

Abraham Lincoln, Universalist

(February 12, 1809 – April 15, 1865)

Independent Testimonies of Abraham Lincoln's Belief in the Salvation of All

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That in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established (Matthew 18:16).

Occasionally over the years, my study of *Universal Reconciliation* has led me to the man, Abraham Lincoln. As our country celebrates the bicentennial of his birth, I thought it might be appropriate to share some of the resources I have found regarding his belief in the *salvation of all*.

Many do not know that for almost all of Abraham Lincoln's life he held a firm conviction that I Corinthians 15:22 was the bedrock of Christ's redemptive work. He found great hope, expounding upon its theme.

What follows is a list of five independent testimonies spanning a period of thirty years of Abraham Lincoln's life, witnessing to his belief that *all men* would ultimately be saved through the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mentor Graham's Testimony

Mentor Graham (1800-1886) was an early schoolmaster of Abraham Lincoln who eventually became intimate friends with him. Lincoln boarded with him for two years. In later years he assisted Lincoln in his speech writing.

Abraham Lincoln was living at my house at New Salem, going to school, studying English grammar and surveying, in the year 1833. One morning he said to me, "Graham, what do you think about the anger of the Lord?" I replied, "I believe the Lord never was angry or mad and never would be; that His loving-kindness endureth forever; that He never changes." Said Lincoln, "I have a little manuscript written, which I will show you," and stated he thought of having it published. The size of the manuscript was about one half quire of foolscap, written in a very plain hand, on the subject of Christianity, and a defense of universal salvation. The commencement of it was something respecting the God of the universe never being excited, mad or angry. I had the manuscript in my possession some week or ten days. I have read many books on the subject of theology, and I don't think, in point of perspicuity and plainness of reasoning, I ever read one to surpass it. I remember well his argument. He took the passage, "*As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,*" and followed up with the proposition that whatever the breach or injury of Adam's transgressions to the human race was, which no doubt was very great, was made just and right by the atonement of Christ."¹

Erasmus Manford's Testimony

Erasmus Manford (1815-1884) was a capable Bible teacher, author and publisher, who taught *the salvation of all*. His periodicals had extensive circulations.² He is best known for his 1849 work, *150 Reasons for Believing in the Final Salvation of All Mankind*. Abraham Lincoln was one of his supporters, himself attending his lectures.

In Manford's autobiography he recounts Lincoln's attendance to one of his addresses on universal reconciliation:

I remember well seeing Mr. Lincoln then punctually every day and night. He often nodded his head to me when I made a strong point.³

Jonathan Harnett's Testimony

Jonathan Harnett was a Lincoln associate and business man from Pleasant Plains, IL.

Harnett retold of his 1858 conversation with Lincoln and some of their associates:

... closed with the restitution of all things to God, as the doctrine taught in the Scriptures, and if anyone was left in doubt in regard to his belief in the atonement of Christ and the final salvation of all men, he removed those doubts in a few questions he answered and propounded to others. After expressing himself, some one or two took exceptions to his position, and he asked a few questions that cornered his interrogators and left no room to doubt or question his soundness on the atonement of Christ, and salvation finally of all men. He did not pretend to know just when that event would be consummated, but that it

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1. *A signed letter of Mentor Graham, published by William Eleazar Barton in The Soul of Abraham Lincoln, Barton, (1920) pp. 346-347.*
 2. *Among his periodicals: Christian Teacher, Golden Era, Manford's Monthly Magazine, Western Universalist.*
 3. *Twenty-five Years in the West, Erasmus Manford (1867), p. 219.*

would be the ultimate result, that Christ must reign supreme, high over all. The Savior of all; and the supreme Ruler, he could not be with one out of the fold; all must come in, with his understanding of the doctrine taught in the Scriptures.”⁴

Isaac Cogdal’s Testimony

Isaac Cogdal was a longtime friend of Lincoln, who recounts his 1859 conversation with Lincoln:

“Lincoln expressed himself ... He did not nor could not believe in the endless punishment of any one of the human race. He understood punishment for sin to be a Bible doctrine; that the punishment was parental in its object, aim, and design, and intended for the good of the offender; hence it must cease when justice is satisfied. He added that all that was lost by the transgression of Adam was made good by the atonement: all that was lost by the fall was made good by the sacrifice.”⁵

James Shrigley’s Testimony

James Shrigley (1813-1905) was a Universalist minister, U.S. Army chaplain, historian, and author. He served churches in: Exeter, New Hampshire, 1838-39; Baltimore, Maryland, 1841-48; Reading, Pennsylvania, 1850-54 and 1856-58; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1854-56; and Richmond, Virginia, 1858-61.

During the Civil War, Shrigley was appointed by Abraham Lincoln as a United States Army chaplain. A group of Protestant ministers traveled to Washington hoping to dissuade President Abraham Lincoln from making the appointment. The President asked on what grounds they were opposed to Shrigley. They replied that Shrigley believed in the salvation of all souls, and that even the rebels would be saved! Lincoln’s response was that, if that be so, then Shrigley deserved to be a Chaplain in the U.S. Army.⁶

4. William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, (Doubleday & Company Inc, 1959), pp. 105-106.

5. William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, (Doubleday & Company Inc, 1959), p. 104.

6. Nelson C. Simonson, *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*, Unitarian Universalist Historical Society.

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