
REFLECTION ON HOPE

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If, as Dante wrote, the sign over the portal of Hell is “Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here,” then the Gates of Heaven are flung open wide—inviting us into a Kingdom that overflows with **Hope**.

As I have wrestled with these papers and responses over the past few months and as I have listened to our dialog over the past few days, there are a few dominant themes that have emerged and some secondary themes that seem to have rested in the quiet shadows of our conversations. I have given up any hope of trying to synthesize this dialog, or referee it, or in these few moments debate with it. Let me share, however, a few observations.

Some of the issues that drive our discussion

- 1 Our discussion indicates a deep fear of being identified with, and reaction against, the extremes of a fundamentalist, misguided eschatology.
- 2 We have a deep concern for matters of accountability for the ravages of systemic evil and for matters of community—for brothers and sisters who live in situations of helplessness and apparent hopelessness.
- 3 Many of us are concerned that an “escapist” eschatology holds danger of creating a passive attitude toward establishing the Kingdom in our own times and places.
- 4 There seems to be a longing for finding, expressing, and nurturing hope through a compassionate community of faith that serves as a model of the Kingdom and that functions in the contexts of holistic worship.

In looking at these issues, I went back to the Scriptures and collected all the references to hope. I did not do as thorough a job as I intended, but in

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sorting them, I did find at least four different concepts in the New Testament—

There were everyday uses (e.g. 3 John 1:14).

Some phrases express trust, faith, confidence, possibility, optimism (1 Tim 4:10).

They speak of matters that are clearly eschatological (1 Peter 1:13).

We find expressions of hope “in the midst” of difficulty (Phil 1:20).

I also looked for definitions of hope that would help me. One describes hope as desire with the expectation of fulfillment. Hope is not wishful thinking, but confident expectation and anticipation.

Our conversations have not brought us to resolution on the issues related to hope. However, in our listening and dialoging we have broadened our understanding of both hope and of each other. We **are** people of hope—even though we do not seem ready to agree on whether that hope is “Maximal or minimal,” or how to integrate love and sovereignty, or on millennial issues. Let me examine some of the themes that emerged from the papers, responses and the group reports I have received (along with some of my own comments).

Observations

1. In our desire to emphasize community, we have said little about hope for individuals or about hope in the gospel of regeneration. We must not lose one in favor of the other.
2. Most of our dialog has been in the realm of the discussion of theological constructs rather than with a wrestling with Scripture. We must do both.
3. We prefer engagement to escapism—but we must be careful to express that preference in both present as well as eschatological frames of reference. In settings of temporal oppression and “violence,” the Church must not herself be violent, but must seek to redeem and lift. Hope is a significant gift to others.
4. There is one important concept of hope that we have left in the shadows. It was in a couple of the papers, but did not surface strongly in the dialog. It is about how we respond in helpless situations where nothing is going to change. Do we have a word of Hope in those conditions? Yes!—a hope that is centered in God’s love and presence “in the midst” of life’s trials and difficulties. In that context, we must be careful that in our discussion of abundance and privation that we do not imply that our hope is in economic and political deliverance. Speaking out of the difficult context in His own country, one of our Latin brothers (Jorge Julca) stated the matter even more forcefully in

the panel than he did in his paper—"Hopelessness does not have to do with our state of being, but in the absence of Christ as our personal Savior." While we must do more to bring hope to the helpless, we must **not** do so in ways that imply that our hope is in wealth or in the horses of Egypt—it is in Jesus Christ. We have noted that there is often more Christian hope among the poor than among the affluent. There is little in the first world that indicates that wealth and power have done much to engender hope. It usually seems to result in more suicide. Hope is in new life, not just in the change of situation.

These aspects of hope rely on God but require our involvement—therefore—We must neither abdicate our responsibility nor rely on our capability. We must trust God in every situation even though it remains unchanged—and

We must work to transform every situation even when it seems hopeless. As we set a trajectory for our further reflections on Hope, we must remember that if our discussion deals with the choice of the maximal over the minimal—the details of Parousia—

if it is escapist in either the present tense (temporal) or the future tense (eternal)—

if it recaptures the importance of community and vital worship—

BUT it does not include hope in the midst of unchanged circumstances—then our message and our mission will be less than the world needs and deserves—less than the Gospel provides (see Richard Thompson's paper in this regard).

In the months before my father died, the Lord gave him a gracious joy in the expectation of heaven. However, in the hours before his death, he also experienced a different sense of hope. His final words were, "Dying grace. Dying grace." It was not an expression of the imminence of his escape, but his awareness of God's presence in the midst of the process. Later, our daughter-in-law expressed it in these words:

Your Dying Grace has become our Living Hope.

5. A number of voices have challenged us to continue to try to bring concepts together and try to reconcile the various emphases of scriptures—to attempt the both/and before demanding that we choose either/or.

My left eye is corrected so I can see the near.

My right eye is corrected so I can see the distant.

My brain can handle both.

How Wesleyan!! If my brain can do that with my sight, then surely we can be passionately active in the present while he look with anticipation toward the future.

Bumper Stickers — Proverbs

It seems inappropriate to reduce our thoughts to such brief statements, but here are a few of our thoughts expressed in even fewer words.

Whether apocalyptic or emergent–eschatological or imminent–personal or corporate

—Our only hope is in Jesus Christ.

If the problem is sin – both personal and systemic,
then the only possible hope is Jesus Christ.

Resurrection hope means that life is not terminal or hopeless or futureless.
The situation may be hopeless, but we are not.

Christian Hope assures us that life does not end in death.
Death ends in life.

Our present situations are hopeful both because of
the hope-filled redemptive act of God (at Calvary and the Tomb) in the
past and
the expectation of the future consummation—
both of which require Divine interventions.

We must reflect God’s optimism that every person, every situation is
salvable.

While thinking on these things, I heard a familiar secular song —
“Walk on, walk on with hope in your heart, you’ll never walk alone.”
They got it wrong. “Because Jesus walks beside us, we never walk alone,
And thus we walk with **hope** in our hearts.”

It seems to me that **HOPE** is the stuff of which the rest of this conference
is comprised

—Memory, Mission, and Message.

Our Hope is ignited by Memory.

MEMORY reminds us that hopes of the past have been realized and
that therefore hope for tomorrow is realistic. Our hope is grounded in the
memory of the God who seeks and saves.

The Biblical memory reminds us that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

—that He is the same Yesterday, Today, Forever.

—and that these truths are contained in the Name by which He said we should call Him—“I will be what I have been—I AM.”

Our Eucharistic memory reminds us that **“Whenever we eat this Bread and drink this cup, we show forth the Lord’s death”**—that intervention of God (incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension) which is the soil of all present and future hope—future hope that is anticipated by the words **“until He comes.”**

Our personal and denominational memories provide evidence that many of the hopes of our fathers and mothers, our sisters and brothers have been realized.

Our Mission is inspired by Hope.

MISSION demands that we have hope in the present and for the future. It cannot be undertaken without the hope that we will be fruitful and that the world can be changed. Our mission is filled with hope that rests in the universality of Christ’s invitation and the promise of His presence unto the end of time. If there is no resurrection, and life ends in death, then we are, Paul says, “of all men most miserable” (1 Cor. 15:19) and are therefore helpless and hopeless and life is “meaningless.” Therefore, resurrection hope not only points toward a heavenly future, but also rescues our present efforts, our missional task, from being in vain.

Our Message is infused with Hope.

Holiness, and the Wesleyan understanding of its powerful impact on **all** of the Gospel, declares that there is hope. It is a radical optimism in what God can do—both by imputation and impartation. It is a message that affirms—that hopes—that “confidently expects”—

This situation is redeemable

This temptation is conquerable

This person is salvable

This trial is endurable

This sinner can be holy

The unlovely can be loved

This relationship can be restored—

Light, love, purity, Christlikeness, can leaven all of society.

This conference is rooted in an earlier meeting held in Oxford England held in 1995 that concluded with the Oxford Affirmation. Although I have not been “commissioned” to write one and have no authority to speak for you (and thus write these lines in first person singular), my response to the discussions of this conference prompt me to commit myself to this—

The Guatemala Covenant –

- I will continue this conversation, listening and contributing, and will seek words, images, and adequate explanations that will enable the understanding of people from other disciplines, other nations, and other ministry roles.
- I will never allow my theological constructs to come before my grappling with Scripture.
- I will seek never to be the cause of hopelessness in others. Instead I will whisper words of hope in the ear of the dying, and shout hope to the community that surrounds me.
- I will never give up on the both/and of the via media until forced to do so.
- I will always remember our heritage of diversity in non-essentials and not force my brothers and sisters to affirm my view unless it is clearly required by Scripture.
- I will never be passive in addressing the hopelessness of others but will seek to alleviate the hopelessness of the helpless.
- I will never let helplessness lead me to despair.
- I will choose only biblical methods to escape situations of helplessness.
- I will seek God’s presence **in** the situation before seeking escape **from** it.
- I will never “escape” without bringing as many others along with me as I can.
- I will embrace Hope
 - For me and for you
 - For both the person and the community
 - For humanity and for creation
 - For pardon and for purity
 - For endurance as well as for deliverance
 - For the present and the Parousia
 - For the oppressed and disadvantaged
 - And in the midst of situations that will not change.
- Here I stand.
- I dare not do otherwise.

AMEN

In facing the issues raised by this topic, it would be comfortable to believe that if we just worked harder, we could usher in the Kingdom or, that on the other hand, to believe that there is nothing we can do until the Parousia—but that is not the nature of our hope.

It would be more comfortable to believe that if we could finally get the End-Times Chart finished and could know what the fourteenth hair on the seventh mole of the 12th horn of the 9th beast revealed by the 7th prophet will tell us what will happen on the 26th day of July 2036—but that is not where our hope lies.

It would be more comfortable to believe that once we accept the atoning work of Christ in our own lives, that for us and for our world all the darkness will become light, all injustice will disappear, all problems will be solved, all contradictions will be understood—but that is not the nature of our hope.

Our hope is in Jesus Christ Who died and rose for us—Who promised to return for us. And we can trust in Him.

Our confident expectation is that Hope flourishes wherever and whenever God's Kingdom is allowed to come.

Our hope is that persons, and families, and cultures, and human systems and all of creation is redeemable.

Our hope lies in the promise that in the midst of the darkest night, in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death, in the midst of trials, temptations, and persecutions—we are not alone and the end is not yet.

As we leave this conference, we “hope”—we confidently believe—that we will never be the same.

In hope, let us continue to grapple with and dialog over the concepts that have been raised at this conference, doing it with our best reason, and on the basis of the data that God has revealed to us, and in fidelity to our heritage.

Let us seek to establish and reflect the Kingdom of God in our own time and space, seeking the transformation not only to the hearts of persons but also of the systems of humanity. But let us do so only with those methods that are consistent with what we find in the example of Christ and the teachings of His word.

Let us continue to present to the world Jesus as the Hope for every person in the midst of every life circumstance.

Let us confidently expect that God's Kingdom can transcend our differences of culture, language, nationality, academic discipline and ecclesial role.

Let us seek to do the work of his Kingdom with humility and grace.

Let us HOPE that we will be true to our heritage,
that our mission will bring people to faith and holiness, and
that the best days of our Church are still future.

Let our Hope—our confident expectation—include purity as well as pardon—endurance as well as deliverance—and eternity as well as time.

Let us have the courage to take the difficult road—a
to accept the paradox and stand in the *via media*
to reject the neither/nors and embrace the both/ands
knowing that perhaps it is precisely there, and only there, that hope will
be born and flourish.

And when we have come to the end of our own efforts, let us still hope
—joining the Christians of all centuries in the hope-filled prayer—**Marana-
tha.**

May the God of **hope** fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with **hope** by the power of the Holy Spirit
(Rom15:13).

Let us hold unswervingly to the **hope** we profess, for he who promised
is faithful (Hebrews 10:23, NIV).

The first word is Grace.

The foundational word is Faith.

The “previous” word is Memory.

The active word is Mission.

The highest word is holy Christlikeness.

The word of response is “Yes.”

The bottom line is Love.

The final word is

HOPE!