

INTRODUCTION

When Christians speak of salvation, they tell a story. It is a story that stretches from even before the creation of the world to its final redemption, when the plan of salvation conceived by God from eternity is to come to fulfillment. While God's dealings of old with God's chosen people, Israel, play an important role in this story, ultimately it revolves around Jesus Christ and his death on the cross.

Yet, because over the centuries this story has been told in many different ways, we can also properly speak in the plural of Christian *stories* of salvation or redemption. These stories differ from one another in many respects. They define salvation in different ways, as well as the problem or plight from which we must be saved. They present a variety of interpretations of human history, generally beginning with a particular understanding of God's original intention in creation and ending with some vision regarding the "last things," that is, eschatology. What particularly distinguishes these stories of redemption from one another, however, is the way Christ and the cross are understood: while all Christians agree that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection "save" human beings in some sense, there are many different answers to the question of precisely *how* these events do so.

Related to this central question are many others. Christian thinkers have traditionally claimed that Jesus' coming and death on the cross were *necessary* for our salvation; but *why* could we be saved in no other way? Does Christ's work consist primarily of procuring divine forgiveness so as to save us from the *guilt* of sin, or is it aimed mainly at our *transformation* and deliverance from the *power* of sin? Do Christ's life, death, and resurrection in themselves "effect" some change in our human condition or in our relation to God, perhaps by making atonement for our sins or liberating us from the evil powers that oppress us and hold us in bondage? It has been common for Christian theologians to make a distinction between an "objective" salvation, involving the redemption of *the whole world* by Christ and his death, and the "subjective" appropriation of this salvation by individuals through faith. If we speak of an objective salvation, can we say that *all people* have been saved by Christ in some way, or is salvation limited only to those who respond in faith to what he has done? If a subjective response of faith is deemed necessary for salvation, is that faith sufficient in itself, or is something else also required, such as a life of love and obedience to God's will? Is our salvation a work of God alone from beginning to end, or does it depend in some way

on what *we* do as well? The different views regarding Christ's saving work also reflect different understandings of God. For example, while all Christians agree that God is love, some affirm that God also reacts with wrath toward our sin and must punish it, in contrast to others who reject the notion of a wrathful God from whom we must be saved.

Although human salvation is associated particularly with Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, it is also regarded as depending in some way on the work of the Holy Spirit as well as on the fellowship and ministry of the church, where the saving word is proclaimed and lived out. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist, are also considered important for salvation. Yet the ways the Holy Spirit, the church, the word of God, and the sacraments are believed to contribute to our salvation tend to vary according to the understanding of the work of Christ adopted.

In the following pages, we will look at thirteen different interpretations of the Christian story of redemption revolving around Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. This work is intended not as a comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of salvation or the atonement but merely as a survey of the thought of several figures who have strongly influenced how salvation in Christ has been understood by Christians past and present. These thirteen figures have been chosen for consideration not because their work has had a greater impact on Christian thought than that of all others—indeed, many other figures have influenced equally, if not more so, the way Christians have understood Christ's saving work—but because together they offer us a rich variety of very different perspectives on the subject.

The objective here is not to present a general summary of the theological thought of each of the figures considered but only to examine the ways each one responds to the questions raised above concerning Christ and salvation. While it is important to take into account the scholarly discussion regarding their writings, an effort has been made to let all of these figures speak for themselves in their own words as much as possible. At the end of each chapter, the ideas of the figure under consideration are subjected to a brief evaluation. It must be observed, however, that this is a difficult task, given that Christians of different backgrounds and tendencies have reacted in conflicting ways to the ideas associated with each figure; what some consider to be virtues and strengths in the thought of any particular figure are often regarded by others as defects or weaknesses. The work ends with a brief conclusion that brings together its main arguments.

Among the criticisms that many today would make of all the figures considered—except the last one, Rosemary Radford Ruether—is that they use masculine pronouns to refer to both God and humanity, or “man.” Many Christians today consider such a usage sexist, in that it contributes to the exclusion and oppression of women. To speak consistently of God as a male, a “he” but never a “she,” and to use words such as *man*, *mankind*, and *men* to refer to people of both sexes, makes the male normative and provides a basis for justifying the domination of males over females. For this reason, throughout this work, the noninclusive language employed to refer to human beings in the English translations of the writings of

the figures considered will be changed into gender-inclusive language. Of course, while this may help promote greater gender-inclusivity, it can also obscure the fact that the figures considered actually *do* regard the male as normative and thus can result in a slightly distorted representation of their thought. Several of these figures, however, use the word *man* in a special sense to refer simultaneously to one man in particular, to human beings collectively, to the human nature shared by all people, and to an abstract concept of humanity. Because this use of the word *man* is central to their understanding of salvation, in these cases, rather than replacing *man* with something more gender-inclusive, it will be placed in quotation marks (“man”) so as to indicate that it is being used in this special sense. Though some may find it disagreeable, masculine pronouns will be used to refer to God throughout most of this work in accordance with the usage of the figures considered, simply because to attempt to change this would make it impossible to represent their thought faithfully and would result in a style that most readers would find somewhat laborious. Hopefully, however, the last chapter will make up for this by serving as a critique of the previous twelve chapters in this regard.

Finally, it is important to stress that the objective of this book is primarily *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. In other words, it does not attempt to argue in favor of any of the figures considered over against the others, so as to conclude that the ideas of one or another are “right,” in contrast to the “erroneous” ideas of others. Instead, the main purpose here is to present as objectively as possible a wide variety of understandings of the Christian story of redemption so that the readers may grasp more fully the many different ways Christians have spoken of salvation in Christ. By gaining a deeper understanding of the many problems, questions, and issues involved, it is hoped that the readers may be enabled to develop their own views on the subject more clearly while at the same time gaining a greater appreciation of views that differ from their own as well as the difficulties inherent to all of these views.