

## **Waterfalls Can Flow Backwards An Evangelical Theology of Hope**

By Eugene Heacock\*

### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the topic of hope and the need to develop an evangelical theology of hope. It includes the author's personal journey, pastoral perspective, and evangelical lament. It explains the connection between the intangible element called *hope* and historical revival also known as *awakening*. It addresses the following questions:

1. What is an "intangible" and why are intangibles important?
2. Why is hope considered an intangible?
3. What is Biblical hope?
4. What is a theology of hope?
5. What is the connection between hope and revival, a massive spiritual awakening?

### **The Kingdom's Presence: Moving Toward an Evangelical Theology of Hope**

The speaker looked unsteady on his feet. He was a man well along in his seventies. His gray beard showed signs of wisdom as well as wear. He seemed a bit tired to begin his lecture. This writer was not sure what to think. Would this be a long hour? Did he invite the right guest speaker? This writer would soon be delighted and convicted as well. The man began his talk with a simple question: "How many people here believe that waterfalls can run backwards?" It sounded simple. It is either a stupid question or a trick question. He "knew" waterfalls did not run backwards. The answer of course is "no." Waterfalls do not run backwards.

He knew his lecturer well. He had taken several of his seminary courses, and read his books. He knew the speaker would not ask such a blatantly simple question and expect a simple answer, so he blurted out (more loudly than he wanted to), "Yes, the answer is yes," but he wondered how? How does a waterfall run backwards? Where is that waterfall? Why hadn't he been exposed to backwards waterfalls before?

The speaker that day was Richard Lovelace, speaking on the subject, "When God Colors Outside of the Lines."<sup>1</sup> Lovelace explained that on one of his trips to the Bay of Fundy he saw a waterfall run backwards. It is a phenomenon

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that occurs in a region whose topography and extreme tidal fluctuations actually cause a waterfall to run backwards. The tide changes and the ocean overwhelm a freshwater stream. The waterfall is actually pushed backwards.

Lovelace asks the question, “Do waterfalls run backwards?”, to probe our thinking. Is it possible to see nature reversed in such a profound way that normal laws of gravity are reversed? Is it possible that exceptions from the “norm” actually happen? Is there a natural reality that points to a greater supernatural reality? Lovelace asked the gathering of over 100 pastors: “Do you believe that God can overrule what is seen, to create something entirely unexpected?” The ocean is greater than the strongest stream. God is greater than cultural decay and moral collapse. Lovelace spent the remainder of the day explaining how God reversed “waterfalls” throughout history in the First and Second Great Awakenings.<sup>2</sup> He makes a direct connection between revival and cultural transformation, and documents specific details of this transformation.<sup>3</sup> Others share this same connection, including Alvin J. Schmidt,<sup>4</sup> Timothy L. Smith,<sup>5</sup> and Thomas Askew and Richard Pierard.<sup>6</sup>

The question Lovelace asks has profound implications for the evangelical church, and it was a pivotal one for this writer. The question is crucial for several reasons. First, it determines if one has a true Christian worldview. Second, it determines if the seen realities (waterfalls) are greater than the unseen dimensions of reality (God himself). Third, the question is a barometer of the intangible element of hope that resides within one’s heart.

Lovelace’s question forced this writer to further explore revival and awakening as God’s reversal within culture. Through revival and awakening God overrules the force of a river running in the wrong direction.

Carl F. Henry has identified one of the great failures of the Evangelicalism as a retreat from social involvement, which he described as the great reversal.<sup>7</sup> Lovelace argues that historical revival like that expressed in the First and Second Great Awakenings would be termed the “grand reversal.” God’s presence pushes back the waterfall of moral decay within a culture so that every strata of society is saturated with God’s glory. This writer’s conviction is that “waterfalls can run backwards” and transform an entire culture. It is what historian William McLaughlin describes as a massive cultural paradigm shift that not only results in the salvation of particular individuals but in a societal transformation. He says revival or “awakenings alter the worldview of a whole people or culture.”<sup>8</sup>

Revival is God’s grand reversal. It is a massive paradigm shift of an entire culture. God’s presence brings divine force upon all the destinies, intricacies, and complexities of an entire society. God sovereignly salts His saints so their savor transforms an entire culture. This is what God has done

historically, and what He can do at any time. It was the great hope of the Puritans<sup>9</sup> and has the power to generate hope for today.<sup>10</sup>

How one answers the question, “Can waterfalls run backwards?”, can have earth-shaking consequences. It will also determine whether our Christian faith will adopt a posture of engagement or retreat toward our culture. It can also move one toward cynicism. There are reasons to be cynical, but there are better reasons to hope. This writer is convinced that how one answers the question regarding the waterfall will determine if one has hope or not. It was so, for this writer on his journey.

### **Lamenting, but not Losing Hope – A Call to Evangelicals**

This author frames an even larger question, “Do evangelicals believe that God can make waterfalls run backward?” The waterfalls for this writer are the predominant threats to the contemporary church, and the moral and cultural issues of American and Western culture.<sup>11</sup>

The second part of this deeper question is this: “Do we as evangelicals know our God?” The issue of hope is directly related to our knowledge of God’s character, and his power to overrule present circumstances regardless of how bleak they may become. It is an exhortation to return to Biblical fidelity and to practical reality. We must know what God has done in the past and we must not deny this present darkness. Both are real. Both were part of this author’s story and journey. He needed a deeper awareness of both realities. He is concerned that evangelicals have forgotten their God, have become pessimistic, and lost hope. They say that waterfalls cannot be reversed. And, in some corners of Evangelicalism, there is denial of the darkness. There are no waterfalls flowing down to the sea. Both are opposite of Biblical hope. Roberto Miranda explains:<sup>12</sup>

There is so much pessimism that can be observed within the Evangelical world today. So many Christian churches and individuals have succumbed to the idea that the paganistic, secular trend of our culture is irreversible and that we might as well just dedicate ourselves to strictly spiritual concerns such as prayer and soul winning, and fervently await Christ’s second coming without raising too many waves in the secular realm.

Many sincere Christians have adopted a fatalistic attitude based on a defective eschatology that does not allow them to consider the thought that God may want us out there in the cultural and political arena, being a prophetic presence undertaking ambitious initiatives, being proactive and systemic in our efforts.

We have been struggling so long with the forces of rationalism and humanism that we have acquired an embattled defensive mentality. It is hard for evangelicals to act out of any other mental model

There needs to be a Biblical corrective and scriptural balance.

Miranda describes the struggle that evangelicals have with fatalism because of the external realities we face. We may have faith for spiritual efforts within the realm of our congregational missions, but we may have lost hope that our culture can be changed. He suggests that Evangelicalism may not be entirely swept away by the river flowing to the sea, but may be quietly circulating in a backwater eddy, just maintaining itself.

In dark times it is easy to forget God, withdraw, and become hopeless. Evangelicals cannot deny the darkness of the present hour in history. There are many who have identified the spiritual darkness, moral morass, and cultural decay that America is now experiencing.<sup>13,14,15</sup> We cannot gloss over the predominant threats to the church, the lack of cultural impact for the Gospel, the growing darkness on the outside,<sup>16</sup> and the sickness of cynicism from within.<sup>17</sup>

We must acknowledge this present darkness as a baseline for the beginning of Biblical hope. If we do not, then evangelicals will continue to pursue methodology rather than theology. We must courageously confront the spiritual gray within our own household of Evangelicalism. We must do this in order to see that God is the only answer. According to Nouwen, "No one has a hopeful future if the present cannot be affirmed."<sup>18</sup> Evangelicals must not attempt to rationalize and dilute our cultural crisis.

The first step toward gaining hope is to call darkness dark. It has been during seasons of darkness in the past that light has been discovered. This has been the precedent for historical awakening.<sup>19</sup>

There are certain phenomena which precede and which follow Revivals of Religion. The symptoms proceeding of a Revival are the phenomena of death, corruption, and decay. It is ever the darkest hour before the dawn. The nation always seems to be given over to the Evil One before the coming of the Son of Man. The decay of religious faith, the deadness of the Churches, the atheism of the well-to-do, the brutality of the masses, all these, when at their worst, herald the approach of the Revival. Things seem to get too bad to last. The reign of evil becomes intolerable. Then the soul of the nation awakes.

This writer's discovery was that his own soul had become increasingly dark. The discovery of the darkness within was not in some moral demise in its more popular forms such as hedonism or materialism, but rather in sinning against hope. His soul had become dark because of futility, despair, and hopelessness. Despair almost snuffed out any ray of light within his soul. His

soul became moldy without hope, like a wet basement without light. He had lost hope that God could change him, so he no longer believed God could change the world. He had become a practical agnostic. He was someone who believed that all the promises of God were true, for somebody other than himself. He was in deep despair, emotionally and psychologically. Despair was his greatest spiritual disease. He survived in a state of despair. "For without hope, we live in despair. Living in despair creates a life of defeat. Constant failure paralyzes the heart and a paralyzed heart has no hope and is purposeless."<sup>20</sup>

He remembers writing this journal entry during a time he describes as a black hole within the soul.

If ever I needed a Father I need one now. If ever I needed a friend I need one now. If ever I needed a high priest who is able to sympathize with my weakness, frustration, loneliness and isolation I need one now. I don't know what to say anymore. I don't know what to pray anymore. It hurts too much to hope again. I know I deserve condemnation, every day documents my fallenness. I cry out for you to change me, but change never comes. I am hopeless and bound and often alone with no one to change me, so I ask you. Why do you resist the thing that you have promised? When change does not come I camp out at despair. I don't try anymore. Have you not heard me nor do you not care enough to help Me.? Father condescend to me. If not for me, then for you. If you leave me to myself I will forever be, hopeless. I am a desperate man (1988).

The writer's discovery during this season was the Biblical paradox of lamenting without losing hope. Lamenting is important. If one does not lament, they are not in touch with reality. Being ruthlessly honest is important. If one loses hope, one is not in touch with God. Staying close to God is critical. This writer found he could only navigate the journey by acknowledging these two polarities. Reality is very dark. God is very powerful. To deny the darkness is to live in denial. To stay in the darkness is to live in despair. To live in God's presence is hope. To long for eternity is the soul's quest. To live in eternity, to the degree that one denies reality, is escapism. Hope is stewarded by investing in daily prepayments, regardless of how dark it may become.

Souls are to be fitted for eternity but are shaped in reality. Jesus prayed, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." He did not ask his Father to take us to heaven and leave the Earth behind. We are to be "Releasing Heaven on Earth."<sup>21</sup>

In the words of C. S. Lewis:<sup>22</sup>

Hope is one of the theological virtues ... a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not a form of escapism but one of the things Christians are meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave this present world. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were those who thought the most of the next. 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.

Jesus called for prophetic dreamers to imagine a new reality within his Kingdom. Jesus instilled the vision of heaven's presence and power coming to Earth. His disciples were heaven's representatives on assignment on the Earth. They were prophets of a new order offering energy through the power of the Kingdom. Walter Brueggemann explains Jesus' role as prophet. "Prophetic ministry seeks to penetrate the numbness, to face the body of death in which we are caught ... it seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed and embraced by us. There is a yearning for energy in a world grown weary."<sup>23</sup>

Hope is the foundation for prophetic imagination and for spiritual formation in the Kingdom of God. According to Willard, "Christian spiritual formation must start with a vision for life in God's Kingdom."<sup>24</sup> This author's confession is that spiritual formation is not easily accomplished when faced with an ideology of hopelessness. The waterfall may theoretically be reversed, but when deep within the inner space of the soul, voices of rage and cynicism bellow loudly, and tears of despair are dried with an iron towel, hope seems impossible. Not only does a journeyman face the black hole of one's own soul of hopelessness, they face a barrage of overwhelming needs within the local parish. It is what Paul describes as the pressure of the concern of the church (2 Corinthians 11:28). The pressure of the church can become a sink-hole that sucks hope's savor out of the soul.

It was during this season, within this seedbed of hopelessness, that spiritual formation did occur. This writer knew that only something outside of himself could accomplish the change he needed. He needed a theology of amazement and he concluded that only God could renew and redeem. Only God could take care of all of the dark places. Only God can change people, culture, and nations. Only God can make waterfalls run backwards. It is His specialty.

This writer was lamenting the darkness, but not losing hope. He needed to acknowledge reality. He had a hopeful future. Nouwen says, "No one has a hopeful future if the present can not be affirmed. And those who dream of better things are not those who hate what is now, but who love the present enough to

seek its transformation.”<sup>25</sup> He was slowly moving on a journey, and daring to become a prophetic dreamer. He needed to grow in intangibles.

### **Growing in Intangibles**

The journey continued in discovery. Intangibles are as important as tangibles. This writer uses the common terms “tangible” and “intangible” in their common understanding. He will expand upon their meaning to describe attributes of the Christian life. A tangible, according to common definition, includes the following range of meanings:

1. Capable of being perceived by the sense of touch.
2. Substantially real.
3. Capable of being precisely identified by the mind.
4. Capable of being appraised at actual value.

An intangible refers to:

1. Something that is not tangible.
2. An asset, such as goodwill, that is not corporeal.
3. An abstract quality or attribute, such as loyalty or creativity.

Commonly understood tangibles describe the seen dimensions of reality. Tangibles describe things that can be quantified by the scientific method. They are concrete and measured through various standardized means. Scales, odometers, graphs, and charts measure tangibles.

However, intangibles cannot be measured by such means. A company’s goodwill can be estimated, but not measured. A person’s attitude can be observed, but not easily reduced to a graph or chart. Intangibles are real but invisible. They are crucial for life to function as we know it. Intangibles are a common part of daily life. A businessman accepts a contract and tells his colleague, “We will pay in 30 days.” The deal is struck with a handshake, yet no tangible means of payment has been made. That represents an intangible. A family doctor bids his patient farewell. He says, “I am confident you will get better – we hope the body will heal itself quickly.” Although medical measures have been applied, his hope is in an intangible element. A couple stands before their pastor and vows faithfulness to each other. They exchange rings. They vow fidelity and mutual charity. From where do these virtues arise? The couple exchanged intangibles in their making a commitment for the rest of their lives.

A baseball manager answers questions at a press conference. He assures everyone that next season will be better. The fans and the owners breathe a sigh of relief. Things will get better, but how do they know? They take the word of the manager. He is believable. He has done what he has said in the past. They have been given an intangible promise for a better tomorrow, although no tangible change has taken place. They have experienced the intangible element of hope.

A pastor is interviewed by a search committee. He shares his background, convictions, and dreams. They believe he is the right person. Why? He is believable. They are confident their congregational future will be better than the past. They have experienced a corporate intangible element of believability. They have belief in tomorrow. A young African-American man speaks to America that he has a dream of a better future, a future that includes all Americans. It encompasses the ideals of the U.S. Constitution, the justice of the prophets of the Old Testament, and the heroes of American history. This dreamer offers no plan of how it will happen. He offers the ideal. He contrasts what is now to what can be. He is a prophetic dreamer. He does not market tangible products, but rather instills intangibles within people's hearts. This intangible dream results in the changing of tangibles, in politics, law, government, education, and the financial redistribution of wealth. It began with an intangible. The reader will realize the last example is not hyperbole, but reality in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

An intangible bridges people to work on a common venture. An intangible creates believability to cooperate for the future. An intangible gives one a belief in a tomorrow. Intangibles inspire hope. An intangible is the highway that hopes travels upon. Intangibles are the DNA of an entire culture, hung on the word of idealist dreamer.

Essentially intangibles are the unseen factors that make tangible things work. Business, medicine, baseball, marriage, and ministry, all are founded upon unseen dynamics called intangibles. There are many reasons why intangibles are not emphasized. Some of them are empiricism, the scientific method, a bottom line mentality, and an anti-supernatural mindset. American culture has moved away from a traditional understanding of values and has moved to an external, immediate response for individual success. Robert Bellah explains. "The manager and the therapist largely define the outlines of 20th century American culture ... it does not speak in the language of traditional moralities ... it is an understanding of life generally hostile to older ideas of moral order. Its center is the autonomous individual, presumed able to choose the roles he will play and the commitments he will make, not on the basis of higher truths but according to the criterion of life-effectiveness as the individual judges it."<sup>26</sup> Bellah says the "old order" is passing away. Intangibles are out, the new order has arrived.

Intangibles are critical for the life of a culture. They are the invisible glue that binds people together into corporate society. They hold things together. They offer a belief in tomorrow. They create corporate energy that helps groups of people cooperate. Without intangibles working properly, energy wanes – according to Proverbs, soul sickness develops. Hope deferred makes the heart grow sick (Proverbs 13:12). Without intangibles present, imagination and dreams languish. Intangibles are real though measuring them is illusive.

One of this writer's parishioners was a professional football coach, who sometimes offered tours of his workplace, an NFL stadium. The team had accomplished great, historic achievements and victories. It was thrilling to see the field close up, and to navigate the labyrinth of levels of the sports complex. This writer toured the weight room, the physical therapy center, and the offices that provided all the back-up services. He met the training staff and talked to the team's nutritionist. He saw the film room where every NFL game film was available. He examined the strategy room, where each player on defense and offense was evaluated with a specific grid that measured past performance. He said to his friend, "With all of this, you should win every game." His parishioner shook his head and smiled and said, "You don't understand, games are not won by the tangibles alone but rather the intangibles."

He then listed things like: believability, unity, trust, camaraderie, sacrifice, and teamwork. He said great teams expected the unexpected and were spurred on when one player would throw his body into a tough situation to help the team move ahead.

This journeyman learned a lot about intangibles from that NFL coach. Christians are called to understand intangibles to a much greater degree than a sports team. The concepts of believability, trust, sacrifice, and unity are hallmark characteristics of Christians. The willingness to throw their life down for another creates hope (1 John 3:16). Hope is an intangible element many have recognized before. Hope is essential for a people to survive.

Augustine of Hippo said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."<sup>27</sup>

Hope is the pillar that holds up the world (Pliny the Elder). Hope is essential to stay on the journey. Hope is essential for forward motion, for individuals, groups of people, and nations. It is important to have hope, but false hope can demoralize a people. Winston Churchill said, "There is no worse mistake in public leadership than to hold out false hopes soon to be swept away."<sup>28</sup>

Jim Collins insists that "great leaders must face the brutal facts of reality but not lose a vision for the future."<sup>29</sup> Hope is the intangible element that is needed for a pilgrim to journey to a new place. Hope is the fuel that allows people to believe in a tomorrow. Hope is the energy that allows people to persevere against impossible circumstances.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."<sup>30</sup> Hope is a waking dream (Aristotle). To hope means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not to become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime (Erich Fromm). Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out (Vaclav Havel).<sup>31</sup>

This writer would add that hope is an intangible. It is not visible. It has no immediate result. It is assumed but not celebrated. By assumed but not celebrated this writer means that hope is the unseen dynamic that governs the outcome but is often not acknowledged.

Hope to a person is like fuel to a car. When the car crosses the finish line, the trophy is given to the driver, the fuel goes unnoticed. However, without the fuel the car would never have reached its destination. The fuel is assumed, unnoticed but absolutely necessary. So it is with hope. Hope is invisible fuel that propels people to future goals. It is the invisible energy that empowers people to believe in tomorrow, and to persevere against difficult circumstances. Hope is essential to the health and well-being of an individual, a group, or a nation. Without the intangible element hope, people collapse internally. It is this intangible that evangelical leaders must rediscover. It is fuel for new leaders to grow into Kingdom leadership. "A leader – a dealer in hope" (Napoleon).

### **Biblical Hope – Paradox of Promise and Patience**

Hope is intensely realistic and yet eternally optimistic. Hope is ruthless in accessing reality. Hope is regular in remembering promises. It never denies the seen dimension of reality yet it never allows ultimate reality to be confined by the seen dimension alone. This author will address the question of Biblical hope in three ways. He will examine the basis of hope, the vocabulary of hope, and the description of hope in the lives of several Biblical characters.

Biblical hope stands in stark contrast to the Greek poets of old. The majority of secular thinkers in the ancient world did not regard hope as a virtue, but merely as a temporary illusion. The popular notion is that hope is something you believe in even when you know it's not true. A common phrase is "all they have is a hope and a prayer." Hope is a psychological necessity. It is not the creation of the need of man, but in Biblical terms is God's revelation of himself to humanity. He gives hope through his promises. Biblical hope is Theocentric. God is the objective source of hope.<sup>32</sup>

Hope is always Theocentric. E. J. Bicknell explains:<sup>33</sup>

Where there is a belief in the living God, who acts and intervenes in human life, and who can be trusted to implement His promises, hope in the specifically Biblical sense becomes possible. Such hope is not a matter of temperament, nor is it conditioned by prevailing circumstances or any human possibilities. It does not depend upon what a man possesses, upon what he may be able to do for himself, nor upon what any other human being may do for him. There was, for example, nothing in the situation in which Abraham found himself to justify his hope that Sarah would give birth to a son, but because he believed in God, he could 'against hope believe

in hope' (Romans iv.18). Biblical hope is inseparable therefore from faith in God. Because of what God has done in the past, particularly in preparing for the coming of Christ, and because of what God has done and is now doing through Christ, the Christian dares to expect future blessings at present invisible (2 Cor. i.10). The goodness of God is for him never exhausted. The best is still to be. His hope is increased as he reflects on the activities of God in the Scriptures (Rom. xii.12, xv.4). Christ in him is the hope of future glory (Col. i.27). His final salvation rests on such hope (Rom. viii.24).

Biblical hope is best understood as a Theocentric reality. Hope is God. Where God's is forgotten, hope ends, hell begins. The description at the entrance of Dante's hell says, "Abandon hope, all you who enter here."<sup>34</sup>

Hope always rests in the character of God. Hope is revealed throughout Biblical history and the promises God makes in his word.

Faith is almost always included in the concept of hope in the Scriptures and often includes the relational quality of love. "This threefold combination of faith, hope and love is found in 1 Thess. 1, 3, 5, 8, Galatians 5:5, 6, 1 Cor. 13:13, Heb. 6:10-13, 1 Peter 1:21-22."<sup>35</sup>

Love provides security for hope. Hope provides confidence for faith. Faith provides trust in order for love to grow. Hope says, "God can." Faith says, "God will." Love says, "God is good." Hope is oxygen for the soul. It is invisible, yet it brings unseen things to life. The absence of hope is hell. When hope fades, God's goodness is questioned and faith's force is diminished.

Hope is the invisible force that assures people of Biblical faith that waterfalls can run backwards. People can be changed. Cultures can be transformed. Society can become more humane and just. The name of Christ will be honored in the next generation. The future of the church can be brighter than the past. The Kingdom will be expanded. God's name will be glorified.

Hope is the intangible element that allows people the belief that there is a tomorrow, that there is something beyond what is seen. For this author, hope is confident assurance in the character of someone to provide what they have promised. Hope rests in the character of the One who has made the promise and who has the power to provide (Ephesians 1:11-14; Romans 4:18-25).

### **Hope Defined – Hope Described**

Language reveals the depth and the diversity of meaning. The Greek language holds great possibility for describing meaning. The Greek noun for hope *elpis* has each of these elements.<sup>36</sup> This noun and its related verb, *elpizo*, occur in the New Testament fifty-four and thirty-one times respectively.<sup>37</sup>

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated as "hope" appears 97 times. There is often a contrast between the wicked, who trust in themselves or

in idols, and those who trust in God. The prophets often warned God's people not to put their trust in man, horses, false alliances, or in their own plans. Kings and spiritual leaders were often tempted to depart from full-hearted trust and hope in God alone.

There is a larger word-group within Scripture linked to the idea of hope. Words like *trust*, *faith*, and *dependence* also discuss elements of hope. God is described as the source of strength, protection, and refuge to his people. Hope is often associated with God's love and mercy. People hope in God because of his unchanging faithfulness, regardless of experiences that appear paradoxical to his promises. "Biblical hope is defined this way: hope is a favorable and confident expectation. It is unseen and has a future orientation (Romans 8:24-25). It is good, blessed and living (1 Peter 1:3, 2 Thess. 2:16, 2 Tim. 2:13). God is spoken of as the object of hope (Romans 15:13). God is hope."<sup>38</sup>

Scripture does not have a singular definition of hope. Biblical hope can be understood by the description of people within a specific context, and defined more by description than simple definition. Hope is understood as a contextualized promise in the life of a Biblical character, or in a future prayer with an anticipated outcome. Often the concept of contextualized paradox is seen alongside this Biblical character within a narrative setting. In Biblical narratives, we gain interpretive clues of Godly patterns of hope, in juxtaposition with difficult circumstances.

Scripture teaches that hope is an intangible element based on God's promises. Hope and trust are complimentary components for Biblical obedience and testing, as revealed in the life of Abraham in Genesis 12 and 22. God often tests man when circumstances seem impossible. The danger is that man may fail the test. Hope's result can occur quickly or may not happen for generations.

This author will highlight several narratives of Scripture. He will draw general principles from these Scriptures. These will include the life of Abraham (Genesis 12-25), Joseph (Genesis 37-50), Hannah (1 Samuel 1-3), Moses (Exodus 1-19), Gideon (Judges 6-8), the early church (Acts 2-15), and heroes of the faith (Hebrews 11). These texts were selected because of their familiarity. The following are generalized statements regarding the intangible element called hope.

- Conditions that precede the appearance of hope appear impossible.
- All hope is based on promise and future expectation.
- People of hope are always deeply in touch with reality.
- Promise is based on the character of God.
- Human need and God's command work synergistically to form hope.
- Impossible circumstances reveal the nature of hope and purify human motivation.

- Hope's promise allows people of faith to persevere over long periods of time.
- Hope requires the paradoxical qualities of persistence and patience.
- Hope always has a future orientation.
- Hope can be expressed by human action but is always rooted in the unseen.
- Hope is contextualized promise and contextualized paradox.
- Hope's goal is always the glory of God and to bless many.

These realities emerge from these assertions. First, God's people always possess some degree of hope. Second, hope is sometimes evident and the results immediate, but at other times hope is invisible and delayed, with results that take generations to be fully realized. Third, God uses circumstances that are humanly impossible to glorify himself. Human beings are agents of his glory, and God can be compared to the jeweler who unrolls his jeweler's cloth and reveals the dazzling diamond for display. The times preceding God's glory are often the time of greatest darkness. William Carey explains,<sup>39</sup>

In answer to a Brahmin who said that God should repent for not sending the gospel sooner Carey replied: Suppose a kingdom had been long overrun by the enemies of its true king, and he though possessed of sufficient power to conquer them, should yet suffer them to prevail and establish themselves as much as they could desire, would not the valor and wisdom of that king be far more conspicuous in exterminating them, than it would have been if he had opposed them at first, and prevented their entering the country? Thus by the diffusion of Gospel light, the wisdom, power, and grace of God will be more conspicuous in overcoming such deep-rooted idolatries, and in destroying all that darkness and vice which have so universally prevailed in this country.

In Carey's view, God is most glorified when he overcomes an enemy that seems well established and fortified. Hope is seen most clearly when circumstances are at their worst. God's glory will be revealed, however long periods of darkness and opposition often precede it.

Hope dwells in the prophetic dream of heaven's presence coming to earth. Hope does not deny but embraces earthly reality without letting go of heaven's vitality. Hope is the intangible spiritual bridge between God and humanity. Hope acknowledges human despair and God's resources simultaneously. Hope is heaven's gift to man, yet paradoxical to humanity. Hope is a necessary intangible for an individual and for groups of people.

### **Moving Toward a Theology of Hope**

There is the need for an evangelical theology of hope. Steps toward that development begin with an examination of two German authors, Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, and their articulation of what has been termed “a theology of hope.” The author will then examine other understandings of hope, including the classical Puritan view of Iain H. Murray, the more postmodern understanding of Jimmy Long, and the more scholarly perspective from Walter Brueggemann. He will then suggest components needed to construct an evangelical theology of hope, and the vital role of prophetic ministry. He will share his journey and movement toward becoming a hopeful revivalist.

This author’s journey has been a process of movement from evangelical burn-out toward a more hopeful position. The term “hopeful revivalist” is a broad term, designed to refer to revival in its broadest scale. The First and Second Great Awakenings would be representative of how he uses the term. He does not mean revivalism as an event, or revival in the sense of specific evangelistic meetings. Revival terminology has suffered from psychological harbingers of the past. Revivals often conjure up images of Elmer Gantry, an over-emphasis upon emotionalism, and manifestations of the “sawdust trail” of days gone by. Unfortunately, extremism and abuse are the things that people remember about revivals. The term that this writer thinks is more accurate and descriptive is “awakening,” a massive spiritual paradigm shift of an entire nation.<sup>40,41</sup> This is what Lovelace means when he describes waterfalls running backwards. A theology of hope is built upon the presupposition that an entire culture can be changed. Waterfalls can run backwards.

As an evangelical, this author needed to rediscover hope on his personal journey. As an evangelical there was the need to recognize the absence of hope within his own soul. As an evangelical pastor dealing with moral issues in the church he served, human brokenness, and the needs of the surrounding culture, he needed to rediscover hope.

As an evangelical, he needed to return to an understanding of Biblical hope and the importance of intangibles of unseen spiritual dynamics.<sup>42</sup> He had to rediscover hope. As an evangelical who honored the Scriptures and his Reformation heritage, he needed a theology of hope.

The reasons why evangelicals need a theology of hope are as follows:

- Our commitment to Biblical authority and importance.
- The existence of predominant threats to the church in America.
- An overemphasis upon methodology over theology – “how” rather than “who.”

- The lack of a scriptural framework when dealing with common themes in pastoral ministry.
- Evangelical pessimism and the ideology of hopelessness.
- Evangelical identity crisis.
- The lack of forward movement.
- A status-quo mentality that can prevent creative and prophetic ministry.
- The cultural and moral issues in society.
- The aging of Evangelicalism, the loss of childlike hope.
- Lack of systems-thinking.
- The avoidance of complexity.
- A Westernized worldview that resists supernatural intervention.
- The unique challenges of the developing world of diversity, complexity and poverty.
- The God given resources and intellectual gifts that now exist within Evangelicalism.
- Our heritage of revival and awakening that demonstrates how waterfalls can run backwards.
- Most importantly, our knowledge of the God of the Bible, the God of all hope (Romans 15:13).

This author needed a roadmap of hope. The history of awakening, the need for a future orientation and a comprehensive vision, led him to this conclusion: evangelicals need a theology of hope. Where are the evangelical theologians and prophetic dreamers of hope? Has the aging of Evangelicalism created what C.S. Lewis described as a simultaneous loss of childlike imagination and sense of wonder? According to Lewis, “the process of growing up is to be valued for what we gain, not for what we lose.”<sup>43</sup> Have we lost the earlier vigor of Evangelicalism? Have we gotten old? Lewis writes, “Not to acquire a taste for the realistic is childish in a bad sense; to have lost the taste for marvels and adventures is no more a matter for congratulations than losing our teeth, our hair, our palate, and finally our hopes.”<sup>44</sup>

This author has come to the conclusion that most people in America (including individual Christians) look to their pastors for comfort in times of need or crisis, but no longer look to the church (or their pastors) to challenge them to a cause beyond themselves. We have become caretakers rather than prophetic dreamers. One evangelical asks, “Where have all the dreamers gone?”<sup>45</sup> Christian faith no longer calls many in America to a greater cause. When hope is lost, fuel continues to evaporate. Dreams have ended. The framework to fashion a new tomorrow is lost. Without hope we remain confined.

An ideology of confinement results in what this writer calls the “chaplain syndrome.” The pastoral role becomes one for care but not for

challenge. This leaves the pastor little time or freedom to consider prophetic imagination. Brueggemann clarifies,<sup>46</sup>

The ideology to imagine or even tolerate a new intrusion is predictable given the characteristic royal capacity to manage all the pieces. It is so even in our personal lives. To imagine a new gift given from outside violates our reason ... We are largely confined by our reason, our language, and our epistemology ... We know full well the makings of genuine newness are not included among these present pieces. And short of genuine newness life becomes a dissatisfied coping, a grudging trust, and a managing that never dares too much ... such a state of affairs ... is characteristic of most situations of ministry. When we try to face the holding action that defines the sickness, the aging, the marriages, and the jobs of very many people, we find that we have been nurtured away from hope, for it is too scary...The question facing ministry is whether there is anything that can be said, done or acted in the face of this ideology of hopelessness.

This author proposes that the alternative to the ideology of hopelessness is found in a theology of hope.

### **A Theology of Hope**

It is unfortunate that American evangelicals were not leading the way in formation of a theology of hope. Neither Moltmann nor Pannenberg identifies himself as an evangelical, and Pannenberg writes, "If there is one thing I am not, that is a pietist."<sup>47</sup> This theology formed by these German theologians in the 1960s is, according to Walter Elwell, "in some ways ... orthodox, yet politically it can be quite radical. Third World churches have been deeply influenced by a theology of hope."<sup>48</sup>

According to Grentz and Olson, "In part the Theology of Hope was the outworking of several developments in 20th century thought. One important precursor was a discovery that had been surfacing in New Testament studies since the turn of the century. Scholars had come to realize that eschatology had been a central feature of Jesus' proclamation and of the New Testament as a whole. Yet these discussions had not yet moved from exegesis to application."<sup>49</sup>

Pannenberg shares the common conviction with Moltmann that eschatology and hope represent the major focus of theology. "They conferred that the time has come to rethink theology in light of *teleos* and that the role of the church is to be a hope bearer."<sup>50</sup> Pannenberg agrees with Moltmann and with classical theology in many ways. He moves away from classical theology in one major point, according to Grentz and Olson: "He declares that truth is not found in the unchanging essences lying behind the flow of time, but is essentially historical and ultimately eschatological."<sup>51</sup>

Pannenberg had a deep concern for the visible unity of the church in a secularized world, as a visible witness to hope in a troubled world.<sup>52</sup> According to Grentz and Olson, Pannenberg sees “the role of the church to be [an] eschatological sign to the world. The church is to represent the Kingdom’s hope to the world.” They continue with the following description. “His [Pannenberg’s] concern however does not end with church unity but moves beyond to include the future of humanity. Pannenberg sees the function of the church in the world to be a witness to the temporality of all human institutions prior to the coming of the kingdom of God. As it gives expression to fellowship among humans and God, especially in the Eucharist, the church becomes the sign of God’s eschatological Kingdom which is the hope of the world. Theology is in part a servant to this task.”<sup>53</sup>

The contributions gleaned from the development of a theology of hope are as follows:

- Movement from exegesis to application.
- The need to rethink theology – the Kingdom of God as the model.
- Visible unity is essential as a witness to Christology.
- The church is to have a prophetic voice to all other institutions.
- The role of the Christian church is to be a hope-birther.
- Orthodoxy in the objective reality of God – God is the hope-giver.
- Orthopraxy – hope as a dynamic force – Christians are hope-bearers.
- Eschatological hope has power which brings transformation to present reality.

This author lists these contributions to exhort evangelicals to rethink theology. That theology includes a systemic framework and the centrality of the Kingdom of God. It is multidimensional, complex, includes the intangible element hope, and is cognizant of the power of visible unity.

Stephen M. Smith summarizes Moltmann and Pannenberg’s theology of hope as the objective reality of God as hope-giver, with a transforming vision for the coming of Christ’s Kingdom as central to the vision and mission of the church. According to Smith, “The theology of hope speaks to an understanding of God as being ahead of us and the one who will make all new. He is known now in his promises. It speaks to a world vividly aware of the ‘not yet’ dimensions of human and social existence, and of the fact that hope at its human level is of the stuff of meaningful existence. Within this sort of situation, sustained by a renewed confidence in the eschatological or apocalyptic vision of Scripture, and reacting to the individualistic exaggerations of theological existentialism (Bultmann), Moltmann has sought to rethink theology.”<sup>54</sup>

Smith writes, “The church is to be seen as the people of hope, experiencing hope in the God who is present in his promises. The coming kingdom gives the church a much broader vision of reality than a ‘merely’

private vision of personal salvation. The church is to contest all the barriers that have been constructed by man for security; it challenges all structures that absolutize themselves, and all barriers erected between peoples in the name of the reality that is to be done in Jesus Christ. The coming kingdom creates confronting and transforming vision for the mission of the people of God.”<sup>55</sup>

According to Iain Murray, revival, eschatological hope, and Biblical promise are to continually renew the church. He contends that it has been eschatological hope that has revived, purified, and empowered the mission of the church. According to Murray, “The Puritan attitude toward history was a perspective of faith in the promises of Scripture respecting Christ’s Kingdom and how theology which proclaims the controlling plan of God behind all events.”<sup>56</sup>

History, according to Murray, is under God’s control and scriptural revivals are part of his plan. He laments that the loss of hope, and the belief that history has no plan, may lessen a nation’s will to survive: “The loss of natural purpose, the loss of a will to advance, the indiscipline and futility of permissiveness, all of these are symptoms of an age in which the dominating mood is one of cynicism and pessimism – to the modern mind history is not under control.”<sup>57</sup>

Reformers and Christian leaders such as John Knox, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Spurgeon, believed in the reality, necessity, and possibility of a global outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The result would be the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ, and extension of Christ’s Kingdom. Puritans in particular, according to Murray, “did not suppose that all Scriptural preaching immediately results in revival. They knew that timing and seasons were ordained by God and observed that every era of great advancement has generally been preceded by the establishment of firm foundations through years of patient sowing, accompanied not infrequently by suffering.” Puritans, in Murray’s view, had a “long-term view” and were able to endure long seasons of persecution and “appalling darkness.” He says, “For men of this noble school neither promising circumstances nor immediate success were necessary to uphold their morale in the day of battle.”<sup>58</sup>

Murray summarizes his thoughts by citing Charles Spurgeon, considered by some to be the last Puritan:<sup>59</sup>

The fullness of Jesus is not changed, then why are our works so feebly done? Pentecost, is that to be a tradition? The reforming days, are these to be memories only? I see no reason why we should not have a greater Pentecost than Peter saw, and a Reformation deeper in its foundations, and truer in its upbuildings than all the reforms which Luther or Calvin achieved. We have the same Christ, remember that. The times are altered, but Jesus is the Eternal, and time touches him

not...Our laziness puts off the work of conquest, our self-indulgence procrastinates, our cowardice and want of faith make us dote upon the millennium instead of hearing the Spirit's voice today. Happy days would begin from this hour if the Church would but awake and put on her strength, for in her Lord all fullness dwells. 'Oh! Spirit of God, bring back thy Church to a belief in the gospel! Bring back her ministers to preach it once again with the Holy Ghost, and not striving after wit and learning. Then shall we see thine arm made bare, O God, in the eyes of all the people, and the myriads shall be brought to rally round the throne of God and the Lamb. The Gospel must succeed; it shall succeed; it cannot be prevented from succeeding; a multitude that no man can number must be saved.

This author includes Murray's writings because they are familiar to evangelicals and include the themes of revival, eschatological hope, and the link between Scripture and the advancement of Christ's Kingdom. Cultural change and transformation come as the result of the preaching of the Gospel.<sup>60</sup>

Long's contribution to the subject of hope is his concern that Evangelicalism retreated during the first fifty years of the 20th century: "It has required over fifty years reversing that retreat. At the turn of the 21st century the church finds itself in the midst of another hurricane, trying to decide how it will respond to the challenges, opportunities, associated with Generation X and post modernism."<sup>61</sup>

Long documents that Xers are "confused," isolated, suspicious, and lack intimacy from their home of origin. Long's focus is missional. The Gospel is "an invitation to hope," and the church is to be a community of hope.<sup>62</sup> According to Long, God's challenge to the church is as follows:<sup>63</sup>

God is calling us to be a people of hope who offer this gospel of hope to a generation without hope. We begin by caring for this postmodern generation as real people with real hurts. We need to meet Xers where they are and listen to their stories. Next we must be praying that God will give us wisdom to know how to demonstrate God's love by word and deed and that God will draw this generation to himself. Finally, we must be sharing ourselves and the hope of the gospel with them so that they will begin to understand that God loves them and desires to give them a home that they have never had, a place to belong. They also need to understand that it is only God who can provide this hope for discovering life's meaning, purpose and direction.

Many Christians see this postmodern generation as a hopeless cause. But I think that the opportunity for revival is greater today than it has been in the last forty years. In the recent past, people have looked to the stable family of the 1950s, societal changes in the 1960s, the me generation of the 1970s and the good life of the 1980s for hope. In the 1990s and beyond, this postmodern generation is struggling to survive the confusing changes that surround them. They feel hopeless. Are we ready to offer them God's hope?"

Another important perspective on hope comes from Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. He points to the necessity of hope, and proposes the idea of a "theology of amazement"<sup>64</sup> to describe prophetic imagination. Prophetic imagination allows for new hope and new possibilities. This writer wants to pay particular attention to Brueggemann's pastoral perspective, which he terms "the ideology of hopelessness." According to Brueggemann, "The question facing ministry is whether there is anything that can be said, done, or acted in the face of the ideology of hopelessness."<sup>65</sup>

He answers that question from a Biblical perspective and argues that our faith tradition has provided a solution in the prophets. People who are connected to God have a unique task, in Brueggemann's view. That task is to energize God's people: "The task of prophetic imagination and ministry is to bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God."<sup>66</sup> Moreover, "the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."<sup>67</sup>

The prophets serve a multidimensional role. The prophet must "criticize" before they can "energize." He must "penetrate the numbness of history." The challenge the prophet faces is penetrating the current framework that attempts to define all of reality. Brueggemann insists that God's Word, not human perception, ultimately defines reality: "A present understanding of reality is based on the notion that all social reality does spring fresh from the Word."<sup>68</sup>

New possibilities, for Brueggemann, exist in the unseen dimension in the power of God's Word. This is the source of hope and dramatic change. Speaking of the incarnation of Christ and his ministry, he says "that ultimate energizing gave people a future when they believed that the grim present was the end and the only state of existence. This imagination and action stood against all the discerned data and in the face of the doubt and resistance of those to whom he came." He explains that, "the present ordering ... claims to be the full and final ordering. That claim means there can be no future that either calls the present into question or promises a way out of it. Thus the fulsome claim of

the present arrangement is premised on hopelessness. This insidious form of realized eschatology requires persons to live without hope.”<sup>69</sup>

Prophetic ministry must bring the claims of the tradition and the situation of enculturation into an effective interface. Therefore confrontation between tradition and enculturation is part of the prophetic task. The prophet does not deny the faith tradition but rather uses that tradition to speak to the present context. “The weariness and serenity of the churches just now make it a good time to study the prophets and get rid of misconceptions.”<sup>70</sup>

Brueggemann utilizes Biblical history and scholarly insight to define the role of prophetic ministry in these ways:<sup>71</sup>

- The prophet is to “present an alternative consciousness as a model for energizing.”
- “The prophet is to bring new realities against the more visible ones of the old order.”
- “The prophet is engaged in a battle for language, in an effort to create a different epistemology out of which another community might emerge.”
- The prophet “has the only hope that the ache of God could penetrate the numbness of history.”
- The prophet and his “task of prophetic imagination and ministry is to bring people to engage the promises of newness that is at work in our history with God.”
- “The prophet must offer symbols of hope, bring to public expression hope and yearnings that have been denied, and must speak metaphorically about hope but concretely about the real newness ... that redefines our situation.”

He concludes that “the hope-filled language of prophecy, in cutting through ... despair and hopelessness, is the language of amazement.”<sup>72</sup>

Brueggemann introduces prophetic imagination as a Biblical alternative to the ideology of hopelessness. He challenges evangelicals (who he terms as “Biblicists”) to reengage within their own faith tradition. He suggests that the re-introduction of the prophetic role within Evangelicalism would incite holy revolution. This would counter present evangelical numbness, enculturation, and energize a new future. He speaks to the present state of tiredness of the evangelical identity crisis. He spoke to this journeyman as well. His message of prophetic imagination is needed to energize an evangelical theology of hope. It is a necessary corrective that must be recaptured.

Brueggemann challenges the ideology of hopelessness with the call to “imagine a new gift from the outside” and to see that this gift “violates reason. ... This gift is not to be confined by reason, language of epistemology.”<sup>73</sup> It is beyond categories of confinement or descriptions of the mind. It is wild but

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progressively redemptive. It is invisible yet powerful. It is hope. It is like the ocean overtaking a river. It is like a waterfall flowing backwards. Brueggemann writes a prophetic indictment of the enculturation of Christian faith, and appeals not only for restoration of prophetic imagination but also a recovery of faith tradition. He calls evangelicals to remember the God of history who turns back waterfalls. He calls for new evangelical dreamers. Part of evangelical faith tradition is the history of revivals. Their power is able to awaken an entire culture and initiate a massive paradigm shift within that culture, a waterfall running backwards. Brueggemann writes:<sup>74</sup>

The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or act ... The internal cause of such enculturation is our loss of identity through the abandonment of the faith tradition. Our consumer culture is organized against history. There is a depreciation of memory and a ridicule of hope, which means everything, must be held in the now, either an urgent now or an eternal now. Either way, a community rooted in energizing memories and summoned by radical hopes is a curiosity and a threat in such a culture. When we suffer from amnesia every form of serious authority for faith is in question and we live unauthorized lives of faith and practice unauthorized ministries. The church will not have power to act or believe until it recovers its tradition of faith and permits that tradition to be the primal way out of enculturation.

He points to prophetic Kingdom leaders who know how to appropriate the old treasures of the Kingdom (past revivals that changed history), and know how to bring out new treasures as well (the new prophets who prepare the way for revivals of tomorrow). God has not changed. People of hope are God's means as the primal way out of enculturation.

### **Waterfalls Can Run Backwards**

What is the connection between hope, revival, and massive spiritual awakening? The connection between hope and massive spiritual awakening is in knowing God. God has not changed. The intangible element called hope is the bridge between the eternal character of God and our present context. The connection is simple and straightforward. Hope is God's invisible fuel that links heaven's promise with the Earth's realities. Can waterfalls run backwards? Has the enculturation of the Christian church, Evangelicalism's identity crisis, the moral decay in culture, the lack of social concern and action, and the division and strife that dominate church life, made us feel hopeless?

As evangelicals, we must come face to face with the dark forces. Their existence is indisputable. They are so strong they appear to wash away all hope. George Barna laments:<sup>75</sup>

There are many vestiges of authentic Christianity still to be found in our nation. But it would be a disaster for Christians and other God-fearers not to recognize that we've reached a turning point in our cultural history, and to go on dreaming that we can gradually change this formerly more or less Christian country for the better.

Those of us who are Christian and take our commitment seriously are slow to recognize it, but ultimately it will be easier for Christians to live in a country that we know is pagan than to live in one that we think is still sufficiently Christian to listen to us and to change in accordance with Christian values.

According to Barna, the tide is out. The strength of the waterfalls is too great, and in his view, the waterfalls cannot run backwards. Give up the dream. Do not even try to imagine another reality. We are not nor can we ever be a culture informed by the values of the Kingdom of God. This writer agrees with Barna's lament, but not his conclusion. This writer's hope is that waterfalls can run backwards.

The connection between revival and hope rests in the knowledge and love of God. It is in knowing the God of all hope (Romans 15:13). Revival's hope is built upon the character of God. Hope leads to faith. Faith says God is good, has a good purpose, and is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him (Hebrews 11:1, 6).

Our only hope is in God. We are beyond human repair. Hope is the highway between heaven and earth. Hope is an honest reality check that admits that darkness is dark. The waterfall is flowing forward, and we are being swept away by the river. Hope is the conviction that waterfalls can run backwards. Hope is "Spirit respiration" in prayer. Hope is the settled conviction that nothing is impossible for God. Hope is the pulse of God and the power to persevere. Hope laments the Earth's present condition but does not lose heart with the promise of God's Kingdom's presence coming to Earth (Matthew 6:10).

Hope is the confidence that a God of perfect love will not forget his people, regardless of how difficult their surroundings have become or how far his people have wandered away. He is the God of all hope. He is the God of perfect love. God's patterns do not change. This God calls evangelicals to hope again. This God calls evangelicals to turn away from shallow alliances and false hopes. This God calls evangelicals to repent of their ideology of hopelessness. If the culture is to be transformed, it will begin within the household of faith. This writer's call is for an "evangelical theology of hope." God has not abandoned his call to American Evangelicalism. We still have a special calling and a role to

fulfill. "There is an obligation upon a New World, a new land, a new people, as we call ourselves here in America. We are called the 'last hope of humankind' and we feel bound to carry out the task of building civilization as close to the Kingdom as we can, until we're released from the obligation. We can't give up in despair, because there is still so much hope for this country."<sup>76</sup> Hope becomes the fuel for future transformation. This writer concludes with the word of a prophetic dreamer who is deeply in touch with the evangelical context – a portion of a sermon by Roberto Miranda to an evangelical gathering. Miranda summarizes Biblical hope and God's faithfulness in the context of American Evangelicalism. It is a prophetic challenge that offers hope in the God of the Bible:<sup>77</sup>

American evangelicals are feeling more besieged and less certain about their future than ever. In light of these conditions, talk of a post-Christian world doesn't seem to be pessimistic at all, but rather an inevitable conclusion that results from a realistic appraisal of the present culture and spiritual climate.

While I acknowledge the seriousness of our situation, I am firmly convinced that the most glorious era for the Christian Church in America, or in the entire world for that matter, is still ahead of us. Someone has said that the darkest moment of the night is right before dawn, and in the case of our present condition vis-à-vis the prevailing culture, I believe this is true.

First of all, we need to be reminded that God loves to intervene on behalf of His people at the moment of their most intense need. There is ample Biblical precedent for this view. Think of Moses and the Israelites suffering for many years under the yoke of Pharaoh, until their cry ascended to heaven and God finally sent a deliverer. Then, after finally being allowed to leave Egypt they find themselves before the Red Sea, with the Egyptian army at their back. Only when Moses cries out in despair does God intervene and provide clear instructions on how to proceed. We also have the image of the disciples, rowing desperately the entire night in the midst of the storm, until Jesus finally appears near dawn, walking on the water to save them. We see him postponing his visit to see his friend Lazarus, in order that he might die and be resurrected.

All these delays are designed for dramatic effect, to make God's power more evident, and to force God's people to become utterly reliant on him. God reduced Gideon's army to a fraction of its

original size in order to make it totally clear that it wasn't the Israelites' military prowess that won the day, but rather God's gracious intervention. The apostle Paul makes it clear that Jesus entered the world in humanity's darkest hour, when 'we were dead in trespasses.

God's intention is to crush man's pride, and to emphasize the need for His grace. I believe that God is waiting for the precise, strategic moment to intervene on behalf of the Church in America where secularism and humanism seem to have taken over. The severity of our situation places us squarely within the Biblical paradigm of God's intervention at the moment of greatest need.

God is seeking to crush the pride of the Church in America. He wants to thoroughly discredit our dependency on money, programs, human strategies and scholarly credentials, and to force us to fall on our knees and cry out to Him like the Israelites in Egypt. He wants to bring us to a point of personal and institutional crisis to remind us of our utter dependence upon Him alone.

Many churches in America are desperately fighting to get out of the rut that they find themselves in. All kinds of clever strategies and programs are being tried by individual congregations as well as entire denominations. Despite the sincerity of these efforts they seem designed to avoid the inevitable crucifixion and death that needs to take place within the American protestant psyche, before God can truly resurrect us into a new life of spiritual power. Like the rich young ruler, we want the life but we do not want to abandon the religious and intellectual crutches that we love so much.

North American Christians should be encouraged and energized by what God is accomplishing through His Church in areas of the world that until relatively recently were engulfed in the darkness of paganism, witchcraft and nominal Christianity. If Third World Christians could overcome such formidable forces in so spectacular a manner, then surely there is great hope for North American Christianity.

Orthodox Christianity in America, despite its profoundly counter-cultural components, is far from becoming extinct. Fears about its waning or demise are totally unjustified and premature. They are

supported neither by historical analysis nor by Biblical principles. The temptation of certain sectors of the evangelical world to water down the proclamation of faith, and to de-emphasize some of the distinctive elements of our worship and theology are misguided.

American evangelicalism needs to experience deep inner healing at the level of the spirit. It needs a renewed understanding of itself and of the nature of God and His dealings in history before it can again engage the culture and carry out effective ministry.

The placid, orderly nature of many evangelical services desperately needs to be contaminated and upset by the moving of God's powerful wind. The one scant hour that many evangelicals dedicate to their services on Sunday needs to be expanded and made more flexible and unpredictable so that God might have some room in which to move as He wants. God will not bring revival in evangelical, middle-class terms. He will do things His own way, and He will not limit Himself in order to fit into our neat, rational paradigms. God has always operated by offending the mind, by turning our neat mental models upside down. The love for order and predictability that pervades the typical middle-class, evangelical service will not be able to contain the new wine that God wants to pour down upon His people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As always, God will offend the mind in order to affect the heart. He will not give us what we want, but what we need. American evangelicalism desperately needs is a confrontation with God's power and the sovereign unpredictable moving of His Spirit. We already have enough aesthetics and theological nuance to last us for several generations. What we need now is for God's rain to fall upon our religious altars and bring spiritual healing and emotional health to our parched evangelical souls."

Miranda believes in the God of the Bible. He has Biblical hope. He believes that waterfalls run backwards. This writer has come to believe that as well, and that has moved him from evangelical burn-out toward becoming a more hopeful revivalist.

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#### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 237-238.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 40, 223-225,
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- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 210-211.
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