



*Renewing Moral Theology:
Christian Ethics as Action,
Character and Grace*

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Moral theology, rooted in Thomas Aquinas, has long found its home in the Catholic and Anglican traditions, and in recent years it has become more familiar through the perspective known as virtue ethics. Renewing Moral Theology unfolds an ethical perspective that is Thomistic in structure, evangelical in conviction and Anglican in ethos.

Morality, Hope and the Church

The object of Christian hope is eternal life and God himself. The virtue comes to us through grace, linked to the virtues of faith and love. Just as love, a virtue of the will, depends on the relationship of faith that develops and perfects knowledge, so hope perfects the will by directing our desire to what God offers us in the age to come.

Hope (Latin *spes*, Greek *elpis*) as a theological virtue is related to the human emotion of hope, since both are directed to obtaining some good thing in the future. In this life we face uncertainty and other obstacles, and we use the word *hope* when we refer to good things or events in the future that may be difficult but possible to attain. When we get into the car to take a trip, it would ordinarily be strange to say, "I hope we get there all right," unless the weather and road conditions or a possible defect in the car made things potentially hazardous. Likewise, the statement "I hope that there will be a decent harvest this year" means one thing in Iowa (where bad harvests are rare) and something very different in Darfur or any other area where people have few resources and famine is common. In most Western countries a full supermarket six months from now is taken for granted and does not involve hope, but where the difficulties are real and substantial, and good outcomes in the future are uncertain, hope is very relevant.

We need to note that there is a point of possibility beyond which hope becomes wishful thinking, that what we desire is simply unattainable, and there are no legitimate grounds for actual hope. For nearly all of us, becoming an Olympic athlete or a concert pianist is material for daydreams rather than for hope.

On this natural level there is really no need to speak of a "virtue" of hope. There is an "emotion" of hope (e.g., on the level of feeling or in the sense of a more remote and rational aspiration for a fulfilling career), but the corresponding virtues that are relevant to the difficulties and dangers attaching to the things that we hope for are covered by fortitude and related subvirtues such as patience.

Hope and the Moral Virtues

Hope directed to the kingdom of God and a new heaven and new earth provides a basis for wisdom in acting that both respects the integrity of this world now and anticipates its renewal in the coming kingdom. Although death and destruction are still all too real and confront Christians with challenges in the form of allocations of resources, involvement in wars, and so on, such difficulties can be faced more clearly with the informed Christian view of God's ultimate triumph and renewal of heaven and earth.

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“Daniel Westberg provides a much-needed, accessible contemporary Anglican guide to moral theology, but he does much more. Focused on virtue and bringing together the wisdom of Catholic and evangelical traditions, his exposition of Scripture and Aquinas provides readers with a biblical Thomist ethic. This book’s moral theology will renew both the minds and lives of Christian disciples and the church’s witness in the world.”

— **Andrew Goddard**, associate director, Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, Cambridge

As a virtue of the will, hope is especially related to the moral virtue of justice. As a cardinal virtue, justice, as we have seen, relates to the ordering of the person’s psyche and overall being, including the body, mind and spirit. The virtue is especially extended to proper relationships with people and other external relations. With a firm belief in the resurrection of our Lord and in the new heaven and earth to be ushered in, we can work for appropriate goals in the right away. As N. T. Wright observes, proper Christian hope will enable us to work for a justice that avoids both a liberal activism that emphasizes human responsibility and a quietism that avoids confronting injustice and flees to individualist escapism. As for specific issues of justice, it is hard to disagree with Wright’s concern for economic imbalance in the world and the problem of Third World debt. There is an excellent biblical basis in the concepts of jubilee and the shared well-being of shalom for reducing inequality and enabling the poor in the Third World to ease the burden of debt.

There is a parallel in Christian hope between personal holiness and social justice. Just as we would not accept the argument that any attempt at developing a holy life will be frustrated by human imperfections and lingering sinfulness, and that therefore we should simply wait for the transformation after our resurrection, so we should not allow Christians to argue that it is too difficult and frustrating to work for social improvements, and that we can simply wait for the eschaton’s fulfillment. Both attitudes are contrary to the New Testament, especially Paul’s message in Romans.

Scripture links the virtue of hope with patience (and thus fortitude) in several different places. In Romans 5 Paul offers this marvelous assurance: “Since we are justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (Rom 5:1-2). And Paul commends the Thessalonian Christians for their “steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 1:3).

A prayer by the theologian John Baillie puts hope in close connection with faith and love:

Help thou mine unbelief, O God, give me greater patience in my hope, and make me more constant in my love. In loving let me believe and in believing let me love; and in loving and in believing let me hope for a more perfect love and a more unwavering faith, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

— *Adapted from chapter sixteen, “Hope”*