



FAITHFUL,



HOPEFUL,



and BOLD

Encouragement for the Church

R. Lee Hagan



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my father, Robert Lee Hagan III, who has been a constant model of faithfulness to Christ and dedication to serving in Christ's church; and to all of the faithful lay leaders who humbly serve their congregations.

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This final thought is a call to action. However, it is not encouraging congregations to launch multiple new initiatives but rather to take one new step based upon their readings and discussions.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This book was written to be discussed among congregation leaders. I would encourage pastors and church leaders to read the book as part of the work of a board or committee, with the desired outcome being particular action to strengthen the faith and embolden the witness of the leaders and the congregation members, individually and corporately. Start by providing copies of the book for each member of the group, then choose a section of the book for all the members to read. The reflections are written so that they do not have to be read in sequence.

Assign someone to lead the discussion at the next meeting. At the end of each reflection, discuss one thing that the group would like to see happen after reflecting on that section. The book is designed to encourage leaders to put what they have learned and discussed into action for the sake of their congregation and Christ's church. My prayer is that this book will encourage congregation leaders to be faithful, hopeful, and bold with the faith and strength kindled in them by the Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION

STARTING WITH HOPE

In preparation, read Romans 15:1–13.

We live in desperate times. Our post-Christian culture is spiraling out of control. As a result of everything from the pressures of social media to the diminished role of religious institutions in society, people all around us are struggling with mental and emotional hurts. In these dark times of virtual reality and artificial intelligence, where can people find a message of true hope? The psalmist writes, “Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD” (Psalm 146:5).

Sadly, many Christians are downcast over the trials we are facing in our culture and the struggles we are facing within our congregations. They see little hope for their own congregation and have doubts about the future of Christ’s church. Dear friends, we have a message of hope for every person who walks through the door of one of our churches or schools. No matter what challenges we may face in this day and age, our hope is in the Lord!

Hope is a precious gift of God for all of us who are part of Christ’s church. We live each day in the hope that was given to us in our Baptism and that continually fills us as the Gospel is preached and as we receive Christ’s body and blood. The Gospel is God’s antidote to despair, and it fills us with hope that is sure and certain.

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Hope in Christ is not like the hope of a sports fan at the beginning of a new season. Hope in Christ is not this pie-in-the-sky naivete that the student who did not study has when taking a test. It is also not the “let it ride” dream of a casino gambler. Hope in Christ is sure and certain because it comes from our God, who cannot lie. All of God’s promises are Yes in Christ Jesus (see 2 Corinthians 1:18–20). This means that the penitent can rejoice in the word of absolution. It means that the dying can cling to Christ’s cross as the certain promise of life everlasting.

Since our hope is based on what Christ has done and continues to do for us, it is not dependent upon our circumstances. We hope, even when everything else would suggest that our situation is hopeless. Since our hope is in Christ, we think differently than the world thinks of hope. As Edward Mote wrote in his beloved hymn, “On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand” (*LSB* 575).

During a mission trip to Guatemala, I was leading a small group that was making home visits among squatters’ huts. The people we were visiting lived in abject poverty with little to suggest that their position would change. As I would lead the devotions from one home to the next, I was struck by listening to the translator speaking the words that I would read from Romans 5 and the words of encouragement that I would offer. Finally, I asked him, “What does the word *esperanza* mean? I keep hearing you say it over and over.” He responded, “Don’t you know? I’m only translating what you are saying. It means hope.” Hearing the word spoken in Spanish struck me for some reason. While we were not necessarily in a position to bring about a dramatic change in terms of where they live, we were still able to speak a word of hope to them. In spite of their poverty,

they could have the certain hope of a better life, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory in the life to come.

Our Lord promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against His church. He does not promise that each congregation will remain until Christ returns. However, the hope that we have in Christ can embolden our congregations. We pray that God would “save us from weak resignation” (*LSB* 850:4) when thinking about our congregations and trust that the Lord will indeed accomplish what He intends through His Word.

One of the most encouraging worship services I have ever attended was a service to mark the occasion of three congregations closing and establishing one new congregation. During the service, a patriarch from each of the congregations read congregational histories. They noted all of the children baptized and confirmed, couples married, and saints whose funerals had taken place over the years. It was emotional not only for the men reading the histories but for all those who had gathered. While there was sadness, there was also gratitude over what God had done in each congregation. There is no failure when a congregation closes. God’s Word never returns to Him void. So those saints of God could rejoice over all the ways in which the Holy Spirit had called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified His people through the means of grace. God had not failed them; rather He had done what He always does: giving forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Members of every congregation are looking forward to a hopeful future. Growing in Christ through His gifts, God’s people are indeed being filled with an eternal hope of paradise restored. On account of Christ, we can look forward to the day when the old order of things will pass away and God will make all things new.

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Christ in you is the hope of the glory to come, when there will be no more death or crying or pain.

Paul writes to the church at Rome, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). Our bold prayer continues to be that through endurance and encouragement from the Word of God, our congregations and leaders may be people of hope. Such leaders are not deterred by the circumstances but are made bold by the Spirit. We know that everything that is done within the church is for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel, the forgiveness of sins on account of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Our individual bearing witness to Christ is nothing more than telling others about the hope that is within us so that they too can live in the certain hope of eternal life with Christ! Such certainty through the Spirit’s work makes us bold in our witness and our labor for the sake of Christ’s kingdom. This does not mean we hope that the church will return to the former glory of the past but that our congregations will be hopeful as the Gospel is proclaimed among us. The confirmation class photos may have smaller classes. The ushers may not have to set up chairs on Christmas Eve. But our hope is not in a particular congregation but rather in Christ and the promises He has given to His church. We are sure that Christ dwells within us through faith and that He will never leave us nor forsake us. We are a people full of hope in Christ. So we set ourselves about the Lord’s work full of hope, trusting in His Word and promise!

Eighteenth-century English poet Alexander Pope wrote in *An Essay on Man*, “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.” The

hope that springs within us is an eternal hope. Peter wrote that God has called us to a living hope. Ours is a living hope in a living Savior, who rose from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. So eternal hope springs within us, the eternal and living hope to which God has called us through the Spirit. Nothing that we endure while living in this vale of tears can take that hope away from us.

Within just a few verses in 2 Corinthians, Paul notes that the confidence of the Christian in the midst of trial, our Christian confidence, comes from the certainty of our salvation and the promise of eternal life. The source of that confidence is hope: “Since we have such a hope, we are very bold” (2 Corinthians 3:12). Twice in the verses that follow, he encourages the Corinthians that because of the mercy and grace of God, they need not lose heart (4:1, 16). Hope in Christ means that we are not fearful of the temporary trials we face, but that we are very bold!

Our congregations have hope! It is not about the continuance of an organization or the maintenance of a building. The hope our congregations have is in the One who overcame death and the grave for us. Nothing is more hopeful than proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus, His atoning death, and His triumphant resurrection. Whether the congregation is large or small, alongside a cornfield or nestled between skyscrapers, wherever God’s Word is proclaimed, there is hope for His people. These reflections are intended to provide hope and encouragement for the saints of God by putting you in mind of Christ and His gifts as you seek to be faithful to God’s Word in caring for the saints and reaching the lost.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope (Romans 15:13).

Discussion Questions

What is one example of how we speak about hope in our everyday conversation?

What is different about hope in Christ?

What hope is there for your congregation?

What are some examples of ways your congregation can be bold since you have hope in Christ?

Why is it important for you as church leaders to be hopeful about the future?

REFLECTION 1

SMALL CHURCH, BIG SAVIOR: CHRIST IN COLOSSIANS

In preparation, read Colossians 1-2.

An Imperfect Church

The small church may not be all that impressive to the uninitiated. In fact, it may be a bit off-putting. But, as important as the “Century Farm” sign is in front of his homeplace, Sam has a similar attachment to his church. In fact, it’s something even more profound. As he walks through the doors into the narthex, he notices it is small and somewhat dingy, but that’s nothing new. It probably could use a fresh coat of paint. Speaking of paint, as he takes the bulletin from Fred, he realizes that Fred was working with green paint on Friday, because he wasn’t quite able to get it all off his hands.

Sam lets his wife and kids go before him into their usual pew. His children wave to his parents, sitting in their usual pew right in front of his family. He nods to the Schmidts. They’ve probably already been here for thirty minutes, while Sam’s family is slipping in just before the bell. At the first note of the organ, he knows that Marjorie is back from visiting her niece in Florida. She always has

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trouble with that one sticky pedal on the organ. As they start singing, he immediately hears Larry's off-key bellowing in the back. He laughs to himself because it just sounds like home to him. In fact, he can't imagine singing without hearing Larry. As his family goes up for Communion, they have to wait because Ralph is here this week, and he makes his way slowly and with great determination as he leans on his walker and refuses all help. As they return from the chancel, he notices that there are only four youth sitting up in the right transept. That used to be such a rite of passage. He remembers that when he was a kid they could cram fifteen or sixteen in those two pews, and if you didn't get there early enough, you had to sit with your parents.

As the service ends and they are ushered out, he looks back and smiles. It may not be glamorous at all, but this is where his grandparents were married and buried. This is where his parents brought him and his sisters week after week. This is where his children were baptized and someday will be confirmed. Here is where he spoke his recitations year after year as a part of the Christmas program. This is where he would tremble as the book was slammed shut on Good Friday. This is where Pastor Lehmann taught them how to prepare to receive the Lord's Supper.

The people aren't perfect. The building isn't perfect. The pastors haven't been perfect. But in spite of all those imperfections, this is where he has been fed and strengthened through Christ. This is where he has received the forgiveness of sins in the waters of Baptism, in the words of the Absolution, and at the feast of the Lord's Supper. It hasn't been easy. There have been lots of hard times and lots of changes. A stillborn child. A layoff with two kids at home. A mother-in-law's long battle with cancer. Yet, through it

all, week after week, here among this small, imperfect collection of sinners, Christ was here for His people with His grace and love.

The Colossae Background

Compared to the recipients of Paul’s other letters—Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and even the great nearby city of Laodicea, whose letter is lost to us—Colossae would be considered a small town. It didn’t begin to compare with the cosmopolitan living of the other great centers of commerce, learning, and religion. Some centuries earlier, it had been a larger city, but by the time of Paul’s writing, its glory days had long since passed. Some have speculated that its leader, Epaphras, served Colossae along with Laodicea and Hierapolis as a triple-point parish. Of the three communities, Colossae was the least in stature and prominence. It was located near the road to Ephesus, and that may have been its only significance. Paul and Silas traveled this road on their way to Ephesus, but they had passed on by Colossae. When a great earthquake struck the region in about AD 60, Laodicea was quickly rebuilt, but Colossae remained in ruins. The church there in Colossae was small enough that a conflict within the congregation could be devastating. That is why Paul’s letter to Philemon is so significant. John Nordling notes, “There must, in fact, have been more at stake” than just Onesimus’s fleeing from Philemon.¹ Such relational conflicts are magnified in small, family-oriented congregations. So Paul implores Philemon, a leader within the Colossian congregation, to receive his runaway slave Onesimus, who has now come to faith, as a brother in the Lord.

1 John G. Nordling, *Philemon*, Concordia Commentary (Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 31.

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With some level of literary license, it would be easy to assume that District President Paul and Mission Executive Silas would be more concerned about places like Antioch, Ephesus, and Philippi. Remember, Philippi had led the district in congregational support for the last two triennia. The church at Colossae had become the little church that couldn't—and in need of a trained reconciler. That may be a bit of a stretch, but it is certainly conceivable that the saints in Colossae would have been downcast because they failed to measure up when compared to the other congregations and communities.

Similarities

Today, many congregations are located in towns whose glory days have long since passed. These towns struggle to keep their young people because nearby cities have so much more to offer. Many feel their town is a bit like Colossae, nothing more than an insignificant village. When church leaders consider the future of their congregations, it may not seem very bright at all. Some congregations struggle with relational conflicts or fail to understand their purpose for existence. Some worry that their congregation may become a relic of the past, waiting for the archaeologists to come and excavate.

Comfort for the Colossians

Paul did not ignore this small congregation in Colossae or consider the city an insignificant village. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. He showed great care and concern for this congregation so that they would not lose heart. Paul's letter to the saints and faithful at Colossae addresses some level of false teaching regard-

ing Christ. But it is also full of encouragement for people who have felt not only bypassed but forgotten.

Paul's comfort for the Colossian congregation is rooted in a robust Christology: "He [Christ] 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" (1:18–19). Paul identifies his readers as the church, the Body of Christ, and Christ is its Head. No matter how small your congregation may be, you are the church: you are the Body of Christ and Christ is your Head.

Also of great significance to those who seem insignificant in their own minds is that Christ now dwells within them. Paul continues, "To them [His saints] 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" (1:27). Christ dwells not only among the Jews who believe but also among the Gentiles. "The promise is for . . . everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself" is how Peter put it at Pentecost (Acts 2:39). Paul Deterding writes,

The revelation of the mystery via the Word means that the mystery is "Christ *in* you." This mystery is revealed as Christ makes himself known to the church, which is created and sustained by his Word and Sacraments. Through these, the mystery is revealed and hence made known as God imparts faith. The nature of this mystery as the *hope* of glory is revealed through the Sacraments.²

2 Paul E. Deterding, *Colossians*, Concordia Commentary (Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 74.

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This means that Christ, the one by whom all things were made and by whom all things are held together, the one by whose blood all things have been reconciled, and the one who is the firstborn of the dead—this One—dwells in you. The crucified Christ, who gave His life on the altar of the cross, fully dwells with His people. Christ dwells in you, in your little imperfect collection of sinners. Christ is present with congregations of all sizes, not just in the big congregations in the big cities. Christ dwells in you as you receive His gifts of Word and Sacrament, whether it is with twenty-five or twenty-five hundred others. It is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

So there is hope for the future, but it is an eternal hope that is revealed each week as Christ is present for His people through the Word and Sacraments. That is a bright hope that is not dependent upon who sits in the Oval Office or in the pastor's study. That is a bright hope that isn't contingent upon the church budget or the size of the campus. That is a bright hope that isn't based on our circumstances or conditions. Christ in you is hope: it is hope for glory, and that is the hope that is brought to people when Christ deigns to dwell among us through His Word. That is the hope that is proclaimed from our pulpits each week. We have something to say for hopeless people, and that is to proclaim Christ because Christ in you is hope!

Paul goes on by expounding these blessings of God as hidden treasures:

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach

all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:1-3)

May your hearts be encouraged and may you be knit together in love and may you have the hidden treasures of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding that is faith in Christ. Paul's encouragement to the congregation at Colossae and to your congregation is ultimately the full sufficiency of Christ. Deterding writes, "The chief power for ministering . . . is the proclamation of the Word about Christ."³ Small congregations can be encouraged and encouraging. Small congregations are knit together in love. And small congregations have all the hidden treasures, as Christ is given away like candy to kids at a parade.

Paul's efforts at correcting the Colossian heresy are also wonderful words of encouragement for the downcast members of the small congregation: "For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority" (2:9-10). As earlier in chapter 1, Paul mentions what it means that all the fullness of God dwells in Christ, and now he tells the Colossians that as Christ dwells within them through faith, they have been filled in every way.

Too often, small congregations think that they have a small Jesus. But there is nothing lacking. There is no want or need. ALL the fullness of God dwells with the little imperfect collection of sinners gathered around Christ and His Word. In fact, as they feast upon the Word, as they eat of His body and drink of His blood, all

3 Deterding, 84.

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the fullness of God fills them each and every one. Christ is present—not just in the large churches like Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus or Milwaukee, Phoenix, and St. Louis—but present in the small churches passed by along the crossroads. Where Christ’s Word is, where His Sacraments are, there He is. There is the almighty God of heaven and earth, through whom all things were made and by whom all things will be made new. Christ’s Word is what parents need to teach children. Christ’s Word is what the saints of God need to evangelize their communities. Christ’s Word is what brings comfort to the downcast and forgiveness to the anguished. It’s okay to be small, because you’ve got a great and mighty Savior, who fills you in every way.

What’s Not Okay

What’s *not* okay is to give up. Some congregations have already planned their funerals. They’ve already given up. All that’s left is to figure out who is going to take care of the cemetery. To the last one here, turn out the light on your way out. What is lost in all of this is that the starting place of mission is Christ. Your congregation has Christ and His Word, and that means you have what you need to engage your community. Many congregation members think that the mission of the church is just about keeping the doors of their congregation open. However, when we look at the Scriptures, we see God’s mission is that repentance and forgiveness would be preached in Christ’s name to all nations and that disciples would be made by baptizing and teaching.

While there is certainly emotional attachment to a building and to land, we never lose sight of the fact that the church exists so that, in the words of John, “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the