

“Although I am not to be numbered among his converts, I was struck by the persuasiveness of many of Gregory MacDonald’s arguments, not least since they rest in an unusually adept interweaving of biblical exegesis with relevant philosophical and theological considerations. As engaging as they are provocative, the claims of this ‘evangelical universalist’ invite serious consideration and encourage further debate.”

—Joel B. Green

Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Fuller Theological Seminary, California

“Gregory MacDonald has wrestled long and hard with the question that confronts all those for whom Scripture is the supreme authority. Are they obliged to hold that God consigns to eternal punishment those who fail to believe the gospel or can they legitimately trust that the grace of God will eventually embrace all humanity? From MacDonald’s spiritual and intellectual struggle has come this passionate and lucid advocacy of an evangelical universalism. It not only engages with key passages in the context of the overall biblical narrative but also treats clearly the profound theological and philosophical issues to which that narrative gives rise. At the same time MacDonald interacts thoroughly and fairly with the major objections to universalism. Whether readers are convinced by all of his arguments or not, they will find this book an excellent, accessible and indispensable aid in their own attempts to grapple with what its author describes as ‘a hell of a problem.’ One’s only regret is that the ethos in some evangelical circles is such that the author felt compelled to use a pseudonym.”

—Andrew T. Lincoln

Portland Chair in New Testament Studies, University of Gloucestershire, UK

“Gregory MacDonald’s defense of universalism is well argued logically, theologically, and especially biblically. He is generous to other viewpoints but suggests that a universalist approach to the difficult texts is more reasonable in the light of the overall structure of the salvation story of the Bible. Evangelicals, among whom MacDonald would count himself, will find him a civil and insightfully critical dialogue partner.”

—Thomas F. Johnson

former Professor of Biblical Theology, George Fox University, Oregon

“With this wonderful book, Gregory MacDonald joins the growing body of Evangelical Christians who now accept a doctrine of universal reconciliation. But I know of no one who has set forth an equally clear, thorough and compelling case for a universalist reading of the Bible as a whole. No Christian who reads this book with an open mind will remain unaffected by its power and clarity of vision, and those who reject universalism as merely heretical, or even as perversely heretical, will likely find that MacDonald has addressed their reservations and objections with ease and great sensitivity.”

—Thomas Talbott

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Willamette University, Oregon

The Evangelical Universalist
Second Edition

The Evangelical Universalist

The Biblical Hope that God's Love
Will Save Us All

Second Edition

Gregory MacDonald

Foreword by
Oliver D. Crisp



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For

Thomas Talbott

Oliver D. Crisp

Alex C. Smith

. . . suddenly God seemed to answer me. An inward voice said, in tones of infinite love and tenderness, “He shall see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied.” “Satisfied!” I cried in my heart. “Christ is to be satisfied! He will be able to look at the world’s misery and then at the travail through which He has passed because of it, and will be satisfied with the result! If I were Christ, nothing could satisfy me but that every human being should in the end be saved, and therefore I am sure that nothing less will satisfy Him!” With this, a veil seemed to be withdrawn from before the plans of the universe and I saw that it was true, as the Bible says, that “as in Adam all die even so in Christ should all be made alive.” As was the first, even so was the second. The “all” in one case could not in fairness mean less than the “all” in the other. I saw therefore that the remedy must necessarily be equal to the disease, the salvation must be as universal as the fall.

—Hannah Whitall Smith¹

¹ *The Unselfishness of God and How I Discovered It: My Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Revell, 1903) chap. 22 (1st ed. only); <http://www.godstruthfortoday.org/Library/smith/hwsmith9.html>.

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Foreword

I DO NOT claim to be an evangelical universalist. But when I first read this book, it changed the way I thought about the scope of the Christian hope in salvation through Christ alone. There are technical books on this subject, and popular treatments of its themes. Since this volume first appeared other voices have joined the conversation, some of which echo much of what this book has to offer. But when it was published, few had dared to say in print that one could be an evangelical *and* a universalist. After all (so it was thought), that was an oxymoron, like the conjunction of the word *military* with the word *intelligence*. Yet this work is replete with reasoning that gives the lie to such preconception. It covers matters philosophical, theological, and biblical. It has a range and a lightness of touch that few contemporary theological works can match. It is, in many respects, that most elusive of things: a book that makes a step-change to the discussion of the topic it treats, while at the same time appealing to a more popular audience. I know many authors who dream of being able to do all that under the covers of one volume.

One does not necessarily read a book to find one's views reinforced. Sometimes we do so. But often (in my experience) the books that are most important to us are the ones that challenge us, or that are written from a perspective other than our own, that make us uncomfortable. For such discomfort is often the occasion of intellectual creativity and development. I read this book wanting to know "Is it really *possible* to be both an evangelical and a universalist?" It might be easy to dismiss a book with a title like this one if you have not bothered to read beyond the contents page. The old adage, "read it? I haven't even reviewed it!" is sometimes rather close to the bone when it comes to works that deal with controversial themes like this one. But if you do read it, you will find it is difficult to dismiss it as the output of some malcontent wanting to make trouble. This is a work of real intellectual honesty, written by someone existentially engaged with the questions he asks as a member of the Body of Christ. It is concerned with Christian doctrine. For this reason, it is also a work that seriously and sympathetically engages with the biblical

tradition. Even if you end up disagreeing with its author, you will surely come away impressed by the, frankly, *evangelical*, treatment of Scripture it contains.

Some, perhaps all, of the most important questions in life are contested. Think of the latest ethical problems raised by cutting-edge technology, or wrangling over how society should be governed, about representation of the interests of different groups, or the deepest problems at the frontiers of the contemporary natural sciences. It is because these are important matters that they engender debate and dialogue. This volume makes a significant contribution to a long-standing theological conundrum that has become a pressing concern in our modern world. For some, it is a dangerous book. But the best books are often the dangerous ones. This is both a dangerous and an important work. For these reasons, it should be read and pondered.

Oliver D. Crisp,
Professor of Systematic Theology,
Fuller Theological Seminary

Preface to the Second Edition

I LOST COUNT a long time ago of how many times people have asked why I wrote *The Evangelical Universalist* under a pseudonym.² The answer is as simple as it is mundane. Universalism was, at the time, considered by almost all evangelicals to be heretical. Owning up to being a universalist was a fast-track route to being theologically hung, drawn, and quartered. The pseudonym was a means of protection; but not, as many supposed, protection of *my* reputation. I had little reputation—I was hardly a household name!—so there was not a lot to lose. To be honest, I really wanted to leap forth and say, “It was I wot done it! So shoot me!” Most of the time I don’t give a fig about what people I don’t know think about me (so long as they don’t start sending me letter bombs). However, two things led me to follow the route that I chose. First, I was the Editorial Director of Paternoster, a well-regarded, UK-based evangelical publishing imprint with a noble history dating back to 1935. I was convinced that my universalism was not a hindrance to my doing the job because it was, in my opinion, evangelical-compatible.³ On top of that, I did not use my position to promote universalism and, in fact, was committed to a policy of not publishing books that presented universalist views unchallenged.⁴ I suspected, however, that if word got out that the head guy at Paternoster was a universalist then our market and our authors would not see things so sympathetically. The suspicion would be that I was redirecting the list in non-evangelical directions and this could do the com-

² For those who have not guessed already, Gregory MacDonald is a combination of St. *Gregory* of Nyssa (c.335–after 385) and George *MacDonald* (1824–1905), an early church universalist and a nineteenth-century universalist rolled into one. Originally I had wondered about Susan D. O’Gregory as the false name (= Sue D. O’Gregory = pseudo Gregory) but thankfully wiser heads prevailed.

³ For my case for universalism being evangelical-compatible, see Parry, “Evangelical Universalism: Oxymoron?”

⁴ So I did publish (and co-edited) *Universal Salvation?: The Current Debate*. That book *was* intended to open up a discussion on universalism. However, it was deliberately not a straightforward case for universalism. Rather, it was constructed as a debate with many voices challenging the case for universalism.

pany harm. I wanted to avoid such misunderstandings for the sake of the ministry of Paternoster. What people think *does* sometimes matter, even if it is mistaken.

The second reason was that I had written another book, called *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship*.⁵ That book is about how to make Christian worship more Trinitarian, more Christian, and it was (and remains) more important to me than *The Evangelical Universalist*. *Worshipping Trinity* had been having a really positive influence in some circles—albeit relatively small ones—and many of those who found the book helpful were very conservative Christians. My fear was that if word got out that its author was a “heretic” then the Trinity book would be considered guilty by association and dropped like a hot rock. I was keen not to undermine the work that God was doing through that volume; hence the pseudonym.

Doing theology in secret may sound exciting but it has big drawbacks. The thinking and writing that I did was almost entirely done on my own, with little peer review and feedback. And there were very few others that I could find thinking along the same lines—especially biblical scholars and theologians—so I was quite often making it up as I went along.⁶ That is a *bad* way to do theology and I have no doubt that the book suffered for it. So I do not consider this book the last word on the matter—nothing of the sort. But my hope is that *The Evangelical Universalist* makes a case that, while far from perfect, has enough plausibility to make the possibility of Christian universalism a live one for some people and, if it can do that, to motivate scholars more capable than I to develop and correct the ideas I have put forward. For universalism to become a serious paradigm within Christian theology we need many more thinkers and scholars to take the time to research and publish in the area. And this is beginning to happen. (Not, I hasten to add, simply because of my work.) There are some significant universalist books recently published or forthcoming.⁷ In the area of philosophy, Eric Reitan and

⁵ There is now a second edition (Cascade, 2012). The first edition was published in 2005 by Paternoster.

⁶ I ought to say that I did find a few Christian philosophers defending universalism—most notably Thomas Talbott, Keith De Rose, and Eric Reitan. Their work was invaluable. I would also like to explain my comment on p. 3 that I found Keith DeRose’s arguments “far from persuasive.” On rereading this book I realized that this comment looks like a criticism of Keith’s arguments. It is not intended to be. When one is immersed in a particular way of looking at things it often takes quite an extended period of reflection on a range of related issues before one is willing to switch paradigms. Keith’s article was my first exposure to a sensible universalist case and there was no way that one article was going to change my mind on such a big issue. *That* is why I was far from convinced.

⁷ In what follows I focus on *academic* volumes. At a more popular level quite a few universalist books have appeared since I wrote *The Evangelical Universalist*. Such books, or some of them at any rate, are very helpful, but for establishing the plausibility of the paradigm the academic

John Kronen brought out their long-awaited defense of universalism, *God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism* (2011); in the area of patristics, Ilaria Ramelli is working on three volumes about *apokatastasis* (final restoration), which, when they come out, will be the definitive work for some years to come.⁸ In the area of historical theology, I edited a collection of studies on Christian universalists from the third to the twenty-first centuries—Gregory MacDonald, editor, *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* (2011). In the area of contemporary theology, Tom Greggs, Professor of Theology at the University of Aberdeen, published his *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation* (2009). David Congdon is working on a universalist systematic theology called *The God Who Saves: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cascade Books, forthcoming). This will be an exciting and innovative work, located within the Reformed tradition. Also within the Reformed tradition is Nicholas J. Ansell's rigorous study, *The Annihilation of Hell: Universal Salvation and the Redemption of Time in the Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Paternoster, forthcoming). Of relevance to biblical studies, David Konstan and Ilaria Ramelli's *Terms for Eternity: Aionios and Aidos in Classical and Christian Texts* (2007) offers an analysis of every instance of these two Greek words in Greco-Roman texts, Second Temple Jewish texts, New Testament texts, and early Christian texts. Their conclusions strengthen the case that I make in *The Evangelical Universalist* that the NT phrase *kolasin aionion* ("eternal punishment") does not mean "punishment that lasts forever." There is also Bradley Jersak's wonderful study of hell, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem* (2009), as well as a new special edition of John A. T. Robinson's classic, *In the End, God . . . : A Study of the Christian Doctrine of the Last Things* (2011). For those who read German, there is now a major study on Paul's universalism—Jens Adam, *Paulus und die Versöhnung aller: Eine Studie zum paulinischen Heilsuniversalismus* (2009). We need all these studies and many more. In private conversation I have found growing numbers of theologians with universalist sympathies and I expect increasing numbers of books and articles in the coming years. That's all for the good and will help Christian universalism in its contemporary modes to mature.

Anyway, back to the story. For three years and four months the identity of Gregory MacDonald was known to only a small number of people.⁹

work is essential. I am also ignoring the various articles published in journals and online.

⁸ The first book will be a major study of *apokatastasis* in the early church; the second will be on *apokatastasis* in paganism of the period; the third book will be on the reason that *apokatastasis* fell out of favor. Ramelli, who is an outstanding patristics scholar, has been working on this project for about thirteen years thus far. Ramelli is also writing a more popular study of universalism in Christian history (Cascade, forthcoming).

⁹ From May 1, 2006 (when the book was published in the USA) until August 29, 2009 (when

This was a slightly weird period. To enable some kind of interaction with readers—both friendly and critical—I set up an email address for Gregory and a blog site (unimaginatively called “The Evangelical Universalist”). Thus Gregory could engage with the wider world if need be. On one occasion I even did a radio interview for a debate on the London-based Premier Radio. My voice was disguised to sound like Darth Vader in order to hide my identity.¹⁰ It sounded . . . really daft.

I must confess too that there were moments when the cheeky little boy in me rather enjoyed all the cloak-and-dagger stuff. Throwing theological hand grenades here and there, without anyone knowing who threw them, was sometimes quite fun. Whether I was acting the role of a masked hero or villain will depend on one’s perspective. Yet it was also a bit frustrating. I wanted to have an open and honest discussion on the issues and having to hide behind a mask inhibited such possibilities.

The biggest surprise for me during the “anonymous period” was that the book seemed to be finding a relatively non-hostile response from readers. Sure, there were some crazy and furious online reactions—many from people who had only read the title—but those who took the time to read the book were, on the whole, generous in their responses to it. More than a few were enthusiastic and many were cautious but open; even critics were usually not hostile. Indeed it was a long time before any substantial criticisms started to appear.¹¹ And I have no doubt that more are to come. And that’s all for the good. My hope was to stimulate a more informed and intelligent discussion on the issue and I would like to think that the book has played a role, alongside others, in doing that.

On August 29, 2009 I let the cat out of the bag and posted an entry on my normal blog (“Theological Scribbles”) titled “I am the Evangelical Universalist.” I had never planned to hide forever—it had been my intention all along to reveal who I was when it seemed right. I thought that the book may play a role in helping evangelical churches gradually come to understand universalism enough to accept it as a Christian position (even if not the *only* one or the *right* one). We’re not there yet but we are closer than we were a few years back, so I thought, “My identity is going to come out some time—bet-

I “came out” about my identity).

¹⁰ The show was broadcast on Premier Radio on March 15, 2008.

¹¹ To be honest, I imagine that the reason for this was that most of those who were likely to disagree with the book did not bother wasting time reading and responding to it. I can appreciate that—life is short. So it was only as the book began to receive more attention that critics began to feel the need to engage it. And even then I think that the position that I was outlining was not the one that they had expected and so it took some extra time to move beyond “off the peg” responses and to craft some bespoke replies. The best critiques, I suspect, are yet to come.

ter to reveal it myself than be ‘exposed.’” And, as time went on, the chances of the news getting out increased, so I took the initiative.

The actual trigger for the self-revelation was receiving the nth email in my Gregory email inbox accusing me of a lack of integrity and seeking to hinder proper academic debate. Of course, (in my view) this was not the case and in the past I had shrugged such accusations off. But I was already pondering whether now was the time and the email prompted me to think, “Stuff it! I’ll do it now!” So I wrote the fateful blog post.

Carol, my wife, was not very happy about my revelation. She was worried that I had, in effect, thrown away my job and without a job we could not possibly afford to keep our personal helicopter! (NB, that was a joke.) I was hopeful that my track record at Paternoster spoke for itself and that I had done enough to demonstrate to our authors and our buying public that the list remained evangelical and would continue to do so. But I was aware that I had taken a big risk on the job front . . . and I did not mind at all; I felt relieved.

The news traveled pretty fast, and *Christianity* magazine—the main evangelical magazine in the UK—got hold of it and decided to run it as a news item. And what made it newsworthy was that I was the man running Paternoster, a reputable evangelical publishing imprint that was, at the time, part of an international organization based in the USA called Biblica. And here I had been naïve. I had been thinking only about whether the revelation would create problems for *Paternoster* authors and readers—mostly people who like to think theologically. I judged that they would be able to handle the news. But, of course, I should have been thinking more globally. What would *Biblica’s* supporters, especially those based in the USA, make of it? Most of them were ordinary, conservative Christian folk who would not have the time or the inclination to read the book—for which I do not blame them at all. They would simply see the headline, think they knew what it meant, and make their judgment accordingly. Fair enough. But that *could* be a problem for the mission of Biblica. As I said earlier, what people think does matter, even if they are mistaken. As soon as the global issues dawned on me I decided to offer my resignation. I really do believe in the mission of Biblica, and if I was to become a distraction or a hindrance to that mission then I had to get out of the way. So by the time the news item was published (“Unmasked Universalist Resigns” in the November 2009 issue) it told the story not only of my revelation but also of my offer of resignation.

Weirdly, I was not remotely worried about losing my job. I had a very strong sense that God was in control and that he would undertake for my family. The story that followed as Keith Danby—the CEO of Biblica—considered my resignation and consulted widely on the matter has sealed my

great respect for the man. He behaved with complete integrity and honor. Suffice it to say that, after much consultation, prayer, and reflection he refused to accept my resignation. In the end, I did leave the company a few months later, although for an entirely different reason. But, lest anyone be in any doubt, I was *not* sacked for being a universalist. And I wish both Biblica and Paternoster (who are now owned by Koorong) all the good blessings of God in their future work.

The Back Story

I did not write *The Evangelical Universalist* for publication; indeed, it did not cross my mind for quite some time that it may have a life out there in the wider church. I wrote it originally as a means of helping me think through some of the issues I was struggling with. Its original audience was, for the most part, *me*, although some parts were presented to small gatherings of academics. Chapter 1 began life as a paper presented to the Tyndale Philosophy of Religion study group meeting in Cambridge in 2001 or 2002 (my memory is a bit fuzzy). Not long later I presented a basic biblical-theological case for universalism to a post-graduate seminar meeting at the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham. I followed that up with a study of Revelation—now chapter 5 in the book. That was for my eyes only. Finally, I expanded my short outline for a case for universal salvation into a book-length discussion. But while it was book-length, it was not a book nor did I intend it to be.

What changed? In 2005 I was invited to supervise a BA dissertation at International Christian College in Glasgow for Stuart Weir, a student writing on Moltmann's universalism.¹² Stuart's supervisor was away on study leave and the college wanted someone who knew about the issue to oversee the project. I had already co-edited a volume on universalism and I was UK-based so they approached me and I agreed. To my surprise Stuart wanted to write in *defense* of universalism. (This was a surprise because ICC is a mainstream evangelical establishment—and a good one—so it went without saying that universalism was not promoted.) In the process of supervising the dissertation I passed Stuart my manuscript to see if it helped. It was he who came back to me and suggested that I should offer it to a publisher. I thought, "Hmmmmm. *In-ter-es-ting*."

Now it would have been wrong for me to use my position running Paternoster to self-publish—such was clear to me from the start. And I knew from discussions with Thomas Talbott that mainstream theological publishers were very cagey about taking books that argued a case for universalism. (His own book, *The Inescapable Love of God*, had been rejected by many of

¹² Stuart went on to do an MA and a PhD in Theology at the University of Edinburgh.

the big players in Christian publishing.¹³) So I was looking for a Christian publishing company that was a bit more daring and edgy. To me, Wipf and Stock was the obvious first port of call. At the time they were just starting to move into publishing new books (prior to 2002 they only published reprints of out-of-print theology titles) and were actively hunting down potential authors. They took my book and published it in 2006. SPCK then picked it up and published it in Europe in 2008.

Things chugged along for a fair while. The book got a reasonable amount of attention online¹⁴ and in published reviews here and there and I did a small number of public presentations and online, radio,¹⁵ and video interviews.¹⁶ There was a noticeable growing openness to evangelical universalism, but mostly in pockets here and there; the majority of the evangelical world could safely ignore the book (and most of the reviews in the mainstream Christian media were understandably cautious, not wanting to lead their flocks astray). Then along came Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*. Overnight the issue of universalism went from being an issue on the margins to being a white-hot topic that everyone wanted to have their say on. None of us expected that.

The Theo-Logic of Universalism

The theo-logic of Christian universalism has become a little clearer to me since I wrote the book so I'd like to finish this preface with a word about that. Paul's phrase, "For *from* him, and *through* him, and *to* him are all things" (Rom 11:36) nicely captures the heart of this clarity. Universalism is not just about a few Bible verses and it is not just about the end times. Rather it is an element integrated into the whole biblical story. It begins with a universal theology of creation (all things come *from* God and are made *for* God). This is an important foundation for Christian universalism. And these universal divine purposes in creation continue in incarnation and atonement—Christ represents all creation before God and makes atonement for all creation (all things are *through* him). Universalist eschatology (all things are *to* him) flows

¹³ Tom's book is a classic and I am very pleased that he is currently revising it for a second edition.

¹⁴ I ought to mention, in the context, the online discussion forum at evangelicaluniversalist.com. The conversation is open to all who wish to take part.

¹⁵ The main radio event was a two-hour debate program in which Laurence Blanchard and I debated hell and universalism on Premier Radio. It was broadcast in 2009 on 17 October. Online: <http://www.premierradio.org.uk/listen/ondemand.aspx?mediaid={ebfc677d-c40c-4fd8-8f41-fe89061acf98}>.

¹⁶ For instance, I did a thirty-minute online video interview for Grace Communion International (<http://www.gci.org/YI083>). And I did a long interview (from which snippets will be used) for a documentary movie called *Hellbound*, directed by Kevin Miller. <http://hellboundthemovie.com/>. It is due for release in September 2012.

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