The Personal Nature of Kingdom Hope

by

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An Integrative Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary
In Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

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December 2007
ABSTRACT
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Many Reformed believers seem to have lost an abiding hope in the return of Jesus Christ, an important element in the Christian life. By way of an interdisciplinary study focusing on church history, theology, and relevant Bible passages, this thesis will investigate some of the reasons and seek to find practical means of restoring the hope of the kingdom to Reformed believers. This thesis will seek to show the importance of themes of hope in Scripture as a whole. It will also show how numerous factors have contributed to the current lack of Christian hope among many Reformed believers. Following an analysis of key Biblical, theological, ecumenical, and cultural motifs, one major unifying theme will be offered as a practical means of restoring hope. Our hope in the return of Christ is far too important to neglect in our teaching.
For my wife, Roxanne

&

My fellow pilgrims in this strange land!
# Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction ........................................................................................................ 6

Chapter II: Themes of Hope in Scripture ........................................................................... 8
   Old Testament Hopes and New Testament Elaborations ........................................... 9
   Patience and Watchfulness ......................................................................................... 16
   Faith, Hope, and Love ............................................................................................... 20
   Summary .................................................................................................................... 21

Chapter III: Themes of Hope in Protestant Theology ..................................................... 23
   Reformation Eschatology ......................................................................................... 23
   German Eschatology ............................................................................................... 26
   Dutch Eschatology ................................................................................................. 31
   An American Contribution: Old Testament Synthesis ............................................. 35
   Summary ................................................................................................................... 37

Chapter IV: Ecumenical and Cultural Influences ............................................................. 39
   Over-Realized Eschatology ..................................................................................... 39
   Under-Realized Eschatology .................................................................................. 47
   Summary ................................................................................................................. 52

Chapter V: Application ...................................................................................................... 53
   Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 56

Bibliography ................................................................................................................... 58
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Genesis chapters 1 & 2 and Revelation chapters 21 & 22 serve as bookends for the whole Bible. Scripture ends with a depiction of the world that is quite similar to the way it was in Eden, a place without pain and death. At the beginning, we see a world where Adam and Eve were able to experience the full benefits of living in perfect relationship to God. Humans had no want or need that was unmet. The end of the Bible describes our hope for the future in similar terms. The last two chapters of the book of Revelation portray a new order where God’s people will once again live in peace and harmony without the ravages of sin and death. Our paradise has been lost and will one day be regained. This is the context for the whole Bible, and yet, this hope does not receive the attention it deserves among Reformed Christians today.

Many Reformed believers seem to have lost an abiding hope in the return of Jesus Christ, an important element in the Christian life. By way of an interdisciplinary study focusing on church history, theology, and relevant Bible passages, this thesis will investigate some of the reasons and seek to find practical
means of restoring the hope of the kingdom to Reformed believers. The big answer for any imbalance in the Christian life is always sin, but more specific manifestations of sin are the subject of this thesis.

Many church leaders would point to the syncretism that has always plagued God’s people as being the chief cause of this despair. The church is always fighting the influences of the world, and there are many influences in culture that are designed by Satan to create despair in the believer. Naturalism, humanism, pragmatism, materialism, and a host of other “isms”, may be offered as possible factors. However, the more pressing questions for the Church are these: Does Scripture emphasize hope and restoration more than we do, in the majority of its contents and not just in its bookends? Does our current trend toward hopelessness in Reformed churches find any roots in our own theology? Do our preaching, teaching, worship, and evangelism reflect the emphasis that Scripture places on hope? These questions must be considered if we are to recover an abiding hope in the return of Jesus Christ. This thesis will seek to show the importance of themes of hope in Scripture as a whole. It will also show how numerous factors have contributed to the current lack of Christian hope among many Reformed believers. Following an analysis of key Biblical, theological, ecumenical, and cultural motifs, one major unifying theme will be offered as a practical means of restoring hope. Our hope in the return of Christ is far too important to neglect in our teaching.

1 It is not the goal of this thesis to analyze the various millennial views at any length. These discussions have dominated the field of Eschatology for centuries, and for many Christians, they may have muddied the waters and detracted from the general concept of hope found in Scripture. It will be necessary to touch on them a little, but more consideration will be given to Christian hope in general.
CHAPTER II
THEMES OF HOPE IN SCRIPTURE

Are Reformed believers missing the importance of hope in Scripture? Themes of hope are not found simply in the last few pages of Scripture. Hopeful language permeates nearly every page of the canon. Since God's Word has been given to sinful people with the purpose of revelation, one must conclude that God intends for His people to understand the object, content, and character of hope, as prevalent as the theme is from cover to cover. This hope is by no means inseparable from the Gospel of grace, which is typically regarded by Orthodox believers as the major message of Scripture, just as God’s works of salvation in the past are never inseparable from His promises for the future. Nevertheless, God’s people have always struggled to remain hopeful. This chapter will briefly survey the Scriptures, seeking to draw out the themes of hope therein. Each of these themes is found in the Old Testament, but has important elaborations in the New Testament.

Themes of hope in Scripture are usually discussed under the heading of “Eschatology” and these themes are usually thought of in a future tense. However, it is not enough to relegate the term “Eschatology” to prophecy concerning future events only. The term literally means “study of the last things”. But simply stated as
such, the term is misleading. As Brian Lee puts it, “From Genesis to Revelation, Eschatology is portrayed as the consummate fulfillment of God’s promises in history...”\(^2\) Eschatology, then, becomes so closely tied to the study of redemptive history in Scripture and the hope of believers in expectation of the fulfillment of promises, that it is hard to distinguish it from Biblical theology. Certainly, some of the promises are yet to be fulfilled, but overall, the character of Eschatology is telos-oriented. Rather than thinking of “end” temporally, the Christian will find better application in eschatological texts by thinking of “end” as a goal. Thus, the character of Eschatology is not dissimilar to Biblical Theology in general.

Old Testament Hopes and New Testament Elaborations

Anthony Hoekema points to seven key eschatological realities hoped for by Old Testament believers: the coming Redeemer, the kingdom of God, the new covenant, the restoration of Israel, the outpouring of the Spirit, the day of the Lord, and the new heavens and the new earth.\(^3\) These hopes are the point of focus in the discussion below. These hopes have “already” aspects, as well as “not-yet” aspects. The writer of Hebrews summarizes the hope of the Old Testament believers in this way:

> These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. (Heb. 11:11-16)


\(^3\) Anthony Hoekema, The Bible and the Future (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 11.
This text gives an over-arching context for the events of the Old Testament. Though, in some sense, the ancients were looking for fulfillment of promises on a smaller scale, and even worked to achieve these ends, there was a general hope for things even greater than the land of Canaan. This is an important elaboration that ties us to the Old Testament church.

During the Exodus, the Israelites found themselves wandering in the wilderness; pilgrims in a strange land. They were no longer slaves but faced new hardships and romantically dreamed of the old days. Moses was inspired to write the book of Genesis to motivate the ancient audience of Israel. Richard Pratt interprets the original meaning of Genesis in the following manner: “Israel should leave Egypt behind and move toward the land of promise because of God’s gracious provisions and promises in the past.” Genesis recounts these promises and presents the Promised Land as more like Eden than Egypt. These promises make the message one of hope, and thoroughly eschatological. Israel is encouraged by the stories to press on toward the goal of arrival in the Promised Land. As God’s people, they were destined for this better land. Later, in Deuteronomy, as the second generation of God’s people out of Egypt stand near the edge of the Promised Land, Moses recounts their struggles and continually charges them to “Remember the days of old...”(Deut. 32:7) and the promises given. This hope was constantly upheld in the Pentateuch as a motivator, to get a grumbling nation to continue moving forward.

More than just a manual for pilgrims moving into Canaan, however, the Pentateuch contains prophetic directives of hope for the Israelites that have a more

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cosmological nature. The immediate salvation was important, but a larger cosmic drama was in play. The mysterious words of Genesis 3:15 reveal such a drama. God said to Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” The entire Old Testament drama can be viewed as a heightening of the revelation contained in that verse. The prophecy in the latter half of the verse refers to the coming Redeemer of Israel. This was certainly unclear to the Israelite’s of Moses’ day but, nevertheless, meant hope for Israel to be one day free of the sin brought about by Adam and Eve. Moses said to the people in Deuteronomy 18, verse 15: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers- it is to him you shall listen.” In context, the original meaning must have had some to do with Joshua, the next leader of Israel. Nevertheless, Acts refers to this prophecy twice (3:22, 7:37), linking the words of Moses to the coming Redeemer. While Joshua was a more immediate type of Christ, the greater hope was in the future Redeemer. Moses was the “already”, while Joshua was in the near future. The greater fulfillment, the true “not-yet”, was in Christ. In our era, Christ has come. However, he will come again bringing a greater restoration of all things. This is our “not-yet”.

After Israel arrived in the Promised Land, much work was to be done. While the land served as a point of promise for Israel, it is clear now that this was not the final resting place of history, but merely a type of something greater. As Joshua led the armies across the Jordan, the people knew much work was ahead. In fact, many

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feared the fight ahead of them in the land of giants. But Joshua builds on the teaching of Moses, handed down by God. “Remember the word that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, saying, ‘The LORD your God is providing you a place of rest and will give you this land.’” (Josh. 1:13) They entered the land with the goal of establishing a theocratic state, a physical kingdom of God on earth. Even though Israel eventually demanded their own human king, it is clear that God was to be understood as the real king. “And the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.’” (1 Samuel 8:7) Why had Israel rejected God as king, as they would continue to do time and time again? It is because they failed to hope for a kingdom of greater proportions, one promised by the prophets. It was not simply the benefits of the kingdom they failed to hope for, but the King Himself.

The entire book of Amos served as a warning to Judah, urging them to recognize the rule of God. After listing the many covenant failures of Israel and Judah, Amos gives the nation hope for restoration, both of the Davidic kingship and in nature. The message of Amos, then, is more than simply “repent or be punished”. It gives both a positive and a negative motivation for change. Verse 10 of chapter 9 reads: “All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, ‘Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.’” But the Lord continues with promises to “raise up the booth of David” and “restore the fortunes of [His] people Israel” in verses 11-15. Hope is offered to incite the people to action. Again, it is clear from New Testament elaboration that more is meant here than simply a hope for a good earthly king. “Rebuilding David’s fallen tent, repairing its breeches (the break up of the united kingdom), does not apply to the physical nation of Israel alone; it includes the
ingathering of the nations.”⁶ Jesus is the one who took his throne and established a greater kingdom. God “raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.” (Luke 1:69-70) The kingly hope of Amos, as well as the restoration of which he speaks, points to the Israelite hope in the coming kingdom of God, in a greater sense than they were already experiencing. The earthly kings were a sort of “already”. Some of them were good kings, serving as decent types of the coming great King. Jesus was their “not-yet”. For us, the King has come a first time and will return again one day.

One of the primary ways God has chosen to deal with His people is through the covenant of grace. This covenant has been administered in different ways with heightening degrees of revelation throughout Scripture. A covenant is a “bond in blood, sovereignly administered” with different covenant heads having received this revelation.⁷ God made covenants with several of the patriarchs, each time adding some new element. But in a special sense, the Old Testament also points to a “new covenant”, which is principally the same covenant of grace, only it is administered with a new and more perfect covenant head: the Lord Jesus Christ. The prophet Jeremiah pointed to this coming covenant administration. He speaks of the Lord making a new covenant with Israel and Judah in chapter 31. The writer of Hebrews recalls this covenant (8:8). Then, speaking of Jesus, he writes: “He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions

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committed under the first covenant.” (9:15) The experiences of Israel under the previous administrations were hopeful, comprising the “already” of the promises they received. However, for them, a final administration was “not-yet”. For Christians today, the perfect Mediator has come and no further administrations are needed. However, the “promised eternal inheritance” is still “not-yet”.

The Old Testament is full of amazing accounts of God’s works among the Israelites. These events were miraculous and awe-inspiring, demonstrations of the power of God to create and destroy at will. They were powerful evidence of the kingship of God, displayed before the ancient world for His glory. But more was to come. The prophet Joel spoke of a day when God’s power would manifest itself directly in the lives of His people, a fulfillment of Moses’ prayer (Num. 11:29). \(^8\) Joel’s prophetic words read:

> And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)

God’s Spirit to Israel meant the physical representation of His awesome power. For God to say that such power would be available to the people (even servants!) was indeed a statement of great hope! At Pentecost, Peter recounted the prophecy of Joel to the audience and pointed to it’s fulfillment in their own midst. Though ancient Israel had some manifestations of the power of God’s Spirit in their own day (the “already”), the greater reality was yet to come. For the New Testament church, God has made available to us the power of His Spirit, which, combined with the force of His Word, is able to change the hearts of men and transform the world. Still, the day

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is coming when God’s power will fully subjugate the earth and completely rid the world of its sinfulness.

Eight of the Old Testament prophets refer to the coming “day of the Lord”, making the event an important eschatological theme in Scripture. In the days of Amos, the people often spoke as though they longed for the day of the Lord but obviously misunderstood its implications. Amos describes the event as a day “of darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.” (Amos 5:18-19) This was a prophecy concerning the day of coming judgment, in which God would judge the sinful nations for their iniquity. The irony of Amos’ prophecy is that Judah and Israel were likely to be doomed as well for their covenant infidelity.

Amos’ prophecy can be understood on both a small scale and a cataclysmic scale. On a smaller scale, this could be taken as exile: “a definite, future divine intrusion in judgment.”9 But in a cosmic sense, this is still “not-yet” for New Testament believers. Jesus speaks of a “day of judgment”, a day that will not be pleasant for unbelievers. (Matt. 10:15; 12:36) Even so, this coming day is meant to be a source of hope for the Christian. In the Revelation of John, the cries of the martyrs go up before the Lord asking, “How long before you will judge?” (Rev. 6:10) God’s judgment will be grim but means cleansing and renewal are around the corner.

This hope of renewal finds beautiful expression in prophet Isaiah. He prophesied concerning “the new heavens and the new earth” where the “former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.” (Isaiah 65:17) To ancient Israel, the Promised Land was a new beginning, a place of restoration and renewal. But

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9 Ibid., 384
nowhere in the Old Testament or anywhere else in history do we see the words of Isaiah fulfilled in all their potency. This prophecy is the primary Scriptural description of the great Consummation we all await. Isaiah’s words are echoed near the end of the New Testament. John writes in Revelation 21:

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” 5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

This glorious hope is the goal of history. It can be stated no clearer. It can be described no more aesthetically or powerfully. While we see inklings of this future reality now, the ultimate meaning of this text, as with the prophecy in Isaiah, is found in the age to come. This passage will be considered in greater detail at a later point.

Living in the Continuation of the Kingdom:

Patience and Watchfulness

Believers living between the first and second Comings of Christ are given clear direction in the New Testament on the character of the Christian life. The calls to hope are different from those of the Old Testament in the sense that the kingdom is now much bigger than one small nation. The cosmological nature of the redemptive-historical plan is much easier to see today. Several passages will be considered below that illustrate how the character of hope became one of patience, tempered with
watchfulness, in the New Testament age. But first, two passages that lay out the more general character of this waiting period will be studied.

The first passage is found in the opening of the Lord’s Prayer, the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:10: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” As it was previously shown, this verse demonstrates the more narrow definition of the “kingdom of God”. This statement, which Jesus urges His disciples to pray, encapsulates the unfolding of the period known as the Continuation. The character of this period involves God’s will being done more and more on earth in the same way it is done in heaven: without question and voluntarily. “What is God’s by right (de jure) becomes God’s in fact (de facto).”¹⁰ The goal of the church, the people of God, must be the same as this goal offered by Jesus. The spread of the kingdom is the primary hallmark of the Continuation and serves as the primary telos of the New Testament church.

Inseparable from this mission is the preaching of the evangel. Christ says in Matthew 24:14, “This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” Most Christians think of this “end” in terms of the last days, and certainly some illusion to this may be interpreted. However, the word is not εὐαγγελίον but τέλος, denoting an aspect of “goal” as well as finality. So, the basic framework of the Continuation is the goal of kingdom advancement, but within the rubric of spiritual acquisition: the preaching of the gospel of grace. The context in Matthew 24 involves the teaching

that nothing will hinder the advancement of the Gospel, neither the hatred of the nations, nor any form of persecution.\textsuperscript{11}

Aside from this basic goal of spiritual acquisition, the believer is encouraged by the New Testament to live in a state of continual patience and watchfulness, which are the basic aspects of a life of hope. Several passages present this tension. One such passage follows on the heels of the proclamation of Christ in Matthew 24:14. Jesus speaks of a number of signs, the nature of which will mean suffering and hardship for God’s people. He says in verse 34 that this age “will not pass away until these things happen.” The implication is clearly that believers must be patient in the midst of such trials. But Christ continues, urging the disciples to remain watchful. “Stay awake,” he says, “for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” (Matt. 24:42) Hope for Christ’s return is always characterized by these two boundaries of disposition.

Paul also demonstrates this tension. Throughout this section of chapter 8, there are words of hope:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{18}For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. \textsuperscript{19}For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. \textsuperscript{20}For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope \textsuperscript{21}that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. \textsuperscript{22}For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. \textsuperscript{23}And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. \textsuperscript{24}For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? \textsuperscript{25}But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 259
For Paul, the present is characterized by “suffering” and “eager longing”. He says we “wait eagerly” as we “hope for what we do not see”. William Hendriksen argues that the first part of verse 24 refers to the reality that our salvation came in Christ with a firm promise that more will follow. Salvation, for Paul was a full concept, not only of justification, but of sanctification and glorification as well. From this and his statements later in the chapter, Reformed theologians derive the concept of the *Ordo Salutis*, of which glorification is a part. Paul adds that the time of waiting is tempered with patience. Also present in this text is the hope that creation in general shares with us: a hope of future restoration. A similar passage is found in 2 Peter 3:13-15, which reads:

> But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. 15 And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him...

Both elements are again present here. On the one hand, one sees the call to wait expectantly for the new order. On the other hand, patience is needed as the elect are brought in. Commenting on this passage, Calvin says, “Hope is living and efficacious; therefore it cannot be but that it will attract us to itself.” True Christian hope will take on a character of deep longing, but will also long for others to share in the same hope.

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Faith, Hope, and Love

One final consideration of hope in Scripture ought to be the importance of the trilogy Paul uses as a teaching mechanism: the relationship between faith, hope, and love. “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:13) “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Th. 1:2-3) “But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” (1 Th. 5:8) In each of these passages, Paul relates hope to faith and love. On the relationship between faith and hope in particular, Pannenberg writes:

The core of eschatological hope, hope beyond death, is faith in God. Faith in the eternal God encompasses everything that must be presented as object of Christian hope. Such hope does not come as something additional to faith in God, and it cannot persist without such faith.\(^\text{14}\)

There is a strong connection between faith and hope, but also between love and hope. After all, the object of hope is primarily a Person. The actions of promises are acts of love. This theme will be developed more at a later point.

Christians have historically struggled with balancing these three virtues. Our natural bents, or personalities, often dictate our emphasis in spiritual matters. Some Christians define their religion by speaking only of their faith. Some define religion only in terms of love. Others, like Moltmann, would say that all aspects of the Christian life must be defined by hope. He writes that “hope gives faith in Christ its

breadth and leads it into life.”

Surely we must not stray to any of these extremes, but seek to balance them as Paul does, though granting the edge to love.

Part of the difficulty is that it is particularly hard to define the terms “hope” and “faith” apart from one another. What is faith but “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”? (Heb. 11:1) What is hope but “standing on the promises” in faith? These terms are extremely connected and both attempt to broach an understanding of the spiritual character that the Gospel brings, a character that comes to us through the Person of Christ and His Spirit. Perhaps this is why Paul gives “love” the edge. The spiritual character of our religion can only occur in relationship to Christ. Paul, enamored with the concept of love in 1 Corinthians 13, defines it in a personified way. He assigns love a set of action verbs, making it a subject, even a person. Among this list we read that “love hopes all things”. (1 Cor. 13:7) Hope flows from a personal relationship to Christ Jesus, the coming Redeemer and King.

Summary

Themes of hope in Scripture are found on nearly every page. There are many eschatological hopes in the Old Testament. Most of these involved aspects of immediate realization, experiences of fulfillment by the ancient believer. But for many of these hopes, if not all of them, the New Testament age held some partial fulfillments of prophecy and added revelation pointing to a future Consummation. The New Testament also encourages believers with an understanding of life between the first and second comings of Christ. It gives us the boundaries of patience and watchfulness, characteristics which must be applied to our hope as Christians.

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Further, it teaches us an important relationship between faith, hope, and love. Above all, it is important to note that hope in Scripture is never merely attached to the benefits of the kingdom alone, but to the Person who grants them: the King.

Since themes of hope are so prevalent in Scripture, we must conclude that they represent an important emphasis that ought to be cherished by Reformed believers. This is not just a secondary theme found on scattered on a few pages of prophecy, but involves the character of Scripture in general. But does our theology demonstrate the importance of this emphasis on hope? The next chapter will look at several streams of theology that may have influenced Reformed believers.
CHAPTER III
THEMES OF HOPE IN PROTESTANT THEOLOGY

Our practice should be rooted in our theology. Our theology should be rooted in Scripture. In the last chapter, the importance of hope in Scripture was demonstrated. Do we find this emphasis in our theology? If, in practice, Reformed Christians have lost an abiding hope in the return of Christ, then one logical question we must ask is this: “Does it have anything to do with our own theology: a de-emphasis of hopeful themes in Scripture?” The following is a survey of several major streams in Protestant theology which have influenced the Reformed church in its conception of hope. Have these influences helped or hindered the hope of the believer?

Reformation Eschatology

The Protestant Reformation was perhaps the most important period in evangelical history after the first century. In sixteenth century Europe, several distinct religious ideas came to bear on Christian thought and have since changed the field of discussion for Christianity.¹⁶ The Reformers looked back to New Testament times to rediscover some basic doctrines of the Christian life, leaning heavily on the interpretations of certain Patristic fathers, with Augustine being the chief of these.¹⁷ Alistair McGrath, in his book *Reformation Thought: An*  

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¹⁷ Ibid., 21
Introduction, organizes the religious thought of the Reformation into 5 major doctrinal categories: justification by faith, predestination, scripture, sacraments, and the church. Eschatology, the study of the last things, is not listed, because it was not a primary focus during the Protestant Reformation.\(^\text{18}\)

In cannot be doubted that some eschatological themes were already present in seed form in the writings of the Reformers, yet the vast majority of content was devoted to the categories of doctrine discussed by McGrath. The emphasis placed on these doctrines was most justified, given the state of the Roman church at that time. In particular, the rediscovery of grace revitalized a spiritually dying church. Robert Capon writes on the impact of this find:

The Reformation was a time when men went blind, staggering drunk because they had discovered, in the dusty basement of late medievalism, a whole cellarful of fifteen-hundred-year-old, two hundred proof grace-of bottle after bottle of pure distillate of Scripture, one sip of which would convince anyone that God saves us single-handedly. The word of the Gospel-after all those centuries of trying to lift yourself into heaven by worrying about the perfection of your bootstraps-suddenly turned out to be a flat announcement that the saved were home before they started.... Grace has to be drunk straight: no water, no ice, and certainly no ginger ale; neither goodness, nor badness, nor the flowers that bloom in the spring of super spirituality could be allowed to enter into the case.\(^\text{19}\)

Certainly, the rediscovery of this “200-proof” Gospel of grace served to revitalize the church in desperate times. The importance of this can not be understated! But in an effort to clarify the work of Jesus in His death, “salvation by Christ has become

\(^{\text{18}}\) This is not to say that Reformation theology contains no focus on Eschatology. For instance, Calvin addresses the final resurrection (\textit{Institutes} III.25) and some meditations on the future life (III.9).

virtually synonymous with the atonement.” Consequently, the resurrection of Jesus and all the eschatological ramifications of it became more of an afterthought. Reformed theology would continue to be dominated by Soteriology, and Eschatology remained a postlude in Systematic Theology well into the 19th century. For many Protestant theologians, it still remains so, relegated to the last few pages of most surveys of theology. Even there, the focus is primarily on millennial discussions, the intermediate state of man, or the sheer apologetic value of the resurrection.

The importance of Eschatology for the church cannot be missed. As Michael Horton writes:

> Only Christianity locates the meaning of history within history (i.e., the Resurrection) without abandoning belief in another world...When we concentrate narrowly on questions about the end times, we actually miss the richness of biblical teaching on eschatology.

Although this emphasis is present in Scripture to a large extent, many Reformed theologians have continued to emphasize the past and present aspects of the Christian life almost exclusively. However, Eschatology began to change with the dawn of historical criticism in the West. Darwinism and other Enlightenment ideas began to have an effect on theology. The effect was largely negative, but the resurgence of apocalyptic themes in theology can be viewed as one positive idea to be captured in the midst of many bad ideas that were spawned by the history critics.

**German Eschatology**

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21 Ibid., 23

With the rise of Enlightenment principles, “meaning in history” became neither universal nor hopeful. Historians began to think of historical meaning only in relation to a particular culture.\textsuperscript{23} Interpreting the data in this way inevitably leads to the conclusion that there is no single goal for all of human history. This mindset lies at the core of our human struggle for hope, for how does one hope if history has no goal?

Due to the lack of meaning attributed to history by Westerners, 19\textsuperscript{th} century German theology simply disregarded Eschatology in Scripture. Adolf Harnack (1851-1930) and his contemporaries were extremely critical of any literal interpretation of future events in Scripture.\textsuperscript{24} C.H. Dodd (1884-1973), a Welsh theologian, spent a year studying with Harnack in Berlin. Rather than virtually ignoring the study of Eschatology, as Harnack did, Dodd took a slightly more moderate approach. Dodd is best known for advancing a theory known as “realized Eschatology”.

JohnWalvoord notes three major areas where Dodd contributed to the field of Eschatology: 1) his concept of \textit{eschaton} as it relates to history and time, 2) the nature and content of the \textit{kerygma}, and 3) the synthesis of the former two ideas resulting in his concept of “realized Eschatology.”\textsuperscript{25} Dodd wrote, “History is symbolically expressed in Christian theology by placing the Old and New Testaments

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Lesslie Newbigin, \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society} (Grand Rapids: Eerdamns, 1989), 103.
\item \textsuperscript{24} John F. Walvoord, “Realized Eschatology”, \textit{Bibliotheca sacra} 127.508 (Oct/Dec 1970), 313.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 315-316
\end{itemize}
within a mythological scheme...”

This meant that religious history was not to be taken literally and, consequently, neither were its eschatological statements. Further, Dodd argued that Jesus’ language concerning the kingdom should be taken purely as present reality, which was where he coined the term “realized”. In *Parables of the Kingdom*, Dodd wrote: “The *eschaton* has moved from the future to the present, from the sphere of expectation into that of realized experience.”

There was no significant future element to the *eschaton*, according to Dodd.

His argument for realized Eschatology rested on passages such as Matthew 12:28 and Mark 1:15, where Jesus said the kingdom “is come” and that it was “at hand” respectively. Dodd took the Greek there to indicate “absolute arrival” rather than simply “spatial nearness”, which is the usual interpretation. The Greek is actually cleverly ambiguous. In Matthew, the verb ἐφοροευ (aorist) is best translated “has come”, an undefined past action. In Mark, the verb ἐγένετο is perfect, but the action completed is one of “having drawn near”, not necessarily “fully arrived”. The nearness should be taken seriously, but balanced with other texts that suggest a future aspect of the kingdom as well. The nearness texts are not sufficient in themselves to warrant a purely realized Eschatology.

While Dodd’s argument lacked a number of convincing elements, he placed an emphasis on an aspect of the kingdom mostly neglected before his time. The tide was turning in favor of Eschatology, but Dodd’s view was not extremely helpful in

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28 Walvoord, 317.
establishing it as a major factor in the Christian life. Many Reformed theologians now believe that the kingdom does, in fact, have a “realized” aspect, but without a future aspect, or a goal of history, there is little point in realizing present blessing. Later in this thesis, the implications of “realized Eschatology” will be further evaluated, along with two troubling extremes. At this point, it is simply useful to note the growing awareness of eschatological themes in theology at the turn of the last century.

Dodd rekindled some interest in Eschatology, but still upheld the basic skepticism of liberal theology with regards to any future apocalypse and its basis in Scripture. This attitude was challenged by several German theologians, reshaping the debate on Eschatology. J. Weiss (1863-1914) sought to establish the entire New Testament message on an eschatological foundation. A. Schweitzer (1875-1965) later popularized the idea. Their “quest” was to show that the language of Christ (and Paul for Schweitzer) was highly eschatological in character.29 While rediscovering the extent of hopeful language in Scripture, Schweitzer himself did not place much hope in Jesus’ words, claiming that Jesus was apparently mistaken. In a sense, Schweitzer saw Eschatology being swallowed up by history, again falling victim to the Enlightenment view that history has no meaning.30 Jesus and his disciples must have anticipated a quick end that did not come.

Nevertheless, other German theologians quickly embraced the eschatological slant on the New Testament and then moved toward one of two extremes. One

29 Ibid., 314

extreme is represented by Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976). He took on the eschatological language of Weiss and Schweitzer, but molded it to fit with the theology of his predecessors, retaining the existential thrust of Ritschl.31 Jürgen Moltmann interprets Bultmann’s work as history being swallowed up by Eschatology.32 Moltmann’s own ideas represent the other extreme in German Eschatology.

For Moltmann, relegating the events of Eschatology to the “last day” robbed the events of their impotence in the here and now.33 He agrees with Schweitzer that every part of biblical revelation is under-girded by Eschatology.34 But he believes the other German theologians were too influenced by the philosophy of Kant, which consequently stripped Eschatology of its historical character, or sense of goal.35 Kant believed we cannot know anything certain about the supernatural realm. Consequently, even Kantian ethics were deontological, basing morals on human nature and not on any future outcome, or goal.

Moltmann’s application is what sets him apart from other liberals. While it is clear that Moltmann is influenced by the Marxist philosophy articulated by Ernst Bloch, he finds within Eschatology a goal-oriented motive for the Christian life. He writes: “The coming lordship of the risen Christ cannot be merely hoped for and


32 Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 165.

33 Ibid., 15

34 Ibid., 43

35 Ibid., 62
awaited. This hope and expectation also sets its stamp on life, action and suffering in the history of society.” With Romantic flavor, he penned this portion of the last paragraph in Theology of Hope:

The hope of the resurrection must bring about a new understanding of the world. This world is not the heaven of self-realization, as it is said to be in Idealism. This world is not the hell of self-estrangement, as it is said to be in romanticist and existentialist writing. The world is not yet finished, but it is understood as engaged in history. It is therefore the world of possibilities, the world in which we can serve the future, promised truth and righteousness and peace.

Many elements of Moltmann’s book are inspiring but must be tempered with realism.

Since Moltmann, a few other recent theologians are worth noting in this stream of thought. The first of these is Ernst Käsemann, a New Testament scholar. Similar to Moltmann, he claims that “apocalyptic ... was the mother of all theology.”

Käsemann’s defense of this thesis involves scrutinizing the New Testament with the apocalyptic rubric of the Old Testament. He seeks to find correlations between the two sets of documents, linking New Testament thought to Hebrew apocalypse language. He asserts that in the teaching of Jesus and Paul, one finds the basis for a post-Easter hope prevalent in the primitive Christian church, a hope necessary for Christian theology to thrive.

Likewise, Wolfhart Pannenberg also seeks to emphasize the eschatological character of Scripture. Pannenberg believes that the dichotomy between historical

36 Ibid., 329-330

37 Ibid., 338


39 Ibid., 46
exegesis and systematic theology is a false one. He is concerned with finding unity in history rooted in Eschatology. He shows how Israel’s history was hastening towards a definite end. Each event on the path of history only makes sense in relation to that End. Thus the whole canon of God’s revelation must be considered eschatological in character. Frank Tupper summarizes the main point of Pannenberg’s theology in this way:

The End-event terminates the progress of history and gathers all history as God’s activity into a coherent whole; consequently, the end alone can illuminate the revelatory significance of each event within the whole of history, “for history receives its unity from its End.”

This is perhaps a bit strong, but intriguing nonetheless. As it is, one might charge Pannenberg with the fallacy of division. Just because the prophesied End of history is eschatological in character does not necessarily mean that all parts of God’s revelation are necessarily eschatological. Slightly modified, one might say that history finds its unity in the event of Christ’s death and resurrection with a view towards the End of time. It is more Orthodox to ground the unity of history in the Person and work of Christ as a group of events than in the single future event of the Consummation. This claim will be defended later.

Dutch Eschatology

The Dutch theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were well aware of the eschatological musings of their German and English neighbors. They


41 Ibid., 18

formed a type of synthesis between the two, leaving room for both realized and future Eschatology. Most of the Dutch contributions centered on the concept of the Kingdom of God.

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) was the premier theologian of the Dutch golden era. His *Reformed Dogmatics* is still regarded as an important work of systematic theology. One of the reasons for this regard is his special and lengthy treatment of eschatological themes in Scripture. In particular, Bavinck introduced a redemptive-historical approach to prophecy in Scripture, which is most evident in his treatment of the prophesied kingdom of God. Bavinck traced Old Testament prophecy and demonstrated how the expectation of Israel rested on the coming Messiah and the kingship He would bring. For the prophets, Bavinck taught, this kingship was the completion of history. He wrote:

> [The Old Testament] regards the messianic kingdom as the final state and clearly views God’s judgment over enemies, the repulsion of the final attack, the transformation of nature, and the resurrection of the dead as events that precede the initial and full establishment of this kingdom…it is all described in terms of Israel’s own history and nation.43

Certainly, this reading of the Old Testament explained why so many people rejected Jesus as Messiah during His earthly ministry. They were expecting a different sort of kingdom finality than Jesus brought at His first coming.

Besides his contributions to a redemptive-historical approach to prophecy, Bavinck was one of the first to say that the kingdom of heaven both “has come” and “is still coming”.44 He does not elaborate on this statement to any great extent but

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clearly interpreted the kingdom message in a new way. Unlike Dodd, who emphasized the already to the exclusion of the not-yet, or the Germans, who predominantly saw all of Scripture pointing to a future reality, Bavinck saw truth in both. The synthesis had begun.

This synthesis found application in the work of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), the pioneer of neo-Calvinism in the Netherlands. In fact, it was probably in the thought of Kuyper that Bavinck found unity for his work. The hallmark of Kuyper’s system of thought was his view of the sovereignty of God. He wrote that the major principle of Calvinism “was not soteriologically, justification by faith, but in the widest sense cosmologically, the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole cosmos, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible.” If God is sovereign and rules over every inch of creation, then it follows that God’s plan involves grace restoring nature. For Kuyper, this thought was expressed in every area of culture: art, politics, and science, as well as religion. It was around this idea that Bavinck’s entire systematic theology revolved.

Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949) would later expand on the redemptive-historical approach to Scripture, particularly in the New Testament. Though Vos was a Dutch

44 Ibid., 162
45 Ibid., 14
46 A. Kuyper, Lectures on Calvinism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 79.
immigrant to America and a long-time professor at Princeton, his work fits neatly into the stream of Dutch Eschatology. For Vos, the two major eschatological events were the resurrection of Jesus and the coming Judgment.\textsuperscript{48} These two events form a type of box in which the current phase of the kingdom is to be understood. He placed little emphasis on the period before the Resurrection. Instead, he focused on a scheme where the world to come is realized in principle now, both in heaven and on earth, but will be fully realized at the Parousia.\textsuperscript{49} We now live in a time when “this age” and the “age to come” overlap. Vos went on to demonstrate this in the theology of Paul.

One final Dutch thinker, Herman Ridderbos (1909-2007), is important to this discussion. Ridderbos’ \textit{The Coming of the Kingdom} and \textit{Paul: An Outline of His Theology} are monumental works in recent Eschatology. In these works and others, Ridderbos defended the present reality of the Kingdom as well as the future Consummation of it. He was careful to avoid the extremes of Dodd and others.\textsuperscript{50} Ridderbos found the words of Jesus and Paul to be rich with eschatological meaning, largely centered on the character of the kingdom of God. This kingdom preaching, while eschatological in character, is inseparable from the outworking of Soteriology. History is fundamentally redemptive and is building towards the consummation. Ridderbos recognized the extreme importance of the first Coming of Christ, and did not limit its eschatological significance to the Resurrection alone. However, the


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 38

\textsuperscript{50} Herman Ridderbos, \textit{The Coming of the Kingdom} (Philadelphia: P & R, 1962), 444.
coming of the kingdom began with Jesus’ activity, according to Ridderbos.\textsuperscript{51} The Old Testament only serves as background material.

An American Contribution: Old Testament Synthesis

George E. Ladd (1911-1982), an American Baptist minister and professor of New Testament, offered a slightly modified version of the kingdom timeline posited by Vos. The most significant characteristic of this modification is the fact that Ladd included an understanding that God’s kingdom was indeed active in the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{52} In his \textit{Theology of the New Testament}, Ladd wrote:

\begin{quote}
In such events as the Exodus and the captivity in Babylon, God was acting in his kingly power to deliver or judge his people. However, in some real sense God’s kingdom \textit{came} into history in the person and mission of Jesus.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

Ladd was acknowledging that the character of the kingdom is such that the timeline of kingdom history did not completely begin at the Inauguration and the coming of Christ. Rather, it was manifestly present in some form in ancient Israel.

Building on the timeline suggested by Ladd, Old Testament professor Richard Pratt teaches that many biblical scholars in the past have missed the relevance of the Old Testament. The full value of the Old Testament may only be gleaned when its original meaning is taken into consideration, along with any New Testament elaborations on a particular theme. Further, proper applications can only be drawn in the light of the original meaning and New Testament elaborations. The Old Testament only serves as background material.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 61
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\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 67
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Testament is foundational to the language and themes found in the New Testament, especially for Eschatology.54

The concept of the kingdom of God does not simply find its meaning in prophecy. Pratt argues that it finds its basis in Genesis, as early as creation. God makes man in His image. Arguing from the context of the ancient Near East, Pratt says that the custom of kings placing images of themselves all over their physical kingdoms was a way to establish their authority visually. He writes:

This custom of Moses’ day helped him understand why God called Adam and Eve his image. Just as human kings had their images, the divine King ordained that the human race would be his royal image. Put simply, the expression “image of God” designated human beings as representatives of the supreme King of the universe.55

From there, it is easy to see how the concept of kingship worked its way into all of Scripture. God used this “image” motif as a way to explain his relationship to his people and the world. Satan challenged God’s kingly authority in the garden. Adam and Eve chose to try and forsake their role as subjects, and God instituted a redemptive historical plan to restore His images and verify His eternal kingship.

Pratt distinguishes between a narrow and broad definition of the kingdom of God.56 In a broad sense, God has always been (and always will be) the eternal king who rules over all creation. In a more narrow sense, Pratt defines the kingdom according to Jesus’ words in the Lord’s Prayer: “On earth as it is in heaven”. God’s


56 For the discussion that follows, see Pratt, “What is the Kingdom of God?” *III Magazine Online* 4.15 (April 14-22, 2002), Internet, http://www.thirdmill.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/TH.Pratt.kingdom.of.god.html.
rule in heaven is recognized by all and he is served voluntarily and without question. On earth, however, rebellion remains, and God intends to expand His kingdom throughout it to establish the same voluntary service experienced in heaven. He is doing this through a lengthy redemptive-historical process.

In the Old Testament, the narrow sense of the kingdom of God was largely limited to the nation of Israel, God’s chosen people. In the New Testament, the kingdom on earth is inaugurated with the first Coming of Christ and extended to people in all lands. The period we now live in is described as the Continuation, in which God’s rule continues to expand into all the earth. Finally, at the second Coming of Christ, the kingdom is consummated and the earth will finally and totally exhibit the rule of God, both physically and spiritually. The entire created order will recognize and freely worship their King. In the Garden of Eden, this rule was an understood reality. It will be again; for God’s coming Kingdom is the true goal of human history.

Summary

Protestant theologians have clearly become more interested in Eschatology since the Reformation. More and more, themes of hope are being discovered in Scripture and developed in Biblical Theology. But have the influences of these theological streams led Reformed believers to a better experience of hope? Several positive themes of hope have developed in Protestant theology since the Reformation, but the influence these themes has had on Reformed believers today is questionable. Why has our theology, which has increasingly focused on themes of hope, failed to incite hope among Reformed Christians? There is, perhaps, a missing element that must be considered. But first, several ecumenical and cultural
influences will be considered that further impress upon us the need for a revival of interest in the return of Christ.
CHAPTER IV
ECUMENICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

In light of the teaching of Scripture concerning hope, and in light of recent theology on the matter, two extreme influences can be clearly seen in American churches today: an over-realized Eschatology and an under-realized Eschatology. Just as Israel lost their sense of hope time and time again in the Old Testament, we may often see today’s church wander from a healthy and balanced hope in the return of Christ. The Reformed church is not immune to these influences. We also may succumb to the idea that everything we hope for is already available to us right now, or continue to face the temptation to either look for an immediate end to history.\(^5\)

Over-Realized Eschatology

The first set of trends involves an over-realized form of Eschatology. In these trends, one finds that future aspects of the Kingdom are de-emphasized, or moved into a more present realization. The following trends in the church today meet this qualification: 1) the Health & Wealth gospel (and less formal trends of this sort) and 2) various forms of Christian Nationalism. These views look for the fulfillment of most or all of God’s promises right now, as in the Eschatology of C.H. Dodd.

The Health & Wealth gospel goes by many names. Some call it the “prosperity gospel”. Others call it the “gospel of affluence”. Based on a popular slogan within prosperity circles, it has even been called the “name it and claim it” theology. This

new theology is not limited to any particular denomination, nor is it limited to American churches. One finds a broader prosperity base within the Pentecostal movement, but the teaching is not limited to that venue.\textsuperscript{58} The basic presuppositions of this brand of theology are simple enough. First, they claim that it is not God’s will for any of his faithful followers to be sick. Second, it is not God’s will for any of his faithful followers to be poor. With enough faith, any hardship can be overcome. As the title of Joel Osteen’s best-selling book suggests, you can have “your best life now”.

It is not the goal of this thesis to fully critique the teachings of the Health & Wealth movement. Suffice it to say, many of the arguments coming from this movement are based on poor exegesis and have failed to take into consideration the major advances in Eschatology in recent times. One basic argument against this movement involves the theme of suffering in Scripture. Even a cursory glance at the New Testament account yields a religion that is characterized by suffering servants. Further, the prosperity proponents speak of a gospel that is full of “ifs”. \textit{If} we have enough faith, \textit{if} we claim it as our own, \textit{if} we get it right, \textit{then} God will bless us. Orthodoxy for centuries has found in Scripture a thoroughly opposite emphasis. We do nothing to merit God’s blessing. Grace is the real flavor of Christianity, not health or wealth.\textsuperscript{59} At least, that is the case this side of the new heavens and earth.

One of the fundamental questions for those who advocate a prosperity gospel is Eschatological. If we can really have our best life now, in the “already”, then what

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exactly should we hope for in the future? Is there anything we have “not-yet”
attained? Prosperity theology suffers from an over-realized Eschatology. There is a
similar example in Scripture: the Corinthian church. The church was wealthy and
gifted. Paul writes to them, “Already you have all you want! Already you have become
rich! Without us you have become kings!” (1 Cor. 4:8) But Paul goes on to exhort the
church to imitate him and the other apostles. How should they live? He writes:

To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and
buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands.
When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when
slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of
the world, the refuse of all things. (1 Cor. 4:11-13)

Can one honestly read these words and still refuse to believe that God would often
have His people live difficult lives in this age for the sake of His future kingdom?
The blessings reserved for the future messianic kingdom were already being claimed
by the Corinthians, who were robbing themselves of the hopefulness that is
characteristic of the true Christian life.60 This same issue is prevalent in many
Christian homes and churches today.

Living in this age is also a matter of patient watchfulness, as exhorted by the
Scriptures. This age will come to an end. We do not know the day or the hour, but it
is coming. (Matt. 24:36) The simply fact of this goal has clear application for the
believer living in this age. We are not left on our own to create a utopian existence
now, for the day is coming when God will do this. If the church is to impact the rest
of the world, it must be in communicating the situation of human history and the
way out. All of this harmonizes only in the context of the goal, and if Christians are

60 Jim Kinnebrew, “The Gospel of Affluence”, Mid-America Theological Journal 9
(Fall 1985), 60.
to be effective in communicating the problem and the solution, we must also communicate by our lives and our words the hope we share for a full reversal of the effects of sin on this earth.

It is difficult to communicate this hope if our people are largely engaged in the same lifestyles of despair that the world espouses. We often find ourselves falling victim to the circular idolatry of the masses. With biting tenacity, Kierkegaard challenges the religious:

When I see someone who declares he has completely understood how Christ went around in the form of a lowly servant, poor, despised, mocked, and, as Scripture tells us, spat upon—when I see this same person assiduously make his way to the place where in worldly sagacity it is good to be, set himself up as securely as possible, when I see him then so anxiously, as if his life depended on it, avoiding every gust of unfavorable wind from the right or the left, see him so blissful, so extremely blissful, so slap-happy, yes, to make it complete, so slap-happy that he even thanks God for—for being whole-heartedly honored and esteemed by all, by everyone—then I have often said privately to myself: “Socrates, Socrates, Socrates, can it be possible that this man has understood what he says he has understood?”

The philosopher rightly draws a contrast between Christ, the Suffering Servant, and the life that many Christians hope to achieve before the Second Coming. Indeed, how can we effectively communicate need and hope if we portray a lifestyle of bliss and stability? Certainly, the Gospel advances in spite of our failures. This is merely a point of conviction important for the church to wrestle with daily. As C.S. Lewis, a more Orthodox writer, so eloquently puts it, “It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”


Another brand of over-realized Eschatology can be found in the various forms of Christian nationalism among Christian sects today. Where the Health & Wealth teachers emphasize personal prosperity, the leaders of Christian nationalism emphasize a type of prosperity in the social, or collective, arena. They advocate the advancement of Christian principles on a large scale, hoping to Christianize American politics, economics, educational systems, and the like. Nationalism of this sort is not characterized simply by a desire to see Christian principles more prevalent in culture. The goal of Christian nationalism is to usher in the physical consummation of God’s kingdom on earth through Christian actions now, in the immediate future. Formally, this mentality is often associated with a post-millennial Eschatology: the belief that the earth will be radically restored and experience a time of peace prior to Christ’s second coming. It is also known as “theonomy” or “Reconstructionism”.

Christian nationalism may seem quite different in theory from the Health & Wealth camp, but in practice they are both founded on an over-realized form of Eschatology. As Richard Neuhaus said, “Theonomy is realized Eschatology with a vengeance.” Christian nationalists hope to conquer the world for Christ. This is not just a spiritual takeover, but a social and political conquest. The writings advocating such a takeover are often laced with anger and pride. This finds an informal base among the myriads of Fundamentalists who hope for their Christian politicians to push out the liberals and resume command of the ship.

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Again, it is not the goal of this thesis to analyze all the pros and cons of such views. One common rebuttal to the theonomic rhetoric behind these movements is that it often seems to be tainted with a soteriological failure. Neuhaus concludes in his article on theonomy, “Its moralizing and legalizing of the Gospel of God’s grace is a dull heresy peddled to disappointed people who are angry because they have not received what they had no good reason to expect.”

As Paul says in Galatians:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal. 3:1-5)

This is never a lesson easily learned. It is one all Christians struggle with, and so it is no surprise that such legalism would manifest itself in unrealistic expectations for human-instituted moral dominion. Not only are these expectations legalistic and humanistic, they require an Eschatology that is over-realized. Too much emphasis is placed on social change possible in the “already” and too little time is spent pointing believers to the future hope of the Consummation. This trend fails to take seriously the findings of recent Eschatology and fails to capture the general thrust of Scripture regarding hope. It misses the forest for the trees.

Living in this age involves realism. While the kingdom is now growing in a very real and spiritual sense, we must temper our optimism with realism. This is not to say that God’s kingdom lacks any power or that it will fail to grow in accordance with His sovereignty. We can be optimistic that the gates of hell will not prevail

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64 Ibid., 21
against the church. (Matt. 16:18) We can be optimistic that the kingdom will continue to grow as appointed by God, like leaven being worked through dough. (Matt. 13:33) But we must be realistic as to the outcome of growth in this age. We must also be realistic about our participation in that growth.

This realism is necessary because sin and death still exist in this age. Moltmann articulated this useful observation in his *Theology of Hope*:

> In the contradiction between the world of promise and the experiential reality of suffering and death, faith takes its stand on hope and ‘hastens beyond this world’, said Calvin. He did not mean by this that Christian faith flees the world, but he did mean that it strains after the future. To believe does in fact mean to cross and transcend bounds, to be engaged in an exodus. Yet this happens in a way that does not suppress or skip the unpleasant realities. Death is real death, and decay is putrefying decay. Guilt remains guilt and suffering remains, even for a believer, a cry to which there is no ready-made answer. Faith does not overstep these realities into a heavenly utopia, does not dream itself into a reality of a different kind. 

This is the reason for balance. We must be optimistic, but realistic. If we live now as though we can usher in a world without sickness or poverty by our own faith, we will face despair. The “prosperity gospel” has found its way into Africa, where new believers are being encouraged to have faith so that God can bless them now with health and wealth. Many are eager for such results given the extreme social needs present in many African nations. Should we not work to relieve the plight of these brothers and sisters, but also encourage them that their ultimate hope lies not in this age, but in the next?

This message of realism applies to those who would seek to usher in the Consummation by way of Christian reconstruction. “We can be realistic, knowing

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that no human project can eliminate the powers of darkness as they operate in human life.”

The world has seen enough humanistic movements promising a utopian future. Many of these movements have risen from within the church, claiming God’s approval, but failing to deliver what only God can deliver. He will be the one to redeem His people, as He always has. We will not see a fully redeemed earth in this age.

In addition to the failures of these trends Biblically and theologically, another consideration is worth noting. Lesslie Newbigin has argued that the historical American notion of “progress” is the real driving force for all types of over-realized Eschatology. Anytime the meaning of history is detached from its final end, problems arise in theology. In particular, “progress” has often been the major paradigm for social movements. Newbigin says that many of these movements are a “one-sided development of the New Testament hope...an attempt to reproduce in history the power of the resurrection without the marks of the cross.”

A classic example is found in Marxism. In theory, Marxists promise a better social order for all. But for them, meeting the goal of history meant some people could be expendable along the way. Christian nationalism, in its various forms, can easily be viewed as an idolatry of progress. As Newbigin writes, these views tended to have “an optimistic view of the possibilities of human history and failed to recognize the enduring power of that which works to destroy human life.”

In other words, over-realized Eschatologies fail to recognize the continuing reality of sin and death in this

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68 Ibid., 112
age. The only thing that separates Christian hope from the secularized hopes of humanistic regimes is the fact that the full realization of God’s kingdom will occur along with the resurrection of the dead, so that all Christians together will be able to participate in the Consummation.  

Under-Realized Eschatology

The second set of trends operates within a system of under-realized Eschatology. This extreme is no less dangerous than the first. Under-realized Eschatology, like the previous views, can lead to an unbalanced and unhealthy hope for the Christian. These trends are characterized by a lack of emphasis on the importance of the present reality of the Christian life. They tend to over-emphasize our future hope and limit the Christian’s interaction with the world around us.

The first of these trends is less of an idea and more of a practice. In an effort to avoid the influences of the world, many Christians circle the wagons and await the return of Christ alone, separating themselves from the culture. Separatist groups have sprung up from within the church for centuries, choosing lives of isolation from influence over the possibility of being a cultural influence in their own right. A few examples of such groups include the Amish, Mennonites, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Aside from the many other theological problems of these sects and others like them, there is a definite under-realized slant to their respective Eschatologies. Especially in the theology of Jehovah’s Witnesses, one finds a clear focus on the future combined with a Separatist outlook on the present religious life. Most

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70 I spent the first 15 years of my life as a Jehovah’s Witness. Many of the remarks that follow concerning their theology are drawn from my own experiences.
Jehovah’s Witnesses hope for eternal life on a new and restored earth under the rule of God, which is also the Reformed position. The Witnesses are very vocal about this hope, sharing it freely and regularly with anyone they meet. However, they also believe that the time left for this world is very short. Consequently, they spend much of their time telling others about their hope as if it were entirely up to them to get people in the doors of the new earth. They see no purpose in attempting to transform any aspects of the current culture, because in their view all the things of this earth will be wiped away. For the Witness, time is best spent working on personal morality and telling others about the Bible.

Jehovah’s Witnesses have no theological concept of a present kingdom reality outside of their meeting place: the Kingdom Hall. They associate the presence of the kingdom in the “already” entirely with their church. Redeeming culture is an activity foreign to the Witness. This attitude is not limited to the Watchtower Bible & Tract Society. It is becoming more common among Reformed believers. If the world is going to be destroyed, why should Christians care about things like art or music? Why not spend all of our time in personal evangelism and missions? Why would we waste time studying chemistry or math? Isn’t it a waste of time to be involved in politics, since the whole system is corrupt anyway? These are the unspoken questions that lead to a lifestyle of Separatism, an action birthed from a poor view of hope.

Similar to the interests of separatism are the emphases of what Newbigin calls “privatized Eschatology”. As the modern emphasis on progress has declined in recent years, a new temptation has arisen. Many Christians in wealthy societies have lapsed into believing in a form of Eschatology that only has eyes for individual
blessing beyond the grave.\textsuperscript{71} Newbigin writes, “A privatized eschatology encourages us as we grow older to turn our back on the struggle and conflict of public life and to withdraw into a purely private kind of piety.”\textsuperscript{72} These believers think of their hope in a personal way, in relation to their own holiness, but fail to realize the implications that a balanced hope must have on the present Christian life. Hope leads to action just as works accompany faith.

Another extreme of under-realized Eschatology is characterized by the frantic reading of headlines by many Christians who fear that the end is coming in the very near future. These believers, often associated with a pre-millennial view of history, watch the reports on television and scan the newspapers for evidence of the last days. Whether from fear of retribution or from general paranoia, they focus their attention on the signs of the times and radically interpret each new current event as a perfect fit for Biblical prophecy.

This phenomena, which we shall designate “Newspaper Eschatology”, is a symptom of under-realized Eschatology in general. If the world is going to hell in a hand-basket in the near future, as all the evidence seems to suggest, then we might as well start watching the sky. Without venturing into the hermeneutics of prophecy much, the most obvious problem with this lifestyle is that no one has any idea when Christ will return. Christians have predicted Christ’s return countless times in history, looking to the sky only to be disappointed in their projections. Whenever believers place too much emphasis on the imminent return of Jesus, their work to

\textsuperscript{71} Newbigin, \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society}, 113.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 113
transform culture suffers. At most, we see believers of this type frantically handing out a few tracts to co-workers before the trumpet sounds.

Aside from the other Biblical and theological problems with these views, the driving force of all these forms of under-realized Eschatology seems to be a resurgence of the ancient heresy called Gnosticism. The tendency Westerners face in placing too much emphasis on the “not-yet” and not enough on the “already” is historically linked to the de-emphasis of the material world as we know it. This disregard for the temporal and spatial elements of creation comes from the Greek philosophy known as Gnosticism. This philosophy has affected Christianity in numerous ways since the first century. It is for this reason that some sins (of the body) are considered worse than others existentially, even though Scripture does not teach such a hierarchy. It is also why many Christians believe that our hope involves only a spiritual existence in the clouds, strumming with the angels.

The influence of Gnosticism on Eschatology has been significant. It suggests that life in a sinful world results in all human activities being unredeemable this side of the age to come. If one buys this logic, then it makes sense to become isolated from culture. It would seem advisable to work on person piety to the detriment of social and cultural action. And finally, it would drive us to interpret the carnal inclinations of modern society as a proclamation of imminent doom.

The nail in the coffin of Gnosticism is the resurrection of the body. If Jesus still has a body, the firstfruits of the resurrection, and is the hope for all believers to one-day receive a glorified body, then one cannot rightfully declare the physical world to be less pure. The kingdom hope of Christians is a physical hope, through and through. God has given us many experiences in the present which are foretastes
of what is to come. We must not allow an ancient heresy to creep into our consciousness. Jesus will come again. The time and day are unknown. Until then, our task is to proclaim the Gospel in word and in deed. This involves enjoying and contributing to the culture around us.

If we are able to become content with our current position in this age, realistic about the existence of suffering, we will also be able to offer hope in the midst of hopeless situations. In many small ways, these offerings of hope can find their way into our public lives. We may effectively contribute to the kingdom work in our schools, businesses, and governments. These glimpses, or foretastes, of glory point people to the “not-yet”. They will not, in themselves, erase the sin and death that now exists. But they can become beacons of hope in a dark world. Kim Riddlebarger writes in his article “Thy Kingdom Come” that many Christians operate under one of two extremes. One extreme says, “Don’t polish the brass on a sinking ship.” The other extreme says, “The ship isn’t sinking after all.” Instead, the Bible teaches that “the ship is sinking, but polish the brass anyway”. An end to sin and death will come. The earth will be purified and wickedness will be purged from it. (2 Peter 3:10-13) But we need not classify all works other than evangelism and missions as futile. We have reason to believe that our cultural contributions in this age will be carried over into the next age.

When John sees his final vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, he writes that “the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it” and that “they will

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74 Ibid., 8
bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.” (Rev. 21:24, 26) While it cannot be argued with certainty, one might read here an implication that the cultural contributions of the nations will not become null and void in the new earth. The new earth will be inhabited by people from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”. (Rev. 7:9) Might this also mean that each nation’s unique contributions to art, music, architecture, and science will be preserved? If this is a fair reading of the text, then it has far reaching implications for believers. We may legitimately continue to “subdue the earth” expecting that many of our efforts will be evident in the age to come. The new earth will not simply be an Eden “do-over”.

Summary

There are many extremes in the area of Eschatology. These extremes may be marked along a continuum of “realized Eschatology”. Some over-emphasize the present realities of the kingdom. Others over-emphasize the future benefits of the kingdom. A few cultural influences have been noted that may have contributed to the rise of these extremes in the church, including the idea of “progress” and a form of modern Gnosticism. Many other cultural influences could perhaps be offered that are beyond the scope of this thesis. All of these extremes lead to lifestyles characterized by unbiblical hope. Many of these extremes have found their way into Reformed churches as influences that seek to destroy a healthy and balanced hope in the return of Christ. But are these influences alone enough to drive us to despair, or are they merely symptoms of a bigger problem? The next chapter will attempt to bridge the gap and arrive at a relevant view of hope and its practical implications.
CHAPTER V
APPLICATION

Recent theology has given us some of the tools by which to engage our churches and the world with the message of hope. Likewise, Scripture is full of themes of hope, expectation, and longing. Still, it seems that many negative influences have had a profound impact on the hope of Reformed believers. The question now becomes: how may we apply these themes to an audience that is so prone to extremes of hopelessness in doctrine and in experience?

Protestant theology has become increasingly aware of the importance of Eschatology in more recent times. But in order for this to translate into a greater sense of hopefulness among believers, a unifying thread must be found. Many theologians, like Pannenberg, have sought to unify history by pointing to an event or series of events in the past, present, or future. Most have been careful to connect the importance of these events to God’s work, which is admirable, but more must be said. Further, many of the extremes of Eschatology form as a result of dwelling too much on certain benefits of the kingdom life. We must never separate our hope in the benefits of the kingdom from our hope of being with the King Himself. This present age, as well as the age to come, is highly personal in nature. The personal nature of the coming kingdom is the unifying theme that solidifies hope in the believer’s life. This will become evident as we reconsider the primary characteristic of the bookends of the Bible: Eden and the new earth. The glory of Eden was that
God was present with mankind in a greater sense than He is today. The same will be true again in the new earth. If we find ourselves longing for the benefits of the new earth, but miss the significance of God’s presence there, Biblical hope will elude us!

To use a familiar illustration, we might consider the actions of a mother when a child suffers some minor injury. The mother will often call the child and proceed to kiss the “boo-boo” to make it better. The kiss does not in itself hold any real power to heal. It is merely the affection of the mother that works to calm the child and heal the spirit. “Mommy” makes it better. In a similar fashion, the changes of the new earth will be the result of a relationship. The benefits of the new earth will pale in comparison to the One who does the giving.

We see this in the way John communicates the benefits of the future consummation in Revelation 21:1-7. He writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

The experiences of this passage are an expression of the hope we share as believers, and as benefits of the kingdom they are inseparable from the King. John stresses the reality that God will be with us. Every sentence of this passage is highly relational.
The world will be radically different one day because God Himself will wipe away the pain. This language makes no sense unless we visualize the thumb of Christ literally brushing the tears from our face as He assures us the suffering of the former world is gone. As we endeavor to communicate our hope, we must be careful to never separate the benefits of the future life from the presence of the King. The “Immanuel” principle is the wonder of our hope. The same God who walked and talked with Adam in the Garden of Eden will do the same with us. This is the fullest sense of hope to found in Scripture. As Anne Cousin wrote in her famous hymn “The Sands of Time are Sinking” based on the letters of Samuel Rutherford:

The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear Bridegroom’s face;  
I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace.  
Not at the crown He giveth, but on His pierced hand;  
The Lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel’s land.

The revisions in recent theology are useful. The redemptive-historical approach to Scripture may help us think in more linear ways. But we must not separate the goal from the Person who makes it all possible. Doing so is most precisely what has led to the many extremes in Eschatology. On the one hand, many Christians have longed for the benefits of the new earth and have forgotten that the King is active even now to restore lives. We have an important part in this kingdom work. On the other hand, many Christians have over-emphasized our part in this work because they believe we can bring the full benefits of the kingdom now. These attitudes will lead to despair if we forget the sovereignty of our King and his timing. As I heard one preacher say, “It is entirely possible to love the things of the kingdom and not the King.”
Conclusion

Scripture gives more than sufficient grounds for the importance of hope, as well as warnings against extremes. These extremes find expression in contemporary Christianity as they have throughout our history. Recent revisions in theology are more hopeful in content, but often miss a key element. We must focus more on the personal nature of our kingdom hope. The benefits of the kingdom come only as a result of a relationship to the King. Kingdom hope should be a more prevalent theme in our preaching and teaching. It should spur us to share our faith more readily. Hope should encourage us in missions. It should encapsulate a common refrain in our worship. It should greatly affect the way we live our private and public lives.

Hope should also be one of the lenses by which we see theology. Put another way, glorification deserves an equal standing among the central doctrines of justification and sanctification. The three together demonstrate a more complete view of redemption. Perspectively, they give credence to one another. Rather than choosing one aspect of God’s work in redemption to be the unifying theme in history, we must instead consider the whole package of salvation (the past, present, and future of the Christian life) to be essential. Every step of redemptive history is fundamentally about restored relationships between God and man. This truth merely builds on the teaching of Kuyper that the most basic principle of our Reformed theology is not justification by faith, or any other single action of God, no matter how grand. The sovereignty of the eternal King over all things is the crown jewel of our theology. With this in mind, the Christian’s life will be strengthened
further by a balanced hope resulting from a better understanding of the goal: greater communion with the King, not just the benefits He will bring.
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