

# Hope for What?: An Unfinished Agenda for the Church of the Nazarene

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## I

The 2001-05 quadrennial theme for the Church of the Nazarene, “Jesus the Hope,” is a most Christian choice. Those who selected it are to be commended. No New Testament theme is more central to the gospel of our Lord than is hope. As a denomination, we proclaim the gospel of hope (Col 1:23). Hope springs directly from the Father’s resurrection of Jesus from the grave (1 Pet 1:3-6). Indeed, our heavenly Father is the “God of all hope” (Rom 15:4), for even now he bestows eternal life. Hope is the abiding and empowering certainty that all Jesus began both to do and to teach he will complete. As Jürgen Moltmann and others have observed, Christian hope instructs us that the future will look just like Jesus. In him the “end” has already come. He is God’s future, our future and the world’s future. There is a human hope that comes clothed in uncertainty and that can conclude in disappointment, even despair. But because of Jesus we Christians already know that the conclusion of Christian hope is “the salvation of our God” (Acts 28:28) and that it “will not make us ashamed” (Rom 5:5).

The New Testament tightly draws the relationship between Christ’s resurrection, our salvation—both present and future—and hope. The connection appears repeatedly in numerous forms. For example, the grace of God that brings salvation teaches us to live upright and godly lives in this present age “while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. . .” (Tit 2: 11-14). Hope unites both realized and anticipated salvation, for it is the “hope of eternal life” (Tit 1:2; 3:7). Hope is the reason for rejoicing at present, and for anticipating “the glory of God” about to be revealed at Christ’s return (Rom 5:2). It is the “anchor” of our souls, firm and secure (Heb 6:19). As an unflinching beacon, Christian hope calls us to holy living in this present age (1 Jn 3:3)

The New Testament is signally united in placing hope at the defining center of Christian faith. But it is not nearly so uniform regarding the *range* of Christian hope. Clearly, Christians are always included in hope. But the uniformity stops there. At least two divergent estimates of the range of hope thrive in the New Testament. We can state both of them in the form of a series of questions. *First*, is there an organic relationship between hope and the created order? Is there a fundamental relationship between hope and the socio-political structures that persons create and in which they live? Do aesthetics, economics, scientific achievements and learning have “mansions” in the Father’s house? Will the kingdoms of this world finally become the kingdoms of our Lord?

*Or*, is hope’s range much more limited? Maybe this world with its physical, political, cultural and economic features simply isn’t included in Christian hope. The “world” as I have outlined it has at best an ancillary, incidental, if not antagonistic relationship to hope. Hope is the “steadfast anchor of the soul,” not of art, the ecosystem, nation states, economic

structures and social systems. Christ stands against culture and is rapidly preparing his Church for an exit that will leave not so much as the “smell of smoke” attached to the saints.

## II

In the New Testament one can find strong support for either the broad or the narrow vision of hope. On the one hand stands Paul’s grand, sweeping assertion in Romans 8 that “the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. . . . the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8: 18-21. See also Col 1:15-17). We will call this first answer to our question the *maximalist* vision of Christian hope.

On the other hand, the writer of 2 Peter believes that this world and all ungodly persons are destined for the flames. The present heavens and earth that God created through his word “are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Pet 3:7-13). Christian hope doesn’t include this world at all. Christians should live godly lives in a perverse world even while they look forward to the day of the Lord, to Christ’s speedy return. But while that day will be good news for Christians, it will “bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire. The elements will melt in the heat” (3:12). The created as well as the socially constructed order will be no more. We will call this second answer to our question the *minimalist* vision of Christian hope.

Unless one is ready to show that the New Testament unambiguously judges one option correct and the other wrong, we will just have to recognize that both visions exist side-by-side in the New Testament. It fuels both visions. For two thousand years both visions have competed for dominance in the Church.

## III

Competition between the two visions has also marked the history of the Church of the Nazarene. The competition has never been resolved. It marks our soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology. One interesting dimension of our history is that the two competing visions have probably exchanged places of leadership. Early on the *maximalist* understanding of hope probably dominated. Today the *minimalist* understanding undoubtedly dominates.

The consequences the competing visions of hope yield with reference to discipleship, theology, Christian witness, ministry and the Church are immense. Our vision of hope will directly shape what we believe regarding soteriology, eschatology, stewardship of nature, citizenship, Christian ethics, Christ and culture, aesthetics, the Church, compassionate ministry, and peace and justice. The doctrine of sanctification assumes one form according to the *maximalist* vision, and quite another when the *minimalist* vision dominates. Our philosophy of education in the denomination is also directly impacted.

Until we settle the question regarding the range of Christian hope, all the pieces of the Christian faith I have named will be hobbled among us. They will be ambiguous and incomplete. For “Jesus the Hope” to be more than an ambiguous slogan and vacuous

promise to a conflicted world, the Church of the Nazarene will have to engage in extensive soul-searching regarding the vision of hope to which it wants to commit. And we must be prepared openly to match the promises we offer to others with the vision of hope we choose to embrace—whether *maximalist* or *minimalist*.

But even if we try to remove the ambiguity from our vision, from where would we draw the criteria for doing so? And how would we assess their validity? Perhaps there is another and better way of appealing to the Scriptures than by simply appealing to specific texts in Paul, Peter, etc. Maybe there is a prevailing vision of God and the world that characterizes the biblical story.