Toward *Shalom* as a Radical and Transformative Conceptual Framework for Post-Apartheid Social Justice in Namibia

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Abstract

Social justice has become a deeply contested subject among Christians. These disagreements indicate an ongoing process of discernment and reflection regarding Christian participation in transforming the social order. For the post-apartheid context, the need to reformulate our vision and approach is crucial to cementing our witnessing. This article seeks to explore how the concept of *shalom* could provide for a thicker theological and conceptual framework for Christian praxis in the Namibian post-apartheid context. It seeks to provide a theological basis for Christian participation in the social ordering and what role the church can play to ensure more positive social outcomes. The paper engages in critical analysis and suggests critical participation as a way of embodying Christian values and the gospel in the public sphere. This engagement is an attempt to answer the question: *In what ways could the notion of shalom provide for a new, radical, and transformative vision for taking part in minimizing the effects of post-apartheid social injustice?*

1. Background

Namibia, like many other African states, experienced colonialism, briefly under British, then German rule, and finally South African apartheid rule. This paper deals with the effects of the third entity—the apartheid system. This was an intentional and systematic cultural, political, social, and economic disadvantaging of Namibians based on their social grouping (Black Africans). Its effects continue to be seen, even decades after it was abrogated *as a legal and political system* (this

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SATS
Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

is also the sense in which I use post-apartheid, as apartheid at social and economic levels continues to prevail).

Although Namibia is now an independent country, its narrative of independence is still "concentrated mainly on the political culture and ideology cultivated since…independence" (Melber 2007, 7). Its political culture is not transforming society to rid itself of the effects of inherited socio-economic injustice. Those with proximity to power are fixating on setting up a new "hegemonic public discourse to reinvent themselves within the heroic narrative that was already being constructed during the anti-colonial struggle" (5). The result is a disturbing manifestation of socio-economic disparity in the absence of a radical vision for social justice. This is evidenced by half of the citizens living in shacks, skyrocketing unemployment and unemployability, increasing disparity of income, administrative corruption, growing classism, and increasing cost of living.

From this grim image of the socio-economic conditions, we can deduce that there is a deficiency of both prophetic and faithful witness to God's social order. It is a society devoid of God's *shalom* in which Christians have acquiesced with the surrounding culture instead of being counter-cultural; or, as Botha (2016, 28–32) calls it, a church of political expediency instead of being a principled opponent of injustice. While the pre-independence church took part in the liberation struggle for independence, today we cast doubt upon the kind of vision they embraced. We feel disconcerted that their vision only aimed at White oppression. But its theological roots and convictions have waned from an uncritical marriage with a political culture to sustain it. As such, the church has become a social institution that enables (through its silence) social injustice to prevail.

From this background, this paper seeks to introduce a new way of rethinking the Namibian social context, not in the tradition of Black liberation theology, but from a biblical and gospel-centered concern. It asks, in what ways could the notion of shalom provide for a new, radical, and transformative vision for taking part in minimizing the effects of post-apartheid social injustice? It advocates for a Christian vision that seeks to strive towards justice as corresponding to a God who is just and concerned with his creation. Our mission of the gospel, as people who have found a new identity in Christ, embodies social responsibility and unashamed materiality. Christian epistemology ignites in us renewed compassion, empathy, and abiding participation which seeks to see the Lordship of Christ manifested in all spheres of human life. We do not believe our faith is only a spiritual activity but one that informs and transforms the way we see the world, making us part of the makers of the social culture. We feel with renewed hearts that are awakened towards love for God and love for our neighbor. Thus, embracing *shalom* is nothing less than a vision for a radical and transformative way of thinking or defying our culture's denial of justice to God's image-bearers.

2. Methodology

This article engages the concept of *shalom* as a method for critical analysis and Christian participation in the public sphere. As a method, it challenges our vision of life, refocuses our epistemological framework, and re-examines the philosophical anthropology that informs our view of the good life. To bring Christian participation that speaks in the public sphere requires a unique and authentic framework that bears witness to the kinds of values we hold, and also reflects the nature of God in human affairs. The Christian faith thrives on the premise of embodiment, as it speaks of God who made himself known in human form, created the physical world, and sustains it. Engaging this as a method provides critical insight on the prophetic role and praxis to humanize society. This method reinvites us to a renewed social

concern and to embrace a paradigm that embodies our confession in the reality of the risen Christ and God's Kingdom in the world (Meek 2011, 15).

As a method, it does not dismiss everything else, but seeks to take heed of our gospel responsibility; this is the way to reshape our belief of the world. *Shalom* in this paper is a knowledge framework that seeks to embody social realities from the perspective of understanding God. I write to dialogue for a social framework for Christian participation in the world (against the prevailing socialist-Marxist analysis of Black theology of liberation). I seek to offer an alternative way of thinking about human happiness based on God's vision, rather than social and political analysis. Such a vision is not to simply communicate popular ideas such as social justice and peace; instead, as Forster (2010, 166) argues, we do this as

> a way of bearing witness to these realities in God's person and nature, and an uncovering and explicating of these realities in history and creation—this is a deeply Biblical theology. It does not preach Biblical truth for the sake of comparing ideas or evaluating measures of truth. No, it is prophetic Biblical theology [that] offers a prophetic, political, orientation for life.

It is not my intention to provide an exhaustive systematic biblical or theological trace of the concept of *shalom*; this article serves as a tentative discussion starter for alternatives to theological approaches that seek social dialogue. The use of Brueggemann is to provide a context of *shalom* as a dialogical framework and social reading thereof. Towards the end of the article, I draw upon several voices that demonstrate what shalom-driven participation should look like in the post-apartheid context.

3. A Radical Conceptual Framework

Aristotle conceived a *polis* that would reflect the meaning of a happy life or what the ancient Greeks called *eudaimonia*. It is a concept which philosophers in applied ethics use as a cluster concept to address various human concerns in society, particularly issues of social justice. But the *eudaimonia* envisioned by Greek philosophers and many modern philosophers is based on a vision of social discrimination, a mismatch against the biblical understanding. For example, the advocates of *eudaimonia* speak of happiness at the exclusion of persons based on their race, sex, social status, nationality, and so on. Or, their *eudaimonia* promotes continued misery and oppression as a natural order, and breaking from it would deprive society of its intended happiness. Implicit in this form of *eudaimonia* are "visions of human flourishing—that are antithetical to the biblical vision of *shalom*" (Smith 2019, 117).

The philosophical anthropology embedded in Greek *eudaimonia* is not rooted in the principle of the covenant. A concept of the covenant is found in God and expressed in humans as God's image-bearers (Gen 1:26). This notion of covenant is a philosophy of life that is opposed to embracing or being silent about human misery. Thus, the biblical narrative of creation provides a conceptual framework that refuses to negotiate for policies, structures, and programs that advocate for "reconciliation without justice, forgiveness without repentance and morally unacceptable compromises" (Koopman 2017). This is a radical notion of *shalom* that stands starkly opposed to the social framework of Athenian thinking and culture. The concept expresses God's desire for humanity, not just in the eschatological future, but also in the *here and now*. It starts *with* God's plan towards Israel:

> Then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit. 'Indeed, your

> threshing will last for you until grape gathering, and grape gathering will last until sowing time. You will thus eat your food to the full and live securely in your land.' I shall also grant *peace* in the land, so that you may lie down with no one making you tremble. I shall also eliminate harmful beasts from the land, and no sword will pass through your land. (Lev 26:4–6, emphasis added)[1]

Brueggemann (1982, 15) argues that "all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security towards the joy and well-being of every other creature." This resembles the Genesis (1–2) creation narrative and a language of covenant. God created a good world which experienced God's peace on all levels. God has not abandoned the world (regardless of people's religious convictions, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and social hierarchy) to utter chaos, even with the presence of sin. This reality of a fallen world should motivate us to have more sweeping visions of God's presence in human affairs, including social justice. However, Longman III and Dillard (2006, 366), citing Ezekiel 48:35, ground the concept of *shalom* in God's promised Messiah and that the "transcending experience of God's presence that brought with it peace and justice would occur when God incarnate would walk the streets of Jerusalem and build his church as a new temple. The presence of Immanuel would mark the day that 'the LORD is there.'" Luke presents us with this prophetic fulfillment that places the *shalom* of God not in a system or political ruler, but in God's promised Messiah, citing Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:8–9)

It is worth noting that the promise of God's *shalom* is not made to a perfect, sinless people but to an imperfect group of persons. It is "a state of right order prevailing within the man whose highest powers are subject" to God's will for the world (van Roo 1955, 57). While it is conditional to Israel and their obedience to Yahweh, it expresses God's eternal desire for humanity. While the giving of peace is said to be a reciprocation of obedience to God, it tells us something about God's eternal vision for God's world. As such, God's vision for humanity looks beyond the various social identities and labels to a world in which justice should be the norm of human life and not a privilege to be given by those with proximity to political, economic, and social power. Ancient Israel, we argue, was to reflect what God's people should be like. The Law, if anything, stands for God's intended order of peace and justice different from the social order they experienced in Egypt. *Shalom* becomes a theoretical framework, hermeneutical tool, and paradigm for resisting injustice among God's people.

There is a Christological reality behind the vision for social justice. It lies in the promise of Christ that "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The framework of *shalom* is not satisfied with mere concepts, but seeks to see symbols that resemble an abundant life in the post-apartheid settings. Abundant life does not only refer to eternal life but to a life that gives dignity and honor to the person. Christ's coming into the world was to restore God's order in creation (Isa 9:6–7). As such, those who trust in Christ's redeeming work are called to be light and salt (Matt 5:13–16) and express their "inheritance of the fullness of blessing, both in this world and the world to come" (Sagovsky 2004, 157).

1 All Bible texts are based on the New Revised Standard Version.

This vision of human flourishing calls on Christians to find new ways of conceptualizing and expressing their concerns, combined with new ways of theologizing that are aware of the socio-political dialogues but deeply rooted in God's Word for understanding the world (Forster 2020, 16–18). It is not necessarily a political conceptualization, even though it may touch on this, but an expression of a new ethic of humanity. *Shalom* lays the premise for a new way of empathizing with the victims of injustice as we come to grips with the suffering of our neighbors. It offers a new intra-human relationship not to accept injustice as a normative social condition, and refuses alternative etiologies that seek to ignore, spiritualize, politicize, or philosophically justify injustice and unjust conditions (Taylor 2007, 11). Through such radical participation, we show what it means to be a community that embraces God's vision of human co-existence in which they would share God's resources (blessings) to forge communal harmony.

If the Christian community is the community of God's covenant people, then how we interact with the world is crucial. How do we take part to ensure the receiving of God's blessing and God's gifts to the whole human community and not just for the few elites of our society? *Shalom* stands for the well-being of a personal kind that is material, physical, historical, and seeks to address needs of real-life struggles with injustice, worry, poverty, and suffering. To be concerned for human spiritual well-being finds a new framework that is not divorced from the material. The biblical vision of human salvation is not divided into the spiritual and material; they are co-existent and both matter in the sight of God.

Because God's vision is wholeness for his creation, this implies that God's vision also becomes our vision to advocate for a society in which there is justice for all persons. This cosmic understanding presumes participation in what Brueggemann (1982, 20) refers to as "the historic political community." In this community, we see the effects of social in justice through socio-economic inequity (the concern of this paper), which are evidence of the absence of God's vision of *shalom*. Such a manifestation provokes the wrath of the Creator upon perpetrators and beneficiaries that accept injustice as the way to self-centered peace and prosperity. The prophet Micah, among others, pronounced this judgment that "Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance" (2:1–2; cf. Amos 4:1).

This search for God's justice expressed in the notion of *shalom* becomes a different framework of thinking. It seeks social engagement with an eternal vision in mind, starting in God and not human systems. It creates a new conceptualization that challenges post-apartheid conceptions that are neither far-reaching nor demanding justice. Moreover, it refuses to compromise with what Boesak (2017) calls "pharaohs: in political, economic, social, and cultural settings that continue to disadvantage the poor." It presents with it a different social ethic of society for both victims and perpetrators. This is rooted in the notions of reconciliation and forgiveness:

> When these two characteristics are brought together, the outcome is a more robust theological understanding of the necessity, and conceptualisation, of notions and processes, of forgiveness that honours the convictions of the Christian theological tradition (ontologically), while also taking concrete social and historical realities (structural elements) seriously. (Forster 2019a, 78)

Such an understanding of *shalom* makes it a radical or disruptive conceptual framework that seeks covenant, neighborliness, community, and justice.

4. Disrupting the Social Order

If *shalom*, as described above, begins in our conception of God and his vision for his creation, then the present effects of apartheid disrupt God's intention for *shalom*. This makes it a sin against God, the self, and the neighbor. Such a society cannot thrive or prosper, for it is devoid of true peace. Social and economic inequality, caused by historical structures and systems of injustice, although they may appear to be displaying prosperity, are structures and systems of conflict and restlessness. This is where theology becomes a tool of God's voice to call for far-reaching notions of post-apartheid reconciliation (Villa-Vicencio 2004, 8; Boesak and DeYoung 2012, 2, 51). This is a practical embodiment of God's vision for the world, which seeks to make social justice more possible by breaking social and political hostility: especially, to foster an environment in which both Black and White people recognize each other as equals.

That millions of people in Namibia and South Africa live in squalid and inhumane conditions, reveals the reality of the absence of God's *shalom*. Living in poverty and all other dehumanizing conditions disrupts God's *shalom*, which no person informed by God's vision of righteousness can simply sit and watch. It is admirable that evangelicals for years have called upon spiritual repentance from sin, but sin should be seen in a much more holistic view. When the Psalmist cries "Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it" (Ps 34:14; cf. Ps 37:27; Isa 1:16–17), he is referring to both the heart and actions of humans. This includes systems and structures which this sin has enabled, and which should be transformed or destroyed, to allow human flourishing as God intended.

Shalom, then, extends beyond mere believing in God's vision of justice or proclamation. It is a motivation to action. It is a framework of thought which cannot be realized by mere speech; it must be embodied by biblically-informed action. If the present effects of apartheid are an affront to God and God's image-bearers, then we are duty-bound to proclaim this truth, in the most radical and disruptive manner until such structures and systems are removed to pave for true and sustainable human flourishing.

When Brueggemann calls for a vision of *shalom*, for those of us in a post-conflict society, this should waken us from the slumber of modern life which would have us believe that we do not have to long for some vision of fullness that goes beyond this corrupt setting. If our social imaginations stay captive to individualized understandings of progress (in which those of us with proximity to economic power have access to decent housing, quality healthcare, an abundant supply of food, and various forms of social security), we still are part of those who entrench the progression of social injustice. A vision of *shalom* would disrupt our self-centeredness and the false comforts we have acquired. With *shalom* as a framework of thought, the search for social justice no longer becomes a mere choice left to cultural interpretations but something profoundly rooted in God's self-revelation.

As such, we acquire a new way of reflection and dialogue that bears witness to God's truth and contingency of life in a way that challenges false notions of justice. Even in an age that would have us reject the necessity of the existence of a God, when we gather ourselves and respond to God's call for a just order, our disruptive and prophetic witness will gain an audience (Noble 2018, 106). This form of a disruptive witness by Christians is yet to be seen in post-apartheid Namibia, where Christians, informed by a vision of God, would draw lines that challenge the present culture experience that embraces inequity and dehumanization. Generating participation in socio-economic redemption is a missional activity that expresses the Kingdom of God.

A word of warning: I do not want to portray *shalom* as an achievement for the this-worldly effort of justice. I refer to justice in this world only

to the extent it is humanly possible. The reality of the Fall will continue to hinder all our efforts. Yet, this awareness, instead of discouraging us, should be the very motivation why we need to do our ultimate best to resist injustice and advocate for justice. We also need to be fully aware that the human condition will only be redeemed at the return of Christ. To hope for a perfect manifestation of peace and justice through human efforts, would only lead to frustration. On the other hand, a true vision of the transcendent would not have us be relaxed.

The concept of *shalom* as revealed through the Law and the Prophets calls us to take the godhood of God seriously (Williams 2020, 30) in our vision of social justice. While we may be opposed to certain stances of liberation theology, especially on matters of spiritual salvation and hermeneutics, it stands as a rebuke to an evangelical vision known for "opting out of our social and political responsibilities" (Stott 2008, 222). For the Namibian Church or Christian community, we need to heed John Stott's call to repent of our fear to challenge the current post-apartheid structures. And we should "not be afraid to challenge ourselves and each other that God may be calling many more Christians" (222) who would hear God's call to take part in various activities of social justice where the Kingdom of Christ is expressed.

With a vision of *shalom*, we do not look to substitute the Great Commission in favor of a socio-political or socio-economic transformation. The Great Commission is carried out as we take part in social activities with virtuous deeds accompanied by the proclamation of the gospel that calls sinners to Christ. Where God's *shalom* is disrupted by the sin of greed, injustice, selfishness, inhumane individualism, and classism, the gospel becomes a tool of socio-cultural disembedding. It resists false, classist, and elitist solidarities that keep people captive and subject to inhuman social conditions. *Shalom* understood within the context of the gospel becomes an alternative way of resisting what Taylor (2004, 66) calls "the present sacralized order of things and its embedding in the cosmos." It is a notion of the vision of God's justice and desire for the well-being of humanity that is not ashamed "to be at odds with the world."

5. Critical Participation in the World

Shalom is a theological concept with deep socio-political, socio-theological implications. It is not a mere theory but seeks a praxis that bears witness to covenant reality through community and neighborliness. The biblical notion of justice is not to speak of lofty ideas but to engage in redressing the injustice that produces the less advantaged as an acceptable side-effect. Leading to embracing a covenant language and action which leads "to a care for the commons, care for the well-being of the whole, that which we hold for the sake of all" (Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight 2016, 49). In search for human flourishing in the post-apartheid context,

> it begins with a belief that the Trinitarian God has a claim upon creation in general (and human persons in particular). This understanding of human dignity moves from a position of conviction (thought or belief) towards action; thereby giving both content and expression to what it means to be truly human and even humane. (Forster 2018, 5)

This political and social implication of such thinking calls for discerning the kind of future and society God desires, and how we should become committed to working towards such a future. When we see people living in squalid conditions resulting from poor leadership and the effects of history, does it reflect what God wants for people in Namibia or Southern Africa?

If our understanding of God's vision for human well-being would be applied to its logical conclusion, the post-apartheid Namibian community

would become part of a Great Disembedding Movement of God's people. With a radical way of thinking comes a revolution in our understanding of socio-economic order—creating an alternative social imagination (Forster 2019b, 73–76). God's new moral order of justice would go with us to confront unjust social arrangements and systems. It is a creation of a new social imagination that provokes righteous anger against social justice measures and concepts that are not far-reaching in redressing the dehumanizing effects of the apartheid system. A biblically sound and socially rooted understanding of *shalom* "disembeds us from the social sacred and posits a new relation to God as designer. This new relation is eclipsable, because the design underlying the moral order can be seen as directed to ordinary human flourishing" (Taylor 2004, 65). However, our notions of "flourishing remain under surveillance in our modern moral view: they have to fit with the demands of the moral order itself, of justice, equality, nondomination, if they are to escape condemnation" (Taylor 2004, 65).

This slow pace of justice in the post-apartheid setting implies the privation of *shalom*. As a result, we cannot speak of true peace and reconciliation; and this absence of justice will only continue to wield "turmoil and anxiety with no chance of well-being" (Brueggemann 1982, 19). Reconciliation as we presently know it carries no meaning on the level that allows for socio-economic thriving. Perpetrators and beneficiaries have continued to thrive with their ill-gained wealth and resources. Together with the post-apartheid elite who have proximity to political power, they now control the economic, social, cultural, and political systems. This describes a tumultuous social context that is "opposed to God's powerful will for orderly fruitfulness" (20).

Our proclamation of the gospel requires holding the powerful and well-off of our society accountable for their role which continues to further social injustice. For God does hold them accountable (Jer 6:13–14). Christian pursuit for justice will not produce any effects if it is divorced from the historical reality. *Shalom* is introduced to the people of Israel amid the historical reality that had distorted the meaning of human dignity and identity. We assume that part of God revealing himself as a God of *shalom* was to inform Israelites how God's people should live, as people of covenant and neighborliness. When justice was perverted by the wealthy and powerful, God's people were all to rise to confront such violations of the covenant. The covenant of God was to lay a new path for social order and alternatives to unjust value systems (Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight 2016, 47).

Jesus's incarnation in human form has come to create a new humanity—reaffirming the covenant of God's created order. His mission was two-fold: 1) to restore our relationship with God; 2) to take part in our social-historical realities. The promised Prince of Peace came to offer an alternative and renewed desire for the cultural mandate. It begins in the call for repentance, the transformation of the human heart. Simply calling for political and structural reforms is not enough; we need an alternative message—the gospel—through which we can seek tangible transformation. The gospel comes with its radical way of thinking and praxis. Our social structures need a new way of covenanting and being human, which cannot be produced from the present greedy and corrupt structures. Covenant opens new possibilities of envisioning society. *Shalom* through Christ brings our relatedness as humans into a conversation; together we resist all practices that violate the humanity of our neighbor. The gospel leads to covenantal justice or "a commitment we make to our neighbors all around us for its own sake" (Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight 2016, 46).

The gospel creates new ways of covenanting with fellow humans and an alternative narrative that confronts the presence and appearances of injustice. It makes us aware of all forms of sin that assault God's image

in men and women. As such, it refuses that God's people should be silent and complacent with practices and living conditions that dishonor God's creation. This creates a new understanding of the world and how God's people can truly take part in "societal transformation endeavors" (Horn 2010, 61). Such participation stands opposed to anything which idolizes greed, power, and wealth that set up social and economic structures that cannot be replicated as normative expressions of human flourishing. Thus, it stands opposed to false notions and practices of prosperity (Jer 17:11; 22:13) that do not shield God's image-bearers from harsh, unequal, and dehumanizing socio-economic conditions.

Shalom, as a vision for social justice does not look at people as White offenders and Black victims. Seen through the framework of the gospel, injustice is a manifestation of sin, a deviation from God's will, an offense against God's holiness and the dignity of our neighbor. Where justice is being needed, it is to put right how historical events have resulted in generational disadvantages among those whom the apartheid system disadvantaged. Reconciliation between social groups cannot be considered genuine unless it is far-reaching to require socio-economic amendments which are the first visible manifestations of social justice. This is the understanding in which *shalom* is expressed among the people of Israel: a peaceful society is a society in which needs are met. The ultimate vision of *shalom* of God's new heavens and new earth also tells us that it is one in which needs are fully met (Sagovsky 2008, 79; DeYoung and Gilbert 2011, 202–206). It is not justice when we cannot receive the life-enhancing goods to flourish and be fully human. The *shalom* vision is equally material in as much as it is spiritual, in which being more is not detached from having more. It is a response to apartheid's dehumanizing effects that continue to deny many people access to life-enhancing goods (Goulet 2006, 26–27).

Such theological participation, however, will need to find legal and political structures and stand in solidarity with them to administer social justice. Thus, theology needs to become more acquainted with the socio-political language, structures, and systems with which it can dialogue. Such a dialogue would hold accountable both perpetrators and beneficiaries of apartheid and those who presently "infringe the standards of conduct laid down" in the system of democracy (MacIntyre 1988, 241). *Shalom*, in this way, enhances a new way of how we imagine society, politics, and culture, not as enemies of the gospel but as realms in which God's Kingdom is expressed. By taking part we become instruments and vessels of God's Kingdom wherever it is manifested, to be part of ensuring the manifestation of *shalom* motivated by a high vision of the transcendent that takes an interest in all human life.

This vision for a radical and transformative theological framework revolutionizes the way the church thinks of itself as salt and light in the world. Both at a collective and individual level "the church can participate in being a bearer of hope in society" (Forster 2015, 11). This is a way of thinking that would allow, as Forster argues, Christians "to be intentional about their ministry in working for God's will in the world" (11), not as activists and lobbyists but because we understand that with accepting the gospel demands upon our lives comes the responsibility to be bearers of God's peace and hope in society. Understanding this role of the church, informed by a vision of God's will for his world, places a demand upon church leaders and theologians. As those at the forefront of Christian thinking, understanding the social circumstances to engage the church to take part in the social transformation is crucial. Not only by engaging the socio-economic structures that further social injustice but also by being able to confront theological notions and confessions that are damaging to Christian witness in the public sphere. This includes false understandings

of withdrawal from the world and false theologies that offer quick fixes to socio-economic conditions.

For example, the growth of the prosperity theology which portrays itself as a solution to masses who are socio-economically disadvantaged cannot be countered with a mere social analysis. It requires a theology that is committed to Scripture, the gospel, and social action. A dichotomized theology that pitches salvation against social justice embraces only part of God's vision for his creation. The Christian faith (like the Jews in the Old Testament) has historically been concerned with actual issues of survival and well-being (Acts 6:1–7; Jas 2:14–17). Their awareness of the social conditions shaped their language, faith, and liturgies in ways that sought God's will and answer to their social circumstances (Rev 20–21). The outcome of this theological reflection embodied a holistic theology of salvation (spiritual and material). And the vision of God's coming ultimate *shalom* has throughout generations moved people of faith to take part to advance, among other things, modern education, set up orphanages, fight racism and racist policies and structures, and further inheritance rights of women; not with a false utopian notion of looking to end the world's present evils, but with the knowledge that while we wait for the final day of redemption, we must be part of the human communities in which God has placed us. By this participation, we embrace the reality of our need for God to deliver us from evil caused by fellow humans and to curb the further spread of dehumanizing conditions. It is participation, as Brueggemann (1982, 29–30) argues, born out of "a vision of survival and salvation" for both the present and eternal future.

As people motivated by the gospel, participation informed by an understanding of God's *shalom* for his creation, there is no salvation history without material concern. There is no mission without engaging with social movements, systems, ideas, and practices that seek justice. *Shalom* does not allow room for withdrawal into a spirituality that is empty of meaningful engagement with human conditions. The less-advantaged are both in the church and outside it. That is, they live among us. The church is part of the society in which we look to see transformation and removal of the effects of post-apartheid injustice. By turning away from our withdrawal, we are making a public statement "that God has a vision of how the world shall be and is not yet. And the faith affirmed in the church is the twin resolve to that we mean to discern God's vision of what the world shall be and that we mean to live toward that vision" (Brueggemann 1982, 39). With a gospel-centered focus understanding of *shalom*, we are made to avoid what Miguez-Bonino (1983, 20) calls "the idealistic fallacy.". That is using the *shalom* framework to derive from it "a political ethics or, even worse, a political ideology and program" (20). Neither is this a pursuit to refurbish Black liberation theology's socialist analysis and present it as an answer and framework of Christian thought. It is not a political agenda or a quick fix to rescue our stranded socio-economic structures.

Instead, *shalom* is the search to break from social epistemologies which do not capture the place of the church or the gospel to create a new space for social imagination or prophetic imagination. It is a way of envisioning a change in basic assumptions informed by the vision of God. To shift from a withdrawn spiritual practice to one that engages the social order that affects the lives of so many people would need a profound change in our theological assumptions about the world. We do not look to replicate another sociological model by simply baptizing it in Christian language. We look for a truly gospel-centered rethinking that is fully aware of the spiritual realities of the human condition, that knows that humans are sinful, and that injustice is a manifestation of humanity's broken relationship with God and one another. Yet it is also fully aware that God is at work even in the present order building his Kingdom and that the church is being called

to take part in the proclamation and expression of God's Kingdom, for the healing and restoration of human relations and socio-economic conditions.

Unlike the approaches of Black theologies of liberation that begin from a social analysis of social participation (Cone 1990; Kameeta 2006; Maluleke 2008; Niitenge 2013; Boesak 2019), this is a call to begin from the context of Scripture. Even the very notions of social justice and call to participation are bound in God's self-revelation. Thus, they should not be given independent status, for such thinking leads only to secularized religion in which God becomes but one who is subject to conform to human limitations. Instead, as Goldsworthy (2000, 443) notes, "the biblical picture is the opposite. God reveals what he is like and in so doing shows us what justice and goodness are…God is not a creature subject to a higher independent principle called [social] order." Our longing for right ordering and social justice is because of what God is; from him flows all true virtue of justice. The notion of *shalom*, I argue, can only take the true meaning that affects our hearts when we base it on the person and activity of God, rather than as human action trying to change the world.

That we begin in God, makes this an activity of worship, and social justice then becomes something much higher than mere social activism. Here, through the faithful preaching of God's word, we are encouraged to create a new culture of the covenant. The kind of culture in which our humanity is tied to that of one another because we all carry the mark of one Creator. This culture extends to everything else that we do. As Smith (2019, 152) writes,

> When we gather, we are responding to a call to worship; that call is an echo and renewal of the call of creation to be God's image bearers for the world, and we fulfill the mission of being God's image bearers by undertaking the work of culture making. For such cultural unfolding to be done well, it must find its animus and direction in a covenantal relationship with the Creator.

We are not social activists; the responses we generate to confront dehumanizing and unjust conditions are reflections of the new community's ethos shaped by faith in Jesus Christ. Even responding to unjust practices requires dependence on God, and our calling of systems, persons, and structures to just ordering, is an attempt to call fellow humans to be ordered to the Creator. In our gathering to worship God and seek his will of how we can make him known through faithful witnessing and presence we dispel human self-confidence. Implicit in the search of *shalom* in post-apartheid Southern Africa is the "understanding that human flourishing requires a dynamic relationship with the Creator of humanity; in short, worship is at the heart of being human" (Smith 2019, 152). It is thus a missional task since injustice is because God is not worshipped in our social, cultural, economic, and political systems. These cannot serve the full purpose of human flourishing and the common good unless human hearts are transformed to behold the vision of God for this world as revealed in Christ Jesus. This approach considers our theological commitments to justice and the common good and how the Christian community can contribute effectively to the healing of society (Horn 2010, 61).

However, this reality of God in human society must reflect or begin in the church. This must be evidenced by: 1) a clear break with complacency about corrupt and unjust political structures by the liberationist churches; 2) a move from the withdrawn attitude of many evangelical churches that feel that their role is only spiritual; 3) clear cultural social integration of the White/Afrikaner churches that continue to exclude other people with their use of language policy that caters only to Afrikaans speakers; 4) a drive to familiarize with the language of the various public spheres to be

truly present witnesses of God's love and social ordering; 5) active but critical participation in activities and programs that contribute towards the undoing of existing patterns and practices of socio-economic injustice.

6. Conclusion

We do not live in a deistic realm of reality. The Bible tells us that God has made himself known in human historical settings and has revealed his will through the Law, the Prophets, and finally through his Son. The concept of *shalom* does not shy away from embracing this other-worldly vision, to take part in this-worldly activities. It is not merely a socio-political framework but says something about our understanding of God. It is a high view of God who would not sit back and watch the continuation of injustice in post-apartheid Namibia. For such silence is an affront to God's vision for his creation. There is nothing necessarily strange about embracing this new framework of the gospel to confront unjust systems, structures, and social arrangements. It expresses our search for what God is doing in the world and how we can be part of it. This search implies calling to repentance those who transgress God's standards, including the church that has been politically and culturally co-opted into complacency and continued social and cultural discrimination. *Shalom* calls for repentance from habits that violate covenant and neighborliness, and the church must lead by confronting its failure which enables unhealthy socio-political practices.

I would like to conclude by asking, what if, while we wait for "the kingdom of the world" to "become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah" in which "he will reign forever and ever" (Rev 11:15), we generate and embrace a gospel-centered notion of *shalom* to take part in the social transformation of post-apartheid Namibia and Southern Africa? Could we embrace this as a notion, even tentatively, through which God could work in the church for decision-making, working through our various gifts and efforts to bring about the transformation of our unjust socio-economic structures?

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