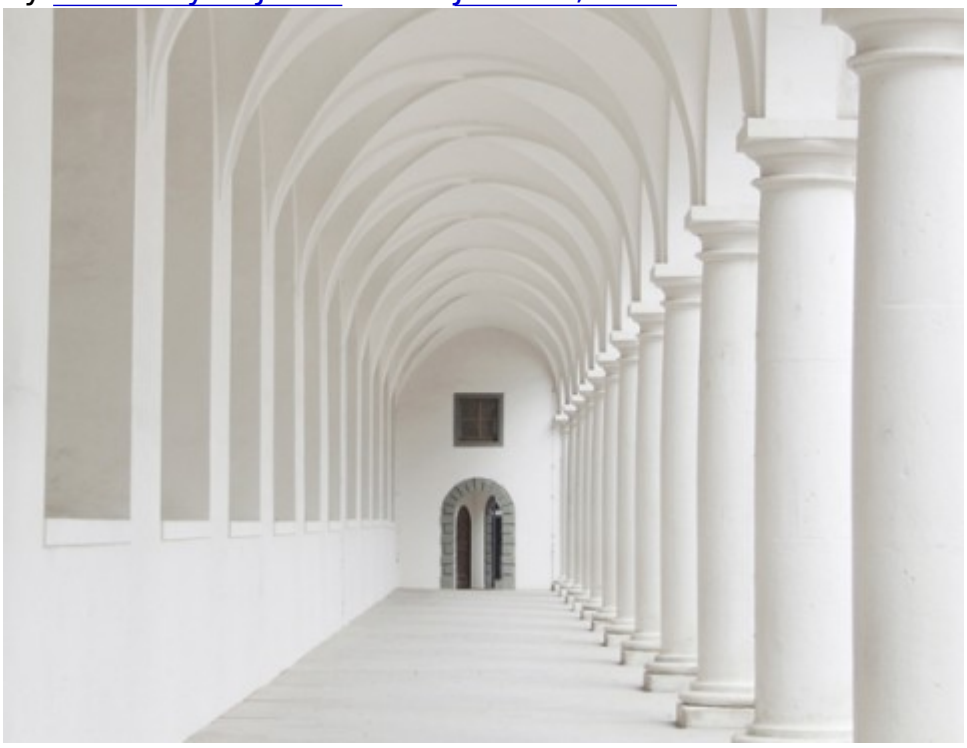
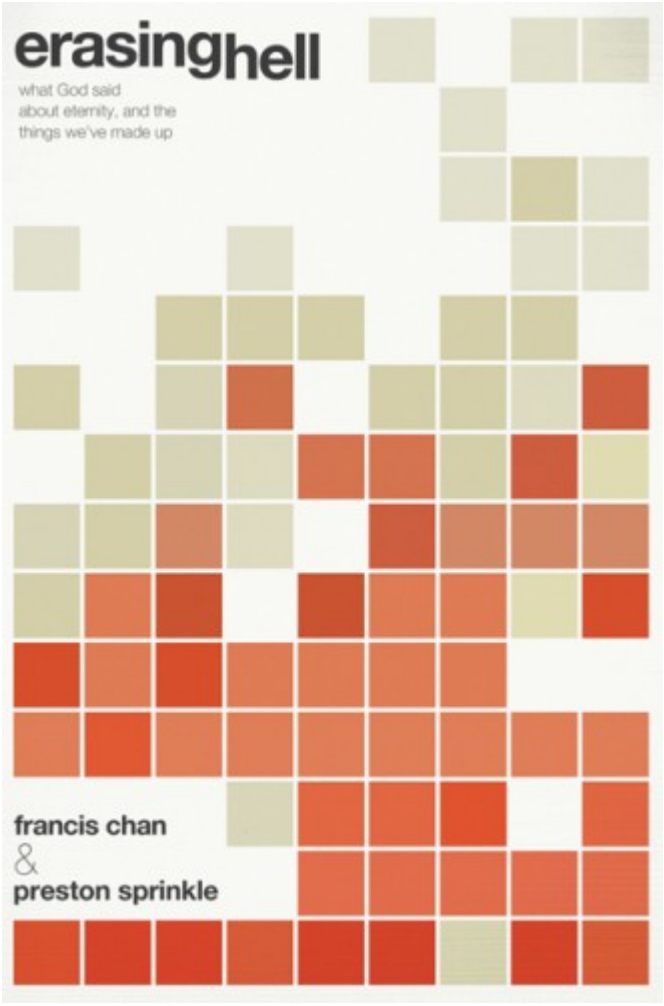
A hopeful universalism

by Paul Dafydd Jones in the June 27, 2012 issue

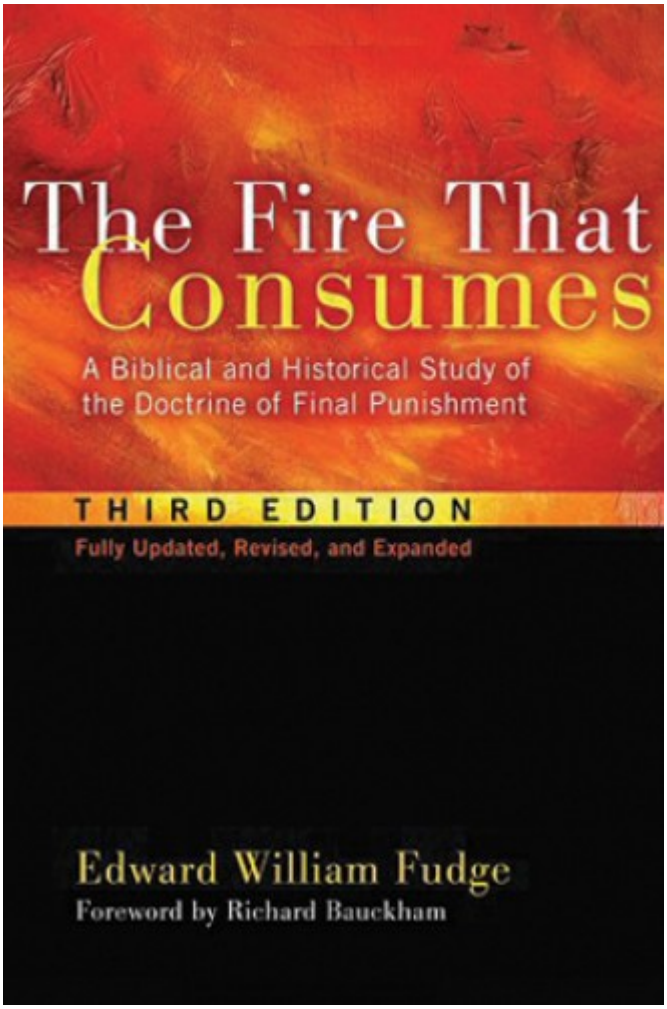


In Review



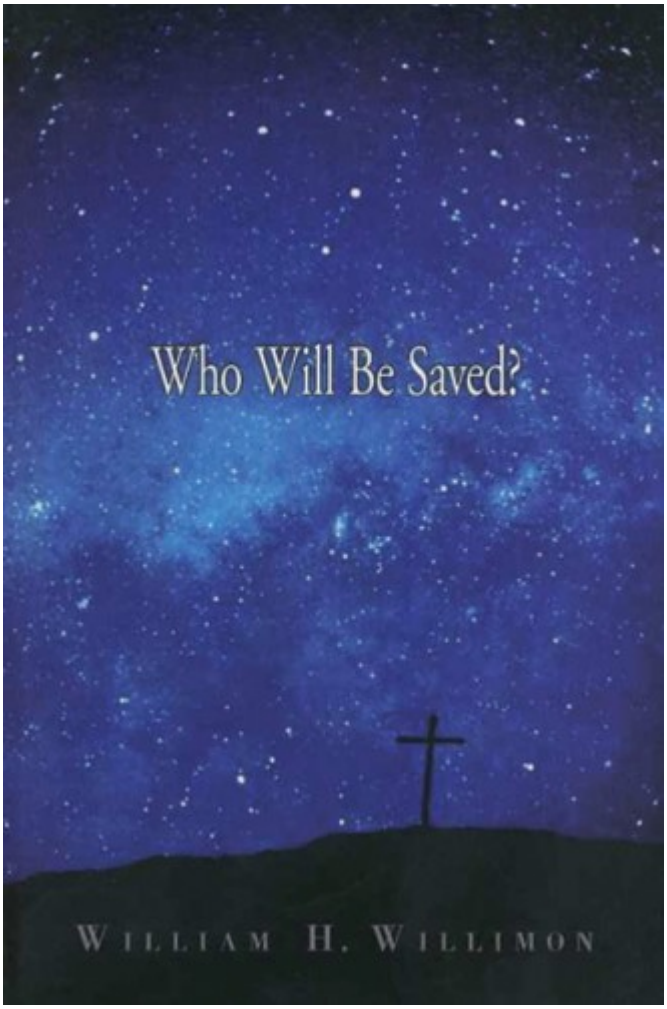
Erasing Hell

By Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle
David C. Cook



The Fire That Consumes

By Edward William Fudge
Wipf and Stock



Who Will Be Saved?

By William H. Willimon
Abingdon

Of the various responses to Rob Bell's *Love Wins*, two struck me as particularly important. On one side, a number of prominent conservatives opted for splenetic denunciation. For Bell to extol God's transformative love in prose that both charms and exasperates—well, OK. No harm, no foul. But a gentle nod toward universal salvation? Absolutely *not*. John Piper's much-publicized quip on Twitter ("Farewell, Rob Bell") was probably as much a prediction of Bell's postmortem standing as an anathematization. On the other side, little more than a bored, smug shrug emanated from mainstream academics and mainline Protestants—so bored it hardly amounted to a shrug, so smug it implied that those still opposing universalism were no more than reactionary Neanderthals. This (non)reaction barely registered, but that's all the more telling. In certain circles, universalism is no longer the preserve of

theological radicals. It's gone mainstream.

Although these reactions merit consideration (what does it say about contemporary Protestantism that limited salvation is a test of faith *and* irrelevant?), the concern of this essay is theological: How might Christians think better about universalism? Given that many of us are neither ardent proponents of double predestination nor so confident in our knowledge of God's saving actions that we know, beyond a shadow of doubt, that everyone will gain admittance to the heavenly kingdom, what should we say about the scope of salvation? After *Love Wins*, where do we turn for guidance?

In *Erasing Hell*, Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle offer an evangelical riposte to Rob Bell. There is no scriptural support, they argue, for the belief that God will save each and every one of us. On the contrary, the Bible insists that an absence of faith has terrible consequences. Jesus himself described "hell as a horrifying place, characterized by suffering, fire, darkness, and lamentation"—and did so "to stir a fear in us that would cause us to take hell seriously and avoid it at all costs." How, then, might one escape a fate worse than death? By committing and recommitting oneself to God, who offers salvation through Jesus Christ. And this must be done straightaway. "The door is open *now*—but it won't stay open forever."

This defense of populist neo-Arminianism—that is, the belief that a decision of faith is needed to complete the salvific process that God initiates; and when this decision is not forthcoming, people consign themselves to perdition—may not receive a warm welcome in some circles. But it should not be dismissed as a mere apology for the "turn or burn" crowd. Beyond focusing attention on the subjective side of salvation, *Erasing Hell* distinguishes itself with a respectful critique of different kinds of universalism, some decent exegetical work and a laudable resolve to connect faith and social justice. ("Racism, greed, misplaced assurance, false teaching, misuse of wealth, and degrading words to a fellow human being—these are the things that damn people to hell? According to Scripture, the answer is yes.")

The authors show, too, that they have learned something from Karl Barth: they recognize that easy presumptions about God's identity and actions typically lead theology astray. To think well, Christians must focus their energies on the concrete fact of revelation, made available through the biblical texts. They must take their bearings from God's self-presentation; they must beware the temptation to conceive of God according to all-too-human standards.

Still, at least two significant problems remain. First, *Erasing Hell* doesn't really address the shortcomings of much neo-Arminian theology. Scriptural references to the salvation of "all" (Romans 5:18, for example) are handled in a cursory manner; the connection between God's gracious activity and the human decision for faith is unclear to the point that faith looks more like a work than a divine gift; and the focus on individual piety is such that God's formation of communities suffers neglect.

Second, Chan and Sprinkle's commitment to thinking with Barth doesn't go far enough, since fundamental terms in their text (sin, salvation, damnation, heaven, and hell particularly) aren't keyed to the person and work of Christ. A good example of this comes late in the book, when the authors write that "Jesus satisfied the wrath of God . . . the same wrath that ultimately will be satisfied, *either* in hell *or* on the cross" (my emphasis). Why the either/or? Primarily because Chan and Sprinkle balk at one of Barth's most profound intuitions: that Christ's death is the death of sin as such; that, by way of the cross, God rejects and overcomes all wrongdoing. On this reckoning, the cross is a decisive articulation of God's wrath—a decisive no against sin that ensures that the positive yes of grace sweeps slowly but surely and savingly toward each and every one of us. Indeed, isn't this what Paul meant when he wrote that "as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:21–22)?

Had Chan and Sprinkle followed Barth (and Paul!) at this point, something more interesting than populist neo-Arminianism might have emerged: a perspective that rejects the binary of saved or damned and instead views the cross as a pivotal moment in God's determination to relate graciously to sinners.

First published in 1982 and recently revised, updated and expanded, *The Fire That Consumes* provides an intriguing counterpoint to *Erasing Hell*. Edward William Fudge is no populist neo-Arminian. His iteration of North American evangelicalism has roots in the Calvinist tradition, but with an intriguing twist: Fudge offers a strong critique of the traditional claim that the reprobate—that is, sinners who do not receive God's saving grace—may be consigned to a hell of "unending conscious torment." In its place, Fudge advocates for annihilationism: the belief that the wicked will eventually be extinguished, subject to a "second death" in the consuming fire of judgment.

What reasons might one have for adopting this view? Biblical reasons. An exacting analysis of scripture shows clearly, for Fudge, that God's punishment of the wicked is not everlasting. While the damned might undergo a finite period of torment, God ultimately brings them to an absolute end. And they deserve nothing less, given

their sin and impenitence. At the end of time, the “wicked will become like weeds, straw, fruitless trees, all burned up with fire that is not resisted or thwarted. . . . They perish. They are destroyed.”

Some readers may roll their eyes at this juncture. Isn’t the attempt to arbitrate between traditional and annihilationist views a macabre counterpart to debates about angels dancing on the heads of pins? Well, I’d caution against being dismissive. This issue is important—because of the biblical witness, yes, but also because Christians *should* think seriously about salvation, judgment and life after death. Fudge’s theological instincts are often on-target, too. While we mustn’t ever lose sight of God’s grace, we are obliged also to acknowledge the gravity of sin. We cannot suppose that God’s love is permissive, that God overlooks or condones our myriad failings. Just as sin matters in human life, sin matters to God. It is an abrogation of the covenant. It is the very reason that God’s saving grace passes through the horror of Calvary. And since the Bible posits some connection between sin and postmortem existence, theologians should take note. In so doing, one faces a truth that Calvin, Luther and others never let slip from view. No one deserves to be saved, given a refusal of right relationship with God. That God favors anyone bespeaks a love of unimaginable intensity and power.

Compromising such insights, however, is a terribly restrictive understanding of biblical inspiration. For Fudge to treat scripture as the source and norm for reflection is, of course, good and proper. But problems are bound to arise when the Bible is considered “without error in anything that it teaches . . . the only unquestionable, binding source of doctrine on this or any subject.” Implicit here is a drift toward biblicism—a failure to distinguish between the divine event of revelation and the human witness of scripture; a tendency to make inspiration intrinsic to a human text, instead of acclaiming God’s action upon that text in the practices of reading, prayer, discussion and proclamation.

This error pushes Fudge into the unhappy position of attempting to systematize aspects of scripture that should not be systematized, given that they stand on the boundary of what is Christianly (and humanly) imaginable. A laudable preference for the “plain sense” of scripture often morphs into a weird kind of exegetical positivism; biblical passages that cry out for imaginative handling, even some degree of demythologization, are given undue attention. It’s unlikely that anyone can truly divine the meaning of phrases like “unquenchable fire” and “the gnashing of teeth,” but Fudge’s doctrine of inspiration is such that he is obliged to try his

hand.

A broader problem: If one rejects the idea that God visits unending, conscious torment upon the reprobate, does positing their eventual extinction represent much in the way of theological progress? Haven't we leapt from a torturous frying pan into an annihilative fire? Fudge, I fear, cannot shake the habit of viewing divine punishment in terms of postmortem, eschatological retribution. As such, he loses the opportunity to think about what God's nonretributive, saving punishment might mean in the here-and-now. He writes movingly about God's determination to bring about "a new heavens and a new earth" with "no more sin and only redeemed sinners," but rather less assuredly about the kingdom in our midst. He edges toward a different perspective—one that supposes God's wrath is exhaustively articulated by way of the cross; one that acclaims the kingdom as it transforms human life right now; one that sees Christ bearing our sin in order to bear it away—but he cannot follow through.

This really is a lost opportunity. When the cross is considered not only as the "greatest revelation of God's wrath" but the sum total of that wrath, actually and decisively outworked, what initially appears impossible—God bringing our faithless, stupid, miserable assault on God and each other to naught; Christ securing for us God's unwavering favor and love—becomes thinkable. Salvation is no longer a distant blessing, reserved for the privileged few. Rather, the effects of Christ's death appear as illimitable as the love that occasioned the incarnation. One can imagine how God's just rejection of sin dovetails with God's determination to distribute grace broadly, even promiscuously, in the past, present and future; one is nerved to approach debates about the scope of salvation with a combination of humility and good cheer. The former because we are wary of our failings and mindful of presumption, the latter because what God has done and is still doing obliges us to envisage the best possible future.

In certain respects, this combination of humility and cheer can be found in William Willimon's *Who Will Be Saved?*—a less recent work (published in 2008), but one that supplies an important counterpoint to the other texts.

Willimon's starting point is the incarnation as an event that defines God's relationship with us and our relationship with God. Because of Jesus Christ, salvation cannot be spoken about in the subjunctive. In agreement with Barth, Willimon considers the incarnation reason to talk about salvation in the indicative—an

“undeniable, ultimately irresistible fact” that confronts everyone.

Does this make universal salvation a “sure thing”? Not quite. Since knowledge of salvation doesn’t carry with it detailed information about the eschaton, Christians are obliged to exercise restraint, to beware the conceit that we are privy to God’s plans. And the very fact that salvation is a gracious, unanticipatable event forecloses the possibility of treating it as a birthright. A saving gift, by definition, may not be confused with an anthropological given. However, talk about “the reprobate”—that is, a discrete number of human beings who do not and will not receive the benefits won by Christ—now strikes a wrong note. Because God has acted decisively in Christ, it’s reasonable to hope for the best. It’s legitimate to suppose that God’s dealings with humankind will continue along the gracious lines that God has set down.

If Barth provides Willimon with a sense of salvation as an accomplished fact, John Wesley and Stanley Hauerwas shape Willimon’s account of the reception of grace. Usefully so—while some will find talk of “divine-human synergy” off-putting, Willimon is surely correct to join an acclamation of the objective fact of salvation with a discussion of our subjective response. Salvation is as much a vocational imperative as a justifying and sanctifying gift.

Our response to God mustn’t be overrated, of course. Human decision is not the pivot around which salvation turns; we’re participants in a process that God superintends from start to finish. Yet the subjective side of things should not be treated slightly or passingly, since there is “some degree of responsible exchange in the matter of our relationship with God.” It follows, too, that while damnation is difficult to imagine, it cannot be ruled out. God will not bully us into the kingdom; God waits, patiently, for us to receive and embrace God’s grace. And that allows the possibility—an absurd, baffling, but conceivable possibility—that some will forever resist God’s gracious advance.

Does Willimon persuade? In many respects, yes. He avoids the pitfalls of populist neo-Arminianism, connects salvation with the incarnation and the cross and works with an appropriately nuanced doctrine of biblical inspiration. Even despite some troubling asides (if one admits to an “amateurish reading of the Qur’an,” don’t say anything about Islam), those looking for a compelling treatment of salvation will profit greatly from Willimon’s book.

Again, however, there are serious problems. Most worrying is Willimon's decision to affiliate his perspective on salvation with an unnuanced diagnosis of the modern condition and an equally unnuanced account of the correct Christian response. Rather than supplying a fine-grained analysis of the social, cultural, philosophical and political moment in which we find ourselves, Willimon succumbs to an outmoded, oppositional style of reflection. It's rarely a case of the church as it exists in or, better, *for* the world; it's typically a matter of church versus world. The script is dated, but that doesn't temper Willimon's enthusiasm—he reads the lines with gusto. As such, we're subjected to generalizations about the "nihilism" of the modern age, sweeping statements about human agency, occasional bursts of ecclesial militancy—and even a quick swipe at the Harry Potter novels.

No doubt, it is important to inhabit a late-modern context critically. Like Willimon, I worry about consumerism, sentimentality and jingoism. Like Willimon, I want an ecclesiology that protests, prophetically and creatively, those dimensions of our society that seem contrary to God's purposes. But a grace-based account of salvation that encourages a cheerful confidence in God's ways and works is best partnered with an equally upbeat account of creation, which segues into a cautious hopefulness about the diverse—and often imperceptible—ways that Christ and the Spirit enable human flourishing in the present. Put still more simply: a theological perspective centered on God's determination to save each and every one of us needn't polemicize against modernity (whatever *that* is).

The key issue here—and, yes, it's important to twist the knife a bit more—is theological consistency. Since Willimon struggles to understand that God's grace sets the terms for Christian thinking about everything that happens in time and space, his approach to creation, society and culture lacks the generosity of spirit that characterizes his treatment of salvation. Instead of balancing an appeal for ecclesial assuredness with an appreciative glance at certain aspects of late modernity that accord with Christian intuitions—say, a preference for democratic decision making, a willingness to reconsider gender and sexuality, and a refusal of uncritical loyalty toward putatively "traditional" values—one is left with the unhappy impression that Christians ought to shun the modern world lest they are undone by it. I sometimes felt, in fact, that Willimon's rejection of double predestination came back to haunt him, albeit with a shift from the simplistic binary of reprobate/saved to the simplistic binary of church/world. His readers therefore face an unhappy choice: do they escape populist neo-Arminianism and annihilationism, only to find

themselves saddled with a new form of Manichaeism?

Yet Willimon is on the right track. This account of “hopeful universalism”—something other than a works-based populist neo-Arminianism or a capricious doctrine of double predestination; something short of making universal salvation a dogmatic no-brainer—is important and compelling. Yet it still needs, I think, more theological oomph. To supply this, it’s useful to reflect on why hopeful universalism might be preferred to less expansive construals of salvation. (And at this point, I take leave of Willimon—what follows are my own views).

Straightaway one must acknowledge that scripture does not provide a clear answer to queries about the scope of salvation. In fact, the Bible admits of diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations. An appeal to Colossians 1:19 (“though him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things”) can be set against an appeal to Romans 9:15 (“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy”; see also Exodus 33:19). An appeal to Romans 5:18 (“just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all”) can be countered by an appeal to John 6:44 (“No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me”).

Might a summary of the general drift of the scriptural witness resolve the issue? Not really. There’s no consensus about this drift; it’s even questionable as to whether one can talk about drift in the singular. Best to be honest: neither exegetical studies nor broad appeals to biblical theology will ever settle debates about the scope of salvation.

A better starting point for reflection, then: given that God’s principal purpose is to disburse saving love to humankind, and given that God has the means to make good on God’s purpose, it is fitting to hope for the best. The neo-Arminian mistake is to suppose that God’s desire for our salvation is trumped by our sinful resistance to God—an overestimation of human potency and an underestimation of God’s sovereignty. The Calvinist mistake is to suppose that God permits and effects the eternal damnation of some—a claim hard to square with a belief in God’s love. The hopeful universalist alternative envisages a loving God getting what God wants: the salvation of humankind. It holds fast to God’s love *and* God’s sovereignty.

But still we haven’t said enough. While a disproportionate emphasis on human agency has been checked and a punitive construal of divine justice exchanged for an

emphasis on love and grace, the painful fact of sin must still be addressed. That is to say, if human beings reject God and harm one another, with the result that God and human beings exist in a condition of estrangement, a mere assertion of divine love doesn't provide sufficient support for an affirmation of hopeful universalism. What's needed, in addition, is an account of God's righteous contestation of sin—a contestation of such magnitude that the condition of estrangement no longer obtains. Absent such an account, Christian theology risks an abbreviated view of God and an account of salvation that yields only warm platitudes. With such an account in hand, however, salvation can be acclaimed an unmerited gift, offered despite our continuing fall into wickedness.

So let's nuance our starting point—an account of God's love and sovereignty—with the category of election. Let's then add another step of reasoning.

Following the later Barth, I favor an account of God's love for humankind that identifies Jesus Christ as the "electing God" and "elected human." These terms, I hasten to add, aren't a tip of the hat to ardent Calvinists. Talk of election helps to connect the doctrines of God, Christ and salvation. It's a way of saying, specifically, that God's loving advance toward us, realized in Christ, has ramifications for human being as such. The incarnation makes a difference to who we are. It renders us people who bear the image of "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation" (Col. 1:15); it marks us as those whom God "chose . . . in Christ before the foundation of the world [and] destined for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:4–5).

Christ, on this reckoning, isn't merely a focus for Christian thought and action (although he is certainly that). Christ is the basis for a soteriology that delights in the fact that none of us are the sum total of our awkward, sinful and frequently disappointing lives. Through Christ, God has bound Godself to us, and us to God, in the most radical way imaginable. And this binding is not occasional or temporary. It cuts to the heart of who we are, while speaking volumes about the person that God is and the actions that God undertakes. Precisely because the scope of the Son's intercession is as broad as the humanity that he assumes, precisely because Jesus is "exalted at the right hand of the Father" (Acts 2:33, cf. Acts 7:55–6 and Mark 16:19), there is good reason to suppose that God's saving work has no limits. It's not theological overreach to hope that salvation will come to all. Such hope follows directly from an awareness of God's love and power, articulated by Christ and distributed, mysteriously, by Christ's Spirit.

The next step is to say plainly that Christ's engagement with sin—an engagement that encompasses Christ's life, death and resurrection—is such that sin has no future. I don't want to suggest here that sin is no longer part of human life. It clearly is, and the world in which we live often shows signs of getting worse, not better. My point is this: in light of Christ's person and work, sin no longer sets the terms for our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. On the cross, specifically, Christ draws the full weight of human sinfulness—past, present and future—upon himself, rendering himself the one in whom all sin is overcome.

There really *is* a "consuming fire," then, as Edward Fudge supposes. But this fire doesn't await sinners in the future. This fire—the fire of God's holy love—concentrates itself in Jesus' own suffering and death. And because Christ takes to heart the entire shocking history of our sin, sin is wholly burned up, wholly *finished*, when Christ breathes his last. Is this not the meaning of Jesus' cry of dereliction? Doesn't this cry show that God has accepted Christ's thoroughgoing identification with sinners and that God's contestation of sin has run its course? And with the fire of God's holy love burned out, doesn't the resurrection show God relating to God's children in a new way?

Hopeful universalism, on this reckoning, does not require the Christian to downplay the past, present and future fact of wrongdoing. It requires only that the Christian acknowledge the nearly unimaginable price that Christ paid for our salvation: *being* the sin that God condemns and rejects, so that those who live "in him" (that is, all of us) might receive the blessings of God's favor.

A host of auxiliary issues (the Holy Spirit, the church, eschatology) must still be addressed, of course. However, I've gestured here toward the legitimacy of hopeful universalism. Christians need not resort to warmhearted banalities when affirming "all shall be well"; it's possible to supply a decent response to those who suppose that salvation has fixed limits.

A "decent response"? Precisely that—a response both reasonable and graciously offered. If Rob Bell's *Love Wins* tells us anything, it's that the Augustinian-Calvinist consensus on limited salvation is breaking down and that populist neo-Arminianism is losing its luster. Hopeful universalists therefore have an opportunity to frame new discussions about the scope of salvation. And we should do so, too, without lapsing into talk of orthodoxy, heterodoxy and heresy—categories so degraded by rancorous argument and power plays as to be next to worthless. What's needed for profitable discussion is something different: a belief in the open-ended task of exegesis, a light

theological touch, a dose of good humor and a clear sense of the impossibility of closure. If hopeful universalists can achieve that—well, regardless of the extent of salvation, we'll at least be doing something to honor a love that, we hope, wins.