

Wilhelmus à Brakel and the Importance of Hope

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Hope is the least prominent of the three Christian virtues, faith, hope, and love. Christians believe that faith is God's gracious gift which is essential for salvation, it is required in order to come to God in a manner that pleases Him, and it is the means through which God's people are justified. Christians know that love is the greatest of the three virtues. (1 Cor. 13:13.) The life of the Christian must be characterized by love; love for God, and love for one's neighbor. (Luke 10:27.) Although hope is not the greatest of the three virtues, analysis of *The Christian's Reasonable Service* by Wilhelmus à Brakel gives much evidence to argue that hope is integral to biblical experimental Christianity, it is worthy of study and promotion, and it is fundamental to a God-glorifying life.

À Brakel uses the Scripture to arrive at a definition of hope. The Hebrew words used in the Old Testament refer to expectation and trust without fear.¹ À Brakel goes into greater depth in explaining the use of hope in the New Testament. "In Greek the word is *elpis* which signifies: to build upon faith, to be free of anxiety, to anticipate with certainty. Occasionally it signifies the matter hoped for; here it signifies the motion of the heart."² When à Brakel uses the word "hope", he most often means an activity which occurs in the heart or soul and manifests itself in an expectant certainty about particular events in the future.

à Brakel follows Paul's example from Romans 8:24-25 in fleshing out the definition of hope. Paul writes, "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." À Brakel writes the following about the connection between hope and the future.

The nature of hope consists in a sure expectation. Hope is not the equivalent of possession; whatever one possesses, one cannot hope for. "Hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for" (Rom 8:25). Hope expects and anticipates that which has not been observed as yet, is not yet present, but which is yet to come. "But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it" (Rom 8:25). The apostle therefore conjoins expecting and hoping—the latter explaining the former. "According to my earnest expectation and my hope ..." (Phil 1:20).

Hope is a sure expectation.³

¹ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, in which Divine Truths concerning the COVENANT OF GRACE are Expounded, Defended against Opposing Parties, and their Practice Advocated as well as The Administration of this Covenant in the Old and New Testaments, Trans. Rev. Bartel Elshout, Ed. Dr. Joel R. Beeke, Vol. III, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999, 317.

² Ibid.

³ à Brakel, Vol. III, 318.

According to à Brakel, hope arises from an expectation. Paul has an earnest expectation and this gives rise to the content and feeling of his hope. Although à Brakel does not say so, there is an element of mental or intellectual activity about expectation. But hope is the feeling that rises from expectation. This hope resonates in the soul of the believer. This is much more intense than the thoughts which lead to a person's belief or expectation about the future.

It is essential to distinguish between hope and wishful thinking. Unlike the believer of Romans 8; 24-25, Balaam wished for a good future, but his desire was very different from the hope of which à Brakel writes. The hope of the Christian is not the desire that events will occur as one plans, or that that a man can avoid the danger that he fears. The believer does not have the object of his hope, but he is certain that he will receive it. Unlike a wish that is founded on desire, the Christian's hope is sure and certain.

À Brakel differentiates between hope and faith on the basis of Hebrews 11:1. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith is so sure that the object of faith will be granted that it is as if the person who has faith already has "the substance of things hoped for." Like faith, hope expects that it will receive the object for which it longs and hopes; but hope has an eye to the future. Hope realizes that it does not have the object of hope. But it is so convinced that it will receive the thing for which it longs that the plans it makes include the object of its desire.⁴

À Brakel explains the origin of hope and the means of maintaining hope. One of the purposes of Scripture is to give God's people hope.⁵ In Romans 15, Paul demonstrates that there is a relationship between Scripture, faith in the God of the Scriptures, and hope. In verse four he writes, "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." In verse thirteen Paul writes, "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost." À Brakel exhorts believers to meditate on the Word as they read it in order to gain comfort. Comforting passages may come to mind during prayer, Scripture reading, or meditation.

À Brakel links this kind of comfort to regular reading of the bible in its entirety. Comforting verses of Scripture will come to mind only if the mind is stocked with a large reservoir of the content of Scripture. Consequently, believers will remember comforting truths of Scripture even if they do not recall the particular place where the passage can be found. If the mind is well stocked with scriptural truth, believers can receive comfort and hope even when they are dreaming.⁶

Not only does Romans 15:13 have bearing on the origin of the believer's hope, but this verse also explains the means by which God works hope in his people. God works hope in the hearts of His people by means of the Holy Spirit. Like faith and love, hope is a propensity which is infused into the heart by God. The Holy Spirit works with the hope which He has implanted in a one-time process, and believers increase the intensity of their hope by means of exercises. À Brakel teaches that God gives His people faith, hope, and love once in their lives; but that the Holy Spirit works and they work to stir up the hope that they have been given.⁷

⁴ à Brakel, Vol. III, 323.

⁵ À Brakel, Vol. I, 61.

⁶ À Brakel, Vol. I, 74.

⁷ À Brakel, Vol. III, 318.

Although À Brakel exhorts believers to aim for a biblical level of hope, he is realistic in his understanding of life experience. If a person hopes in man, there is reason to have some measure of doubt mixed with hope. Even people with the best intentions are sometimes unable to keep their promises. But in contrast to weak and fallible people, God's Word is true and immutable. The believers' hope is focused on God, the object of hope, and the One who gives the promises, the source of hope. Through the application of the Word by the Holy Spirit, believers see that God's promises are sure and certain through the saving work of Jesus Christ. Consequently, Christ becomes precious, and believers hope in Him. À Brakel cites three passages which refer to Jesus Christ as the hope of believers.⁸ The hope of the believer is more than a vague wish that God will provide; it is the certainty that God has provided all things necessary for physical and spiritual life especially in and through Jesus Christ.

Yet there is weakness and instability in believers who are the subjects of hope. Faith is a one-time gift of God and is never taken away from God's people, yet believers vary greatly in their level of assurance of faith. Similarly, hope also is a one-time gift of God's Spirit and is never taken away; but the level of hope also varies greatly from person to person and with in the same person from day to day. Although À Brakel recognizes this variation of experience, he exhorts believers to strive for the full measure of hope.

However, when it comes to faith, those who exercise hope are weak in all respects. Therefore, there is also weakness in hope. ... This does not, however, remove the certainty in hope, and a believer is obligated to strive for the full assurance of hope. "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast" (Heb 6:19); "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb 10:22); "Hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:13).⁹

The hope of which À Brakel writes belongs to believers only. Several times, he quotes Ephesians 2:12 to explain the state of the unbeliever. "That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, **having no hope**, and without God in the world." The language of Scripture is clear. The thoughts of the unbeliever notwithstanding, he has no hope whatsoever. À Brakel asks his unbelieving readers three questions in order to expose their lack of hope. First, he asks if they are experientially acquainted with the Christian life.

"First of all, are faith in Christ, reconciliation with God (and the sense of this), the despising of the world (and all that pertains to it), the denial of your own lusts, the love of God, a sanctified life, and felicity after this life your portion and are they precious to you? Are you acquainted with them, do you recognize yourself in them, do you long for them, is it your objective, and do you reach forth unto them in order that you might attain them/?"¹⁰

Since the unbeliever must answer that he is not aware of these truths at an experiential level, it is clear that he has no reason to have hope.

⁸ À Brakel, Vol. III, 322-323.

⁹ À Brakel, Vol. III, 318-319.

¹⁰ À Brakel, Vol. III, 325.

Next, à Brakel asks whether the unbeliever hopes in himself or other people. He speaks plainly and warns that this kind of confidence is contradictory to hope in God.¹¹ The presence of hope in others or oneself in the unbeliever is proof that the unbeliever does not have hope in God. Thirdly, à Brakel asks the unbeliever what the foundation of his hope is. If he puts his hope in the assurance that he is saved, or the morality of his life, he does not have hope in God. Having asked these three revealing questions, à Brakel brings biblical teaching to bear on the hopeless situation of the unbeliever.

You, therefore, having been convinced by a threefold variety of questions that you do not have a true hope, consider how wretched you are, for there is not a single promise to be found for you in the Bible—there is not one whereby you can comfort yourself. Rather, all the threatenings and curses recorded in the Word of God are applicable to you. They will become a reality for you if you do not repent. Hear for a moment what the Lord says concerning your hope. “The hypocrite’s hope shall perish: whose hope shall be cut off, and whose trust shall be a spider’s web” (Job 8:13-14). It is indeed woven together, but it is the weakest structure there is. When removed by either the wind or a mop, it lies there—fully undone. “But the eyes of the wicked shall fail, and they shall not escape, and their hope shall be as the giving up of the ghost” (Job 11:20). What will it avail you that you have deceived yourself with an imaginary hope if you find yourself to be excluded? Therefore, awake and repent!¹²

It is impossible to speak of hope without referring to the promises of God. À Brakel repeatedly discriminates in the use of the promises. God has directed the promises in His Word for the encouragement of believers only. Unbelievers must not think that they have hope because the promises of salvation are for those who flee to Christ in faith and turn from sin in repentance. This is why à Brakel warns unbelievers that there is not a single promise for them in the Bible, that they are under the wrath of God, and that they must flee to Christ in order to be saved. À Brakel’s goal is to strip unbelievers of their false hope, to reveal their situation to them in all its danger, despair, and hopelessness. He does this so that unbelievers would despair of themselves, and trust entirely in Christ as their only hope.

Although à Brakel generally maintains the distinctions between the topics he discusses, it is impossible to say much about hope in isolation from the other elements of experimental Christianity.

There are points of similarity between hope and faith. Both faith and hope must have content. It is impossible for a man to describe his faith and hope without explaining what he believes or has faith in or what his hope is. Without content or knowledge, faith and hope are emptied of all significance. À Brakel refutes those who equate faith and hope with each other and attempt to empty both terms of knowledge.

Objection #1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Faith therefore excludes knowledge.

¹¹ À Brakel, Vol. III, 326.

¹² À Brakel, Vol. III, 326.

Answer: The apostle does not say that faith is without knowledge and is blind. To the contrary, he says that faith proves something and establishes the certainty of something—which is the essential meaning of the word *elenchos*. However, without knowledge of the matter in question, one can neither demonstrate nor prove anything. “Things not seen” are those things which can neither be observed by the physical eye, nor can the natural intellect find out or uncover. Such is true for the mysteries of Christ. God, however, reveals those things to His own by His Word and Spirit, and faith embraces them as undoubted truth. Therefore this text even proves most clearly that faith consists of knowledge and light.¹³

Although à brakel is defending the idea that faith contains knowledge, the content of Hebrews 11:1 which describes faith as “the substance of things hoped for”, gives warrant to attribute content to faith and hope. First Peter 3:15, the text most often used as the biblical mandate for apologetics also supports the idea that in order to be meaningful, hope must have content. “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.” This text teaches that the lives of the believers are to be characterized by hope to such an extent that unbelievers will ask why a person is so hopeful. Although all believers are not required to earn doctorates in apologetics, God commands all believers through the apostle Peter to be ready to answer anyone and everyone who asks the reason For the hope that is in them. Readiness to explain one’s hope and its foundation is not optional. According to à Brakel, this text is the ground for instruction of all who wish to make confession of faith.

... there must be catechism for adults who are inclined to partake of the Lord’s Supper. How will they make confession of faith and give an account of the hope which is in them if they are not thoroughly acquainted with the truth, and how will they know if they are not instructed? The instruction which they have received as children is not sufficient. They must receive further instruction in the knowledge of the truth, and they must be stimulated in the practice of godliness.¹⁴

Not only does à Brakel emphasize the content of hope, but he also emphasizes the necessity of genuine biblical experience. Although knowledge in itself is important; knowledge alone is not sufficient. Those who claim to have faith and hope must also live in godliness as a result of this faith and hope.

Although Sanctification proceeds from the work of the Holy Spirit, the cooperation of God’s people with the work of the Spirit is connected to hope. À Brakel often cites 1 John 3:3 in support of the idea that hope and sanctification are very much connected. In verses two and three of 1 John 3, John writes “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this **hope** in him **purifieth** himself, even as he is pure.” Those who hope in God and hope to spend eternity with Him will be characterized by purity. They will desire to be pure as Jesus is

¹³ À Brakel, Reasonable Service, Vol. II, 272-273.

¹⁴ Vol II, 139-140.

pure. The Holy Spirit will be at work in them to conform them to the image of Christ. À Brakel combines sanctification, faith, and hope in describing the life of the believer.

By faith, the true believer believes, enjoys, or hopes for reconciliation with God and the adoption as a child. He appropriates or seeks to appropriate God as a reconciled Father in Christ, and thus he walks, or seeks to walk, as a child and partaker of the covenant of grace. According to the measure in which he may walk with a childlike heart, he may rejoice in this, even though in other respects he perceives deficiencies in his walk...

The true believer believes and in so doing perceives in God and in communion with God such holiness, glory, and desirability that he considers all that is outside of God to be of no value. He views sin as foul, despicable, and hateful. And as he desires and hopes by this faith to obtain as well as live out of this salvation, he despises that which is despicable, hates that which is hateful, and thus overcomes the world by faith (1 John 5:4). In this way the heart is purified by faith (Acts 15:9b)..¹⁵

À Brakel also shows that hope is part of a progression of the virtues. Hope proceeds from faith. Hope is necessitated because the believer often must experience a long delay between the giving of the promise and the fulfillment of the promise. Often he must bear his cross, and in order to walk to the glory of God, not only faith and hope, but also patience are necessary during this time. Rather than resulting in passivity, patient hope results in holy industry.

The result of hope is holy industry. Hope neither causes us to be inactive nor will it tolerate occupation with other things; instead, it engenders holy industry to attain the end in the right way. The end in view causes us to be active and to take the means in hand. God, who has promised to give the end, leads His children to this end by means of holy industry. He causes them to forsake the world, focus upon heaven, and lay aside all burdens and the sins which so easily beset them. They thus courageously overcome all the obstacles that stand in the way and hinder them. He causes them to walk in the way of His commandments and to seek glory, honor, and immortality by persevering in well-doing.¹⁶

à Brakel rebukes God's people who do not live in hope or increase the intensity of their hope. À Brakel laments the general lack of hope among believers when he writes, "It is grievous that they who may and are able to hope do not more frequently engage therein."¹⁷ There are four reasons why believers do not live in fullness of hope as they should. First, their view of God's promise is obscured by a lack of thinking of and meditating on the promises. Second, the Devil takes advantage of sin in the life of believers to cause them to doubt their salvation. Third, since believers must bear their crosses for such a long time, these trials also give rise to doubt and despair. Fourth, when the historical faith of believers is under attack, they are not able to view their situation clearly or to perceive the truth of the Christian faith.¹⁸ It is especially in these times of trial and battle that believers are to hold to the promises of God. They are to observe the

¹⁵ À Brakel, Vol. II, 333-334.

¹⁶ À Brakel, Vol. III, 324.

¹⁷ À Brakel, Vol. III, 322.

¹⁸ À Brakel, Vol. III, 328.

internal evidences that allow them to say that they are participants in those promises. They must continue in hope even if they do not experience the joy of soul that they felt in the past although hope is a propensity originally given by the Holy Spirit, only God's people who strive in the use of the means will progress in the way of increasing joy in hope.¹⁹

À Brakel concludes his chapter on hope with seven thoughts intended to encourage those who experience weakness of hope and spiritual anemia. First, believers must meditate on the object of their hope. God has promised them sanctification and fellowship with Him in this life and eternal uninterrupted fellowship and joy in heaven in the next. Meditation on these matters will stir believers up to strive, hope, and live in accordance with these desired outcomes.²⁰

Second, believers should focus on the certainty of God's promises. À Brakel gives eight aspects of this certainty connected to the character and persons of the trinity. God is true and cannot lie; His promises are most trustworthy. God is faithful, He will do what He has promised. God is omnipotent; no enemy can interfere with God's ability to fulfill His Word. Jesus is the chief cornerstone of the sure foundation; and all who build on Him will not be put to shame. Again à Brakel refers to the Word of God which is truth. The promises based on the saving work of Christ must be fulfilled because the testator has died and the testament of the testator must be put into effect. God has also sworn an oath, and in order to be true to His Word He is obliged to keep His promise; therefore, believers are to rest on god's promises as most certain of fulfillment.²¹ à Brakel erroneously states that the earnest of the Holy Spirit, which believers receive, is worth infinitely more than the promised possession.²² A biblical understanding of this argument is that since god has given believers the seal and guarantee of the Holy Spirit, the further delivery of the deposit of eternal life is indubitably certain. The last point of certainty lies in that believers have fellowship with Christ who is in heaven, and who is the guarantee that believers themselves will join Christ our head in heaven.

Third, hope is a great motivation to patient endurance in cross bearing. Believers are to focus on the eternal life and blessedness for which they hope; and they are to press on in their pilgrimage and bear their cross until they arrive at the rest for which they have longed.

Fourth, hope is a motivation to battle courageously. The final victory of the believer is certain because Jesus has already defeated the Devil. God's people hope that their Savior will assist them with His Holy Spirit, so that they will experience the totality of His victory in their daily spiritual battles.

Fifth, hope is cause for joy. Although à Brakel is realistic in that he does not ignore the trials and sorrows believers' experience, he ads that human life would be impossible if believers only experienced sadness. When hope generates joy in the soul, joy strengthens both the soul and the body.²³

Sixth, hope results in progress in sanctification. Unlike wishing or imagination, two mental activities which do not result in action, a sure hope necessarily results in further

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ à Brakel, Vol. III, 328

²¹ à Brakel, Vol. III, 328.

²² À Brakel, Vol. III, 329.

²³ Ibid.

sanctification. À Brakel notes that God leads His children to glory in the way of holiness. Therefore, genuine hope will cause the believer to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit to grow in holiness. À Brakel refers to 1 John 3:3 in support of the connection between hope and sanctification.

Seventh, the exercise of hope glorifies God the Father and Jesus Christ. Here, à Brakel focuses on the gracious work of the Father in planning and working salvation, and the unfathomable love of the Son in giving Himself for his sinful people. When they hope in the Father, believers glorify his truth as God of the promises, and the omnipotence of the God whose word cannot fail. Those who hope in the Lord must continually search for promises in the Bible, and appropriate them. God's people are to pray that God will help them to grow in hope, and they are to encourage others to hope in the lord.²⁴ although à Brakel does not specify how this can be done; mutual encouragement in hope occurs when God's people speak well of the Lord. A hopeful spirit is related to a thankful spirit. When believers look back and see how God has provided for them in all of their needs, hope for the future is a rational act in view of God's continuing provision.

Lastly, like faith, hope is a temporal virtue.²⁵ Although faith, hope, and love will characterize the Christian life, faith and hope are only necessary for life on earth. When God's people are glorified, there will be no reason for faith and hope in the fulfillment of God's promises. Then believers will live in perfect love to God and perfect love for all the saints. The temporal character of hope is a wonderful reason to hope in the lord and to encourage God's people to grow in hope and to live in hope to the glory of God.

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²⁴ à Brakel, Vol. III, 330.

²⁵ À brakel, Vol. II, 306.

Bibliography

Wilhelmus à Brakel, The Christian's Reasonable Service, in which Divine Truths concerning the COVENANT OF GRACE are Expounded, Defended against Opposing Parties, and their Practice Advocated as well as The Administration of this Covenant in the Old and New Testaments.

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