

## CHAPTER 2

### Health, Healing, and Wholeness

#### *Theological Reflections on Shalom and Salvation*

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The purpose of this chapter is to present a theological framework for a biblical understanding of health and wholeness and then to relate this frame to the practice of healing and healthcare missions. To build this theological foundation for health and wholeness, we need to do three things. First, we need a clear Christian anthropology—Who are human beings? Of what do they consist? What were they intended to be and do? And how do we, or does God, help us overcome the fact that we cannot be and do as God intended? This anthropology is derived from the creation account. Second, we need to explore the related theological ideas of shalom and salvation. Finally, we need to explore the implications of this theological work in terms of its consequences for the theory and practice of Christian health care that seeks healing, wholeness, and human flourishing.

This reflection ends with three main conclusions. First, human beings were created by God as relational beings, not autonomous individuals. Any understanding of shalom must begin here. Second, we are inseparably mind, body, and soul; human well-being or a sense of shalom is determined by the indivisible mix of all three. Third, human beings were always intended for health, wholeness, and flourishing—shalom is and was God's intent. In spite of the disruption of our sin, God calls us to participate in God's work of saving and healing. These conclusions require us to understand human health, wholeness, and flourishing relationally and holistically: when all of our relationships work for the

well-being of our body, mind, soul, and community, all may flourish as human beings in the way that God intended. This is the essence of shalom, the central biblical metaphor for understanding a Christian account of health, healing, and wholeness.

### The Creation Narrative

A Christian anthropology is the foundational underpinning for understanding the role of the church in its missional practice of saving and healing. On the one hand, we need to know who God is and what God is doing, and on the other hand, we need to know who human beings are and why they were created (Myers 2011, 50ff.). Until we are clear on both of these key theological ideas, our investigation into health and healing will be limited, shortsighted, and possibly flawed.

We need to begin with God. What is the God of the Bible like? What is God doing? Working from the creation account, the truth about God is that God is the creator, sustainer, redeemer, and restorer of creation (Gen 1:1,2; John 1:1–3; Heb 1:2,3). Furthermore, this three-in-one God is a relational God whose being is characterized by communication, peace, and love. A Christian understanding of health and healing rests on the truth about this relational God and the certainty of God's continuing project of redemption and restoration of God's struggling creation (Fountain 1989, 53ff.).

The first truth about human beings that is relevant to our conversation comes from the second creation account. *Adam* was created by God "from the dust of the ground," and God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and *adam* became a living being" (Gen 2:7). We are of the earth and alive by the Spirit of God. We are whole persons—inseparably body, soul, and mind.<sup>1</sup> Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians reinforces

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper I am setting aside the intriguing idea that there is really no such thing as mind and soul, and that, rather, the mind and soul are higher-level emergent properties of the complex human physical organism (Brown, Murphy, and Malony 1998). I believe the argument I am making works with either proposal.

this: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:23). Any Christian understanding of human health and wholeness must reject the modern, Western idea that somehow human beings can be subdivided into three discrete elements. The idea of separate domains—medicine and the body, psychology and the mind, and evangelism and discipleship for the soul—does not stand up in the light of the biblical account (nor current scientific research for that matter; more on this later).

The second truth about human beings comes from the first creation account: "So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27 NLT). This has three important contributions to make to our conversation about health, healing, and wholeness. First, being made in the image of a three-in-one God and being whole persons suggests a more provocative question that is directly relevant to human health and well-being. In what way is the image of God "in us"? Biblical studies scholar J. Richard Middleton points out that for much of church history the image of God was understood as being reflected in our soul or mind—the image of God as an analogy of being. The modern worldview, which separates the material and spiritual, reinforces this view. Barth and Westermann challenged this reductionism and proposed a relational interpretation: the image of God as analogy for a more holistic, personal reflection of God (Middleton 2005, xxx). How, then, is the image of God present in our mind, body, and soul? We need to be open to the possibility that the image of God may also find expression in our material selves (more on this later).

The second consequence of human beings' being made in the image of a three-in-one God is that we are relational beings too. Our identity and vocation are embedded and expressed most fully in a family of relationships—our relationship with God, with each other, with those we call Other, with the natural world where we live, and within ourselves.

Emulating the triune God, our relationally embedded selves were intended to embody and express love, justice, and peace. In the garden, all of these relationships were without tension or flaw; there was food, water, beauty, and the presence of God in the afternoon. Health, well-being, and human flourishing were just how things were—all part of God's original intent (Fountain 1989, 90). It is from this anthropological foundation that Jesus articulates his greatest commandment—we are to love God and our neighbor as we love ourselves. The very drive to find ways to heal, accompany, and care for those who are unwell or not flourishing finds its source here in the creation account.

The third consequence is that we are made in the image of God for a specific purpose—to make God's creation fruitful and productive (Gen 1:27,28). Being made in the image of a creator God means we are intended to enhance and to partner with God in developing God's creation. Middleton asserts, "The human calling as *image Dei* is itself developmental and transformational and may be helpfully understood as equivalent to the labor or work of forming culture or developing civilization" (2005, 89). Genesis 2 expands on this. The cosmic God of Genesis 1 becomes a hands-on, working, creation-improving God in Genesis 2 (Brown 2012, 23). God formed *adam* from the dust of the ground and later determined that *adam* should not be alone—relationally again. God placed *adam* in the garden to nurture the garden and make it productive—our vocation again. Finally, *adam* was given the responsibility to see the rational order in what God had created and then name the animals accordingly.

Being made in the image of rational, order-making God means that we were created to observe, reason, and figure out how God made us and how God's world works. Paul makes the same claim about Christ in his role as creator: "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:16,17).

This fact is the ultimate origin of all science—rational human beings figuring out how God created God's world. Furthermore, we are to act on and even create new things based on what we figure out. This is the foundational source of the exploding number of medical inventions and interventions that have emerged over the last two hundred years. We are clever and creative because we are made in the image of a clever and creative God. The potential to be healed and the means for us to discover how to heal are part of God's original intention. Thus, we are to use reason and investigation in ways that make the world more conducive to human well-being.

Finally, in the creation narrative, we must also take note of the fact that, upon completion, God announced that what God had created was very good. At one level, this means that creation was designed to work for the well-being of human beings. Health, well-being, and the means for human flourishing were built into the creation and into us. At another level, this also means that creation contains a God-created moral order. Being righteous matters to human well-being too. Furthermore, it means that we have a responsibility to engage in the increasingly complex and difficult ethical conversations that surround the science and practice of health today.

There is another meaning to the idea of the creation being very good. God's creation does more than just work well; God's creation was beautiful (Gen 2:9). Scripture reminds us that this beauty is a witness to God and reveals God's glory (Ps 19:1–4; Rom 1:20). This should alert us to the fact that human well-being is more than just a life without illness, psychological struggle, and spiritual emptiness. Being in God's creation and doing what God intends us to do makes us excited, happy to be alive, and full of joy. Music and worship were also part of the creation narrative (Gen 4:23,26). We need art, high culture, music, celebration, and worship, which take us beyond ourselves and give our lives cultural form and meaning. Beauty, art, aesthetics, and worship are relevant to human health, healing, and wholeness (Goizuerta 2009).

Sadly, the biblical account from which we are deriving our Christian anthropology ends with human disobedience and separation from God. Bad human choices disrupted our relationships with God, with each other, with nature, and within ourselves. We no longer know who we are, nor do we live up to our vocation of tending God's creation. Our relationships no longer work for the well-being of all and too often work against it. Illness, psychopathology, and the worship of false gods join injustice, oppression, and violence in a fallen creation (see fig. 2.1).

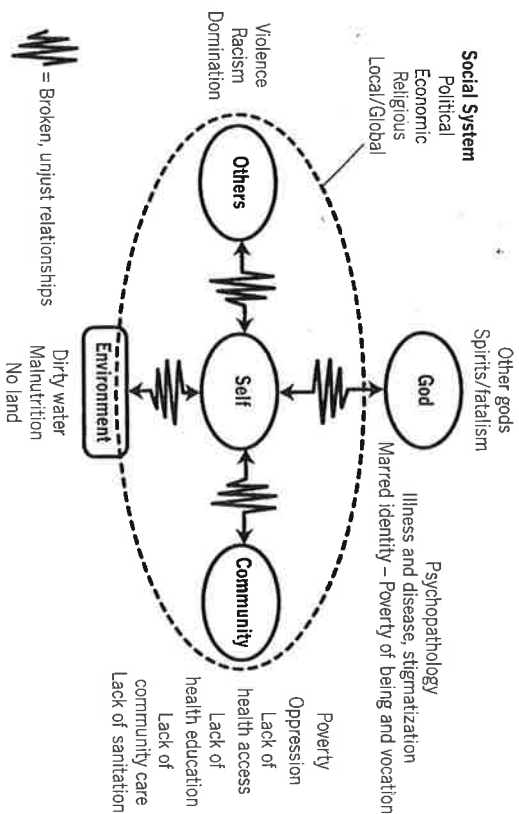


Figure 2.1: The impact of sin on health and wholeness

The consequences of the Fall are fairly obvious. A fruitful creation reluctantly sustains life (Gen 3:17), and only by hard, back-breaking work (Gen 3:19). Human life now ends in death (Gen 3:19). The relationship between men and women is disrupted and becomes unjust (Gen 3:16). Violence and murder enter the human story (Gen 4:8), as does the hunger for revenge (Gen 4:23). Human well-being is now a struggle and beyond the reach of human effort alone (Myers 2011, 65).

We need to take special note of the relational impact of sin and its consequences. The absence of health and well-being are not just

biological or psychological, but relational as well. Thus, we must understand the task of seeking human health and well-being as a relational task that must go beyond the merely biological or psychological interventions suggested by modern science. It is theologically as well as practically important that the recent work in both medicine and psychology is taking the relational context of human beings more seriously (more on this to come).

We must also remember that God's love and grace remain in creation after the Fall. God made us our first clothes and prevented us from making the Fall permanent (Gen 3:22). God still speaks of us as being made in God's image (Gen 5:1), and even after the flood, God reaffirms the image of God in us and our vocation of being fruitful and productive stewards in creation (Gen 9:1,6). Our vocation remains, while our sin makes us flawed partners working alongside a faithful God.

Thus, our God-given mandate to make God's creation fruitful and productive for all and conducive to human flourishing continues in two important ways. First, we must remember that the human community is infused with both original sin and original good.<sup>2</sup> The impact of sin means disease of body, mind, and soul, but the impact of the original good means we can find ways to prevent, ameliorate, and even cure disease and damaged hearts. The only "disease" that is beyond our power to address is restoring our relationship with God and overcoming death, things only God can do. By creating us in God's image, God made it possible for us to figure out how to mitigate the impact of sin and work for the common good. Medieval religion historian Lynn White has argued that we might think of technological innovation, which would include our healing sciences and medical technology, as expressions of grace whereby God helps us cope with the effects of sin (1978, 13).

Second, contemporary research into medicine and psychology is leading us to understand the tremendous resilience that God has built

<sup>2</sup> Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters are much better at this than we Protestants are, especially those of us of the Reformed variety.

into human beings. Our bodies are designed to do what they can to heal themselves. Grace is already in place. Thus, working for health and wholeness is working with God on God's project to redeem and restore God's creation.

## Shalom

*Shalom*, "peace," is an important biblical word and is the second major theological theme that we need to investigate. In the Old Testament, shalom is a concept that relates relationships to human well-being or wellness. Nicholas Wolterstorff describes shalom as "the human being dwelling in peace with all of his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature" (1983, 69). We flourish when our relationships are peaceful, a stance consistent with what we've already noted in the creation narrative.

*Shalom* (*šālôm*) is often used in a way that conveys an image of wholeness, unity, and harmony—of something that is complete and sound. Thus, relationships that reflect shalom also include the ideas of prosperity, health, and human fulfillment (Richards 1999, 479). This makes the idea of shalom highly relevant to a discussion about human health and well-being.

Nicholas Wolterstorff adds the ideas of justice, harmony, and enjoyment to capture the full biblical understanding of shalom (1983, 69ff.). Recalling Psalm 85, Wolterstorff reminds us that "Love and Fidelity now meet, Justice and Peace now embrace" (1983, 70). Relationships that are not just can never be peaceful. Therefore, shalom means just relationships (living justly and experiencing justice), harmonious relationships, and enjoyable relationships. Shalom means a healing and restoring community or society whose conditions encourage human flourishing.

Wolterstorff then takes the idea of shalom a step further. Yes, relationships must be just and peaceful, but God's shalom also incorporates the ideas of delight, enjoyment, and even fun. 😊

Shalom at its highest is *enjoyment* in one's relationships.

To dwell in shalom is to enjoy living before God, to *enjoy* living in one's physical surroundings, to enjoy living with one's fellows, to *enjoy* life with oneself. (Wolterstorff 1983, 70)

Once again, worship, ritual, celebration, and having fun all become part of what God intends.

In the New Testament, the word *peace* (*eirēnē*) is used in a number of varied forms (Freedman 2000, 1021ff.). *Peace* is a frequent part of normal greetings. Peace is also used as an attribute for one's relationship with God. The Greek term is also used to refer to the absence of war or interpersonal conflict.

Of particular interest to us, the word for peace in the New Testament is also used to speak about personal well-being. In the Epistles, *peace* most often refers to the wholeness of restored relationships that Jesus brings to our relationship with God and others, "although this cannot be separated from the inner sense of well-being that accompanies them" (Richards 1999, 481). Peace is harmony with God, others, and within ourselves. This use of the word *peace* lines up nicely with the OT understanding of shalom and the lessons we have drawn from the creation narrative.

This brings us to the issue of what God is doing in the world—God's project of redemption and restoration. From the day we were driven from the garden, God has been at work to find a way home for us that satisfies the requirements of God's love and justice. This work culminated in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the son of God. The kingdom of God entered human history and is now working toward God's final victory. Through Christ, the potential is now in place to restore all of our broken, strained, unjust, and unhealthy relationships—with God, within ourselves, with our community, with those we call Other, and with nature. This emerging, not-yet kingdom is full of health, healing,

wholeness (fig. 2.2). It embodies shalom and is hence designed for human flourishing.

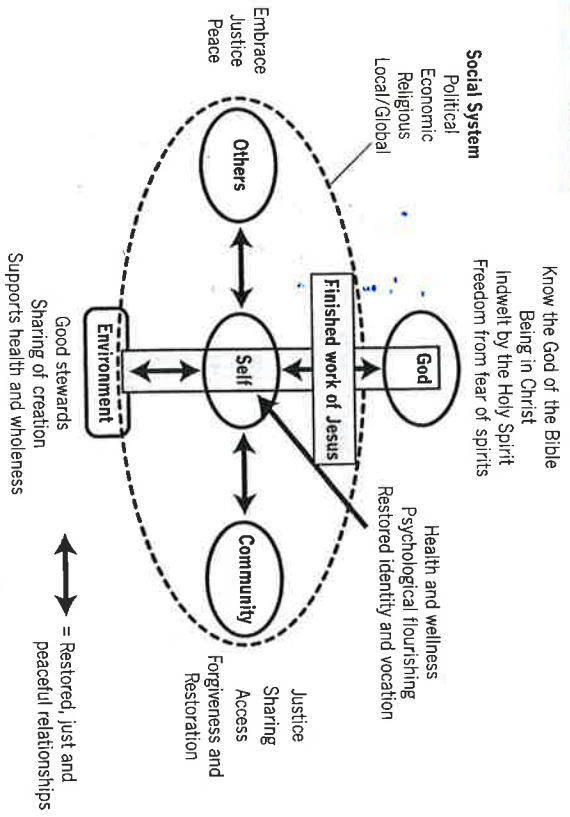


Figure 2.2: Salvation, shalom, health, and wholeness

This New Testament understanding of peace orients us to the future, to what God is doing and is going to do in human history. The ideas of shalom and what God is doing redemptively in the world are related, and thus human health and well-being are part of God's intent. "Because God's goal for humanity has always been to experience fellowship with him and in that fellowship to develop every human potential, 'peace' also speaks of health, completeness, and fulfillment" (Richards 1999, 481).

Newbigin reminds us that the church is to be the sign of God's kingdom in the world and that working for shalom is such a sign (1954, 67). Making the same point in eschatological terms, John Howard Yoder argues that the church is "called to be now what the world is called to be ultimately . . . a foretaste of the peace for which the world was made" (1984, 92, 94). Wolterstorff again: "Shalom in the world is both God's cause in the world and our human calling. . . . We are not to stand around,

hands folded, waiting for shalom to arrive. We are workers in God's cause, his peace-workers" (1983, 72). This is the foundational grounding for a Christian mission that seeks to provide health and wholeness.