

UPWARD CALL

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but this is my one aim: to forget everything that's behind, and to strain every nerve to go after what lies ahead. I press on toward the finish line, where the prize waiting for me is the upward call of God

IN KING JESUS.

(Philippians 3:13-14)

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Eonian Judgment—New Age, Liberal Theology or Not?

Recently, a brother in Christ attempted to share with another believer about the ultimate salvation of all mankind and the error of believing in the modern-day concept of hell as a place of literal fire and worms. Knowing this brother, along the way, he probably also mentioned the concept of *eonian* as it relates to the age and ages. Well, the one receiving this word did not take it too kindly and informed church leadership, which led to an inquisition of the brother who had shared it. They demanded: *Where did you get this? Where did this come from; we never heard of this?* There was such an indignant rise against this understanding of scripture that the leader (head pastor) felt the need to refute it from the pulpit, which was labeled as *new age, liberal theology*.

Interestingly, about a year before this incident, I shared similar thoughts with men of this same local assembly. The initial reaction was on the same order. Actually, I thought some of them were going to run from the room screaming. But things settled down and I was able to meet with these men without conflict for the next year. Some knew what I believed and they accepted me in the group. Unfortunately, I met with another group of men from the same assembly, but it did not turn out quite the same, and I stopped meeting with them. I will leave it at this. Needless to say, an open dialogue on this subject is not welcomed at this local assembly, and in my further experience very few, if any, gatherings.

The purpose of this issue is not to air dirty laundry, so to speak, but to key off the question that is often asked: ***Where did this come from?*** We could add another question that goes along with this one: ***Is this something new?*** You see, the tradition of men has so permeated Christian teaching in our day that, when it is challenged, it is not unusual that there is a great push-back on it. Rather than search it out, many choose to brand it as *something new, something liberal*. This is especially true of those who hold to the tradition of men that says billions upon billions of mankind are going to face eternal punishment or judgment, a never-ending judgment likened to torture with absolutely no chance of reprieve or release. Simply, God is going to toast them forever and ever.

Of course, if you have read any of my material, you know that I see judgment as eonian or age-during (i.e., limited in duration), based on the Greek words *aion* and *aionian*.

Now, I have some news for you regarding the source of eonian judgment, besides the obvious fact that it is in scripture. Would it surprise you to know that the early Greek church held eonian judgment to be the truth, meaning it is not some new age, church doctrine of our day?

The early church was split by language, the Greek-speaking in the east (Constantinople) and the Latin-speaking in the west (Rome). The Greeks understood that *kolasin aionian* referred to *eonian* or *age-during judgment*; thus, they did not hold to endless punishment. The Greek root word for *kolasin* is *kolazo*, which means "to curtail; thus, to prune; figuratively to chastise, restrain." Thus, it signifies a chastening or pruning, which is a far cry from endless torture. However, this was not universally understood, especially in the western Latin church where the concept of eternal or endless judgment took hold. We could say that the controversy centered on the meaning of the word *aionian*.

In the early fifth century, Jerome translated the Greek new testament into what is known as the **Latin Vulgate**, and the Latin word *aeternum* was used to translate the Greek word *aionion*. However, *aeternum* can mean either *unending time* or an *age* or *eon*, as in a limited period of time. In a sense, both meanings incorporate the concept of time, but practically speaking, unending time is eternal.

Unfortunately, Augustine, a contemporary of Jerome, was virtually ignorant of Greek, as noted in the book *Augustine of Hippo* by historian Peter Brown: *Augustine's failure to learn Greek was a momentous casualty of the late Roman educational system; he will become the only Latin philosopher in antiquity to be virtually ignorant of Greek*. Now, when Augustine read the *Vulgate*, he chose to interpret the word *aeternum* to mean "eternal" or "endless," rather than an "age" or "a period of indefinite time." From this, he made *judgment* eternal and not eonian. It is said that Augustine nearly abandoned this understanding later in his life, but the damage had been done, and the Latin church made it a tradition that has stood to this day and permeated a vast majority of Christian teaching.

However, Augustine knew the argument of eternal verses eonian judgment as evidenced by what he wrote in *City of God*:

"For Christ said in the very same place, including both in one and the same sentence: 'So these will go into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.' If both are eternal, then surely both must be understood as 'long,' but having an end, or else as 'everlasting' without an end. For they are matched with each other. In one clause eternal punishment, in the other eternal life. (To say) 'eternal life shall be without end, (but) eternal punishment will have an end' is utterly absurd. Hence, since eternal life of the saints will be without end, eternal punishment also will surely have no end, for those whose lot it is."

Based on common logic, his argument is sound. If life is eternal then judgment must be so also. If life is eonian then judgment must be so also. However, this does not change the fact that the argument rests entirely on the Greek meaning of *aionion*, not on the Latin meaning. In other words, the Latin interpretation of the Greek word does not necessarily make it the correct meaning, especially if it is contrary to the Greek.

The fact that the early fathers of the Greek-speaking church believed that judgment was age-during was not lost on Augustine and Jerome. Augustine wrote that *very many who, though not denying the Holy Spirit, do not believe in endless torments*. Jerome wrote: *I know that most persons understand by the story of Nineveh and its king, the ultimate forgiveness of the adversary and all rational creatures*. These are amazing admissions by these fathers of the Latin church. Note that they acknowledged many and most held to eonian judgment, not a few. Ultimately, ALL are forgiven! Today, it is just the opposite as many and most hold to eternal judgment and only a few being forgiven.

So, the next time the question of "where did this come from" is posed to me, I am going to respond that it came from the early Greek-speaking church prior to the fourth-fifth century. However, I won't stop there, for I am going to ask the same question of them regarding eternal judgment. What is your answer? You are encouraged to research this topic on your own; there are plenty of good resources on the subject.