

THE PILGRIM PEOPLE OF GOD: SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Rev. Professor S. N. Williams

The phrase 'Pilgrim People of God' has long been in vogue in ecumenical discussions of ecclesiology, including those within the writer's own tradition, the Reformed Tradition.

The two New Testament works that most encourage the use of the phrase are 1 Peter and Hebrews. Peter spoke of his readers as 'aliens and strangers in the world' (2.11) and it is under that heading he offers ethical instruction on ruler and subject, master and slave, husband and wife and relationships in general with those within and outside the church. 'Ἐλπὶς, used twice in the context of these injunctions (3.5;3.15) and not at all afterwards, is expounded at the beginning of the epistle and Peter's theology of hope in its relation to theology of suffering and of holiness sets the tone for the rest of the epistle. The object of hope is, first, the heavenly inheritance ('imperishable, unspoiled and unfading', 1.4), then 'the grace to be given to you when Jesus Christ is revealed' (1.13) and, finally, just 'God' (1.21).

In toto Peter's first epistle looks like a classic exposition of other-worldly hope and concomitant social quietism. Studies of Peter's vocabulary both in relation to the Old Testament (a word like 'inheritance') and the first century background (see Bruce Winter's work) show the possibilities of modifying this claim². Yet the concept of pilgrimage is given meaning in the context of the contrast between the present world of suffering, submission and good conduct and the future hope of victory, coronation and the salvation of the soul. A Pilgrim is a stranger, not destined for the land of passage.

We find the same phrase as we did in 1 Peter when we read again in Hebrews (11.13) of aliens and strangers³. Like Peter, Hebrews gives ἔλπις a special prominence in comparison with most of the literature of the New Testament. And, as in 1 Peter, the

² E.g. in *Themelios*, 13~3 (1988) Winter discusses social ethics according to 1 Peter (pp.91-94).

³ Παρεπίδημοί is a word found just in these two texts.

exposition of hope has preceded the designation 'aliens and strangers'. The importance of hope is announced in 3.6 (and see 6.11) but the most specific deliberate statement of its object awaits the beginnings of the unfolding of the high priestly theme. Those who have 'fled to take hold of the hope... have this hope as an anchor of the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.' (6.18-20). While Hebrews works with an exodus model of the people of God, the high priestly presence of Christ, destined for perpetuity and constituting present possession as well as hope, modifies the model. Hope is certainly not just of future possession (7.19). But it is also hope for what is future (11.1). The soul is anchored above, but it is the soul of a traveller. So the object of hope is present, transcendent and heavenly while the life of hope is the life of *homo viator*, a pilgrimage, journey to a city yet to come 'whose architect and builder is God' (11.10).

As with Peter's letter, citing texts in translation is not good enough to establish something like 'other-worldly hope'. Yet the meaning of the pilgrim people of God as we have come across it in this biblical context seems far distant from the constructions of modern, including Reformed, ecclesiology. Liberation theology has difficulty with these two canonical books⁴(3). And Moltmann, whose work in eschatology has long been influential within and beyond Reformed circles, certainly seems distanced from the reported biblical perspectives. The fullest statement of his ecclesiology was in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, where first the world, and only then the church, is the object of eschatological promise and orientation. That means both the refusal to separate church and world as 'pilgrimage' often does and the refusal to alienate this present world from the promises of God, in favour of some other world. Peter and Hebrews do not seem to get much of a look in here.

Now obviously contemporary theology does not feel compelled to incorporate the whole range of theological perspectives found in the New Testament into its proposals⁵. So if on

⁴ Admitted in conversation by the liberation theologian, Thomas Hanks.

⁵ Whether or not this should be so is a different matter.

examination the concept of pilgrimage in the two books mentioned turns out as it superficially appears, why not just drop it? That is, given the widespread prevalence of the view that we are not obligated to display all the biblical data in contemporary theological construction, why continue to make use of the concept at all, in the name of 'biblical theology'? Why, given this view of Scripture, not just get rid of it. One difficulty in the way of this is Calvin's own incorporation of the theologies of Hebrews and 1 Peter into his own, and Reformed ecclesiology is naturally anxious to enlist Calvin in its cause as far as possible. Indeed, the shift in ecumenical thinking which was the backdrop to Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* in 1964 was the push in the fifties to get eschatology straight and into relation with social ethics. And at that time there was considerable interest in the interpretation of Calvin's eschatology.

One example was Heinrich Quistorp's work published in 1955 as *Calvin's Doctrine of the Last Things*⁶. Quistorp welcomed the eschatological orientation of Reformation theology as a whole but noted too that

the eschatology of Luther and Calvin lacks very largely the cosmic breadth which is characteristic of the Biblical expectation of the end. They fail to do justice to the ideas of the perfection of the new humanity as a whole, of the church in the coming kingdom of God and of the new creation in a new heaven and earth (p.12f).

When dealing with the concept of hope in Calvin, Quistorp spent by far most of the time on the concept of pilgrimage. He expounded it under the themes of life as combat, life as crossbearing and life as pursuit of life eternal. In his discussion of the first of these two, Quistorp cites again and again those phrases of Calvin where he emphasizes other-worldly hope and the contrast between the earthly and the heavenly. But the third section is especially important where he takes Calvin's idea of aspiration toward heavenly and eternal life to summarize his idea of Christian life as pilgrimage. Here we arrive at the famous *Meditatio vitae futurae* of the *Institutes* (111.9). The contrast between *contemptus mundi* and heavenly felicity is

⁶ Lutterworth, London, 1955.

accentuated. Of particular interest for us and post-Evanston eschatology is the description of the relation of eschatology to ethics in Calvin's theology. Eschatology grounds ethics in terms of another world in prospect, purifying our aspirations in the present world. Eschatology encourages a form of *contemptus mundi*. Quistorp maintained that only the Christology and christocentricity of Calvin's theology 'prevented Calvin from lapsing into a certain philosophy of death to which he was perhaps inclined' (p.47). Indeed, Quistorp's defence of Calvin against Schultze's earlier two volumes is interesting. Schultze had followed Ritschl in taking the *Meditatio vitae futurae* to be fundamental in Calvin and in his conception of Christianity, and this made Calvin's theology an eschatology with a negative and world-denying ethic of sinister character. Quistorp's rebuttal was that Calvin's theology had no one centre and that it was wrong to claim for the *Meditatio* such a pivotal role. Yet, while Quistorp claimed that Calvin was ultimately beyond pessimism as well as optimism, he did little to challenge the claim that Calvin's eschatology bred or was associated with a world-denying ethic.

Such a challenge was, however, offered by one who wrote a preface to Quistorp's book, namely Tom Torrance. In the preface, Torrance had claimed that

Calvin's main teaching about eschatology can be formulated by saying that eschatology is the application of Christology to the work of the church in history. It is the understanding of the church and all creation - in terms of the *Regnum Christi*. Calvin's teaching here pivots upon the doctrine of union with Christ. Because we are united to Christ and participate in His risen humanity, eschatology is essential to our faith (p.8).

This emphasis on the risen humanity of Christ had, said Torrance, a double significance. Firstly, it means participation in the new creation to whose renewal we reach out. Secondly, it means participation in the earthly order in the reality and power of that new humanity,

...And it is only through the operation of that new humanity that this wild and inhuman world of ours can be saved from

its own savagery and be called into the Kingdom of Christ in peace and love (p.8).

When Torrance went on to offer his own account of Calvin's eschatology, he insisted that the *contemptus praesentiae vitae* and even the *contemptus mundi* as they surfaced in the *Meditatio* in no way involved depreciation of earthly life but just 'such handling of our present life that its future renewal or restoration is already made to govern the present'⁷. Torrance found the nerve of Calvin's eschatology in the 'analogical transposition of Christology to the whole understanding of the life of the Church' (p.101) and the nerve of the Christology, as he anticipated in the preface to Quistorp, in the doctrine of the new humanity in Jesus Christ to whose risen humanity we are joined. Torrance emphasized the concept of humanity in Calvin. *Humanitas* and *humanité* are constant themes in Calvin's sermons. The distinction between Luther's and Calvin's understanding of the two kingdoms relates to the role of humanity, for the overlap of the two kingdoms, for Calvin, has to do with an emphasis on our earthly humanity and the *iustitia novi hominis*. So Torrance is determined to put talk of pilgrimage and the other-worldliness of the *meditatio vitae futurae* in this context. Though and while we are pilgrims, we need civil and political order as aids to our very humanity (*Institutes* IV.20.2) and while Calvin teaches the *meditatio vitae futurae* he makes it a point of prime importance throughout his works to combine it with teaching 'the unceasing activity of the Church on earth in the growth and extension of the kingdom of Christ' (p.91).

Torrance actually states with even greater vigour the importance of the humanity of Christ in Calvin and in theology generally when he expounds Calvin's eschatology for ecumenical purposes⁸. He returned to the theme of the union with Christ and the humanity of the risen Christ as the crucial issue in Calvin's eschatology and then added:

⁷ *Kingdom and Church* (Oliver & Boyd, London, 1956) p.141.

⁸ *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, vol.1 (Lutterworth, London, 1959) pp. 48-101.

This is a supremely important question today: in my view it is the main issue which divides all theologies and strikes them apart to the one side or to the other. Are we to take the humanity of the risen Jesus seriously or not? (*Conflict and Agreement...*, p.98).

Yet again Torrance emphasized the way faith, in union with Christ, 'reaches out in hope toward the renewal of humanity, to the renewal of the whole earth, of heaven and earth' but he emphasizes even more the importance of such faith-union for our present worldliness. Turning, as he did in *Kingdom and Church*, to the discussion of the magistrate in *Institutes* IV.20, Torrance says that

...eschatology by its very nature injects into the Christian Church on earth and in the midst of history the power and the imperative to live out that humanity, and so extend among men, as Calvin puts it, the Kingdom of Christ (p.100).

Conclusion: 'Let the Reformed Churches of the Alliance learn again the meaning of *the Word made Flesh* and the *Resurrection of the Body*.' (p.101).

Although Torrance ended with an account different from that of Quistorp, he had sought to balance the elements in Calvin's thought and to take at its full force the *Meditatio*. But with a further turn of the wheel, in Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, there was no such attempt; just the attempt to incorporate Calvin's into his own theology. It is true that it was not Moltmann's job to expound Calvin in a balanced way, but it is instructive to observe his use of Calvin. Moltmann from the beginning declared war on an other-worldly eschatology that produced flight from the world, in the name of a messianic this-worldly eschatology that produced engagement with it. Calvin figures so prominently in Moltmann's opening meditation on hope that one wonders whether Moltmann's 'meditation' echoes Calvin's *Meditatio*. Be that as it may, Moltmann cited Calvin in support of two important contentions. The first was the contradiction between future and present, hope and suffering. The second was the

emptiness of faith without hope. The only commentary on Calvin is the summary reassurance that when Calvin spoke of hope hastening beyond this world:

He did not mean by this that Christian faith flees the world. But he did mean that it strains after the future (p.19).

When Moltmann cited Calvin on the present-future contradiction he cited the exact remarks from Calvin's commentary on Hebrews that Barth had cited in support of his dialectical theology in *The Epistle to the Romans*, though Moltmann combats precisely such a Barthian perspective in *Theology of Hope!*⁹. But it is in the concluding chapter, on the Exodus Church, that Moltmann makes most significant use of the letter to the Hebrews,

Here the title 'Exodus Church' is meant to focus attention on the reality of Christianity as that of the 'pilgrim people of God', as described in the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come' (Heb.13.13f.) (p. 304).

Yet the development of Moltmann's interpretation of *Christianity within the horizon of the expectation of the kingdom of God* (pp.325ff) owed little or nothing to an exposition of Hebrews or (for those who resist too much exegesis in dogmatics) it did not obviously derive from the concept of pilgrimage in Hebrews. Moltmann's emphases were on hopes for the world, the church for the world, the coming freedom and dignity of humankind, the renewing of the world, the transformation of earth by the coming kingdom of God, 'the eschatological *hope of justice*, the *humanizing of man*, the *socializing of humanity*, *peace for all creation*' (p.329). The point is that Moltmann does not seem to feel accountable, as Calvin did, to the theology of Hebrews nor does he seem to feel

⁹ *Theology of Hope* (SCM, London, 1967) chapter 1. For Barth, see the OUP edition (London, 1968) p.19f.

accountable to the theology of Calvin. This, for the moment, we record just as a fact ¹⁰

Indeed, one should go further. Moltmann cited *Institutes* 111.2.42 (p.20). Calvin does, indeed, have pilgrimage partly in mind in 111.2 (see 111,2,4). But the perspective on present possession of eternal life and what the future holds (e.g. 2.28f; 2.40-43) does not square well with Moltmann's alleged form of this-worldliness and hostile attitude in *Theology of Hope* towards eternity in the present. And, of course, Calvin sustains the distinction between believers and unbelievers in this connection. Moltmann does not reckon with the *meditatio vitae futurae*, which certainly reads just like the sort of thing Moltmann is out to combat. Nor, despite the discussion of *The Calling of Christian in Society* (pp.329 ff) where he looks at the Reformers, is there an attempt to take on Calvin's important discussion of the magistrate and civil order. My point is this: the Calvinist conscience is being lost here in the discussion of the pilgrim people of God, and the shift from Quistorp to Torrance to Moltmann is very instructive in that very decade running from Evanston to *Theology of Hope* ¹¹(10).

Plenty of water has flowed under the bridge since the sixties. Yet we need, I suggest, to ask whether we have not taken over uncritically from that period a concept of eschatology in relation to the pilgrim people of God that requires revision. I do not undertake here to offer that revision but the following concluding points are meant to be programmatic for purposes of ecclesiology in the Reformed tradition.

1. It is widely supposed that other-worldly hope is inimical to social action. Yet Calvin seems to sustain a version of other-worldly hope and the Calvinist tradition, of all the confessional traditions, was right in the vanguard of socio-political action. We need to inquire about the coherence of Calvin's theology in this respect with a view to re-examining the relation of eschatology to social action.

¹⁰ For that matter, see the reference to 1 Peter 3.15 (p.22).

¹¹ These are examples: I am not surveying the scholarship of the period.

2. The opposite of other-worldly hope, this-worldly hope, is an ambiguous phrase. Sometimes people seem to use it to refer to proximate, rather than eschatologically future hopes. In such cases this-worldly hope seems to lead constantly to frustration, disappointment and antagonisms. Where this-worldly hope is understood in a future eschatological sense, the line dividing it from other-worldly hope is thin. If new heavens and new earth follow by divine grace after environmental or nuclear devastation of our planet' is that a kind of this-worldly or a kind of other-worldly prospect?

3. A fruitful way of investigating the issues might be to compare Moltmann with Abraham Kuyper in the context of another look at Calvin¹². In *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* Moltmann attacked Kuyper but of course there is much more to Kuyper than we find there and his legacy today (e.g. in relation to South Africa) is controversial¹³. Undoubtedly, however, Kuyper affirmed a form of profound Calvinist this-worldliness.

4. A personal plea for the rehabilitation of the eschatological perspectives of Hebrews and 1 Peter, integrated into the rest of New Testament and biblical theology. To be sure, this derives from a certain view of the canonical Scriptures, which brings in separate and massive issues. But the epistles constitute an antidote to and offer realism about a situation where we all constantly seem to be incredibly frustrated (and consequently irritable and hostile) about and in the global socio-political situation.

S.N.Williams

¹² One should not over-emphasize Moltmann; Weber and, better, Hendrikus Berkhof, come to mind.

¹³ SCM, London, 1977 p.43f. Moltmann's ecclesiology in this work is not explicitly, though perhaps implicitly, geared to the concept of pilgrimage. Note the brief section on pp. 83-85 in comparison with *Theology of Hope*.