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Dear **MARS HILL AUDIO** listener,

The past year has been a very difficult financial season for **MARS HILL AUDIO**. So in writing you to ask for your help, I thought I might explore the question of the nature of Christian hope.

In 1933, America was in the grip of one of the worst economic crises in its history. It was the fifth year of high unemployment rates, reaching 25.2 percent. It was a year of bread lines, homelessness, and despair. 1933 was also the year of the Chicago International Exposition. A world's fair focusing on industry and science, the Exposition's motto was "Century of Progress." The fair lit up 424 acres on the shore of Lake Michigan with (in the proud words of the organizers) "more colored lights than in any equal area or even any city of the world." Like the glossy, escapist movie musicals of the period, the Century of Progress exhibition lived in a kind of fantasy world detached from the needy and seedy reality that characterized the lives of many Americans during that period.

The official guidebook for the fair explained that, while the exposition's motto was "Century of Progress," the main idea exemplified in the exhibitions was the partnership of industry and science. This partnership, it was assumed, ensured progress, but at what seems to me to have been a rather high cost. In that guidebook is a paragraph with the headline, "**Science finds, Industry adapts, Man conforms.**" The paragraph explained in greater detail the inner workings of this three-phase engine of progress: "Science, patient and painstaking, digs into the ground, reaches up to the stars, takes from the water and the air, and industry accepts its findings, then fashions and weaves, and fabricates and manipulates them to the usages of man. Man uses, and it effects [sic] his environment, changes his whole habit of thought and of living. Individuals, groups, entire races of men fall into step with the slow or swift movement of the march of science and industry."

A metal statue in the foyer of the Hall of Science at the fair, positioned like the figure of Apollo or Athena in a classical temple, gave a visible expression of human conformity to this inexorable march of science. The statue, called "Science Advancing Mankind," depicted two life-sized, stylized figures, male and female, with surfaces of shiny aluminum making them seem oh so modern (if oh so mechanical). This latter-day Adam and Eve are on either side of a huge, angular robot. All three figures face the same direction, in implied motion, the hands of the man and woman raised almost worshipfully in apparent anticipation of their glorious future, the hands of the robot firmly and ominously at the backs of the two smaller figures. The robot is clearly in charge, and one wonders what would have happened if the human figures were to pause for some stray moment of reflection or meditation, or simply for a rest.

Photographs of the statue I've seen reminded me of Adam and Eve being escorted from the Garden. The difference is that this pair of figures represents not the Fall of mankind, but its alleged new Ascent, its rise to an ostensibly glorious new future. It is, however, a future with no personality and no grace.

Such is the iconography of early-twentieth-century notions of progress. Given the futility of the economy at the time, this may have been regarded by many as a dynamic symbol of hope, the only hope available in a world that for decades had been assumed to be (in the opinions of its best thinkers and most creative artists) a world no longer ordered by God.

The spirit of modern Western culture has been one in which Man is not only the measure of all things, but the maker of all things, including the maker of meaning. The modern idea of progress is a secularized version of the Christian idea of eschatological fulfillment. Instead of God bringing the story of history to a triumphant conclusion, which was always the source of Christian hope, the modern account depicts Man, originally the creature of evolutionary chance, directing history ever upward but never to anything conclusive. The presence of that big robot in the sculpture in the Hall of Science gave visitors the impression that there

was something quasi-transcendent guiding their progress. Today, the marketing of new technologies still often relies on allusions to mystery and quasi-divinity. But since *we* built these machines, even though we now seem to be mysteriously guided by their momentum, there really is nothing beyond our strivings to strive toward. To paraphrase Roosevelt, in modernity's story, there is nothing to hope for but hope itself.

The West's sense of purpose and progress for the last two millennia has been sustained by the Christian story. As that story recedes from public assent, the very idea of *any* narrative flow to history is less and less plausible to many people. Theologian Robert Jenson has argued that in the West, the world has thus "lost its story;" we have lost the sense that the world is a "narratable reality." Without a meaningful origin, without a meaningful and purposive *eschaton*, history becomes a tale not tellable at all, not even by an idiot. And where there is no origin and no *eschaton*, there can be no hope.

The world, having no real reason for hope, still strives to muster up reasons for optimism. Optimism is a secular virtue, an upbeat attitude instilled by techniques or political programs or profit-and-loss statements or drugs. Hope, on the other hand, is rooted in God's nature and action. Believers have the greatest reason for hope, though we often fail to be hopeful people. Because things don't happen as we planned, because, in spite of Christ's triumph, we continue to suffer, we lose hope. Churches don't seem to stress the virtue of hope as much as they do faith and love. Hope is often assumed even by Christians to be more a psychological mood than a theologically rooted virtue. As Janet Soskice has written, it seems to be assumed that "Lack of faith and charity can be treated by prayer, but lack of hope is treated with antidepressants."

We lose hope when we lose confidence in the reality of the story of which we are a part, and in the connection we have to the author of that story. The apostle Paul, in his various imprisonments and persecutions, was surely tempted to lose hope. Yet he constantly reminds his readers (and himself) of the power of that story. When writing to the believers in Colossae, he contrasts the darkness of hopelessness with the light of Christ. God, he writes, "has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

And this Christ is not a therapeutic latecomer to the world's story, arriving only in time to rescue the perishing. Christ is engaged with this story from beginning to end. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

It is on the basis of this creating *and* redeeming power that Christ can be the source of hope for Paul and for us. So Paul could finish that passage of his letter by proclaiming: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Christ is surely the source of hope, because Christ is the agent of redemption whereby the disorder of sin is being reversed, in the lives of his faithful disciples, and finally in the whole of creation.

Our hope is eschatological and rooted in God's love for us and for his project of creation. In the Creed, our hope is summarized by our affirmation of our belief in the return of Christ in judgment and eternal rule, and in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Because this is the source of our hope (see Titus 2:11-14), we should be eager and zealous to do good works in the body *now*. Just as the virtue of love cannot thrive without concrete acts of love, acts which anticipate the perfect love we will know when sin is dispelled from our lives, so the virtue of hope cannot thrive apart from concrete acts through which we strive to enact in some faint way the ordering of life in the body that is our ultimate inheritance.

I started thinking about the question of hope more deliberately when a listener e-mailed me a few months ago, worried that I was getting too curmudgeonly in my comments on the *Journal*, and saying that he longed

to hear more about hope in what we did. In fact, he said, he hears very little about hope from *any* Christian sources. I had several immediate reactions to the note. The first was a memory of an anecdote about the Canadian philosopher George Parkin Grant. Grant's writings for many years lamented wrong turns taken in modern Western culture, specifically in North American culture, turns which seemed to exemplify the death of God so perceptively sensed by Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century. Later in his life, Grant was interviewed by a journalist who asked him why, given his Christian profession, there was not more hope in his writing. After all, Christians are supposed to be hopeful people, and he seemed to be so pessimistic about the modern West. Grant replied that he was indeed quite hopeful: he was entirely confident that God would judge the West for its disobedient folly.

Grant's remark underscored the difference between optimism and an eschatologically rooted hope. When I remembered that quip, I also called to mind the many Psalms that express hope because God is a righteous judge, or the hope expressed by Mary that God would scatter the proud and put down the mighty from their seats and send the rich away empty. Christian hope is tied to the making of distinctions; it involves a sword that separates. Like love, which does not, *cannot* rejoice in the wrong, hope, because it anticipates a fruitful order for human flourishing, cannot take comfort in or from disorder, either disordered souls or the disordered cultural forms that twist and misdirect our lives.

I don't think that I and my guests are hopeless, though I am sometimes discouraged when fellow believers are unwilling even to entertain the idea that we must make distinctions with regard to our cultural lives. If the meal you've prepared turns out to include rancid meat, a commitment to hopefulness doesn't require you to pretend that it is fresh and wholesome. An oncologist does not serve her patient well by ignoring what her best diagnostic tools convey in the interest of appearing hopeful. And if many of the dominant cultural institutions of your time and place are promoting gnosticism, narcissism, relativism, and other disorders, it's not really an expression of Christian hope to regard them with an encouraging nod. It may convey to others that you are upbeat and positive, and you might think that you can leverage that image into good deals for the Kingdom. But from the beginning, the hope of the Kingdom was announced with a call to repentance. John the Baptist may have been the most hopeful man of his time, since he had so much confidence that the ax was really being leveled at all the diseased trees.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27). In this exhortation to the disciples just before his betrayal, Jesus establishes the context of Christian hope. In the context of the entire discourse (John 13-17), it is clear that the hope for which the disciples long must be rooted in their alliance with the Trinity (the Father and the Spirit regularly appear in Jesus' comments) over against what Jesus calls "the world." Not only can the world not give peace; it hates the disciples, just as it hates Jesus (17:14).

When I was a boy, many American Christians assumed that an alliance with the world was a bad thing. From this passage in John, from Romans 12:1f., from James 1:27, from I John 2:15, and from many other less explicit biblical texts, they knew that worldliness was a condition fervently to be avoided by faithful disciples. Unfortunately, they believed that worldliness was adequately defined by delighted participation in almost any kind of cultural activity; movies, card-playing, alcohol, and tobacco were especially singled out, but the general principle was that "worldly" meant "bodily." Since that time, the gnosticism implicit in such attitudes has been abandoned by many Christians, a change for which we must be grateful. But it seems as if American Christians have moved from assuming that all cultural activities are inherently suspect to assuming that all cultural activities are inherently innocent and beyond criticism. Rejecting a *bad* definition of worldliness, we exhibit almost no collective concern whatsoever about avoiding worldliness rightly defined.

Gnostic asceticism has always proceeded from the assumption that since what God *really* cares about is our hearts, we should not allow earthly pleasures to distract us from focusing our hearts on him. But there were other Gnostics who believed that, since what God *really* cares about is our hearts, we shouldn't be too scrupulous about what we do with our bodies. There were Gnostic libertines as well as Gnostic ascetics. The mistake both of them made was to assume that how we order our bodily existence is a matter of indifference. Therefore how we live our cultural lives is a matter of indifference, as long as our hearts are in the right place.

For fifteen years, I have guided the work of **MARS HILL AUDIO** with the belief that the shape of cul-

tural life really does matter; that faithlessness can take cultural as well as personal forms; and that, because cultural life matters, the Church must often strive to be counter-cultural. I have learned a lot in those years, and I have changed my mind about a number of things. But there are two conclusions with which I started this project (based on previous study and observation) which have been remarkably reinforced. The first is that what is called “modernity” is essentially incompatible with Christian faithfulness, that what makes modern culture distinctively “modern” involves a rejection of important Christian beliefs and practices. The second is that one of the greatest temptations faced by the Church and her leaders is the desire to be approved by the world, that the evangelistic motive can produce a dangerous preoccupation with “getting along,” with being “winsome.” When the Church gives in to this temptation, the result is a form of cultural captivity in which the Church is simply a chaplain to some cultural status quo, reducing the consequences of faith to personal, “spiritual” matters, but incapable of encouraging a truly counter-cultural stance except at the margins.

As I have read the books written by my guests, talked with them, and with pastors and lay-people around the country, I have come to a deeper conviction of the truth of the first point above. And as I have looked at the books that sell really well among Christians, as I have watched the churches and parachurch groups with large and growing constituencies (some of them, admittedly, short-lived), and as I have talked with younger Christians whose experience and assumptions has been shaped only by “culture-affirming” institutions, I sense a growing level of uncritical identification with contemporary culture. While there are a number of wonderfully insightful books by Christian authors who see the underlying dynamic of many cultural conventions (books about technology or commodification or narcissism or our addiction to entertainment or the state of modern marriage), the insights of such prophetic thinkers seem to be ignored by celebrated Christian leaders, and hence by most Christians. It is easier to keep a big church program running if you don’t introduce too much cognitive dissonance between what you say on Sunday and what advertisers and entertainers and professors and miscellaneous experts say the rest of the week.

Of course many good things happen even in churches that are culturally assimilated, just as many good things happen in churches that are culturally disengaged. But bad things in people’s lives that are culturally induced and sustained are much harder to deal with when believers aren’t ready to recognize that the Church’s ways need not be the world’s ways. Churches that are culturally careless will not be likely to nurture disciples capable of recognizing cultural disorder *outside* the church. So, for example, a congregation that adopts contemporary media techniques without reflection is unlikely to produce people alert to the limitations and liabilities of mass media. The church with a food court is unlikely to foster thoughtfulness about the deep cultural losses sustained by modern eating habits. The pastor committed to “entertainment evangelism” will never be able to convey the wisdom in Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and other similarly prophetic books.

For fifteen years, with the help and encouragement of many people, I have been trying to raise some unpopular questions about the direction of our culture and (often implicitly) about the cultural choices Christians and churches make. The work has often been frustrating, especially in the past year as we have endured a difficult financial season. One need not be optimistic about the future of our culture or about the willingness of the majority of American churches to offer much in the way of alternatives to the growing cultural confusion to believe that wisdom about how we ought to live is available to those willing to resist conformity to the spirit of the age. Meanwhile, I am more hopeful than ever that Christ’s work of redemption has wide-ranging cultural consequences which will, in God’s good time, be fully revealed. And I believe more than ever that our lives should be lived in deliberate and hopeful anticipation of that eventual harmony in every aspect of human life. I hope that the work of **MARS HILL AUDIO** conveys those hopeful strains, even as we attend to the important diagnostic task of documenting how we, like sheep, have gone astray. If you share these concerns, please consider making a generous gift to support our work.

Sincerely,



Ken Myers