Grace before anything

by John Buchanan in the June 27, 2012 issue

Lewis Smedes, who taught theology at Fuller Seminary, studied with Karl Barth and once asked the great theologian if he was a universalist. Barth put his face close to Smedes, poked a finger in his chest and said, “Ich bin kein universalist [I am not a universalist].” Barth then asked Smedes, “You believe the Bible? Fine, then believe this too,” and Barth quoted Paul’s words, “Christ died not for our sins only but for the sins of the whole world,” and added, “If you are worried about universalism, you had better begin worrying about the Bible.” Smedes realized that he needed to quit worrying about whether he was acceptable to God, “to quit stewing about it and just rest in the fact that I was loved and accepted by God, no strings attached.”

In this issue Paul Dafydd Jones critiques three books on the eternal destiny of humans. The topic can bring out the worst in people, but Jones treats the various perspectives with respect. In presenting his own stance of “hopeful universalism,” he suggests that a profitable discussion needs “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.”

One of my encounters with the controversy over this issue came while serving a church located a few blocks from the Moody Bible Institute. Founder Dwight L. Moody and one of my early predecessors had been great friends, and the two institutions once saw themselves as partners in ministry in Chicago. Moody students

worked for our church, taught Sunday school and sang in the choir. But after the modernist-fundamentalist controversy, Moody and the Presbyterian church pulled apart and identified with different theological strains.

By the time I arrived, Moody students were only occasional visitors in our worship services. I always suspected that they were there on assignment. When I would suggest in a sermon that God's love for us is unconditional and can overcome anything in us, and that grace abounds, they'd approach me after the benediction, Bibles in hand. "Do you really mean what you said, that God will save us even if we haven't done a thing? Even if we don't know what we believe?"

These were never satisfying conversations, and I'm sure the students were convinced that I and my ilk were hopelessly lost. Some even went for the jugular and informed me that because of my message I was responsible for the eternal damnation of some of those to whom I preached.

As soon as I was old enough to think about it, I was uncomfortable with the idea that accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is an automatic ticket to heaven, and with the reverse idea—that failing to confess belief in Christ results in an eternity in hell, even in the case of unbaptized infants and all the people who have never heard about Jesus. What about those who heard but were unpersuaded? What about my Uncle Harry? God consigning all those people to hell never squared in my mind with God loving us as a parent loves a child. I wondered how a parent could condemn a child to punishment forever.

The issue remained beneath the surface of my thinking until I bumped into the notion of prevenient grace, grace that comes before anything else, in spite of anything we have done or not done. I understood then that whatever relationship existed with God had a lot more to do with God than with me. My whole idea of Christianity turned from a method of guaranteeing salvation to the acknowledgment and proclamation of astonishingly good news. My response is gratitude.