

Response

by

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What do we have when we have *hope*? And what do we hope *for*? As Michael Lodahl makes clear, the answers we often give betray a crisis of reflection. There *are* better answers to be found in Wesley’s doctrine of entire sanctification to be sure, but only insofar as they are *embodied* in the community of faith. That means not just better ways of communicating an alternative to apocalyptic eschatologies, but also of allowing the alternative to inspire the imagination.

The faulty reflection underlying many popular Christian views of the future is truly “bad news.” Lodahl rightly points out the ironic hopelessness of such perspectives; they do indeed “mitigate against Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection as a *realizable* eschatology *in this world*.” Just as tragic is that these apocalyptic scenarios offer little help in making sense of the changes going on in our world. Trying to fit global events into a particular end-times theory tends to reinforce the fatalistic assumption that we can’t do anything to improve things.

There are other compelling reasons to articulate and embody our hope. Competing with the hope of Salvation are secular “end of history” eschatologies that promise fulfilment, but ultimately don’t deliver. For example, not long ago it was thought that the universalization of Western liberal democracy would usher in a time of world harmony and peace-making. This illusion was dissipated by “ethnic cleansing,” the breakdown of law and order, the resurgence of neo-communist and neo-fascist movements, and the intensification of religious fundamentalism, to name but a few post-Cold War developments. It is in this world, and the post-September 11 world, that Christian hope is proclaimed. To answer Lodahl, surely we Wesleyans *can* locate our hope in the flourishing of love for God and all of our neighbours—this *is* “a more adequate Wesleyan reading of eschatology.” How best to communicate it?

For many, including many Christians, “hope” means little more than a desire for a better future, a future which may or may not be. In contrast, the Bible speaks of hope as anchored in Christ, who is the meaning of history. There is a clear vision of the goal of history, which we affirm when we declare the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. This assurance that the goal will be realized makes Christian hope subversive. It refuses to accept “the grandiose pretensions of the present” (W. Breuggemann) but makes hopeful action possible even in situations that are, to the stunted imagination, hopeless. Thus, we communicate our hope, first, in our imaginations, as we envision possibilities for our world through God’s wooing (not coercing) love and our grace-enabled response. We will see that God’s “gracious manner of working” touches *every* person. Rather than assume others are without hope, we’ll regard them as loved by God and

not-yet-Christians. If the optimism of grace gives us eyes to see, we can go on to embody this hope in concrete, creative ways.

Lodahl's challenge to articulate our hope more adequately in the classroom does, and should, strike a powerful chord. To orient our students around God's gracious purposes in history will mean challenging the powerful prevailing values of modern culture, values that often define the character and direction of many Christian lives. It will require an ongoing awareness that we are part of the *international* body of Christ. It will mean allowing for diverse models of Christian community and mission; providing support without control for innovative, postmodern tribal expressions of church. Most important will be the constant reminder that life's number one decision is to follow Christ's call to a whole-life faith, to live out the purposes of God in every aspect of our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. God's agenda in history is to redeem a people and transform a world. His kingdom is both present and coming, both now and not yet. *Soli Deo Gloria* [To God Alone Be Glory!].