CONFESSING GOD

Essays in Christian Dogmatics II

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HOPE

I

Christian hope is a moral phenomenon; but it is so derivatively, and the derivation is one of the clues to its Christian character. For, on the one hand, to speak of Christian hope is most properly to speak of the object of Christian hoping, that for which the Christian hopes, namely the personal divine subject 'Jesus Christ our hope' (1 Tim. 1.1). Hope is this one, Jesus, before it is a set of attitudes or undertakings on the part of those who hope in him. And, on the other hand, hope shares with other Christian virtues – most of all, faith and love – the fact that its human exercise is at the same time a work of God the Holy Spirit, and so cannot be described in a comprehensive way simply by talking of creaturely operations. Nevertheless, the hope which Jesus Christ constitutes and which the Holy Spirit engenders is of necessity bound up with moral activities and moral judgements. To abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15.13) is not only to look to a prospective benefit but also to receive appointment as a certain kind of agent. The presence of Christian hope is therefore visible in, amongst other things, the particular activities and abstentions by which members of Christ's fellowship dispose themselves in the world.

Christian hope is thus one of a cluster of spacious and internally complex theological realities which serve to provide moral orientation. The hope of Christian people is part of what is involved in envisaging the world in the light of the Christian gospel. Through this primary feature of Christian moral vision, the Christian agent is schooled into steady, disciplined knowledge of certain moral realities and ends, and is thereby instructed in action which is fitting, that is, action which is in accordance with the way in which the Christian gospel declares the world to be. In particular, hope enables the Christian moral agent to clarify and act out a way of life within the historical character of created existence – that is, to

existence in time. To exist in Christian hope is to trust that in all its dissipation, complexity and misery, human history is by the mercy of God on the way to perfection. History is not random, unformed occurrence but an ordered reality moving towards the fulfilment of its given nature in the coming manifestation of the immeasurable greatness of Christ's power (Eph. 1.19ff.). The life and activity of the Christian fellowship is, therefore, life and activity in the knowledge of his coming reality, a reality of which the New Testament speaks in irreducibly personal terms as 'our blessed hope', namely 'the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (Tit. 2.13). This knowledge is both the church's joy and its affliction: joy, because hope for coming perfection exalts; affliction, because to wait is to suffer imperfection. Further, hope is both prospective and retrospective. It is rooted in faith's trust in a *future* perfection which *has been* promised and secured. Hope arises from the divine promises, that is, from authoritative divine enactments and declarations in the past which are sufficiently commanding and persuasive in the present that they can direct the Christian fellowship's actions towards the future. Emerging from the promise of God, hope shapes the actions of the Christian fellowship by instructing it about its true condition. Hope sees the world as a particular kind of place, one which moves along a specific historical trajectory and which makes possible and necessary action in a particular direction.

Accordingly, an inquiry into Christian hope as a moral phenomenon asks a number of related questions. Are the world and its history such that hope is not a fantasy but a truthful estimation of our situation? What kind of person is the Christian who hopes, and in whose company does she live and act? Existing within that world and history, with a particular given identity and a particular set of companions, to what kind of hopeful action is the Christian summoned, equipped with what resources and for what ends? Taken together, answers to those questions would form an account of the conditions and modes of Christian hope. But they would only do so if they rested upon an answer to the fundamental question concerning Christian hope, namely the identity of God as the object and ground of Christian hope, the one by and towards whom all hopeful action is directed. A moral theology of Christian hope, that is, must start from the Christian confession of God.

Before turning to theology proper, however, three observations about this way of approaching the moral theology of hope ought to be recorded. First, one test of adequacy for a theological account of

Christian hope as a moral phenomenon will be whether it asks all those questions, and asks them in their proper sequence and order, in such a way that the range and structure of its account are shaped by the Christian confession. Thus, for example, answers to the question of the ethical forms of hope are derivative from answers to the question of the human historical condition, which are in turn dependent upon theological teaching about God. Second, a theological account of Christian hope will give priority to biblical and theological description, and will not invest heavily either in a phenomenology of hope as human attitude and disposition, or in the self-descriptions of contemporary culture. Often, indeed, it will find that the matter of its own inquiry requires a rather free and sometimes critical attitude to such preoccupations, believing that the persuasiveness of Christian hope is more satisfactorily demonstrated when it is allowed to emerge with its own inherent clarity and profile than when it is commended or defended comparatively. Third, a theological account of Christian hope is especially concerned with given moral nature and ends. This means that it is an exercise in moral ontology, though of a distinctively theological kind. Christian hope concerns the phenomenon of human action. But, as we shall see, it is not action as pure, spontaneous world-making, but action ordered to the world and its history as an *economy*, a shaped sphere in which God's creative, reconciling and perfecting acts precede, enclose, judge, vindicate and consummate the works of creatures.

With this in mind, we examine (1) theology proper, that is, the triune God as the object and ground of Christian hope; (2) a Christian understanding of the nature of creaturely history as the theatre of the works and promises of God which engender hope; (3) the nature of the human subject and agent of hope within the divine economy; and (4) the particular character of hopeful human action in relation to the coming perfection of all things in Christ.

II

Christian hope is hope in God, for the God confessed by the Christian fellowship is 'the God of hope' (Rom. 15.13). Christian hope and its activities have to be explicated out of faith's apprehension of God and God's ways with the world as its maker, reconciler and consummator. In formal terms, this is simply an application of the rule that Christian moral theology ought not to

exist in independence of Christian doctrine. In material terms, it is an application of the rule that all Christian teaching, including teaching about the moral life, is an extension of the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the Christian doctrine of God. Christian hope is hope in this God; and the doctrine of the Trinity can therefore rightly be said to furnish 'the environment of Christian behaviour'.[1] How is this so?

The Christian confession of God as Trinity attempts to indicate that the sovereign majesty and perfection which is God's life is that of the eternal and perfect relations of Father, Son and Spirit. God is the relations of these three persons; his being is his eternal fullness as the Father who begets the Son, the Son who is begotten of the Father before all worlds, and the Spirit who proceeds from them. In these relations, fully achieved and lacking nothing, God is one; his unity is the repleteness and blessedness of the fellowship of the three.

This repleteness of God's life includes within itself, as an integral aspect of its perfection, a turn to that which is not God. In this turn there occurs a movement in which the fellowship of the immanent life of God creates a further object of love. This turn is free, self-caused, wholly spontaneous, original to the divine being; its necessity is purely the necessity of God's own self-determination to be in fellowship with that which is other than himself. As such, it is not a turn which completes or extends the divine life; it is a turning out of fullness, not out of lack. More simply: it is gift, love. This turning or act of love is the work of the triune God as the world's creator, reconciler and consummator. It takes historical form in the simple yet staggeringly complex work of God's majesty in the entire scope of the economy, as God brings creaturely reality into being, redeems it and ensures that it will arrive at its perfection.

As Father, God purposes that in its abundance, the divine love should be directed to bringing creation into being, bestowing upon it life, order and direction. Because it is rooted in the Father's will, this purpose is unshakeable. That is, God's relation to what he makes is not simply an act of origination, but an act which ensures the creation's *destiny*, and therefore one which oversees, directs and protects the creation so that it attains that destiny. As Son, God intervenes in the history of creation when by its own perversity the creature seeks to struggle free from the Father's purpose, refusing

1. P. Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (London: SCM, 1963), p. 117.

to be a creature, and in so doing exposing itself to mortal peril. Only as creature can the creature have life; and it is the work of the Son to reconcile and therefore to recreate what has brought destruction upon itself. Through the person and work of the Son, gathering created being to himself and bearing in himself its alienation from the source of its life and well-being, creation is reintegrated into the Father's purpose. Lastly, as Spirit, God acts to bring to completion that which the Father purposes and the Son secures against all opposition, namely the identity and integrity of the creation in fellowship with God. God the Spirit perfects, bringing creaturely being and history to their completion.

What is the significance of this for Christian hope? Hope is that creaturely disposition which corresponds to the fact that all occasions of human history, including its future, are caught up within the economy of the triune God's mercy. Because God is to the depths of his eternal being triune, and because he acts in the world as the one he is in himself, then the entire scope of human history and action is embraced by God's purpose. God is not simply originator (setting the creation in motion), nor simply end (tying up the loose ends of history at its terminus). Rather, as Father, Son and Spirit, God is infinite – no time or space is apart from or beyond his presence and action – and so steadfast – his purpose has been, is and will be at all times constantly and reliably at work. And it is as this one that God is the ground of hope, for hope trusts that, because the Father's purpose has been accomplished in the Son and is now at work in the world in the Spirit's power, then human history is God's economy. Within the space which the triune God creates, hope is neither a fantasy nor a gesture of defiance, but a fitting, truthful attitude and shape for action. In sum: hope rests upon God's faithfulness, and God's faithfulness is triune.

One immediate effect of rooting a theology of Christian hope in the doctrine of the Trinity is to prevent an exclusive orientation towards eschatology. Hope is not simply a correlate of the divine futurity or the coming of God; it is, rather, a disposition which is related to the entirety of God's dealings with his creature, past, present and future. Within this, hope undoubtedly has an especial regard for the future horizon of human history. But this future quickly becomes isolated when not adequately related to a theological account of God as the world's creator and as its reconciler in the person and work of Christ. An isolated eschatology accords little weight to created nature, and often functions with only a pale theology of incarnation and atonement,

precisely because the preponderant doctrinal weight is placed in the future of God. This imbalance within the structure of Christian teaching orients hope, not to the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose but to an absolute eschatological *novum*. The corrective to the imbalance is achieved by relating hope not simply to the future but also to the triune eternity of God, that is, to God's sovereign and purposive presence to and action within all creaturely time. Christian hope, and therefore hopeful Christian action, rests not simply on what will be, but on what will be as the fulfilment of God's steadfastness as Father, Son and Spirit, his already-enacted, present and promised constancy to the creature. Hope is hope in God's steadfast love (Pss. 33.18, 22; 130.7; 131.3; 147.11).[2]

A Christian moral theology of hope begins thus with the perfection of the triune God. This suggests a further consequence, namely that because hope is hope in God, it has no grounds and no capacity in itself. Not only does this mean that hope is, as Aquinas puts it, *totaliter ab extrinseco*,[3] since it is that to which we have been 'born anew' (1 Pet. 1.3). It also means that hope relies upon the fulfilment of the promise of divine grace, and that only as such is it active engagement in the works of hope. 'The hoping person looks gladly, willingly, and joyfully beyond the present and away from himself', writes Barth.[4] And so:

> As faith is real faith only by being finally transcended in demonstration of the faithfulness of God, and as love is the good work of faith only inasmuch as we are loved by God before we ever love him ... so the question of whether we really hope can be answered with ultimate clarity and certainty only as we give up the dignity of being subjects and admit

2. Cf. C. Schwöbel, 'Last Things First? The Century of Eschatology in Retrospect', in D. Fergusson and M. Sarot (eds), *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 238: 'Christian hope has as its content the perfection of God's creation with his reconciled creation. In Christian theology the integrative framework for the understanding of God's action in creation, reconciliation and perfection is the doctrine of the Trinity. By understanding every form of divine action as an act of the triune God, creation, reconciliation and perfection are internally related by ascribing them all to the agency of the triune God. If we want to avoid the dangers of an isolated treatment of eschatology, the task consists in developing a Christian eschatology as a trinitarian eschatology.'

3. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IaIIae q63 a1.

4. K. Barth, *Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), p. 515.

> that we can hope only in and by God himself, and that the overwhelming certainty and clarity of Christian hope rests upon its being hope not at all on the basis of its own hope, but wholly and utterly for the sake of what is hoped for. ... Yet we do not plunge into an abyss here, for if we want to stand, then again we finally have to lose all ground beneath our feet save the one.[5]

Starting in this way from the doctrine of the Trinity shows how far back we must reach in inquiring into the practices of Christian hope. In order to reflect upon ourselves and our acts, we must talk of the perfection of God. But because God's perfection is his perfection as this one – the triune Lord, saviour and finisher of creation – then it is not a perfection indifferent to human history, absorbing it and robbing it of its proper substance; rather, God's perfection includes his perfecting of his creatures. The arena of this perfecting is human time; hope is among the virtues which correspond to God's perfecting work. Rightly to discern the character of Christian hope, therefore, we need to turn next to consider its historical conditions. In what kind of historical sphere do we exist? How does this condition shape the practices of Christian hope?

III

Christian hope requires for its exercise a particular sense of our historical condition; the explication of that condition is one of the tasks of Christian moral theology. As it elucidates the historical condition of Christian hope, theology seeks to develop a moral ontology. That is, it attempts to understand the kind of place the world is, and the kind of beings that we are; and what it says both about the world and about ourselves derives from what theology hears in the gospel about who God is. Christian moral theology thus depicts the historical situation of Christian hope by talking of 'natures' and 'ends'. It portrays, first, the given identities ('natures') of the agents in history – the triune God as the origin, ruler, sustainer, judge and redeemer of created time, and human persons as those created by God for fellowship with himself. And, second, theology depicts the historical situation of Christian hope by portraying the 'ends' of history, that is, the *telos* of created reality and persons in which their natures will be perfectly realized. Such a

5. Barth, *Ethics*, p. 515.

reflective portrait of the nature and ends of created history furnishes the frame for a Christian ethics of hope, offering a theological description of the moral field within which the practices of Christian hope take place.

Fundamental to such an account is an affirmation that it is possible to speak of history as a whole, as an integrated reality which has form and direction by virtue of the purpose of its creator and Lord. History is a field of hope because it is part of the divine economy, God's orderly administration of all things by which they are brought to fulfilment. History is not simply random, indecipherable, endlessly redescribable; it has shape, order. Shape and order are given; that is, they precede all our human attempts to bestow a unity upon history. Of course, history's shape and order are not given in such a way that history is from the beginning a finished product, established by a pre-temporal decree. History is real; its shape and order are acquired through an historical process of perfecting; they are that which history *comes to have* as it moves towards its end. Nevertheless, that which history becomes is in accordance with the divine purpose: it moves to its end.

To speak thus is certainly to invite reproach for ideological imposition, or for detaching hope from the broken miseries of time. The danger certainly exists, and protest against it is proper. But a gesture of protest, however necessary, ought not to be allowed to become a first principle; when it does, it inhibits thought, and may relieve theology of its responsibility to give an account of the Christian confession that our times are in the hands of God. Much will depend upon how theology sets about the task of giving such an account – whether it succeeds in avoiding heartless serenity, whether it retains a sense of its own corrigibility, whether it speaks of the end of history with fear and trembling. Yet not to speak of history as God's ordered economy is to fail to articulate a primary condition of Christian hope, for hope arises from discernment of our place in God's history with us.

What is it that hope discerns? It sees human history as the history of fellowship between the triune God and his human creatures. That history is a fellowship which is purposed by the eternal will of God the Father who creates and gives destiny to that which he creates. History is therefore embraced by 'the purpose of his will' (Eph. 1.5) or his 'plan for the fullness of time', namely 'to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph. 1.9f.). By virtue of the Father's will, history has a destiny. Yet this history does not unfold flawlessly; the history of fellowship includes – and

appears to be broken by – the contradiction of sin in which the creature refuses to be satisfied with its given nature and end as a creature made for fellowship, seeks to create its own destiny, and so unleashes the dreadful episode of human depravity. But it remains an *episode*; it may not be rendered absolute and all-consuming so as to annul the constancy of the creator. To the estrangement of creatures from their own good there corresponds the work of God the reconciler through whose saving work sinful, self-destructive creatures are reintegrated into the divine purpose, so that the Father's will to fellowship triumphs. 'In him we have redemption' (Eph. 1.8) – that is, human history is liberated from bondage to sin, falsehood and disorder and set free to attain its end. That it is even now moving towards perfection is the work of the Spirit, by whom history is pointed to its consummation in which the purpose of the Father will be vindicated and the creation glorified.

Christian hope knows itself to be in this historical condition. Grasping the fact that human creatures are caught up in the economy of God's grace, embraced by the Father's purpose, the Son's redemption and the Spirit's promised consummation, Christian hope is a stance within this history. Most of all it is a stance towards our future, which regards the incompleteness and imperfection and bleakness of history not with terror or resignation but with trust that, because God has made himself known as creator and reconciler, he will also demonstrate himself to be consummator. The triune God has been and is now for his creature, and so he will also prove himself to be in what is to come. This means, once again, that it is not quite correct to relate Christian hope only to the eschatological element of history. Christian hope is expectation; but it is expectation which is instructed by past and present mercy. Certainly it is oriented to 'the expected future of God's kingdom'.[6] But Christian hope anticipates the future as consummation, not only as contradiction of the present order; what is anticipated is the destiny purposed by God the Father and secured in the Son's reconciling work. The experience of Christian hope is not simply an intrusive 'sabbath' moment in which 'the laws of this world are suspended and only the righteousness of God

6. J. Moltmann, 'The Liberation of the Future and Its Anticipations in History', in R. Bauckham (ed.), *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 286.

counts'.[7] Rather, it is based on a judgement that the true 'law' of the world is God's plan for the fullness of time, which is now at work and which will receive its consummation in the future for which the church hopes.[8]

As it takes stock of its circumstances, Christian hope does not see itself situated in a history of decline, still less in a tragic situation in face of which hope is simply protest or contradiction. It finds itself in the time of grace, in that space in human history which follows the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit. Thus for the writer of Ephesians, knowing 'the hope to which [God] has called you' (Eph. 1.18) is inseparable from knowing

> what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church. (Eph. 1.19–22)

This is not to dismiss the reality of sin and suffering, nor to turn from its victims: to wait in hope is to groan (Rom. 8.22f.). But the situation in which hope finds itself remains – solely by the merciful judgement of God – one in which grace is superabundant, and therefore one in which the possibility of a tragic reading of our history has been taken away. Jesus Christ rules, and Christian hope finds in his rule the enactment of the Father's purpose which will be fully manifest in the coming of 'our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (Tit. 2.13).

To draw the threads together: a moral theology of Christian hope generates a moral ontology, an account of hope's historical condition. Looking back to God's work of creation and reconciliation, Christian hope also looks for the coming consummation of all things. The present time is not an empty space to be filled with dread, or perhaps with dread held at bay by projects of self-making

7. Moltmann, 'The Liberation of the Future', p. 280.

8. On the relation of hope to past and present as well as future, see J. Fischer, 'Zum Fürchten oder zum Hoffen? Die Wahrnehmung der Zukunft als Problem theologischer Ethik', in J. Fischer and U. Gäbler (eds), *Angst und Hoffnung. Grunderfahrungen des Menschen im Horizont von Religion und Theologie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1997), pp. 135–37; V. J. Genovesi, *Expectant Creativity: The Action of Hope in Christian Ethics* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982).

and self-defence. It is the arena of promise. To hope is to exist in trust that God's constancy is such that the present is on the way to perfection.

This moral ontology finds both its norm and its content in the Christian gospel, from which it acquires its rather distinctive picture of human history and of the nature of hope. Beginning from the gospel and governed by it throughout its inquiry, a Christian moral theology of hope is not much disposed to take its bearings from prestigious readings of our cultural situation developed without the gospel's tutelage. Partly this is because the gospel outbids other interpretations of human history; partly it is because the gospel is the principle of its own explanation and defence. Little is to be gained (and a good deal may be lost) by expounding Christian hope as a counterpart to some philosophical or cultural-theoretical presentation of the human condition. Apologetic advantage is always short-lived, and frequently won by succumbing to the temptation to believe that our historical situation is transparent to us, that we know, as it were, what it is to be without hope, and need only to be furnished with the hope for which we long. Similar difficulties attend attempts to frame a theology of hope in terms of theodicy: how can we hope in face of this or that monstrous evil? But even – especially – our experience of evil is not self-interpreting: evil lies about itself. A theology of hope does not hang upon a satisfactory answer to the question of theodicy (satisfactory to whom, and to what ends?), but vice versa: only on the basis of faith's confession of the God of hope, of his ways with the world in the history of fellowship in which we now live and for whose consummation we wait, is it possible to develop anything like a responsible Christian theodicy.

IV

Having remarked on the God of hope and on hope's historical condition, we turn to the anthropological question: what kind of person is the Christian who hopes? By way of brief answer: the Christian who hopes is one who knows in faith that in the economy of God's grace, enacted in the resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit and lived out in the company of the saints, his or her future is secure; and so the Christian who hopes is one who turns to that future and acts in its light, confident because in the Spirit Jesus

Christ is our present help and the pledge of our coming consummation.

The question 'what kind of person is the Christian who hopes?' is an ontological question before it is an ethical one. The answer which it invites is a description of human nature formed by the purpose and action of God. The Christian who hopes is not engaged in an act of self-formation; he or she makes history only because in a deep sense history has already been made, and because only on that basis is it possible to be a hopeful person and agent. A Christian anthropology of hope is decidedly non-voluntarist. Hope is not a correlate of freedom (understood, degenerately, as radical self-government) but of nature (that is, of the reality which the work of the triune God establishes and which the gospel announces with joy). The Christian who hopes is one whose being is enclosed, determined and protected by Jesus Christ our hope.

Such an anthropology of hope is not readily available to us in late modernity. The disruptive effects of its absence can be illustrated from Rubem Alves' *A Theology of Human Hope*. 'Only as the creator of history does man find his authentic life; only where man is the creator of history is there hope for the world.'[9] By conflating hope with human self-actualization, the book falls victim to the agonistic habits of modern conceptions of freedom in which the primal form of free human consciousness is 'the consciousness of being dominated by a power which does not allow it to create its own history'.[10] On this account, hope is freedom and therefore power (not, note, trust in being helped). Hope is thus not to be set in the economy of grace, for any such economy could only be repressive and alienating: all perfection is at cost to human liberty. Rather, as Alves puts it, the person who hopes 'is experimentation':[11] 'when man's hope informs his action, man thrusts himself upon the world as power'.[12] The problem here is not simply that this remains entangled in modern dualities of freedom versus nature, divine versus human action, though they are ruinous enough and scarcely compensated for by a muddled theology of grace in which 'creation is a joint enterprise'.[13] It is more that Alves cannot conceive of a genuine anthropology of hope based on what he

9. R. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (Washington: Corpus, 1969), p. 141.
10. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, p. 10.
11. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, p. 137.
12. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, p. 138.
13. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, p. 144.

dismisses as 'a non-historical, dogmatic idea'.[14] And therefore he cannot satisfactorily distinguish his 'messianic humanism' from secular political humanism, since the entire metaphysical-theological apparatus of Christian anthropology has to be discarded in order to respect the basic principle for an account of the ethics of hope: 'When nature or any sort of order becomes the context which man elects for his life, history comes to an end. At least man loses his openness to the future since the future is to be the imitation of the values once given in the past.'[15] A Christian anthropology needs to move beyond this acute sense of historical responsibility, and allow the gospel to introduce us into a more spacious and relaxed world. It will do so by starting, not from human indeterminacy, but from faith's confession of God's works of creating and preserving persons for fellowship and therefore for hope. This (material) starting point will then be reflected in the order of exposition, so that the anthropology of hope is derivative, not fundamental. Here, too, it is a matter of removing 'the last possibility of a surreptitious resort to anthropology in Christian ethical reflection'.[16]

The Christian who hopes exists in an 'eschatological situation' defined not by self-realization but by the judgement of God. This is a matter of being

> a person under the promise and in the expectation of new life. Under this promise one is called, one is inserted into the new situation before God that is opened up by God's condemning and saving judgement. One is inserted into the hidden history of Jesus Christ in the world. That *is* the living space in which our human history is 'located' and 'takes place'. 'For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God' ... That is a categorical indicative, the content of the judgement of God upon our existence and at the same time the communication of new life.[17]

This new life determining the Christian is a life towards the future in which God's purpose will be completed. To hope as a Christian is to hope as a creature – one who has been formed and appointed by God to live a specific history, reach a specific destiny and so attain perfection. It is also to hope as a sinner who has been redeemed

14. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, p. 87.
15. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, p. 83.
16. Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, p. 120.
17. G. Sauter, *Eschatological Rationality: Theological Issues in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 197f.

from self-destruction – one whose evil tendency away from creaturely good has in Christ been authoritatively intercepted and put away. It is to hope as a saint – one who, because elect and redeemed, is also directed and empowered to live towards a certain perfection. And it is to be all this in a fellowship of persons gathered by God as the communion of the saints. Christian hope has its roots in our common participation in the reality of grace extended to us; to be a person of hope is to partake in this history in this company.[18]

All of this, however, rests upon the fact that God's merciful judgement upon lost creatures in which their human vocation is restored is the gift of *being*. God's judgement is not a conditional offer, contingent upon the completion of a task: it is a mighty work of creation. For the Christian who hopes, this is who she and her fellows are. Hope is thus an aspect of that 'conformity-to-being'[19] in which consists the goodness of our acts and our blessedness. To hope is to be the person one is and will be – a person for whom hope is 'natural', that is, a disposing of oneself in accordance with the nature and vocation bestowed by God. Two consequences follow.

First, the Christian who hopes is one who knows his or her future. Such knowledge comes from the 'spirit of wisdom and of revelation' by which 'the eyes of the heart are enlightened' and we come 'to know what is the hope to which God has called us' (Eph. 1.18). To the Christian who hopes there is revealed that we are reconciled creatures of God directed by him to our coming blessedness; and so hope includes knowledge. This knowledge, because it is the gift of the Spirit, is 'spiritual'. It is not sight or possession: 'who hopes for what he sees?' (Rom. 8.24). We have hope as we have God, as gift, not as material or psychological condition. Yet spiritual knowledge is for all that no less certain. Christian hope is 'fully assured' (cf. Heb. 6.11) of the coming perfection. Hope is not 'nescience' which fears to go beyond 'the

18. On the social dimensions of eschatology, see K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), pp. 930–34; W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 177–80; M. Volf, 'The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition', in J. Buckley and L. G. Jones (eds), *Theology and Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 89–111.

19. R. Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 79.

unfinished narrative of history'.[20] It is the knowledge of our future good given by the Spirit who is 'the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it' (Eph. 1.14). And such knowledge is sufficiently robust, offering a sufficiently persuasive account of our condition and our identity, that it forms the basis for action which is not timid or calculative but a free, bold and generous move towards the future to which we have been appointed.

Moreover, because hope includes knowledge given in the Spirit's work of 'revelation in the knowledge of [Christ]' (Eph. 1.17), it is inadvisable to speak of the cognitive dimension of hope in terms of imagination.[21] 'Imagination' suggests something too projective or poetic, too little oriented to what has been accomplished and what is now being made known in the Spirit's revealing work. A natural counterpart of a strongly futurist eschatology, imagination is oriented more to possibility than to actuality; and it can make hope's envisaging of the future into a task to be undertaken rather than the hearing of an authoritative divine judgement which has already been announced.

Second, Christian hope is a mode of personal existence (though not *private*, since I hope in company with my fellow-members in the body of Christ) in which the Christian, having been turned by God to her future good, turns to that good. God's turning to his creatures, his self-communicative presence and promised constancy, evokes a corresponding turn on the part of the creature; Christian hope is an aspect of that turn. The creaturely movement of hope is entirely and astonishingly a matter of grace: 'It is very difficult to keep in mind the fundamentally incomprehensible fact that hope, as a virtue, is something wholly supernatural.'[22] The Christian turns to the future only because that future has already been secured, has already made itself our good and the condition of our being. Above

20. N. Lash, 'The Church's Responsibility for the Future of Humanity', in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), p. 195. For an (incomplete) corrective, see K. L. Hughes, 'The Crossing of Hope, or Apophatic Eschatology', in M. Volf and W. Katerberg (eds), *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 101–24.

21. E.g. Genovesi, *Expectant Creativity*, and more recently R. Bauckham and T. Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999). Both make much use of W. F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as a Healer of the Hopeless* (Dublin: Helicon, 1965). See also G. Green, 'Imagining the Future', in Fergusson and Sarot (eds), *The Future as God's Gift*, pp. 73–87.

22. J. Pieper, *On Hope* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), p. 35.

all, that to which the Christian turns – this 'future good' – is Jesus Christ himself. Because he is not only the first but also the last, because he is alive for evermore (Rev. 1.17f.), then the Christian may – must – turn to him. To be without hope is for the Christian an impossibility, excluded by the promise of Jesus Christ; to turn to him in hope is the only way forward.

Yet hope is *hope*, not delight. The object of delight is 'a good that is present';[23] the object of hope is future: 'we do not hope for what is at present within our grasp'.[24] Further, the object of hope is 'something arduous, attainable only with difficulty'.[25] Hope is therefore a particular disposition which, in knowledge of our coming good, turns to that good. Hope lies between despair and the delight of possession. It is not despair, because Jesus Christ has already turned to us and secured our future; it is not delight, because our fellowship with him awaits consummation. Hope is, rather, confident longing for the full realization of life with Christ. The Christian who hopes is confident. Because hope is conformity to being, because it is knowledge, because it is active turning to the future which has already turned to us at the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then hope 'does not disappoint' (Rom. 5.5), and leads to boldness (2 Cor. 3.12) and steadiness (Heb. 6.19). Accordingly, the Christian who hopes is free and assured, and can venture what Paul Ramsey calls the 'immoderate life',[26] living and acting beyond the demonstrable and actual, with an intemperance grounded in the reality of the one who died, is risen and will come again.[27]

23. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IaIIae q40 a8.
24. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IaIIae q40 a8.
25. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IaIIae q40 a8.
26. P. Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville: WJKP, 1993), pp. 226–31.
27. The lack of this note of boldness is a major weakness of J. Ellul's *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: Seabury, 1977). The book's presentation is overshadowed by its insistence that what we have called the condition of hope is the divine *silence*, hope being the (quasi-absurd) confidence that, despite every indication, God might speak again. 'Hope is man's answer to God's silence' (p. 176); and 'If hope is indeed response to the silence of God, it has no place nor reason except when the situation is actually desperate' (p. 206). All this is intended by Ellul as an affirmation that Christian hope transcends every worldly possibility. 'It is the impossible which is the sole creator of true history. God's impossible is the only real ... Hope ... wants us to write another history, that of the impossible life, of the true life, which the mind of man never conceived' (p. 203). It is also a protest against making hope a matter of worldly calculation and efficacy ('As long as there is a chance to employ some kind of means ... hope has no place in the venture', p. 197). But this is an extreme moral ascesis; scouring out the *positum* of hope, it misjudges the condition of hope by neglecting the proper givenness of the Kingdom of God in which hope has its ground. 'Hope is that act whereby a person becomes aware of the distance of the Kingdom, and it clings to apocalyptic thinking. If the Kingdom is there, within easy reach, if the Kingdom is *quite naturally* within us, there is no need to hope ... Humanly speaking, it is not true that the Kingdom is present' (p. 207). Certainly the Kingdom is not an object of possession; but the negative will not do justice to the full scope of Christian hope and its modes. Ellul speaks of 'the pessimism of hope' (p. 227), of hope as 'a hazardous undertaking' (p. 229) and so reduces hope to 'pessimistic waiting' (p. 259), a kind of perverse, stubborn disengagement from the present. This is one mode of hope; but it is hardly the *parrhesia* which the gospel engenders and which sees itself, not in a time of abandonment, but in the era of grace.

V

What has been offered so far is a sketch of the moral domain of Christian hope: Christian hope is part of the movement of reconciled life in which redeemed creatures look for and tend towards their end. But to exist in this moral domain, as this kind of person in covenant with this God, is to be quickened to action. The economy of grace is also *law* (that is, being in its imperatival force) to those who exist within its blessing. To what acts are we quickened? To what are we summoned by the law of our eschatological being?

In answering this question, moral theology has to guard against the drift towards either eschatological moralism or eschatological passivity. The first was much promoted by Kant: 'the Kingdom of Heaven can be interpreted as a symbolic representation aimed merely at stimulating greater hope and effort in achieving it'.[28] But eschatology is not mythological incitement to action; nor is that for which the Christian *hopes* identical with that which the Christian *makes*. Action is action in a field of reality and makes sense only as a response to a condition. Hope, courage and effort require a sense that the world has certain qualities which make such action possible and offer it a reasonable chance of success. 'Eschatology' – reflection upon the objects of Christian hope – is the attempt to depict these qualities; without them, Christian hope is moralistic and profoundly ungracious.

This does not, however, entail passivity. To hope is to act in conformity to being. 'Is hope a help or a hindrance to action?' asks

28. I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason*, in A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni (eds), *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 161.

Aquinas.[29] It seems to be a hindrance, for 'hope brings a sense of security, but this feeling leads to carelessness, which frustrates action'. But

> of its very nature hope is an aid to action, intensifying effort in two ways. First, in terms of its object, which is difficult, possible and agreeable, awareness of difficulty calls forth concentration; the judgement of possibility certainly does not stifle effort. Hope, then, will inspire a man to earnest action. Second, in terms of its effect we have seen that hope causes delight, and that makes for more effective operation. Therefore hope is a help in acting.[30]

Hope does not generate *negligentia* but *operatio, conatus*. Because hope has this object and engenders delight, it leads to action. Put more concretely: hope is an aspect of the fellowship with God for which we have been created and reconciled and in which our perfection lies; and that fellowship is a differentiated fellowship of action. Elected to this end, we are summoned to hope in its direction. The divine Word which promises our end is also the divine command which summons us actively to move towards that which is promised. But with what kind of action?

Christian action is hopeful when it is oriented to the future consummation of all things in the Kingdom of Christ. Hopeful Christian action is undertaken in the trust that Christ's coming Kingdom is present and promised with such axiomatic certainty that it outweighs all discouragement, opposition and counter-testimony. In such trust (to which courage is closely akin) the Christian extends herself towards that which has been promised. Hope refuses a moral calculus based on what apart from the gospel is taken to be our present condition; it incites action which is obedient to the true law of our being, namely that the creation 'will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom. 8.21). Hopeful Christian action stems from the judgement which has been declared to the believer, namely that 'the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (Rom. 8.18). On the basis of that judgement, the Christian reaches towards the coming consummation and glorification, acting in and upon the world as the reality which it will be. That reaching towards – what Aquinas

29. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IaIIae q40 a8.
30. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IaIIae q40 a8.

calls magnanimity, *extensio animi ad magna*[31] – is action which seeks the fullest possible anticipation of our end.

Hopeful Christian action extends towards the world's coming judgement and vindication. The eschatological dimension of Christian action is sometimes stated by speaking of hope as essentially critical – oriented not to the present but to the overcoming of the present in the future. Hope thereby opens up a distance from the present which inhibits the kind of stasis in which history is considered to have already achieved its perfection. In his *Theology of Hope*, for example, Moltmann speaks of 'hope which sets about criticizing and transforming the present because it is open towards the universal future of the kingdom'.[32] In concrete terms, this means that hope engenders a highly mobile attitude to the orders of social existence: hope does not seek to preserve or stabilize but 'historify'.[33] This reaches towards one moral consequence of the last judgement. But Christian hope does not only look for the overthrow of present disorder, but also for the vindication of present righteousness. 'Hope', says Calvin, 'awaits the time when [God's] truth shall be manifested.'[34] The manifestation to which hope looks and towards which it acts will also be the vindication of present action, that is, the declaration that such action has been in conformity with the good order of God. To act in the light of that coming vindication is to trust that acts whose end is not yet evident, and which may therefore appear vulnerable, even futile, will bear fruit. Charity which receives little or no reciprocation, resistance to powers which oppose Jesus Christ, sponsoring forms of civic courtesy and respect for strangers: such things are hopeful, not simply because they 'historify' (which they do not always do; often they are caught in moral gridlock) but because they anticipate a coming revelation of their obedience to the law of our being. And in that lies their authority as hopeful actions which bear witness to the true end of the human world.

Hopeful Christian action is action which is both realistic and unafraid of its own limits. All action in history is necessarily limited – by lack of competence or knowledge, by the unavailability of

31. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IIaIIae q129 a1.
32. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM, 1967), p. 335.
33. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 330.
34. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III.ii.42 (London: SCM, 1960), p. 590.

resources of time, energy, wisdom, political and economic power. Such limits do not undermine Christian action, however, because Christian hope confesses that we do not need to be infinite in order to act well now and to survive in the future: we are and will be *helped*. Incapacity and limitation do not inhibit, because Jesus Christ has undertaken for our future. And so the Christian agent, hoping in him, is relieved of final responsibility and called instead to steadfastness, alertness and expectancy.

Such are some of the characteristics of hopeful Christian action. If the description risks vagueness, it is because hope is primarily a matter of orientation or general moral policy. Hope is not so much a separate act as a quality of other acts; in one sense it is adjectival. The determination of the particular moral configuration of Christian hope will depend upon a number of factors: the depth and seriousness with which Christian agents have come to read themselves and their situation in the light of the gospel; a developed capacity for truthful attention to particulars; the existence of intelligent and worshipful forms of Christian common life to enable such training in Christianness. Above all, however, formation in hope, and discernment of which acts of hope are fitting and prudent, are the works of the Spirit; and prayer for his coming is the first and last act of the hopeful Christian.

9

EVANGELICAL FREEDOM

I

We are schooled by cultural convention to believe that freedom is self-determination. The convention is long-standing and pervasive. Its origins, largely hidden from us within our everyday dealings with the world until retrieved by critical historical reflection, lie in some deep mutations in the West's traditions of religious, philosophical and political thought and practice from the early modern period. Its presence is made known in a complex set of images of human selfhood which form our civic, economic and moral accounts of ourselves. Among its most enduring and culturally successful corollaries is the assumption that the existence of God and human freedom are necessarily antithetical.

One of the primary tasks of a theology of evangelical freedom is to bring that cultural convention to consciousness, and to show that it is both contingent and inhumane. That is, a theology of evangelical freedom has to demonstrate that the conventional conception of freedom as self-government is precisely that – a *convention*, an intellectual and practical strategy for negotiating certain problems which arose in the course of the history of the West's religious and political life. And it has also to demonstrate that the convention's claim to promote human well-being is untruthful, that it is, in fact, destructive of the very reality of liberty which it seeks to uphold and defend.

But this critical or polemical task of Christian theology can only be a secondary undertaking. Its primary task in the matter is descriptive, indeed celebratory: that is, the task of loving and joyful depiction of evangelical freedom. It is the claim of the Christian faith that the understanding and experience of evangelical freedom alone can illuminate, chasten and heal us of the convention which holds us in thrall and which is destructive of the peace and good order of our culture. What is evangelical freedom? Evangelical