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**The Loss of Modern Optimism and the
Recovery of Christian Hope**

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Abstract

The following article explains the importance of hope in the Christian life. Hope is not an optimistic feeling that tomorrow will be better or a positive expectation that Christians will not suffer, but a lived assurance that God remains with believers through all trials and tribulations. This assurance is based on the eternal work of Christ on behalf of all Christians. The first part of the paper examines the nature of modern optimism in its belief that progress will solve all material problems. Modernity collapses the classic Nature and Grace dichotomy making the secular world sacred. The loss of transcendence in our time has precipitated a crisis that leads to cultural despair. It is the loss of faith in the future of modern progress that has created the current crisis of values and expresses what is

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often meant by the idea that “God is dead.” The modern loss of nerve contrasts in the second part of the paper with the biblical meaning of hope which states that “if God is with us who can be against us?” Hope means an encounter with the Living God in our daily struggles to find purpose in the midst of despair.

I. The Failure of Modern Hope

Hope is the substance of life; the driving force behind all that we do. The Christian life is based on hope: the hope of eternal life, the hope of resurrection and the blessed hope of our Lord’s return; “If we have hope in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most miserable” (1 Cor.15:19). Paul described our condition before our redemption as one in which we were “in the world without God and without hope” (Eph. 2:12). Hope sustains us in times of suffering and gives us reason to persevere to the end. Hope is not the absence of trials and tribulations, but the assurance that God is with us through it all. Hope lives the divine promise that He will never leave us or forsake us.

Hope preoccupies the central concern in both the church and society today. Hope is the principal idea in theological studies giving rise to numerous movements such as Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology. Conservative thought too has been fueled by aspirations of hope. All eschatological thought whether premillennial or postmillennial have their tap root in a Christian notion of hope. Apocalyptic thinking that envisions the end times as rapidly approaching is yet another version of hope that desires the coming of the kingdom age that will arise on the rubble of the present era. Conversely, the idea that the present age progressively gives way to the kingdom of God in its social structure, science, and technology presents another view of hope.

Theologians of Hope such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann argue that all Christian theology is grounded in hope and that the eschatological categories of traditional theology are proleptically happening in the present age making Christianity the fulfillment of history and bring future hope to bear on all present crises.² Theologian Ernst Käsemann once argued that the “apocalyptic

² Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 143-151.

was the mother of all Christian theology.”³ This means hope is central to the meaning of Christianity in bringing about the fulfillment of the kingdom of God in history.

The Idea of Progress operates as a source for hope in the culture as well. The modern technological system is rooted in the idea that future innovation and development will improve the human condition so that technology, politics, economics, and education all become sources of hope. The failure of the hoped for golden age promised by progressive thinking in the modern age precipitates a crisis of faith. Things are not turning out as we once expected. The term “modern times” conveys the meaning of the fullness of time that says history has arrived at the last or perfect stage of development. It communicates an unabashed messianic character. “Modern” connotes a similar meaning to Joachim Fiore’s Age of the Spirit or August Comte’s third stage of progress or the positive stage which will be ruled by science beyond which there could be no further development.⁴

The Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset once remarked that “modern culture” meant “the height of time.” This era was one that thought history was fulfilled in its arrival. He stated, “The very name [modern] is a disturbing one; this time calls itself ‘modern’ that is to say, final, definitive, in whose presence all the rest is mere preterite, humble preparation and aspiration towards this present.”⁵ The modern overly optimistic view of itself has led to disillusionment and the present crisis of values. For example how can any person in the twenty-first century seriously believe that our educational system will produce a greater spiritually aware and morally astute population according to Enlightenment ideas? Gotthold Lessing argued in *On the Education of the Human Race* (1770) that the kingdom of God is transposed into modern progress so that the “divine plan of salvation is replaced by educative providence, which can be perceived from the spiritual and moral development of the human race.”⁶ The school

³ Ernst Käsemann, “The Beginning of Christian Theology” (1960), In Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W.J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 102.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1996), 219.

⁵ Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton, 1932), 32.

⁶ Moltmann, *The Coming God*, 187.

would be a source of spiritual and rational enlightenment for the population. The American High School represents the last place anyone would look for spirituality and progress in our society and it is hardly a place we would say the kingdom of God is now dawning in reason and morality.

Technology has always been the main source for modern hope in a better tomorrow. The belief that technological progress and advance will improve the world has a long history dating back at least to the Renaissance. Theologian Paul Tillich explained that the Classical World of Greece could be understood as a circle representing the affirmation of natural life. This was a worldview that affirmed the cycles of nature and found meaning and fulfillment within the contemplation of the cosmic cycles. The second predominate view of Western Civilization was the Christian notion of transcendence symbolized by a vertical line and was representative of the Medieval World. This belief found its *telos* or purpose through faith in the ultimate God of history above the world. The last view which occupies the modern mind since the Renaissance is represented by the horizontal line and indicates that the aim of its existence is neither in the vertical dimension or the circular one, but in the horizontal dimension of the material and practical world. The modern age has moved away from contemplation and transcendence of the natural world to controlling and transforming it in the Name of God and Mankind.⁷

Theology has often characterized a split between the two realms of the vertical and the horizontal called Nature and Grace. Nature preoccupies the realm of the tangible, the material and horizontal dimensions of life. Theologically it is called immanence or the belief that God is present in the natural world and sovereignly operates in it, sustaining and governing it. God may be known through natural occurrences such as the awesome beauty of nature that reflects the glory of the creator or the moral consciousness of all people. Science is only possible because the physical world was created by a good God that established a rational order that people can discern through observation. History plays a huge role in any theology of immanence.

⁷ Paul Tillich, “The Effects of Space Exploration on Man’s Condition and Stature” in *The Future of Religions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 39-51.

God reveals himself through historical events and development from the calling of Abraham to the founding of the Nation of Israel to the birth of the church. God rules over history manifesting Himself at key moments and bringing His plan of salvation to bear on humanity. Many theologies of hope such as Liberation Theology or the thought of Pannenberg and Harvey Cox use history to explain God's relationship to the world.

The second realm of transcendence or the vertical also understood as Grace demonstrates those aspects of God that we can only know through his transcendent actions such as divine revelation, the plan of salvation in Christ and the character of God as love. This is the realm of value and meaning or *telos* that humanity cannot reach on its own, but must rely on grace as a gift. Thomas Aquinas gave the classic formulation to the Nature and Grace paradigm and argued that "Grace does not remove nature but fulfills it."

We should not think of these two poles as opposites but as compliments. We need one to understand the other. Without the category of Nature our thinking will become Gnosticism or world-denying and nihilistic. This belief does not recognize the natural order as originating in the goodness of God, but something that is evil and demonic. Christianity is world-transcending, but not world-denying in its emphasis. This means Christianity locates a *telos* for Nature in something outside of Nature or in transcendent grace. Grace without Nature becomes the demonization of Nature. Conversely, without the category of Grace, belief in Nature alone slips into Naturalism or the belief that the natural world is all that exists and denies any traditional transcendent *telos* by relocating it within the natural dimension only. Nature without Grace becomes the divinization of Nature. Modernity reverses the polarity between Nature and Grace. Aquinas argued that Grace fulfills Nature. Today materialism does not remove Grace but relocates it in Nature. *Nature fulfills Grace*. The material world and all our accompanying accomplishments take the place of traditional transcendence. The cosmos takes the place of God. Reason replaces faith as our means of knowledge. Science supplants religion. The City of Man replaces the City of God. Divine Providence transmutes into the Idea of Progress. An ethic of equality replaces God's universal love and salvation. Transcendence is now located within immanence. The individual finds God within himself, history and nature. Human

achievements in science and technology are raised to divine status. Heaven is brought to earth. Tillich offers a further explanation of the modern transition of the temporal into the eternal,

The transition from the vertical to the horizontal line in the determination of the “telos,” the inner aim of human existence, was greatly helped by the astronomy of the Renaissance and the related “utopian” literature. The Copernican astronomy had thrown the earth out of the center of the universe – the least divine of all places – and elevated it to the dignity of a star amongst other stars. About the same time a highly influential philosopher, Nicholas of Cusa, taught the immanence of the infinite within the finite, e.g. in earth and man. This raised the significance of everything in the world by making it an expression of the divine life and it gave impetus to the expectation of a fulfillment of history on this planet.⁸

The reversal of Nature and Grace and the transposition of transcendence into immanence explains how modern thought has developed theologically since the Renaissance and has arrived at its current hope in all things technological. The rapidly disintegrating nature of modern hope has created the current crisis of despair. The relocation of meaning into history and technological development has created expectations that cannot be sustained. As heirs of modernity in the twenty-first century we now realize that technological improvement will not bring us the hoped for golden age of universal peace and happiness. The failure of this faith in the future cannot be underestimated as the source for much of our current anxiety, depression, despair and turmoil. Whether it is the crash of the stock market, divorce, war, teen rebellion, or peer pressure and suicide we can trace much of our individual angst back to a corporate failure of hope. We have lost faith and a confident expectation in our values. Individuals do not experience trouble alone; rather they participate in the larger social consciousness and take their personal meaning from the larger whole of society.

The nineteenth century philosopher Fredrick Nietzsche spoke prophetically when he declared that “God is dead!” This term does not mean that God does not exist, but that the notion of God is no longer relevant. It means modern society has lost the values that derive from a transcendent God. It is a declaration of despair rather than an argument for God’s non-existence. In an age of despair and

⁸ Tillich, “The Effects of Space Exploration on Man’s Condition and Stature,” 40-41.

loss of values it is the role of believers to step forward and fill the empty spaces with a message of hope grounded on the assurances of eternal salvation. If Christianity wishes to survive the end of our century we must prove Nietzsche wrong and demonstrate a living hope that only the Living God provides.

II. The Recovery of Hope

Jesus declared that “Man does not live by bread alone but every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). This is perhaps one of the most relevant passages to the modern age. Jesus spoke it as a rebuke to the temptation of Satan who wanted him to satisfy his hunger by turning stones into bread. Satan appealed to Jesus’ basic material necessity for food. We can sympathize here since we all know what it means to be without something we need especially the most basic necessities. Jesus’ action appears to us as counter-intuitive, if he was hungry why didn’t he just eat if he had the ability to do so?

Jesus sets the example of hope for us in resisting temptation. Jesus was not a pragmatist, who weighed everything in a cost-benefit analysis. Nor was he ruled by bodily necessity, but he was moved by a higher principle of obedience to God and trust in his heavenly Father. The purpose of fasting whether from food, which is the ultimate fast or from cell phones and TV is to reveal our weaknesses, our addictions and break us from dependence on necessities. Fasting brings us into utter dependence upon God. When Satan tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread he was telling him to trust himself instead of God for provision and sustenance.

If the modern technological age is good at one thing we know it has excelled far above all other ages at provision of basic necessities of life such as food, water, shelter, transportation and so forth. But we are left wondering what about our spiritual sustenance in a materialistic age? Where is the Word of God that sustains us in an age that pursues only material needs? What Jesus teaches us is that if all we do is pursue food, shelter, bigger houses, bigger cars and more profits and lose sight of his kingdom then God truly is dead to us and we have given into the temptation to necessity. Christians may walk around and parrot the words of the Bible and the Gospel of Christ but it is to no avail; “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Matt 15:8).

The theme of trusting God as the source for our hope instead of material capacities resounds throughout the Bible. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that we cannot serve God and money (Matt 6:24). He also tells us to stop worrying so much. And what was it that people worried about in the first century, but the very same things they worry about in the twenty-first century: food, money, clothing, and the basic necessities of life (Matt 6:25-34). “Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” In an age that has abandoned the transcendent realm life gets reduced to these material dimensions and by unbelief we miss the provision of God; “for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom and all His righteousness: and all these things shall be added to you” (Matt 6:32-33).

The second and third temptations are similar to the first in that they appeal to the basic instinct for self-preservation, which are the temptation to safety and the temptation to security. Satan tempted Christ to cast himself down from the temple and God would send angels to rescue him. Then he showed Christ all the kingdoms of the world which he would give to him if he would only bow down and worship. Each time Christ takes recourse in the Word of God to counter a basic appeal not to rely on God.

Hope begins when we start to move away from ourselves and closer to God. When our hope in the things of this world is diminished then we can exercise a greater confidence in God. The French Social Critic Jacques Ellul noted two kinds of hope. The first he called *espoir* or optimism. This kind of hope bears a remarkable resemblance to the temptation to turn stones into bread or an overly confident expectation in human ability to care for its own material needs without recourse to God. “Man does not live by bread alone” means people need more than material resources are capable of producing, without a transcendent element in our lives that relies on God for meaning and purpose we will locate that telos in the creation of our own hands. This is the hope in human progress and development that declares God is irrelevant to human aims and goals. “This form occupies the focus of modern society when it places the

greatest confidence in the power of technique [technology].”⁹ As *espoir* wanes and people realize the emptiness of this false hope then a new hope full of confidence and expectation in the promises of God will emerge. Ellul called this hope, *espérance*. This expresses the Christian hope based on the biblical text that God is faithful to deliver us as He promised. Ellul noted,

Christian hope, the Hope so fundamental to the Biblical texts, has a reason for being, a place, only where there is no more room human hope. Human hope (*espoir*) is the feeling that tomorrow will be better. One may be in the throes of economic crisis today, but one may have grounds for hoping that the crisis will be over in one or two years. So long as human hope of this sort exists, there is no reason for Hope (*espérance*). Human hopes will do. Hope, precisely, has no *raison d’etre* unless there is no more room for human hope. This is Hope against hope [Rom 4: 18].¹⁰

The foundation of Christian Hope is based directly on the security of our Salvation in Christ. The Christian life starts with the basic notion of God’s love for humanity (John 3:16). If we do not begin with God reaching out to save humanity in grace we have no alternative but to accept the Pelagian idea of the denial of Adamic sin, and belief in basic human innocence and moralism as a means to our salvation, which places us back into the quandary of human hope that will attain its own salvation. There is a recurring battle that juxtaposes grace and works as the causes of salvation and hence the sources of hope either human or divine (Rom. 3:21-31; Gal. 3 and Eph. 2). The old Pelagian controversy has not gone away but simply has assumed a new form. In the past it took the shape of traditional notions of grace vs. works righteous. Today this struggle plays itself out on the grand scale of human progress as the locus of hope in contrast to the message of hope in the person and work of Christ. Secularism assumes the place of the sacred in modern life as I have noted in the first half of this paper. Tillich noted the essential issue in the old debate; “The question is whether the moral imperative is dependent on the divine

⁹ Lawrence J. Terlizzese, *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005), 124.

¹⁰ Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives On Our Age*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (New York: Seabury, 1981), 98.

grace for its actualization, or whether divine grace is dependent on the fulfillment of the moral imperative.”¹¹

The Pelagian heresy argues for the power of the will to achieve perfection and attain salvation. Although it is an ancient idea it still resounds throughout secular modernity. Tillich argues for the contemporariness of the Pelagian doctrine today. “America is very much in favor of this Pelagian idea that every individual can always make a new beginning, that he is able by his individual freedom to make decisions for or against the divine ... Do not take him lightly; take him seriously. I do not say we are all born Pelagians ... but I would say that Pelagianism is very near to all of us, especially in those countries which are dependent on sectarian movements, as America so strongly is. It is always effective in us when we try to force God down to ourselves.”¹²

A theology of grace must be raised against this recurring notion of works righteousness that serves as the basis of human hope. The notion of salvation by grace alone removes the volitional capacity for human progress in achieving its goals. Grace teaches the helplessness of the will or the “bondage of the will” to sin and causes complete reliance on God alone for the removal of Adamic guilt. In placing morality first as with the Pelagian doctrine, grace loses its efficacy and we become trapped in a hopeless effort to attain our own salvation. A doctrine of grace as explicated by Saint Augustine places grace first as the source of salvation and relegates morality to the consequences of either grace or works. Morality or the lack of it is not the cause of salvation or sin. Salvation is union with God through grace; sin is the state of separation from God where people rely on their own merits. Morality expresses the consequence of either condition. Obedience flows from grace and disobedience from separation from God. “Since this is the nature of sin, it ought to be kept distinct from ‘sins,’ which refer to moral acts. Sin is primarily and basically the power of turning away from God. For this reason no moral remedy is possible. Only one remedy is adequate – a return to God. This, of course, is possible

¹¹ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 123.

¹² *Ibid.*, 124, 125.

only in the power of God, a power which man under the conditions of existence has lost.”¹³

The beginning of hope starts with the acceptance of the simple premise of accepting our acceptance in God based on grace given in the work of Christ. “He who participates in God participates in eternity. But in order to participate in him you must be accepted by him and you must accept his acceptance of you.”¹⁴ Hope will flourish when we realize that God is the source of our salvation alone. Human works will lead to further anxiety.

The security of salvation in grace leads us to the knowledge that God will not abandon his people. Jesus said to his disciples, “I am with you always” (Matt 28:20). What is despair but the feeling that God has abandoned us? In the absence of a transcendent relationship with God, characteristic of our age, a sentiment of hopelessness creeps in as evident in the declaration that God is dead, absent, eclipsed or hiding. The insidiousness of Nietzsche’s pronouncement appears evident not in the idea of God’s non-existence, but in the despair that He just doesn’t care!

The promise of eternal salvation secures for believers a transcendent dimension and assurance of God’s presence in our lives, even when it appears as if God is absent. “For in hope we have been saved, but our hope that is seen is not hope: for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it” (Rom. 8:24-25). We can endure suffering and present turmoil because we have the promise of God’s deliverance to sustain us. “For I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). Hope arises out of this vertical relationship to the transcendent. One’s meaning and purpose is grounded in this relationship, in this openness to the transcendent being that is the source of all hope. The Philosopher of Hope Gabriel Marcel noted that, “The only possible source from which this absolute hope springs must once more be stressed. It appears as a response of the creature to the infinite Being to whom it is conscience of owing everything that it has and upon whom it cannot impose any condition

¹³ Ibid., 126, 127.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 170.

whatsoever. Indeed, seen in this perspective, what is the meaning of despair if not a declaration that God has withdrawn himself from me?”¹⁵

Despair then becomes the declaration that one is alone, homeless in the world. It says, “God has withdrawn himself from me!” Despair is the alienation of the individual from any transcendent source other than himself. We can recall Jesus’ words on the cross, “My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me,” (Matt. 27:46) as the embodiment of the temptation to despair. But as Marcel points out the conditions of despair and hope are the same, so that, Jesus did not despair, but hoped that he would be resurrected from the dead. Hope and despair cannot exist without each other. For there to be hope there must first be the possibility for despair. Marcel states that, “The truth is that there can strictly speaking be no hope except when the temptation to despair exists. Hope is the act by which this temptation is actively and victoriously overcome.”¹⁶ Hope and despair exist on the same conditions. The conditions of despair such as, alienation, loneliness, illness and death are also the same conditions for hope. Only when there is the greatest danger for despair can there be the possibility for hope. Marcel states, “It remains true, nevertheless, that the correlation of hope and despair subsists until the end; they seem to me inseparable. I mean that while the structure of the world we live in permits – and may even counsel – absolute despair, yet it is only such a world that can give rise to an unconquerable hope.”¹⁷

In the condition of alienation we are tempted to despair, to withdraw into ourselves and cut off the transcendent being from our lives, or we can embrace the transcendent and arise to “unconquerable hope.” Marcel never offers us a clear definition of hope other than like Ellul distinguishing it from optimism, which is a vague sense that everything will work out. Marcel scholar Albert Randall noted that in Marcel’s thought “no adequate definition is possible, i.e., hope cannot be adequately defined, described or explained. Instead hope is lived.”¹⁸ The closest Marcel comes to defining hope is in the

¹⁵ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *Philosophy of Existentialism* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1933), 28.

¹⁸ Albert B. Randall, *The Mystery of Hope in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Mellen Press, 1992), 341.

following passage, “Hope is essentially the availability of a soul which has entered intimately enough into the experience of communion to accomplish in the teeth of will and knowledge the transcendent act – the act establishing the vital regeneration of which experience affords both the pledge and the first fruits.”¹⁹ Hope is a human activity, not a thought, opinion or feeling, but a continuous act of the will. It is at its deepest level a mystery and as a mystery it is an encounter with the transcendent Being. Hope is experiencing the presence of transcendence in one’s life. Randell summarizes for us: “As a person lives in hope, he lives in being and Infinite Being. Thus, the value and depth of human existence is determined, in part, by hope since hope is a way of participating in the mystery of being and

Infinite Being, and such participation is to experience the fullness of life.”²⁰

The modern age believes God is dead or no longer relevant to a technological age. The Christian can counter this pessimism with the resounding confidence that despite the appearance of absence, God does not forsake his people, despite the present trouble, trials and sufferings, God is with us through it all and will never leave us based on the eternal work of Christ. This is the essence of the great passage in *Romans 8* that declares “If God is with us who is against us?” This is not a promise that believers will not suffer, but that in our suffering God is with us and that neither trial, persecution, suffering, lack, famine or sword will be able to separate us from God’s love. Even when things appear at their worst; “For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered” (Rom. 8:36), Paul declares that “we are more than conquers through him that loved us” (Rom. 8:37) and nothing will be able to break that eternal bond between God and his redeemed people.

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¹⁹ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 10.

²⁰ Randall, *The Mystery of Hope*, 343.

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