

Dear Lillian Methodist Church family,

The Apostle's Creed is one of our oldest creeds, dating back to the very beginnings of the Church. It was a way for early believers to summarize their core beliefs as followers of Jesus, in a time when written scriptures were scarce and false teaching was plentiful.

There have been a variety of versions of this creed down through the years. Each was translated into English from Greek and Latin. One version contains the phrase "He descended into Hell." This erroneously gave the impression that Jesus died, and then went to Hell to suffer more punishment. This caused many Christian fellowships to delete this phrase from the creed, including many Methodist denominations.

However, this leaves out an important element of Christian doctrine. A better English translation is the version we are currently using in our Sunday worship services, "He descended to the dead."

The word "Hell" has the connotation of punishment and eternal damnation. The Hebrew word "Sheol" and the Greek word "Hades" (the words most often used in scripture) simply mean the "place of the dead". When we say that we believe that "He descended to the place of the dead", we affirm the doctrine that Jesus truly died on the cross. His body lay in the tomb, but His spirit went to the place where all other spirits of the dead go. Hell, with its punishment, is a **part** of the "place of the dead," but Jesus did not join the unrighteous there.

He did not go to Hell to be punished. He (as gleaned from various scriptures) went to the place of the dead, like every human being, but He did not remain there. This is a crucial doctrine. Jesus did what no one else could do. He laid down His life, then He took it up again. (John 10:17-18)

Jesus declared victory over death itself. According to Ephesians 4, His spirit fulfilled the prophecy in Psalms 68, ascending on high, leading a "host of captives." I believe these are the righteous souls of everyone down through history who were saved by faith by looking forward to Jesus, as we are saved by faith as we look backward to His sacrifice. These souls were not being punished but received "comfort" and were joined by Abraham himself (see Luke 16). These souls were residing in "Sheol" in the Old Testament, and "Hades" in the New Testament.

Jesus meant it when He told the man on the cross next to Him, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." Jesus died first. He went to "the place of the dead," not to be punished, but there he waited for the man to die and join him. Then Jesus led them all to Heaven, where they will remain until their earthly bodies are resurrected. "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son, and believes in Him, should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6)

See y'all Sunday,

Perry Cunningham
Lay Leader