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Modern Recognition of Universal Salvation

by David Sielaff, August 2010

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Substantial elements within scholarship and orthodox Christianity are dealing with the issue of universal salvation of all mankind through Christ (and Christ alone) because more and more people are accepting this biblical teaching. That issue is increasingly being recognized as true by more and more theologians, some as a true doctrine, and others as a threat to orthodoxy. I want to bring you up to date on some of the current discussions in scholarly circles on these matters. I do not know all that is going on, being published, or discussed, but I want to notify you about some scholarly initiatives that are currently available. God is in control and it appears He is informing the world that Jesus Christ is the savior of the world, not merely the offerer of salvation.

I even believe that God is bringing about a slow turn by major elements in orthodox Christianity toward teaching the truth about universal salvation. In this article I evaluate four books written in recent decades. Of course, there are many books that contain excellent teaching but those tend to be popular presentations of universal salvation. Dr. Ernest Martin's book *The Essentials of New Testament Doctrine* is intermediate between a popular and a formal scholarly presentation. There is not time or space to cover all the recent books that have come out in the last decade alone by authors who have a full range of religious backgrounds and theology, including evangelical theology.

There are several classic works on the history of universal salvation in the early church period written in the 1800s. They are very comprehensive. They are John Hanson's [Universalism, the Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church during its First Five Hundred Years](#) (1899) and Hosea Ballou's [The Ancient History of Universalism, from the time of the Apostles, to its Condemnation in the Fifth General Council, A.D. 553](#)

(Boston, 1829).¹ These two books are the best of several that could be mentioned which contain the great majority of references by early Christian leaders demonstrating their belief in and teaching of universal salvation. Most of their reasons are biblical, some are not. In those books also are statements by early church leaders and great scholars like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, his brother Basil of Caesarea, and even Augustine, each stating that the majority of people in Christian congregations in their day — and for centuries after Christ and the apostles — believed in universal salvation.

Both Ballou and Hanson wrote books defending universal salvation as a doctrine, as have many others throughout Christian history, but that evidence is dealt with in other ASK webpages. Dr. Ernest L. Martin presents the biblical evidence in several articles: “[The Time Periods for Salvation, Part 1.](#)” (Access “The Time Periods for Salvation, Part 2” from the link in Part 1.) This material originated from the 1975 booklet by the same name, and is currently presented with added footnotes. In 1984 Dr. Martin presented further research in his presentation “[The Doctrine of the Ages in the Bible.](#)” His final explanation of this evidence is presented in chapter 16 of his book *Essentials of New Testament Doctrine*, “[The Resurrections from the Dead.](#)” Other scholars have recognized the biblical evidence for universal salvation, of course. They are too many to mention. Christianity came to reject universal salvation because of theological bias that eventually overruled biblical evidence. That bias became the basis of what is Christian orthodoxy today.

Much of the problem deals with the concept of time and the ages God has prescribed for His plan of salvation. Those ages are called *eons* in Greek, from which the word “eons” in English is derived. Even though there are several meanings attributed to the Greek word *eon* in the full mass of Greek literature,² the Bible has a severely limited meaning of the term. Rather than giving the sense of “eternal” or “everlasting,” the meaning of *eon* is limited (in both singular and plural), as is the adjective *eonian*.

As the 4th century Greek Father, Gregory of Nyssa, said, “***Aion designates temporality, that which occurs within time.***”³ This is elaborated in Marvin R. Vincent’s, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, [1864]):

“*Αἰών*, transliterated *aeon*, is a period of time of longer or shorter duration, having a beginning and an end, and complete in itself. Aristotle (*περι ουρανου*, 1:9, 15) says: ‘The period which includes the whole time of each one’s life is called the *aeon* of each one.’ Hence it often means *the life* of a man, as in Homer, where one’s life (*αιών*) is said to leave him or to consume away (*Il. v. 685; Od. v. 160*). It is not, however, limited to human life; it signifies any period in the course of events, as the period or age before Christ; the period of the millennium; the mythological period before the beginnings of history. The word has not ‘a stationary and mechanical value’ (De Quincey). It does not mean a period of a fixed length for all cases. There are as many *aeons* as entities, the respective durations of which are fixed by the normal conditions of the several entities. There is one *aeon* of a human life, another of the life of a nation, another of a crow’s life, another of an oak’s life. The length of the *aeon* depends on the subject to which it is attached. ...

The word always carries the notion of *time*, and not of *eternity*. It always means a period of time. Otherwise it would be impossible to account for the plural, or for such qualifying expressions as *this age*, or the age *to come*. It does not mean something endless or everlasting.”

• ***Vincent, Word Studies, vol 4, pp. 58–59, underlining mine***⁴

¹ Both are available free online as Google Books. I linked both on the [ASK Web References](#) page for your convenience so they can be printed or read from the internet. They are also available in some major libraries, and in many seminary libraries. In my experience most seminary libraries allow non-students to enter and read their books. Some even allow the public to obtain a library card (perhaps for a fee) and check books out on loan. Whenever possible, use every resource available to you.

² The occurrences and meaning of *eon*, the plural *eons*, and the adjective *eonian* in early Greek literature are discussed in the article “*Αἰών*” in G.W. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961) and are analyzed in Heleen M. Keizer’s *Life, Time, Entirety* (Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1999). Dr. Keizer’s book is discussed below.

³ G. Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, vol. 7 in *Collected Works* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Pub. Co., c1972–1987), pp. 209–210.

BOOK: *God's Universal Covenant*

The oldest book under consideration is Walter Vogels' *Universal Covenant: a Biblical Study* (University of Ottawa Press, 1979, 1986). Professor Vogels is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at St. Paul University, Ottawa. He states that God's covenant with Israel is central to God's plan for universal salvation of the nations. Vogels incorporates much of the important technical understandings of "covenant" as being similar to a treaty or contract between God and groups of people (such as Israel) or with individuals (such as Abraham and David).⁵ This concept has been developed by others, but Vogels is the first to apply it to universal salvation.

The purpose of Vogels' study is: **"to show the close link that exists between the covenant with Israel and the salvation of the nations. In a certain sense, we might even say covenant is universalism."** (Vogels, p. 7). Hence the title of his book *God's Universal Covenant*. Some day the nations will understand that Israel by its continuing existence, is a witness to the nations that YHWH is God.⁶

"Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, 'It is truth.'

You [Israel] are my witnesses, says YHWH, and my servant whom I have chosen: that you may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am YHWH; and beside me there is no savior.

I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore you are my witnesses, says YHWH, that I am God."

• *Isaiah 43:9–12*

At this present moment the existence of Israel as a people is a living, ongoing witness to the nations who view God's role in history in favor of Israel (Isaiah 61:11–62:2, Jeremiah 3:17). Some day God shall open the eyes of the nations to understand that fact: **"YHWH has made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."** (Isaiah 52:10). At that time the nations will remember the history of God's people Israel, and the nations will come to Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:2–4, Micah 4:1–3). This will occur at the same time that Israel will go out to the nations telling them about God. **"The salvation of the nations will be accomplished only 'in' and 'through' Israel"** (Vogels, p. 111).⁷

The knowledge God gives about His chosen people is progressively revealed throughout the Bible.

"[God] concluded a covenant with Israel and started revealing himself to her. During many centuries he formed that people to prepare them to accomplish their service to the nations. But this does not mean that God totally neglected the others [the other nations]. This covenant [with Israel] was made with those other nations in mind."

• *Vogels, p. 144*

Vogels writes about the nations and their relations to their King, God, in the international arena, but much of his book applies to individuals as well. Israel has a call of service to the nations, as we all know. I venture that Israel's call to service goes beyond even what Vogels imagined. YHWH spoke to Israel:

[continuing note from previous page]

⁴ I cited this quote from Vincent previously in my "December 31, 2004 Commentary."

⁵ See his interesting Chapter 3, "Parallel Covenants with the Nations?"

⁶ Israel shall fulfill that role of witness with knowledge in the future. It has fulfilled that role in great measure through Jesus who came through the tribe of Judah to Israel as their King, Prophet, and Messiah, as well as Savior of mankind.

⁷ Salvation of individual human beings comes through the King of Israel, the Messiah of Israel and Savior of all mankind, Jesus Christ.

“Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.”

• *Exodus 19:5–6*

Israel will be a kingdom of priests on a national and international level. A priest is a mediator between God and man. Israel will perform that function for the nations. We know that there is only one mediator that is necessary or acceptable between God and man for individuals:

“For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.”

• *1 Timothy 2:3–6*

BOOK: *Terms for Eternity*

The next book is from 2007. It is *Terms for Eternity: Aiônios and Aïdios in Classical and Christian Texts* by Iliaria Ramelli and David Konstan⁸ Dr. Ramelli was (as of April 2008) Professor at Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, Italy. Her collaborator David Konstan is a Professor Emeritus of Classics and the John Rowe Distinguished Professor at New York University in New York City.

It is interesting that Ramelli and Konstan titled their work *Terms for Eternity* because they note in Chapter 2, “From the Septuagint to the New Testament” that the adjective *eonian* and noun *eon* in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the LXX) does not mean eternity. The Greek terms *eonian* and noun *eon* correspond to the Hebrew Bible term *olam*, in 431 out of 439 occurrences, and both the Hebrew and Greek terms mean duration of indeterminate length requiring modification by other words. Ramelli and Konstan end their chapter (p. 48) by agreeing with, and quoting Dr. Heleen Keizer’s statement:

“Our [Keizer’s] study has led to the conclusion that infinity is NOT an intrinsic or necessary connotation of *aion*, either in the Greek or in the biblical usage (*olam*).”

• *Keizer, Life Time Entirety, p. 250*⁹

This book covers biblical “terms for eternity” even though Ramelli and Konstan never arrive at a conclusion that differs from the title of their book. They discuss the term Hebrew *olam* but mostly they examine the Greek term *eon*, *eons*, and *eonian* in classical Greek texts, in the Old Testament (the LXX), the New Testament, and in the period of the early Christian *ekklesia*.

“The uses that we have outlined for the terms *aionios* and *aion* correspond closely, as we have said, to those of the Hebrew *olam*, and indeed the Hebrew term lies behind almost every occurrence of the two Greek words in the Septuagint; in turn, where the word *olam* is found in the Hebrew Bible in one or another construction, it is all but invariably rendered by *aionios* or *aion*.”

• *Ramelli and Konstan, p. 41*

The scholars that they cite vary in their understanding of the usage of *eon* and *eonian*, some stating that they always imply eternity and others stating that they never mean eternity. These are the two major

⁸ 1st ed., Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007. They also discuss the Greek word *aïdios*.

⁹ Heleen Keizer, *Life, Time, Entirety: A Study of ΑΙΩΝ in Greek Literature and Philosophy, the Septuagint and Philo* (University of Amsterdam, 1999). I discussed Dr. Keizer’s privately published dissertation in the “[January 2005 Newsletter](#).” Ramelli and Konstan cite Dr. Keizer’s work several times in a positive way, including her conclusions. Their period of analysis is similar, from the archaic Greek period to the 500s AD. They discuss areas that Keizer examined but did not touch on. The biblical “ages” (the biblical words *olam* in Hebrew and *eon* in Greek) are used to strictly denote living in a period of time, an *eon*, which is usually long in duration, which a simple study of the biblical occurrences will show.

opposing positions at issue (p. 59). Surprisingly, Ramelli and Konstan accept (without discussion) the concept that:

“When the reference is to God, *aiōnios*, like *aidios* (in one of its two occurrences) may be presumed to signify ‘eternal’ in the sense of ‘perpetual,’ ‘uninterrupted,’ as in ...”

• *Ramelli and Konstan, p. 58*

Elsewhere in this chapter Ramelli and Konstan give examples where they themselves “presume” that eternity is in the mind of the ancient authors they cite. Why “presume” anything? This is interesting scholarship. The definitions of “presume” in my handy basic dictionary are:

“1. To take for granted as being true in the absence of proof to the contrary. 2. To give reasonable evidence for assuming; appear to prove. 3. To venture without authority or permission; dare.”

• *The American Heritage Dictionary, 3^d ed.*

Throughout their book Ramelli and Konstan assume for some unexplained reason that the adjective *eonian* means eternal, stating that to be so without giving evidence. They give opinions of several scholars, but no reasons why they make that assumption. They clearly state several times that neither *eon* or *eons* mean “eternity” unless modified by other terms, but consistently state that the adjective *eonian* does mean “eternity.” Then they note that those modifiers are not found in the biblical occurrences.

In the preface of this book, the authors state that it is a systematic study of the doctrine of *apocatastasis* in Christianity, and especially in the Church Fathers who held to the Bible as central to all their arguments. *Apocatastasis* only occurs one time, in Acts 3:21 and it does not refer to a reconciliation of all or a universal salvation. It refers to a restoration of truth before Christ returns:

“And he shall send Jesus Christ [again], which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution [*apocatastasis*] of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began [from the *eon*].”

• *Acts 3:20–21*

Ramelli and Konstan conclude their book with this statement:

“Very broadly, *aiōnios* corresponds to the uses of *aion*, which means a lifetime, a generation, or an entire age or epoch, particularly in Stoicizing contexts [contexts influenced by Stoic philosophic ideas]; in Christian writings [outside of the New Testament], *aion* may refer to the temporal age prior to creation, to this present world, or, most often, to the epoch to come in the next world. *Aiōnios* may also acquire the connotation of strict eternity, particularly when it is applied to God or divine beings: here, the sense of the adjective is conditioned by the subject it modifies [using similar words as Vincent on page 2 above].”

• *Ramelli and Konstan, p. 237*

The authors qualify their conclusions twice with the word “may.” They may feel that way but their analysis in the book does not give a reason for *eonian* meaning eternity. The only argument they give is that when the adjective *eonian* is modifying the word “God” then the force of God makes *eonian* mean “eternal” or “forever” or “everlasting.” The occurrences where God and *eonian* are related in this way is in Romans 16:26.

There are problems with this reasoning. Just because He is described as the “*eonian* God” does not limit Him to being outside the eons, if they have a beginning and an end. YHWH is the God of Israel but He is also the God of the nations. God created the eons through His son (Hebrews 1:2), which are limited as Ramelli and Konstan demonstrate, so to describe Him as the “*eonian* God” is quite proper. It does not limit God in any way. The eons are limited in time, God is not limited or bound by time in any way. However, this does not prove a use of “eternity” in the New Testament.

The same can be said for “eonian life” or “life eonian” which are found in 45+ verses. Just because the reward of the saved is described as “eonian life” does not mean that it lasts only for the *eons*. The eons end, but our life does not end because we will have immortality resident within us just as Christ has.

“It is not always easy to identify the precise sense of the term *aionios* [the adjective] from its context; this is why we have identified and often quoted the relevant passages at length, so that readers may evaluate our interpretations for themselves.”

• *Ramelli and Konstan, p. 237*

Ramelli and Konstan do not explain why *eonian* means “eternal” in the Bible, yet throughout they apply the word “eternal” to the term *eonian* without explanation when quoting texts and writers. They conclude:

“What emerges from the present analysis is that, apart from the Platonic philosophical vocabulary, which is specific to few authors, *aionios* does not mean ‘eternal’; it acquires this meaning only when it refers to God, and only because the notion of eternity is included in the conception of God; for the rest, it has a wide range of meanings and its possible renderings are multiple, but it does not mean ‘eternal.’ In particular, when it is associated with life or punishment, in the Bible and in Christian authors who keep themselves close to the biblical usage, it denotes their belonging to the world to come.”

In other words, Ramelli and Konstan insert meaning into the word *eonian* for theological reasons.

If you are interested in this subject, this expensive book has an excellent bibliography and extensive footnotes. It is, given its problems, probably the most comprehensive survey of this subject that is currently available, or will be available for a long time.

BOOK: *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*

This book, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*¹⁰ deals with the critique by evangelical scholars to the understanding of one Christian philosopher, Thomas Talbott, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Willamette College in Salem, Oregon, who initially wrote about his belief in biblical universal salvation in his book *The Inescapable Love* (Parkland: Universal publishers, 1995) and in numerous peer reviewed articles. His original book on the subject and this book in response were put out by major evangelical publishers and his work has created a stir. Talbott summarizes his position in the first 52 pages of *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, then he is critiqued by nine evangelical Christian scholars who believe in an eternal hell. In the last section, pages 247–273, Talbott responds to his critics.

Talbott begins his argument by giving an autobiographical essay on how he came to believe in a biblical universal salvation. He used his philosophical training to see the logical fallacy of the opposing theological arguments of Calvinism and Arminianism. Calvinism (essentially derived from the writings of Augustine, later modified) holds that God determines for some to choose to believe in Christ, while also God determines for others not to believe in Christ, and hence to go to hell. Arminianism understands that individuals are given free will to choose to accept God, or reject God and go to hell.

Talbott gives biblical evidence, of course, but then he defends universal salvation with philosophical arguments. He notes that Calvinists and Arminians both share one assumption: there is an eternal hell:

“Why, after all, should an assumption concerning everlasting punishment be the only unquestioned assumption in a context where some are limiting the extent of God’s love and others are limiting the scope of his ultimate victory? Why not at least examine the pros and cons of

¹⁰ Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). Surprisingly Thomas Talbott is quoted in Ramelli and Konstan’s book supporting their position that “eternal” is meant when God is modified by the adjective *eonian* (Ramelli and Konstan, p. 58).

universal reconciliation alongside those of limited election and those of limited victory over sin and death?”

• **Talbott, Universal Salvation?, p. 5**

Talbott says that one sinner not being saved constitutes a defeat for God, especially in light of God’s and Jesus’ statements that none shall be lost (note Jesus’ parables in Luke chapter 15).¹¹ He also correctly understands and defends Paul’s teaching about the two Adams in Romans chapter 5 and 1 Corinthians chapter 15 (and the confession of all in Philippians 2:10–11 and the reconciliation of all in Colossians 1:15–20).

“For if, by the offense of the one [Adam], death reigns through the one, much rather, those obtaining the superabundance of grace and the gratuity of righteousness shall be reigning in life through the One, Jesus Christ. Consequently, then, as it was through one offense for all mankind for condemnation, thus also it is through one just award for all mankind for life’s justifying. For even as, through the disobedience of the one man, the many were constituted sinners, thus also, through the obedience of the One, the many shall be constituted just.”

• **Romans 5:17–19, Concordant Version**

Note Paul’s use of the definite article in **“the many”** (which is in the Greek) because it refers to **“all mankind for life’s justifying.”** Paul’s argument is simply this:

- **through one man (Adam) came death for all mankind,**
- **through one man (Jesus Christ) came justification for all mankind.**

That justification shall be fulfilled at the end of the *eons*, according to the plan and purpose of God.

Talbott understands that God’s reconciliation was not to repair a plan damaged by Adam’s sin, but rather that reconciliation was part of God’s plan from before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8).

I am disappointed with Talbot’s discussion of *eon* and *eonian* (pp. 45–47). It is weaker than it should be. On the one hand he acknowledges the limited nature of *eon* and notes that the adjective *eonian* is also limited, but then he concedes that *eonian* has an aspect of “eternity” to it, particularly when it relates to God or His actions. This is an unnecessary concession and his critics attack him on this mistake.

The *eons* were created. They were created by Christ (Hebrews 1:2) as a set of timespans (undetermined in length, but most of long duration) each having a beginning and end, and each *eon* having particular qualities to it. The adjective form *eonian* can only modify nouns according to the limits of the original noun *eon* — unless you insert theological meaning into the term. How can I prove that? Look at a verse often used to prove “eternity” as a meaning for the adjective *eonian*:

“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal [*eonian*] weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal [*eonian*].”

• **2 Corinthians 4:17–18**

This passage is clearer with the Concordant Version translation:

“For the momentary lightness of our affliction is producing for us a transcendently transcendent eonian burden of glory, at our not noting what is being observed, but what is not being observed, for what is being observed is temporary, yet what is not being observed is eonian.”

• **2 Corinthians 4:17–18, Concordant Version**

¹¹ Read in order and note John 3:17; Matthew 18:14; 2 Peter 3:9; Titus 2:11; 2 Corinthians 5:19; 1 Timothy 2:3–4, and Luke 15:7. Speaking of unbelievers in Israel, see Romans 11:32.

The comparison in verse 18 is not “temporary” versus “eternal” as the King James Version has it, the distinction is between “temporary” (of short duration) and “eonian” (of long duration). Will our glory be not be eternal? No, and yes. Our glory will be *eonian* and it will last until those *eonian* time periods end.¹² Then our glory and our immortality will extend beyond the eons. God does not tell us about that, probably because our minds are limited. The *eons* have an end, a “consummation” in Greek.

Could “beyond the eons” be a definition of eternity? It could be, but Scripture is silent on what comes beyond the *eons*. The text of 2 Corinthians 4:18 actually says our “burdon of glory” is *eonian*, and at this time that *eonian* glory is not observable. To read the concept of “eternal” or “eternity” or “everlasting” into the occurances of *eonian* is reading meaning into the text. Perhaps the concept of time itself (as we conceive it) will be unnecessary. God’s “purpose of the eons” will have been accomplished. Time “ends” insofar as time is defined by *eons*, but even though those *eons* end, we will still be immortal.

The apostle Paul gave us a teaching that we are to re-transmit to others as fact:

“To me, ... was granted this grace: to bring the evangel of the untraceable riches of Christ to the nations, and to enlighten all as to what is the administration of the secret [the mystery], which has been concealed from the eons in God, Who creates all, ... in accord with the purpose of the eons, which He makes [the eons were made, created] in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”

• *Ephesians 3:8–9, 11, Concordant Version*

To teach otherwise is a mistake. Talbott’s acceptance of any concept of “eternal” being a part of the adjective *eonian* is a mistake, using a faulty assumption, and in so doing he gives ammunition to his critics.

The majority of this book are critical responses to Talbott’s advocacy of universal salvation, set out as biblical, philosophical, theological and historical. They are good examples how scholars over-analyze biblical and other texts, turning simple straightforward statements into complex theological formulae.

Why is evangelical Christianity interested and perhaps afraid of the biblical teaching of universal salvation and why is there enough interest in Talbott’s views to attack his work? Talbott presents arguments on universal salvation that academics can relate to, and he engages them on their own philosophical grounds. He has gained recognition and repute by his publications within the evangelical scholarly guild. I think Talbott’s work, and the work of others including Dr. Martin, cause students in evangelical seminaries to ask questions that are no longer quieted by theological declarations unrelated to large sections of the Bible.

Now the Roman Catholic Church is beginning to acknowledge and promote universal salvation. This will lead to even more discussion.

BOOK: *Jesus Christ: Salvation of All*

This last book, *Jesus Christ: Salvation of All*, demonstrates to me that the Catholic Church, with approval and encouragement at the highest levels including that of the current Pope Benedict XVI, has allowed to be published and is quietly promoting the doctrine of universal salvation.

For years people have wondered at statements by the late Pope John Paul II that seemed to hint at or lean toward an advocacy of universal salvation, statements such as: “**Christ is none other than Jesus of Nazareth; he is the Word of God made man for the salvation of all ...**” (John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Redemptoris missio*, 6). He was not talking about salvation merely being made available to all.

Published in English in 2008, this book by Luis F. Ladaria¹³ titled *Jesus Christ: Salvation of All* (Miami, FL: Convivium Press) presents a powerful statement openly advocating the doctrine of universal salvation (as well as divination or deification of the saved as the goal of God for individual human beings). This eminent Spanish Jesuit scholar carefully chooses his words throughout his book, making sure he goes only

¹² “**Now all these things happened unto them** [to Israel] **for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world [*eons*, plural] are come” (1 Corinthians 10:11).**

¹³ His full name is Luis Francisco Ladaria Ferrer (b.1944). He is a Spanish Archbishop.

slightly beyond the latest doctrinal statements of the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, his advocacy of universal salvation is undeniable and openly proclaimed.

Archbishop Ladaria is a professor of theology at the Papal Gregorian University of Rome since 1984 and at Comillas Pontifica University in Madrid. Ladaria is no ordinary Catholic academic from a prestigious university. Since July 2008 he has held the position of Secretary of the [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith](#) of the Roman Catholic Church. This is the current name of the organization within the Catholic Church originally called the “Sacred Congregation of the Universal Inquisition.” This was known negatively in history as the “Inquisition.”¹⁴ According to the Vatican website, the Sacred Congregation, the Inquisition, began in 1542. The Catholic Church must have felt that the earlier secular Spanish Inquisition was such a good idea that it should be extended to the entire Church in all Catholic lands.

The current Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, was made Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1981. He held that position for 24 years until 2005, answering only to Pope John Paul II during that time. In 2005 Cardinal Ratzinger himself became Pope from his position as Prefect.

In the year 2000 Cardinal Ratzinger (named as the author) oversaw publication by the Congregation of a document titled “[Declaration ‘Dominus Iesus’ on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.](#)” It was approved and signed by Pope John Paul II. This statement clarifies and expands issues from Vatican II decades earlier. This document comes close to advocating universal salvation as readers of ASK material would understand it. However, the document uses qualifying words that prevent open advocacy at that time:

“The [Catholic] Church is the ‘universal sacrament of salvation’, since, united always in a mysterious way to the Saviour Jesus Christ, her Head, and subordinated to him, she [the Catholic Church] has, in God’s plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being.”

• *Declaration ‘Dominus Iesus’ 20*

This document goes on to say that salvation is possible in a mysterious way **“For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church,”** even for unbelievers.

“With respect to the way in which the salvific grace of God — which is always given by means of Christ in the Spirit and has a mysterious relationship to the [Catholic] Church — comes to individual non-Christians, the Second Vatican Council limited itself to the statement that God bestows it ‘in ways known to himself’. Theologians are seeking to understand this question more fully. Their work is to be encouraged, since it is certainly useful for understanding better God’s salvific plan and the ways in which it is accomplished.”

• *Declaration ‘Dominus Iesus’ 21*

Note the portions that I underlined. In reality the Catholic Church does NOT have **“an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being.”** I am not promoting Catholicism; that is not my purpose. I am pointing out the shift by the Catholic Church to openly advocate the teaching of universal salvation to its members, changing centuries-old tradition.

The *ekklesia* of Christ does indeed have such **“an indispensable relationship”** with the salvation of all mankind. The apostle Paul makes that clear in Ephesians chapter 3 (verses 3:8–9, 11 are cited above), but

¹⁴ The Inquisition was organized to defend the Catholic Church from heresy. Their task was to discover and prosecute heretics within the Church. The Inquisition’s judgments were made not only upon clergy (most of whom were uneducated) but upon lay people as well. The Inquisition was little interested in condemning witches and relatively few witches were accused or persecuted except in certain areas and cultures. In fact, most witch trials were prosecuted by secular courts, not religious courts.

The Spanish Inquisition is what most people have in mind when they think of the term “Inquisition.” The Spanish Inquisition was begun by two secular rulers, King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I of Spain in the late 1400s (the sovereigns who sponsored Christopher Columbus). It had Papal approval. Later the Spanish Inquisition was conducted wherever Spain had dominion, including the Americas, the Philippines, the Netherlands, and all the European principalities ruled by the Spanish royalty.

the *ekklesia* of Christ is not an organization or a corporate body. The Declaration does state, in sections I quote here and elsewhere, that not only do non-Catholic Christians have salvation, but so do non-Christians. The Catholic Church declares this while admitting they do not know how God will save non-Christians.

“Jesus Christ has a significance and a value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute. Jesus is, in fact, the Word of God made man for the salvation of all. In expressing this consciousness of faith, the Second Vatican Council teaches: ‘The Word of God, through whom all things were made, was made flesh, so that as perfect man he could save all men and sum up all things in himself.’”

• *Declaration ‘Dominus Iesus’ 15*

Archbishop Ladaria in his book (p. 142) reiterates this point, quoting the portion on Christ’s significance from the Declaration. He emphasizes that statement several times throughout his book, but he also qualifies it by stating it is a mystery how non-Christians will be saved outside the Catholic Church.¹⁵ I repeat, there are no overt statements of universal salvation (as the readers of ASK material understand the biblical teaching) in either Vatican II pronouncements or the “Declaration ‘Dominus Iesus.’” They are all implied.

But there are explicit declarations of universal salvation in Ladaria’s book, although they are very carefully stated. In other words, Ladaria takes the next step in putting forth not only that all men can be saved, but that all men shall be saved in Christ — even though he still does not know how God will accomplish that result. Ladaria says in his introduction: **“The title of this book proposes Jesus Christ as salvation for all humanity and not merely as its Savior”** (Ladaria, p. 11, italics his).

Professor Ladaria makes his case with explanations and commentary on the appropriate passages from the Bible that ASK readers would recognize and appreciate. Ladaria’s proper understanding and appreciation of these passages are set forth throughout the book’s 148 pages, clearly explaining the biblical verses that declare universal salvation. That being said, much of the doctrinal support for his argument comes from outside Scripture, particularly from the “Declaration ‘Dominus Iesus’” which Ladaria refers to frequently.

What this all means is that Archbishop Ladaria — as Secretary of the Sacred Congregation and one who helps define what is proper “orthodox” teaching within Roman Catholicism — is actively promoting universal salvation with powerful biblical evidence. This could not be done without the approval of his superiors, the current Prefect and former Prefect, current Pope Benedict XVI, himself an internationally recognized scholar in these matters.

Speaking of the unity and universal scope of Christ’s salvation:

“[T]his universality includes more than it excludes, among other reasons because the unique mediation of Jesus cannot be separated from God’s will of universal salvation (1Tim 2:3–5).”

• *Ladaria, p. 96*

“We are all called to place ourselves within the body of the [Catholic] Church, which will not reach its fullness until the whole human race and the entire universe has been completely renewed. Christian faith begins with the premise of the unity of humanity as a whole because of its origins in Adam, and above all, because of its destiny in Christ. It is inconceivable that salvation, as it is presented in the New Testament, is only for Christians and not for those who do not know Christ.”

• *Ladaria, p. 117, emphasis mine*

Ladaria goes on to discuss how unbelievers could possibly be saved. This is speculation and wrong, but it is in keeping with recent Catholic doctrinal trends. The Bible is clear that salvation can only come by

¹⁵ We know that non-Christians are already saved through Christ, but they will not receive their salvation or their glory until they accept Christ during the great white throne judgment period. Remember, the purpose of the Gospel of Christ is to tell people they are already saved, not how they are to get saved. Christ already has accomplished salvation for every person.

Christ, and by no other means (“**Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved**” [Act 4:12]). This is a problem for Ladaria.

Ladaria makes one interesting point, which he gained from early Church Fathers. It is that our humanity is defined in Christ’s coming in the flesh, and not through Adam. Christ is the express image of God (Hebrews 1:3). What Adam and all of us were created to be, were meant to be, Jesus fulfilled and is fulfilling at this moment. Likewise, His experience will be the experience of every human. His salvation will be the salvation of every human. Jesus is the true model for humanity (the fullness of the image of God) not Adam (a physical example of the image of God). What Christ accomplished He will fulfill for each human being (in the section “Christ’s Salvation and the Salvation of All,” pp 65–96, and 106ff). This is an interesting argument.

Interestingly, there is only one use of the word “hell” in the entire 148 pages, which Ladaria minimizes with almost no explanation:

“We may also add the early Christian conviction that hell is something neither wanted nor created by God. ... Maintaining the possibility of eternal damnation is the only guarantee of the truth and reality of the salvation offered to us, which is nothing less than God’s love.”

• *Ladaria, pp. 130–131, emphasis mine*

Ladaria says God does not want hell, and that He did not create hell. Why, then, does it supposedly exist? Who did create this fictitious hell? He says eternal damnation is a “possibility,” not a fact, even though the doctrine of hell and eternal demnation has been preached for 1500+ years as a prime Church teaching. Love will prevail, Ladaria writes. Of course, he cannot openly deny the pagan doctrine of hell because to do so would directly reject the tradition of the Catholic Church since before the time of Augustine. So, Ladaria minimizes the reference and concentrates on the positive:

“Jesus includes everyone and excludes no one, and all of us have received his fullness (cfr. John 1:16). The universality of salvation and unity of Christ’s mediation mutually affirm each other.”

• *Ladaria, p. 144, emphasis mine*

Understand that Archbishop Ladaria is not speaking about God “wishing” for all mankind to be saved, God is not merely “offering” salvation to mankind. This is not what Ladaria is saying at all. In his introduction he writes: **“Through paths known only to God, the Holy Spirit provides all of us with the possibility of being part of the paschal mystery ...”** (Ladaria, p. 12). By “paschal” he means the crucifixion and resurrection events (the term originally had reference to Passover). Yes, Ladaria uses the word “possibility” because he does not understand the mechanism whereby God will save all, even those presently non-Christians.

“The saving influence of Jesus and his Spirit know no bounds: Christ’s mediation is universal. ... Salvation in Christ is possible for all humanity, and on the horizon of theological reflection. The hope may arise that this salvation will indeed reach everyone. Salvation itself would become denaturalized if its absolute certainty would be affirmed and if we lost sight of the possibility of damnation.”

• *Ladaria, p. 12, emphasis mine*

These words seem to contradict his former statements. Look again at his words, and note how carefully he phrases his argument. In these short sentences he covers every possible equivocation of all men being saved or not being saved: **“paths known only to God,” “the possibility,” “is possible,” “may arise,” “if ... absolute certainty,” “if we lost sight,” “possibility of damnation.”** I believe this is done for a reason, so that Ladaria has a fall-back position if his advocacy is later rejected.

Ladaria makes the case that as the Second Adam, Christ’s salvation necessitates the universal salvation of mankind. **“The good news of Christ and his saving work has not, in fact, reached all human beings, to whom it is destined. This does not mean that the salvation of Jesus will not reach them”** (page 95). Indeed, it will reach them. He could have written positively: “This means that the salvation of Jesus will reach them,”

but he expressed it in the double negative. Ladaria is saying that the salvation of Jesus will reach all human beings!

Ladaria points out several times in different ways throughout the book that: we know every human being will be saved through Christ, we just do not know how God will do that. On page 148 he again explains that the process of universal salvation **“has its realization and foundation in the paschal mystery.** Christ died on behalf of every human being. This, of course, is well understood by all Christians.

“Yet by dying, he gave us life, that is the life of his resurrection. Even those who do not know him are called to this divine vocation, that is, to the perfect *sonship* in and through Christ. Christians and non-Christians reach this goal by virtue of the gift of the Spirit that associates us with the unique paschal ministry of Christ even if it is through diverse paths known only to God.”

• *Ladaria, pp. 148–149*

This statement seems to contradict his words from page 12 at the beginning of his book. However, the page 12 words were qualified, while these words at the end of his book are not qualified. He is saying it will happen, all mankind will be saved, which we know from the Bible to be true.

There are items lacking in Ladaria’s presentation, however. He denies *apokatastasis* even though Gregory of Nyssa, the most orthodox of the early Church Fathers embraced the teaching totally. Ladaria also does not mention the *eons* as set forth in Scripture, which is surprising, even though a great deal of literature would support Ladaria’s position. The work of professors Ramelli and Konstan should have been known to him and Professor Ramelli’s published works on the subject of *apokatastasis* should be well known to Ladaria. Dr. Keizer’s book was published 8 years before Ladaria’s and it had favorable notice.

Unfortunately, the unbiblical doctrines of the trinity and immortal soul, two other bedrocks of orthodoxy today besides the doctrine of hell, are supported in Ladaria’s present book. (He formerly wrote a book on the trinity.) In this he is in step with traditional Catholic doctrine as well as with most all Orthodox and Protestant organizations.

It is always important to understand that most all Christian organizations and denominations, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, evangelical, pentecostal, etc., at the very least acknowledge (if not believe) that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead. At least they have that correct.

Professor Ladaria supports his understanding of universal salvation with Vatican II documents, papal statements, and citations of well-known modern scholars Urs von Balthazar and Karl Rahner, both universalists. I believe Ladaria is trying to give the impression that the Catholic Church is a growing and progressing institution, moving toward a more mature doctrinal position of universal salvation. This creates a difficulty. Ladaria cannot say universal salvation is a strictly biblical teaching because that would imply that Scripture overrules tradition, denying the validity of 1,500+ years of traditions of men.¹⁶ He attempts, therefore, to incorporate Catholic tradition with the biblical truths of universal salvation, so that tradition can be viewed as a progressive development toward the “new” truth.

Long established Catholic tradition must not be viewed as irrelevant, useless, or worse, a lie, and the institutional Catholic Church with it! Ladaria cannot say “we knew about universal salvation all along” because Catholicism has promoted hell and eternal punishment for so many centuries.¹⁷

¹⁶ In addition, when Ladaria teaches the biblical truth of universal salvation, he must also discuss the long-standing Catholic tradition that there is no salvation outside of the Catholic faith, although that has been dealt with by Vatican II, the Declaration mentioned above, by John Paul II, and further by the current Pope, Joseph Ratzinger. In other words, if Catholic teaching now pronounces that all will be saved (contrary to the hell and eternal punishment doctrine), and now pronounces that there is salvation outside the Catholic faith (taught as late as the early 1900s), why would anyone pay attention to Catholic teaching. They are changing basic teachings held for 1,500+ years?

¹⁷ See Dr. Martin’s article “[The Folly of Tradition](#)” which explains the foibles and errors of trusting religious traditions.

So, although his biblical teaching, as far as it goes, is impressive and powerful, his historical analysis is disingenuous if not deceptive. There is little historical notice of biblical teachers of universal salvation outside of the Catholic tradition. As Hosea Ballou and John Hanson make clear in their historical works of the 1800s, the majority of the early *ekklesia* for hundreds of years believed in a clearly-stated biblical teaching of universal salvation. This detail is not mentioned by Ladaria.

Why is the Roman Catholic Church now coming out with this strong doctrinal shift that will probably take perhaps generations to be completed? My skeptical view is that this is part of an ongoing effort to stop the collapse of the institution of the corporate Roman Catholic Church.

What Dr. Ernest Martin taught for 30+ years, the Concordant Publishing Concern has taught for over 100 years, and others before them have known and taught, back to the early *ekklesia* and the apostles Paul, John, and Peter, is now being acknowledged quietly yet openly by the Roman Catholic Church. To me this is a very interesting historical development both as to the timing of the change and because it is being done so quietly, subtly, and with long-term promotion in mind.

Prophetic Significance?

Might there be prophetic significance of this current trend of increasing awareness and acceptance of universal salvation, and what might be the effect if it succeeds? That question was recently asked me by Charles Rutsch. I believe there could be a very real prophetic significance to this movement.

The truth of universal salvation is only part of the Gospel; it is not the whole Gospel of God by any means.¹⁸ The Gospel centers around Christ and His actions, His faith, and His justification of all mankind. The understanding of universal salvation is the result of Christ's redemptive acts. Universal salvation is a goal of creation. It is the goal of salvation. It glorifies God.

The biblical truth of universal salvation must be part of the restitution (*apokatastasis*) of all things spoken by the apostle Peter in Acts 3:11–26 at Solomon's Porch. That truth has certainly been lost in orthodox Christianity today and it must be "restored." Christ will not return until that restoration takes place. The truth of universal salvation, if sent around the world, will be misrepresented and perverted just like any other truth by so-called "**ministers of righteousness**" (2 Corinthians 11:15).

For God to judge the world, there must be some knowledge of truth. God judges according to truth (Romans 2:2). He judges with righteousness (Romans 2:5). He judges and pays each according to their acts (Romans 2:6), giving "**Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that does evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile**" (Romans 2:9). God does this with no partiality (Romans 2:11). "**My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because you have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you**" (Hosea 4:6).

Most people will hear the biblical truth about universal salvation, think it makes sense, discuss it a little while, and then go on living their lives without much further thought about God or living according to His wishes. After all, they and their loved ones and friends are saved, we all are.¹⁹ As Paul writes: "**What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid**" (Romans 6:1–2). God shall judge the world on what they know and how they obey Him according to that knowledge. The Ninevites in the Book of Jonah knew very little, yet they acted righteously on their little knowledge and were saved. There is more to be said on this subject.

¹⁸ When I on occasion meet atheists and tell them about universal salvation (and that the Bible does not teach an immortal soul or trinity), they are intrigued — not converted, but genuinely interested. The problem of evil is dealt with up front. They are receptive when I then talk about Christ and His resurrection as the first of many, including their own resurrection. They never heard of such things before. I view this as planting seeds. God will, if He so chooses, bring the increase.

¹⁹ See my article "[Christian in Name Only](#)."

Conclusion

None of these four books I dealt with break new ground theologically, so why am I commenting on them? Each of these books show progress of a slow and general movement toward consideration of universal salvation from several directions by scholars and by the largest Christian religious corporation. In a sense these books are reinventing the wheel. They revisit old material that has been covered before, with biblical data since the apostles.²⁰ These books show how unique Scripture is with its use of terms such as *eon* and its adjective *eonian* that are consistent yet communicate concepts of time. The authors of these books greatly desire to inject the concept of “eternity” into limited terms.

These books contribute little in the way of new knowledge, although they deal with details and nuances of facts that could not have been known to the biblical writers. For example, surveys of the use of *eon*, *eonian*, and other terms can now be done throughout all existing Greek literature through concordant-type computer studies. No matter how encyclopedic an ancient scholar’s knowledge would have been, no one could have known the entire body of Greek literature as can be done today.

A simple understanding of the *eons* is very important. It will give you the same understanding that the original recipients and audiences had of the biblical writings. In most all cases the audiences were simple people, uneducated, even if they knew how to read and write, who knew less than those writing to them. God was communicating to the people through the biblical writers.

God had the biblical writers keep the vocabulary simple, one step above street language, even when the concepts were difficult. Every communication, every book of the Bible, was written to be read aloud and to be heard by the ear with others listening and likely asking questions about what they heard. The authors of the Bible never “talked down” to their listeners and readers. The biblical writers merely kept the words and terminology simple for common people to understand.

To think that audiences composed of simple farmers, traders, skilled and unskilled laborers, and shop-keepers thought in complex and sophisticated theological terms is nonsensical. To think that the readers and listeners would comprehend the concept of “eternity” with all its supposed contextual understandings, when the concept is not defined anywhere, that is a ridiculous proposition. If scholars do not understand the supposed nuanced meanings that Paul and others supposedly intended, why do they think the original audience understood? It is more likely that scholars think the audience did not understand because they themselves misunderstand what the writer is communicating. They over-analyze the texts.

But to understand the simple concept of an *eon*, a measure of time with a beginning and an end, but having greatly varying durations (most long but some short), that is something ordinary people can understand, just as they understand concepts such as hour, day, week, sabbath, month, and year. An *eon* is a concept suited to ordinary people. The concept of eternity is impossible to define or understand, supposedly embedded within some uses of *eon* and *eonian*. It is similar in that regard to the concept of the trinity — utter confusion not found in the Bible. These are concepts of philosophers, not ordinary people:

“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

• **Colossians 2:8**

“Let no one be seducing you with empty words, for because of these things the indignation of God is coming on the sons of stubbornness.”

• **Ephesians 5:6, Concordant Version**

The first occurrence of the concept of *eon* or “age” (*olam*, Hebrew, in this case) is in Genesis after Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit from the tree of good and evil. Compare this Concordant Version translation with your own King James version. Adam would not have been immortal. He would have lived for the eon:

²⁰ There are substantial statements of universal salvation in the Book of Isaiah, which has long been recognized by scholars.

“And saying is YHWH Elohim, ‘Behold! The human becomes as one of us, knowing good and evil. And now, lest he stretch forth his hand, moreover, and take of the tree of the living, and eat and live for the eon [*olam*]—!’ And YHWH Elohim is sending him away from the garden of Eden to serve the ground whence he is taken.”

• ***Genesis 3:22–23, Concordant Version***

The idea of universal salvation is gaining popular interest and support. The response by many religious people will be emotional, just like the response to teachings denying a trinitarian godhead or immortal soul, two other fraudulent beliefs that quickly gain opponents of those doctrines the label of “heretic.” So be it. The truth will prevail in God’s own time.

The books I dealt with in this article (and many more popular books) demonstrate a scholarly engagement with what many of you have known for years, that the salvation of all mankind through Christ was planned from before the foundation of the world. That plan was carried out through Christ coming in the flesh, living, dying, being resurrected from the dead as the captain of our salvation, and being glorified with God the Father. In due time, we and eventually all mankind shall share that glory with Christ. The fulfillment of that plan shall occur within the *eons* and will abound to the glory God the Father.²¹ The apostle Paul wrote to the *ekklesia* in Rome:

“Now to Him Who is able to establish you in accord with my evangel, and the heralding of Christ Jesus in accord with the revelation of a secret hushed in times eonian, manifested now and through prophetic scriptures, according to the injunction of the eonian God being made known to all nations for faith-obedience — to the only, and wise God, through Christ Jesus, be glory for the eons of the eons. Amen!”

• ***Romans 16:25–27, Concordant Version***

Your personal salvation and glory is an integral part of God’s glory. You are loved and you are very important to God.

David Sielaff, August 2010

²¹ Romans 11:36; Galatians 1:4–5; Ephesians 3:20–21; Philippians 2:5–11, 4:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; 1 Peter 5:10–11; Jude verses 24–25; Revelation 1:6, 4:9, 5:13, 7:12.