); if it is too weak, it fails to bridge the gap required for communion, presenting the Holy Spirit as participation's stop-gap.

[50]Luther, 'Torgau Sermon', p. 42.

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Christ's body can be in heaven and in bread, just as Christ's body can be in hell and in the tomb.

Calvin differs, maintaining that a ubiquitous humanity is a contradiction in terms that transgresses creaturely finitude. Rather than becoming physically omnipresent, Christ remains in heaven, while those united to him by the Spirit are lifted up with him into heaven to feed on his body there. The Lord's Supper occurs therefore by not pulling Christ's substance down but by lifting the body of believers up. We might say that, for Calvin, the mystery of eucharistic participation consists not in a schizosomatic flesh, but by way of an in-corporating Spirit. Humanity participates in divinity without compromising the integrity of either nature. As with the sacrament, so, too, with the *descensus*: it is from the human nature assumed that forsaken feelings arise, but the divine Son was never actually hateful to God,[51] just as it is from the original divine nature that a victory was attained over death and hell ('Who but Life could do this?').[52] The divine and human natures are united with clear distinction and division of labour that does not threaten the integrity of either nature. Importantly, on this take the *descensus* is not from the Reformed perspective a hyperbolic metaphor, any more than for the Reformed Christ's real presence in the sacrament is an illusion because it is effected by Spirit-participation instead of substance-communication.[53]

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Luther predates Calvin in interpreting the descent to hell in terms of Christ's cry of dereliction from the cross. The standards of Lutheran orthodoxy have hidden this fact and therefore obscured Luther's status as a significant forerunner to the so-called Reformed distinctive on the *descensus*. Though their followers pitted opposite interpretations against each other based on legitimate differences in sacramentology, Luther and Calvin can be heard joining in harmonious voice as they celebrate the mystery that by surrendering himself to his God-forsaken death, Christ has wrestled down hell and conquered the Devil. In the words of Luther from *A Sermon on Preparing to Die*:

> So then, gaze at the heavenly picture of Christ, who descended into hell [1 Pet. 3:19] for your sake and was forsaken by God as one eternally damned when he spoke the words on the cross, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani!'– 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' [Matt. 27:46]. In that picture your hell is defeated . . .[54]

[51]See Calvin, *Institutes* 1559, 2.16.11.

[52]Ibid., 2.12.2.

[53]'For Calvin, to say that Christ is really present and that he is spiritually present are synonymous.' David Willis, 'A Reformed Doctrine of the Eucharist and Ministry and Its Implications for Roman Catholic Dialogues', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21/2 (1984), p. 295. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 1559, 4.17.33 (*CO* 2.1034; *OS* 5.392): 'For us the manner is spiritual because the secret power of the Spirit is the bond of our union with Christ.'

[54]Martin Luther, *A Sermon on Preparing to Die*, in *LW* 42:105 (*WA* 2:690).

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