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Theological Observer

The Consecration of the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Siberia

This sermon was preached by the Rev. Vsevolod Lytkin on the occasion of his consecration as Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Siberia at the Cathedral Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Tallinn, Estonia, on May 6, 2007. The Editors

Fathers, brothers, and sisters, I would like to begin my sermon with a quote from the song of a famous bard of the Soviet time:

I remember, I was silly and young
I heard from my parent
How my parent destroyed
The church of Christ the savior.

You know, this is not black Russian humor. There is history in these words, history of my country of Russia as well as history of your country of Estonia, since by the evil destiny you were forced to share our sufferings with us. For over fifty years you were part of the Soviet Union, the country that was founded by hangmen and czar-murderers.

This country is no more. We now live in free democratic countries. Still, almost all of us have "come out" of that Soviet time. Some people were touched more by this, others less. Some people tried to oppose the regime; others have realized all the terror of the Soviet system only after its fall.

"I remember, I was silly and young." From a Christian perspective, one realizes that the most terrible thing was that such a great multitude of people were born in unbelief. They lived all their life in unbelief and the most terrible thing is that they also died in unbelief. I don't like to speak about politics, particularly while preaching, but it is impossible to forget those times. I remember them especially when I visit Estonia, since it was here that my Christian life began.

Just like many others, I was looking for God. I remember how "silly and young" I was; yet, gradually, little by little, I began to seek answers to *eternal questions*. My family was not Christian. Nevertheless, my parents taught me not to trust Soviet propaganda, and so I did not. Since soviet propaganda said that God does not exist, it seemed quite likely that he does. Thus my Christian faith began because of my parents, though they did not tell me about God directly.

Like many other people at the time, we also understood that it was impossible for God not to exist. What would one live for if one's life is limited to earth, not even in a sense that we are just temporary dwellers on this earth, but, as one priest wrote, "if there is no God . . . then all humankind is found collectively not on earth, but in the earth, in our common grave."

I understood little of religion, but I knew that there must be something besides this material world, in which we live, only to die. I purchased books, atheistic books, for there were no other ones at the time, and I tried to find quotations from the Bible in them, words about God, and I found them and tried to understand. Obviously, the atheists quoted the word of God only for critique. But, after all, we were *Soviet* people—we got used to interpreting all official things backwards.

Finally, God's grace led me to Estonia. Here I met Christians for the first time in my life. I will never forget how I talked to an old man who was the guard at the Church of the Holy Spirit. Then I spoke with the wife of Pastor Jaan Kiivit, and finally with the pastor himself. I was twenty when I came here for the first time in order to find the Lutheran church. I did not know anybody. I had virtually no money and lived in the train station for a week where I memorized Luther's Catechism.

I would not dare do that now. But then I came back to the train station every evening and tried to find a seat on a bench in the waiting-hall area. There were a limited number of seats. I was surrounded mostly by poor travelers like me, and also alcoholics and homeless people. It is so strange to recall it now. But I learned the Catechism, and then Jaan Kiivit baptized me. This is how my Christian life began here in Estonia during the old Soviet era.

I remember, I was silly and young,
I heard from my parent
How my parent destroyed
The church of Christ the savior.

You know, these words are a perfect description of Soviet life! Certainly, *my* parents were not involved directly in the destruction of Christianity, but a number of people participated on a *global scale* in the construction of society with no room for God. Wily rulers deceived them by promises of earthly paradise, and they gullibly followed them.

Afterwards it was too late. Millions of Christians were tortured in prison camps; thousands of churches were blown up and demolished. To be sure, the Orthodox Church suffered the most, but other confessions also shared in that horrible slaughter. You know, we have no Lutheran church buildings left in Siberia. All that could be destroyed was destroyed. The last Lutheran church building—St. Peter's in Barnaul—was destroyed in the early seventies. So, what a grace has been given to us that this regime did not outlive us. Rather, we outlived it! And we have not been only passive observers of its collapse but active participants in building a new life.

This happened because God placed us in the ministry of his church. We save people's souls through the word of God and the holy sacraments. Can there be anything more wonderful than this task? But all this is not of us; it is only due

to Christ. It is he who came to us with his word. However little this word can be seen in the essays in atheistic books, nevertheless God helped us to see his word there. And he called us through this word, just as we read in today's Gospel: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden . . ." (Matt 11:28a). The word of God always accomplishes that for which God sends it. One believed secretly, and then he began to believe openly. Another remembered the faith of his parents. And yet another began to seek and he found. You can meet all these kinds of people, laymen and priests, in every parish. One of my colleagues almost joined the Communist Party, but he heard the gospel and was so captivated by this news that he finally left everything, took his wife and children and a box of potatoes, and went to work as a missionary. Finally he became a priest. This is how miraculously God acts in our lives.

Today's sermon is based on the Old Testament reading in our church lectionary, from the twelfth chapter of Isaiah. It describes the joy of deliverance, but it is not limited to *description*; it is rather a praise song of God's people, gratitude to God for his miraculous gifts. It is obvious that this song of praise had a liturgical meaning, because one may see a number of parallels here with the other hymns of praise, most notably with the *Hallel* psalms that the Old Testament church was singing at the Passover and other celebrations while thanking God for the gift of deliverance.

This chapter is like Psalm 118, which we sang on Easter Sunday. "The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. . . . I thank thee that thou hast answered me and hast become my salvation" (Ps 118:14, 21). Salvation is a major theme of both the Psalter and our text from Isaiah. The key word here is *yeshuah*, which is related to the name of Jesus, our savior: "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation" (Isa 12:2).

We also sing another part of Psalm 118, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," every Sunday when we greet Christ who comes to us in the Sacrament of the Altar. God comes to save us. Just as the people of old had been saved from Egyptian slavery, so also we have been saved from the slavery of sin and death through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Christ Jesus – Joshua – has become our salvation. He has come to us in order to bring liberty to the oppressed and to give rest to all who labor and are heavy laden: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28–30). That is: "Come to me, all who carry heavy burdens of life, and I will give you rest. . . . Take *my* yoke, not yours. Take *my* burden, not yours." The "yoke" that our Lord gives us is quite unlike those yokes to which we are accustomed to bearing in this world. There is no violence and oppression here, as Christ is gentle and lowly in heart.

It is not difficult to see here the idea of *the blessed exchange*, so loved by Luther. Those carrying their burdens may take them off their shoulders and take another one, which is of Christ. Those tired and looking for rest may find it with Christ, the Son of God who humbled himself, took the form of a servant, and also took our sins upon himself so that he could present his righteousness to us. He brings salvation to us as a gift. He does not require that we redeem ourselves from our own sins, but grants forgiveness to repentant sinners at every liturgy. And it is only in him that a soul of a sinner who is thirsty for forgiveness and reconciliation with God may find rest: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt 11:29-30).

As children, we were taught that only obedient children receive the gifts. The gifts of *God*, however, are given to us without any qualifications or conditions. God does not postpone his grace until *people* do something. God freely gives his blessings. If I have to become somebody or do something for my salvation, if I have to *earn* salvation, then there is no grace here but only unfulfilled law. We can do nothing to be saved. The Lord, nevertheless, does not require it from us. Even before we were born, he came and died for us and rose. He still continues to come and to serve us by giving his true Body and Blood to us at the Eucharist. Through these he strengthens our faith and gives us power to follow him into the kingdom of his Father.

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isa 12:3). Remember your baptism now. Remember how God accepted you and how you became a Christian. Maybe we do not remember it often, but today God gives us a new opportunity to thank him and rejoice that water from the wells of salvation was poured also on us, that we are saved, and that nobody can snatch us out of Christ's hands. "And you will say in that day: 'Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name; make known his deeds among the nations, proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth'" (Isa 12:4-5).

God always makes great things, even if it seems to us at times that he is idle. Isaiah wrote at a terrible time; Israel's enemies were threatening to destroy God's people. The strong ones of this world attempted to destroy the chosen nation and her monotheistic faith. The hearers of Isaiah may have found it difficult to believe that their God would be known in all the earth. The ancient prophecies are, generally speaking, unusual. They are spoken, and then there is silence until prophecy resumes moving forward with fulfillment. The powerful ones think that all the power is in their hands. Therefore they create empires and name cities in their honor; they build monuments and mausoleums for themselves. But in the end, it turns out that time is not in their hands. Time is in God's hands.

A day comes when that which seemed indestructible and unshakeable is destroyed. People in all the earth are given knowledge of God, acquire faith, come to church, get baptized, bring their children. The church grows—this is how God acts in our lives. “Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 12:6). Brothers and sisters, the Lord is in the midst of us. We are able to hear his word and partake of him. He comes so close to us in the Sacrament of Eucharist that we can even touch him.

The Eucharist not only connects us to Christ, but also unites us with each other. It is so wonderful to have spiritual fellowship with the brothers with whom we share a common faith. However, the special character of this day for us Siberian Lutherans is that not only have we been *one in faith* with the Church of Estonia for a long time, but we have also been a part of her. Now we become an autocephalous church. Though we are independent, the Church of Estonia will always remain our spiritual mother. No matter what happens, we will always remember the many years in which you cared for us.

No matter what happens . . . we went through a number of things together. And who knows what else we will have to go through? We know how the church buildings, even those that were large and sturdy, were destroyed. We know also how fragile temples of human lives are destroyed. It happened often and—who knows—it may happen again. Who knows what the future has in store for us. Global warming, materialism, street extremism, Islamic terrorism, liberal theology—there are so many terrifying and deadly things around us! Yet Christ is among us, both now and forever. Neither death nor hell nor the devil can change that. We will receive forgiveness of sins, rest, and a blessed eternity in Christ. Amen.

Vsevolod Lytkin
Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Siberia

The Reception of *Lutheran Service Book*

When one of the editors of CTQ requested that I offer comments on the reception of *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)*, I knew that it would be necessary to begin my comments with a self-disclosure. After all, I spent the past eight years guiding the new Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) hymnal to completion and served as its chief advocate. Clearly, I have a few things to say about *LSB*, and if some of it is a bit biased, then so be it!

As of this writing, *LSB* has been available for 16 months (since August of 2006). During that time, nearly 800,000 copies of the Pew Edition have been sold. Concordia Publishing House (CPH) estimates that the acceptance rate is now over 50% of congregations, and perhaps even over 55%. While it is sometimes prudent to be wary of numbers, they can often enlighten us. To the

best of our knowledge, *Lutheran Worship* (*LW*), published in 1982, never quite reached a 60% penetration of LCMS congregations. Without judging one hymnal over against the other, the rapid and fairly widespread adoption of *LSB* in our congregations certainly says something about how the LCMS is receiving it. While those of us most intimately involved in its development anticipated that there would be broad acceptance, the worries voiced by some that no one would be interested in buying yet another hymnal did cause the occasional doubt to enter our minds. The past 16 months have, fortunately, erased those doubts.

How does one explain the positive response to *LSB*? Perhaps we are too close in time to offer an accurate explanation. The historians among us would probably urge us to wait a decade or two before making any judgments. Still, the process of how *LSB* and its companion resources were developed does shed some light on what we have experienced.

First, the Commission on Worship and its hymnal committees worked very carefully to develop a hymnal that would be a true successor to both *The Lutheran Hymnal* (*TLH*) and *Lutheran Worship*. This was no easy task. Ever since 1982, the LCMS has been a two-hymnal church body. While nearly 60% had moved to *LW*, another 35% of congregations had chosen to stay with *TLH*. In many cases, this was a very deliberate decision. Our work required a careful balancing act that preserved the best of *TLH* while also building on the strengths of *LW*. This meant, for example, that the much-loved "Page 15" service in *TLH* needed to be included with only very minor revisions. In certain places, though, revision was necessary, such as the updating of the creed translations, using what had already appeared in *LW*; in some instances, such as the Salutation, compromise was necessary, with both responses ("And with your spirit" / "And also with you") being used in different services.

While *LSB* is not a perfect hymnal, its rapid and positive reception suggests that our goal of producing a faithful successor hymnal has been successful. That response is seen not only in the numbers given earlier but, more importantly, in the anecdotal comments received during the past 16 months. Time and again, both the Commission on Worship office and CPH received reports of unanimous decisions approving *LSB* at congregational voters' meetings. Several individuals expressed amazement, saying that they seldom—if ever—had unanimous votes on any issue. Once the new hymnals were in the pew racks and in use, many expressed satisfaction with their decision.

Again, what might account for this seeming success? Clearly, the Commission on Worship did its job preparing the LCMS for *LSB*. For nearly eight years, regular reports were issued. Many congregations also took part in testing various resources. For the first time, the internet was used in a variety of ways to disseminate ideas and gather feedback on a hymnal project. We also

listened carefully to complaints about our predecessor books and attempted to learn from previous mistakes. As much as possible, our goal was to prepare a hymnal that not only exhibited doctrinal integrity but also took into consideration the needs of those who would use it for decades to come.

Another factor in the positive reception of *LSB* is the simultaneous appearance of the electronic version, known as *Lutheran Service Builder*. As best we know, this is the first time in history that a hymnal was prepared from the start for both print and electronic media. CPH exhibited tremendous leadership both in developing a truly innovative product and in negotiating agreements that simplify the often arcane world of copyright permissions. While there were some fears that the electronic version might result in significant reduction in sales of the print version, these fears have been allayed. Very precise statistics have shown that more than 80% of congregations that buy the *Builder* also purchase sufficient copies of the hymnal for use in worship.

What the future holds for *LSB* remains to be seen. It is far too early to know what percentage of congregations will ultimately adopt it. While a record was probably set in publishing not only the Pew Edition but also the majority of the *LSB* companion volumes in the same year, there is still more to come. A *Guitar Chord Edition* is nearing completion, and a concordance of the hymns will be ready by mid-2008. Recordings of the hymns and liturgies, for congregations that have no musicians to lead the singing, will soon be made. Also on the drawing board are commentaries for both the services and the hymns. Who knows what other helpful resources may be developed to assist pastors and musicians in unlocking the riches of *LSB*?

It never was our expectation that *LSB* would be adopted in every LCMS congregation. As many have pointed out, "the genie is out of the bottle"; we will likely never see the days of the vaunted 1950s when everyone in the LCMS was using the same hymnal. What about those congregations that choose not to use hymnals or to use them selectively? Two thoughts must suffice for now. First, the "contemporary worship" phenomenon is not nearly so settled as some might be led to believe. Evidence continues to mount, especially outside Lutheranism, which shows that congregations that led the way in informal worship some three decades ago are beginning to rethink what they are doing. That, coupled with a growing desire for more substance—and even tradition—in worship suggests that, although "the genie is indeed out of the bottle," it is quite likely that "the genie" will continue to change, perhaps in surprising ways.

Second, the appearance of *LSB* will, to some degree, influence the worship even of congregations that do not use it. Whether one "likes" the hymns and services in *LSB* or not, it is difficult to deny that on the whole they exhibit a rich and varied expression of the gospel. The contents of *LSB* were carefully

compiled and reviewed by many individuals and groups. Although the hymnal does not represent the limit as to what is appropriate for use in worship, it does place before the entire church an expectation of how the gospel ought to be given expression in all of our congregations. To that end, every pastor and musician in the church will want to become familiar with its contents in order to discover the richness of its gospel expression.

It now remains for those who plan and lead worship to make every effort to become thoroughly acquainted with *Lutheran Service Book*. This will take both time and commitment. The benefits, though, are well worth it. Above all, it will guarantee that this latest hymnal will continue to serve faithfully for many years to come.

Paul J. Grime

“The God Squad”: Towards a Common Religion

On Mondays *The Pocono Record* carries a syndicated column by Rabbi Gellman and the Rev. Tom Hartman, a priest, under the title “The God Squad.” It is amazing that Jewish and Roman Catholic clergy persons can team up to give religious advice to members of both faith communities and supposedly to Protestants who may need their assistance even more than their own sisters and brothers. On July 23, 2007, four questions were posed, the second of which had to do with the singing of “Amazing Grace,” a standard American favorite which entered Lutheran hymnody in *Lutheran Worship* and remained there in the *Lutheran Service Book*. R., Brooklyn, N.Y., submitted the following:

Q: “Amazing Grace” and “We Shall Overcome,” both Christian hymns, have now become popular as civil rights and protest songs. Can people of the Jewish faith feel comfortable singing these hymns?

A: Absolutely. The only hymns that cause problems are those that expressly affirm Christ as Lord. When “Amazing Grace” and “We Shall Overcome” are sung at public rallies, rather than in a ritual setting, their purpose is not to affirm specifically Christian doctrines but to share common sentiments and values.

One does not know where to dig into this tempting morsel, but a petition from the hometown cannot be ignored. “We Shall Overcome” is a protest song, but is “Amazing Grace”? This hymn has taken its place alongside of “God Bless America” as the national hymn. What would the funeral of a politician be without it? At the funeral of non-churched relative of mine, a New York City policeman dressed in kilts led the mourners to a tavern playing “Amazing Grace” on bagpipes. One size fits all. As valuable as *sola gratia* is for Reformation sermons, Roman Catholics claim theirs as a religion of grace. What is meant by grace is a subject for another time. The New Perspective on

Paul has been saying that Judaism was a religion of grace. Paul's problem with the Jews was not that theirs was a religion of works, but that it did not give non-Jews equal standing before God. Supposedly, Luther got it wrong. (See CTQ 70 [2006]: 197-217.) Should a standard of orthodoxy require that *Amazing Grace* be removed from the hymnal, other hymns would also face the ax. *Love Divine, All Love Excelling*, especially according to the melody common in Anglicanism, is a favorite of mine. We can postpone its reference to progressive sanctification in verse four until we die, though Charles Wesley thought that we could get a head start on this here below. *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past* oozes a Calvinist's confidence in his election. Like *Amazing Grace*, neither "Christ" nor Jesus is mentioned, but we can refer "Lord" and "God" in these hymns to the second person of the Trinity. No problem with *Love Divine, All Love Excelling*. Jesus plays a bigger part in Arminianism than in Calvinism.

Both the rabbi and the priest get it right. The meaning of a hymn often depends on whether it is sung in a stadium or a church and, add to that, which church. *God of Grace and God of Glory* was sung with gusto when it found a place in *Lutheran Worship*, notwithstanding that Walter A. Maier pointed out to the Missouri Synod laity that its author, Harry Emerson Fosdick, was incorrigibly liberal. Fosdick denied all the fundamental doctrines. For the record, it was the theme song of the Social Gospel movement. Its convoluted wording is one reason not to sing it. Try this one on: "Shame our wanton, selfish gladness, Rich in things and poor in soul." Already with *The Lutheran Hymnal* doctrinal censors took the scalpel to hymns that did not meet orthodox standards. In the hymn credits "alt." means that for doctrinal reasons or literary improvement the hymn has been altered – a most appropriate word for putting the knife into the poet's genius. In *Lutheran Worship*, *Christ Be My Light* became *Christ Be My Leader*, which does not fit with the end of the first verse: "Darkness is daylight when Jesus is there." Some changes qualify as mutilations. Few, if any, parishioners would have been converted to Calvinism if the third verse of *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name* – "Ye chosen seed of Israel's race" – had not been replaced with "Ye seed of Israel's chosen race." Didn't Paul say that not all Israel was Israel? Some were elect and others were not. The substitute reading could allow for the *intuitu fidei*, but who cares – especially if one is singing a hymn. Hymns having different meanings are hardly new. Certain Psalms, portions of Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon may have been taken over by the inspired writers from other sources in the ancient world.

Amazing Grace is not a favorite of mine, and it is unlikely that I will suggest singing it, but not because it can be sung in the Capitol rotunda or in a synagogue. (Has this ever happened?) For me, grace without Christ is dogmatically cold. That's a personal opinion, and, if a parishioner wants it sung, I will happily and willing go along. From childhood I know by memory all the national songs, which I will continue to sing knowing that the person

standing next to me may give an entirely different meaning, or none at all, to the words. Some of the great choral directors and singers of Bach's *B-Minor Mass* and his other explicitly Christian cantatas are Jewish. Some years ago, Bill Buckley, the conservative writer, said that he would enjoy the ballet in the Soviet-dominated states knowing full well that it was funded by a political system he abhorred. A similar principle is at work with where and how some of our hymns originated as well as where and when I will listen to and participate in them. Life is too short not to listen and possibly sing. Hymns should be exempt from doctrinal censorship, although this is unlikely to happen in our fellowship. Before intended synergistic lines are reworded from some hymns, as I suspect some have been, perhaps we should remind ourselves how we have lived with some unintended synergistic biblical passages. We can give our hymn censors a break. Our minds can make the adjustments.

David P. Scaer