Shalom: A Biblical/Theological Vision for God’s People

The Concept of Shalom

Shalom is a fitting place to begin a discussion of the biblical basis for anti-racism and reconciliation. A society characterized by shalom embraces the core values of peace, justice, and enjoyment of all relationships, centered in relationship with God. God in Christ has begun the work of reconciling the world to himself. Those who are in Christ join in this marvelous work of reconciliation. In pursuit of shalom, those who find themselves in relationships scarred by injustice actively seek restoration and reconciliation. In pursuit of shalom, those who enjoy special privilege freely give it up to serve and benefit others. In pursuit of shalom, the community of Christ speaks truth to institutions, calling them to model and practice justice and reconciliation. In pursuit of shalom, every person commits to the hard work and profound joy of reconciliation.

The biblical concept of shalom supports this picture. In the Bible, shalom connotes the complete well-being of a society or community. Because it has a strong communal emphasis, shalom necessitates “right harmonious relationships to other human beings.” Part of what right relationship means can be seen in the linking of shalom with justice. That these two words are at times found in parallel lines of Old Testament poetry indicates that shalom and justice are closely related concepts. While shalom includes more than justice, it certainly produces nothing less than a just society. In addition, the common linking of the word shalom with covenant in the Old Testament seems to indicate that shalom comes as a result of God's covenantal commitment to His people. If this is the case, then a look at God's intentions for His covenant people will help in fleshing out a vision of biblical shalom.

The Divine Intention for Humanity

Both in the creation account and in texts concerning the consummation of all things, we get glimpses of God’s intention for humanity. In creation, humanity is made in the image of God, which means every person has great value in God’s eyes. Also implicit in the creation story is the idea that all human beings are equally significant before God, because all humanity derives from one family and thus share the same origin. Indicating what will be the case at the consummation, John’s Revelation shows a community of diverse people from every nation worshiping God in Christ-centered unity. This diversity in unity that will fully characterize God’s people at the end of time gives a snapshot of God’s intention for His community now.

Diversity in unity as a model for God’s people has its basis in the nature of God. God reveals himself in Scripture as one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God’s very nature may be conceived in terms of diversity in unity. In John 17, Jesus asks that His people might mirror the unity that typifies His relationship with the Father. “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world might believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Imaging diversity in unity seems to be an important part of what it means to image God, fulfilling God’s intention for humanity.

God’s ultimate intentions for humanity can be derived from Old and New Testament texts that indicate God’s ideal for His covenant community. His ideal is a community/society in which “steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”
It is a community in which the chains of injustice and oppression are broken. Drawing on New Testament imagery and language, this community will not value division based on race and economic factors. Instead, those most polarized in terms of social and religious categories will be made into “one new humanity” through the reconciliation accomplished through Christ Jesus. Paul refers to this spiritually unified community as the very temple of God, a people “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

**Shalom Marred**

The story of humanity, however, shows that the shalom envisioned by God for humanity and established at creation was marred in the fall. As a result of sin, not only was the relationship between God and humanity broken, but there was also increasing division among peoples. In the early chapters of Genesis, we see brother divided against brother, families divided against each other, and nations divided against one another. The devastating effects of this division of and enmity within the human family can be seen in the biblical story. The existence of slavery, ethnic prejudice, and economic oppression are just a few examples. The marring of the original vision of shalom is exemplified today in many similar kinds of injustice and division.

**Shalom Restored**

God’s redemptive solution to what sin had marred is revealed in Genesis 12. God calls Abraham into a covenant relationship that is meant to bless him and his descendants. God makes it clear, however, that Israel is to be a blessing to all nations. In fact, God’s larger plan is to bless all nations. God’s plan for restoring universal shalom is to be accomplished through His particular choice of Israel. This universal reach of God explains the many threads in Israel’s life together that speak of the inclusion of the foreigner, the outsider. Laws that show concern for foreigners living with the people of Israel abound. Many parts of Israel’s story involve the enfolding of the outsider into the blessings or covenant of Israel while not eliminating his or her ethnic identity. Finally, the prophets clearly articulate a vision of shalom meant to extend to all nations through Israel’s priestly role. Isaiah speaks the words of the Lord, “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants…these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer’…Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, ‘I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.’”

Acting on Israel’s behalf, Jesus Christ fulfilled God’s intention of bringing shalom to the nations by becoming “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to [God’s] people Israel.” The Messiah was the completion of all that Israel had been put in the world for…God’s self-revelation and his work of human redemption.” And in Jesus the Messiah, the covenant community is thrown open to all peoples and nations without prejudice. Jesus focused His new community around two central commandments that bring together the law and the prophets—to love God wholeheartedly and to love one’s neighbor fully. One’s neighbor is broadened and specified to include those outside one’s own circle. Even a person's enemies are now included in the category of neighbor. In His earthly ministry, Jesus consistently transcended cultural and racial boundaries, incarnating reconciliation to those He encountered.

The early church progressively came to realize the inclusive nature of the Christian community. We see this worked out in the book of Acts as language boundaries and then major ethnic barriers are broken down by the gospel so that the witness of Jesus might reach the ends
of the earth. The divine vision for the covenant community now centered in Jesus is the actualization of the truth that in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.” The church is to be a spiritually unified community in which God’s spirit dwells in anticipation of that eternal vision of “a great multitude [of worshippers] that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”

CONCLUSION

Justice and unity are integral to God’s intention for humanity—His vision of shalom. This unity, however, is not to be confused with uniformity. Diversity is not erased in God's ideal of covenant community and shalom; rather, it is wonderfully woven into the fabric of communal unity. So Paul can speak of the Christian community as a body, made of diverse members who function in different ways for different purposes while still being one. This diversity in unity is achieved through a unity of focus, as the church worships the one true God together. Diversity in unity is also achieved through a passionate commitment to restored relationship with fellow believers. This diversity in unity is theologically grounded in the very nature of God. God as three in one (God as trinity) provides the basis and model of true biblical community. Finally, diversity in unity is to characterize the Christian community in the present world as it seeks to image God and live as a biblical witness to all peoples. Only authentic biblical community—composed of people from all nations, tribes, and tongues united in worship of Christ—can fully image the triune God in a way that brings glory to God and shalom to humanity.
Endnotes

1 Cf. the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff, Until Justice and Peace Embrace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).
2 2 Cor. 5:18-19.
3 2 Cor. 5:19-21.
4 The following description is not so much a lexical study of the Hebrew word shalom as a conceptual study of the idea and ideal of well-being intended by God for humanity. So while this study draws on specific Old Testament usages of the Hebrew word, texts that do not use the term but nevertheless convey aspects of God's overall intention for humanity are also used to elaborate the broader concept.
5 Nicholas Wolterstorff, Until Justice and Peace Embrace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 70.
6 E.g., šālôm and s’dāqā in Ps. 85:10.
7 E.g., Isa. 48:18; 60:17.
8 Wright in his comments on Isa. 42 observes that the fundamental mission of justice (mišpāt) “is augmented by compassion, enlightenment and liberation. Justice and gentleness. Healing and wholeness. The picture is very rich indeed.” Christopher J. H. Wright, Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 179.
9 von Rad, TDNT, 2:403. For example, the term for covenant (b’rît) is linked with šālôm (i.e., “covenant of shalom”) in Ezek. 34:25; 37:26.
11 Gen. 2; cf. Rom. 5:12.
12 Rabbinic tradition states it nicely. “Why was man created a single, solitary human being? So that it might not be said that some races are better than others.” “[He was created alone] for the sake of peace among men, that one might not say to his fellow, ‘my father was greater than thine.’”[Talmud, Sanhedrin, 37a.]
13 Rev. 7:9-12.
14 John 17:21-22.
15 “…righteousness (s’dāqā) and peace (šālôm) will kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10).
16 Isa. 58:6-8; cf. also 42:1.
17 Isa. 56:6-8.
19 Eph. 2:11-18.
20 Eph. 2:19-22.
21 Gen. 3.
22 God and humanity (Ps. 51:3-4); brother against brother (Gen. 4); families divided (Gen. 9; cf. 9:32); and nations divided (Gen. 11).
23 Slavery (e.g., Exod. 1:8f.; Phil. 15-16), ethnic prejudice (e.g., Num. 12:1f; cf. also Acts 10, esp. v. 28), and economic oppression (e.g., Amos 4:1; James 5:1-6).
24 e.g., Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Deut. 4:5-8.
26 Isa. 56:6-8; cf. also Isa. 2:2-3; 9:1-2; 49:5-6; 51:4-5; Jer. 2:3; 4:1-2; 12:14-16.
28 Wright, 44.
32 e.g., John 4; Luke 7:1-10.
33 Language boundaries (Acts 6:1-6); ethnic barriers (to Samaritans, ch. 8; to Gentiles, chs. 15f.).
34 Acts 1:8.
37 Rev. 7:9.
38 1 Cor. 12:14-26.
39 cf. Eph. 2:19-22 where the temple imagery provides an allusion to worship; also Rev. 7:9.