

Response

by

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INTRODUCTION.

I resonate with this essay, “HOPE: Reflections from a Context of Hopelessness,” especially when I reflect on my tenure at the Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in Manila, The Philippines. I want to respond specifically to three affirmations by the author for Christians who seek to impact those who “live without hope” in Latin America, and around the world.

In the background of my reflections are these questions: What are the foundations for Christian hope, especially the Christians suffering from economic privation, vast social disparity, and political dictatorship? Since the mission of the church and the center of the Christian gospel is the reconciliation of all creation to God through Jesus Christ, what are we to do as Christians in the context of “hopelessness” as we anticipate the return of our Lord? How can we live faithfully as members of the “community of the King” with Kingdom “eyes,” ruthless trust, and a radical hope?

1. **CHRISTIAN HOPE IS ROOTED IN JESUS CHRIST.** “Hope in Christ” is never egocentric, but rather “oriented to the kingship of God.”

Jürgen Moltmann, during his fall, 2001 visit to NTS, responded to a question by theology professor Thomas Noble regarding his *Theology of Hope*. Moltmann reminded us, “. . . the only things we can say with certainty about the future center on the crucified and risen Christ.” Our hope — the Christian hope — is in Jesus Christ. Hope in Christ does not mean we will avoid or be able to ignore suffering. Hope is nurtured and purified through pain, suffering and difficulty. The basis of our hope, however, has to do with the One who is stronger than the suffering we encounter.

Hope has to do with God, even while the world is shrouded in darkness. Our faith is that God has overcome the world. Waiting patiently in expectation of God’s time (*kairos*) is the foundation of the spiritual life, and enables us to ask the question where we live and work, “What might God be doing here?”

2. **THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY MUST REFLECT THE CHARACTER AND VALUES OF THE KINGDOM.** The task of the community of the King “is to embody an alternative model before a suffering world and a generation without hope.”

What is this “alternative model” we are called to live so that those whom we serve will be attracted to both message and messenger? How are we as members of the community of the King to participate with God in the ministry of reconciling the whole creation to God through Christ?

Ephesians 4:1-6 describes life within faith communities that seek to model and proclaim the gospel. We are challenged to “walk worthy” of this calling (to be agents of reconciliation), and urged to be humble, gentle, patient, supportive of each other, and to strive to maintain unity in the fellowship. Before we are to go “outside” the fellowship with the challenge of reconciliation, we must first express reconciliation with our Christian brothers and sisters within the “community of the King.”

This theme continues in 4:25-32. In so living, we reflect a “life of love, just as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (5:2). The chapter is less an “alternate model” than the way of life of within the “community of the King.” This holiness lifestyle gives credibility to our message and integrity to the messenger, as the ministry of reconciliation is presented in its various expressions to those experiencing “separation” in its numerous manifestations.

3. CHRISTIAN COMPASSION IS THE CORE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.
“Incarnational evangelism needs to be carried out in the context of service; and this service is as multifaceted as the needs of humanity.”

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14a) is the incarnational model of Jesus described in Philippians 2:5-11. The incarnational model — “voluntary displacement” or “downward mobility” — compels us to go where “we would rather not go” in expressing and reflecting compassion to those experiencing “social disparities” in the countries where we serve. The essence of true ministry is a compassionate ministry.

Compassion is not just a way of doing certain things for certain people. It is a way of the heart, and a way of experiencing life from within. A compassionate community is not based on psychological compatibility or even theological unanimity. To be compassionate means to be with one who is suffering. God did not reveal Himself in Jesus first of all to take away our pain, but to share our pain. In Jesus, God revealed Himself to us as a suffering God. God entered into solidarity with humankind. We must likewise find appropriate entry points and carry the pains of those in need in the name of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

The people of Israel repeatedly reflected on their history and discovered God’s guiding hand in the many painful events. Memory reminds us of the faithfulness of God in the hard times, and joyful moments. Without memory, there is no expectation.

With expectation, we experience the minutes, hours, and days of our lives differently when hope takes up residence. Christian hope is not dependent on peace in the land, justice in the world, and success in the business. Hope is willing to leave questions unanswered and unknown futures unknown. Hope makes one see God’s guiding hand,

not only in the gentle and pleasant moments, but also in the shadows of disappointment and darkness.

As I have read and re-read the essay, I reflected on our years in the Philippines. The following words capture thoughts and themes to be explored as this topic is discussed: solidarity, silence, listening, downward mobility, prayer, hospitality, discipleship, life together, gratitude, compassion, justice, worship, gospel, and Christlikeness.

These are biblical and practical ways we can model and proclaim HOPE within the context of ministry in Latin America and beyond.