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Expectations

Prepared for the Yale Center for Faith & Culture consultation
on “Expectation and Human Flourishing,” June 2015

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I. Wait and see – expect – watch

- a. *Waiting for Godot* (Samuel Beckett). The two beggars are waiting because beggars are always waiting for something. Mr. Godot should come, but doesn't come. There is no Mr. Godot. Their waiting is without sense. It is absurd. This existentialist play was written to show that human existence is fundamentally absurd, especially human expectations.

In *Waiting for Godot* the two beggars Vladimir and Estragon are speaking and doing only absurd things. The waiting for Godot is without any consequence for them. The object is indeterminate, and the waiting means nothing to them. "Waiting for Godot" is at best a "wait-and-see," *ab-warten*.

- b. *The expectation of a child* is determined and related to a distinct object. It is no "wait-and-see," *ab-warten*, but a waiting for something and this "something" determines the waiting to an expecting. The time is also limited at 9 months. The embryo is already there in the mother's womb. Sure there are also fears: Will a miscarriage come? Is the child healthy? Will the birth be without complications? But the people are calling a pregnant woman a "woman of good hope." The expectation of a child

changes lives: the woman becomes pregnant, the man becomes a father, the siblings are no longer alone. To expect a child means to prepare for the birth and the life with the child. The expected child is not only the growing of a family, *Familienzuwachs*, but also the beginning of a new life. In the perspective of a trans-individual stream of life, one may say with Hannah Arendt: Life is taking a new start. No child is as the other; every child is a unique birth of life. Most important is the social field of expectation, in which children enter with their birth—and actually already in their mother’s womb. Are they welcome or unwanted? Are they expected with joy and then grow up in an atmosphere of appreciation? Are they unwanted or neglected and then have low self-respect all their lives? The field of expectation in a family can also depress the child: Will the child ever meet the expectations of the father?

- c. “The kingdom of God is at hand”: “is come nigh unto you” (Luke 10:11); “The Lord is at hand” (Phil 4:5), “The end of all things is at hand” (1 Peter 4:7). “For the coming of the Lord draweth nigh” (James 5:7). We shall deal here with the Greek word *eggys*. If the divine future is “at hand” or “nigh,” it is a present future, but in terms of time and space this future remains undetermined: “Time and hour nobody knows.” But the expectation of the Kingdom of God, or the advent of Christ, or the end of all things already transforms the present with repentance and with

joy and with the exodus out of the past. The expectant people prepare for the expected future. They open their senses for the near-expected future: They watch. The nearness of the divine future can't be calculated as with the expected child. You can also not react with a "wait-and-see." This nearness can't be measured in days or years, it can't also be measured in space, because there are no distances in time and space: The divine nearness is "now." It is like the personal intimacy in which we say: she is near to my heart. Experience of divine nearness is always accompanied with repentance, joy, and a new beginning. I would summarize this under the word: "watching": "Pray and watch," "watch and be sober," "watch and see." (cf. The parable of the ten virgins, five wise, five foolish [Matt. 25:1-13]).

d. Attempt of a first definition:

Hope is anticipated joy; anxiety is anticipated terror. Both are undetermined. Expecting brings the determined into the undetermined of hope and anxiety. Waiting can mean simply to "wait and see," in which case we contribute nothing to the arrival of the expected. Waiting can also mean expecting, in which case we prepare for what we expect. The expected future is already determining the present. Waiting can also mean watching. I don't know when it is coming, but it is already at hand. I begin to live in the nearness of the expected and open all my senses to

meet the coming. A field of expectation is emerging, in which the expected can always enter.

II. Expecting a good life in children

For me there are three reasons why children are incarnate hopes for a good life, and are also God's true promises:

- a. Every child that is born and accepted represents a new beginning of life, a beginning which we do not immediately understand because it is original, unique and incomparable. It is true that we always ask whom this or that child resembles, but when we try to compare it with the mother or the father we come upon what is special in this child. We must respect this; it is always astonishing. But we can only do so if we love the child's own life and keep his or her future open. We must be prepared to be surprised by the new possibilities that are born with every child. We know a child in its unique character only to the extent to which we love it.
- b. With every new beginning of life, the hope in the fullness of the good life—and the eternal life, which fulfills the promise of the good life—acquires a new chance. Every child is also a new occasion for the home of life in this unredeemed world. For Ernst Bloch, the philosopher of hope, this is the “home of identity, which shines in the childhood of all, and in which nobody so far was.” The new beginnings and the new

births point out beyond themselves to the new creation of all things to eternal life in the presence of the living God. Every fortunate birth of a child confirms the great hope in the victory of life over death.

- c. The final reason for seeing the beginning of the life of a child as the beginning of something new lies not only in seeing children as incarnations of our expectations but also in perceiving in them the embodiment of God's expectations for us. We do not expect only; we are also expected. Human beings are God's great love, human beings are God's dream for God's beloved earth, human beings are created in God's image. They should correspond to God's goodness and resonate with God's mercy. But as human history shows, humankind is a deep disappointment for the "God of hope." God may repent and be sorry for having created these ambiguous and contradictory human beings (Gen 6:6). But God remains "faithful" to his own creation-will. God is still expecting the truly humane human being in every newly born child. This expectation of God must be the deeper reason why "we are not yet wholly cut off," but one generation after the other is born. We and our children are born in this transcendent field of divine expectation. We expect the good life, and we are expected. What does a good life look like which meets God's expectations?

III. Expecting a good death in the old

Death is part of human life on earth, and dying belongs to the living. If there is a “good life,” what does a “good death” look like? If there is a good living, there must also be a good dying—or is every death an enemy of life and the “living God”? How do we experience death and dying?

- a. “Abraham died old and satisfied of life” (Gen 25:8). Luther’s translation: “*alt und lebenssatt.*” One can only be “*lebenssatt*” if one has really lived. The unlived life, the voluntarily missed life or the involuntarily stolen years of life, causes pain and grief and hinders a “good death.” However, more of the old are tired of life, *lebensmüde*.
- b. “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation” (Luke 2:39-30). A “good death” is a death in peace with God, oneself, the family, friends—and foes. Expecting death, it is good to make peace and to pray for peace, to forgive guilt and to ask for forgiveness of one’s own guilt. We have this mutual forgiveness in our burial ritual, but it is, however, better to seek peace before than after death. Whoever dies in discord dies no “good death.”
- c. Where do we experience death? At the end of my life I shall experience dying, but I don’t experience my death, because on earth I don’t survive it. But in the case of people I love, I experience their deaths, for I have to survive and to mourn their loss, being bereaved. The poet Mascha Kalecko wrote in her “Memento” when her only child died:

I am not afraid of my own death,
Only of the death of those near to me,
How long can I live when they are no longer there?

Remember: with our own death we merely die,
But with the death of others we have to live.

But before one has to live with the death of others, one has to live with the slow departure of a beloved person. With the long life-expectations in our countries, aging and dying can no longer be separated. Where ends the aging? Where begins the dying? Sometimes parts of the brain are dying, and this changes the whole person. I find it difficult to take then the attitude of the therapist. This distant kind of care should not replace the living community. It is also not right to say: "This is no longer the person I loved once." I am trying to hold onto the togetherness of our common life and feel this is a "good life" under changed conditions. The slow departure from the past in forgetting is part of a "good dying." In the trust to be present in God's memory eternally, we can accept our own forgetfulness. And old couples have a "common memory": what the one can't remember, the other remembers. With the same love with which we had built up our life when we were young, we must also surrender the things of our youth with grace when we are old.

d. In our epoch of objective Palliative medicine, organized care, and hospices for the dying, we need a subjective spirituality of the “good dying.” In earlier times there was a special *ars-moriendi* literature. One knew how to prepare for dying, because the people could look beyond death into the judgment and the kingdom of God, or into purgatory and the happiness of heavens. Today many say: “With death it’s all over.” They don’t expect something beyond death. There can’t be any spirituality of dying apart, perhaps, of surrendering to annihilation. When we expect something new to happen after our death, we don’t die as a victim of death but as a child of that new. *Ars moriendi* becomes a part of the *bene vivere*. A willing readiness to dying is the first step toward resurrection into divine life—no matter whether one wants to accept “*Sterbehilfe*,” as does Hans Küng, or would reject this as I do.

I work with the threefold concept of life:

Life – the good life – eternal life.

But where will the eternal life be?

The Apostles’ Creed says: “I believe in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life” (wherever that is).

The Nicene Creed has it more precisely:

“We must expect the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

Eternal life is lived not in heaven but in the new creation of heaven and earth, where righteousness will dwell.