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The Unexpectedness of Hope: Good News for a Generation

By David M. Johnstone

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The gospel of Jesus Christ is wrapped in the notion of God's "will be[ing] done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10 NIV). The *good* in the good news (or gospel) looks a little different for every age, culture, and context. Unlike the Eastern notion of karma, or what goes around comes around, the Christian gospel centers on God's grace being offered to those who accept Jesus's kindness and authority. God extends grace so that men and women do not receive what they deserve; therefore, what goes around does *not* come around. Many find this to be good news, particularly when they realize that they are not as kind, merciful, and conscientious as they might wish. My premise is that current North American college students have a deep sense of their flawed nature and are genuinely attracted to the possibilities of hope being restored in their lives. I will unpack what observers, practitioners, writers, and theologians note (a) about these students and (b) about hope. I will then reflect on my own interactions and observations with regard to students, hope, and the good news of Jesus Christ.

In Christian theology, followers of Jesus understand the idea of good news as grace intimately related to the scriptural notions of faith, hope, and love, as outlined in 1 Corinthians 13:13. The idea of *love* so saturates our Western culture that it has lost much of its power for college students. Further, *faith* seems to cover much of their inner life, but that self-awareness and introspection is not encouraging. Many college students are unsettled with their own moral inner character. Many are not happy with who they are becoming or have become.¹ The *hope* that there is the possibility of change seems to be the "good news" or the means of grace to many of this current generation of college students.

My suggestion is that this generation links the good news of the gospel with hope. Although love is still rich with meaning, hope is more immediately pertinent

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because it seems to be less common. Hope may be the central message of Jesus's good news for today's college students: hope that they are acceptable in spite of the way they are and hope that the Holy Spirit will enable them to change. They hope that the Holy Spirit can transform the tragedy and circumstances of their lives. Hope pulls them from despair and gives them a vision for the future.

Reflections on Student Culture

Much of our popular culture depicts American undergraduate culture in simplistic, embellished, and entertaining ways. It would be more realistic to describe it as harassed, broken, cynical, depressed, and damaged.² Traditional undergraduates bring a growing list of concerns, tragedies, medications, illnesses, and negative experiences with them to college. Upon matriculation, they join a community of peers who are encountering similar challenges with hormones, personal identity, faith development, academic disorientation, and complex relationships. The pressure-cooker environment of academic seasons often causes students' anxiety and desperation to boil to the surface. Panic, stress, eating disorders, despair, and suicidal ideation are all too often parts of their lives, even becoming normative for many students. In some cases, the stressors encountered by students are so paralyzing that the hopelessness leads to substance abuse, self-harm, and at times suicide.³ The variables of collapsing family dynamics, changing sexual mores, and the increased chaos of life wreak havoc and create complexity in students' lives.⁴

Jon Dalton notes that the spiritual lives of students provide a way for them to make meaning of their experiences and studies. He also observes that, for college students, "the spiritual journey almost always involves traveling companions."⁵ Students are looking for the "transcendent and sacred"; they are led "inevitably to the desire to connect with others."⁶ The needs that students have for both meaning and relational significance will often come together.

For college students, this connection with a community creates a sense of belonging, intimacy, and security.⁷ They gain tremendous support from one another during a time of life that is full of transitions. Sharon Daloz Parks notes

¹Richard Kadison and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo, *College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What We Must Do about It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²Kadison and DiGeronimo, *College of the Overwhelmed*; Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*.

³Kadison and DiGeronimo, *College of the Overwhelmed*.

⁴*Ibid.*; Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*; Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵Jon Dalton, "Integrating Spirit and Community in Higher Education," in *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*, eds. Arthur Chickering, Jon Dalton, and Liesa Stamm Auerbach (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2006), 171.

⁶*Ibid.*, 172.

⁷*Ibid.*; Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

the importance of community, particularly within the world of college students' spirituality.⁸ As young people mature, the presence of a community around them enables and facilitates that growth, especially when a community "poses a trustworthy alternative to earlier assumed knowing," thereby helping them see beyond themselves.⁹

Reflections on Hope

Hope is often viewed as a virtue—something of high value and integrity. A more modern perspective views hope as "the virtue that orients us to fulfillment, the virtue by which we consistently seek, despite hardships and discouragement, our most magnanimous possibilities in life."¹⁰ In his theological discussions about hope, Thomas Aquinas notes that hope is a virtue because it provides the possibility for attaining difficult things.¹¹ We hope along with others and do so even better when within a community. As humans we are prone to discouragement and liable to abandon our quest unless others support and "remind us of the value of our quest."¹² The community's role in hope is vital.¹³ At both the communal and individual levels, hope refers to belief in the potential or possibility of change along with awareness of steps for how to achieve said change.¹⁴

I consider hope to be (a) an emotional response to the circumstances of life, (b) a virtue, and (c) a cognitive and intellectual approach to life as reflected in theology and philosophy. On one level, hope is a response to life events, frequently a reaction to our experiences. Successes usually reinforce a sense of optimism and increase hope, while failures often undermine and decrease hope.¹⁵ Individual experiences both in the past and present frequently determine responses to life. Often individuals base their hope for future success on successful experiences in the past.¹⁶ Theologically, hope can be built upon how we have interpreted the ways God has acted in the past, as revealed in Scripture. In our lives, "Hope enables people to transcend the difficulties of today and envision the potentialities

⁸Parks, *Big Questions*, 89.

⁹*Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁰Paul J. Waddell and Darin H. Davis, "Tracking the Toxins of Acedia: Re-envisioning Moral Education," in *The Schooled Heart: Moral Formation in American Higher Education*, eds. Douglas Henry and Michael Beatty (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 146.

¹¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 3. Westminster: Christian Classics (trans. 1911, 1981), 1237.

¹²Waddell and Davis, "Tracking the Toxins," 147.

¹³Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions*; M. Phillips, "The Relationship between Hope and Psychological Sense of Community: An Examination of Students, Faculty and Staff in a Small Campus" (doctoral diss., University of Missouri–Columbia, 2002).

¹⁴Charles R. Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Marva J. Dawn, *Truly the Community: Romans 12 and How to Be the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 89.

The discussion of hope in Christianity spans the centuries, illustrated by the biblical reflections in Paul's letters (1 Cor. 13:13; Rom. 8:24) and various psalms (71:5; 119:43; 130:5). Hope was seen as a virtue, "the virtue by which we consistently seek, despite hardships" the great possibilities of life.¹⁸ In a small handbook, written at the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine reflected on how individuals should view hope as beyond themselves. Hope is both (a) temporal and (b) future focused; in either case, the fulfillment of that hope is determined externally from our own actions.¹⁹

Aquinas viewed "hope as a future good, difficult but possible to obtain."²⁰ In his theological discussions about hope, he asserted that hope was not a solitary experience. Aquinas observed men and women as being more capable of hope when they are in community. We are prone to discouragement and liable to abandon our hopes unless there are others who support us;²¹ others help us remind us of our goals and dreams.

John Calvin described the interrelated roles that hope plays with other virtues. He specifically referenced the connection between hope and faith: "faith believes God to be true, hope awaits the time when his truth shall be manifested."²² Calvin connected hope to the belief that what God has promised will come to fruition.

Biblically, hope is more than having objectives or goals or viewing circumstances positively. There is a future element of anticipation in biblical hope.²³ Yet there is also a sense that the implications of future hope should also affect daily lives. The scriptural view of hope also has a future focus: God will make wrongs right; injustice will be dealt with; and the wounded will be made whole. Yet hope is not escapist in nature, as there is an expectation that hope should shape current perspectives and actions. In anticipating the future, hope yields implications for the present.²⁴

N. T. Wright observes that this future perspective is accurate but only half of the story. He also notes that the transformative power for the present suggests neither Jesus's teaching nor that the biblical writers intended to create a separation between the present and the future.²⁵ Although believers can anticipate God will one day make the world right, there is no reason for delaying efforts to redeem

¹⁷James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 341.

¹⁸Waddell and Davis, "Tracking the Toxins," 146.

¹⁹Augustine, *Faith, Hope, and Charity* (New York: Newman, 1947).

²⁰Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1236–37.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. J. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 590.

²³Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 78.

²⁴N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

²⁵*Ibid.*, 265.

the world in order to bring about temporal justice.²⁶

Throughout the church's history, Christian thinkers (theologians, pastors, mystics, and laypeople) grappled with hope's definitions and implications.²⁷ In these reflections and conversations, they emphasized the centrality of hope by understanding what hope is not. The opposite of hope would seem to be hopelessness.²⁸ However, Jürgen Moltmann observed despair is not the absence of hope, but "the pain of despair surely lies in the fact that a hope is there, but no way opens up towards its fulfillment."²⁹ It is better to understand hope's antithesis as despair. It is being able to see a solution to a problem or a needed change but having no idea or means to get there.

Aquinas linked despair with apathy or acedia, one of the seven deadly sins.³⁰ He saw despair and acedia as mutually reinforcing and destructive. Paul J. Waddell and Darin H. Davis, reflecting on Aquinas, note despair is a belief "that moral and spiritual excellence, however admirable, is impossibly beyond [individuals] ... acedia is the paralyzing spirit of dejection that robs them of hope."³¹ Aquinas saw despair as a pervasive sadness that immobilized the individual.³²

Søren Kierkegaard suggested alienation and despair are closely related.³³ Developing this observation, C. Stephen Evans sees the sense of marginalization, loneliness, and alienation experienced by many in Western culture as having arisen from acedia, apathy, fatalism or "the sickness of despair."³⁴ Making further observations about alienation, Waddell and Davis say, "Acedia is a dejection of the soul—a moral and spiritual torpor—that leads to the trivialization of oneself and one's relations to others."³⁵ That relationship to others becomes a theme in understanding the nuances of hope. The opposite of hope is being able to envision a solution but being unable to reach it; it is a paralyzing resignation that nothing can change attended by isolation and alienation.

Over the past dozen years of professional experience and research, I observed the emergence of a battery of common themes in the lives of American college students as noted in literature. First, students had no need to be convinced that they were a mess—sometimes of their own making, sometimes due to the actions and decisions of others. Second, potential eternal salvation is of less importance

²⁶Ibid., 276.

²⁷Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

²⁸*Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed August 19, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88379>, s.v. hopeless, adj.

²⁹Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 23.

³⁰Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1255.

³¹Waddell and Davis, "Tracking the Toxins," 134.

³²Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1255.

³³Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954).

³⁴C. Stephen Evans, *Existentialism: The Philosophy of Despair and the Quest for Hope* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 74.

³⁵Waddell and Davis, "Tracking the Toxins," 136.

than immediate needs—eternal life is a bonus, but the current conditions of life take preeminence. Third, many desperately want the conditions to change. However, they could not envision that happening. They needed to know their circumstances have the potential or the possibility of being transformed. My conjecture is that for these students, the gospel of Jesus is good news because it offers the hope of change.

Observations

American culture likes to leverage the idea of hope; however, it is still quite rare. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is truly good news, the hope Jesus offers to those who trust in him is very good news even to many college students. Drawing on the themes I noted above, I anticipated in my research that relationships and community would play a significant role in the lives of students and indeed my conversations confirmed these assumptions. The surprise came when I observed that meaning-making was equally important for these students as they experienced the good news. Meaning-making, drawing an understanding of the nuances and complexities surrounding a significant life experience, was necessary to their well-being.

Relationships

My first observation is that students often need support to move beyond experiences of tragedy, trauma, or hard times. This support was provided by both men and women who invested in the students' lives before and after the trauma. Their roles were diverse, being teachers, family, friends, or colleagues. Their unique role was assisting the students in discerning the meaning that underlay their particular experiences of trauma. These men and women helped students recognize and interpret the faith-related dynamics of their particular situations and helped them wrestle with existential questions arising from their experiences.

Both individual and communal relationships played an important role in the lives of students. Indeed, pain and despair only became magnified if a particular participant was alone.³⁶ This support often took the form of encouragement or a perspective that challenged the students' interpretations of events or helped them make sense of these experiences.

Community

With the assistance of sustaining and challenging communities, students began to discern their experiences had not happened in a vacuum.³⁷ Their com-

³⁶See Gerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

³⁷Parks, *Big Dreams*; Dalton, "Integrating Spirit."

munities helped impart a vision of hope even when the participants themselves had little or no hope. The sense that others might have hope for their lives played a crucial role in moving the subjects away from despair. That others could assist or see good things in their future is very significant for one who is struggling with despair.³⁸

Making-Meaning

Students, as faithful followers of Jesus, were trying to work out the personal implications of their faith. Their faith kept them grounded amid the chaos of their tragic experiences and served as the lens through which they were able to discern the redemptive implications of these experiences and embrace hope. They began to see that their experiences enabled them to identify with others, deepened their relationship with God, and prepared them in one way or another for the future.

The meaning that supportive communities facilitate, and faith they promote, could not be reduced to answers to the question, "Why did this happen?" Students may indeed have dealt with this question as part of the processing of their lives and traumas. There was a growing sense that their suffering had a benefit beyond their pain, particularly in developing empathy for others who had also experienced difficulties. This growing empathy helped students move away from an internal focus and allowed them (a) to invest in others, (b) to see the hope that was hidden in the pain of others, and (c) thereby to gain a more robust understanding of their own experiences and a deepening hope.

Today's college students have experienced illness, pain, and difficult times caused by themselves and others. Hard experiences often lead to the belief that things cannot change. As a result, some students collapse into cynicism, fatalism, or despair—losing hope. Followers of Jesus trying to convey good news can lean into the good news that circumstances do not have to remain the same and change is possible. I would suggest this hope is the good news of Jesus Christ for this generation; it has impact for coming to faith, but it also has deeper and enduring implications for life. Through supportive relationships and a sustaining community, meaning can be made in the most difficult of circumstances, and we as educators have a role to play. Hope is thus possible, and that is good news, indeed.

³⁸David M. Johnstone, "The Journey from Tragedy to Hope: The Experience of Christian Undergraduates" (doctoral diss., George Fox University, 2014).