

# A Pastoral Theological Reflection on Hope

David C. Stancil, Ph.D.

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way." So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

M. Louise Haskins<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to have, or not to have, hope? Louise Haskins's famous lines suggest that hope is, to some extent, an expectation of help. She hints that hope is forward-looking, and that it has a religious quality—it has something to do with God.

Like many words, the word "hope" is used in many different ways in our language. "Hope" can function as different parts of speech (a noun, a verb, or an adjective), and can have many varying meanings. As a noun, "hope" can mean "desire," "trust," "confidence," "reliance," "faith," "assurance," "optimism," "enthusiasm," or "aspiration." One of my favorite meanings for hope is as an anchor.

True hope exists on a continuum, with non-hoping positions at either end. Persons who "overhope" tend to approach life with presumption; persons who "underhope" approach life with despair. Presumptuous persons may assume that others will slavishly meet their needs without any effort on their part, or they may fail to take the dangers and threats of the world seriously, taking unnecessary risks. Despairing persons may assume that their needs will not be attended to by anyone, and may become gluttonous in the present, having no trust in the future at all. David Garland has called this attitude that of "get all you can, can all you get, and sit on the can!"

Neither "overhope" nor "underhope" is really hope. Both are hope-less approaches to life. Hopelessness is the opposite of hope. Both hope and hopelessness are at least partially the result of internal, largely unconscious, calculations of probability. Persons who assess their life situation—particularly a crisis situation—and conclude that the resources required to deal with this situation are either presently available or can be gained in a timely fashion, tend to be "hoppers." Persons who conclude that the challenge is too great, that the resources cannot be obtained, or that trying to grapple with the situation simply makes no difference, tend to be "non-hoppers." "Hopeless" may almost be equated with "powerless."

Authentic hope operates within a realistic range of expectations, for having hope never means having to hide from what is Real in any situation. Yet there is more to hope than this. Hope is related to the range of vision, to the horizon of expectation of the hoping person as well. This is where Hoskins's verse points to a central quality of hope—its religious quality. Jürgen Moltmann has written that "Hope is nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised by God."<sup>2</sup>

Hope which includes the perspective and the possibility of God's activity is not hope, but Hope. Such Hope does not deny or sugar-coat the reality of evil and suffering in the world (did not Jesus say, "in this world you will have trouble"? [John 16:33]), but is experienced even in the midst of trouble. Hope lives in the tension between reality as we are able to perceive it and that which God might do.

I suggest that there are at least four primary understandings of "hope" in a theological sense. When **hope** is not capitalized, it refers to proximate hope, to this-worldly hopes, to that which I do. When capitalized, **Hope** refers to ultimate Hope, to trust and confidence in God, to that which God does. "Little H" hope refers to "hope that;" "Capital H" Hope refers to "Hope in." In daily life, these two primary categories are often combined, and often confused. When Hope and hope are confused, when a person takes a proximate, non-ultimate reality and attributes to it ultimate meaning or significance, then the result is **H(h)ope**, or an idol. When an intentionally proximate, non-ultimate reality is infused with larger meaning from the horizon of faith, then the result is **h(H)ope**, a waystation on the journey to Hope.

Hope and hopelessness have differing ways of perceiving the horizons of life with respect to time:

### hope

forgiveness/faithfulness	effectiveness/purpose	anticipation
PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
guilt	boredom	anxiety <sup>3</sup>

### hopelessness

While hopelessness is thus "despair in three movements," hope involves the pull of possibility, the lure of the future, and the confidence that "he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

Persons need both hope and Hope when they bump up against, or are thrown up against, the limits of human life. When our dreams collapse, and finitude seems to win the day, what then? While Hope does not free us from finitude or from the *angst* of facing our human limits, it does give us more resources with which to meet them. Actually, as Moltmann has written, Faith and Hope work together toward this end:

Thus in the Christian life faith has the priority, but hope the primacy. Without faith's knowledge of Christ, hope becomes a utopia and remains hanging in the air. But without hope, faith falls to pieces, becomes a fainthearted and ultimately a dead faith. It is through faith that man [*sic*] finds the path of true life, but it is only hope that keeps him on that path.<sup>4</sup>

Faith and Hope operate synergistically. Faith, believing God's promise to "make all things new" (Rev. 21:5), looks beyond apparent reality toward that which has been foretold. Again, as Moltmann has written,

"the possible," and therewith "the future," arises entirely from God's word of promise and therefore goes beyond what is possible and impossible in the realistic sense. It does not illuminate a future which is always somehow already inherent in reality. . . . Rather, it contradicts existing reality and discloses its own process concerning the future of Christ for man and the world.<sup>5</sup>

The Bible contains three metapromises which overarch its entire terrain: the promises of deliverance articulated in the Exodus, in the Resurrection, and in the *parousia*. Of these, two have

been fulfilled; one is yet to come. Both the Exodus and the Resurrection demonstrate God's work within history to free those persons who are enslaved—whether to human masters or to sin and death. God now calls into history from its end, having proleptically shown us "the end from the beginning," and challenges us to both trust and participate in "the Process." It is as if God asks us, "Based on my track record of keeping promises, take this Final Hope and build your lives upon it." Isaiah 54:1 speaks of God's challenge to the barren woman to sing for joy. God's possibilities are always greater than we dare to believe!

The critical test for Hope is whether or not its ground is valid. If faith in God concerning the future is validated by the record of the past, then Paul correctly contended that our Hope in Christ, which contradicts hopelessness, stands or falls with the veracity of God's resurrection of Jesus from the dead (1 Cor. 15:14). The Resurrection is the guarantee of our hope, the prolepsis of the *Eschaton*, the proof that "no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20).

While the Resurrection does enable these positive possibilities, it also creates "an interval of tension between the uttering and the redeeming of the promise"<sup>6</sup> of Christ's return and the fulfillment of the *Eschaton*. Living in this tension, those who Hope in Christ can no longer be comfortable with reality as it is, but yearn for what has been promised: the "goad of the future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."<sup>7</sup>

Hope is thus directed toward the future—toward a future which beckons and lures us onward. Professor Bruce Corley captured this yearning when he said, following his wife's sudden death,

Heaven is a place for another person until your wife dies, and then it becomes home. The resurrection day is a deferred doctrine most surely to be believed until your wife dies, and then reunion becomes a longing. For me flat-footed faith in the final promise now stands on tiptoe awaiting the consummation. To be at home with the Lord is now very real.<sup>8</sup>

Such Hope does give life a "why," a future referent . . . but what do we do in the meantime, until the promise is fulfilled? Hopefulness involves believing that the resurrection of Christ has indeed opened up the future to realities yet unseen, but it also involves appropriating this hope by risking involvement in the Promise now. God calls us to labor in the world to the end that dignity, freedom, and justice prevail, that the good news is preached to the poor, that the brokenhearted are cared for, that the captives are released (Is. 61:1-2). h(H)ope preserves us even as we are responding to its call to mission.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>M. Louise Haskins, *God Knows*, cited in John Bartlett, *The Shorter Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, ed. Christopher Morley and Kathleen Sproul (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1937; Pocket Books Edition, Doubleday, 1953), p. 158.

<sup>2</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (in German, 1965; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Oden, *The Structure of Awareness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>Moltmann, *Hope*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 85-86.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>Bruce Corley, in a sermon delivered at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary on March 7, 1979.