

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# CHRISTIAN HOPE AND HISTORY

(Concluded)

## III. HOPE AND HISTORY

The purely religious way in which hope is conceived in the Bible seems at first sight to remove it completely from the ordinary life of man and from history. If that were the case, we would be confronted with a serious duality. Whenever life in those spheres should prove to be unsatisfactory, man would have merely "natural" hopes at his disposal, while the Biblical hope would fail him. Actually, however, the believing person finds himself in a vastly different situation.

### (1) *The Futility of History*

By identifying Himself with the Incarnate Son in glorifying Him, God shows that it is through his historical development that man is gradually to be led to his divine destination. Thus history is not entirely meaningless, as is held by many idealists and mystics who contend that the only place where "true" life can be found is in the interior of man's mind or heart. Rather it is in the strivings and labors of historical activity that man gives expression to the fact that he has instinctively apprehended the transcendental goal for which God has chosen him. For the same reason, rather than for biological or psychological necessities, man is never willing to give up the uphill fight in history. Despite all its numberless disappointments and frustrations the human race has started historical activities over and over again.

But by sending His Son from heaven to bring about the salvation of mankind, God reminds us at the same time of the futility of history. The fact that God Himself has to come to man's rescue indicates man's inability to reach his ultimate goal by means of historical attainments. What lends to history its tragic character is the fact that with all his efforts and toil man is not capable of making history truly meaningful because he is not able to escape the "law of equalization". That law states that in this world the ratio of happiness and danger, of constructive and disintegrating forces, of co-operation and enmity, is stationary when watched over a long period of time, notwithstanding brief spells in which there seems to be a real increase in positive attainments. Because man instinctively envisages a high goal, he accomplishes great things in history. But re-

maining at bottom unchanged, viz., as a being primarily concerned with his own well-being, both as an individual and collectively, man will utilize every new accomplishment for evil no less than for good purposes.

The life of Jesus makes it plain that it is God's will that history should be subject to that law. As a being destined for fellowship with God, man is capable of making progress in history and of accumulating the experiences of the past. Thus there is real growth in human civilization. But since he wants to live his own life just as though God did not matter, man is not able to enjoy his historical attainments. According to the Bible that is the wrath of God under which man chafes. God does not allow man to reach a goal which would give him full satisfaction. Hence it is rather naïve when people make so much of the idea of Progress.

For the same reason, the idea of the "end of history" is elusive. Throughout history man looks out for a time when all the toil of history will be over. Working and sweating merely in order to keep oneself busy does not yield real satisfaction. In history people want to accomplish something: a work of art, a political order, a position of international superiority, a high type of civilization, etc. Once the "historical work" has been realized its accomplishment provides a resting place for the historical group. It is followed by a period of relative rest, a time in which the historical group appropriates the fruits of its accomplishment. Man hopes all the time that by acting in such a manner he will eventually reach a state where no further effort is required and things are so well arranged that they will take care of themselves. But instead, the time comes when a given order no longer satisfies the needs of a people, because circumstances and human individuals have greatly changed. Thus it becomes imperative that a new effort be made in order to adjust the life of the group to the conditions and requirements of a new age.

During a period of activity people will easily entertain the hope that this will be the final effort, and that the new stage will be so perfect that all generations will find in it their satisfaction. The Reformers, e.g., hoped that by their work the purity of the Church would be finally restored; the French Revolution was considered as the perfect embodiment of reason in political and social life; we fought the "war to end all wars", etc. Yet God does not grant sinful man the privilege

of bringing about the end of history. Thus man cannot live in history without the hope that something permanent will be brought about by his labours, only to see his hopes frustrated and disappointed time and again.

Finally there is the pathetic fact that all historical groups are of a limited duration only and inevitably come to an end. Experience shows that not a single historical unit has been able to maintain itself in existence for more than a few centuries. Then follows a process of disintegration. Portions may survive as splinter groups or as parts of a new group that is being formed. But the specific accomplishments of the paternal group are lost in such a process. Spengler has rightly pointed out that the borrowing or imitating of foreign civilizations or systems of law by new groups cannot be interpreted as a continuation of the original group. The borrowed elements are completely metamorphosized in such a process.

Would this analysis of history confirm the popular contention that the Biblical view of hope turns people completely away from history and public life and toward a purely transcendental reality? Fortunately our analysis is not all that the Bible has to say concerning the relationship of hope and history. There is one factor which has not yet been discussed, viz., Jesus Christ's place in history.

## (2) *Jesus Christ in History*

The purely "other-worldly" interpretations of the Christian hope are caused by a failure to take Christ's place in history seriously. He is treated as a heavenly being who has happened to appear for some time here on earth, but whose work has no connection with human history. Though the advocates of Christian transcendentalism usually emphasize that Christ is true man no less than true God, that fact remains a purely metaphysical datum and is in no way related to the historical character of human existence. Different, however, is the picture offered by the New Testament.

To the Primitive Church the birth of Jesus from a Jewish mother, and His ministry in and to historical Israel, e.g., were essential features of His mission. He is also introduced as the heir of the promises God had given to Abraham and David, and the moment of His ministry is the "fulness of time", i.e., the turning point of history, where one age ends and another one begins. He opens His public ministry with the announcement

that God's kingly rule is being applied to the earth. He does not discuss the nature of the Kingdom or recommend His own brand of the eschatological idea, but rather he states authoritatively that now the clock of history is striking the decisive hour, and that the New Age is being ushered in by His ministry. Thus He introduces Himself as being a decisive factor of human history.

Jesus' resurrection deeply affected the national existence of Israel. It split the nation in a manner more fatal than had been the disruption of Solomon's kingdom in their ancient history. For that political breach could be healed, whereas the division caused by Jesus is irreparable. The Primitive Church furthermore confesses that the risen Lord has not withdrawn into inactivity. Rather He is depicted as ruling from heaven as the head of the Church and guiding its history. Thus His reign becomes the occasion for momentous clashes in history, as, e.g., between the Roman Empire and the Ancient Church, between Pope and Emperor in the Middle Ages, between the secular mentality of the Renaissance and the spiritual inwardness of the Reformation, or between National Socialism and the German Confessing Church.

Jesus is capable of influencing the course of history so decisively because He is the Son of God; and in turn people who experience His power realize that He is not just a great man. He sanctifies us, He enables us to see not only the wrongness of our former outlook on life, but also the necessity of a life in communion with God, and He brings to us the forgiveness of sins, and the courage to start life afresh despite all we have done in the past in wrecking our own life. While we are not "deified" by Jesus Christ, nor "free from sin and this world", nor "free from fear", yet we are enabled by His Gospel to see Him moving in history towards His Parousia, and by believing in Him we are united with Him. Thereby we create spiritual realities. Faith is not a purely subjective, mental reality. As a personal fellowship with the risen Lord it is a trans-subjective fact capable of influencing our environment and history. For Jesus was obedient to the Father, and He identified Himself with the goal that God had set Himself in making this world, viz. that this earthly world and man should attain to full communion with the Creator. It is in view of this goal that the Risen One transforms this world step by step until finally He will completely subjugate the powers of evil, and render them incapable

of harming anything that is under His rule. It is with this risen Lord that His followers are united. Thus those who believe in Jesus Christ entertain a very definite hope concerning this world and history, and an exalted view of the significance they have for their transformation.

The ministry of Christ is not just one among other important and momentous events in the history of mankind. Rather it carries absolute finality with it and is the decisive event in the whole development of the race. We have to be careful, however, in defining that finality. C. H. Dodd, e.g., seems to view the event under a purely positivistic angle and hence confines it to the public ministry of Jesus. In it he finds the fulfilment of the prophetic prediction. The "Realized Eschatology" which Dodd professes on that basis means that all the decisive events of history belong to the past, at least as far as spiritual history is concerned, and that all we do by faith is to appropriate to ourselves the benefits of Christ's work. This "Realized Eschatology" leaves no room for Christian hope because there is nothing new to be hoped for.

Professor John Knox, of Union Seminary, New York, on the other hand, interprets the "Christ-event" as being formed by the earthly ministry of Jesus plus its aftermath in the operation of the risen Lord. On that basis there is ample room left for Christian hope. We may expect that as in the past so in the future the risen Lord will manifest His power in the lives of His followers. But here, too, the finality of Christ's significance belongs entirely to the past. For the Christian hope which rests upon the "Christ-event" has no bearing upon history. There is nothing new to be expected; as in the past so in the future the risen Saviour will dispense the same gifts.

According to the New Testament, however, the task of Jesus is not confined to His earthly ministry. Rather He who speaks of Himself as being the Son of Man constantly refers to His return in glory, too. Yet the Parousia is not just a show of Christ's present glory disclosed to the whole of mankind, but rather heralds the end and climax of His messianic activities. Hence when we speak of the finality of His work we mean the whole work from the Incarnation to the Parousia.<sup>1</sup> With Christ's promise of His Parousia we receive not merely hope

<sup>1</sup> The once-for-allness of the Cross does not mean that with the Crucifixion the work of the Son was completed (cf. 1 Cor. xv. 24, 25) but rather that thereby the remission of sins was brought to mankind.

for the future because we are sure that the risen Lord is capable and willing to act in the life of the believers, but also the assurance that whatever He is to do will be of decisive significance for the history of mankind. Each act will contribute, e.g., to making articulate the separation of mankind into believers and unbelievers.

Under Christ's rule the "law of equalization" does no longer operate. Those who are "reborn to a living hope" realize that it is not necessary for man to seek himself, his power, glory, recognition, happiness or success in order to live in this world. Experiencing that they have lasting spiritual resources, such as the Bible, the Sacraments, and the Church at their disposal, the believers are able to be content in all circumstances of life, because they look confidently toward Christ's future. Furthermore, while the believers are not exempt from the Divine Judgment, the latter has an educative rather than a punitive function in their lives. When God frustrates our earthly plans or takes the goods away for which we strove in our self-assertiveness, He does so in order to show us the truly constructive opportunities we have in Jesus Christ. That proves to show that Jesus Christ is not just a messenger of the good things which are to come to pass, rather He is the Agent who, through His heavenly rule, brings about these changes, and as those who are united with Him by faith we, too, share His power.

### (3) *Christ, Satan and this World*

Two implications of Christ's work should especially be mentioned, because they affect considerably our understanding of the Christian hope. They are the fight the risen Lord wages against Satan, and the plasticity of this world.

The historical process in which we as Christians live would be but partially described if we mentioned only the human factors at work therein. A Christian differs from a non-Christian not merely by the fact that he holds different religious views, and practises a different kind of worship, but also and above all that he owes his faith to a divine impetus, and that by faith he is enabled to draw constantly on the energies of a new life that flow from the Resurrected One. For this reason everything that we do as Christians has its effects both upon our historical environment and also upon the spiritual realm. Every act of faith creates a spiritual reality. We forget so easily how

much Christians by their spiritual life have contributed to human history. Time and again it was the Christian experiment by whose success the secular world was encouraged to engage in similar enterprises. To mention only a few things, it was the Church that started popular education, that engendered respect for the dignity of womanhood, that created the concept of unselfish administration through officials. Protestantism gave the impetus to political democracy; the Christian hope brought about the spirit of initiative and enterprise in trade and industry, etc. Everywhere in history we notice how the fact that people have believed in Christ gives them a new attitude toward this world and their environment.

But what Christ performs through His followers is not just done in order to replace the imperfect or the obsolete by something perfect or new. Rather Christ came to redeem people from the dominion of Satan, and thus He has constantly to break the spiritual opposition of the powers of evil. In that fight the risen Lord constantly demonstrates His superiority. The presence of Christianity in this world has curbed evildoers everywhere. They tried in vain to suppress the "little flock" and to suppress the Church. Yet invariably they experienced their inability to overpower the "powerless". Thus, notwithstanding the realization that we have to fight with seemingly superior and invincible powers, believers must not be dismayed. The fight is fierce, and the activity of the Church is permanently beset by difficulties and dangers. For this reason, the Christian hope cannot be based exclusively upon what Christ has done in the past. Unless we believe in a living Lord who is with us to the end of this age and who constantly makes intercession for us, i.e., who is constantly concerned with the progress of His cause as accomplished by His followers, we have not yet understood the "power of His resurrection". When we rely upon our own strength, notwithstanding that we may remember the benefits of Christ's death, it is easy for Satan to triumph over us. We become self-seeking Christians, who are not a bit better than the self-seeking unbelievers, and our actions do not generate spiritual realities but rather disruptive and disintegrating energies. Only when we turn constantly to the living Christ in prayer and worship can we be sure of His promise that the powers of Hell and Destruction will not be able to overcome the Church. For by doing so we are empowered by the spiritual life that is present for us in Jesus Christ.



In that power, we no longer share the view that the goods hoped for will come automatically to us. Rather our hope challenges us to fight the powers of evil which attempt to rob us of the future goods, and to pay the price for the benefits in store for us. There lies the element of truth in the otherwise perverted concept of hope which we find in the modern totalitarian movements. Fascists and Communists have alike realized that the liberal idea of inevitable progress was contradicted by history. If man wants a better future he has to fight for it. The error of those movements lies rather in their belief that their hope could be founded upon natural superiority, e.g., of the Roman people, the Germanic race, or the proletarian class.

It is in this fight for the realization of his hope that the individual Christian will experience the futility of standing by himself. The only resources that will prove to be effective against the powers of evil are the spiritual realities which are engendered in the fellowship of the believers. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a period of religious individualism, like ours, the power of Christianity should not be particularly conspicuous and that those individuals who are interested in reforms should therefore look out for worldly resources and secular allies. But it can be said emphatically that such hopes will not come true, or at least that such efforts will not bring us closer to the ultimate goal. Church and fight against Satan are correlative terms.

There are people who think that Christ will bring about His goal by successive acts of miraculous interference in history, rather than through the instrumentality of His Body. While miracles will certainly take place, they are nothing we can reckon with. What is more important is the fact that those miraculous events are not by themselves transforming factors. They are opportunities which the Lord offers to His followers, and only by utilizing them in acts of faith are they rendered instrumental in the fight against Satan. Such utilization, in turn, can take place in the fellowship of the believers only. Otherwise the individual who is the recipient or instrument of the miracle is considered by others as its agent, and thereby the spiritual nature of the work is obliterated. People will admire him personally.

The other implication of our Christian hope is the belief in the plasticity of the universe. Modern man is obviously so

conditioned by the spirit of modern science that the universe appears to him as an agglomeration of unchanging elements. This invariableness seems to offer a solid basis for the prediction of the future. Those, however, who put their trust to-day in the prognostications of economists and sociologists overlook the fact that man, who is the central factor in history, is a most variable being. The predictions of the scientists rest upon the assumption that the present set of circumstances will remain stable and that no unforeseen event will upset their equilibrium. Yet another war, e.g., with its cumulative effects, a decline of national health, or modern man's inability to cope mentally with the pressure of a highly industrialized civilization, may seriously affect the present trends. Furthermore, the kind of hope the scientist is capable of offering is not a very satisfactory one. The only thing he can promise is such a rearrangement of the constitutive elements of this world that more favourable living conditions will be created. It is anticipated that the advance of science will serve that purpose. Yet such reasoning is doubly faulty. First of all, the discoveries of science will never be capable of eliminating the law of equalization. It is the scientists, e.g., who have brought upon mankind the threat of atomic warfare. Secondly, the chances that such favourable conditions will develop are very slender. For it is wishful thinking rather than a law of probability that conditions will increasingly improve, and things will be gradually perfected. Probability rather teaches us that the more favourable a condition the more rarely it occurs and the shorter the time it lasts. Furthermore, by drawing out the line from the past to the present and extending it into the future the scientist thinks merely of a quantitative improvement of historical conditions, whereas Christ offers us an essential, qualitative change. Hence the scientists' claim to have a monopoly on human hope is sheer presumption based upon an erroneous axiom.

While it is true to say that man is not capable of changing the nature of this world, and while thus for the scientist as for the practical man, the laws of nature are the supreme authority of action, the same is not true for God. It is an apologetic mistake to defend the miracles as being entirely breaches of the natural law on the part of God and to justify them on the ground of God's sovereign power. But the rejection of a poor defence must not mislead us into a denial of the facts themselves. The Resurrection of Jesus is the singular yet firm basis

of our faith and hope. The laws of nature are solid and universal with reference to the goal God had in mind when He placed man into this world, viz., that life should be hard and dangerous for the sinner. In other words their rigidity does not rest upon the qualities of the things only, but also and above all upon the divine purpose those things serve at present. In the Resurrection, in the regeneration of sinners and in other miracles of Jesus we see, however, that the earthly things are plastic and that Christ moulds them in a new way. Inasmuch as they are to serve the purposes of His kingdom the things of this world are no longer subject exclusively to the "old" laws of Nature but also to new ones, are in accordance with the spiritual ends of mankind.

Realizing the opposition of Satan will keep the believer from mistaking optimism for Christian hope. The goal will not be realized by an intrinsic tendency in this world or in human nature, as is assumed by those who believe in Progress. Rather the way to the goal will be beset with difficulties and dangers everywhere. Realizing the plasticity of the universe will obviate the pessimistic trend of thought which has so often marred the good news of Jesus Christ. The Christian hope by far transcends the modest hopes implied even in the most boastful exaggerations of the scientist-prophets. We can be sure that what God has in store for us is not simply an improvement of living conditions here on earth, but rather Christ's complete reign over all creation.

#### IV. SECULAR AND CHRISTIAN HOPE

Do these eschatological views confine the Christian hope to the ultimate period in history? In other words, do they provide the hope of a final victory in Christ, while dooming history itself to futility? Certainly not, since Christ is so tightly related to history. Rather, they introduce a new element into historical hope by means of which the latter becomes a valid expectation of the future. Faith does not operate in a limited sphere of human life only, viz., in our spiritual experiences and expectations. Rather, faith is a new energy that gives a new outlook and power to all we do in this world.

We have the promise that as Christ's followers we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Being united with the risen Lord, we belong already to the heavenly sphere; yet

as such we exercise a useful function here upon the earth. While the candle does not increase the volume of the room, it adds a new quality to it, viz. light. In the same way the spiritual realities created by the believers help to transform this world. Wherever there is a church it plays a rôle in history, irrespective of whether or not its members realize their influence. In turn the only way the Christian hope comes true is when the Church is active in history, and when its believing members participate in secular life. Hence the eschatological hope has to be translated into secular goals.

In formulating his expectations the believer no less than the unbeliever will be guided by his imaginations. Hope would mean little to our life if it only pointed to a distant star and did not in a concrete way tell us what the things are we may expect from the future. Yet since the actual future is hidden from our eyes, our imagination must try to construe an ideal picture on the basis of past experiences, on the one hand, and the final goal, on the other. There is a tendency in modern theology to decry Christian no less than secular utopias and to substitute for them the purely formal idea of Christ's Lordship. Just the opposite is seen in the New Testament and early Christian literature.

There is nothing wrong with utopian dreams, no matter whether they anticipate the brotherhood of all men, peace on earth, the victory of justice, or the imminent dawn of the Day of God. On the contrary, we do not really hope in the final victory of Christ, unless we have big and concrete expectations. Too often it was the pettiness and the insignificance of the things expected or their "other-worldly" character and their lack of concreteness which made the Christian hope look irrelevant. There is no harm in the fact that by means of such utopias the Christian hope embraces material goals. It is misreading the Bible when it is said that Jesus substituted spiritual goods for the material ones the Jews hoped for. He who was concerned with the health of body and mind and who fed the hungry multitudes did not disparage the material goods. The transformation of the world for which the Early Church, like its Master, hoped was the material world.

However, in adopting such utopias we have to keep two things in mind. Firstly, any such utopian expectation is an attempt to express the total goal in terms of a limited human programme. Inasmuch as thereby a neglected emphasis is

brought out, focusing our hope on a specific goal is justified. Nevertheless, it would be fatal if the partial character of such an ideal were overlooked and it were propagated as the whole truth. Secondly, over against purely secular or pagan hopes we must keep in mind that the future state of things is to be an expression of the Lordship of Christ. It is not to serve merely our own interests or those of our group; not even those of our denomination only. Hence, every realization of our hope can be regarded only as a step towards the ultimate goal, which is the full triumph of Christ. The proponents of the most grandiose utopias were closer to Christ than those social and political "realists" who aim merely at goals of momentary usefulness. The condemnable feature we see in their utopian programmes is not to be found in the enormous magnitude of their expectations but rather in their anti-eschatological attitude. Invariably they equate the first step in the realization of their programme with the final goal and hold that its champions are powerful enough to give history its final shape.

Christians may join in the pursuit of such aims, but they will consider the steps taken towards their realization as something provisional. By doing so they will have enough flexibility constantly to adjust their programme to changing situations. But above all they will have a firm guidance in the choice of the next stage, and the ways and means to reach it, which the non-Christian lacks. The Christian, though aware of the fact that in this life we cannot get rid of the tendency to seek our own advantage, is capable nevertheless of taking into consideration the interests of other people, or, in a case where he or others fail to do so, to recognize such activity as one which ought not to be. Thus the Christian hope always implies a corrective against our human shortcomings and a directive which keeps the ultimate goal before the believer's mind. But above all the Christian hope acts as an incentive to responsible activity even when the going is rough. While non-Christians usually are discouraged after a prolonged period of stagnation or failure, the Christian is confident that Christ will finally triumph.

Thus the Christian hope extends not only to the life beyond the grave or the ultimate consummation of history, but also to history. However, the glorious victory of Christ spells good tidings for those only who believe in Him, while it means judgment and rejection for those who do not believe. We would render a terrible and criminal disservice to those who do not

put their trust in Christ if we concealed the fact from them that there is no prospect of ultimate meaning for them. No matter how successful they may be for some time, they will be found agents of disintegration and harm and hence will not escape God's judgment. Their own works will soon disintegrate and the futility of their efforts will become manifest.

The gospel is an offer of salvation to all men, but only on condition that people grasp that offer by faith. Thus the New Testament view presents on the one hand the supreme goal that can be conceived for man, viz., communion with God. But on the other hand it also underlines drastically the utter hopelessness of those who refuse to accept God's gift of forgiveness. Thus of the followers of Christ only can it be said that "Hope abideth".

*Princeton Theological Seminary.*

OTTO A. PIPER.