

Hope that Defies: Envisioning a Redeemed World

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1. From Fragmentation to Fire: Why Hope Must Be Defiant

On October 7, 2023, as violence erupted anew between Israel and Gaza, its repercussions were felt well beyond the Middle East. In cities across Europe and North America, thousands took to the streets, some waving Israeli flags, others marching under banners of Palestinian liberation. At universities, tensions ran high. On one campus, a student group organized a vigil for victims in Gaza, drawing hundreds. The following day, another group held a rally in support of Israel's right to defend itself. Posters were torn down, accusations of hate and insensitivity flew back and forth, and friendships unraveled over social media posts. Professors struggled to teach in classrooms while walking a tightrope; some were accused of being too neutral, others of taking sides. Alumni pulled funding. Boards issued carefully worded statements, with each word weighed, criticized, and dissected by the public. What was once a distant conflict had arrived in intimate spaces: dorm rooms, dinner tables, places of worship. People weren't just reacting to the events overseas but to one another. What emerged wasn't only about war or peace in a distant land. It became a test of identity, belonging, and loyalty at home. Some chose to listen and learn in the face of sorrow and anger. Others retreated into certainty. And many more stayed silent, unsure how to speak in a world where every word seemed to carry the weight of judgment.

Beneath today's political divisions, there appears to be a deeper, shared search for moral direction. Roger Spitz captures this underlying tension when he observes that "society is on the road to the paradox of polarization and uniformity." Hashtags like #RhodesMustFall, #BlackLivesMatter, and #MakeAmericaGreatAgain, along with the ongoing struggles over identity, reflect the depth of this divide. In many democratic contexts, it can sometimes feel like partisan loyalty overshadows a commitment to democratic values. As Milan W. Svobik puts it, this is when "ordinary people become pro- or anti-Chávez, Orbán, or Erdoğan first, and democrats only second" (Svobik, *Polarization versus Democracy*, p. 24). These patterns point to ideological rifts and the slow erosion of a shared narrative—one capable of renewing a sense of collective purpose and rebuilding trust in our common institutions.

Against this background, one might naturally hold onto hope, defined in its simplest terms as Emma Pleeging and her colleagues put it, "a desire combined with a belief about the possibility of attaining this desire" (Martin, 2011; Meirav, 2009, as cited in Pleeging et al., 2022, p. 1686). However, if hope were truly that simple, we wouldn't find ourselves turning to it with such urgency. The hope we need must rise above mere sentiment; in an increasingly divided world, it must transform into "a form of social engagement," a deliberate act of defiance against despair. If the night of polarization persists, we as people must find a hope whose fire light in defiance of the shadows of hopelessness. But to kindle such a fire, we must first name the forces that extinguish it. This means we must confront polarization not simply as a political crisis, but as a profoundly theological one—an ailment that fractures societies and souls.

2. Diagnosing Our Dis-Ease: Polarization as Theological Crisis

Beneath the visible cracks of our public life lies a shift—what might best be described as cultural and moral disintegration. Social trust is deteriorating, political discourse is saturated with animosity, and communities are fracturing under the weight of unresolved historical wounds and escalating ideological antagonism; at least it seems so. Democracies today face more than institutional dysfunction; they are experiencing affective breakdowns, where it looks like "ordinary people become pro this or that or anti this or that first, and human beings only second" (Paraphrased, Svolik, p. 24). If this is true, then this division has become a defining characteristic of modern social and political life. Andreas Schedler notes that such an affective polarization transforms disagreement into existential suspicion. We no longer argue policies; we deny the moral credibility of those who dissent. This transformation cultivates avoidance, reinforces intolerance, and sometimes legitimizes political violence (Berntzen et al., 2024).

We observe that polarization within the church can sometimes mirror and intensify broader societal divisions, exposing deep moral, theological, and communal fractures. It is often demonstrated in how members rule "out any form of compromise and 'shut down the desire to communicate'" (Peter Vos, *Introduction*, p. 2). Rather than being recognized solely as God's people, theological distinctions emerge between conservative and liberal, evangelical and ecumenical, and pro and anti-same-sex relationships. This dynamic is charged with conflicts, wherein "Christians tend to define themselves in opposition to other Christians," reinforcing an "us-versus-them" mentality within the body of Christ (Vos, p. 3). Amanda Henderson provides an example of how "political polarization and Christian nationalist impulses within mainline Christian churches impact congregational leadership," resulting in "heightened internal conflict and fragmentation" (Henderson, *Political Polarization and Christian Nationalism in Our Pews*, p. 2). Among other impacts, this theological polarization affects clergy well-being and leads many pastors to consider leaving the ministry altogether. Instead of witnessing the shalom peace of God that creates life, people are left spiritually wounded, and the church becomes a bearer of despair in this regard.

Why should we be surprised when the Body breaks and the church splinters along the same fault lines that fracture the world outside its walls? Borrowing the language of American politics, Vos describes how this fragmentation runs deep, compounded by the fading of what he calls "purple churches"—spaces where ideological differences once shared the same pew. Instead, we see the rise of sanctuaries tinted red or blue, echoing not heaven but Washington. Vos names the danger: the rise of "**politically homogeneous churches.**" He warns us with unsettling clarity: "**Our theological understanding is perverted**" when we speak in the dialect of division. We become what we oppose, entangled in the dualisms we long to expose (Vos, pp. 5–6). And so, the question haunts us—not just how to name this unraveling, but how to live through it. How do we remain faithful when the structures that bind us pull us apart?

3. Reclaiming Hope: From Virtue to Vision

This prompts a crucial question: What type of hope can sustain us amid our fragmented realities, in the West and beyond? Perhaps we should start by asking, "What is hope?" This seemingly straightforward question initiates a philosophical and existential exploration of how human

beings maintain meaning in the face of fragmentation and despair. The multi-faceted perspective from these disciplines highlights a key point of this lecture: the assumption that hope, when truly grasped, transcends mere feeling to become a bold act that defies ideological despair.

Michael Milona proposes this perspective on hope, suggesting it consists not just of belief and desire, but "a non-doxastic [non-DOX-as-tic], perceptual-like experience of reasons to promote the object of one's desire." This is to say that hope transcends belief or intellectual agreement, serving as a felt orientation toward the good, even in the face of uncertainty (Milona, *Philosophy of Hope*, p. 106). Catherine Rioux emphasizes that such a hope "[fuels] our motivation in the face of challenges," but must be navigated carefully to avoid detachment from reality (Rioux, *Hope: Conceptual and Normative Issues*, p. 1). Hope is not naive optimism but a disciplined posture that sees possibility amid hardship. Thomas Aquinas calls it "a movement or a stretching forth of the appetite towards this supreme but arduous good," namely eternal happiness found in the divine (**Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q.17, a.3; cited in Pinsent, *Hope as a Virtue in the Middle Ages*, p. 50**). For Aquinas, hope is not grounded in human capacity but "leans on [God's] help" to attain what is otherwise unreachable (ST II–II, q.17, a.1; Pinsent, p. 52). This leaning implies relational trust—a second-person engagement with the divine as co-attending subject. In a world increasingly defined by despair from polarization and existential threats, hope acts as "a general orientation or sense of how things are with the world," transforming despair into a resilient movement (Milona, *Philosophy of Hope*, p. 101).

From an alternative perspective, perhaps from a psychological one, hope transcends mere optimism; it serves as a subversive force that disrupts the grip of emotional absolutism, which frequently drives and exacerbates polarization. While polarized societies tend to provoke responses of fear, anger, or apathy—each a fixed emotional posture—hope creates the psychological space for adaptive agency and moral imagination. As Della Mosley and her colleagues put it, "radical hope allows for a sense of agency to change things for the greater good" (*Radical Hope in Revolting Times*, p. 2). This capacity challenges emotional closure by offering a reason to act without certainty of success. As already implied, hope as collective memory and shared purpose subverts individualistic logic, forging solidarities that resist the divisive narratives of tribalism and ideological purity. In contrast to the paralysis of polarization, which breeds either cynical disengagement or combative extremism, hope from a psychological perspective fosters resilience, humility, and a shared moral vision. By doing so, it insists on meaningful participation and replaces rigid emotional binaries with complex affective registers—courage, longing, grief, and anticipation. Thus, in fragmented societies, hope is not a naive sentiment but a psychological revolution: it reclaims the right to imagine and pursue a life beyond the constraints of antagonism, uniting people in the shared labor of meaning-making and healing.

Theologically, hope confronts polarization not by retreating into neutrality, but by refusing to let ultimate meaning be determined by ideological allegiance or reduced to social utility. In the words of Aquinas, hope orients us toward a "future good possible but arduous to attain" and is grounded not in present consensus but in divine promise. It is, as David Elliot reminds us, the virtue that answers to St. Augustine's famous phrase, "You have made us for yourself..." and thus locates human longing within a teleological framework that resists both utopianism and despair (Elliot, *Hope in Theology*, p. 121). This kind of hope does not pacify differences; rather,

it shapes them, channeling temporary passions towards lasting objectives. Instead of erasing disagreement, it might even heighten it—since it neither glorifies the present nor vilifies others. As Elliot states, hope is "a firm disposition" that enables one "to desire and trust in what God alone can fulfill" (p. 121). This theological perspective reframes our anxieties, not by dismissing their validity, but by displacing their ultimate significance. It liberates us from the responsibility of treating political identities as sacred while grounding us in a transcendent promise that cannot be reduced to partisan narratives. As such, hope must be understood not as a soothing balm, but as a radical virtue that sustains agents "from the sloth and despair that threaten amid injustice, tragedy, and death" (p. 117). It is both comfort and confrontation: comfort because it assures us of grace; confrontation because it calls us to live in tension with the world's false eschatologies. This is not a vague optimism, but a theological fire—one that may warm our hearts to one another or leave us divided.

Polarization views radicality as a condition of constant vigilance, caught in a loop of fatigue and heightened awareness. However, amidst this turmoil, hope resides in finding a tranquility that transcends situations, soothes the spirit, and quiets the mind even in the face of chaos. This peace is not the fruit of denial or escape, but of hope that anchors the self in divine faithfulness. Such hope does not eliminate suffering but transfigures it. It turns despair into endurance and chaos into communion, precisely because it leans not on human strength, but on the quiet assurance that God is at work, even in the dark. Vilas Boas makes this distinction clear: Such a "HOPE [espérance] belongs to the order of transcendence... where salvation is possible beyond the (often adverse) constraints of life" (Vilas Boas, p. 3). True hope does not reside in resolving every political conflict or papering over the wounds of injustice inflicted on individuals or communities. Instead, it takes root in humility and seeks to bear witness to a deeper assurance grounded in the Triune God's redemptive work. In doing so, it quietly subverts the absolutism of polarization by creating space for both lament and patience. It resists the temptation to sanctify the present moment or vilify those who differ, because it discerns all time and every person under the sovereign care of a God who redeems. This posture neither rushes to closure nor yields to despair. Instead, it inhabits the in-between with a faithful attentiveness that is both truthful and tender. This ethic is not merely countercultural; it is a theological refusal to let sin and division define the limits of Christian witness.

When hope in the theological sense shapes ecclesial communities, it becomes a visible protest against the despair and rage that polarization breeds. In a world trained to choose sides, the church is called to embody a different kind of belonging—one that makes room for lament, patience, and prophetic action. "Hope ordains earthly goods to our eschatological end," writes Elliot, and this reorientation allows Christians to act "with a resilience and vitality that transcend widespread cynicism" (Hope in Theology, p. 117). Philosophically, this offers a counter-narrative to polarization by rejecting the false dichotomy between quietism and activism. It provides an endurance that flows not from ideological certainty but from what Elliot calls "the youthfulness" of the Spirit, which "curbs demoralisation when the results of our... endeavours prove flawed" (Elliot, p. 120). This hope allows the church to become what James McClendon described as a "contrast-society," marked by practices that reject the logic of fear, control, and division. Yet such a witness requires clarity about the nature of hope itself. As Boas warns, "to collapse HOPE [espérance: specific, often referring to a strong, almost certain expectation or a hope rooted in faith or a strong belief] into hope [Espoir: a wish or anticipation for something

positive to happen]" is to confuse divine promise with human projection—leading inevitably to despair when outcomes disappoint (p. 3). True hope is anchored in God's faithfulness, not in strategic success or cultural acceptance. This liberates communities to live vulnerably and boldly, bearing witness to what Elliot calls a "foretaste... of redeemed humanity" (*Hope in Theology*, p. 121). In an age of ideological exhaustion, such hope does not escape the world's pain but speaks into it.

In a polarized world facing existential threats, radical perspectives on hope aren't mere optimism; they often emerge from suffering and struggle. This is exemplified in the historical legacy of the Anabaptists, whose origins provide a powerful illustration of hope shaped by adversity.

4. Anabaptist Roots: Hope Forged in Fire

How does the issue of a radical and defiant hope relate to the story of the Anabaptists? Their stories serve as a guide and inspiration, showcasing the enduring power of hope. The Anabaptist movement emerged during one of the most uproarious periods of European history, the sixteenth-century Reformation. In its earliest stages, Anabaptism arose from a break with the mainstream Swiss Reformers. Students of Ulrich Zwingli, like Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, grew disillusioned with Zwingli's willingness to partner with political authorities to achieve reform. They believed instead that "the progress and completion of the Reformation ought to be directed by the churches and not by government."¹ They opposed any church strategy linked to the coercive force of the state. In 1525, they put their beliefs into action by performing believers' baptism—an audacious act that confronted both church and empire. This pivotal moment established the Anabaptist testimony as one that denounces oppression in favor of a voluntary and covenantal pledge.

It's crucial to understand that the Anabaptist emphasis on believers' baptism, non-violence, and separation from worldly politics and government did not arise in isolation; it developed in the context of polarization, persecution, and theological divides. Theirs was not a movement born of tranquility but of turbulent defiance. In a culture dominated by religious alliances with empire, the Anabaptists insisted on another way—one marked not by triumph but by testimony, not by cultural conquest but by cruciform faithfulness.

The story of Dirk Willems shines like a quiet defiance. In 1569, Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist imprisoned for his faith, escaped and ran across a frozen pond. When his pursuer fell through the ice, Willems turned back and saved him, only to be recaptured and burned at the stake. "This image of Dirk Willems extending his arms to the desperate man in the frozen pond has become perhaps the most enduring image within the Mennonite tradition of what it means to follow Christ no matter what the cost," Kevin Enns-Rempel describes.² His action was driven not by strategy but by a commitment to a radical lifestyle defined by a bold hope that persists, even amid uncertainty. He broke the logic of polarization, not by outmaneuvering his enemy, but by loving him. Willems revealed the kingdom already present in a single moment of redemptive fidelity. It was not simply altruistic but a hopeful rebellion against a world shaped by vengeance and domination. This way of living contrasts with the logic of conquest that often shapes the

¹ (Roth & Nolt, *A History of the Amish*, p. 41)

² (Enns-Rempel, *Pacific Journal*, Fresno, CA, 2009, p. 7).

church and society. In a world driven by domination, the church is called a contrasting community—formed not by power, but by promise, not by victory, but by costly faithfulness.

5. Covenant Over Conquest: The Church as a Contrast-Community

This isn't to suggest that all Anabaptists were like Willems; certainly, the events of the Müntzer Rebellion highlight this. However, the contrast between Willems and Thomas Müntzer is not incidental—it reveals two theological paths in response to crisis. Müntzer believed the Kingdom of God could be realized through radical revolution and was described as a "proto-communist of his age" who used biblical texts to justify "a real communist order... similar to Marxian classless society" (Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 47). His apocalyptic rhetoric fueled the Peasants' War, where thousands rose up against feudal oppression, only to be crushed. Müntzer's failure was not merely military—it was theological. By cloaking conquest in divine language, he betrayed the cruciform shape of Christian hope. It was a vision without mercy, without patience, without enemy-love. However, while Müntzer's vision utilized apocalyptic rhetoric for political power, Willems witnessed hope as a form of cruciform fidelity—a subversive journey defined not by triumph, but by redemptive love.

In contrast, Willems modeled a politics of covenant. His choice was not passive resignation but a decisive act of resistance to hatred, retaliation, and fear. As Menno Simons later wrote, "True Christians do not know vengeance. They are the children of peace. Their hearts overflow with peace. Their mouths speak peace, and they walk in the way of peace."³ The theology behind this claim is not abstract; it is grounded in martyrdom, in communal sharing, and in an unwavering commitment to Christ's way. As John Roth and Steve Nolt summarize, Anabaptists believed that "Christians, empowered by the Holy Spirit, would witness to the transformative power of Christ's love... even to enemies" (p. 74).

The Anabaptist vision of hope is thus a direct theological and ethical critique of polarization by rejecting the logics that sustain it—domination, ideological absolutism, and relational fragmentation. Identity is often forged in opposition in polarized societies, and community is maintained through exclusion. Anabaptist ecclesiology, despite the notion that the concept of the "ban" might oppose it, subverts this by emphasizing community based on reconciliation, covenant, and discipleship rather than uniformity or coercion.

This way of living exists not in an idealized realm but in the messy in-between of a broken world and a promised future. Here, hope must take flesh in daily practices—embodied acts that witness another way of being that operates outside the dichotomy of "pro" or "anti" that is prevalent in our world.

6. Living in the In-Between: Hope Embodied in Practice

Speaking of "hope embodied" acknowledges that hope, in its transformative form, is a practice—a way of living that embodies the future we desire. With its radical commitment to community, peace, and discipleship, the Anabaptist tradition has long insisted that Christian faith must take

³ (Simons, in Roth & Nolt, p. 73).

flesh in ordinary life. This means that theology is not fully real unless enacted in embodied relationships.

In this sense, Anabaptist theology presents not just a moral proposal but an incarnational ethic: to faithfully inhabit the space between crucifixion and resurrection, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday—a place where we grieve what has been lost and dare to hope for resurrection, not only in the story of Christ but in the circumstances we find ourselves in. As I have suggested throughout this speech, while polarization thrives on the need to be "right," Anabaptist theology promotes a different approach, as captured in the words of Menno Simons: "True evangelical faith... serves those that harm it, it binds up that which is wounded..."⁴ This stance is neither one of triumphalism nor victimhood; rather, it is a gentle, prophetic determination to proclaim a stronger hope than fear. Such a proclamation must also be embodied, spoken, and actively demonstrated through our actions.

Anabaptist hope is not enforced through doctrinal coercion but embodied in, as Kirk MacGregor explains, "eating with banned church members" as an imitation of Christ's mercy, sustained by a "Christocentric outlook on Scripture which proved a staple in most Anabaptist hermeneutics" (MacGregor, *JETS*, 586). The church becomes, in this light, not a fortress against the world, but a porous, Spirit-shaped body witnessing to an alternative way of life. J. Denny Weaver describes this as "the community that lives by the narrative of Jesus." This community, he argues, is not marked by abstract belief but by practices that mirror Jesus' life: crossing boundaries, resisting domination, and extending grace to outsiders.

Living with hope, then, means creating communities that make forgiveness and reconciliation possible. This is not naïveté but costly grace. It requires structures of accountability, compassion practices, and empathy habits. It calls us to remember that even those with whom we disagree—politically, religiously, or culturally—are made in the image of God. In times of violent polarization, this is an act of spiritual defiance. It is the refusal to reduce people to categories or enemies. This hope does not bypass struggle or silent protest. Rather, it transfigures resistance through a cruciform lens—grounding justice in reconciliation, and protest in communion.

Anchored in a theology of nonresistance, Anabaptist traditions bear witness to a longstanding refusal of enemy-making as antithetical to the gospel. Even amid the moral and theological complexities surrounding his legacy, John Howard Yoder reminds us that the church is summoned to be "a new society," a community in which the cross, not coercive power, becomes the locus of reconciliation and the healing of divisions. This vocation does not entail the evasion of conflict; rather, it calls the church into a cruciform mode of engagement—shaped by patience, vulnerability, and the shared work of discernment.

But such hope must ultimately do more than resist the present; it must point beyond it. True radical renewal does not emerge from nostalgia or naive optimism—it breaks in as apocalyptic witness, unveiling the false powers of the age and testifying to the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.

⁴ (Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, as cited in Sandra F. Joireman, "Anabaptism and the State: An Uneasy Coexistence," in *Church, State, and Citizen: Christian Approaches to Political Engagement*, ed. Sandra F. Joireman [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], p. 77).

7. Radical Renewal Reimagined: Hope as Apocalyptic Witness

In conclusion, to speak of hope today is to rebel against resignation. In a world where polarization feeds on fear and where identity is often weaponized, the decision to hope—to live, organize, and believe as if reconciliation is still possible—represents nothing less than a subversive act. From Dirk Willems's defiance to the communal ethic of the gathered church, we have seen how hope resists ideological despair and spiritual resignation.

The Anabaptist tradition invites us into this rebellion, not through grand gestures but through humble faithfulness: building communities of grace, welcoming the stranger, and refusing to return violence for violence. It is a way of life that refuses both nostalgia and despair. It names the fractures of our time honestly—racism, colonial legacy, ecclesial complicity, ideological rage—but does not allow these classifications to have the final word. It insists that the story of Jesus is still unfolding and that our witness matters.

In this light, hope is not a retreat from reality but a confrontation with it, infused with a profound loyalty to the coming kingdom. It is a hope that embraces crucifixion without giving up on resurrection. Such hope equips the church to embody a different future even now: not a perfect community but a truthful one, not a triumphant body but a faithful one, not a church of conquest but of covenant. This is not a hope grounded in outcomes, but in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. In such faith, we rebel not with swords, but with scars, shaped by covenant and sustained by grace. This is our calling in a burning world: to choose light, not because we deny the darkness but because we dare to believe it will not win. Hope is rebellion, and love is its strategy.