

Hoping

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*“May the God of hope
fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit”
(Romans 15:13).*

— Paul the Apostle

What did Paul believe is the nature of the hope in which we are to abound by the power of the Holy Spirit? What are we *hoping for*?

We have all learned that eschatology is all about hope. It is our hope in Christ the Crucified and Resurrected One – a hope that somehow, in God’s own appointed way, the promise inherent in Jesus’ resurrection shall be fulfilled for all of creation. Just as Abraham, “hoping against hope,” believed as an elderly man in God’s promise that he “would become ‘the father of many nations’” (Rom 4:18), so we too are called upon to trust in “the God . . . who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (4:17).

What are we hoping for?

Are we hoping for the “end of the world as we know it”? Apparently many evangelical Christians in the pews are. Of course, apocalyptic fervor is nothing new, though it does appear to have gained a head of steam over the past three decades or so, thanks in part to Hal Lindsey’s apocalyptic sensationalism. More recently, Tim LaHaye’s series of endtime novels have obviously captured the popular imagination of many people, Christians or not. As I write these words, our hearts and minds are reeling over the horrific destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, not to mention the airliner attack on the Pentagon and the fourth that crashed near Pittsburgh. Certainly these vivid apocalyptic images will have spawned a new spate of predictions for Jesus’ return. Dan Rather described it as “apocalypse now,” as though the end of the World Trade Center marked the end of the world. But aside from the occasional catastrophes, there are always people out there ready to offer their latest calculations as to the date of the virtual demise of “the late great planet Earth.” Is *this* the content of Christian hope?

What *are* we hoping for – a cataclysmic end? Does the resurrection of Jesus really spell the end of the world? Is Christian existence essentially a determined effort to “hang on till the end”? Are we “counting the hours”? A great many, if not most, evangelical Christians – including, to be sure, a great host of Nazarenes – apparently think that the answer to all these questions is affirmative. If as theologians of the church and the academy we find ourselves dismissing (or even simply downplaying) literalistic or vivid eschatological scenarios, we apparently are not seeking (or at least not finding) effective ways of communicating alternatives to the people in our pews and classrooms.

What *are* we hoping for?

The obvious place for us Wesleyans to begin is with the recognition that eschatology is, in fact, at the very heart of Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification. In the words of Theodore Runyon, "This doctrine is distinctive from notions of sanctification in other Christian traditions in that it expects the finite equivalent of eschatological fulfillment (i.e., entire sanctification) as something which can happen in history rather than beyond it" (Runyon 2). By differing with most of his contemporaries who taught that Christian perfection occurs only at the point of death, or very near to it, and by insisting that divine grace may perfect us in love *in this life*, Wesley proclaimed an eschatological hope that could be more than simply a hope – it could become a gracious reality in the here and now. Wesley's insistence upon the possibility of entire sanctification in this life testifies not only to the transforming power of God's loving grace, but also to the potential of this present world to become a place where divine love is truly experienced and actualized.

Wesley took delight in quoting Augustine's words, "He who made us without ourselves will not save us without ourselves." He did so partly because it runs counter to Augustine's general tendency toward a unilateral soteriology — even unmitigated predestinationism. But Wesley delighted in these words also because he so thoroughly agreed with them. He was convinced that God "will not save us without ourselves" — without our own, divinely-empowered yet creaturely contribution to God's gracious labor in our lives.

But does not eschatological expectation inevitably veer toward the idea that God will, indeed must, "save us without ourselves"? Obviously, in this case, the "us" in question is meant in a much broader, cosmic sense — that God will at some point intervene to redeem a world that can only get worse without that intervention. To the extent that Christian eschatology concerns itself with what God is going to do to bring a cataclysmic end to the world in the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ, then it seems that Christians *do* believe God will "save us without ourselves." Further, to the extent that traditional eschatological scenarios either imply or encourage a certain hopelessness about the project of history, do they not to that extent mitigate against Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection as a *realizable* eschatology *in this world*? What if the *real* "end" of history, God's most fundamental *telos* or purpose for our world, is the gracious (re)creation of human beings to become, *in this life*, creatures made, molded, and mended by divine love? What if God's "end" for the world is that love might flourish — that we might become lovers of God and all of our neighbors? Might this provide a more adequate Wesleyan reading of eschatology? Can this be our *hope*?

Indeed, it is precisely this kind of hope that surfaces in Wesley's sermon entitled "The General Spread of the Gospel." After surveying the world as he knew it, and admitting that, humanly speaking, the prospects for winning the world to Christian faith were not encouraging, Wesley remained undaunted. He insisted that "the loving knowledge of God, producing uniform, uninterrupted holiness and happiness, shall cover the earth; shall fill the soul of every man" (Wesley VI: 279). Note carefully the unmistakably eschatological tone of Wesley's language — and yet, Wesley continues, this will not be accomplished by God acting irresistibly. If God were to effect salvation in unilateral fashion, by the sheer power of divine fiat,

... then man would be man no longer; his inmost nature would be changed. He would no longer be a moral agent, any more than the sun or the wind; as he would no longer be endued with liberty – a power of choosing, of self-determination. ... [How] can all men be made holy and happy, while they continue men? ... As God is One, so the work of God is uniform in all ages. May we not then conceive how he will work on the souls of men in times to come, by considering how he does work now, and how he has wrought in times past? (Wesley VI: 280)

Interestingly, Wesley counsels us **not** to expect a radical change in the manner and mode of God's creating and redeeming activity in the world. The pattern of divine activity that Wesley detects in human experience, "God's general manner of working," is that of gracious assistance, not of force. God enlightens and empowers human understanding and affections, God does not delete or undo them. This gracious synergism between God and human creatures provided Wesley with a model not simply for divine-human interaction, but for the entirety of the God-world relation. After all, "as God is One, so the work of God is uniform in all ages" – including, presumably, even *the age to come*? If Wesley is fundamentally correct in this theological conviction, we need only to expand considerably on his relatively limited awareness of just how many, wide, and vast all those "ages" actually are. For Wesley the essential point is that God's character – the character of a humble servant, revealed Jesus our Lord – changes not. Thus, the manner of God's laboring in the world changes not. "Now in the same manner as God has converted so many to himself without destroying their liberty, he can undoubtedly convert whole nations, or the whole world; and it is as easy to him to convert a world, as one individual soul" (Wesley VI: 281).

Writing out of this optimism of grace, Wesley predicted the triumphal spread of the gospel from one nation and people to another as God gradually "renews the face of the earth" until the vision of the Revelator is fulfilled and "the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!" After the technologically-enhanced horrors of world wars and mass genocides of the past century – not to mention the rather stubborn unwillingness of the other great world religious traditions to lie down and die in the wake of the gospel! – we are likely to smile dismissively at Wesley's naïve optimism. We probably should. Even so, is there any good reason to reject his interpretation of God's mode of working in the world as persuasive and empowering *presence* (i.e., prevenient grace) in contrast to a unilateral, heavy-handed, apocalyptic inbreaking? After all, which manner of working best suits *God's end* for the world, as proposed by Wesley himself: *that we might come to flourish ever more greatly and deeply in love for God and neighbor*?

Even so may we come, by the gracious empowering of the Holy Spirit, to love God and neighbor as you have taught and embodied that love, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Works Cited

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