

HOPE? REFLECTIONS FROM A CONTEXT OF HOPELESSNESS

Jorge L. Julca

Professor, Seminario Nazareno Sudamericano; Pilar, Argentina

(English translation by Lois Dunn)

When we reflect theologically, we need to include two key coordinates which frame and personalize our task. In this brief essay we attempt to keep both in mind. The first one has to do with the context in which we fulfill God's mission. Theologically we have no doubt that, although the church is not of the word, it is in it; and when it reflects upon its faith, it does so in dialogue with that reality. The second is a missiological coordinate which reminds us that this task is not an end in itself, but rather, it only achieves its purpose when it keeps itself closely linked to the task of the church and it gives direction in the fulfillment of God's mission.

At the present time, crises of all kinds are assaulting Latin America. The much longed for political, economical, and social stability, instead of coming closer, would seem to be getting ever more distant. Years are passing inexorably without anything changing significantly, bringing along feelings of frustration and disenchantment. The marked contrasts of Latin American reality are not only evident in ethnic, cultural, and geographical aspects, but they also cut through social and economic life. Recent decades have been marked by the accentuation of social disparities, deficient access to basic services such as health, education, and housing; increase of extreme poverty; growth of problems of drug trafficking; increase of unemployment indices; the sharpening of the demographic problems; among other indicators.

In the face of this situation, to speak of *hope* would seem out of place because the social indicators are disheartening. Paradoxically, although hopelessness exists, there is also a great need to believe in something or someone, which has become evident in the proliferation of religious offers that have seduced many Latin Americans in recent years.

Scripturally, we know that hope is the expectation that all that God has promised will be fulfilled. Hope is synonymous with trust in God and His faithfulness. (Rom. 4:18-22; 5:2). But, what missiological implications are derived from our definition of Christian hope? Evidently there exists a direct relationship between theology and mission. In the manner in which we understand our theology, thus, we live and develop our ministry and implement our mission models. Next, two ways of conceiving Christian hope will be contrasted and related to some missiological emphases.

The first conception, framed by an apocalyptic orientation, assumes an exclusively futurist understanding of hope and the Kingdom of God. The current situation in which the church lives should be understood only as a transitional time of waiting, that is impossible to transform. The mission of the church is defined principally in terms of proclaiming the Gospel as a device for hastening the *parousia* of the Lord Jesus. This conception has precipitated, under an escapist nuance, an "eschatological paralysis" that has blocked the church from participating in the social life of our nations.

The second conception, framed theologically by the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the Kingdom, understands hope not only in future terms, but in present terms also. Through Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God has burst forth into history, therefore it is at once a present reality and a promise that still has to be fulfilled. The future has become the present. In this perspective, the mission of the church while it lives within that eschatological tension between the inauguration and the full manifestation of the Kingdom, is to embody the values of the Kingdom and be an agent for change in society.

Based on this second concept, do we have something to say or do for those that “live without hope” in Latin America?

First, we have to avoid reducing our definition of hope to the sphere of the immediate satisfaction of our material needs. There is a danger of being trapped within the postulates of the theologies of prosperity, which, taking advantage of the difficult social situation, are promoting a mutilated and individualistic Gospel that offers material and economic well-being without a life transformation.

Second, biblically, Christian hope is centered in Jesus Christ and His redemptive work (Eph. 2:12; Col. 1:27; I Tim. 1:1). Because He entered the world and history, we have hope (I Pet. 1:3). Under this perspective the incarnation is not only a transcendent theological event, but also, a paradigm of the fulfillment of the church’s mission that needs to be carried out in the context of service.

Third, Christian hope in the context of the church’s mission needs to be harmonized with God’s purpose of forming a new humanity in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:13-16) and made effective in the power of the Spirit (Acts 1: 18; I Thess. 1:5). It is a divine project that transcends personal ambience and has a communitarian dimension. According to the New Testament, hope in Christ is never egocentric, but rather oriented to the Kingship of God in which He shall be “all in all” (I Cor. 15:28). This project of God is to constitute a community of the King, formed by a gathering of persons called to serve Him and to live together giving testimony to the character and values of the Kingdom.

In the fourth place, when we reflect upon our hope in Jesus Christ, we need to become aware of the grave situation being experienced by the vast majorities on this continent in crisis. We have to ask ourselves in the context of the incarnational paradigm of Jesus and the model of the church as a community of the King, “What does it mean to preach a message of hope in Latin America today?”

The mission of the church, conceived of in its integrity, has as its fundamental premise that God’s purpose is to reconcile all creation through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1: 9-10; II Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:20). The fall affected the relationship between human beings and God, but also humanity’s relationship with itself, with fellow humans, and with creation. Therefore, when we speak of an integral mission, we need to mean the reconstruction of all of human life and the restoration of all relationships affected by sin (Rom. 8:22-24). Biblically, God’s very design in creation teaches us that the human being is an indivisible unity of body, soul, and spirit which needs to be tended.

This way of looking at things implies that, in order to fulfill God's mission, we cannot obviate the raw reality in which persons are living, because God's purpose is to transform that situation.

As a church, we must be aware that through the ministries of compassion and mercy toward our fellow humans, we can also demonstrate God's redeeming love and give a testimony about Jesus Christ. Hope and salvation, even though they have a personal dimension, are not foreign to the community dimension. The demand of God's word is overwhelming; it teaches us that love for God is inseparable from love for our fellow humans (Matt. 22:39-40; I John 3:16-18).

In that sense, our task as the church of the Lord, and as the community of the King, is to embody an alternative model before a suffering society and a generation without hope. We, as a visible expression and agent of the Kingdom, need to commit ourselves and participate responsibly in God's redemptive project and demonstrate that in Jesus Christ we find the true hope of complete transformation for Latin America.