

Did Martin Luther Lean Towards Universal Salvation?

By Florian Berndt

“One of the first surprising discoveries one makes after coming into the realization that it is our Abba Father’s heart desire to draw *all* of His creation back to Himself, is that one can not only find plenty of scriptural evidence that supports this truth, but also an abundance of historical witnesses that held to the belief that Jesus Christ really is the Savior of the whole world (gr. *Cosmos*), and not only a handful of people as church tradition so often tries to convince us.

Beginning with the post-apostolic writings of the Early Church unto modern times, there has always been a great cloud of witnesses, a remnant so to speak, which followed the Holy Spirit’s teaching on this matter, rather than just to buy into the traditions of men and the doctrine of demons that have led to the great falling away from the Spirit of Christ after the departure of the first apostles.

However, some of those who have come to see the *reconciliation of all* in our times, have made the something that is often vehemently denied by those who oppose the Greater Hope. The famous quote that is often brought forth as evidence that Luther at least leaned towards this direction says

God forbid that I should limit the time of acquiring faith to the present life. In the depth of the Divine mercy there may be opportunity to win it in the future. (*Martin Luther’s letter to Hans von Rechenberg, 1522.*)

After reading this quote at first it seems to be clear that Luther at least saw the possibility of post-mortem conversion and one might even hope that he secretly might have held a far larger hope than mostly proclaimed by his contemporaries.

Since it is not that easy to find a good English translation of Luther’s letter to Hans von Rechenberg, which contains the quote mentioned above, I have been asked to have a look at it in its original language to confirm if this is really a true statement of the German Reformer. But before I will undertake the endeavour to share my discovery, a few words concerning the manuscript.

Hans von Rechenberg to whom Luther addressed the letter, seemingly belonged to an old Silesian family, and had sought his fame and fortune in the military service of the kings of Bohemia and Hungary. Famous for his bravery Hans was soon generously rewarded by the sovereigns and secured for himself a number of estates as well as the small Silesian principalities of Schlawa and Beuthen an der Oder. He became a strong supporter of the Reformation and was very influential in establishing evangelical preaching in Silesia.

After some time von Rechenberg seems to have been confronted with the question of the destiny of those that die without having found faith in Jesus Christ. Since the belief in Universal Salvation was quite common among several Anabaptist groups, the Reformers also would have to battle with this question sooner or later. This matter came to Luther’s attention, according to the testimony of the Reformer in the letter itself, through Count Albert VII of Mansfeld who frequently addressed queries to him.

One also needs to understand that even though German is my first language, that the letter is very old and written in a no longer common German dialect. Since Luther was the first one that began to develop and reform the German language, it’s obvious that the way he wrote is quite different from how the German’s would use words in writing these days. This makes it very difficult of course, for anyone who, not speaking the German tongue, to translate the mentioned phrase, let alone the whole letter, into English.

At first it was quite difficult to determine which part of the letter contains the controversial quote, as I

couldn't find anything in the German original that looked remotely like the phrase that believers in Universal Salvation so often quoted as evidence that even Martin Luther was secretly inclined to it.

After a while it became clear that those who claim the statement to be an overly exaggerated translation are actually right. The sentence from which the mentioned quote derived is better translated

It would be quite a different question whether God can impart faith to some in the hour of death or after death so that these people could be saved through faith. Who would doubt God's ability to do that? (*Martin Luther's letter to Hans von Rechenberg, 1522.*)

However, after having said this, he continues to say that

No one, however, can prove that He does do this. (*Martin Luther's letter to Hans von Rechenberg, 1522.*)

This point is essential in understanding this writing of Luther, as his argument is not about Universal Salvation in itself but about the question if someone can be saved without faith, something he vehemently denies, citing a handful of scriptures to support his opinion. Since it is God who gives faith, Luther argues, no one can know when someone will believe and thus be saved, leaving the possibility of receiving this saving faith from the Father even after death.

Luther is also surprisingly very much aware that the belief of Universal Restoration was quite common in the Early Church and he seemingly counts Origen, a major proponent of the doctrine in the 2nd Century among the most renowned people of his days. He then continues to try to refute some of the scriptural arguments brought forth in his own day by those who held to this view, without really rejecting the idea altogether. In fact, he even writes in the very beginning of the letter

For the opinion that God could not have created man to be rejected and cast away into eternal torment is held among us also. . . (*Martin Luther's letter to Hans von Rechenberg, 1522.*)

By this however he seems to speak about certain groups in his locality not about himself, having been an admirer of the already mentioned Anabaptists in his earlier years. (Later on he would turn against, and even violently and brutally persecute them as heretics.)

He then concludes with the statement that true faith does not try to argue why God does not save without faith and advises von Rechenberg to be careful with whom he might discuss these matters, suggesting that people of sound and tested faith can discuss these questions with profit, but for those who are weak or young in faith such discussions would, in his opinion, be rather harmful.

To be honest this last statement reminds me a bit of the 'Doctrine of Reserve' that some of the early church leaders held and which stated that it might be sometimes necessary to keep certain truths secret to the masses and teach them only to those who are, in their opinion, ready to receive them. (It doesn't even really need to be stated that this was neither the way of Jesus nor His disciples.)

Judging from the presented material... he seems to have had the hope of post mortem conversion, leaving it open to the Creator when and to whom He would impart the saving faith of Christ.

Seeing also that the very often quoted verse is very difficult to translate into English, however, I don't think that the overly exaggerated phrase was translated intentionally in such a way to mislead people. Those of us who have come to see the Restitution of *all* things, however, need to be careful concerning the evidence that is brought forth for this wonderful truth, lest our hope loses credibility in the eyes of the Body of Christ and the world at large."

My thanks to Gary Armirault, of tentmaker.org, for making this article public.

