

The End

Rev. Philip Hale – St. Paul, Bancroft and St. John, Lyons NE

December, 2014

We see death all around us. Small towns are dying, our country itself is racing toward bankruptcy, and our entire population is aging and declining. With the exception of a few designated holidays, Christianity is a forgotten memory for most. What does this mean for our congregations? Eventually, the end. There are many issues and problems, but they all remind of the fact that everything ends. Only the Word of God and those who cling to it remain forever.

First and foremost, citizens of the U.S. are not reproducing. It takes roughly 2.1 children per woman to sustain a steady population. With immigration, we are close, but not if we only consider the existing population. Christianity is declining much more rapidly. We are not a Christian nation in any sense. Our government has laws which oppose marriage, children, the God-given distinction between the sexes. But God's Word does not change. Even many "Christian" churches believe absolutely nothing, not even the most basic biblical teachings, such as 1) God created directly the world and all people. 2) Christ, God's living Son, died in the flesh for sins 3) the 6th commandment (that God hates divorce and living together is a dishonoring of God's institution of marriage).

As President Harrison in his recent State of the Synod pointed out, the whole LCMS is declining and has been for decades (since 1970). Since 2000 the entire LCMS membership is down by 12%. As the culture has grown more anti-Christian, the Church has done less teaching and less confessing in the face of paganism. We looked to programs and outward actions and gimmicks to shore up our congregations, while ignoring the main reason churches grow: children who are taught to be orthodox by their father and mother. As Martin Naumann, a former

Seminary professor put it in the 1970's: "The Christian Church on earth will grow or shrink as families grow in faith. In our own days statistics witness to a correspondence between less children had and the loss of membership as well as loss of interest in missions. How can a Christian who desires to bring people to Christ, refuse for one selfish reason or another to bring children into the world, into the church, that is, bring children to everlasting life?" Sadly, many children grow up today not knowing their earthly father and having no conception of the heavenly Father. Satan has attacked and uprooted the family, thereby disrupting churches. The Word of God is under attack and always has been, we just didn't prepare people for it.

The glory days of American churches are long over. Baptisms have declined precipitously since the 1960's to just a trickle now in most parishes. Confirmation classes have shrunk. Now we are seeing that parents, who are technically Lutheran, have no interest in taking their kids to catechism or getting them confirmed. But some who do bother with catechism class see it as a formality and burdensome obligation—like getting a vaccination at the doctor, so they never have to be imposed upon by religion again. Children are rarely taught Christ's teaching as foundational to a living faith. If the parents do not do this, the pastor has little influence. We can be sure that they are learning more values and religion from TV and pop music than from the Catechism or Bible. If our young marry without a consideration for the faith or confession of their spouse, what will be the result? The next generation will likely not even bother baptizing their kids, because they will have no reason except as a pointless custom.

As parents, we have failed in our job to make Christians. Dropping kids off at Sunday School was sometimes seen as enough. But that can hardly undo all the ungodliness they hear at school and the filth on TV. We armed our children with water guns to take to Satan's battleground—the world. But in trying to make Christianity fun and exciting, we neutered it and gutted it of real comfort for the truly dying. When parents do not go to church, they are teaching loudly that church is for children and the immature, not for real life problems. If God is only for one hour a week, not also for us in a daily reading of Scripture and prayer, then we have minimized Him. Christ makes us alive everyday with the promise of eternal life.

Most parents do not mold their kids to be Christian, but expect them magically to become

one. They would not think of making their high school child go to church. Yet, we make them go to school and do homework. In truth, eternal life and righteousness in Christ is more important than education or a successful life. If we raise children to do what they want, not what is right and godly, they will exercise that freedom and the result will not be good. Those who despise preaching break the 3rd commandment and put themselves in grave risk of falling away from Christ. Without regular and consistent church attendance, there is no congregation. God's Word is more than a rabbit's foot or a pretty decoration for special days. It offers life.

There is great reason to be pessimistic—we are dying. But the answer is not to blame politicians. They do what the people want. Neither is the pastor who preaches God's Word the problem. To disagree with God's Word is to deny Christ Himself. Scripture is our only authority. Right and wrong do change. If the Church accepts sin and does not speak against it, it serves no purpose. Neither does complaining and whining about our sad state help. The problem is us, not someone else. We must face up to our sins and stop expecting a miracle cure. We must stop looking for a quick fix, when we live in a culture of death that hates God and His Anointed One, Christ.

So why go on? "End" also means purpose and goal. Congregations exist, not to keep existing, but to preach the Gospel and forgive the sins of those who are repentant. Yes, that includes murderers (such as in the sin of abortion) and sexual adulterers (those who divorce without Biblical cause, have sex outside of marriage, and engage in homosexual activity). We are to welcome those people. Christ died for all. But we cannot approve of those sins. Christ was not put on the cross to help us rebel against God, but to bridge the chasm of sin. We do forgive sinners and offer life to them. The world wants acceptance and the blessing of sin, but we preach repentance and turning from ungodliness to the true God. One cannot love sin and Christ. God's love causes us to hate even the appearance of sin. We joyously receive all broken sinners and grant them Christ's righteousness, but many will not believe. If we speak God's Word faithfully we have not failed. We exist because we will fail, but God's Word cannot. The Gospel preaching of Christ will save a remnant in the meantime. Our success is with our treasure, not on earth, but in heaven.

It will get worse. Unless Christ rescues us first, there will be few churches and even fewer faithful pastors who are willing to preach the truth. Congregations are closing and combining resources and ungracefully aging as they live out their dying breaths. But we should not be surprised or dismayed. Christ has warned us that few will be saved at the end. *Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come* (Matt. 24). We may feel like Elijah, thinking there are no other believers left. We should prepare to be hated and to find little faith. There may not be any orthodox congregations around us at some point in the future—it is certainly headed that way.

But these problems should not disturb your peace with God or harm your faith in Christ. Our end is eternal life. This world is not your home, it is your casket, a momentary time for you to bear your cross. The Church is people gathered around God's Word, not those who think confirmation as a teenager is enough and never intend to call upon Him. Without hearing the Word of God, there is no faith, and therefore no church. Preaching of the pure doctrine is hearing God speak. This is sole purpose of a church: to receive Christ's favor and eternal life. If we lose sight of this, it is better to demolish our church buildings and disband. To do this properly means to have a pastor trained and called, if at all possible. It is the teaching of Christ that saves us which is our banner and flag. If we see the congregation only as a human institution we must keep going, we are losing sight of Christ who is risen from the dead and promises: *I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it* (Matt. 16).

The Church is not a building or a list of people. It is a spiritual people made alive by God's Word and who continue to be fed by it. As we cling to the Word, we are clinging to Christ. We latch on to it even as others are swept away by the tide of death, in order to live. Yes, we are all dying sinners who need forgiveness. It is a sacrifice and chore to maintain a congregation and cooperate with other sinners. But Christ will return, at which point everything will end. We

wait for this final end, when all the world will be consumed with fire. Then we will not care if our outward congregation was weak and fragile. All believers will rise to life to be with Christ forever. Death, though fearsome, is temporary in Christ—a mere sleep.

It is true that few will be saved. This is a tragedy, but the world hates Christ and always has. We should not be surprised that so many fall away—faith cannot be inherited like earthly possessions. But he who stands firm to the end will be saved. We support our congregation so God’s Word goes out and especially for our own salvation. We are dying in sin, but Christ makes us alive by His Word. Our hope is in Christ, not in outward things, and certainly not in outward congregations. We, as the Church, do have a noble end: to preach the Gospel, as we wait for the final end of this dying world. Amen.