

## A Response

by

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Hope is essential to Christian faith and life; and hope is inextricably tied to eschatology and expectations. However, as Michael Lodahl asks, what is the nature of our hope? He notes that popular eschatological beliefs have arisen from literalistic interpretations predicting a cataclysmic and/or apocalyptic end to the world. Furthermore, these views often leave Christians with the impression that their duty is to “hang on till the end.” Lodahl is concerned that if we “as theologians of the church and the academy” fail to take seriously these popular concepts, we minimize our effectiveness in communicating alternatives to congregations and students.

Evangelical Christians holding apocalyptic, cataclysmic eschatological expectations is not confined to North American or Western audiences influenced by endtime novels. Various cultural, social, or theological milieus foster such expectations. We cannot dismiss the possibility that some theologians gathering for this conference share these views, and they should not be belittled for it. However the end comes, it *will* come; and part of our hope justly entails our future beyond death and history. But New Testament writers did not restrict *hope* to such a narrow focus, and neither should we.

Popular eschatological views, which leave Christians with the impression that their duty is to “hang on till the end,” justify Lodahl’s concern. Such a perspective may lead to isolationism and / or defensiveness among Christians. After all, if “this world is not my home, I’m only passin’ through” becomes the dominant mentality, the outcome is to focus predominantly on the “end” rather than on the journey, on the idyllic future rather than on the onerous present. Although this seems unlikely to be the dominant attitude of younger generations in more affluent countries, suffering and persecution enhance its appeal.

But a more disconcerting possibility arises. To what extent do eschatological expectations for a cataclysmic or apocalyptic end to history reflect an underlying hope that, final judgment will be executed on “God’s enemies” (or ours). After all, human nature finds condemnation easier than forgiveness; revenge more immediately appealing than reconciliation. The thought of God executing radical judgment, crushing the opponents of truth and righteousness, presents an attractive scenario.

Some truth resides in these perspectives, but neither is capable of holding the full weight of biblical hope. If popular eschatological beliefs are insufficient at the exegetical, theological, and experiential level, we are faced with a critical question: How *do* we find effective ways of communicating an alternative eschatological understanding? More pointedly, regardless of individual views of “the end,” how can we, as theologians, provide a stronger link between *hope* and our *entire* life in Christ?

Lodahl asserts that the obvious starting point for us as Wesleyans is John Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification. At the heart of Wesleyan eschatology is the conviction that God's end for all creation can be realized *in this life*. Thus, *in this world* we are presented with time, place, and opportunity to experience and actualize divine love. God's purpose is that we unreservedly love God and our neighbors now.

Of course, loving God and neighbor is beyond human ability, apart from "the persuasive and empowering presence (i.e., prevenient grace)" of God. Lodahl rightly emphasizes the "optimism of grace" John Wesley wrote and preached. Though many of Wesley's critics fail to recognize his vigorous emphasis on grace, many of his theological heirs have also ignored or overlooked it. Perhaps in seeking practical answers to such questions, we must renew or intensify focus on God's grace and what it truly provides us.

For Wesley, the kingdom of God included the kingdom of *grace* and the kingdom of *glory*, i.e., life in the Spirit on earth as well as in a future heavenly dwelling. The kingdom of grace provides a point of entry to the kingdom of glory; heaven is opened in the soul and extends to eternity. He asserted that, with the words *Thy kingdom come* "we pray for the coming of [God's] everlasting kingdom, the kingdom of glory in heaven, *which is the continuation and perfection of the kingdom of grace on earth*" (emphasis added; *Works*, 1: 582). Significantly, Wesley made no essential distinction between the nature of *the kingdom of God, true religion, and holiness*. Each is ". . . righteousness, the image of God stamped on the heart, the love of God and man, united with the *peace* that passeth all understanding, *and joy in the Holy Ghost*" (*Notes*, Rom. 14:17).

We face a great challenge seeking to redirect some of the current eschatological fervor. Pop theology finds an eager audience when advancing the spectacular. "Apocalypse now!" rings with more excitement than the call to "flourish ever more greatly and deeply in love for God and neighbor." Besides, is it not much easier for God to act radically and decisively, than for us to live consistently and purposefully with love toward God and neighbor?

Careful consideration of God's grace compels us to reflect on God's character — that of a humble servant. God's most spectacular inbreaking was, remarkably, as a helpless, vulnerable infant who grew to adulthood only to be executed as a common criminal. Thus, we dare not be narrow-minded regarding God's eschatological methodology. Surely the babe in the manger and the suffering servant on the cross must find a corollary in the transformation of human hearts and lives, and the subsequent flourishing in love for God and neighbor so that the face of the earth will be renewed.

*The mystery that has been kept hidden . . . is now disclosed . . . .  
God has chosen to make known . . . the glorious riches of this mystery,  
which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.  
(Col. 2:26, 27)*

### Works Cited

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