

WHAT MUST WE DO TO BE SAVED? A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO PAUL FIDDES, *PAST EVENT AND PRESENT SALVATION*

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One of the more dramatic stories found in the Acts of the Apostles recounts the incident when Paul and Silas were released from prison, following an earthquake (Acts 16. 16 - 40). At the heart of the story, the jailer wakes to find that the prison doors have all been thrown open by the earthquake and, supposing that all the inmates have escaped, he is about to kill himself. It is understood that he would be held responsible for their escape and his livelihood and indeed his life are lost. But Paul intervenes, urging him not to harm himself "for we are all here". Then the jailer asks the question which has since become the focus of countless evangelistic sermons and tracts: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Exactly what he meant by being saved can only be a matter of conjecture, but the story that follows speaks of him becoming a believer in God.¹

The simple inference drawn from this story is that what we must do to be saved is to believe. In her studies of the faith experience of women, however, Elisabeth Moltmann Wendel found that although they had accepted and believed the doctrine of justification by faith, many women did not *experience* the freedom and forgiveness promised to them by their faith. Their salvation had not become a reality in their lives. The issues are addressed in Paul Fiddes' book *Past Event and Present Salvation*.² In this essay we will begin with an outline of Fiddes' approach and proceed to a critical appraisal of his insights and contribution. The question posed by Paul Fiddes' book is immensely relevant: What has the death of Jesus two thousand years ago got to do with our present need of salvation? How and in what sense does such an event effect "present salvation"? As we consider this question, it is also necessary to place it in a broader context. In what sense, if at all, is anyone asking today, "What must I do to be saved?" What is the most crucial need people face today? We live in a time when natural disasters such as earthquakes, violent storms, drought and other extremes in the climate threaten lives and whole communities. The context of that jailer's question was just such an event and the meaning of his question may not be as "spiritual" as so many of the sermons based upon it imply. What is the meaning of salvation, in the face of climate change, or the situation of some 43 million people living as refugees and displaced persons today?

¹ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey* (London: SCM, 1986). See particularly Chapters 5, 10 & 11.

² Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989).

THE BASIS AND DIRECTION OF FIDDES' ARGUMENT

Past Event and Present Salvation is dedicated to his former teacher Frederick Dillistone and several features of Fiddes' approach reflect Dillistone's ground-breaking work, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement*.³ Dillistone argued that all understandings of atonement identify or at least imply an understanding of human need: if we are saved, there is something from which we are saved. Furthermore, there are many ways of explaining this need and consequently many ways of describing atonement or salvation. Dillistone describes multiple frameworks of interpretation, both in scripture and within the Christian tradition. As Fiddes says, the church over the centuries "has never made any one understanding of atonement official or orthodox".⁴

Fiddes begins with an exploration of the human need of salvation.⁵ He identifies three broad categories of need or difficulty, towards which models of atonement may be addressed. The first is *alienation* or *estrangement*: This is essentially the idea of division or brokenness. In the human condition, family relationships are often broken, there is division, polarization, and open conflict, and often people experience a fundamental alienation from reality itself. We may not be sure where we belong or may feel that reality is in some way indifferent to us. In all these situations, we are estranged.

Secondly, Fiddes writes of *falling short, or unfulfilled potential*. Another constant in the human situation is the sense of what might have been, the sense that our lives are unfulfilled. The Apostle Paul speaks of "falling short of the glory of God" (Romans 3. 23). There are many other ways of describing and imaging this sense of lost potential. Some of these are closely linked with the idea of estrangement too: we are estranged from our true selves, or what we might have been. It is important to add that this image does not always imply failure or decline. It may refer more to the sense of "not yet"—a destiny as yet unfulfilled, coupled with a question about whether we actually have the capacity or will to achieve that potential.

Finally, Fiddes writes of *sin as personal and as rebellion*—"a failure in personal relationships between human beings and their creator due to rebellion from the human side."⁶ This idea of sin is grounded, he argues, in a lack of trust. We do not trust God, we do not believe and obey the way of God and so rebel and go our own way, trying to centre everything upon ourselves and our own efforts; but as a consequence we fall into both alienation and a loss of potential.

At this point, let us note several critical questions to which we will return later in the discussion. Do these images actually relate to all people and are they sufficient as an appreciation of the human predicament? On the one hand, it is arguable that some people today have little or no sense of any of these things: they live moderately happy, fulfilled, contented lives. They don't feel particularly alienated, guilty, unfulfilled or broken. They may not consider themselves to be part of this "human predicament", described in these ways. Do they need salvation? Tom Smail has identified this issue, quoting a Belgian study which found that as many as forty percent of people surveyed did not acknowledge any level of guilt or regret in

³ Frederick Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (London: SCM, 1968, 1984).

⁴ Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 5

⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6

their lives.⁷ On the other hand there are those for whom these images are too small: perhaps because they are too individualistic and too human-centred. Such people may sense that what is broken or needing fulfilling is more cosmic than these three images suggest and the need for salvation is greater, not less than, what is envisaged by these categories.

Here, then, is the challenge for salvation theology. It needs actually to address what people are concerned about and to offer a coherent and credible account of that past event and present (and future) salvation. Kenneth Surin has stated that the "acid test" of any book on atonement is how Christian reflection engages with human narratives of "pain, dereliction and death".⁸ In short, atonement theology must not only focus on a past event, but offer some coherent experience of present salvation.

There are further elements in Fiddes' distinctive approach to these issues we need to identify, before we proceed to the detail of his argument. Fiddes' approach to soteriology is distinctively theological and not only christological. In a chapter entitled "Salvation as event and process", he reminds us that God's life as *creator* and as *redeemer* are not two entirely separate dimensions or activities. Scripturally we see the unity of creation and redemption: "a frequent way of portraying God's creation of the world was as a deliverance from the hostile forces of chaos".⁹ Furthermore, both creation and redemption are presented as continuous processes. God is perpetually engaged with the suffering of the world, seeking to redeem it and recreate it. Nonetheless, scripture also presents the idea of a "decisive event of salvation", specifically with regard to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In reflecting upon these aspects of biblical faith, Fiddes helpfully distinguishes the *subjective* and *objective* dimensions in atonement. It is interesting that here he uses the term 'atonement' rather than salvation. What he means by the 'objective' dimension is that something happens and effects a change with regard to God and in our relation to God. If we are "at-oned", then this is an objective occurrence. Atonement is a reality which exists in itself, in a sense whether or not we know it or believe it. On the other hand, the "subjective" dimension of atonement is about how this reality impacts upon us: Do we experience it and does it change us, in the present? In his exploration of models of atonement Fiddes is interested, then, in how these images help us to understand and appropriate both the subjective and objective dimensions. Clearly a model that provides insight and impact in both dimensions is superior to one that does not.

MODELS OF ATONEMENT

It has long been observed that a distinctive feature of Western theology, in the latin traditions, is to seek to *explain* the mysteries of faith, such as the efficacy of sacraments and the means of atonement. A substantial section of Fiddes' book is devoted to five models of atonement. While we cannot examine the details of these chapters, it is helpful to note the ways in which he evaluates these models, in each instance asking about the objective and subjective dimensions of atonement.

⁷ Tom Smail, *Once and For All: A Confession of the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 41.

⁸ Kenneth Surin, "Review of *Past Event and Present Salvation*," *Theology* 93 (1990): 400-401.

⁹ Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 17.

The first model considered is the idea of Christ's death as a *sacrifice*. Fiddes attempts to clarify the significance of sacrifices within ancient Israel, seeking both the objective and subjective dimensions. He concludes that "according to the Israelite and early Christian conceptions, [sacrifice] is not something human beings do to God (propitiation) but something that God does for humankind (expiation)."¹⁰ While genuine repentance is needed, this in itself does not effect atonement. It is God who forgives, offering the possibility of expiation. Sacrifices, then, are more a response to God's offer of forgiveness than a means of bringing it about. Christian theology, however, came to see the offer of forgiveness through Jesus as the final sacrifice: "the cross of Jesus had been the decisive act of God in dealing with human sin" and was "like a sacrifice".¹¹ In exploring these ideas, Fiddes strongly rejects the idea of propitiation, the need for sacrifice to appease an angry or vengeful God. Rather, it is God who offers the sacrificial atonement to humanity through the life and death of Jesus. Having sought to explain these ideas and their development in Christian history, though, in the end Fiddes finds this image inadequate and concludes that "the image of 'expiation' does not in itself explain how one event can so decisively destroy sin in our lives".¹² As an idea of atonement, it functions overwhelmingly on the "objective" side, without a coherent explanation of how sacrifice effects present salvation.

Next comes a discussion of atonement understood in terms of the *justice* of God. It was Anselm who most clearly developed this idea of salvation as justice. Sin is understood in terms of a lack of balance in the scales of justice, and order must be restored: God's justice must be satisfied. The need for justice could be satisfied in two ways: either by something which satisfies the honour of the Lord, or by an appropriate punishment. Anselm's idea was that the death of Jesus satisfies the honour of God.

Fiddes finds some crucial problems with this idea: chiefly that the whole concept of honour and satisfaction is not available to us. It no longer explains why Jesus died and how that saves us. He also suggests that this idea all too easily slips into Calvin's legalistic notion of penal substitution, once it is separated from its cultural base that this results. Fiddes concludes that this idea of divine satisfaction is all too objective: what it doesn't show us is how *we* are saved, or indeed why. While the "justice" of God may be satisfied, it all seems to happen in God, over our heads as it were: what part do we have in all this?

Another model concerns God's *victory*, given new currency in the last century through Gustav Aulen's book *Christus Victor*.¹³ The basic idea is that the human predicament is a situation of enslavement: we are simply not able to be and do what we could be and might hope to be. In Christ's life, death and resurrection God has broken the power of sin, and though it is not yet complete the victory is assured. Here the death and resurrection are apocalyptic and eschatological in character. In his explanation of this model

¹⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹¹ Ibid., 68.

¹² Ibid., 79.

¹³ Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* E.T. by A G Herbert, (London: SPCK, 1931, 1970).

there are many hints of Fiddes' other works, relating to the creative and redemptive suffering of God and the character of hope.¹⁴

Clearly one of the merits of this model is that it directly relates to the suffering and anguish of the human condition and does not see them in entirely "objective" terms. Similarly, the model envisages salvation as impacting upon lived experience in the present—calling forth redeemed living in freedom and hope. While Fiddes finds a number of difficulties with the actual exposition of this model in Aulen and in Barth's theology, it is clear that he sees merit in it and his own idea of the "journey of forgiveness" includes aspects of God's choice to overcome sin through redemptive, patient suffering and hope.

Next Fiddes turns to the very familiar idea of salvation as God's *forgiveness*. His initial consideration deals with Calvin's idea of penal substitution, which he finds inadequate for many reasons, including the suggestion that Calvin has made atonement into a matter of law, which he says is exactly contrary to the teaching of Jesus. Overall, though, Fiddes' concern is that the ideas of Anselm, Luther and Calvin, for whom atonement as the payment of a debt or an atoning punishment, is too objective. It does not sufficiently relate to us. It doesn't help us to know about God's salvation.

Up to this point, Fiddes has been considering models that primarily focus upon the "objective" and somewhat forensic aspects of atonement. In a vital turn in his argument, he examines what is known as the *moral influence* theory developed by Peter Lombard (1096 - 1164). The emphasis here is upon the impact of God's love, revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Fiddes explains that Lombard wanted both to emphasize something objective—the love of God—and its capacity to evoke a loving response from us and thus draw us into its saving power. Here Fiddes sees the balance he has been seeking, between objective and subjective dimensions. "Abelard believes that the love of God revealed in the cross has the power to *move* human hearts and minds to a similar love." It is the revelation of God's love, in the power of the story of Jesus, that saves us.¹⁵

Clearly appreciative of these arguments, Fiddes nonetheless sees a number of limitations as well. This approach he finds highly individualistic, in its focus on the subjective experience of individuals. A second concern is an apparent separation of the work of the Spirit, in impressing the love of God upon us (the "moral persuasion") from the actual events of Christ's life and death in the past, and thus a question arises about how the two are in fact related. Finally, Fiddes names what is surely a critical issue for all these approaches to salvation theology: "why love should be revealed in a *death* ... the sight of a man dying by means of a prolonged and agonising torture does not immediately arouse a sense of the love of God."¹⁶

These challenging questions lead Fiddes to his own excellent theological explorations, drawing upon Karl Barth's emphasis on Christ as the revelation of God's freedom for us, 'the one who loves in freedom', and Bonhoeffer's insistence that we must know and find Christ in the 'secular' world today.¹⁷ The thrust of

¹⁴ Of particular note here: Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) and Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology Series (Oxford: Blackwells, 2000).

¹⁵ Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 141, 145.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162-64.

this argument is that the revelation of God's love is not only in a past event, but in the continuing presence of the humiliated and crucified Christ, taking shape in the people and events of the world around us. To see and meet this suffering God who comes to us *from* the cross, Fiddes says, is "to enter into the interweaving of relationships which is God's own life". Here we see a clear indication of the trinitarian theology later developed in *Participating in God*.¹⁸ The critical point here is that Fiddes has articulated a theological framework for better understanding Abelard's affirmation of the transformative love of God.

On this basis, then, Fiddes returns again to the models of atonement, to offer his own distinctive account, the idea of *the journey of forgiveness*. Unsurprisingly, this is both an account of the experience of forgiveness (arguing "from below") and a richly theological idea of the activity and experience of God, who initiates and makes this journey.

THE JOURNEY OF FORGIVENESS

Drawing upon another seminal work in this area, H R Macintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, Fiddes begins with a focus on the actual experience of being forgiven, including both objective and subjective aspects.¹⁹ Forgiveness includes the activity of one who forgives (we are forgiven) and the appropriation of that gift (we experience a freedom from previous guilt). What is distinctive in Fiddes' analysis, though, is his development of Macintosh's idea that the one who forgives must engage in a kind of voyage or journey.

There are several elements or stages in the journey of forgiveness, for the one forgives. The first of these Fiddes calls the *journey of discovery*. This involves the often painful recognition and acknowledgement of the reality of the situation: "there is a brokenness in relationship that has to be faced up to if it is going to be healed, and so the forgiver needs to bring the injury done to him (sic) back to mind, and has to live again through the pain of it".²⁰ In doing so, the forgiver will also empathically consider (Fiddes actually says sympathetically) and "discover" the perspective of the offender also. Only in the light of this discovery can the forgiving person go to the offender and say, "I forgive you." At that point, then, the offender must also undertake a journey of discovery, both acknowledging the broken relationship and the offer of forgiveness, exploring what it might mean to accept it.

This first stage, in a sense, establishes the objective dimension of forgiveness, but by itself it is never enough. The second element Fiddes calls the *journey of endurance*. The one who forgives must wait, possibly for a significant period, while a process of emotions and even aggressive reactions takes place, until the subjective reality of forgiveness comes to the offender and she or he submits to it, accepts it and the relationship is indeed restored. Thus forgiveness becomes a reality, both objectively and subjectively. That the gift of forgiveness is not always accepted is also a sad reality in human life and community.

One valuable contribution of Fiddes' work is his development of these dynamics in theological terms. He explains the life and death of Jesus in exactly this way: Christ enters into the experience of those who

¹⁸ Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).

¹⁹ H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet, 1934).

²⁰ Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 173.

have offended against God and life itself—the journey of discovery. Then as he declares from his cross "Father forgive them", Jesus "provokes the guilty into awareness of the wrongs they would prefer to hide".²¹

It is crucial to note that Fiddes sees God's forgiveness demonstrated in Jesus' life and actions, not only in his death. But the focus is mostly upon the cross as the supreme outworking of the journey of forgiveness. In a sentence that draws upon the ideas of moral persuasion and his own desire to link past event and present salvation, he writes: "In this one past event the God who was and is always willing to forgive gains through the cross that experience of the human heart that gives him a way into our hearts."²² Fiddes goes on to suggest an objective change in God, which is not a change from wrath to love, but rather a change in God as a result of moving us, changing us.

While Fiddes makes this declaration, though, it would seem to be a little premature to say that God has achieved the atonement or forgiveness sought, since this is but the first part of the journey. There is yet to be the acceptance of the gift, through the journey of endurance. The remainder of the chapter engages with problems of guilt and the difficulties we have in forgiving others, before a final and superb theological affirmation. Here is the recognition that the atonement is not complete without the present and "subjective" fulfilment in human acceptance and restoration. Thus Fiddes speaks of God's capacity not only to enter into human estrangement, but in doing so God does not cease to be God. Even as God "becomes strange to himself" and willingly enters into an element of the unknown, there is the power of resurrection, yet to be fully completed and appropriated. This continues to be God's journey voyage of discovery and endurance in hope.

The final sections of the book consider the problems of suffering and political engagement, leading to the conclusion that the creative power of God's love, revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, gives meaning to present suffering. Just as God was present at the cross, so too God perpetually makes the journey of discovery into our lives and invites us to respond with imagination and hope. Here Fiddes is drawing upon his more extensive work on the creative and redemptive suffering of God, which not only has "a persuasive power, moving us to trust him" but is itself definitive of God's own being. God is the one who overcomes death by taking it into Godself, in Jesus Christ and perpetually so in the ongoing work of salvation.²³

CRITICAL RESPONSE: THE MEANING AND MEANS OF SALVATION TODAY

There are many things in the argument of *Past Event and Present Salvation* to applaud and at the time of its publication numerous scholarly reviews expressed appreciation of these strengths. First of these is the fundamental question to which the work is addressed: exactly how can an event in distant history effect salvation today? In engaging with this issue Fiddes consistently explores the subjective and objective dimensions of salvation, showing how some models of atonement are more able to explain one or the other,

²¹ Ibid., 176.

²² Ibid., 178.

²³ Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 267.

while he works towards a model that maintains both. His gathering together of the various models is itself a helpful contribution, while his critical appraisal of them is insightful and offers many valuable clarifications.

Other particular strengths arise from Fiddes' theological perspective, reminding us that salvation theology should not be separated from creation theology. Then in his own constructive approach he makes clear that God's life as revealer and as Holy Spirit are also integral to the process of salvation. What is especially valuable here is Fiddes' stress upon the importance of what he calls the "subjective" dimension of atonement. Faith cannot be merely a matter of belief in something "objective", which has no impact upon our lives and in a sense makes no difference. This stress upon the need both for some objective and subjective dimension provides a powerful basis for critique of models and also a direction for his own insights into the character of forgiveness. These insights in turn lead back the wider theological perspectives already noted—God as creator, Holy Spirit and revealer. There is a deeply integrated and wholistic aspect to this theology.

Finally, it is worth noting how this early work of Paul Fiddes indicates significant directions in which his wider theological writing has developed. Here there are clear links with his work on the creative suffering of God, his understanding of eschatological hope and a hint of the idea that in our quest for healing and community we participate in the divine life. So this is indeed a very valuable and important book in the theological corpus of Paul Fiddes.

Nonetheless there are a number of critical issues which need to be considered, both in regard to the specific content of Fiddes' argument and then in the wider area of soteriology today. At the beginning we noted that one of the key issues is not just the means of salvation but the meaning of salvation. We begin with a criticism of Fiddes' preferred model, the idea of the journey of forgiveness. The fundamental question here concerns the very concept: forgiveness presupposes guilt, the need to be forgiven, and that is the basis for our question here. Just why does Fiddes presume that the essential need of humanity is to be forgiven? At the outset, he established that there are many ways of understanding the human predicament, but at this later stage of his argument the focus on forgiveness seems to have narrowed the concern to a question of guilt.

Earlier in this essay we raised the possibility that there may be some people who sense no particular need at all to be "saved". Cyril Rodd, in his review of this book, names this as "the essential modern problem: people today have little sense of sin in the traditional sense, few believe in demonic powers, and few have any sense of the need of redemption."²⁴ Even if we wanted to deny that, and insist that all people are in some way needing God's salvation, it is not so clear that the need is always and everywhere to be understood as a problem of guilt in need of forgiveness. Donald Capps, for example, has argued that in our time the central concern of humanity is not guilt but shame.²⁵ Others might argue that a sense of meaninglessness, perhaps a sense of the futility of life, or alienation from self and others, or from community and the world at large, is a much more significant concern. Certainly we can say that the idea of guilt in need of forgiveness

²⁴ Cyril Rodd, "Talking Points from Books", *Expository Times* 101 (1989): 4.

²⁵ Donald Capps, *The Depleted Self, Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 90-94.

is not a sufficient conception of the human predicament, especially since it is prone to an individualistic and moralistic focus. When set against the challenges of social injustice and poverty on a massive scale, the plight of refugees and the great threat of global warming and its potential to exacerbate these other evils, the problem of individual sins needing to be forgiven seems somewhat less significant and the concept of salvation as forgiveness of those sins might be considered less compelling.

Fiddes himself does not allow his own concept of forgiveness to become exclusively individualist nor moralistic. Still, his own critiques of models of atonement identifies the dangers or tendencies of those models towards legalism, for instance, and it seems fair to raise here the strong tendency today to reduce ideas of guilt and forgiveness to individualist and moralistic concerns.

This brings us to a cluster of issues relating to Fiddes' idea of the journey of forgiveness as a model of atonement and salvation. Just as Fiddes himself has sought to offer an essentially *theological* account of atonement, there are a number of questions about his concept of God. William Abrahams wrote that Fiddes' account "needs a much richer pneumatology", though he also says he cannot precisely see how this would "improve on" Fiddes' discussion.²⁶ For Abrahams, Fiddes has been too much influenced by the German approaches, in seeking a theology of God from a theology of the cross without sufficient attention to natural theology and the analysis of religious language. While there may be some merit to these later concerns, the central issue here is the doctrine of God. This is the specific focus of Colin Gunton's critique. He is especially critical of the claim that God "increases in experience" through the cross.²⁷ Gunton sees a "virtual identification" of the Father and the Son in what happens, which makes it difficult he says to maintain the importance of the Son's representation of humanity before God. Gunton also asserts that the stress on the subjective or experiential aspects of atonement, including for God, has diminished the real and active renewal of the creation (the objectivity of the atonement), with the result that the resurrection is seen "mainly as divine protest against evil".

If we take these various criticisms together, it is clear that the central issue is with Fiddes' conviction that God is not only engaged in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in the past, but that what is revealed in these past events is indeed the perpetual character of God. God is what we see in Christ, engaging and experiencing the alienation of creation and humanity, but also working through redemptive suffering to restore, forgive and renew all life. But if this is the character of God, then "the atonement" is in a very important sense not complete. This difficulty is evident in fact in the final pages of the book, where the strongest theological argument is made for this model. As already noted, Fiddes suggests that God gives meaning to the cross and reveals God's love in the present, thus perpetually engaging in the journey of discovery. God is, as the Apostle Paul puts it, continually appealing to us to be reconciled with God and to become participants in that reconciliation process (2 Corinthians 5. 18 - 20). This means, as Fiddes sees it, that God is perpetually engaged in the journey of discovery—and endurance—hoping that those who need forgiveness or salvation will be so moved by the love made evident in Jesus as to receive it.

²⁶ William Abrahams, "Review of *Past Event and Present Salvation*," *Perkins Journal* 43 (1990): 40.

²⁷ Colin Gunton, "Review of *Past Event and Present Salvation*," *New Blackfriars* 71 (1990): 209-10. Gunton's quotation is from *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 110.

There are two important implications here. The first is that God's work of salvation is in some degree dependent upon its recipients. What is reflected here is what is sometimes called an "open" doctrine of God. Ultimately, God cannot determine who will be saved but waits upon the journey of discovery on the part of those who need salvation. Here we are confronted by the issues of election and determinism, somewhat beyond the scope of this essay. The point is simply that in Fiddes' account of salvation these implications are indeed open. For him, this is the nature of the Gospel. For others, this indeterminacy undermines their sense of the sovereignty of God. Fiddes' own response to these issues is evident in his Trinitarian theology, which fully embraces the idea that God is inherently relational and open to our participation in the divine life.

A second issue, however, is one of credibility: Is this a compelling and credible argument for the salvation of the world? When Fiddes says that God makes the story of Jesus present and available for us, offering meaning to other human stories of suffering and need, is this a convincing and credible account? At this point, the challenge is not so much that the argument fails, but that this "meaning" needs to be presented in a way that effectively transforms human lives and situations.

Fiddes might respond that this revelatory effect is nothing less than the task of preaching the Gospel, in relationship, deeds and words, itself dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit. That would be a reasonable response and a worthy outcome of a work of salvation theology: to inform and provoke the proclamation of the Gospel. But in itself, that proclamation has to be a credible Gospel, an appropriate and effective response to the human predicament, and it is this difficulty we have been raising. How does the message of the cross acquire such meaning and relevance to the needs and concerns of people today? What must we do to be saved? It would seem from the preceding arguments that in order to convince people to engage with this journey of discovery and forgiveness, we need a stronger and more compelling understanding both of the means and the meaning of salvation. The difficulty here flows into the question of Jesus' death as "the central saving event" and it is to these issues we now turn.

THE CROSS AS SAVING EVENT?

Salvation theology today is not only confronted by a plethora of issues with regard to the meaning and need for salvation, but also in relation to the emphasis placed upon the death of Jesus as the means of salvation. In this regard, there is a cluster of arguments and issues we need to take into account.

The first argument is an objection to the focus on Jesus' death in virtual separation from his life. When atonement theories focus upon Jesus' death as sacrifice or ransom, in what Fiddes rightly sees as a legalistic and objective way, there is indeed a great danger that this death becomes separated from the life and ministry which led to his arrest and execution. It has to be acknowledged, though, that many fine works in atonement theology, including Fiddes' own work, resist this separation. Fiddes gives examples of how Jesus offered forgiveness during his life and ministry.²⁸ In his classic work *God Was In Christ*, Donald Baillie

²⁸ Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 176.

says quite bluntly that what led to Jesus' death was his love for sinners, the way he lived with and for those "on the outer".²⁹

Nonetheless, there is a very powerful theological tradition that places the cross at the very heart of the Christian gospel, with the implication that Jesus came in order to die, to save us from our sins. This emphasis is greatly enhanced by the fact that the creeds of the Church do not mention Jesus' life and ministry at all: only his birth, death and resurrection. Not only that, but in this commonly held perspective, dying in atonement for the sins of the world was Jesus' own intention. In the many works of N T Wright, this case is made consistently. Wright offers an impressive account of the message and mission of Jesus and on the basis of this research argues that Jesus saw his life and death in these terms. Jesus expected to go to his cross as implicit 'king' of the world and through his resurrection God would reveal him to be such, in contrast to the powers of Rome and all other earthly kingdoms. "Jesus seems to have believed that this would occur, uniquely and decisively, in and through his own suffering and death ... he would win the victory that would establish him as Israel's true messiah and transform the kingdom from its current present-and-future state into a fully present reality."³⁰

While there is much in the New Testament that can be adduced to support this view, the difficulty is that it seems to imply that until Jesus died and was raised there was no salvation. This flies in the face of the entire corpus of Scripture. Ted Grimsrud has presented a very powerful case to this effect.³¹ The critical focus of Grimsrud's argument the idea of atonement as necessary in order for retribution to be made: God seeks to punish sinners and 'salvation' is made possible by an appropriate act of retribution. Grimsrud argues that this is not a biblical view of God: all through the Bible, God is one who *offers* salvation as gift. Central to this case is a review the place of sacrifice in ancient Israel—an argument partially seen also in Fiddes' chapter on sacrifice. It was never the case that sacrifices would in some sense persuade God to forgive sinners or the sinful nation. Rather, the cult sacrifices were a means of appropriating and giving thanks for God's already-existing forgiveness and mercy. "Contrary to the logic of retribution, we find mercy at the very core of Old Testament sacrifice theology."³² So it is with the teachings of the prophets, who are presented as "guardians" of God's way of wholeness. Crucial to this argument is the view that the Law is in fact a way of salvation, albeit Israel did not always follow its promise and hope. The implication of this argument, then, is that Jesus did not come to institute or inaugurate the way of salvation. He came, rather, as an advocate for the salvation available through the Law and the Prophets. He came as the servant of this same God and his life and death are to be understood within this theology. Thus Grimsrud argues that the death of Jesus should not be seen as something "extra", something needed "to change God's disposition towards human beings or to enable God to overcome limitations imposed on God's mercy by 'holiness' or

²⁹ D. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 182-83.

³⁰ N. T. Wright, "The Crux of the Faith", Chapter 6 in Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 98.

³¹ Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement: The Bible's Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

³² *Ibid.*, 44.

"justice".³³ Rather, Jesus' message and mission was simply to announce, as his name actually means: *God saves*.

On this basis, Grimsrud interprets the death of Jesus as the offering of his own sacrifice *to us*. He is willing to die so that the love of God can be revealed. Jesus offers forgiveness to sinners as an outworking of the forgiveness that already exists. Thus, when Grimsrud presents his case "instead of atonement", he is not in fact rejecting all models of atonement but is rather offering an interpretation similar in some ways to Fiddes' own case for the journey of forgiveness and, in other aspects, to Abelard's idea of the transforming gift of love. There are two distinctive things in Grimsrud's work: first, the rejection of any element of retribution in all biblical understandings of salvation and then a very significant exploration of the implications of salvation in terms of restorative justice and healing, in the face of "the powers" which threaten human life and society today. In these aspects, then, this work can be seen as an effective development of the directions set out in the latter parts of *Past Event and Present Salvation*.

A further line of critique of the focus upon Jesus' death as the central "saving event" is the argument that this theology implies a violent God. While there have been many developments of this case, I will draw briefly upon the recent work of J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*. In an increasingly violent world, there has been a strong theological impetus to oppose any claim that violence, and perhaps especially religiously motivated violence, can claim a theological imprimatur. Those who set forward the idea of a God who requires the death of his own son, as propitiation of divine wrath, are most vulnerable to this critique; but so too are all views of atonement which celebrate the death of Jesus as the expiation or sacrifice which brings peace or forgiveness. In all these approaches, the implication is that the end justifies the means. These arguments are vulnerable to the charge that they approve of some violence, at least, and imply a blood-thirsty God, at worst. As Weaver puts it succinctly, "The logic of satisfaction atonement leads to a violent image of God. God emerges as the chief avenger or the chief punisher."³⁴ The subsequent argument in Weaver's book suggests an alternative reading of the significance of Jesus' death, giving due weight to his own rejection of violence and thus a theology of God's reign involving restorative rather than retributive justice.

Here it is important to note that Fiddes' argument tries to avoid any implications of a violent God, albeit that he presents with some approval the ideas of expiation—though not propitiation of a vengeful God. Consistently Fiddes suggests that Christians saw the death of Jesus as *like* a sacrifice, in the sense that Jesus' death could be seen as a gift of God, the offering of expiation. While this somewhat blunts the critique, it might still be argued that it still implies that the gruesome death of an innocent man is somehow a good thing.

This line of criticism is greatly strengthened, however, in an extraordinary new study which suggests that the central focus of Christian faith and theology upon the atoning death of Jesus was actually a development that took place almost one thousand years after the event. In the opening words of this study,

³³ Ibid., 87.

³⁴ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2013), 65.

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker say, "It took Jesus a thousand years to die."³⁵ In this work, Brock and Parker argue that late in the first Christian millennium the focus of spirituality and theology shifted from celebration of life with God in the present world, itself created and redeemed by God through the death *and resurrection* of Jesus, to a much more specific focus upon the death of Jesus as a source of atonement. It is noteworthy that all the models of atonement discussed earlier were articulated after the first millennium, including Abelard's, which can be seen as a form of resistance to the newly developed stress upon the cross as atoning sacrifice—though it has to be acknowledged that atonement theology is clearly evident in much earlier periods, such as the works of Augustine, for instance.

Brock and Parker suggest that the Black Death plagues and the Crusades had a crucial part to play in the need for a different theology of death, offering meaning to the early and gruesome deaths experienced in the plague and providing a spiritual significance to the sacrificial deaths of Christians in the Crusades.³⁶ In effect, these soldiers of Christ were entering into his death and receiving salvation through that sacrifice. Brock and Parker undertook extensive research into Christian art throughout all of Christian Europe and found that there are virtually no representations of the cross prior to this period. On the other hand, with the development of this new emphasis on atonement theology, an impressive number of works were created, feeding the imagination of the faithful. Furthermore, it was at this time that new liturgies for the Eucharist were written and mandated, expressing this theology, with a stress upon the death of Jesus as a victim, "a pure victim, a holy victim, an unspotted victim", as the Carolingian liturgy stated, inviting believers to hope and pray that their own lives and deaths might also have such significance.³⁷

While there might be some objections to the sweeping nature of Brock and Parker's conclusions, their argument has considerable impact. The issue that arises for our present consideration is, then, to consider the nature and means of God's salvation in the present. Brock and Parker have made a strong case for re-considering the way atonement theology has claimed a central place for the death of Jesus, largely without reference to his life, his message of creative life with God in the present, against the powers of "empire". Their understanding of the Christian faith as grounded in the resurrection of Jesus and an affirmation of God's creation, invites us to re-consider the nature and foundation of our life with God and thus also to a radical re-appraisal of atonement theology. This brings us back to Paul Fiddes' fundamental question: How can an event in the distant past effect salvation for us today?

At the beginning we noted two critical aspects of our enquiry: the meaning and the means of salvation. We have argued that in several ways, especially with the idea of a journey of forgiveness, Fiddes' argument becomes too narrowly focussed on the problem of guilt, as if this is the definitive element in the human predicament. In the wider reaches of his argument, however, and especially through its strong emphasis on the need for "present salvation", having its impact and power in the present experience of individuals and communities today, we can find a corrective to this limitation. In fact the corrective involves all of the

³⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Anne Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), ix.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapters 10-12.

³⁷ *Ibid.* See particularly 233-253.

elements Fiddes himself identified in his discussion of the human predicament. Our problem, theologically named "sin", is much more than a matter of moral misdeeds needing forgiveness. We are alienated from ourselves and our potential. We fall short of the meaning and significance our lives and communities could have. Even if our lives are comfortable and individually fulfilled, we may so easily succumb to self-satisfaction or indeed selfishness in the face of global poverty. Furthermore, our lives are threatened by ecological disaster on a grand scale, much of it the result of our mistreatment of the earth and our pretense that we are in fact the masters of the universe.

The good news offered to us in the biblical witness, however, is that God does not hold our sins against us. Nor will God stand aside and allow sin and suffering to destroy the creation. Rather, God is ever creatively working towards our redemption: offering us present salvation. If we are not appropriating God's salvation, that too indicates another dimension of our sin—our rebellious pride, in wanting some other form of salvation, perhaps through merit or favour. The converse reality, though, is that God's salvation is already available to us and here again we find helpful indications in Fiddes' thought as to what this actually means. The meaning and the means of salvation for us today is the work of the Spirit, enabling us to participate in God's new creation.

The invitation of the Gospel, then, is to participate in the trinitarian life of God, as Fiddes has later argued, to journey with God into the discovery not only of our sin and need of salvation but also to endure with God, in the creative and redemptive suffering and hope, until there is indeed present salvation.