

CHRISTIAN HOPE AND HISTORY

I. THE BIBLICAL MEANING OF HOPE

Hope, being the subject of the Evanston 1954 World Assembly of the Churches, has been widely discussed all over the world. Yet, as to the exact meaning of Christian hope there is obviously a great deal of confusion, as the theological discussion has shown thus far. Rudolf Bultmann, e.g., in his article on ἐλπίς in *Th.W.N.T.*, II, p. 515 ff., emphasizes rightly the basic difference between the secular understanding of hope as found in the Greek and Hellenistic world on the one hand, and the Biblical understanding on the other.

In the secular world, he points out, hope is tied up with the natural course of events, whereas in the Bible, the term is invariably related to God. This definition requires a further elaboration, however. There is a tendency in modern theology to interpret that relation merely as trust in God's goodness and wisdom so that we can accept everything as coming from Him. In such understanding the fact is overlooked, however, that the Biblical hope is teleological and its implementation is expected from a very definite development in time, whose curve is determined both by a definite, God-chosen goal, and by the fact that God governs the approach toward the goal. In secular hope, on the other hand, the time process is viewed as being subject to hazard. Thus, while pleasant things may be hoped for from the future, there is no final goal toward which the process moves.

Furthermore, hope differs from mere expectation of future events by the fact that the events to which the individual looks forward will be beneficial to him. In the case of Christian hope that result is the consequence of divine promises. The mere existence of God, or the divine activity in the universe, does not by itself inspire hope. God must have entered into a special relationship with man, in which God declares his willingness to bring about the things which will be good or wholesome for the believer. Furthermore, the fact that the God of the Bible is a God who makes promises to man conveys an eschatological character to Biblical religion. A distinction has to be made between the time in which the believer lives, on the one hand,

and the time when the fulfilment of the promise takes place, i.e., the "latter" or the "last time", on the other. The Biblical hope implies, therefore, the conviction that things are moving of necessity from the present to their final stage. It is furthermore characteristic of the God of the Bible that he not only gives promises, but also discloses the way in which the promise will come true. These eschatological revelations have often been mistaken for mere predictions of the future or of the final period of history. Failing to consider them as related to the benefits which God has in store for the believer, men have supposed them to provide an esoteric instruction concerning an otherwise unknowable future. Such interpretation was a relapse into paganism, however. While the prophets utilized the eschatological or apocalyptic imagery of the Bible in connection with the ideas of the Covenant and the divine Promise, yet in post-exilic Judaism a tendency developed to interpret those predictions simply as the timetable of the future. The time process seemed to move with an intrinsic momentum, and consequently the hope entertained implied no longer a personal relation to God but was rather the expectation of the unveiling of the apocalyptic panorama. Unfortunately this attitude was frequently adopted by Christians, too, who misunderstood the eschatological outlook of Jesus. The speech of Jesus on the Mount of Olives (Mark xiii and parallels), the description of the Parousia in 1 Thess. iv. 13-17 and 2 Thess. ii. 1-12, and the Book of Revelation, e.g., seemed to justify such interpretation. As a result, the Biblical hope was replaced by a waiting for the gradual passing of the final events. Dispensationalists, and the self-appointed adepts of "prophetic" interpretation have recently popularized such a view. But there is no Biblical justification for this. Unfortunately, however, the excesses of apocalypticism were but the passionate fashion in which believers reacted to excesses in the opposite direction. Since the second century the church has come increasingly under the spell of Greek metaphysics and has misunderstood the realism of Biblical eschatology.

Since the God of the Bible is a Being who pursues a saving purpose, Paul insists that hope is as constitutive for the Christian life as are faith and love (1 Cor. xiii. 13). A life without hope, be it one of pessimism or of indifference toward change, is an indication that the Gospel has not yet been truly grasped.

II. THE NATURE OF HOPE

(1) *Its Foundation*

Hope is an essential feature of the Christian life, because we have the assurance that there is a living, personal God who cares for us. If God were mere being (Tillich), devoid of personality, things would happen of necessity. While one might be convinced in such a case, as Leibniz, e.g., was, that this world is as good as can be, no room would be left for hope, nevertheless. For in a universe or a reality which does not move towards a goal things are meaningful as they are and must be accepted as they occur. If that were the ultimate nature of reality, people could perhaps be persuaded to acquiesce in the given conditions. Yet for the defeated or suffering or frustrated person there is but small comfort in such advice.

Belief in a personal God is infinitely more than belief in the Bible. Certainly, apart from the Bible we would not be able to know God and to believe in Him. But we must not fall prey to an apocalypticism in which people believe that they can derive the accurate timetable of all the coming events from the Bible; and in which it makes, therefore, practically no difference whether or not God reigns, as long as He acts as the infallible source of information concerning the future. Yet according to the New Testament, the thing that matters most is that we should be on the right side as the process goes on, while the knowledge of what will happen next is obviously of subordinate importance. Our "walk with God" is not determined by apocalyptic revelations but rather by the fact that God has made a covenant with man, i.e., that God pursues a beneficent end for man. The Bible tells us that God is a God who remembers, i.e., who continues the course He has once started. That is the reason why in turn God's great deeds in the past are so frequently referred to in the Psalms as the ground of hope. Past experiences by themselves are hardly fit as the basis for hope. For in this world the human conditions are unstable and unpredictable. Hence we cannot reason that we shall be lucky in the future merely because we were lucky in the past. But things are different when we can be sure that the helpful event of the past was wrought by God.

God is able to control history. This ability He has demonstrated most clearly in Jesus Christ. The historical existence

of Jesus shows us that God, acting in an unexpected and unforeseeable way, is capable of radically changing the course of history. There is no way, e.g., by which the birth or the ministry of Jesus could be explained as the necessary outcome of Jewish and Hellenistic history. Though He was rooted in the history of His time, Jesus acted in a manner essentially superior to all that was found in His contemporaries. Some historians have attempted to interpret that superiority as a fortuitous event in Jewish history and have argued that according to the laws of probability you can reckon from time to time with the appearance of a genius. But since a fortuitous event has no essential connection with its environment, its effects will be of brief duration only. The contrary was the case with Jesus. With Him an entirely new course of history was started, which left behind both Judaism and the Hellenistic civilization of the Roman Empire. This fact indicates that the power of God Himself was at work in Jesus Christ. The Christian hope, then, does not rest upon God in general, nor merely upon the Creation or the Covenant with Adam or Abraham, or the faithfulness of God, but also and above all upon His work in Jesus Christ. He is our hope, because in Him in a singular way God has revealed His attitude towards man and the goal for which we are destined. Man is made to live in communion with God by receiving the Son who condescends to him.

That is to say that the firm basis of our hope is the living, *risen* Christ. Those, e.g., who place all emphasis exclusively upon the death of Jesus may derive from the Cross the assurance that the past is no longer a burden in our life, because our guilt has been blotted out. But thus interpreted Christ would not be our hope. The New Testament writers underscore the significance of the Resurrection of Jesus because apart from it He would be a personage of the past only. As a result of His return from the land of the dead, however, He is the living Christ who establishes contact with us, and He is the heavenly Lord with whom we are enabled to have contact. By faith we share the risen life of Christ.

(2) *Hope of Salvation and Hope for this World.*

This fact explains the twofold outlook of the Christian hope. It is concerned both with the believer's salvation and with the future of this world. Because we are united with Christ, we are certain that the death of our earthly body is no final end,

but rather that the new life which we experience already now in us, though for moments only, will be a permanent state in which we shall be freed from all earthly limitations. God has begotten us again into a living hope (1 Peter i. 3). To many Christians this expectation of the life everlasting seems to be the only hope which Christ conveys to us. Yet if it is thus understood, one is almost compelled to consider this world as a vale of tears, and the only good to be hoped for is the life beyond the grave. Yet our vocation is not just a personal confirmation of the fact that we are saved, but rather a call by which we are incorporated into the people of God for the service of Christ's cause. The goal to which we look forward in hope is not a state in which passively we are to be the recipients of God's gifts. The Lord's call confirms the dignity of our personal life, viz. that we are to assume responsibility for the advance and consummation of the Saviour's work. Where the divine call is interpreted with reference to man's sin only, the result is almost inevitably an individualistic misunderstanding of the Christian life. Such individualism is a carry-over from Greek mentality, and can hardly be reconciled with all that the New Testament says about the Church, the people of God, the Body of Christ, the fellowship or brotherhood of the believers, the spiritual Israel, the new mankind, etc. Rather from our election and vocation we learn that our hope, while it is a personal one, is one in the Body of Christ, and thus one by which we share the goal that the risen Lord has set to Himself. He who calls us is the heavenly Lord, to whom God has given power over all the earthly creatures.

The Lordship of Christ does not mean that everything that exists in this world is already acting and moving according to His will. Rather, by working here on earth, our Lord establishes His reign in successive acts, and utilizes His followers as His instruments and weapons through whom he expands His rule. In that process, nothing is able to resist Him effectively. Hence, having by faith been made active participants in the work of the risen Lord, we entertain the hope that we shall share in His victories, too. They will be won successively, wherever people believe in Him and act by faith. Yet this process does not continue indefinitely. Christ's victories incapacitate the forces that militate against Him, and thus there will be a final triumph in which Christ's full glory as Lord is to be revealed. That is the Parousia.

(3) *The Objective of Hope.*

Realizing that it is the personal life of the risen Lord by which history is kept going, and not an eschatological determinism, we must refrain from systematizing the apocalyptic passages of the New Testament, or from connecting them too directly with certain historical events. The symbolism of apocalyptic imagery in the Bible does not primarily refer to historical events, but rather to aspects of the personal work of the Lord, as can be seen particularly in the references to divinely sent messengers and events and to the "coming" of the Lord. Thus the fact that the future events are described symbolically—for even the prophetic prediction of historical events transforms the latter ones into symbols of the final event—serves as an appropriate means of giving expression to the freedom of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through the apocalyptic images we are reminded of the fact that the decisive events of the future are not the outcome of intramundane factors, but rather that in them a Divine Person is at work, and that He has an ultimate purpose. Thus while all the concrete details of the plan's execution remain hidden from us, we can be certain of the goal Christ has in mind as well as of the means He employs and the signs indicating the progress of the eschatological process. Yet it is obvious that all attempts exactly to foretell the future on the basis of the Biblical apocalyptic data must remain utterly futile. True Christian hope is not impaired by such limitation, however. For we are certain both of the Agent of the process, and of His ability to reach the goal. Thus over against a purely subjective view, in which hope is confined to the life beyond the grave, while life in this world is emptied of meaning, belief in the Lordship of Christ gives us a right to entertain hope for this life, too. The victories which Christ is to win will be accomplished by means of our life of faith. Hence the life of faith is one of utmost urgency and importance, because it is the means by which Christ overcomes the world.

A warning should be sounded here, however, over against an unduly simplified view of the Christian life. The power by which we fight and conquer those forces of this world by whom Christ is opposed, is not to be identified with the natural strength of our body and mind, or the natural resources at our disposal. They are only the means which we employ; the real power is the life of Christ, that works upon our heart. Apart from it we

would not be capable of overcoming the forces of evil, no matter how much we accomplished in this world; in turn it is amazing what great things are brought about in the power of the Spirit by persons who lack earthly resources and influence, and who may be physically frail, or possess no higher education. Thus a person who believes in Jesus Christ ought never to give up hope though, humanly speaking, his life gives little prospect of accomplishment. One might rather say paradoxically that our chances are proportionate to the power of our hope.

A second misunderstanding that should be dispelled is this. Outside of the life of faith, people measure the value of life by personal success. The value of their aspirations seems to be confirmed by the recognition which other people give to their activities and efforts. Conversely, poverty, lack of influence or power, and oppression, e.g., are considered as indications that one's hope has failed him. The goal for which the Christian hope looks out, however, is not primarily the individual's success, but rather Christ's victory. Hence the meaning of our life does not depend on our personal recognition or our influence in society, but rather on the assurance that we are used by Christ as His helpers to win His victories. Of course, what happened to the Master may also be the fate of His followers, viz., that advocating God's right and fighting for Christ's glory may lead to suffering, loss of earthly goods and even the death of a martyr. Keeping this fact in mind, the believer, while grateful if and when earthly success is granted to him, will not think that his hope has failed him merely because he has encountered adversities in life.

Individual Christians and churches may at times have the satisfaction of seeing recognized the significance which their activity has for the progress of the cause of Christ. But in other instances an individual may die before anyone realizes what he has done for Christ, and it may even be that no one ever becomes aware of the labours of his faith. The advance of the cause of Christ is not brought about exclusively by the great saints and theologians and church leaders, but also by the millions of humble believers whose names God alone remembers. Similarly, it may be His response to the faithful work of a church that the envy or hatred of its opponents is kindled, and thus persecution seems to be the reward of what has been done for Christ. But in neither case was the Christian hope mistaken. The true reward of our life of hope and faith is the recognition

that we shall receive at the hands of God. As Paul reminds the Thessalonians: "What is our hope or joy or honorable crown before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?" (1 Thess. ii. 19). The deepest hope of the believer is this—that the life which Christ has engendered in him, should bear fruit for the Saviour's sake, and thus that in the day of judgment the individual should be found a faithful steward of the talent entrusted to him. The Christian realizes that no matter what happens to him personally, his works of faith are grains of spiritual seed which will germinate. With such a hope he is capable of braving all the disasters and adversities of his life. For the same reason, Christians who entertain such a hope will not, in the first place, concentrate their energies on the gathering of earthly resources in order to be safe from their adversaries and to secure outward success. All those resources are valuable only as means to attain the spiritual end, and thus their absence is no obstacle to effective ecclesiastical activities. History has taught conclusively that it is not always the rich and influential churches by which Christ's cause is fostered, but in many instances the poor and despised sects.

In conclusion we can say that Christianity has deepened the Biblical hope in two important respects. Firstly, through the Gospel hope has become a personal relationship of a reciprocal character. The individual realizes that he has a personal stake in the things God is preparing. At the same time, the Gospel has eliminated the last vestiges of egotism from hope. The New Testament hope is not concerned with the attainment of goods which please us, but rather with the realization of values in which God is interested.

(To be concluded)

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