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For the Life of the World

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

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7 Why Your Congregation Is More Important Than Ever By Dr. Dale A. Meyer

The congregation where you worship has always been important. It's the place where the faithful gather around God's Word and Sacraments. As eternally important as that is, changes in American life make our weekly gatherings at church more important than ever. If you're concerned about the challenges facing your congregation in these changed times, remember our hope is Jesus, the Lord of the Church. We need to trust He's leading us.

10 Take Care of the Souls and Do the Work of an Evangelist By Dr. K. Detlev Schulz

The Church is not the end itself. She is placed in a world and community and there becomes God's instrument into which outsiders are invited and welcomed. And the pastor is accountable to the Lord Himself for upholding that divine prerogative of reaching out to others so that through teaching and preaching about it and demonstrating it in practice, the members will be motivated to participate in their own respective ways.

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Hope Among the Remnant

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

“Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, ‘Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not.’” Haggai 2:2-5

We are the remnant of Israel. And we are that by the grace of God; we are preserved by the grace of God. We have been scattered in wrath, but gathered in grace. We are smaller than we were, but God continues faithfully to work in and through us, for our Lord works all things through the weak, the small, the low, the despised, and the foolish.

God called Haggai to prophesy to the remnant of Israel after the Babylonian captivity (about 520 B.C.). The returned exiles had by this time rebuilt the foundation of the temple of the Lord, but they had become discouraged and their own doubts overwhelmed them. Haggai’s ministry served as the channel through which God roused this foundering remnant to trust in His care and to carry out their vocations. They completed the temple four years later in 516 B.C.

Wishing for a return to an imagined past can lead to apathy. Things were so much better *back then*. What would you rather dwell on, challenges or successes? For me, it is always easier to recall a former glory. *Back then* church buildings were sacred, pastors honored, and all church workers trusted and respected. *Back then* the church served as the center of social life. *Back then* the pews were full.

But *now* what do we see? At least here in the United States, ridicule for

the Church, plunging membership statistics, and increasing difficulties for the institutional church simply to maintain itself, much less to grow, seem to be the order of the day. The alarming statistics are before us: pastors retiring at irreplaceable levels, low numbers of pastoral candidates, declining membership, and pews without children.

And so we long for *back then*. Things have changed so much that it can tempt us to lose hope.



Certainly the Bible speaks, particularly during the early days of the Christian church in the Book of Acts, of multiplying and adding to their numbers. Yet the word “grow” is about God working in us. “We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head,” Paul wrote to the Ephesians in 4:15. “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” Peter said in 2 Peter 3:18. When Paul heard that the Corinthians were dividing themselves into camps according to their favorite teacher, he admonished them to look past the laborers to the One who had not only sent them but was doing the real work of growth: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:5-7).

We know this, of course. We make plans, but we know those plans only stand according to God’s will. He guides and directs all things, often for a purpose we neither understand nor see. In fact, the first time the word “remnant” is used in the Bible is in Genesis 45:7, when Joseph begs his brothers not to be distressed or angry with themselves for selling him into slavery, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.”

We know these things. But to believe in challenging times is, well, challenging!

The truth is, we are the remnant of Israel. And we are that by the grace of God; we are preserved by the grace of God. We have been scattered in wrath, but gathered in grace. We are smaller than we were, but God continues faithfully to work in and through us, for our Lord works all things through the weak, the small, the low, the despised, and

The present age presents us with an opportunity to serve our Western culture in a way not granted to our forefathers: to sow seeds in a generation that has tried to ignore the Law written on their hearts, and that has never heard the Gospel that would grant them relief from terror. This was the Church’s vocation *back then*, is the Church’s vocation *now*, and it *will be* the Church’s vocation until Jesus returns.

Above: President Lawrence R. Rast Jr. with the participants of the 2019 Christ Academy high school students. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:37b-38).



the foolish. These words, taken from 1 Corinthians 1:27-28, are simply a summary of centuries of history in which God proved it was so, generation after generation. And so we always hold “fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (Col. 2:19).

Does this lead to lethargy? It mustn't! Rather, the present age presents us with an opportunity to serve our Western culture in a way not granted to our forefathers: to sow seeds in a generation that has tried to ignore the Law written on their hearts, and that has never heard the Gospel that would grant them relief from terror. This was the Church's vocation *back then*, is the Church's vocation *now*, and it *will be* the Church's vocation until Jesus returns.

Dear friend in Christ, you and I are so loved that our evil has been washed in the blood of the Lamb, every sin bought and paid for by Jesus's once and for all sacrifice. We know to whom we belong. A promise Christ met when He was lifted up on a cross: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

The church is always a remnant. It was *back then*, it is still *now*, and it *will be* until Christ's return in glory. As we live our lives as Christ's remnant people, we do so confident in the hope that is ours because of Jesus. “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:3-5). 🏠



Above: *The Rev. Paul Gregory Alms welcomes a new member in Christ through the waters of Baptism at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Catawba, North Carolina.*

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