

Worship, Lament, Psalms and Hell Interviews With Robin Parry

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Introduction

This is a transcript of interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 120 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at www.gci.org/YI.

When people speak, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In these transcripts, we have removed some of the words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

We incur substantial production costs for these interviews and transcripts. Donations in support of this ministry may be made at www.gci.org/participate/donate.

Our guest in the following interviews is Robin Parry, editor for Wipf and Stock Publishers. He received a PhD in 2001 from the Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education in England. He is the author of:

- *The Bible and Epistemology* (with Mary Healy)
- *The Biblical Cosmos: A Pilgrim's Guide to the Weird and Wonderful World of the Bible*
- *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (contributor)
- *Deep Church Rising: The Third Schism and the Recovery of Christian Orthodoxy* (with Andrew Walker)
- *Exorcism and Deliverance: Multi-Disciplinary Studies* (edited with William Kay)
- *Four Views on Hell* (contributor)
- *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects* (contributor)
- *Great Is Thy Faithfulness? Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture*
- *Lamentations* (in the Two Horizons Commentary series)
- *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study*
- *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (with Christopher Partridge)
- *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship*

The interviews were conducted in Scotland by J. Michael Feazell, D.Min., now adjunct professor of theology at Grace Communion Seminary.

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A Trinitarian Perspective in Worship

Introduction: This edition of *You're Included* comes to you from the city of St. Andrews, Scotland. The University of St. Andrews, founded in 1413, is the oldest university in Scotland and one of the oldest in the English-speaking world. In its 600-year history, the university has established a reputation as one of Europe's leading centers for teaching and research. St. Mary's College, the university's divinity school, was founded in 1539. The school is still housed in its original 16th-century buildings. Join us now in St. Mary's College Hall as J. Michael Feazell interviews Robin Parry. Dr. Parry is Theological Books Editor with Wipf & Stock Publishers. His published works include *Worshipping Trinity*, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics*, and *Lamentations*.

J. Michael Feazell: Thanks for taking time to be with us today.

Robin Parry: Thanks for having me.

JMF: What was it that led you into your study of Trinitarian theology?

RP: It was an experience in my church one Sunday. I must have read something about the Trinity before coming out because it was vaguely at the back of my mind when I went into the meeting. When the meeting began, the leader at the front said, "Well, everyone, we've come here to meet with Jesus." I thought, "Okay, I've actually come to meet with some other people as well, but that's nice." They went on and they prayed, "Dear Lord Jesus, thanks for being with us, come and be with us as we sing to you." Then we sang a whole lot of songs.

Something near the beginning made me think, "This is interesting because there's Jesus talk, but what about the Father or the Holy Spirit?" There was no mention of them. So I listened as the meeting went through. Song after song, they were either what I call "Jesus songs" or they were what I call "You, Lord" songs, which are the kind of songs about the Lord or God and it doesn't say either Father, or Son, or Spirit. In the context of the meeting, it was clear that the "You, Lord" songs meant Jesus. All the prayers were about Jesus, and then we had a sermon about Jesus, but there was no mention of the Father or the Holy Spirit. We had a sinner's prayer at the end, but it was a sinner's prayer re-cast in a Jesus version, "Dear Lord Jesus, I've sinned against you. I know you love me, you died for me, you rose from the dead, come and live in my heart." Then we went away.

By this point I was thinking, there's something weird about this. The other thing that was weird was that nobody else seemed to think there was anything wrong. It just didn't click, it didn't register. I thought, now that's worrying, that you can have a whole meeting devoid of any sense of engaging with the Father or the Holy Spirit in a Christian meeting and they won't notice it.

I thought, “Maybe I should go.” I went home and got a worship album, probably the best-selling worship album in the world at the time, and thought I’d have a look through the lyrics and see what they’re saying. I read through the lyrics, and all the songs were good. On their own, there was not a problem with any of them. But as I read each song, what struck me... (it was a recording of a worship event)... looking at the whole thing, there was not a single reference to the Father or the Holy Spirit anywhere.

Intriguingly, the story of Jesus was completely collapsed, so there were references about God’s transcendence, there were references about the imminence and presence of God, but there was no reference to the Incarnation, the story of Israel, creation, no reference to the ministry of Jesus. One song referred to his death and resurrection. There were no references to the Ascension, the giving of the Spirit or the return of Christ. The whole thing was collapsed into “my experience of God now.” I thought, “That’s really worrying. As a worship event (which this was a recording of), it’s completely un-Trinitarian.”

It’s terrible once you’re led to this, you start listening for it... In subsequent weeks I listened to the songs and the prayers and so on, and I found regularly the Father and the Spirit either hardly mentioned or not mentioned at all. It was terrible.

I then started looking at a Vineyard worship album. I went through every Vineyard album published over an eight-year period, something like eight years, maybe five to eight. I went through the lyrics to see how many of them mentioned the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, how many mentioned two, and if so which two, how many mentioned all three. It was shocking. When you looked at the whole corpus of songs, all the songs were fine. I have no problem with any of them in particular, but when you look at them as a whole, there was no sense of Trinitarian balance. This is what alerted me to the issue of, when we worship, is our worship fully Christian, or is it slipping into something that’s almost Unitarian in practice, or what Karl Rahner calls “mere monotheism.” If somehow we discovered that the Trinity wasn’t true, would it make any difference to the way we did anything? Would anyone even notice?

That was the thing that set off my flags and got me thinking that I needed to look into this and see if I can do something constructive about it, which is what I tried to do by writing the book [*Worshipping Trinity*] and talking to worship leaders and song writers and so on after.

JMF: After your teaching (and you’ve done a lot of work in it), what is it about Trinitarian theology that you find the most compelling and exciting?

RP: It’s hard to put your finger on one thing and say *that’s* the thing. In the same way, when I was a kid, I used to have a favorite color: green. Whereas now, I can’t abstract a single color. Green’s beautiful when it’s alongside of these other colors, but it’s the interplay.

If there was one thing that I keep coming back to about Trinitarian theology, as I conceive it, is this sense that in the person of Christ... It came to me through one of the concerns raised when I started saying we need to be more Trinitarian, intentionally Trinitarian, in the way we worship. Somebody said, "Yeah, but shouldn't our worship be Jesus-focused, because we're Christians and the Gospels are Jesus-focused, shouldn't *we* be Jesus-focused? I thought, "That's true. We are Christians and we should be Jesus-focused." Then it dawned on me, to be Jesus-focused is to be Trinitarian because it's precisely in the incarnation of Christ that the Trinity is revealed. By definition, if you are focused on the Jesus who is revealed in the Gospels, the Jesus that the church believes in, if you're that kind of Jesus-focused, you will be Trinitarian. You can be Christocentric Trinitarian – it sort of follows.

I keep coming back to this sense that in the person of Christ, God has completed this work of salvation in the Savior, inscribed in his flesh, our humanity is redeemed. In the risen body of Christ, God has done all that needs to be done to save us. Now, through the work of the Spirit, God is working to join people to Christ to participate in that salvation.

I keep coming back to this thought, and it keeps inspiring me, because it takes the pressure off. I think, I can have hope because it's God doing this. It's not about me doing this or anyone doing this. I look at the statistics of how churches are doing, and I think, this isn't good. Then I think, God's doing this. God has completed this work in Christ. There's no way he's not going to finish it. There's no way that the Spirit's been caught by surprise.

All analogies of the Trinity have their pros and cons. I like Irenaeus' image: two hands of the Father. It has its downsides, but one of the upsides is it gives a lovely way of thinking about salvation. You have the Father, whose intention is to draw humanity and people to himself, so he does this by stretching out the hand of his Son. Then he reaches out the hand of his Spirit, and through the Spirit he draws us to Christ. Then through Christ, he draws us to himself. We're held in this Trinitarian embrace where the Father, through the Spirit, draws us through the Son to himself.

I love that image and this sense that it's God that does this. It doesn't depend on us in the end. God, the Spirit, enables us to participate, and we engage, and it's a subjective engaging with God in our relationship with God. But it's not something *we* do. It's not earning anything with God or achieving anything with God. It's being enabled by God to participate. Even our response to God is, as Matt Redmond says, a gifted response, a response that God enables us to make.

JMF: If Christians don't have some kind of understanding of the Trinity and the relationships within the Trinity and how we're drawn to that and so on... (and many don't – it's common to go into a church that doesn't have a Trinitarian point of worship or preaching. Even though they believe in the Trinity as a fundamental doctrine, most members don't think about it and they wouldn't be able to explain it if they

were asked.) What do they lose? They're Christian, they have faith, they're saved by grace and they walk in Christ and so on to the degree that they can. But what are they missing? What could they have, if they better understood?

RP: Their experience of God *is* Trinitarian even if they don't realize it, because there's no other way of encountering God, because there is no other God to encounter. When anyone has an encounter with God, it is the Triune God they encounter. But it can enrich their encounter of God, their subjective understanding and experience of that relationship with God, and it can free them up to walk with God in more liberated ways, to understand better the God who they encounter, the God who is at work in their life working out their salvation. It's still the Holy Spirit working in them even if they've never heard of the Spirit or can't conceptualize these things rightly.

It would enrich their relationship with God in many ways. For instance, it would enrich their engagement with God as a Father to realize that it's not through their effort to try and please the Father or earn status for the Father or somehow, if they misconstrue their Trinitarian theology, somehow placate the Father who's not very kindly disposed toward them. To realize that you don't have to placate God, God doesn't need placating. God loves us. This is why he sends his Son and this is why he sends his Spirit and draws us.

It enables us to appreciate more the love and grace of God and to take some of the pressure off that we have to earn stuff with God. But it doesn't change the objective fact that it is still the Father through the Son and the Spirit. That's the only way that they are able to engage with God in any sense at all, even if they can't think of it straight.

JMF: Isn't it true that there is no such thing as good in the world or love, mercy, all things good that *don't* come from Christ, that don't come from the Triune God into the world? It's not like people who are not Christian if and when they do good things...it's not like that comes out of some other universe not made by...

RP: Right. They're living in the same created order which is the good creation that the true God made. They're living as God's creatures in the image of God even if they don't realize they are. People shouldn't understand a doctrine of total depravity, say, to mean that everybody is as depraved as they possibly could be. I've always reacted against the misuse of the scripture that says, even the good things you do are as filthy rags... What the prophet means, what God means when he says that, is "You guys are so bad, you guys in particular, that even the good stuff you do is bad." He's not saying *everybody's* such that even their love and kindness, even *that's* filthy and disgusting in my sight. God isn't saying anything like that.

We can see genuine aspects of the image of God and the work of God and even the Spirit working in

and through people who don't yet know Christ, because they're God's creatures in God's world. Although the image of God might be broken in us, it's not completely destroyed. We would cease to be human if that was the case.

JMF: The only way to be human is to be human in Christ. That's all there is.

RP: Right. In one way of thinking about salvation, salvation is about the restoration of our humanity. It's about being human the way God made us to be human. Sometimes I think of it like this: Imagine our humanity is like a rubber glove. You might wash the dishes with rubber gloves... Christ, or the Logos, is like that on which we are modeled as humans. It's like a rubber glove molded on this hand, but the rubber glove has become torn and ripped and damaged.

So what God does in Christ is the very template, the very one in whose image we are made, he takes on – I don't mean *disguises* himself as a human – but he *becomes* flesh, and on the cross melts down this humanity, our humanity, and re-molds it around himself, remakes it, re-forges humanity in the resurrection. So in the resurrection of Christ, we see it's all about the glory of God in human flesh, in human beings. Salvation is about all of that, being human as God made us to be, because we need a bigger view of what it is to be human.

In Genesis, when God makes us, God makes us in his image. The word in Hebrew is *tselem*, the word used to describe the image of a deity. In the Ancient Near East you would have a temple and a statue of the deity in the temple. The statue of the deity was understood to be... They would go through a ritual, and when they went through the ritual, they believed that the spirit of the god would inhabit the statue.

Now, the amazing thing is, Yahweh forbids the use of any statues, any images like that. Because of the kind of God that God is, nothing like that, no statue that can't speak and can't act and do things, can image this God. But God authorizes in the earth his own *tselem*, his own icon, as it were, which is a human being, to be indwelt by the presence of God in the earth, mediating God's rule and dominion over creation. It's an astonishingly *high* view of what it is to be human. Amazing. And people say Christians have such a dour view that humans are just scum and worm and all that.

The Bible has a very high view of humans as God's icons through which God commissions humans that his glory, the presence of God himself, would be in humans. This is what's being restored. This is a glory lost in sin, and humans fall short of this glory. But in Christ it's a glory that's restored. So being a Christian is all about being changed by the Spirit to share in Christ's humanity. It's about in Christ, through the Spirit, becoming more human.

JMF: Going back to the topic of worship... You've done a lot of work on Christian worship, and I don't know if I can put it in these terms, but could you talk for a few minutes about what we might call the good, the bad, and the ugly of Christian worship?

RP: Sure. There's a lot of good, there's a lot of bad, and there's a lot of ugly. I guess it's easier to talk about the bad and the ugly. One thing that concerns me as a person who thinks theologically and thinks Trinitarianly is all the stuff that *isn't* in worship, particularly in my own tradition.

I'm charismatic, evangelical, free-church ecclesiology, and the way we do things has plus points and downsides. One of the changes that's taken place recently is there's been a move where you used to have the minister who would lead the whole service, and often it would have a clear theological shape, a certain kind of terrain that you would cover. You'd always have confession of sins, thanksgiving, you'd have intercessions and so on. For various reasons, this has changed to a form of worship where you have a worship leader who is basically a singer and guitar player, and worship becomes more about singing one song after another, just linking songs, and that would be a worship time.

One of the problems with that it is in great danger of cutting out crucial parts of Christian worship, like confession, like intercession. And because the songs tend to come out of the same songwriting stables, you don't tend to get songs that deal with issues like lament, or confession, or the Eucharist, or baptism, or listening to the word of God and so on. Things that are central in Christian spirituality are gone, and very quickly you lose a sense of balance or shape.

In some of the more liturgical worshiping traditions, to me it's like *Lord of the Rings* – you have this vast landscape of terrain that you're covering as you move through it. There's a sense of movement as you go through a meeting or a series of meetings. Over the whole Christian year you have this shape of movement and engaging with different aspects of God and the story of God in Christ.

Sometimes it feels to me like we charismatics are in danger of being like locked in a broom cupboard under the stairs walking in circles, and we're covering such a small terrain there's not much sense of... What holds to link the songs together is often in the key, and that means I can go from one to the other... Are they songs that have blessed me recently? But there isn't much thought often given to the theological shape and the sense of what are the kind of things that we ought to be engaging with here.

This is through no bad intent on the part of worship leaders. In my experience, worship leaders and song writers desperately want to help the people of God to engage with God. This is where their heart is at, but they have no role models in how that can be done. There's little help given to them through leaders or training courses. When I see the programs of these training courses for worship leaders, it's often all technical stuff about PAs, or it's technical stuff about the music, or it might be encountering the presence.

One of the dangers of contemporary worship, particularly charismatic, is it all becomes about my engagement with God now. Everything becomes collapsed into now. There's no sense of where we come from or where we're going, and this is bad for our spirituality, because most of our Christian spirituality and the way we were led to God is something we pick up through engaging in the practices of worship.

The ways we think about God, the language we use to describe God, the kinds of things we think to talk to God about, and the kinds of things that would never cross our minds to talk to God about, we learn through engaging in prayer. We learn those habits and things through doing it communally. If our spirituality is being shaped in a deformed (not unchristian, but sub-Christian) way when we meet together to worship, then we are selling short our congregations.

Our people are being shaped in ways so that, just to take lament as an instance, if there is never any place for lament in our worship (unlike in Scripture where there is), then when people are confronted with situations where the appropriate and honest response, the faithful covenant response to God, is like Christ himself on the cross, to lament... If we're not giving people a vocabulary to know how to respond to God in those situations, they end up feeling bad or feeling like they're somehow unbelieving... "How could I have those thoughts?" It's pastorally terrible.

One of my goals is to help charismatics to rediscover a charismatic way of lamenting in the Spirit. Christ on the cross stands in our place and laments in our place. He prays, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 22. It's not in a sense of abandoning God – it's, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" He's lamenting as a way of holding onto God in this situation. Christ does this, Old Testament saints do this.

I argue this in a paper and a book I've done on Lamentations.... One of the ways that the Holy Spirit helps us, is that the Holy Spirit, as creation groans [Romans 8] and as the church groans, lamenting the current state, groaning in frustration, groaning looking to the future, and groaning at intercession – the Holy Spirit groans with us, groans with creation. As we groan, I argue, the Holy Spirit is doing the same thing. The Holy Spirit is groaning in frustration at the brokenness of creation, and so lamenting.

The Holy Spirit is looking to the future to bring to birth, like through the travail and pain of childbirth, a new future. The Holy Spirit, through the groaning, is praying by the will of the Father for creation to be liberated. The Holy Spirit can groan through our groaning. In the Holy Spirit, we can lament in the Spirit, so our laments and prayers are taken up by the Holy Spirit and infused with his and become, rather than cries of despair, transformed into groans that take hold of God and look to the future with hope.

There is a Trinitarian way of understanding what is going on and how lament is something that God himself through Christ and through the Spirit is engaged with, and through which we ought to, as faithful Christian disciples, be lamenting, groaning with creation and praying it forward into its glorious destiny.

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Lament and the Role of Israel in Salvation History

Jesus' lament on the cross

J. Michael Fezell: We've been talking about lament in Scripture. When Jesus was on the cross he says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Many times people look at that and see the despair included, but doesn't that imply the entire Psalm from which it comes, with its conclusion that resolves a sense of despair?

Robin Parry: Absolutely. When in the New Testament someone will quote from the Old Testament, often they might just quote a verse or even a phrase, but the hearers will know the Scriptures; they were immersed in the Scriptures, and the hearers will call to mind the whole context, the whole story, the whole Psalm or whatever. When Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we need to remember that Jesus would have known how the Psalm ended, and the Psalm ends with deliverance.

The book of Hebrews chapter 2 quotes from the salvation part of the Psalm and applies that to Jesus. In the early church, the Christ-followers saw it as appropriate to take the second part of the Psalm as applying to Christ and the resurrection, and Christ as the one who praises God in the congregation.

But we need to be careful not to collapse or to downgrade the despair or the lament of Christ on the cross as if he knew it was going to come out all happy in the end anyway, so he wasn't really lamenting. Christ isn't just putting on a show. He isn't feigning lament. He really is suffering in our humanity, he really is lamenting on our behalf. He is expressing precisely how he feels. It's the positive part. In Mark and Matthew, "why have you forsaken me?" comes right near the end. This has been building up through the whole experience on Calvary. It comes out near the end, "why have you forsaken me?" It's not just a passing thing and then he gets over it.

We need to beware of somehow collapsing the hope and the despair together — so he's despairing, but actually he's happy. He's lamenting, so we need to take that seriously, but also to recognize that Jesus has not given up on God. He says, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" This is lament within a relationship with God where he knows... for the joy set before him, as it says in Hebrews, he endured the shame of the cross.

This is an important tension to hold onto, that we have cross and resurrection. Alan Lewis does this wonderful thing on the theology of Holy Saturday where he says, Holy Saturday is situated between cross and resurrection. In a way, it holds them apart, and it holds them together. On one hand, Holy Saturday

means we can't have the cross without the resurrection, or the resurrection without the cross. We have to have the two, we have to hold them together, but we don't want to collapse them into some smudge. So it gives a bit of distance between the two. We need to hear them, he says, in stereo.

On one hand, we need to hear the cross almost as it would have sounded, as it would have felt, without looking back in retrospect from the perspective of the resurrection. But on the other hand, if that's *all* you do, that can't be a Christian way of looking at the cross. At the same time, you have to hear the cross through the resurrection, seen from that perspective.

This is instructive for how we should understand lament, and lament within the Christian life. On one hand, there's a space for lament. We don't want to collapse lament and salvation together, so that the lament isn't really lament. We need to give it space to be itself. In a biblical theology, it never has the last word. We are a people who believe in the cross and the resurrection. If you let lament have the last word, it's like saying, "Go there, but there's no empty tomb."

If you look at the biblical book of Lamentations, this comes out nicely in that Lamentations ends with the one voice that they're desperate to hear. The people in the book of Lamentations are saying, "God, come, save us, rescue us." The one voice that does not speak by the end is the one voice they want to hear, the voice of God. The book ends (in the canonical form, the form in which God has seen fit to preserve it for us) without the salvation. They're looking, they're calling, they're begging, and it hasn't come. But the book of Lamentations is also preserved for us in a canonical context, and we can't read it as if it's not part of these other Scriptures, which proceed and follow it.

The book of Isaiah picks up on Lamentations on numerous occasions. In Isaiah we see God's speaking, God's solution. To give one example of this: in chapter 1 of Lamentations, over and over again, we see there's no one to comfort her. Jerusalem is desolate, and there's no one to stand by her, no one to offer consolation. Isaiah picks this up. Chapter 40 begins, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Over and over again God says, "I am Yahweh, your comforter."

On one hand, you need to hear Lamentations to give it space to be itself, because God preserved it in that form, and the Bible doesn't rush in and say, "Quick, quick, quick, let's get to the hope, let's rush to the hope." It leaves the pain, the breathing space. But it can't let it stay there, and it wouldn't be a Christian, it wouldn't be a Jewish, it wouldn't be a faithful hearing or recension of Lamentations to hear it just in its canonical form but not in its canonical context. We need to hear it in stereo.

Lamentations, in a sense, is Israel's reaction to its exile. It's looking back to the exile and it's looking forward to the restoration. It's a bit like Holy Saturday as we look back to the cross and forward to the resurrection. In some ways, as Christians, we can see Lamentations as the Holy Saturday literature of Israel. It's a way of trying to look back at what was, and what's been lost and what's been destroyed...it's

looking around at the grave, at this destruction that surrounds them, and it's looking forward to a salvation that is to come but has not yet come.

Jewish worship does this brilliantly, because every year in the Jewish liturgical cycle, on the ninth of Av, the book of Lamentations is recited. On that day in the synagogue, people sit on the floor. There is no celebration, there are no readings from the Torah, it's a day of mourning and fasting. The next day it begins with the comfort thing from Isaiah, and it moves forward then, towards the liturgical cycle of Atonement. So Jewish people have brilliantly captured this insight of saying there's a time to weep and there's a time to rejoice, and we need to give space for the two, but we need to realize that the time to weep is situated within a bigger story, and that story doesn't end with weeping.

As Christians, we want to say the reason we have hope... We recognize that there's a cross, and that the creation is marked by brokenness, and that our own lives are often broken, but we know that it can't end that way. We know that it ends with resurrection, because the tomb is empty. As Stanley Hauerwas says, we can never be hopeless people even if we might despair (maybe despair is the wrong word)...even if we might lament, even if we might feel pain, even if we might cry out. To have an honest and integrated and faithful relationship with God, we need to do that. That's the appropriate human response on certain occasions, but if it's a Christian response, it is never hopeless.

The imprecatory psalms

JMF: In the Psalms, there's an honesty of a feeling, of expression... Often it comes across as anger toward someone who has hurt the psalmist in some way. It gives the freedom to feel what we actually feel, knowing that God has already dealt with sin, both ours and others, so there's a freedom to know that he's not going to condemn us for expressing how we actually feel. Yet the freedom to express that isn't an end in itself, and it doesn't leave us alone in our lament.

RP: No. The Psalms of lament usually move through that and beyond that. Not always, but there are situations within a bigger context, and in a bigger context we move beyond that. Some of the Psalms are troubling — the imprecatory Psalms, particularly Psalm 137, smashing the children on the rocks and so on. How could that be an authorized kind of prayer? We could say various things about that, but one of them is, that it is how the psalmist feels, and it is a sense of honesty. Walter Brueggemann brings this up well in his work on lamenting Psalms. There's a brutal honesty in these Psalms — not one we feel comfortable with, but he thinks it's important to have space for that kind of thing even if you can't end with that, if that can't be where you stop.

JMF: I've had people ask about that... Sometimes it's attributed to David...he's "a man after God's own heart" and yet he's talking like this. How can that be part of the Bible and how can it be okay to feel that way? I think I've said worse than that. I don't publish it for everyone to read, but sometimes when

I'm in the car alone and there's a traffic situation, I can get like that. Sometimes when I think of things that someone has done, not necessarily to me, but outrageous things that have happened of injustice, I feel these things. I'm not David, but I don't think when we ask a question like that, that we've never felt like that. We've all said things that we would be embarrassed if they would be played back to a full auditorium.

RP: Often when you see in a Psalm the psalmist will say, "Lord, strike my enemies down and destroy them, wipe them from the face of the earth," or something... Often, it's not a sense of personal revenge that they're after. The psalmist is speaking from a place of powerlessness. What the psalmist is *not* doing is they're not saying, "I'm going to take vengeance into my own hands."

JMF: Right.

RP: The psalmist is saying, "I am not going to take vengeance into my hands. I'm not in a position to do so, and I'm not going to do so. That is God's role." The Psalm is a stepping back by the psalmist saying, "I cannot do anything about this and I'm not going to. This is God's place to do something about this." That's an important theological lesson for Christians to learn — as Paul says, "Do not seek vengeance, for the Lord says, it's mine to repay." Christians, like the Psalmist, need to learn that, even from those imprecatory Psalms.

The second thing we need to realize is, it's not personal vengeance. They're seeking deliverance and salvation. They've been persecuted by Assyrians or Babylonians... When they pray destruction on them, what they're saying is, "Lord, save us." The political reality is, what salvation would entail would be for our enemies to be removed. It reflects a sense of God's justice and judgment. These people have acted terribly, and what they have done is inhuman, and it is not inappropriate for God to judge them.

For a Christian to pray this, a Christian couldn't take it up in an unreflective way — we would have to read it through Christ, and we'd have to read it in the light of Christ saying, love your enemies, forgive those who persecute you, and so on. But there are still important lessons that Christians need to draw, even from these Psalms that at first sight seem so outrageous — they're actually prayers of powerless people who need God to deliver them from people who are treating them inhumanly, and they're being realistic about what that might look like.

JMF: In many cases historically, the enemies of Israel, didn't they do some of those kinds of things to the Israelites?

RP: It would depend when and who, but there were some atrocities; the Babylonian destruction is one instance. The people are kept in the city under siege, they're dying of starvation and disease, the cities are ravished, people are killed, exiled. It's devastating — not least psychologically, not least in the way they understood their sense of relationship with God and, "We're the people you've chosen, this is the land that

you've put us in, this is your city, this is your temple, this is your king and now the king is captured." Their whole world is falling apart. It's incredibly traumatizing.

Even aside from the issue of people starving to death and people being killed, the Bible tends to be very down on imperialism. This comes out in many ways, but here we see the military, imperial power imposing itself on this little nation. The prophets and psalmists don't tend to warm to that. It's a critique of that kind of militarist expansionistic empire-building thing.

Israel in salvation history

JMF: Let's switch gears for a moment and talk about Israel in salvation history. Is the church a replacement for Israel in salvation history?

RP: No — although I have to say that for most of my Christian life, and for most of my theological life, I would have answered yes. I now think it's one of the things that has blighted Christian theology and Christian history, is this idea that the church somehow replaces Israel — that the people of Israel have been abandoned, they were faithless and now we're the people who are doing it properly, fulfilling their mission and so on.

This is disastrous not simply for the Jewish people — and it has been disastrous for them, as any study of the history of Jewish-Christian relations will show that Christians have treated Jews despicably over the centuries and often still do — not merely that, but it's been terrible for us, because we have lost the sense of who we are.

I will give a brief summary of how I would understand what the church is. Not all Christians agree with this, but the way I think it comes out scripturally is that here you have this story, of God creates the world and his desire in Genesis 1-11 is for humanity as a whole, it's for the nations, but creation has fallen, creation has broken, how is God going to deal with that? The way that God chooses to deal with this is through electing a man, Abraham, and the descendants who come from him — not simply for their own sake, but also for the sake of the world, that through this nation and through what this nation is about and their ministry, it's going to be somehow (and it's not clear how, at the start), God will bring redemption for the created order.

So we're set out in Genesis with this way of understanding what Israel's mission is about, and Israel is called in some ways like a new humanity. Abraham is a bit like a new Adam and his descendants living in the land, Adam and Eve living in the Garden of Eden. They are to live God's way in God's land, modeling righteousness and justice, following the laws; this is the calling they have. As Paul says, "because of the flesh," actually living the Torah doesn't happen. Over and over again they're a stiff-necked people. They can't do it.

Then the covenant curses come into play. In Deuteronomy and Leviticus, God says if you do not keep

the covenant, these curses will come into play. These curses are not the collapse of covenant, they're not the breaking of the relationship, they're taking place within covenant. God's covenant is irrevocable. Paul says as much with regard to Israel in Romans 11. God's gift and God's calling and the covenant with the patriarchs is in place, it is irrevocable, and nothing Israel does can break that, but what it can do is incur all the sort of curses that take place within that.

So God starts to say, through the prophets, for Israel to play its role in creation, something has got to happen for Israel. Israel needs saving. So through Jeremiah, through Ezekiel, we learn of this... a new covenant that God will make with Israel where he will put his laws within them. Deuteronomy speaks of circumcising the heart. In Deuteronomy 30:6, it talks about after the exile, God will circumcise Israel's hearts and enable them to obey him. This is what Jeremiah speaks of as new covenant, and Ezekiel talks about putting the Spirit within you so that you'll obey my laws.

So we have this solution whereby God will redeem Israel from their exile and then the nations will come on pilgrimage, they will worship the God of Israel, and so on. These Old Testament (or whatever we want to call it) – those prophetic expectations of salvation are the key for understanding what New Testament says of the church and everything we're about.

Tom Wright put this brilliantly: Christ on the cross is standing in the place of Israel. He is like Israel writ small, I think he puts it like that. He is one man, Israel, and he bears Israel's exilic curses upon himself. As such, he is bearing the sins of the whole world upon himself because Israel is a microcosm representative of humanity. The sin of the world is focused on him, and in the death and resurrection of Christ we see the exile and restoration of Israel played out and taken to its climax.

In the book of Acts we see this worked out where lots of Jewish people start to come to recognize Jesus as their Messiah and receive the Holy Spirit, which is one of the signs of the new covenant. The Holy Spirit is given and poured out. Here we see Israel being restored in their midst. Somehow in the midst of time, in the midst of the old age, here is *the end of exile* being played out in the giving in the Spirit.

Then the Gentiles, the nations, with Cornelius and so on, come and worship Israel's God. This comes out clearly in Acts 15 with James and the Jerusalem Council. We have this picture in Acts and through the other New Testament documents – in the church, you have Jew and Gentile united into a single body, but they're not blurred together into some mush. They are both one in Christ, both accepted in Christ, because of the saving work of the Messiah.

But Israel is still Israel with its distinctive calling, and the nations, the Gentiles, are like the pilgrim nations in an eschatological foretaste. So the church is like a prophetic anticipation of the end of the age in which we see the promise realized of Israel restored, in Jews who accept the Messiah, and the pilgrim

nations coming in, the Gentiles who accept the Messiah united as one body. But the Jews are still Jews. I think that Jewish believers still should be circumcised and follow food laws and so on, Gentile believers should not, because the Scriptures are clear that when the end times come, the Gentiles will be accepted as Gentiles; they don't have to convert to Judaism. Paul is emphatic about this. If Christ has brought in the new age, then Gentiles not only don't have to, they *must* not get circumcised.

We have a vision here of the church in which Jew and Gentile exist as Jew and Gentile side by side in one body, but without saying, as has happened in the history of the church, any Jew who becomes a believer has changed their religion and ceases to be Jewish and has to give up anything that looks distinctively Jewish. I think this is a complete misunderstanding of what the New Testament is about. It's failing to be the kind of church that Jesus aimed to bring about, of restored Israel anticipated — for the end times, when all Israel will be saved, which it says in Romans 11, and all the nations will come and worship, which is anticipated in the church prophetically.

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Hope for All Humanity

Universal salvation?

J. Michael Fezell: Does the Bible give place to the possibility that God would ultimately be successful in drawing absolutely everybody to faith in Christ?

Robin Parry: Most Christians would answer that unequivocally no, but I'm a little unusual in that regard. I think the Bible provides good grounds for hope that indeed God will achieve his purpose of saving all people. I'm a little out on a limb here, although it is a Christian tradition with a noble heritage even though it's been a minority sport through the years, and it's a Christian tradition rooted in both Scripture and in the gospel itself.

I'm not suggesting it's something that if you're an orthodox Christian you have to believe this (I would never be so bold or arrogant to suggest that) but I do think the idea that God will save all people through Christ is neither heretical, nor dodgy, nor unbiblical. The idea grows out of a deep Christian instinct grounded in fundamental orthodox Christian beliefs. We believe that God created all things, and that God created all things good, and that God purposes good things for his creation. We believe that Christ becomes incarnate as a representative man not just for some people but for humanity. He stands before God as High Priest as a human in our place, as the God-man — that comes out brilliantly in the work of T.F. Torrance.

Most Christians (not all) believe that Christ not only came to represent all people before God in his life, but also in his death, and that when Christ dies, he dies on behalf of all humanity. There are various scriptures that do that, and some Christian traditions would deny it, but it seems clearly the teaching of Scripture, and it is the teaching of the majority of Christians. So already there is a deep orthodox instinct that God has purposes. God takes no delight in the death of anyone. God's purpose, God's wants, God's heart is for the salvation of all, and it's precisely for that purpose that he sends Christ to stand before God on behalf of all to die on behalf of all, and not simply to die but to be raised on behalf of all.

The question is, in one sense, salvation for the whole of humanity and the whole creation is not something that in Scripture we even hope God *might* do, but it is something that in the person of Christ himself, God has already achieved. In the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, that is already done in the past, the salvation of all humanity and all creation following from that in our place, in our representative, in our Messiah. The Holy Spirit is working in creation by uniting people to Christ through faith and baptism and joining our lives to Christ so that we can participate in the salvation that's already achieved in Christ and in the Messiah.

My conviction is that what God intends to do and what God achieves in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, God will do by eventually bringing all people to faith in Christ, and with them being united to him. I'm not wanting to suggest...often people say this, "You think everyone will be saved. Does that mean all roads lead to God? Or does that mean it doesn't matter what we do because we're going to be saved anyway, or we can go and sin...let's do all those things we want to do that are bad. We can do them because it doesn't matter, because we're going to go to heaven anyway, so what difference does it make?" I'm not saying any of that. I don't think all roads lead to God. I think the only way to God is through Christ. The only way to salvation is through union with Christ by the Holy Spirit. There isn't another option, so I'm not suggesting something that's not Christ-centered or gospel focused or about the cross and resurrection.

In some senses Calvinists are right and in some senses Arminians are right, the way I try to hold things together. Calvinists have this strong sense that God is sovereign, God will not fail in achieving his purposes. What God sets out to do, in the end, God will achieve it and God wins. That's absolutely right, and God intends to save humanity, and that's precisely what he's going to do. The Arminian on the other hand says we believe God loves everyone. We believe God wants to save everyone...of course, because of creature's free will, God sadly won't be able to achieve his purposes, but that's what he wants to do and that's what he tries to do through Christ. The Calvinist says, no, if God wanted to do that he could. If God wanted to save everyone he could. If God wanted Jesus to die for everyone he'd have done that, but that's not what happened.

I want to say the Arminians are right — God loves everyone, God wants to save everyone, Christ died for everyone. The Calvinist is right in saying God will get his purposes done, God will achieve his purposes.

Christians have always been forced into this, because we feel that some people have to end up in hell forever — that's been our unshakeable conviction. If that's what you start with, you're going to have to sacrifice something else. You're going to either have to say, as many Christians do, God could save them but he didn't want to, or you're going to have to say, he does want to but he can't, because somehow they throw a spanner [a wrench] in the works or something.

In 1 Corinthians 15 you have this wonderful text, "As in Adam all will die, so in Christ all will be made alive." In Romans 5, Paul has a similar thing comparing Adam and Christ. He's saying everything that goes wrong in Adam gets put right in Christ. "And where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." There's nothing that sin can do to deface God's creation that grace in Christ cannot put right. There's no depths that sin can go to or human depravity can go to, but that the grace of God in Christ and the death and burial of Christ can't go deeper. There's no sin that God can't deal with in Christ. The end of the story

is resurrection, it's the empty tomb, it's not Golgotha. It's the triumph of grace.

My worry with some theology is it sounds like people are saying, where sin abounds, grace abounds a little bit. Where sin abounds, what sin does, grace undoes some of it. Paul is much more robust than this. He says, "Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." There's nothing that goes wrong in Adam that isn't restored in Christ and more.

It's not just about finding proof texts, as often the discussion degenerates — look how many texts I've got. "I've got all these hell texts." "Oh, I've got all these universalist texts." We need a way of turning the biblical story from creation through the new creation in a way that tries to do justice to the whole, and I want to do justice to the texts about hell. I can say something about it in a minute. There's justice to the whole story that tells the story in a way where the ending of the story makes sense — where the ending of the story gets you where God wants to go and where God's already gotten in Christ.

I think the universalist end to the story makes sense of this. We see this in Colossians 1, in the lovely Christ hymn where it says, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, for by him all things were created." In case we're wondering what "all things" are, he says, "All things in heaven and on earth and visible and invisible," he covers the ground. Everything.

JMF: Why else go that far to say it that way?

RP: Exactly. He's says *everything* was created by him, for him, through him. Then in verse 20 he says, "And through him God has reconciled all things to himself, making peace through the blood shed on the cross." What are the "all things," reconciling all things? We know what the "all things" are because he just told us "all things" means everything. He said everything in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, everything made through Christ was reconciled in Christ, making peace through the blood shed on the cross. To me that's about as universalist as you can get, and it's Christo-centric, it's gospel-focused, it's cross-focused, it's about a work of God already achieved in Christ.

But that doesn't mean that there's no need for a response. He says, you too, you were reconciled when you first came to Christ, and so they're participating in this. We see it in 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." He's given us the message of reconciliation, so *be reconciled to God*. There's this imperative. God's done this in Christ, he's reconciled the world to himself and we've got a message now, we proclaim what God has done in Christ. There's a call that people need to participate in that, to be reconciled. Not through doing something themselves, but through coming to throw themselves on the mercy of God, to trust him, to put their trust in the grace of God and through the Spirit be united to join their lives with Christ in faith and in baptism.

In Colossians we have this thing that runs from creation through the cross to new creation, and it's a way of telling this biblical story that the story ends in the way you think that's right, that's the way it

should end. If you say the story ends where some people are suffering forever and ever and there's no possibility of redemption for them, you think (and this is for me, as I ask this question, I'm not suggesting this is what all Christians think, because it's not what most Christians think), How is that an ending that makes sense to the story? It seems out of place. Is God's love somehow deficient or is his power somehow deficient or is the cross somehow deficient? What's gone wrong, how has it gone wrong to end up like this?

Hell

I want to find a way to say, How can we do justice to what the Bible says about hell, given that kind of framework, because the Bible speaks clearly about it, and Jesus speaks clearly about it. If we're going to be those who, rather than say this is what I'd like to think God is like, and make God in our own image, we have to respond to revelation. We have to say these texts are important, and we need to do justice to them in our theology.

Why assume that hell is a place from which there is no redemption? Why is this unwritten rule that if you go to hell, that's it, there's no exit, even if you repent, even if you throw yourself on the mercy of God, even if you put your faith in Christ? – that's it, tough.

There are biblical grounds for seeing that there is an eschatological judgment and some people will experience it, but it is not a point of no return. I think this comes out nicely in the book of Revelation, where you have the two most ferocious hell texts in the Bible. In chapter 14 we have the smoke of their torment ascending forever and ever, and in chapter 21, you've got the lake of fire and sulfur. It's where all the medieval images of what people imagine hell is like comes from, this very graphic imagery, which is drawing on Old Testament imagery.

What's amazing is that both of these texts, when you read them in context, are chronologically followed by a picture of the redemption of the very nations who have it's just been said that the smoke of their torment arises or that they're in the lake of fire. In chapter 15 we have this (like an epilogue) where the redeemed are standing on the lake of fire. They talk about all "the nations." (In Revelation, the nations are always the baddies. The church are never called the nations, the church are those who are called out *from* the nations, and they're always distinguished from the nations.) But all the nations will come and worship you, it says [Revelation 15:4]. But hold on a minute, they've just been chucked into the lake of fire.

It's clearer in chapter 21, where we see the kings of the earth (also always baddies in Revelation). The kings of the earth are thrown into the lake of fire, the nations are slain by this Messiah, Jesus. He comes back with a sword from his mouth and they are destroyed [Revelation 19:19-21]. They've had it, this judgment. But then we read in chapter 21, we see this image of the new Jerusalem and the gates are

always open and the kings of the earth and the nations are bringing their treasures in [Revelation 21:24]. You're thinking, hold on a minute, they're the guys that have just been there in the lake of fire – what are they doing here?

But the doors are open, and I argue (in a book I wrote) that they're coming, being redeemed and washed in the blood of the Lamb and coming out of that into redemption after death, a sort of post-mortem union with Christ. So in the end, God will “be all in all,” as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 [verse 28]. That's the sort of destiny I envisage and which inspires me with hope when I see a lot of the really terrible things that happen in the world, but in Christ God has redeemed. In the end, God will bring about, for the whole creation...what he's already done for creation in Christ.

JMF: What about the passage (in Acts 2, I think it is) where in Peter's sermon it's talking about the times of refreshing, times of restitution of all things? A lot of times people raise the issue of, does God love Adolf Hitler, does God love Mussolini? They can't comprehend that somebody who was that destructive of other people could possibly be saved, and so the person themselves is decided. But it would seem that once everything is restored, everything that Hitler may have taken away from anyone is resolved, restored in the way that it would be in the age to come...the life is back, the ability of the people who were destroyed by someone like Adolf Hitler... (Well, it could be anybody. You have people go wild and kill a family, you know?) Their ability to forgive would be resolved as well, and we're redeemed and made immortal and enter the fullness of the kingdom — ability to forgive would be not a question anymore.

RP: Yes. People often raise the Hitler thing because Hitler's crimes are so terrible. They become emblematic.

Salvation never trivializes sin. In the cross, God saves us through the cross, and on the cross sin is not trivialized or passed over or ignored. We see the horror of sin for what it is, exposed — and that is our sins as well as Hitler's. But if we're Christians and we understand something of the grace of God...(I sometimes wonder if Christians raise the Hitler thing I think, Do you think *you* deserve to be saved? Hitler doesn't deserve to be saved, it would be wrong for him...but you're okay, it's all right if God saves you, that doesn't require too much grace “because I wasn't really that bad.” I think it betrays a failure to understand God's grace, God's love, but also the transforming power of Christ in the Spirit.)

I do think God loved Hitler, because Hitler was a human being made in the image of God and terribly broken and warped and evil – but not so broken that he can't be restored in Christ, not so evil that God can't change him by the Holy Spirit. No sin is that deep or that big that it can't be restored in Christ, and no person is that broken that they can't be restored in Christ. The same grace of God that saved you and me is the same grace of God that can save someone like that and enable a reconciliation to take place.

Hitler would have to experience remorse, regret, repentance and all of that, but I don't see how it can be a Christian instinct that it would be somehow appropriate for God to save me but not Hitler.

JMF: Two things come into play. Some people feel a sense that whatever someone has done, they need to be punished at least enough to experience what they perpetrated on somebody else, and that's their sense of fairness. Others feel a sense of needing vengeance, needing a sense of justice or whatever. It has always struck me that we don't appreciate the fact that, at least what I think is a fact, that we all have in us to be exactly like Hitler, given the opportunity, given the circumstances, given the power, the authority to wreak some sort of vengeance or justice on people that we don't like, that we feel are in our way, we feel that are a drag on society or whatever, and everybody has their different views of who that might be. I think within our hearts we feel that from time to time.

If we're going to be honest with ourselves, if we had the opportunity and a council around us that said that's the right thing to do, that's what we need to do to further society or whatever, we all have it in us to react that way. We do react that way for a moment with our own families; with people we care about, we can have a moment of anger that reflects what's in our heart. We all need a redemption from that kind of thing. To single out an individual who is notorious and then say, "I could never be like that," I think is naive and silly on our parts.

RP: That's one thing that's scary about those psychological experiments with electric shocks. It was set up where somebody pretended to be in the chair receiving electric shocks when, in fact, they were an actor, they weren't [receiving shocks] at all. The psychologist would invite someone to control the levels of electricity. Whenever the person in the chair got an answer to the question wrong, the participant had to administer an electric shock to them. Each time they got it wrong, they turned the shock up. There was no electricity at all, but they didn't know that.

What they found is if the scientist told the person, "It's okay, they might be screaming and make a lot of noise, but they'll be fine, just keep doing it," the number of people who were willing to administer lethal electric shocks was very disturbing. This was research done on the back of "Why was it that apparently decent, good German guards would be prepared to participate in the Holocaust just because they were told to by people they trusted?" It's scary to realize some of the things that we might be prepared to do in certain circumstances.

JMF: We've never faced the circumstances, so how do we know how we would respond? The point is that we need redemption as much as the next person. It's no surprise that Christ came for all of us. We all need redemption, we're all capable of that. Sin is sin. I've never seen that as a good argument even though you could understand it, especially if you're a victim of someone.

RP: Sure. There are arguments against the view that I take, and I sympathize with some of them. It's

not the mainstream historic tradition. The most spiritual Christians in our history, most of them have believed in traditional views of hell, and the best theologians in our tradition, most of those have believed in traditional views of hell, and I acknowledge that. I wouldn't for a minute suggest that if you believe in a traditional understanding of hell you're careless or you're corrupt or anything of the sort. I just think the traditional understanding of hell is one that creates tensions within a traditional Christian theology of the doctrine of God that are problematic.

Often people will go, "You need to understand that God is loving, but he's also just." Then they give me that knowing look, as if somehow I'm wanting to say God's loving, but he's not just. He's loving but he doesn't punish people. That's so wrong-headed to me because God hasn't got two sides in there — sometimes I do loving things and sometimes I do just things. *Everything* that God does is motivated by the holy love of God. Everything that God does is just. Everything that God does is loving.

If God could do things that were just but not loving, as is being implied, hell is God being just but it's not God being loving. I think, hold on here, if everything God does is motivated by the holy love of this God who is an integrated God, he's not schizophrenic or something...you need to give an account of hell where you can say this is something that would be done by a holy and loving God. This action of sending someone to hell is an action that is consistent not just with God's justice but also with God's love.

It's not that I have some sentimental view of love. I seek to have a biblical view of love. I have an understanding of love that is based around how God has revealed his love to us in Christ — what the cross is about and this story that's stretching the notion, and shaping the notion of what God's love is like, around creation and redemption. How can it be the case that God is love, if some of the things he does are "just" but not loving? It has to be loving. If it's eternal torment with no hope of redemption, how is that loving? It becomes a problem. How is that an act of God, the holy, loving God?

JMF: I guess it depends on one's definition of love. I attended a lecture by a noted American theologian on this topic of God's justice. Someone asked the question, "How can I enjoy heaven if I'm looking at my loved ones writhing in hell?" He said, "If you understood God's holy love, you would know that God's love is consistent with that. He enjoys the destruction of his enemies, and you will enjoy it as well. That is how God's love is, and you will experience God's love that way, too."

RP: That's a very dehumanizing theology. What kind of human being is that shaping you to be?

JMF: God has created us with a sense of love that wars against such nonsense.

RP: Exactly. It's a repulsive notion. But it comes out of a desire to submit to revelation, and I can respect that.

JMF: Yeah, a desire to uphold the sovereignty of God.

RP: Yeah. But you end up with a theology which is shaping humans where what it is to be fully

human and fully redeemed is that we would be able to look at people suffering in excruciating pain and rejoice in it.

JMF: It takes a logical definition of how God must be and then it takes, by logic, in order to safeguard the sovereignty, and discards all sense of love that's found in Scripture and turns it on its head to fit that. He went on to say, "You have to understand that God is an infinite God and that a sin against God therefore is an infinite sin, and infinite sin requires an infinite punishment, and it's only fair and just." I thought a third grader would not reason in such nonsense! How can a sin from a human being who is not infinite be infinite? Nothing about a human being is infinite — so you're going to say a human sin is infinite? That doesn't make sense.

RP: You're greatly overestimating human capacities there. I've argued at some length against that argument in my book, *The Evangelical Universalist*. If God is shaping us to be more loving, more sensitive to the pain of others, then you would think that the combination of redemption...when we're fully redeemed and so on, we would see the suffering of others and experience it with sorrow. This is how you see God responding to the suffering, even the suffering that God himself inflicts. In the book of Jeremiah, for instance, God punishes Israel for their sin, and yet several times we see God lamenting over the suffering of the people. You don't see God going, "This is deserved and it's just, and so I rejoice in it."

JMF: Precisely.

RP: It might be deserved and it might be just, but God's not rejoicing in it. God takes no delight in the death of the wicked, as Ezekiel says. It paints a vision of God, God somehow rejoicing in this and so we should be rejoicing in this. We will be standing there looking at maybe our children who have turned away from the Lord, suffering, and we will praise God, "Yes, this is glorious." Something inside of most people is repelled by that.

JMF: Yes.

RP: I think that's a deep Christian instinct based on a Christian understanding of what love is and what it is to be a human and what it is for God to be God and God to be loving. It's not just sentimentalism.

JMF: Hosea 11, "My heart recoils within me, how can I give you up?" In the face of the punishment, God can't even endure watching it, so he reverses it. He says to us, "Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you." What is this, something he will not, cannot do? It makes no sense.

RP: Which is a problem. This is an argument that an 18th century Baptist preacher called Elhanan Winchester, a revivalist during the latter part of the 18th century who also happened to be a universalist, so he was quite unusual. He employed this argument. He says, "Are we saying that God is calling us to do things that he himself doesn't do? He's calling us to love our enemies, but he doesn't do that. He's calling

us to pray for the lost with hope for their salvation, but he doesn't, because he knows they're not going to be saved, so he's got no hope for their salvation. Is God requiring us to do things that he doesn't do?"

It's problematic. There are all sorts of problems ... What got me into this was I read William Lane Craig's book, *Only Wise God*. William Craig is a brilliant evangelical philosopher. He was talking about a way in which it might be possible, it's controversial, as to how God could be sovereign and humans could have free will, understood in this sort of libertarian sense of being able to do something or not do it. I thought, that's amazing. God can allow us freedom, and get his will done. Then almost immediately, this was years ago, I thought, "but then why does anyone end up in hell forever, because if God could get his will done as well as allowing us our freedom, how does that work?"

He [William Craig] has some attempt to argue how it is that God can allow some people to be in hell, and, to my horror (because I really wanted to believe in the traditional view of hell), it didn't work! I thought, "I am not at all persuaded by this." That really unnerved me, because at the time I thought, "I know that the Bible says that some people will be in hell forever." I thought that was a given, and not open for question. That then started me on a search, have I understood the Bible right? Haven't I?

I began searching for a few years trying to think it through, and I came to conclusions which were different from most Christians, but in a sense I want to say, "Look, what I believe is orthodox. It's consistent with everything in the Creeds, it comes out of the evangel, it's gospel-focused, it grows out of a reflection on the cross, it's Christ-centered, it's Trinitarian, it affirms the inspiration of Scripture, and it tries to do justice to a whole load of texts, including hell texts. It is not, in terms of orthodox Christianity, heretical, although it might be fringe. I want to argue this is a view that should be tolerated as a possible expression of orthodox Christianity.

JMF: I would add that even if some people do hold out and never respond to God's love, God's love is no less what it is for them, and the Scripture makes plain what God's heart is and his desire is, even if he does allow someone to hold out (which I have to struggle with, even though I have to allow it, because I don't know), but I do know God's heart because he reveals it, and I know that he's awfully good at what he does.

Editor's note: Grace Communion International does not teach universalism. Our website contains this statement:

In Jesus Christ, who is God's elect for our sakes, all humanity is elect, but that does not necessarily mean that all humans will ultimately accept God's free gift. God desires that all come to repentance, and he has created and redeemed humanity for true fellowship with him, but true fellowship can never constitute a forced relationship. We believe that in Christ, God makes gracious and just provision for all, even for those who at death appear not to have yet believed the gospel, but all who remain hostile to God remain unsaved by their own choice.

For more details, see the article at <https://www.gci.org/gospel/universalism>.

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About the Publisher...

Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshipping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in southern California. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at www.gci.org.

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

To find a congregation, write to one of our offices, phone us or visit our website. If we do not have a congregation near you, we encourage you to find another Christian church that teaches the gospel of grace.

We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

Our work is funded by members of the church who donate part of their income to support the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news, and that is what we strive to do in our literature, in our worship services, and in our day-to-day lives.

If this e-book has helped you and you want to pay some expenses, all donations are gratefully welcomed, and in several nations, are tax-deductible. If you can't afford to give anything, don't worry about it. It is our gift to you. To make a donation online, go to www.gci.org/participate/donate.

Thank you for letting us share what we value most — Jesus Christ. The good news is too good to keep it to ourselves.

See our website for hundreds of articles, locations of our churches, addresses in various nations, audio and video messages, and much more.

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You're Included...

Dr. J. Michael Fezell talks to leading Trinitarian theologians about the good news that God loves you, wants you, and includes you in Jesus Christ. Most programs are about 28 minutes long. Our guests have included:

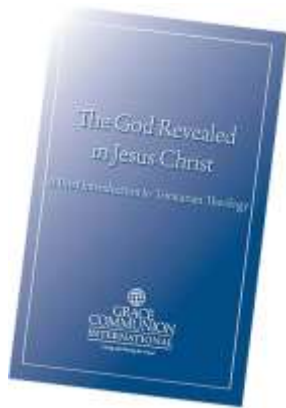
Ray Anderson, Fuller Theological Seminary
Douglas A. Campbell, Duke Divinity School
Elmer Colyer, U. of Dubuque Theological Seminary
Gordon Fee, Regent College
Trevor Hart, University of St. Andrews
George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary
C. Baxter Kruger, Perichoresis
Jeff McSwain, Reality Ministries
Paul Louis Metzger, Multnomah University
Paul Molnar, St. John's University
Cherith Fee Nordling, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary
Andrew Root, Luther Seminary
Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews
Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University
N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews
William P. Young, author of *The Shack*

Programs are available free for viewing and downloading at www.youreincluded.org.

Speaking of Life...



Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to www.speakingoflife.org.



Want to read more?

Readers in the United States are eligible to receive a free booklet, *The God Revealed in Jesus Christ: An Introduction to Trinitarian Theology*. This booklet explains, in simple language, how all our most important questions are answered by a simple starting point: Who is God? We can be confident that God has planned something excellent for us. To have a hard copy mailed to you, phone 1-800-423-4444. Readers in other nations may read the booklet online at www.gci.org/god/revealed.

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Grace Communion Seminary

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Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of people engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the church.

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For more information, go to www.ambascol.org

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