

Introduction: This special 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, Vice-President of Grace Communion International, interviews Robin Parry. Dr. Parry is Theological Books Editor with Wipf and Stock Publishers. His published works include *Worshipping Trinity*, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics*, and, most recently, *Lamentations*.

Mike Feazell: Does the Bible give place to the possibility that God would ultimately be successful in drawing absolutely everybody to faith in Christ?

Robin Parry: I think most Christians would answer that unequivocally no, but I'm a little unusual in that regard. I do think that the Bible does provide good grounds for hope that indeed God will achieve his purpose of saving all people. And I know I'm a little bit 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 I think it's a Christian tradition rooted in both Scripture and in the gospel itself. And I'm not suggesting it's something that if you're an Orthodox Christian you have to believe this, I mean, I would never dare to 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. What we want to say ... I mean in a sense 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 although ... 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 list comes out brilliantly in the work of T.F. Torrance.

Most Christians, not all, most Christians 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 I'm aware that 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 we have ... there is a deep orthodox instinct that God has purposes. It's not ... God takes no delight in the death of anyone. God's purpose, God 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. And so the question is, in one sense, you know, I want to say salvation for the whole humanity and the whole creation is not something that in Scripture we even hope God might do but it is something that in the

very person of Christ himself, God has already achieved. So 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. And what the Holy Spirit is doing 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. And so 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. So I'm not wanting to suggest ... often people say this, "Oh my goodness, 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 because ... let's do all those things we want to do that are really 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. But 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, 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. I'm really wanting to say that in some senses Calvinists are right and in some senses Armenians are right, the way I try and hold things together. Because Calvinists have this very 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. I want to say that's right, that's absolutely right, and God intends to save humanity, and that's precisely what he's going to do. The Armenian 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. And the Calvinist, of course, says, well, 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 Armenians 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.

And Christians have always been forced into this, you know, 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, well God could save them but he didn't want to or you're going to have to say well, he does want to but he can't because somehow they ... in the works or something, you know. The problem there is we ... in Romans 5 you have this wonderful taste, you know, "As in Adam all will die ..." This is 1 Corinthians 15, "As in Adam all die so in Christ all will be made alive." But in Romans 5, Paul has a similar thing comparing Adam and Christ. And

he's basically saying everything that goes wrong in Adam gets put right in Christ. "And where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. And there's nothing that sin can do to deface God's creation that grace in Christ cannot put right. And so there's no depths that sin can go to or human depravity it can go to but that the grace of God in Christ and the death and burial of Christ can't go deeper. And there's no sin that God can't deal with in Christ." And the end of the story is resurrection, it's the empty tomb, it's not Golgotha. You know, it's the triumph of grace.

And 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. Whereas 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, and more. And so we get this ... it's not just about, you know, finding proof texts as so often the discussion degenerates - I mean, look how many texts I've got, you know? I've got all these hell texts, oh, I've got all these universalist texts. And I think what we need is a way of turning the whole 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. And 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 actually gets you where God wants to go and where God's already gotten in Christ. So I think the Universalist end to the story makes sense of this. And 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." And in case we're wondering what all things are, he says, "All things in heaven and on earth and visible and invisible," you know, he just kind of covers the ground. Everything.

MF: And why else go that far to say it that way?

RP: Exactly. I mean, he's says everything, everything was created by him, for him, through him. And then later on in Verse 20 he says, "And through him God has reconciled all things to himself, making peace through the bloodshed on the cross." And you think, well, what are the all things making ... you know, reconciling all things. Well we know what the all things are because he just told us all things means everything, everything. He's just, I mean he said everything in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, everything made through Christ, reconciled in Christ, making peace through the bloodshed on the cross. Now that doesn't ... I mean, that to me sounds, that's about a Universalist as you can get and it's Christ-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. And so he says, you know, you too, you were reconciled when you first came to ... and so they're participating in this. I mean, we see it in II Corinthians 5 where Paul says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." And

he's given us the message of reconciliation, so be reconciled to God. So there's this imperative, you know? 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. And 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.

So, you know, in Colossians we have this thing that runs from creation through the cross to new creation, and it's a rare telling this biblical story that, well the story ends in the way you think, that's right, that's the way it should end. Well as if you say the story actually ends where some people are suffering forever and ever and there's no possibility of redemption for them, you think well how is that ... 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 just seems out of place. Is God's love somehow deficient or his is power somehow deficient or is the cross somehow deficient? What's gone wrong, how has it gone wrong to end up like this? So I want to find a way then to say well, how can we do justice to this stuff, what the Bible says about hell, given that kind of framework because the Bible speaks very clearly about it and Jesus speaks very clearly about it. And 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, you know? And so we have to find ... we have to say these take are important and we need to do justice to them in our theology.

But what I want to do is to say well, why assume that hell is a place from which there is no redemption? Why is that this sort of 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. And I think there are biblical grounds for seeing that it is ... yes there is an eschatological judgment and yes it is something that some people will experience, but it is not a point of no return. I think this comes out nicely in the book of Revelation where you have this ... the two most ferocious hell texts in the whole Bible. In Chapter 14 we have the smoke and the torment ascending forever and ever and in Chapter 20, 21, you've got the lake of fire and sulfur ... and it's where all the, you know, the evil images of what people imagine hell is like comes from this very graphic imagery, which is drawing on Old Testament imagery. But what's amazing about this 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 just been said that the smoke of their torment arises or that they're in the Lake of Fire. We read in the next section ... so 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 that we know 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 here all the nations will come and worship you, it says. But hold on a minute, they've just been chucked in the Lake of Fire. It's even clearer in Chapter 21 where we see the Kings of the Earth also always baddies in Revelation. The Kings of the Earth thrown into the Lake of Fire, the nations are slain by this messiah, Jesus he comes back with a sword from his mouth and destroyed. That's it, you know? 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. And you're thinking, hold on a minute, but 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 yeah, I argue, in a book I wrote that they're actually coming, you know, 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. And so in the end, God will do all-in-all as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15. That's the sort of destiny I envisage and which sort of inspires me with hope when I see a lot of the really terrible things that happen in the world, I think, but in Christ God has redeemed. And in the end, God will bring about, you know, for the whole creation ... what he's already done for creation in Christ.

MF: What about the passage in Acts Chapter 2 I think it is ... it speaks ... where ... in Peter's sermon where it's talking about the times of refreshing, times of restitution of all things? Because a lot of times people will raise the issue of well, does God love Adolf Hitler, does God love Mussolini? And they can't comprehend that somebody who was that destructive of other people could possibly be saved and so the person themselves is sided. But it would seem that when ... 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 as opposed to, you know, maybe just ... the life is back, that the ability of the people who were destroyed by someone like Adolf Hitler ... well, it could be anybody. I mean, you have people just go wild and go 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. And of course, you know, people often raise the Hitler thing because Hitler's crimes are so terrible, you know? They sort of become emblematic of ... but, you know, salvation never trivializes sin. In the cross, God doesn't ... 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, you know, if we're Christians and we understand something of the grace of God ... I sometimes wonder when people raise the Hitler thing, if Christians raise the Hitler thing I think that ... do you think you deserve to be saved? You somehow ... Hitler doesn't deserve to be saved, it would be wrong for ... 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. You know, when we talk about ... 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. Nobody, no sin is that deep or the big that it can't be restored in Christ and no person is that broken that they can't be restored in Christ. And the same grace of God that saved you and me is the same grace of God that can save someone like that and, of course, enable a reconciliation to take place. And Hitler would have to experience remorse and regret and repentance and all of that, but I just don't see how it can be a Christian instinct that it would be somehow appropriate for God to save me but not Hitler.

MF: Two things come into play. There's ... 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 that ... well it's the sense of needing a vengeance and so on, needing a sense of justice or whatever. It's ... 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. And 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, in fact, 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. And we all need a redemption from all that kind of thing. To single out an individual like ... who has, 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 of the things that's really scary about those psychological experiments with the 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 at all. And the psychologist would invite someone to control the levels of electricity. And whenever the person in the chair got an answer to the question wrong, the participant had to administer an electric shock to them. And each time they got it wrong, they turned the shock up. In fact there was no electricity at all, but they didn't know that. And what they found is if the scientist told the person, "It's okay, you know, they might be screaming and make a lot of noise, but they'll be fine, just keep doing it," the number of people who actually were willing to administer lethal electric shocks was very disturbing. And 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. And it's quite scary to realize some of the things that we might be prepared to do in certain circumstances.

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

RP: Yeah. Sure, sure. And there are, I mean, there are arguments against the view that I take, and I, you know, I sympathize with them, some of them. It's not the mainstream historic tradition. And the most spiritual Christians in our history have, you know, 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, you know? 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 it's a tradition ... the traditional understanding of hell is one that ends up forcing us to reject ... it creates tensions within a traditional Christian theology of the doctrine of God that is problematic. I mean, oftentimes people will go, "Yeah, but you see Robin, what you need to understand is God is loving, but he's also just." And 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. Well you know, that's so wrong-headed to me because I think you can't ... 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 well, 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, loving God - a holy and loving. And 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. And if ... it's not that I have some sentimental view of love, you know? I think I have ... 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 whole story that's stretching the nation and shaping the nation of what God's love is like around creation and redemption, you know? I think, I wonder if ... how can you say, 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. And if it's eternal torment with absolutely no hope of redemption, how is

that loving? It becomes a problem. How is that an act of God, the holy, loving God.

MF: I guess it depends on one's definition of love. I attended a lecture by a noted American theologian, and it was on this topic of God's justice. And someone asked the question, "How can I enjoy heaven if I'm looking at my loved ones writhing in hell?" And he said, "Well, 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?

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

RP: Exactly, exactly. I mean, it's a repulsive notion, I think. I can understand the sort of ... it comes out of a desire to submit to Revelation, and I can respect that.

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

RP: Yeah. But you end up where you have 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.

MF: It takes some kind of 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 actually found in Scripture and turns it on its head to fit that. In fact, he went on to say that, "Look, you have to understand that God is an infinite God and that he ... that a sin against God therefore is an infinite sin. And infinite sin requires an infinite punishment, and it's only fair and just." And I thought that is ... a third grader would not reason in such nonsense! How can a human being who is not infinite ... how can a sin from a human being be infinite? Nothing about a human being is infinite - so you're going to say a human sin is infinite? That doesn't even make sense.

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

MF: Precisely.

RP: God ... yes, it might be deserved and yes it might be just, but God's not rejoicing in it. God takes no delight in the death of the wicked, as Ezekiel says. And so you have this ... it paints a vision of God, God somehow rejoicing in this and so we should be rejoicing in this. You know, 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.

MF: Yes.

RP: And I think if anything that's because we've got sinful minds. I mean, 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.

MF: 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. And he calls on us to ... doesn't he? I mean, he says to us, "Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you." And yet, what is this something he does not, will not, cannot do? It just makes no sense.

RP: Which is, I guess a problem, you know? Is God calling ... this is an argument that an 18th Century Baptist preacher called Alhana Munchester (ph), a revivalist during the latter part of the 18th Century who also happened to be a Universalist, so he was quite unusual. And he employed this argument. He says, you know, "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 just, it's problematic. And there's all sorts of problems with ... I have yet to see ... I mean, what actually got my into this was reflecting ... I read William Lane Craig's book, *Only Wise God*. And William Craig is a brilliant evangelical philosopher. And he was talking about a way in which it is possible, 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 Unitarian sense of being able to do something or not do it. And I thought wow, that's amazing. So God can allow us freedom and get his will done. And then I 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? And so he 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 a talk threaded by this. And that really unnerved me because at the time I thought, "But 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. And that then started me on a search, you know, have I understood the Bible right?

Haven't I? And yeah, so 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 evangelist Gospel focused that grows out of a reflection on the cross, it's Christ-centered, it's Trinitarian, you know, 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. And so I just want to argue this is a view that should be tolerated as a possible expression of Orthodox Christianity.

MF: And I would just add as well that even if there are those who do hold out and never do respond to God's love, God's love is no less what it is for them, and the Scripture makes absolutely 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, I guess, 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.

RP: Yeah.

MF: Anyway, thank you so much for being with us.

RP: Thank you.

MF: We appreciate it very much.