

Anchoring Faith, Hope, and Love in Today

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“How do we know when to give up hope?”

As soon as the words had escaped my lips I knew it was a mistake. I should have spent just a few more seconds thinking about the question before I had opened my mouth. But it was too late

My grandmother used to say, “Don’t be afraid to speak, but always think before you speak.” Wise words. But somehow, in the relatively informal setting of this bio-ethics seminar I had managed to forget my grandmother’s words for just a few seconds.

I was sitting with a small group of fellow CPE interns in one of the education rooms of a hospital when it happened. During our discussion of end-of-life issues for the terminally ill and those in perpetual vegetative states, the question had seemed obvious; and foolishly, without even taking a breath, I had asked it.

The leader of the seminar, a Christian like me, was gentle. She replied with the next question I should have thought of myself, “Is it giving up hope to begin assuming that death is the next experience a person will have?”

I realized it wasn’t. I had used the word “hope” in a very limiting way.

I suspect that some of my readers, intelligent people who are committed Christians involved in higher education, will know how I felt in that moment. Our traditions and our cultural conditioning are often much closer companions in daily discourse than is our clear theological reflection.

The wording of my question betrayed a common way of thinking, and a poor use of language, both of which are all too prevalent among Christians today. Even as I had been trying to rise above these thinking and communication problems for years, I still fell back into them in a moment of weak focus. “This is a teaching moment,” I said to myself. As I turned back to a mindset that disabused itself of all the wrong ways we use the word “hope” in this culture, I soon came to see it would also be helpful to apply some consistent thought to the words, “faith” and “love.” Our Christian practices of prayer and worship, the ways we attempt to pass on Biblical Christian tradition in the classroom, as well as the ways in which we talk about sickness and death, will benefit greatly from what may be discovered in this re-thinking.

We live in an outcome-based world. Get the job done. Business is based on outcome, politics is based on outcome, military action is based on outcome, medical treatment is based on outcome, even friendship and marriage may be based on outcome.

“Of course,” you might say, “business is about the bottom line – if you don’t turn a profit you go out of business. Politics is about swaying public opinion and fostering relationships to get things done – the one who influences the biggest following gets elected and makes the decisions. Nations don’t go to war if they don’t expect to win; and when it comes to medicine, the point of studying the human body and fighting disease is to promote and extend life – isn’t it?”

What is common to our usual approach to all these things? Is it not the desire for victory—whatever that may be? Perhaps the single outcome-based question we could ask ourselves would be, “this is victory, isn’t it?” That is to say, “this is how we must think and act in order to end up on top.” Our culture’s immediate reaction to many circumstances—perhaps to most—is to reframe them in terms of overcoming, and to then assume that the goal is to win. Winning is good. Victory is what we want, isn’t it?

Is it? What about those situations where “winning” is not an option? In my own experience as a Christian educator and a dedicated parishioner with a calling to pastoral ministry, I have to say I have not experienced the life of growth into Christian maturity and grace as one easily characterized by straight-forward good/bad, win/lose decisions.

Perhaps along with redefining faith, hope, and love, we should also redefine “victory.” I would say that we need to stop thinking about faith, hope, love, victory, overcoming, suffering, etc., as words pertaining to attitudes that are based on attainable goals. In our culture we set goals, we try to attain those goals, and then once we have attained them we feel we are done - we have achieved, we have gotten there, we can check this item off our list of things to accomplish and move on to the next. Unfortunately, the church (every church) has, to a greater or lesser extent, absorbed this way of looking at things and unthinkingly applied it to our Christian spirituality. It seems like a non-issue until I hear language about “living victoriously” from a terminal cancer patient, for example. It is not that I believe living “victoriously” is impossible in such a situation. Quite the contrary. It’s just that “victory” may mean something very different than overcoming the disease to live cancer-free and die of old age. Perhaps living victoriously would more constructively be seen as feeling deeply the victory of Christ’s presence while living fully and realistically through the difficulty set before us.

Take a moment to trace with me my thoughts – those I had as I quietly kept developing my own question, which had been asked too early in that bio-ethics didactic.

I am a Christian. In terms of tradition, I am well-rounded by typical standards, having spent many years in each of four major Christian traditions, (Evangelical Lutheran, Covenant, Assembly of God, and Episcopalian—overlapped; not one at a time), and less time sampling countless others. Yet, in spite of the apparent diversity of these influences, the common experience of God in each that has born fruit in my own life has been consistent. I have come to expect God to be alive and well and active, and I expect this because I cannot deny my own experience. I expect God to move in the present; I expect prayer to make a difference—sometimes to make a difference in attitude, and in my own extension of grace to others, but also quite often in events themselves - in sickness and health, and in physical circumstances. I have witnessed miraculous healings, and I have been told of many more by close friends I know and trust. I have been touched directly on several occasions by what could only be the specific answer of an omniscient, caring God; I have even been party in one church service to the return to life, through prayer, of a woman confirmed dead (surprisingly for some, this happened in an Episcopal church, not an Assembly of God).

In fact, this base of experience, combined with unthinkingly buying into our culture’s assumptions regarding victory and hope, compelled me to blurt out my question.

What assumptions did I get from our culture? How about, “Life is good, death is bad.” How about, “It is just natural to want to keep living. To give up on living is to not

have faith. Hope means you still have some hope that you will stay alive—that you will keep on living, right? To admit you are dying is to give up hope; (and down deep inside, most of us feel that must be a sin); that is just fatalism, or pessimism, or something...you should pray for a person's recovery right up to the end."

Sound familiar? It sure sounds familiar to me. But it also sounds very wrong. It may become a real distortion of God's love and sovereignty to always pray naively for the recovery of a patient right up to the end of their natural earthly life, because then when they die, and sooner or later they will die, one may be left with the question, "Did God stop caring?" or "Did God stop hearing us because of something we did or did not do?" or the too quick answer, "It must have been God's will to take her now." These things don't jive with the concept of God I get from scripture: that God has done, and continues to do absolutely everything possible to reconcile his creation to himself, that God cares for each of us personally, and that God desires that we have life, and have it more abundantly.

A few days ago I walked into the hospital room of a patient that had died four or five minutes before. Eight family members were in the room. They were Christians. The patient had been the matriarch of the family. Had I walked into an experience of defeat? Had these people been trying to win, but instead lost? Was hope gone?

No, no, and no.

For this family, a significant loss had been experienced, but the loss only marked a shift into a new family dynamic in which life would still be celebrated, as it should be. Hope was intact. Hope had not been clung to with the expectation that death would be put off as a result. No, hope was bigger than death. Hope transcended death. Hope continued when death had come and gone. There were tears of course, but victory – true victory in Jesus, was a companion before, during and after the death-event. Death was just one more moment in a life that went on.

Such thinking is not foreign to Christians, yet most of us behave as if we have failed or lost our faith if we simply take realistic stock of the inevitability of death. In fact, many of us may feel like failures if we pray for the recovery of a person from a particular illness, and it does not happen as we expect or when we expect. We talk about our prayers as if they worked or did not work, as if they were magic spells, and about God as if He agreed with our prayers or decided to do something different, which, we concede, is God's prerogative.

I believe Christians need to stop seeing hope as wishing, as clinging to something in the future. I believe Christians need to understand, for their own sanity, in this day and age, that the ultimate realities of God and heaven and the supernatural universe in which we live and move and have our being, are not all operating according to the same time line, or with the same limitations, to which our human lives are temporarily bound.

What is hope? In what do we place our hope? For me, this is academic. I place my hope in *Emmanuel*. God with us. *Not*: God was with us once, and God will be with us again, but right now we don't know what's going on. No. God with us. That's it. Circumstances will change; outcomes will be good or bad; our silly assumptions and guesswork about what God must be "up to" will come and go; but *God with us* does not change. No matter what happens, God is with us. This is hope.

Such a hope offers me a worldview in which creation matters more than consummation. Such a hope gives me inspiration to keep living the Christian life to which I am called when I know it may get harder and more painful. Such a hope as this makes excruciating difficulties like war and sickness and death not less painful, but able to be endured - more like unbelievably irritating speed-bumps in a journey so long, and so filled with goodness, that the pain they cause wanes in proportion to its substance.

A worldview framed by this kind of hope makes faith possible. Faith is now the confidence with which we can lean into the journey, no matter where the journey will be taking us. The hope of *God with us* cannot disappoint; the faith that we can go where we must go, because some bad or unexpected outcome cannot destroy us, makes all things possible. And love? Love is the attitude—the open heart and selfless action with which we can now freely greet every other creature placed in our path by God, as fear is gone; we cannot be harmed. The reflex of self-preservation, of self-first, has been swallowed in hope. Our “selves” are no longer what is at stake in our meetings with other fellow creatures. Team work – real body life and ministry to the world is now truly possible.

The apostle Paul calls attention to “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” I suspect most of us default to an interpretation of these words that assumes, “because Christ is in you, you have hope of attaining glory someday, after you die.” I would like to leave you with a challenge, then, and ask a question.

How would scholarship change; how would institutions understand themselves; how would churches minister differently; and how would Christians be empowered to live into the maturity of Christ if only we read, “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” and understood: “this glory is in me and with me *now*, waiting to break out; the hope is that Christ is in me now, operating and changing me and caring and serving others right now, not waiting for some future event. I can let God’s glory show through right *now*; I can give people hope by showing them *God is with them right now*, in me. The proof that God has not abandoned them lies in the fact that I am standing there, holding their hand and caring. *It is God* holding their hand through me, because *God is* caring. God is present. The kingdom of God has come with power.”

There is not evil in the world because God has abandoned us, or because God is weak. There is evil in the world because God is with us - God has poured power and authority into us in hope, and we are doing nothing about it. We speak of victory, but we are afraid of it, because truly living in victory can mean more pain, not less—may be harder, not easier. We would rather hope in ‘deliverance from,’ not in ‘deliverance through,’ assuming ‘deliverance from’ means something like, “I’ll fly away” before I have to feel too much pain. But perhaps we are delivered from evil when, instead of avoiding it, we live through it with God and come out on the other side, shining.

There is hope in midst of suffering, not because it will be over some day, although certainly it will be, but because God is there in the midst of it, now. Grave, where is your victory; death, where is your sting?