

"Shalom": A Message for the City

This radiant word expressed superbly Yahweh's all-embracing concern for human welfare. In it, everything that made for wholeness was intertwined: health, right-relationships, justice, physical safety, good harvest, prosperity, the presence of Yahweh.

Alan Kreider: Journey Towards Holiness

We should make a renewed effort to place shalom more centrally in our proclamation and struggle. Placing matters related to peace on the outer edge of faith, making them an optional, individual matter of conscience, and reducing the meaning of peace to a passive avoidance of violence, have all skewed our understanding of both shalom and the central core of biblical faith.

Perry Yoder: Shalom, The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace.

Short summaries of the Old Testament meaning of "shalom" express a dream whose content is attractive but elusive. For Colin Marchant (*Shalom, My Friends*) "shalom" is a key concept in urban spirituality, the search for an expression of Christian faith which speaks to modern city-dwellers. In this paper I want to give a three-fold answer the following question:

Why is "Shalom" a vital part of Christian proclamation to the city?

1. It is a description of the positive content of salvation

My father-in-law, who worked in the Welsh mines during the war, describes the pit ponies, who were brought up to the surface for their annual holiday for two weeks each

year. Released from confinement, they spent most of their time running up and down the field until the time came for them to be herded underground once again. In Hebrew the root meaning of "yasha", salvation, is release from cramping confinement into a broad place. Both the confinement and the relative freedom can take many forms, but its paradigmatic expression in the O.T. is the release of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the promised land. In the land of Canaan, God promised abundant natural resources, prosperity, freedom, high self-esteem, good physical health, harmonious social relationships, security from outside attack, rejoicing and rest. The word "shalom", meaning wholeness, health, harmony or welfare, sums up these blessings. The high priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-26 culminates in shalom.

Shalom can only come as the gift of Yahweh; it cannot be achieved without him. But it can be prevented by disobedience. "Torah" is an expression of shalom, which is why it draws forth the rapturous praise of psalms 19 and 119; by obedience to torah, especially its demand of righteousness and justice, the blessing of shalom can be secured (Psalm 72). One of the signs of disobedience is the tendency of the prophets to promise shalom when there is none (Jeremiah 6:17, 8:11). Because it requires obedience, shalom is elusive. Despite the will of Yahweh for his people's shalom (Jeremiah 29:11) repeatedly they fail to secure it, so that eventually the dream of shalom is pushed into the eschatological future, when Yahweh will dwell among his people in Jerusalem, the nations will come to learn torah, and security, prosperity and harmony with the environment will be restored (Isaiah 2:1-4, 4:2-6, 11:1-9, 65:17-25).

The N.T. writers follow LXX in translating shalom as "eirene". "Peace" in the N.T. has the sense of shalom, so the good news which Jesus preached is the gospel of shalom

(Acts 10:36; Ephesians 2:17, 6:15). Specifically, quoting Isaiah 57:19, the writer to the Ephesians claims that the O.T. dream of shalom is realised through faith in Christ. In the fourth gospel, shalom is Jesus' parting gift to his disciples, a well-being of a different quality from that offered by this world (John 14:27, 16:33). In this gospel, "eirene" is parallel with "zoe", the eternal quality of life which is only realised by the sacrifice of "psyche", the life of this world (John 12:25). So, "eirene" is the true shalom, which comes only as the gift of Christ.

To proclaim the gospel is thus to preach shalom. Shalom is central to Christian proclamation, not an optional extra on the periphery.

2. It expresses a dream which is much wider than Christianity.

One of the features of post-modernism is a disillusionment with the philosophy of individualism and a search for a sense of communal identity which nevertheless does not reduce the individual to a fraction of the collective. In a recent article in *The Independent*, Geoff Mulgan of the independent think-tank "Demos" traces the philosophical roots of this trend to thinkers like Alisdair McIntyre and Charles Taylor. In addition, he cites the discovery of the downside of individualism, the anxiety and insecurity of consumer society; the rise in crime with the loss of responsibility; the neglect of public provision. Politicians of both left and right in Britain appear to be feeling their way towards appropriate expressions of community, but with the perceived failure of top-down government to bring about prosperity and social harmony, they are looking to the empowerment of small groups to help themselves. Some elements of the recovery of community are "traditional" - the rediscovery of morality and re-emphasis on the family (the prototypical community where the foundations of identity are laid and people learn

to make sacrifices for the good of others). Others are postmodern - the realisation that community today is likely to be self-chosen, based on networks of communication rather than locality. The dream of free and responsible individuals recognising and accepting the demands of community, of justice and social harmony, prosperity and psychological well-being is summed up in the biblical vision of shalom.

Another picture of shalom is found in the current best-seller, *Life and How to Survive It* by Robin Skynner and John Cleese. This and their earlier *Families and How to Survive Them* set out to be examinations of psychological health, one of the elements of shalom. Ostensibly, the book is a report with comments on the results of empirical studies. Nevertheless, in some ways it is closer to a dream. Not only does the healthy life elude most people, who are handicapped by their family background, but significant numbers fail to recognise it as healthy because they are trapped in various kinds of egotism. Like shalom, psychological good health is realisable only in and through communities which function in ways likely to contribute to individual well-being, and the patterns of relationships conducive to good health apply to families, organisations and societies as a whole. The characteristics of good health turn out to have much in common with Christian love. They include spontaneous generosity, love based on commitment freely given without dependence, freedom to express one's point of view within clearly structured authority exercised for the general good, a rich diversity of relationships, open communication and the absence of "moralism" (doing good from fear of condemnation). Families who display good health tend to have good internal relationships, good relationships with the wider community and a transcendent value system which provides a sense of meaning and purpose wider than individual or family life.

A third version of the dream of shalom is found in the story of Paradise in Genesis 2 and 3. Here we find individual in community, a man for whom it is not good to be alone finding his identity in relationship with his wife and she with him. In this relationship nothing is hidden; nakedness produces no shame. They live in harmony with the animal kingdom in a garden in which both food and natural resources are abundant, and where there is opportunity for fulfilling work. Above all, they enjoy the fellowship of God the Creator. But the biblical picture shows this harmony with God, nature and each other broken by disobedience. A broken relationship with God is identified as the factor which prevents the realisation of shalom.

Thus shalom is a key element of the Christian message to the city because it expresses the dream for which people of good will, whose ideals are less distorted by egocentricity, tend to strive. Not only does the Bible picture shalom, but it also shows why we fail to attain it and where to look for the solution.

3. The concept of shalom ties together the spiritual and material aspects of life.

The story of the Garden of Eden points to material effects of spiritual dislocation. The weakness of the Christian community in the city is likely to be that we fail to see how the salvation in which we believe is to be fleshed out in terms of the lives of individuals and communities. Part of the lostness of the city lies in the divorce between material and spiritual preoccupations. We have made a division which the biblical writers resolutely resist.

Shalom is an expression of God's priorities for human life on earth. Fair dealing is an aspect of shalom and fair weights are "shalom" weights. To care for the poor man is to honour the God who made him, and who is the "redeemer" of the poor, the near relation

whose task was to stand by him in court and to rescue him from debt. In the book of Proverbs, "Yahweh" sayings and statements of ordinary "human" wisdom stand side by side with no distinction, and for both the ideal background situation they express is that of shalom. But on the other hand, God is the giver of shalom. His is the "torah" which shows the way of life conducive to it, his the blessing which makes it a reality. Concentration on economic success cannot produce prosperity; humanitarian values alone are not sufficient for all-round well-being; we need a transcendent reference point for every aspect of individual and community life.

The Church needs to be challenged to recognise the values of shalom, including justice, straight dealing and sabbath rest, and to proclaim them as part of the gospel much as the inequality of black and white in South Africa was recognised as a denial of the gospel. The Church needs to be challenged to adopt the incarnation of shalom as its goal, in contrast to the superficiality of relationships and compartmentalisation of life too easily accepted as the norm. To those outside the Church the biblical vision of shalom gives expression of a widely held set of ideals and offers Jesus Christ as the way to its realisation.

David Heywood, February 1995

Colin Marchant	<i>Shalom My Friends</i>
Roger Dowling	<i>The Recovery of a Lost Bequest</i>
"Peace"	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
"eirene"	Kittel: <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
Skyenner/Cleese	<i>Life and How to Survive It / Families and How to Survive Them</i>