Movements of Reconciliation Within the Trinity: Inferences for Pastoral Theology

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Abstract
Situations of abuse, neglect, violence, control, hubris, and so forth, which break relationships and leave a trail of unforgiveness and hurt, are commonly encountered by those in person-centred care services, especially ministers of the Christian church. In these scenarios, the need for genuine, reconciling transformation of the inter-personal relations is significant and imperative, and yet there are often numerous blockages that limit statements of grace and forgiveness to only lip service. What is often missing is a robust theology of reconciliation upon which all verbal and physical statements of forgiveness and reconciliation can be grounded. In this article, Paul S. Fiddes' theology of reconciliation, which is undergirded by his 'persons as relations' definition of the Trinity, is outlined and then drawn upon in order to begin a delineation of a vigorous theology of forgiveness and reconciliation. Into this theology it will be possible to locate all attempts at forgiving and reconciling movements towards inter-personal transformation.

Keywords
Reconciliation; forgiveness; relations; Trinity

Introduction

In her essay 'Love Your Enemies: Toward a Christoform Bioethic', M. Therese Lysaught argues that forgiveness and reconciliation are not 'Pollyanna, touch-feely, why-can't-we-all-just-get-along sort of things' but rather practices which are concrete and require much repetition and a lifetime of effort to learn. Moreover, they are not habits which can be formed individually without the help of a community of persons. Since forgiveness and reconciliation are not natural to our fallen human nature, they have to be mediated within a community; a relevant

community which is open to the concrete practices of forgiveness and reconciliation that make it possible.[1]

There is no shortage of belief within Christianity that a community of Christian believers who accept that forgiveness and reconciliation are possible should be something regularly demonstrated and experienced. However, it is questionable whether churches have creatively and fruitfully facilitated space within services and ministries for genuine acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. This, despite the fact that Christian ministers or workers, like ministers of different faiths or workers in other person-centred care professions, regularly come into contact with persons who are unforgiven and unreconciled survivors of conflict, trauma, abuse (all types), historical and current sexual exploitation, marginalisation or oppression. As common knowledge among pastors attests to, these causes of relational breakdown are all-too-common human realities within church pastoral and mission ministry in the United Kingdom.

Moreover, it is vital that all church ministry praxis should be undergirded by a clearly articulated operant theology, which can, for those who earnestly seek reconciliation, ground any genuine reconciling action beyond lip-service statements of forgiveness into whole life transformation. Notwithstanding the prevalent articulation and definition of Christ's reconciling love and forgiveness, as based upon the apostle Paul's delineation of Christ's death and resurrection as the quintessential act of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5, it seems the case that church leaders seldom manage to journey with someone past the above-mentioned 'Pollyanna-touch-feely' wishful thinking type of shallow and precarious statements of forgiveness.

Using the constructive-systematic theology of Baptist theologian Paul S. Fiddes, I argue in this article that a robust theology of participation within the relations of the triune God offers an optimal theological framework from which a pastoral and operant theology of reconciliation could be built; one that is applicable to a wide range of

[1] M. Therese Lysaught, 'Love Your Enemies: Toward a Christoform Bioethic', in *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective*, ed. by David Matzko McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 307–28.

pastoral situations of conflict and unforgiveness within mission and ministry. By drawing upon Fiddes' trinitarian theology, it is not my intention to address or repeat critiques given elsewhere.[2] Rather, having found Fiddes' theology sturdy and pastorally helpful, I endeavour to build upon his model for forgiveness and reconciliation, which is based upon his 'participation in the relations' trinitarian understanding. This will develop a theology of reconciliation vigorous enough for the various scenarios of trauma, hurt, abuse, or estrangement, that are encountered by Christian ministers in which there is a desire for reconciliation from either victim, perpetrator, or both.

This exploration into the theology of reconciliation will consist of four parts: consideration and development of Fiddes' 'relational movements without objective persons' thesis; examination of his theology of salvation and atonement based upon a nuanced Abelardian theory of transformation; consideration of the need of rightly remembered and healed memory in the process of forgiveness; and, assessment of the implications for the realisation of robust and lasting reconciliation through acts of Christian worship. Finally, this investigation will be concluded with a brief comment on the significant potential for change and growth when an emphasis upon trinitarian relations is used to focus on *becoming* instead of *being*.

Participation in Triune Divine Relations

Within certain streams of Hebrew Bible scholarship, it has been lamented that the Christian church in the western world has relied for too long on Old Testament monarchical images of dominance and masculine power. There is, so it is claimed, a need for the non-monarchical biblical witness of God to be brought to the forefront.[3] Fiddes, who started his academic career as a Hebrew Bible scholar, is part of this move to unearth, communicate, and amplify the God of Scripture in a way that resonates with the aspired to western cultural

[2] For sustained, fair, and effective discussion of Fiddes' theology and his use of sources, see the various essays in Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (eds), *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[3] For example, Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. xiii–xvi.

milieu of egalitarianism. If abuse, dominance, exploitation, or oppression is rooted in perceived, apparent, or actual hierarchy in relationships, as often seems to be the case, then what is needed is a theology which exemplifies the non-hierarchical, non-monarchical nature and character of Yahweh. This can be done by describing God's triune nature in terms of panentheistic relations which can heuristically describe God's perichoretic interaction within Godself and between God and creation.

Fiddes asserts that defining God's triune nature as a social, perichoretic, and panentheistic reality *actually* places human beings in participation with the relations of the Godhead, and this has some significant advantages that offer solutions to perennial problems in church history and the praxis of the Christian faith. Key for this article, such a definition strongly counters all persistent images of dominance, power, and monarchical superiority which would seem to enable church cultures where subordination and abuse occur.[4] The divine dance that emphasises interpenetration and a focus on the movements, not the dancers, removes the domination of the Father, which is often used to justify oppression. It throws open relational language allowing us to talk about a motherly father or fatherly mother which, without undermining it, brings equality to our understanding of the Trinity.[5] This egalitarian dance flattens out authority structures both within the state and the church, and it redefines authority in terms of *kenotic*, humble service as modelled by Jesus in John 13. Fiddes claims that vicious cycles of domination, power-plays, and scapegoating could lessen if we focus on our participation in the Trinity and the completeness of fellowship we have with the triune God.[6]

Another benefit is that social, personal language rooted in pastoral experience is vital and very promising in helping humankind understand its relations both with God and with each other. Participative language is not subservient to analogous language, but

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[4] Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2000), pp. 62–71.
[5] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 71–96. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981).
[6] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 96–108.

rather provides an appropriate image for the personalness of God.[7] Seeing God as an event of relationships grounded in the language of participation can, insists Fiddes, allow us to retain the heritage language of 'subsistent relations' so long as we raise our gaze to a third level of meaning: God's relations are as 'beingful' and real as that which is either created or uncreated, and in themselves lies their ground of existence.[8] This understanding is what sets the foundation for a 'social' trinitarian model[9] consisting of *perichoresis* and mirroring Jesus's high priestly prayer in John 17:21.[10]

The final advantage of this perichoretic and panentheistic model of God is that it can lead to a genuine understanding of our participation in the divine nature (Acts 17: 28; Col 1:16–20; 2 Pet 1:4) which could, claims Fiddes, help us more effectively close the post-enlightenment gap between ontology and epistemology since we know God as we participate in life. It may also help with ecological theology and inter-personal relations since all of creation — because of its covenant with God (Gen 9:8) — shares in the divine dance and responds to God, and participation in the Trinity closes the gap between the subject and object which will impact, intensify, and deepen our relationships with each other.[11] This could, for the purposes of this article, offer the distinct possibility of healing all ruptures within human relations irrespective of the severity, content, or context.

Of course, any proffered trinitarian theology will be contested and face some scholarly push back, especially if it claims a level of uniqueness. Indeed, Fiddes' definition of trinitarian 'persons as relations' and 'participation as relations' which are the central theological claims of his articulated panentheistic doctrine of God are, by his own admission, his *unique* contribution to trinitarian theology.[12] He is very

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[7] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 28–33.

[8] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 34–46.

[9] This social trinity model is based on relations, not persons, of the Trinity and has been labelled a 'radical' model. Paul S. Fiddes, 'Relational Trinity: Radical Perspective', in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. by Jason Sexton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), pp. 159–85.

[10] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 46–56.

[11] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Participating in the Trinity', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33, no. 3 (2006), 375–91.

[12] Paul Fiddes, personal communication with the author, 15 and 16 March 2016. This unique contribution of Fiddes has come in for significant criticism in recent years. For instance, in

aware that this language comes from Augustine and Aquinas, and his claim of uniqueness lies in taking an extra step beyond 'subsistent relations' and using radical language that talks about the 'event of relationships'. This, he claims, is the best language of participation and it sits well with both *prayer* and the *eternal generation* of the Son from the Father which we experience in the *mission of God*.[13] Moreover, as every children's pastor knows, it is very difficult to communicate the ancient formula of the Trinity without slipping into modalism or tritheism. Children's talks, as well as sermons, often fall short of describing the relations in God and so, because the idea of 'participation' takes the triune relationships very seriously, participation in the Trinity needs to be the central idea, which, Fiddes suggests, can be best articulated within a panentheistic framework.[14]

In the face of Fiddes' claim of uniqueness, however, there is the frequent rebuttal that it is incoherent to speak about relations without involving any language of persons, and, as McCall argues, the emphasis on relations leads to a jettisoning of classic Christology and the embracing of degree Christology.[15] Granted, on the specific charge that Fiddes is moving away from classic towards degree Christology, Fiddes is ambiguous and possibly guilty.[16] Concerning the accusation of incoherence however, Fiddes avers that all human language falls short

response to Fiddes' radical model, Molnar forcefully asks what relationships are being referred to when using the term *perichoresis*, since the compound term confuses two terms historically used to refer to the inner relations of the Trinity, not relations between God and humanity. See Paul D. Molnar, 'Response to Paul S. Fiddes', in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. by Jason Sexton, pp. 191–197 (pp. 195–96). Notwithstanding the push back, participation in the 'relations', not persons, of the Trinity is the centripetal idea to which all Fiddes' theology migrates. He comes back to it often in his writings on the doctrine of God. For example, see Paul S. Fiddes, 'Creation Out of Love', in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. by J. Polkinghorne (London: SPCK, 2001), pp. 167–91 (pp. 184–91); Paul S. Fiddes, 'The Quest for a Place which is Not-a-Place: The Hiddenness of God and the Presence of God', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. by O. Davies and D. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 35–60 (pp. 51–55); Fiddes, 'Participating in the Trinity', pp. 375–91.

13 Fiddes, 'Participating in the Trinity', pp. 379–83.

14 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 11–13.

15 Thomas H. McCall, 'Response to Paul S. Fiddes', in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. by Jason Sexton, pp. 197–203. It could be countered, however, that New Testament trinitarian language is both relational and understandable. See Matt 3:16–17 for example.

16 Paul S. Fiddes, 'Review of *Christology in Conflict: The Identity of a Saviour in Rahner and Barth* by Bruce Marshall', *Journal of Theological Studies* 40, no. 2 (1989), 700–03.

and that our own human experiences of living in relations with others can be seen to reflect and participate in the relations within God; we are simply trying to find the most appropriate language in light of revelation,[17] and delineating the Trinity as an 'event of relationships' is, asserts Fiddes, a participatory concept that makes sense *only* in existential events of daily life.[18]

Moreover, he continues, not only is this the most appropriate language that we have to speak of the persons of the Trinity, but 'persons as relations' is methodologically sound, uses the majority of theological sources — that is Scripture, tradition, and experience[19] — and was the approach of the early church fathers who defined hypostasis relationally, not objectively.[20] Fundamentally, we exist within a universe of participation with relationships at the epicentre, all of which is experienced within the very being of God. The entire universe is engaging in God like this and so into this experienced framework we should place all other existential questions and events, especially those of forgiveness and reconciliation.[21]

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[17] 'Revelation is not to be replaced by human experience, but the self-disclosure of God is located where God wants to be' (Fiddes, 'Relational Trinity', p. 185).

[18] McCall, 'Response to Paul S. Fiddes', pp. 197–203. Paul S. Fiddes, 'Rejoinder Comments and Clarification', in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. by Jason Sexton, pp. 204–06 (pp. 205–06).

[19] Of course, it should be pointed out that historically, all traditions of the church have consensually held Scripture, tradition, and reason to be the sources of theological formulation. 'Experience', as the fourth source of Wesley's quadrilateral, does not have universal acceptance or univocal meaning. For a critique of Fiddes' use of experience see Andrew Moore, 'Experience and the Doctrine of God', in *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes*, ed. by Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 61–76.

[20] Holmes disagrees, claiming that the eastern Fathers were committed to divine simplicity more than Fiddes acknowledges and that the concept of 'relations' does not connect to the idea of personhood, as claimed by Fiddes. Stephen R. Holmes, 'Response to Paul S. Fiddes', in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. by Jason Sexton, pp. 186–190 (pp. 188–190). For a sustained defence of this rebuttal point, see Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), pp. 97–120.

[21] Paul S. Fiddes, 'What is God? [parts 1&2]', Closer to Truth, <https://www.closertotruth.com/series/immortality-and-personal-consciousness#video-2221> [accessed 12 April 2022].

Following Abelard but with a Difference

Buttressing Fiddes' 'participation as relations' trinitarian theology is an understanding of salvation as a process of transformation which can only happen in relationship and community and is undergirded by a theology of atonement which situates 'sacrifice' at its heart. Following H. Wheeler Robinson, Fiddes asserts that there is a cross in the heart of God which thus eternalises suffering.[22] This creates outcomes in the divine relations and movements of the triune God, and grounds the theology of transformative forgiveness and reconciliation that Fiddes sees as a model. Locating the cross into the centre of God's being is possible because of the catalytic event of the crucifixion of Christ; that historical moment of crucifixion, cry of dereliction, and resurrection of Jesus Christ which establishes the objective event from which Fiddes develops his nuanced Abelardian atonement theory: a 'subjective view which has an objective focus'.[23]

Fiddes advocates a modern atonement theory which has greater explanatory power in today's western culture as one that begins at the subjective pole, by focusing on the present response to God, and is then *followed by* affirmation of the objective event of the cross for a response.[24] Indeed, a subjective theory with an objective focus manages, so Fiddes claims, to overcome the perennial polarity between the subjective and objective found in most other atonement theologies. Instead of a focus on God's demand for justice or the Satan's destruction, Fiddes follows and develops Abelard by holding the *agape* of God as the central impetus for both salvation and the atonement. Within the *agape* of God, both the human and divine go through a process of change, resulting in the most satisfactory way of dealing with human alienation and estrangement, as well as with the fragmentation of social relationships which need to be

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[22] The cross is due to the active suffering which befalls God. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 166–68; cf. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1965).

[23] Paul S. Fiddes, 'A Response to Stephen R. Holmes' (paper presented at the one-day colloquium on the Doctrine of God in conversation with Paul Fiddes, St Mary's School of Divinity, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Fife, 16 April 2016).

[24] Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1989), pp. 28–29.

healed and reconciled.[25] God's *agape* love is more than mere example; it is transformative.

Indeed, it is Fiddes' commitment to understanding salvation as a *process of transformation* that underlies his preference for a subjective view with objective focus. Starting with his baptistic commitment to community and relationship within an eschatological reality, he uniquely interweaves it with the more eastern concept of progressive divinisation, which is identified by being increasingly moulded into the likeness of God. Within a committed and faithful Christian community, one that views the other side of Easter as the *only* place from which we can see reconciliation and in which our ultimate hope lies,[26] Fiddes defines salvation as a moving away from sin towards a more divinised existence that, in the process, effectively deals with aspects of residual fallenness such as estrangement, anxiety, hostility, unforgiveness, fear, and idolatry.[27]

This process reflects effectively the fundamental purpose of God's transformational, suffering love, its *raison d'etre*, which is to heal broken relationships in acts of divine-human reconciliation. God is constantly seeking out people to save (1 Tim 2:3–4; 2 Pet 3:9), perennially offering forgiveness and reconciliation to the sinner in a process which is costly to God. This must happen in the here and now, and involve response from humanity: the reciprocal movements in the process of salvation are the intimate act of atonement.[28] This reconciliatory act with humanity also has its place within a greater quest for the unity of creation through redemption. Salvation in the present is enacted by God as creator and redeemer seeking to bring oneness to a chaotic and disharmonised creation, often symbolised in the Hebrew Bible as sea monsters of chaos.[29] Like forgiveness and reconciliation

[25] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Salvation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. by J. Webster, K. Tanner, and I. Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 176–96 (pp. 178–80).
[26] Paul S. Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 82; Paul S. Fiddes, 'Tragedy as Rhetoric of Evil', in *Rhetorik des Bösen / The Rhetoric of Evil*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes and Jochen Schmidt (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2013), pp. 165–92 (p. 176).
[27] Fiddes, 'Salvation', pp. 176–78.
[28] Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, pp. 14–17.
[29] Scholars such as Boyd and Day argue that these monsters are demonic, malevolent beings with their own irrevocable freedom to wreak havoc on creation. See Gregory A. Boyd, *God at*

with humans, this harmonisation of creation involves much pain, suffering, and cost to God, and causes a continual kenotic posture of vulnerability within the relations of the Trinity.[30]

As with his 'persons as relations' definition of the triune God, Fiddes' 'subjective view which has an objective focus' has not gone unnoticed nor passed without scholarly critique. Because his atonement idea places the present process of salvation prior to the past objective event of the cross and is juxtaposed with the insistence that God continually suffers through vulnerable love in the process of salvation and reconciliation, interlocutors have stated that this atonement theory comes dangerously close to syncretising the specific and unique suffering of the Son on the cross into a broader and more general account of divine suffering.[31] In response, Fiddes assures that despite locating himself firmly within a reinterpreted Abelardian tradition on the atonement which is often accused of underplaying the cross of Christ,[32] his refined account of the cross exemplifies not only the sublime example of who God always is in creative-redemptive work[33] but that it is, moreover, a totally unique and ultimate event in the story of the human and divine. The cross is the most intense event of divine suffering because God goes the furthest he ever will into a world alienated from its creator in order to achieve reconciliation.[34]

War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), pp. 93–113; John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 87.

30 Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, pp. 17–22; cf. Fiddes, 'Creation Out of Love', pp. 167–91.

31 Holmes, with forensic insight, acknowledges that Fiddes manages to avoid collapsing Christology into divine passibility in the way other divine suffering accounts do. However, he goes on to claim that Fiddes is less successful in keeping the cross the objective focus in his critique of various soteriological images. See Stephen R. Holmes, 'Who Can Count How Many Crosses?: Paul Fiddes on Salvation', in *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes*, ed. by Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 120–33.

32 As Aulen points out, the main reason why Abelard's subjective view was rejected in the Middle Ages by traditional theologians was his tendency to assign no special significance to the death of Christ (Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931), pp. 96–97).

33 Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, pp. 24–26.

34 Fiddes, 'A Response to Stephen R. Holmes'.

The Role of Memory

Having briefly sketched the theological case for locating movements of reconciliation within the relations of the Trinity, one needs to now consider the pastoral-theological overtones, especially the *actual* practice of forgiveness and reconciliation which, for those survivors, offenders, or both who genuinely want to reconcile, goes beyond external lip service to authentic relational rebuilding. One key area, as highlighted by Fiddes in following Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, and Miroslav Volf,[35] is the process of forgiveness and the function of memory in that process. In *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World,* Volf posits the question, 'How can we enjoy the blessings of memory without suffering its curses?'[36] The curses Volf refers to are memories, both qualitative and quantitative, that prevent movements of forgiveness, let alone reconciliation. The answer is to develop truthful memory that can be used in the process of forgiveness, since too much memory can actually hamper or prevent forgiveness.[37]

Fiddes partially agrees with Volf. While acknowledging that too much memory, especially malevolent memories, can hinder forgiveness, Fiddes insists that there can only be forgiveness when there is *true* memory; the wrong cannot be forgiven if it has been forgotten. However, the proffered notion of forgetting with forgiveness is based upon Isaiah's account of forgiving and forgetting attributed to Yahweh himself,[38] and advocated by Volf, Derrida and Ricoeur. It does contain elements of merit that Fiddes incorporates into his delineation of forgiveness and reconciliation as being a journey of anguish consisting of two voyages: one of discovery and one of endurance.[39]

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35 Paul S. Fiddes, 'Memory, Forgetting and the Problem of Forgiveness: Reflecting on Volf, Derrida and Ricoeur', in *Forgiving and Forgetting: At the Margins of Soteriology,* ed. by Johannes Zacchuber and Hartmut Von Sass, Religion in Philosophy and Theology 82, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), pp. 117–33.

36 Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 85.

37 Volf, *The End of Memory*, pp. 85–102, cf. Fiddes, 'Memory, Forgetting and the Problem of Forgiveness', pp. 118–23.

38 'I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more' (Isaiah 43:25).

39 Paul S. Fiddes, 'Preaching Forgiveness', *Preaching Today*, 36, no. 1 (1993), 11–15 (pp. 11–12).

Derrida's definition of forgiveness as an unconditional, limitless, and non-instrumental *gift,* given without expectation of reciprocation, grounds the movement of the forgiver in their journey of anguish, specifically in terms of the voyage of discovery. For those victims wanting and able to make this journey, forgiveness, Fiddes insists, must be offered before any repentance and with no expectation that there will ever be repentance from the perpetrator, since this act of gifted forgiveness forgives both the actor and the act together.[40] When speaking forgiveness over people *before* they repent, reconciliatory repentance can be unlocked since the person will be subjectively set free from guilt; this will take the perpetrator and victim, hopefully, into new, undiscovered territory.[41] This is indeed what Christ did in his earthly ministry (Matt 9:2) which climaxed with his declaration of forgiveness from the cross (Luke 23:34).[42]

Similarly, Ricoeur agrees that non-conditional forgiveness eradicates culprit and victim categories but, contra Derrida, he states that the work of memory has pertinence since memory concerns an event which is at the heart of all exchanges centred around repentance, forgiveness, and absolution. Fiddes welcomes and uses the flexibility and untidiness about forgiveness in Ricoeur, as well as an insistence on having a carefree memory.[43] It is this untidiness and unpredictability that give rise to the endurance voyage in the forgiver's journey of anguish.

Overall, Fiddes' theology of reconciliation, which borrows related elements from Volf, Derrida, and Ricoeur, situates all forgiveness and reconciliation in the participatory-relational network of the triune God. Given our participation in the relations of the triune God, we participate not only in the reconciling and forgiving movements of God but also in divine suffering and empathy. Thus, our situatedness within movements of divine possibility and participation in divine empathy opens victims up to understanding forgiveness as a

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40 Fiddes, 'Memory, Forgetting and the Problem of Forgiveness', pp. 123–27.

41 Forgiveness *before* repentance will, claims Fiddes, take restorative justice to a new level of effectiveness and move the penal system much closer to its set aim of reform (Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, pp. 14–17, cf. Paul S. Fiddes, 'Restorative Justice and the Theological Dynamic of Forgiveness', *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* (2015), 1–12).

42 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 197–220.

43 Fiddes, 'Memory, Forgetting and the Problem of Forgiveness', pp. 127–30.

journey of anguish that includes voyages of discovery, endurance, and empathy. Moreover, given our participation and situatedness, we know and experience this journey with God, not alone. In this journey of anguish and empathy, the victim absorbs the hostility and tries to place themselves in the offender's shoes. Clearly, it is a journey open only to those who arrive at a juncture where they want to offer forgiveness and have a desire to be reconciled.

Since it is all based on the Abelardian atonement of transformation where God makes a journey of empathy through Jesus of Nazareth into the depths of human despair and estrangement in order to transform rebellious lives, all chosen movements of forgiveness participate in this divine act and the journey of forgiving memory thus becomes part of God's journey. Ultimately, the journey of anguish is an optional movement into the unknown in which one is trying to win the offender back into relationship, something made possible by the memory of the violence and injustice of the cross that lies at the heart of the Christian faith, and which invites participation in the God who transforms, forgives, and reconciles.[44]

Implications for Pastoral Theology

In a recent and unfinished conversation with philosopher Pamela Anderson, Fiddes agrees that there are significant dangers in forgiving too quickly: for instance, in situations of domestic violence where the woman is under duress to 'just forgive' while remaining in an abusive family situation. In these types of situations, ones that pastoral ministers come across with some regularity, small and slow steps should be taken towards starting first with an imaginative narrative about the offender that could foster a desire in the victim to extend forgiveness to the perpetrator. Indeed, insists Fiddes, since forgiveness should be framed as an emergent property materialising out of dialogue, it is possible to encourage forgiveness without demanding it.[45]

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[44] Fiddes, 'Memory, Forgetting and the Problem of Forgiveness', pp. 130–33; Fiddes, 'Preaching Forgiveness', pp. 13–15.

[45] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Forgiveness, Empathy and Vulnerability: An Unfinished Conversation with Pamela Sue Anderson', *Angelaki*, 25, no. 1–2 (2020), 109–25 (pp. 119–21).

Having established that forgiveness is an unconditional *gift*, this does not mean that it is easy or a 'touchy-feely' type of action. Rather, it is a struggle that cannot and should not be circumvented or short-circuited precisely because there is an intrinsic tension between forgiveness and justice, and this is a cause of disturbance.[46] At a deeper theological level, forgiveness leading to reconciliation is premised in the inimitable reconciling act of God in and through Christ that reveals 'the incongruity of God's recognition of God's creatures as *perpetrators* of sinful relations and as *victims* of the sinful relations of others'.[47] Therefore, this incongruity, which is present in all situations of antagonism and unforgiveness, needs to be brokered and broken by radical and unilateral action. As Fiddes has already pointed out, the starting point of forgiveness leading to reconciliation is to offer forgiveness *before* repentance, which could metaphorically or physically be done by outstretching one's hand of forgiveness to persons or groups with whom there is an interpersonal conflict.[48] This will transcend the trappings of destructive mutuality and also open the door to posthumous forgiveness for offenders who are no longer alive.

The juxtaposition of the incongruity of broken relations with a theology of pastoral ministry leads to some imperatival conclusions. As Jesus himself instructed, when a worshipper who is about to make an offering remembers an unreconciled situation with a brother or sister, then that person is to go and first initiate reconciliation with them (Matt 5:23–24). Considering that the one bringing the offering is both offender and victim in different situations renders void any act of worship before reconciliation is sought.[49] Moreover, the incongruity is dramatically acted out and overcome in every act of corporate Christian worship as progression takes place from unconfessed sin to repentance, and in the celebration and movement of a broken community of persons to a newly established community rooted in Christ Jesus.

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46 Fiddes, 'Forgiveness, Empathy and Vulnerability', pp. 110–11.

47 Christoph Schwobel, 'Reconciliation, Justice and the Incongruity of Recognition' (paper presented at the Society for the Study of Theology Reconciliation Conference 2021, Newnham College, University of Cambridge, 13–15 September 2021). Italics mine.

48 Schwobel, 'Reconciliation, Justice'.

49 It should be noted that our Roman Catholic and Anglican brethren regularly create opportunities in their liturgical approach for forgiveness and reconciliation *before* acts of worship.

In less liturgical and more sermon-centric traditions, such as the Baptists, the pulpit can become the epicentre of movements of forgiveness and reconciliation rooted in the relational movements of the Trinity. Paramount for this is articulating and emphasising the painful journey of forgiveness and reconciliation to the preclusion of a divine courtroom legal pardon.[50] There are a range of texts in both Testaments which elucidate God's reconciliation journey of anguish and endurance into which all believers can situate themselves and move in divine reconciling movements as they forgive and potentially reconcile with other persons.[51]

Collectively, all aspects of Christian worship, whether corporate or individual, in a church building or some other space, could be acts whose sole purpose is to create a new and different future for the worshipping community — both individuals and groups — by making promises and keeping them; a triumvirate of 'forgiveness, promising and yearning'. Because any promise-keeping happens within a web of relationships, there is a ripple effect which could bring significant healing to a myriad of relationships, through which God is enabled to win back offenders via reconciliation and life-transformation.[52]

Nevertheless, the question arises as to what this looks like concretely in Christian worship and ministry. Key to how this could be answered is our recognition that moments and movements of forgiveness and reconciliation are situated within a 'persons as relations' trinitarian reality of the panentheistic God, one in whom we 'participate in the divine nature' and 'live and move and have our being'. What follows are some brief and embryonic suggestions. First, we need to use our imagination while consciously thinking of the Holy Spirit. Then persons participating in Christian worship who are in need of and are open to pronouncements of forgiveness and possible reconciliation can, through declaration and prayer, situate all acts and utterances of forgiveness and reconciliation as taking place within the communications, love, and relations that intrinsically exist within the

[50] Fiddes, 'Preaching Forgiveness', p. 11.
[51] For instance, Jacob and Esau, Hosea and his wife, Christ on the cross (Fiddes, 'Preaching Forgiveness', pp. 12–14).
[52] Fiddes, 'Forgiveness, Empathy', pp. 111–13.

triune God. This incorporates, of course, what Fiddes calls 'the infinite twisted knot' that is found in the 'yes' between the Father and Son, a knot actualised during the moment of Christ's cry of dereliction which is infinite enough to contain all 'noes' of rebellion and sin including attitudes of hostility, bitterness, and other corollaries of unforgiveness on the part of created beings, both physical and spiritual.[53]

Second, if salvation is a process of transformation with agape love and sacrifice at the epicentre, then all relationships within the church, both in times of worship and during the rest of the week, should be moving toward the *telos* of a community underpinned by an Abelardian theology of atonement.[54] If relationships are to be healed through forgiveness and reconciliation, then the subjective locus of the objective focus needs to be facilitated through opportunities for unreconciled persons to converse, relate, work together, and to be in fellowship. Life groups, discipleship ministries, and other serving opportunities could be organised in such a way as to give those in need of forgiveness and reconciliation opportunity to be together and journey alongside one another.

Third and finally, in acts of Christian worship, space needs to be created to allow persons to ponder, reflect, and form *true* memory of the historical rupture(s) in the unreconciled relationship. Care should be taken to not allow too much time for mental indulgence that could

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[53] The 'no' found in the 'yes' between the Father and Son has become a regular theme in Fiddes' corpus of work since 2006, and one that he gets from Hans Urs von Balthasar's work on dramatic soteriology. Select works where the theme appears includes Fiddes, 'Participating in the Trinity', pp. 388–90; Paul S. Fiddes, 'Dual Citizenship in Athens and Jerusalem: The Place of the Christian Scholar in the Life of the Church', in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes*, ed. by A. R. Cross and R. Gouldbourne, Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies 6 (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2011), pp. 119–40 (pp. 133–36); Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes and Richard Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints: A Theology of Covenanted Disciples* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), pp. 95–101; Paul S. Fiddes, 'The Trinity, Modern Art, and Participation in God', in *Christian Theology and the Transformation of Natural Religion: From Incarnation to Sacramentality: Essays in Honour of David Brown*, ed. by Christopher R. Brewer (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), pp. 81–100 (p. 96). As Fiddes said to this author in an interview, 'There is only one place that anyone can say "no" to God and this is in the "yes" of the Son to the Father' (Paul Fiddes, personal communication with the author, 15 and 16 March 2016).

[54] Lyall insists that *agape* love is the underlying root of all pastoral relationships, including ones needing to be reconciled. This is because the agape love demonstrated through the incarnation of Christ enables any person to situate themselves into the context of the one being offered forgiveness. David Lyall, *The Integrity of Pastoral Care* (London: SPCK, 2001), pp. 97–98, 154–56.

change a true memory to one of embellishment and hyperbole. Effective illustrations, stories, or imagery could be used in order to catalyse the memory reflection exercise and prepare the forgiver to initiate their journey of anguish that could lead to a voyage of discovery.[55] Though challenging, the ideal would be to have junctures in the worship service with enough time to allow for formation of true memory, and opportunities to commence unconditional agape forgiveness that will, hopefully, catalyse a journey of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation.

Conclusion: More Becoming, Less Being

In concluding, while never self-identifying as a process theologian, Fiddes has accommodated into his doctrine of God elements of potential, growth, and becoming over any category of pure act (*actus purus*). Therefore, creation's participation in the relations of the triune God, relations that have room for potential and becoming, offer a location within the panentheistic reality of God for genuine movement through the process of forgiveness into actual, experiential healing and reconciliation of inter-person relationships. The theological emphasis upon the relations of the Trinity as constant movement and change places greater focus on becoming instead of being, and this elicits greater opportunities for growth and development, both in this life and the life to come.

Fiddes, following Ricoeur and much poetic literature, holds that the *eschaton* is by nature open and full of possibility. With regard to the end of evil, Fiddes' hopeful universalism posits that there will be a final and complete overcoming of all evil, including de-personalised, unreconciled, and dehumanising relations: this is a Christian hope in

[55] Recently, this author witnessed an effective illustrative lesson on the dangers of giving the devil a foothold by not dealing with anger, offense, and resentment quickly enough (Eph 4:26–27). Using the image of a homemade monkey trap that is used in Africa (a carton with a banana in it; the monkey puts its hand through the hole to get the banana but cannot get its hand out unless it lets go of the banana, which most monkeys do not), the speaker's point was that we often hold on to offense and dislike just like the monkey with the banana and so we get trapped in unforgiveness and bitterness. Instead, we should let go of the offense through forgiveness and, like a smart monkey, be released from the entrapment. Unfortunately, no space or time was created following the talk for people to approach others whom they needed to forgive.

which no one is left outside, alienated, or rejected.[56] The overcoming, however, will not be instant but a gradual eradication of evil as it allows people to repent, grow, and be sanctified before and after death, which best explains those above-mentioned scripture texts that speak of God wanting 'all to be saved'.[57]

Therefore, situating the journeying process of forgiveness and reconciliation — often encountered by Christian ministers in their ministerial duties and pastoral care — into the constantly becoming and changing participation in the relations of the triune God can and should unlock growth and development in the stages of forgiveness and reconciliation by assimilating the work of the triune relations into the restorative process between unreconciled persons. Moreover, framing this operant theology within a broader eschatological 'now and not yet' milieu creates room for hope-filled optimism in the face of death and the best theodicy, since justice, healing, and wholeness can be found in post-death growth and development of those who remained unforgiven and unreconciled to other persons at the point when their lives were prematurely cut short.[58]

[56] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Question and Answer Session' (Institute for Theology, Imagination & the Arts Seminar, St Mary's School of Divinity, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Fife, 15 April 2016).
[57] Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 190–196; Fiddes, 'Tragedy as Rhetoric', pp. 188–89.
[58] Fiddes, *The Promised End*, pp. 49–52, 133–35.