

**FROM SHALOM TO KOINONIA**  
**TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF COMMUNION**



**DANIEL G. OPREAN**

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TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF COMMUNION**



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## **General Introduction**

For too long the church's internal life has been consumed by the fire of disagreements between different theological positions, regardless of the fact that from the beginning the church was imagined to be one Body with many members, this underlying the uniqueness of the church: a community of unity in diversity.

A long-term observation reveals the fact that one of the biggest problems of the church today (no matter the denomination or tradition) is not only the scandal of conflictual relationships between different forms of being Christian, but also the incapacity of diverse Christian religious forms (or traditions) to take the time and energy to understand each other in such a way as to start to discover the validity of some of the other tradition's arguments that could enrich one's own tradition.

By taking time to understand each other, it might be that different Christian traditions have a chance in the beginning of the third millennium, in this more and more pluralistic society, not only to consider the other as a viable partner for discussion and reflection, but also to develop an openness for the many elements that constitute the common terrain in which different Christian traditions share a great deal. This is not that kind of ecumenical openness that will lead to the dissolution of one person or community's traditional or denominational identity, or to a strange union of all churches in only one church. Rather, it is that meeting of churches on the existing common ground, that is, the Christ event as revelation of the Father's plan in the Holy Spirit, and thus being able to offer to society as a whole the partnership that is not only required and desired by God but is also needed by the world today.

Still, if this could not be possible on a global scale, in various towns and communities this could become reality locally. Also, it might be that there are a few preliminary conditions for this: first, the cultivation of a deep respect for the human being no matter his or her Christian religious tradition; second, the cultivation of a spirit of acceptance of the fact that God could work and inspire people beyond one's limited capacity of comprehension and

understanding; third, the cultivation of a positive way of being together with others in Christianity that will value the other's potential rather than underscore their weaknesses.

To sum up, the thesis of this work is that the proper attitude and coordinates of such a development in interdenominational dialogue and relationships could be grounded in a real understanding of the theology of *koinonia*, that is, the reality of communion in the internal life of the church and of its relationship with the society around it.

Regarding the subject of *koinonia*, the reality is that many times different Christian traditions have a kind of unbalanced view of the area of church history and history of doctrine in which they focus their research. For example, the insistence of the modern Protestant-Evangelical traditions on the importance of the Holy Scriptures for the theology and the life of the church is well-known.

The insistence of the premodern Christian traditions, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, on the importance of patristic theology in the life of the church is also known. In our argument we start with the presupposition that these two important perspectives are not excluded by each other; rather, they are elements of a very prolific theological synthesis for the life of the church.

This synthesis is necessary because, on the one hand, many communities of Protestant evangelicals are champions of a biblicism that needs to be theologically informed, and on the other hand, the Eastern Orthodox as the champions of the study of patristic theology need to be reminded of the fact that the Fathers were deeply biblically minded and culturally focused.

Thus, it is clear that this work is limited to an analysis of the concept of *koinonia* as reflected in Scriptures and contemporary Orthodox thought, acknowledging the fact that there are interesting developments in Roman Catholic and Western Protestant theology as well.

Therefore, our study has a threefold focus: to discover, first, the way in which the Bible develops the theological concept of *koinonia*; second, the way in which the theology of *koinonia* is reflected in contemporary Orthodox thought; and third, to try to sketch a possible model for a theological synthesis that will avoid denominational partisanship, in the form of extreme fundamentalistic biblicism or theological fundamentalism.

A biblically grounded and theologically informed theology of *koinonia* is one of the possible ways for the different churches to come together with openness and humbleness,

creating space for the other as well, in a context of a modernity which is characterized many times by "the disappearing other."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 41.



**The Theology of Communion in the Old  
Testament**

***Covenants as Contexts of God's Revelatory  
Actions towards Communion with His People  
and with the World***

**Introduction**

It is argued in theology that the only possibility for man to know God or something about Him is that of God's self-disclosure and revelation to humankind. It is also argued that the act of creation is the beginning of the process of the self-revelation of God. There are many directions in which theologians have argued in regard to the elements of God's revelation.

The proposal of this section is that of a possibility of drawing an ascending trajectory of God's revelatory actions, and that the covenants of the Old Testament are essential

elements of such a trajectory.<sup>3</sup> Also, the covenants are occasions not only for the revelation of some aspects of God's revelatory character,<sup>4</sup> but also for the revelation of different aspects of God's people's ministry to God and to the world of nations around them. In this context the idea of the partnership of God with Israel is to be taken into account. Thus, this partnership relates not only to the mediation of God's presence in the midst of Israel, but also to His revelation to the world through His people.

The discussion will start with creation as the framework of communion between God and human beings; second, the Noahic covenant as the reiteration of the purpose of God in creation; third, the Abrahamic covenant as the proclamation of God's purpose and care for all the earth; fourth, the Mosaic covenant as the way in which God's will and presence is to be mediated to the nations; the Davidic covenant

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<sup>3</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, vol 1 (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1975), 129. He says „The most striking decisive moments of this kind are the making of covenants by Yahweh.“ Also, William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (London: Paternoster Press, 1998), 85. He says that covenant is „the core of the Hebrew understanding of their relationship with God.“

<sup>4</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 37.

as the preparation of the final step in God's self-revelatory activity in His Son, in the New Covenant, in prophetic message of the Old Testament in exilic crisis and of the New Testament in the great Exodus of Christ, as the conclusion and fulfilment of all the dimensions of the covenants.

We have to specify that the study of this section is not an exhaustive one; rather, it is more a survey of the concept of covenants in the context of the trajectory of God's self-revelatory activity that circumscribes God's relationship and fellowship with Israel and the world. Also, we have to specify, this is not a word study as *shalom* and *koinonia*; rather, it is a study of the theological meaning of harmony and communion expressed by the words.

### **Creation as the Framework for Communion between God and Human Beings**

God created the world out of the love and harmony that the three Persons of the Trinity share.<sup>5</sup> The expression of the perfect *shalom* and harmony within the Trinity is the way in

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<sup>5</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică*, vol. 1 (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1996), 226.

which the three persons of Trinity are involved together in the act of creation: God created everything through His Word in His Spirit.

After every day of creation God looked upon what created and "saw that is good" (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25). When, in the sixth day of creation, on the firmament of the fresh creation resound the words: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over all"<sup>6</sup> (Gen 1:26), the masterpiece of creation is now the one that completes the goodness of creation. God Himself confirms it: "God saw all that He made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:31). The purpose of creation according to the will of God was that of equilibrium and security. Or in Karl Barth's words:

God created it with the aim to be secure. As the Creator, He did not will a threatened and lost creation but a saved and preserved. And for the

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<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), He writes: „ The designation of human beings is described in two different words: *selem* and *demuth* – in Greek *εικον* and *ομοιωσις*, in Latin *imago* and *similitudo*. The first of this terms is used for the concrete representation, the second is used for the similarity. The first expresses more the outward representation, the second rather the reflexive inward relationship" 218.

fulfilment of this aim He bound himself to this creation from the very act of creation.<sup>7</sup>

The created order had to be maintained by God through His authorised steward made in the image of God. This is another dimension of God's will, namely, His desire for the human person to participate in what Barth names "the divine covenant of grace."<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, the Fall occasioned the brokenness of man's *shalomic* relationship with God, with each other, with himself and with the created order, as is clear from the narrative of Genesis 3-4.

The devil's proposal addressed to the first human beings contained a different way of being as that of God, not modelling the mutual fellowship within the Trinity<sup>9</sup> but starting from the human being, based on satisfying human curiosity and disobeying God. The result was

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3: 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1966), 144.

<sup>8</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics*, 3: 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1966), 80.

<sup>9</sup> *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 80. Here Volf presents Zizioulas' idea that "the Trinity can be the paradigm for the human communion, however, because the Trinity represents the human communion's ground of possibility."

the breaking of communion between God and man (Gen. 3),<sup>10</sup> alienation in communion between men (Gen. 4),<sup>11</sup> and also alienation of man in relation to himself (Gen. 5).

However, God continued to be faithful. His desire to have humankind in communion with Him remains constant. This is the reason for His initiative in the restoration of communion with man. One of the most important steps was the call of Abraham (Gen. 12) to be the father of a nation, the nation of a restored relationship with God.<sup>12</sup> The history of the people of God continues in the events of Exodus. They experienced the salvation of God from the Egyptian slavery by the man appointed by God to be their leader (Ex. 3-4)

Communion with God, after salvation from the Egyptian slavery (Ex. 5-18), is now circumscribed by the covenant of the Law<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, edited by David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 90.

<sup>11</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity: Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 72.

<sup>12</sup> Deryck Sheriffs, *The Friendship of the Lord* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 41.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962): "The covenant is the internal basis and the goal of creation," 151. Also,