

Introduction

In the sixteenth century, when the Church of England departed from the jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome, it was frequently charged with theological novelty. The English reformers responded by appealing to the Early Church Fathers as a means of arguing for their theological principles. Some of this was implicit, such as where they allude to certain Fathers in the Articles of Religion, or when they quote the Fathers copiously in the *Books of Homilies*. However, the leaders of the Church also made frequent explicit references to their reliance upon the Fathers (especially regarding the interpretation of Scripture, which was viewed as the grounds of their faith). Two of the more famous examples of this were made by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and Bishop John Jewel.

Cranmer, at his degradation, said:

And touching my doctrine of the sacrament, and other my doctrine, of what kind soever it be, I protest that it was never my mind to write, speak, or understand any thing contrary to the most holy word of God, or else against the holy catholic church of Christ; but purely and simply to imitate and teach those things only, which I had learned of the sacred scripture, and of the holy catholic church of Christ from the beginning, and also according to the exposition of the most holy and learned fathers and martyrs of the church.¹

1. Thomas Cranmer, *The Works of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. John Edmund Cox, The Parker Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1846), Vol. 2, p. 227.

Even though Cranmer was primarily defending his view of the Eucharist, he says here that he sought to make all his doctrine consistent with what was taught in Scripture ‘according to the exposition of the most holy and learned fathers and martyrs of the church’.

The second example of this appeal to the Fathers was made by Bishop John Jewel, especially known for the *Apology* which he wrote, at least in a semi-official capacity, for the Elizabethan Church, to answer antagonistic claims made by Roman Catholic polemicists. He ends Part I of this *Apology* with these words:

In like manner, because these men take us to be mad and appeach us for heretics, as men which have nothing to do neither with Christ nor with the church of God; we have judged it should be to good purpose and not unprofitable if we do openly and frankly set forth our faith wherein we stand and show all that confidence which we have in Christ Jesus, to the intent all men may see what is our judgment of every part of Christian religion and may resolve with themselves whether the faith which they shall see confirmed by the words of Christ, by the writings of the apostles, by the testimonies of the catholic fathers, and by the example of many ages, be but a certain rage of furious and mad men and a conspiracy of heretics.²

Quotations like these could be multiplied. In fact, we shall see several others in later chapters.

One of the doctrinal disputes upon which this stated methodology was tested was the creedal formula regarding Christ’s descent into hell. There were significant debates over this doctrine during the Tudor era. As the debate played out, it was not merely a Catholic versus Protestant dispute, but also became a point of contention among Protestants. The debate was multifaceted: participants argued about whether the doctrine was taught in the Scriptures; and there were vehement disagreements over hermeneutics, translation and philology. This book will seek to explore the extent to which the English reformers of the Tudor period followed through on their stated purpose to have their

2. John Jewel, *An Apology of the Church of England*, ed. John E. Booty (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2002), p. 21.

teachings consistent with the Church Fathers concerning the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell.

Only two authors have dealt with this English doctrinal dispute in a significant way.³ Dewey Wallace penned a lengthy journal article on the topic in the late 1970s. His premise was that this was a 'lesser but vigorous' controversy of the Reformation era and that 'its story had not been told in detail nor has its significance received proper assessment'.⁴ In more recent years, Jean-Louis Quantin's *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity* has offered fresh insights.⁵ Quantin's primary focus was on the appeal to antiquity in England during the seventeenth century. In preparation for discussing this topic in the seventeenth century, he does deal to some extent with the sixteenth century but he notes, 'It would require a whole book to examine all the disputes in Reformation England that discussed patristic texts.'

In some sense, this book is attempting to deal with one dispute in a more systematic way. I shall do so by discussing more thoroughly the development of the doctrine of Christ's descent in the patristic period, by extending the discussion over how the descent was understood during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI and by examining a broader field of literature from the Tudor period, including liturgical, catechetical and devotional material. This will also serve to take the debate beyond the scholarly circles into the lives of the laity.

More precisely, after delineating the teaching of the Fathers in the first five centuries on the topic of Christ's descent, I intend to examine this doctrine in the context of the Tudor Reformation to measure whether the English reformers lived up to their stated ideal of teaching only the doctrines which are found in Scripture as they were understood by the Early Church Fathers. To that end, the first chapter will be devoted to tracing the development of the doctrine

3. David Bagchi deals with the topic more broadly in 'Christ's Descent into Hell in Reformation Controversy', *Studies in Church History* 45, no. 1 (2009), pp. 228-47.

4. Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., 'Puritan and Anglican: The Interpretation of Christ's Descent into Hell in Elizabethan Theology', *Archive for Reformation History* 69 (1978), p. 248.

5. Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of Christ's descent in the first five centuries of Church history. Here I shall seek to show especially which biblical texts were deployed to explain the doctrine and why the Fathers saw the descent as an important aspect of the Christian faith.

In the second chapter, I shall briefly outline the exposition of this doctrine through the medieval period. Then I shall discuss the understanding of the descent among the continental reformers since there was a great deal of cross-pollination among Protestants during that era. Then I shall move on to discuss how the doctrine was understood during the successive reigns of Henry VIII (1509-47) and Edward VI (1547-53). Special attention will be given to devotional, catechetical and homiletical works, as well as to official and unofficial doctrinal statements during these periods. It should be noted that there has been very little research on the doctrine of the descent in England during these periods.

In the third chapter, we shall briefly explore how this doctrine was understood during the reign of Mary Tudor (1553-58), before spending the bulk of the chapter tracing the points of controversy that arose during the lengthy reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). In addition to considering these scholarly debates, we shall also discuss the doctrine as it was found in homiletical and liturgical works, as well as in the new Bible translations that were being published at this time.⁶ We shall see how the understanding of the descent became quite tricky for the Established Church, as it sought to follow the paradigm of appealing to the Ancient Fathers, while also trying to remain consistent with their Protestant brethren on the continent (this was especially pertinent because Roman Catholic polemicists charged that the Protestants could not agree with one another). I shall endeavor to show that, while the English Church largely followed the Fathers on this doctrine, it made adjustments because of the charge made by some within the realm that the doctrine was too closely aligned with the teaching of Rome. In quoting some of the older documents, I have occasionally updated the spelling of certain antiquated words (though I have tried to keep this to a minimum). I have also purposely sought to steer clear of the anachronistic term 'Anglican' and the pejorative term 'Puritan'.

6. Special attention will be given to the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible and the Rheims New Testament.