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Jiri Moskala

*Andrews University*, moskala@andrews.edu

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TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF COMMUNITY

The Creator God made humanity into His image (Genesis 1:26–27) with multiple functions and dimensions, and one important aspect of this reality is that we were created as social beings to form a community. As humans, we need to live in all five dimensions of our existence—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social—in order to enjoy the fullness of life, harmoniously grow, and develop a true personality. However, anthropological studies usually stress only the first four aspects, but the fifth one, namely social, is as essential as the other ones, even though often overlooked. We tend to live individualistic lives, independent of the community, and we are proud of our distance and separation. Unfortunately, it is possible to isolate ourselves and withdraw into the shell of our individualism or faith community and forget the world around us and our essential God-given mission to live a life of integrity built on loving relationships, trust, and service.

The two biblical creation accounts clearly explain this social aspect. Our Creator created us for fellowship with Him, living in total dependence upon Him and enjoying His Presence. His desire is that we live a balanced life by first cultivating vertical and then horizontal relationships. These two features of life—a spiritual relationship with God and social relationships with other human beings—are essential ingredients for a healthy life and experiencing true happiness.

Our Creator God is unique and creative and by His magnificent design, so are His children. This uniqueness derived from God is good, and it is precisely the reason why we belong together, need each other, and have a strong desire for belonging. Because we are diverse yet equal, we can be a contribution and blessing to each other. From the very beginning, God’s model is that we form a community, not a human island: first a community of faith that will in turn serve the larger community in need.

God is a community; one God manifested in three persons, the Heavenly Trio. He is not a solitary person but a fellowship of love. The Bible alludes to this reality by proclaiming that the Creator made us in His image as the divine “We.” He created humanity as “we,” because He is the “We” (Gen 1:26). It is significant that God usually speaks about Himself in the “I” formula in the Old Testament (e.g., Exodus 20:2; Isaiah 41:10, 13), nevertheless, five times (in four biblical verses), He refers to Himself in the category of “We” (Genesis 1:26; 3:22; 11:7 [twice]; and Isaiah 6:8). Three times these specific proclamations are stated in cohotative forms, i.e., admonitions in the first person plural (“let us make,” “let us go down,” “let us confuse”) and twice with prepositions (“of us,” “for us”).

I wish to underline that the plural of the divine “We” is a plural of fellowship or plural of community within the Godhead. This plurality is a “plurality of Persons.” God communicates within Himself; He is in a dialogue within the Godhead. Edward Young speaks about the “plurality of persons in the Speaker,” Gerhard Hasel about “an intra-divine deliberation,” and Allen Ross about “a potential plural, expressing the wealth of potentials in the divine being.” When we truly know Him, then we will fellowship with Him and bow down in adoration before Him and His revelation (Isaiah 66:2). This will enable us to cultivate meaningful relationships and fellowship with others. God is the foundation of society, because He is We, He is Plurality, and from Him flows all the blessing.

This divine “We” also made humans as “we” (male and female; husband and wife), not as isolated individuals, but persons in close relationship and fellowship to Himself and to each other. From the very beginning, God wanted to be known not by His “I” only but also as “We” in His relationship to humanity. Humans created in His image must also be a plurality as He is We; and as there is a unity within God Himself, so two human persons (male and female), distinct and different, should become intimately one in marriage. Thus, the whole human being is “We” and not only “I” (Genesis 1:26–27). This will happen when they live in close personal fellowship and stay in relationship with Him who created them out of love. This communion and community of love and friendship begins in a marriage and should be reflected as well in our families. Marriage is a nucleus and model of all other healthy relationships. Society and community are built upon family units.

God’s intention was to have one big family living in harmony, love, peace, joy, and service. Their unselfish nature was to be God centered and other-person oriented. After the Fall, humanity lost this closeness, and alienation, separation, division, and blaming began. Only after conversion, when we become Jesus Christ’s disciples, are we changed and sent to build
meaningful relationships founded in unselfish service. As Jesus was preaching, teaching, and healing, so we should do (Matthew 4:23; 9:35–36; Mark 10:45; Acts 1:8). Service is one of the crucial characteristics of life and a sign of genuine Christ-like discipleship (Luke 10:25–37; James 4:17).

There is no commission without a mission (Genesis 12:1–3; Matthew 28:18–20). God is giving His spiritual gifts (gifts of ministry) to equip and enable His people to serve unselfishly. The spiritual gifts must be exercised within the fruit of the Spirit, otherwise the service misses the mark and is empty because of self-centeredness. Paul proclaims powerfully in 1 Corinthians 13:3, “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (NIV). It is interesting to observe in the book of Acts that the gift of the Holy Spirit was never given to an individual in isolation. This precious gift was always exercised in community as a result of prayer. As a community, we need to be equipped and serve together.

Believers in God, His Church, exist and should exist for others. This special community of faith is in the world to serve humanity’s needs: to preserve, to care, to heal, to give hope, to give a foretaste of heaven because of love (John 13:34–35). In this way, people will be attracted to God. For the first time, the universality of the mission was explicitly mentioned to Abraham. The Great Commissioner of the Old Testament declared: “And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). The Lord stressed it three times to Abraham (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18) that he was to be a blessing to the “all families on earth,” i.e., a light to the whole world. To Abraham, God explicitly said: “Be a blessing!” Why? Because He richly blessed him. He could be a blessing only because God blessed him. The seven-fold structure of Genesis 12:1–3 is striking. In the center position of the divine statements is an imperative (in Hebrew; not well expressed in our English translations and usually overlooked): “I will bless you... Be a blessing! [italics added] ...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:2–3). God commands Abraham to be a blessing to others because the Lord’s blessing cannot and should not be taken selfishly. Abraham needed to live for others. Genesis 12:2–3 was therefore God’s programmatic statement for Abraham and those who would follow the same faith. Abraham thus became the special messenger, missionary, to the entire world with a mission that would later be carried out by Israel and only fully fulfilled by Ebed Yahweh, the Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12; 61:1–3), on an even larger scale, because He would be the Salvation (not only that He would declare, bring or proclaim it) for the whole world (Isaiah 49:6)!!

When the Creator God calls His people into existence, He gives them a mission. God’s call presupposes a call for action. Biblical theology is a mission-oriented theology. The Hebrew Scripture knows nothing about an election of individuals or a people for salvation, but knows an election for mission (Exodus 3:7–10; 7:1–2; 19:5–6; Deuteronomy 7:6–8; Jeremiah 1:5). The mission and the message of the Old Testament people, even though both issues can be separated, belong firmly together. The mission includes the proclamation of the message to the larger community.

We need to remember and recognize that our mission also includes the God-delegated responsibility to care for His creation (Genesis 1:28). Ecological global concerns form part of this enormous task. Godly stewardship includes the care of nature, God’s created world. God did not say that we should malach (rule like monarchs over the animal world) or mashal (dominate by force or fear), but rather we should radah (rule with care). This special word suggests that we should rule by respecting this precious gift of life. We need to have in mind that this command is given in the pre-Fall situation to Adam and Eve, who were to exercise and imitate God’s loving and caring rulership as His representatives. They needed to exercise His delegated authority. Also, the term kabash used in Genesis 1:28 underlines the synonymous idea: to subdue with respect and love as God lovingly rules over His creatures.

We are here to create safe neighborhoods with good relations between neighbors. We have a message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19), a message of forgiveness and healing (Psalms 32:1–2; 41:4; 1 John 1:9), and a message of hope (Zechariah 9:12; Romans 5:1–5; 1 Corinthians 13:13). Jesus Christ stressed—in His intercessory prayer—for His followers to go to the world and serve, but at the same time be untouched by the world’s pollution and corruption (John 17:11, 15–19) and unite people (John 17:20–23; 14:6). The question always remains: How are we as a Church, Seminary,
or individuals engaged in answering and fulfilling the needs of the larger community around us and responsibly caring for God’s creation? Sometimes we can live as if in a greenhouse isolated from others or in a mighty unconquerable fortress that is isolated from people. In His commission at His ascension, Jesus underlined: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them…and teaching them to obey everything I commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20 NIV), and “Be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8 NIV). We are without excuse to go forward by His grace and fulfill this God-given task.

Endnotes

6 The New King James Version renders this text in the following way: “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). The proper translation depends on the understanding of the Hebrew preposition “b” (“in, ““by,” “through,” “on,” etc.) and its syntactical function (taken here as an instrumental bet).
7 My translation. The Hebrew phrase kol mishpechot is rendered in the Septuagint as passai hai phulai “all the tribes” (12:3; 28:14); but the Hebrew expression kol goyeh is used in Genesis 18:18; 22:18; and 26:4 and is translated in the LXX as panta ta ethne (“all the nations”). The intention of the text envisioned the whole world with all families or clans.
8 Paul Borgman, Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 124: “God’s ultimate promise to Abraham, a challenge also, lies in the bringing of blessings to others.” Sarna comments on the statement “you shall be a blessing” in the following way: “As a consequence, you [Abram] will serve as the standard by which a blessing is invoked” (Nahum Sarna, Genesis [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 89).
10 It is significant that the seventh promise is quoted in Acts 3:25 with reference to the Jewish people who listened to Peter’s sermon, but in Galatians 3:8 it is used in reference to the Gentiles. In this way Abraham’s physical and spiritual descendants are included. The mission of the Christian church is the same: to be a blessing to the whole world (Matthew 5:16; John 15:5, 16; Ephesians 2:10; 1 Peter 2:9).
11 The literal translation of Isaiah 49:6 highlights this point plainly: “And he says [the Lord to His Servant]: ‘It is a small thing that you be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will even give you for a light to the Gentiles (nations) to be my salvation to the end of the world’” (translation is mine).
13 God did not make a decree in the eternity past to save only some people and others to condemn to eternal damnation regardless of their will, attitude, life and response to His love (Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 45:22; Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11; compare with 1 Timothy 2:3–4; 4:10; Titus 2:11). See also Romans 8:28–39; Ephesians 1:1–10. Salvation is only in Christ Jesus and eternal condemnation is for those who refuse to believe in Jesus as their personal Savior (John 1:12; 3:16, 17, 36; 16:9; Acts 4:12).
14 About the summary and characteristics of the Old Testament message, see my article “The Message of God’s People in the Old Testament,” Journal of the Adventist Theological Society 19, no. 1–2 (2008): 18–39. It is misleading to speculate what was first—mission or message. It is like asking the question: What was first, a hen or an egg? Mission without its content is a contradiction per se, an empty experience; and it is no mission at all, because it would have nothing to live for and/or proclaim. Content without mission is dry and deadly.