

Luther's *jenseitige* eschatology -- by Dr. Francis Nigel Lee

Jenseitig! Unlike the theologically-impoverished English language, German has a fine word to describe "the life hereafter" alias "the life after death."

Jenseitig -- "on the other side of"; or "hereafter in the next life." And that, notwithstanding the paucity of German compared to Dutch and English books thereon in modern theological literature after Kant and the *Aufklärung* or so-called 'Enlightenment.'

Indeed, even the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther is sometimes wrongly regarded as an advocate of soul-sleep, and occasionally even of postmortal annihilationism -- just like conditional immortalists such as the Anabaptists, the Seventh-day Adventists, and the so-called Jehovah's witnesses. Yet a careful study of his writings teaches exactly the opposite -- *viz.*, Luther's keen awareness of ongoing human consciousness also between death and resurrection -- and beyond, unto all eternity.

To Luther, the dying Christ in Luke 23:43 did not at all mean, nor say, to the penitent thief on his cross: "I tell you today, you shall **only after** the resurrection of the body at the very end of World History be with Me in Paradise!" Instead, to Luther and to the Church Universal of all ages, Christ here meant what He actually said, *viz.*: "I tell you -- **today** you shall be with Me in Paradise!" For, as Luther remarks: "Here Heaven and Paradise are one!"¹

Indeed, apparently mindful of the poor man (Lazarus) right after his death going to "the bosom of Abraham" in Luke 16:22-31, Luther further remarks: "Abraham, after death, lives with God; serves Him; and also **rules** with Him.... How the soul 'rests' [cf. Revelation 6:9-11 & 14:13 & 20:4-6], we are not to know. It is certain, however, that it **lives**!"²

In fact, on Revelation 6:10, Luther even states that the postmortal "souls of the martyrs also **work**" -- and even "with their **crying**."³ See too Genesis 4:10's "the voice of your [dead] brother **keeps on crying out**"; and Matthew 10:28's "Fear Him Who is able to **keep on** destroying both soul and body in **Hell**!" Indeed, Luther ends his *Preface to the Revelation of Saint John* with the statement: "In chapter 21, the final comfort is depicted. The holy city...is led as a bride to the **eternal** marriage. Christ alone is Lord; and all the godless are damned and go, with the Devil, into **Hell**."⁴

Philippians 1:21-23 makes it quite clear that for the Christian, even now "to **live** is Christ, and to die is **gain**." For "**to depart** and to be with Christ...is **far better**!"

As Luther observes,⁵ the Christian is "to turn his back on this transient life, and keep his gaze fixed on the future life...that...will **endure forever**.... The citizenship...and the home of Christians is...in Heaven.... Whoever does not direct and prepare his heart for **yonder imperishable life**...does not understand what Baptism, Gospel, Christ [and] faith, mean....

"Another existence and life...begins here in faith -- but **yonder** is made perfect in **sight** (First Corinthians 25:53)...where there is...only **eternal and imperishable life**.... Only security and **joy**.... As soon as the child is baptized...he is from that hour dedicated unto eternal life -- so that henceforth throughout his life he is only a pilgrim...in this World, prepared and ready to leave this temporal life [and] always hoping and looking for yonder enduring life!"

Also the statement in First Peter 3:18 that Christ was quickened or brought back to life 'according to the Spirit' – Luther regards⁶ as designating the Spirit-ual life to which the *zoopoieethis* alias 'the having been **quickened again**' belongs, and as parallel to First Corinthians 15:44-45. "Hence Peter says that He is quickened according to the Spirit.... He has entered into a Spirit-ual...life which comprehends the whole life that Christ now has in soul and body."

Indeed, Luther's view is found also a few verses later in First Peter 4:1's words that 'Christ has suffered for us in the flesh.' In respect of this, Luther explains: "Peter still continues along the same line of thought." There, Luther means that Christ was put to death in the state of humiliation, and **quickened** according to His glorified heavenly mode of subsistence in the state of exaltation – in which glorified state He went and **preached to the spirits in prison** alias in the intermediate state also between His Own death and resurrection.

Elsewhere Luther adds, and at quite some length:⁷ "Death is a blessed thing only to those who believe in Christ.... [To them,] death is nothing other than a pure grace; yes, the commencement of **life**!... Death is given [to them] -- even like a doctor who consumes it, and strangles sin, and helps the [human] spirit to become blessed....

"On the last day..., the trumpets shall sound and the dead shall rise and we shall be changed [First Corinthians 15:51-54].... We [viz. believers] shall always be with the Lord [Second Thessalonians 4:14-17]....

"He shall say to those on His left hand: 'Depart from Me, you accursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels!'... And they shall enter into everlasting pain [*cf.* in Matthew 25:41-46].... See the Gospel, concerning the rich man and Lazarus [Luke 16:20-26]!...

"Hell shall be a special place. They [the wicked] shall be condemned to hell, to the everlasting wrath of God.... The damned shall be burned with everlasting fire.... It shall not be a fire which roasts or singes them only a little, and then ceases.... It shall not be such as they might hope again to get out of it..... But they shall stay there for ever.... Mark 9 [verses 43-48]....

"In the most grievous pain of the damned in hell, their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched.... They shall not only be separated from Christ and His saints and have no part with them; but they shall have to submit, everlastingly, under their feet....

"Jesus Christ said He has the power to give everlasting life [John 5:24f *cf.* 3:16 & 3:36].... Then, God shall be all things in all people [First Corinthians 15:28].... When He

[thus] reveals Himself, all of us shall have enough in body and soul.... That which we now have with all creatures, and need to take here and there one at a time and piecemeal -- that, we shall all acquire from Him and be given and have immediately in all things and without deficiency or cessation....

"Let us think of the life to come, because we shall there await a great salvation and unspeakable goods!... Even in each life, there shall be many differences.... Each shall in his own body have his own clarity, and every body-part its own particular honour.... Just as there are many kinds of names and colours and powers among precious stones [Revelation 21:19-21] -- so shall there be many kinds, also among the body-parts, in one and the same body....

"Our Lord Christ has become another Adam -- in spiritual life.... And yet, with a true and real body of flesh and blood [First Corinthians 15:12-54]....

"There you see how the two, a natural and a spiritual body, are placed together.... Not like certain [anabaptistic] heretics have suggested..., as if 'flesh and blood' cannot inherit the Kingdom of God; and as if on the last day only the spirit or the soul shall be there and be blessed, while the body would remain on the Earth.... Nor as if there would be only a 'spiritual' resurrection -- as when a man is baptized, only the spirit is resurrected without concerning the body [*sic*]!

"No. Not so!... For I read clearly that there shall be a spiritual body, just as there had earlier been a natural or fleshy body.... We are baptized not only according to the soul; but also the body is baptized. That is how the Gospel is preached to us. And we are thereby blessed not only in the soul but, for the sake of the whole man, also according to the body....

"He Himself said to Adam: 'Dust you are, and unto dust you shall return!' [Genesis 3:19 & 4:19 *cf.* Ecclesiastes 3:20f & 12:7]. All men are earthy, and must again go back under earth.

"But it shall not remain earth! For whereas He formerly made a beautiful man out of it with body and soul -- so too shall He at another time make it much more glorious and more beautiful. For that is precisely why He lets it decompose in the ground.

"I believe in the resurrection of the flesh' or the body -- and not only of the spirit (as the [anabaptistic] heretics say).... You have heard how the wiseacres and gangs of [anabaptistic] spirits (*Rottengeister*) preach against and mock this Article [of the *Apostles' Creed*].... [But] even Judas, Caiaphas, and all the damned -- shall be resurrected bodily.

"However, they shall not enter into the Kingdom of God! For 'what has been born from the flesh, is flesh' -- He says [John 3:5]. But the flesh and blood which have been baptized into Christ, are no longer called 'flesh and blood.' For they have been born anew from the Spirit [John 3:5-8]....

"It is actually the old man which is called 'flesh and blood' [in First Corinthians 15:50 *cf.* and John 1:12].... He [Christ] tells St. Peter, Matthew 16[:17], that 'flesh and blood' had not revealed such.... But from that, it does not at all follow that flesh and blood shall not rise

again on the last day. Far rather does the opposite follow! For therefore, just as 'flesh and blood' cannot enter into the Kingdom of God but must cease and die and decompose -- they rise again in a new spiritual being, so that it may go to Heaven" and thereafter inherit also the New Earth.

As Luther elsewhere affirms:⁸ "What is said of a 'purgatory' -- is nothing but lies.... It is based on nothing but wicked life and unbelief!"

Instead, he rightly concludes:⁹ "We have the promise and hope of **Heaven**.... The recompense and **reward**...will be so great.... I never would have believed that there could be such **surpassing glory in eternal life**" -- had this not been assured to us in the Holy Bible.

Luther thus believed in man's everlasting conscious future existence in the final World yet to come! Either in Heaven-on-Earth; or in Hell submersed in the Lake of Fire. Thus, Luther rejected the conditional immortality and annihilationism of the Anabaptists and their stepchildren such as the Seventh-day Adventists and the Jehovah's witnesses (*sic*).

You too shall continue to exist -- consciously and forever -- especially after your death. So then, where and how shall you spend -- **eternity**?

Endnotes

- 1) M. Luther: *Works*, St. Louis ed., I:1763.
- 2) M. Luther: *Works*, St. Louis ed., II:216.
- 3) M. Luther: *1545 Preface to the Revelation of Saint John*, in *Works of Martin Luther*, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1932 ed., VI:482.
- 4) *Ib.*, VI:486.
- 5) M. Luther: *Works*, St. Louis ed., IX:930f.
- 6) M. Luther, as cited by F. Pieper in the latter's *Christian Dogmatics*, Concordia Pub. House, St. Louis, [1951], 4th ed. [1975], II:318-320.
- 7) M. Luther: *German Thesaurus [Deutscher Thesaurus des Hochgelerten wertberümbten und ertheuren Man Dr. Martin Luther]* -- ed. by T. Kirchner, Franckfort am Mayn, 1570, rep. 1983 by Christlicher Verlag Johann Berg, Lüdenscheid, pp. 453a-b, 473b-74a, 479b, 495b, 505b, 508b-509a, & 514b-17a.
- 8) M. Luther: *Works*, St. Louis ed., I:1762.
- 9) M. Luther: *Works*, St. Louis ed., II:1237.

About the author

Dr. Francis Nigel Lee was born to an atheistic father and a Romish mother in Westmorland, Cumbria, Great Britain. He was baptized when one month old in the Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church in Kendal. Later, Nigel became a Christian and had the great joy of leading both of his dear parents to Christ (and later also his father's murderer and the latter's parents). and became a Minister and Pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church in Natal (in South Africa). He is now in his early seventies, and was till his retirement in 2000 the Professor of Systematic Theology and Caldwell-Morrow Lecturer in Church History at the Queensland Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Australia.