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CHURCH SURVIVAL IN ADVERSE SOCIETY

by Alexey Streltsov

Christ must be at the core of everything the Church is and does.

FIRST OF ALL, LET ME BRING GREETINGS to this honorable missionary assembly on behalf of the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church where I serve as a pastor and Theological Seminary of Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church where I work as a rector.

I am very pleased to be here with you and speak to you for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the plain fact that at this time of the year it is more comfortable to be in the south of California than in the center of Siberia.

Once Christendom, always Christendom?

The title of my presentation is “Church Survival in Adverse Society.” When I was thinking about the possible content of my message, more than once a question came to my mind of what I could possibly say to a church that has persevered in a multi-confessional and multi-religious milieu for some 150 years, that estab-

lished strong centers of pastoral education, that presented a number of evangelism programs involving various strata of society and various technological means. In any number of fields, the LCMS has served as a confessional beacon for the conscientious Lutherans worldwide, and even its theological and ecclesiastical opponents recognized its earnest desire to preserve the doctrine presented in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church.

However, most part of that history took place in society that was — at least to its general self-perception — predominantly Christian. Clergy were viewed as a recognized and respectable part of society, especially in more rural settings. While pastors could not expect to

have extravagant income, their living standards were not sub par compared to many of their neighbors. Christian children received education in Christian schools and were raised with the comfortable feeling that much of the world around them was Christian, although there could be temptations to the faith coming from those who did not match the profile of the basically Christian community. Those days are long gone. Yet many people continue to operate under the assumption that what we see today

It may well be that those Christians who enjoyed religious freedoms for generations will become subject of persecution that neither they nor their recent ancestors have ever experienced.

around us is only a temporary state of affairs, that the norm is what transpired a few decades ago, and that this state of affairs will inevitably come back in the near future when we will overcome all the obstacles to the Christian faith.

This is at best a wishful thinking, an “ostrich policy.” You may lock yourself in a small room in your house and pretend you don’t notice that the walls have come

down, and all you have left is your little room, at least in the community where you happen to be.

Sudden changes in society always take most people off guard. People tend to think that if things went in relatively the same way for some time, then it will also continue that way in the future. Not necessarily! Who could have predicted in 1515 what would happen in just a few years to the monasteries and convents in the large parts of Germany? The pietists of the eighteenth century would not have expected that — following publication of the *Wolfenbuettel Fragments* of Herman Samuel Reimarus — their children and grandchildren would be overrun by the spirit of Rationalism. Complacent Orthodox clergy of the

Russian Empire would barely have predicted on the verge of the Bolshevik revolution that a number of them would become martyrs, willingly or unwillingly. And who could have possibly thought just several decades (if not years) ago that faithful pastors in the Western world would be in danger of facing outright rejection and even persecution just for asserting the biblical claim that homosexuality was a sin in need of repentance.

Indeed, Christ said that “the gates of hell shall not prevail” against His Church. This promise of Christ holds true. The gates of hell have not prevailed over *una sancta*, the one holy Christian apostolic Church that we confess in the Nicene creed. Nor will it happen in the future, for Christ is not a liar, and He is “the same yesterday and today and forever.”¹ However, this promise does not relate to every particular place within the Church, to every local or national church or synod, but only to the Church in general. In this life, the Church militant may seem to lose individual battles, but the victory in the war belongs to Christ, and that will not change even if a small remnant of faithful Christians becomes all that is left on this earth.

In a number of places that once were significant centers of early Christianity we can see only ruins, reminding us of the glorious past of the church there but presently serving only as tourist attractions and research material for archeologists. Persecutions of Christians in Iraq, Syria and numerous other places continue with increasing intensity, making one believe that the long-term Christian presence in those regions will soon come to an end.

In these circumstances, few people abide in the illusion that “once Christendom, always Christendom.” I remember how twenty-two years ago I met a neo-evangelical missionary from Campus Crusade for Christ who was sincerely convinced that America was the world-leading Christian nation whose global and divinely instituted task it was to carry the light of the Gospel to the whole world. Alas, I was fairly unsuccessful in trying to explain to that *sancta simplicitas* that Russia was not a totally heathen country, that its Christianity was at least a thousand years old, and that the current predominantly secular environment was the result of the destruction of the church that once was widely represented there.

¹ Heb. 13:8.

God, who is able to raise up children for Abraham from stones,² is likewise able to restore His bride from the ruins. But people again and again through sin and unbelief make a desert where the springs of water once were, when they try to corrupt or silence the clear voice of the Gospel. It happened before, and, alas, it will continue to happen in the future. The collapse of Christendom that Timothy Tennent refers to as “megatrend 1” in his assessment of shifts in the modern missiology has too many far-reaching consequences for anyone to ignore.

“If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me” (John 12:26a).

The rapid disintegration of Christianity in Europe and North America of the last decades comes as a final result of long-term erosion that started at least two hundred fifty years ago. Trying to remove the stone blocks from your foundation and replace them with sand is never a good idea in terms of the stability of the house. What was once a gnostic-like secret “knowledge” of the elite has gradually trickled down to the masses, resulting in the loss of any meaningful Christian identity.

Already in 1872, radical German theologian David Friedrich Strauss wrote an essay, “The old and the New Faith.”³ In this book, Strauss poses a fundamental question: “Are we still Christians?” Following his critical investigation of the Bible and the history of Christianity, Strauss arrives at the definite conclusion: “To be sincere, we have to admit that we are no longer Christians.”⁴ According to Strauss, “old faith,” which to him was maintained both by the Roman Catholics and the Protestants, albeit with some variations, is unacceptable in any form. Strauss posits a liturgical and pastoral question: “What is a priest who is ‘enlightened,’ that is, who ‘stands on the ground of modern science,’ to say to his parishioners?”

The key to the dilemma is the understanding of Christology: This “enlightened” pastor considers Christ to be

Use every opportunity
to strengthen your faith:
Be faithful in church
attendance, support the
work of your church and
mission department, the
work of your seminaries.

² Luke 3:8.

³ David Friedrich Strauss, *Der alte und der neue Glaube*. The references further are given from the Russian translation, Д. Штраус. Старая и новая вера: христиане ли мы еще? (пер. Ф. Д. Капелюш), 1906.

⁴ Strauss, 36.

mere man, and therefore Christmas only celebrates a birth of a renowned man. Likewise, “In the feast of Transfiguration it is difficult to abstain from satire. To tell educated people of our time about this event as about actual fact is to insult them.”⁵ The prayer addressed to Christ becomes a meaningless trick: “What’s the sense of addressing a mere man in a prayer, because [the pastor] considers Christ to be not god but man!”⁶

Gradually parishioners became familiarized with these notions, which unsurprisingly led to the abandonment of Christian beliefs and values. What happened in the West over a long period of time came to be realized in Russia in much more drastic fashion.

Persecution of the Church in Russia

Dmitry Pospelovsky, former professor of history at the University of Western Ontario, discussed the incompatibility of a totalitarian regime with the Christian faith:

Totalitarianism may not be not hostile to faith in God, for it itself is some neo-pagan cult of idol-state, idol-nation, idol-race, finally, idol-leader. As any religion, totalitarianism encompasses the whole person, it requires from a man a full self-denial for its cause, just as the profoundly believing person commits himself to God.... Totalitarianism... creates its utopia by violent submission of human personality by means of state or party system.⁷

From the outset, totalitarian ideology intended not to coexist with traditional religiosity but rather to replace the very idea of God. Thus, Lenin claimed in his article “Socialism and Religion”: “Electricity will replace God for a peasant. Let a peasant pray to electricity instead of God.”⁸ Given the role that church played in the social life of the people, Lenin thought that theater was perhaps that

one establishment that could replace the church.

The popular idea in the early 1920s was that the question of existence of God could be decided by majority vote. Then the retrograde minority would have to submit to the “people’s will.” For example, in a given town or village groups of “laborers” would write to the local Communist authorities (independently, of course!) with the request that they need a cultural club or a movie theater in for their children and youth, while there is that church building that stands at that place used by increasingly less number of people. Authorities will generally give in to the common will of the people and transfer this church building to whatever people ask for (this is how it looked officially, of course). This is how the Lutheran Church in Siberia and in Russia in general lost most of its property in the 1920s and 30s.

All Christians and Lutherans came under attack, but the ministerium of the church was selected as the primary target. “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of his flock will be scattered.”⁹

Pastor Ivan Lokkenberg of St. Mary’s Church in Tomsk wrote in 1929 that people did not come to the meetings because “they were terrorized” and held to an opinion that they would be purged for attending the church. He claimed that the law prohibited the parish from taking care of the poor and to organize any study or evangelism groups. The church building property was transferred to the state, yet the congregation had to pay all the utilities for the building even though it could not use the building the way it wanted.¹⁰

Official charges brought against Lokkenberg included (1) hiding some of the books, that is, he turned over 52 books by order of the authorities, but he hid the rest both at the church basement and in his house; (2) charity work among the congregation members; (3) he sent personal data from the congregation abroad, acting as a legal entity without registering as one.¹¹ As a result, Lokkenberg was arrested, and the Lutheran church activity in Tomsk was officially shut down.

The situation in Tomsk is sadly typical of what trans-

You must invest now in your spiritual future and the future of your children, and there may come a time (perhaps even quicker than we tend to think) when you will have to reap the fruit of your investment.

⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷ Дмитрий Поспеловский. Тоталитаризм и вероисповедание. Библиейско-Богословский Институт св. Апостола Андрея, Moscow, 2003, 34. Pospelovsky wrote about “classical” totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, but now in 2014, his assessment still sounds very relevant, given the recent shifts in the social agenda in the western world.

⁸ E. Andreeva, “I do not believe in God, nor advise it to you,” quoted from <http://www.bibliotekar.ru/andreeva/47.htm>

⁹ Zech. 13:7.

¹⁰ Ольга Курило, Лютеране в России XVI–XX вв., (Moscow, 2002), 314–315.

¹¹ Ibid., 315.

pired at that time throughout all the country. By 1937, there were no parishes left and no clergy left. Church buildings were closed down, and many of them were permanently destroyed. In Irkutsk in eastern Siberia, the monument to Lenin was erected on the very spot of the altar of the former Lutheran parish. In Tomsk, St. Mary's church was replaced by the Ferris wheel at the entertainment park.

All organized activity of the church ceased, and faith continued only in the homes of people who were not able to conduct public worship. Yet even in the midst of suffering and persecution, God was still in control, fulfilling His judgment concerning the world.

At one of the last open court processes during Stalin's Communist purges of the 1930s, General Prosecutor Vyshinsky read a sentence not just to his former comrades but to himself as well:

As we see ... during arrest of Rozengoltz there was found ... a little paper with some notes in the back pocket of his trousers, which upon closer investigation happened to be a hand-written prayer. I would like to ask the court to read some portions of the text of this so-called prayer and ask Rozengoltz to provide his explanations regarding it. This is the text: "God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him! As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away; as wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God!"¹²

God truly has a sense of irony. Those godless authorities were busy denying God, but in the end they denied themselves. Soon Vyshinky himself was pronounced an "enemy of the people" and executed, and thus the Word of God that was read publicly by his command at the Communist atheistic court once again fulfilled what it said.

Attempts at religious persecution in SELC recent history

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a slow resurgence of the Lutheran Church in Soviet Union and then Russian Federation. The church we see around us now is in human terms only a fraction of what she was in the past. While Lutherans reached almost 5 percent of population of the Russian Empire (with a far greater percentage among the elite: science, army, business, etc.), which amounted to more than seven million people, today Lutherans from all jurisdictions combined constitute less than .05 percent of the population. The days of prominence of Lutherans in Russian society are long gone.

What we have on this earth is not the end. The end has already come on the cross, and when we are able to preserve the cross, that is Christ and Him crucified, in our preaching and teaching, in our approach to the ministry and mission, then we have fundamentally nothing to be afraid of.

Nevertheless, with freedom of religion, congregational life was somewhat restored, and the Lutheran Church is represented now in most major cities of the country. The church I belong to received its first registration as a "mission" in 1992. However, in some provincial areas, local officials continued to deal with the churches as though the Soviet past was still around.

In the local Siberian republic of Khakassia, problems with the local officials started almost immediately in 1996 when a process of local registration was initiated by the young mission. Suddenly this process was interrupted, and our mission was denied registration. To be sure, the legal excuses were of a bureaucratic nature, but the reason behind such action was the Communist atheistic ideology of the local administration as well as its intolerance of the contacts local Lutherans had with their fellow believers in the Baltic and in North America.

For example, the head of the local town administration confronted our missionary Pavel Zayakin with the statement that he himself was a true Communist and thus he did not believe in the Bible, which he probably perceived as a moral basis for his legal case against the mission.

In the fall of 1997, local parishioners complained that police had visited their place inquiring how they became members of the Lutheran Church. People who were co-founders of the mission as a legal organization were

¹² Quoted from <http://www.samisdat.com/3/311-006.htm>.

targeted here. During these police raids, parishioners were harassed and threatened with punishment because they were local people and could easily be reached. Most people (in fact, all but one, a courageous woman by the name Yulia Burtina) gave in to pressure to write “confessions” (which were partly dictated) that Pavel Zayakin had pressured and forced them to come to the church.

Thus the prosecutor’s office brought the charge against the Lutheran mission that it had cheated the people by misinforming them about the purpose of the mission. The prosecutor claimed that these people did not confess the Lutheran faith. During the court proceedings, people were put under enormous pressure. There were more visits to homes of the congregation members where they were “encouraged” to write explanations that could be used against the local mission. During the court session, the questions were asked in a way reminding one of the classical acts of the martyrs: “Do you confess the Lutheran faith or do you not confess the Lutheran faith?” (By the way, such questions went against the official Russian Constitution).

One old lady fainted during the court session. Another lady parishioner got so scared that she blurted out, “I do not believe anymore. I used to attend the Baptist services, then the Lutherans, but now I do not even read the Bible.” We need to be realistic: When real persecution comes, many people give in to pressure.

The mission was shut down and local authorities were getting ready to confiscate the property, but the Lutheran Church in Siberia appealed to the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, which overturned the decision of the local Khakassia court. The Supreme Court thus demonstrated to the local Khakassian officials that it was no longer the time of the Soviet Union.

As I recall, those events of more than 15 years ago, the most painful blow came from some people within the Lutheran church. The behavior of local Soviet style authorities was perfectly normal given their anti-Christian convictions. But some fellow Lutherans from the other Lutheran church in the western part of Russia said the following: “Let Zayakin shut his mission down and keep silent. What will he lose after all? Now he can create a problem for us and our relationship with the authorities in the European part of Russia.” These sentiments are infinitely far from the spirit of the apostle Paul who stated that, “If one member suffers, all suffer together.”¹³

Take the sufferings of your brothers and sisters as your own, pray for them, assist them in what way you can and through their courage, learn how to act when these trials and persecutions come to your backyard.

The Church survives only through that one who is “true life.”

The last literary work of the Russian Christian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, “War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations, including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ,” which he produced at the turn of the twentieth century, reads in 2014 as a prophetic peace — at least in a significant portion (and surely, it is a different story from the *Left Behind* novels!). There is an Antichrist working at first in disguise making sure the globalization (involving, among other things, “the United States of Europe”) will go its course for the benefit of all humanity. After some major initial advances, he decides to unite all religious confessions under his own personal umbrella. He offers to major Christian confessions what each may consider to be their most valuable asset. He proposes the full restoration of temporal power of the papacy to the Roman Catholics. To the Eastern Orthodox enamored of Holy Tradition he grants a major donation to establish a world museum of Christian archeology in Constantinople and facilitate their study of antiquity. To the Protestants he promises major support of the Biblical studies and scholarship. Most religious Christian religious leaders happily agree, and only a small part is reluctant to receive such generous donations. When asked what the problem was, the leader of the Orthodox remnant, who at this time came close to the similar tiny parts of the Roman Catholic and Protestant communions, says the following: “Great ruler! Christ himself is the most precious one for us in the Christianity... for we know that in Him all fullness of the deity dwells bodily.” Then he asks the emperor publicly to confess Christ according to the creed in the assembly. And it is here, according to the plot that the Antichrist reveals himself, religious persecution of the Christians breaks out in the open and the story continues in its own way.

What is important to us is that Christ — and Christ only — establishes that “red line” beyond which the Church may not recede under any circumstances. For if “another gospel”¹⁴ is preached from the pulpits instead of the one of Christ or if the sacraments are not given

¹³ 1 Cor. 12:26.

¹⁴ Gal. 1:8.

according to the Gospel,¹⁵ then salvation of people who are entrusted to the care of the pastors becomes chronically uncertain.

We are to listen to Luther, who despite all his loyalty to the princes in the temporal matters, was firm in asserting the impossibility of the church compromising in the matters of faith:

If your prince or temporal ruler commands you to side with the pope, to believe thus and so, or to get rid of certain books, you should say: "It is not fitting that Lucifer should sit at the side of God. Gracious sir, I owe you obedience in body and property; command me within the limits of your authority on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe or to get rid of certain books, I will not obey; for then you are a tyrant and overreach yourself, commanding where you have neither the right nor the authority," etc. Should he seize your property on account of this and punish such disobedience, then blessed are you; thank God that you are worthy to suffer for the sake of the divine word. Let him rage, fool that he is; he will meet his judge. For I will tell you, if you fail to withstand him, if you give in to him and let him take away your faith and your books, you have truly denied God.¹⁶

Ministry and mission in the hostile world

The modern world is fascinated with large numbers. Size does matter. Bigger is better. Such are the typical clichés people work with. Numerical church growth is something every Christian would be happy about, but one can always ask, at what cost? Tennent justly observes that the megachurch movement "unwittingly became just another illustration of popular culture."¹⁷

For example, the world today may view the priests serving in their liturgical garments as hobbyists similar to the fans of J. R. R. Tolkien saga or costumed history reconstructors. If we think that traditional vestments serve as a hindrance to the wider acceptance of the church by the outsiders, then (given priority of the numbers in our self-perception) we'd probably do better by getting rid of them and serving in business suits or any other typical

clothing that people are used to and are comfortable with.

In a world fascinated by numbers and statistics, the sociological concepts of the church come to the foreground. Philip Jenkins' concept of the move of Christianity to the "global south" is well-known. As far as marginalization of Christianity in most of Europe and now increasingly in North America is concerned, there is nothing to argue about. The former center of the Christian world has once again become a mission field in the same way it was in the days of the early church, and the sooner local Christians realize it, the better their situation will be in the future.

There are questions, though, as to where this center of Christian gravity moves and what it consists of. Tennent marks the emergence of a Fourth Branch of Christianity as his Megatrend 5. He calls this branch by the tentative term "independent," saying that it cannot be included in the "Protestant" camp "when they clearly have no link whatsoever to any European "protest" movement,"¹⁸ while at the same time assuming no connection to either the Roman pope or to any of the Eastern Orthodox churches.

There is clearly a problem here. We cannot construct some new and artificial form of Christianity that has no connection to the historic Church. Church is not a system of ideas or a "platonic republic." Just as the Church would not get by without both Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures (and so Christianity by necessity involves Hebrew and Greek elements), so she would not and cannot bypass the councils, the creeds and the historic confessions of the Church. I come from Siberia, but I cannot think of myself as a Christian apart from the Nicene Creed, which was formulated 1,700 years ago quite far from the place where I reside, and I cannot think of myself as a Lutheran apart from events that took place in Germany in the sixteenth century.

If Christianity springs up suddenly at some place, then all the more it ought to be connected to one of the historic churches. Christianity is different from the eastern religions in that in Christ, God incarnate truly acted in history, which is epitomized by the creedal reference to Pontius Pilate. Just as the church may be destroyed locally, which does not mean that the whole church thereby is destroyed, so likewise when the church is created though the mission work in a particular place, it does not mean

¹⁵ Cf. *Confessio Augustana* 7.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Temporary Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed*, (Luther's Works 45.), 111–112.

¹⁷ Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2010), 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

that it must be created anew every time.¹⁹ The church is already present on earth, it is historic and this historic “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints”²⁰ moves to other parts of the earth.

When our mission spread in Siberia 20–25 years ago, there was always an understanding that we could not operate without a viable connection to the historic Lutheran centers of ministry, which for us were in the area of the Baltic. For our people in Siberia, it was and still is extremely important to know that there are Lutherans in the other parts of the world, there are large churches, venerated traditions and so on; they do not want to feel isolated.

There may be no mission without accompanying ministry. It is not random that ministry is selected as a target when the persecution comes. Pastors of the Lutheran church in Russia became first to experience hostility from the atheistic authorities. None of the pastors remained. Satan attacked the holy ministry because he considers this institution to be most harmful for his plans, as the ministry of preaching the word and administering of the sacraments destroys the kingdom of Satan and establishes God’s kingdom. And so when the church is restored — or when she comes to a new place where she was not before—establishment of the regular local ministry must be viewed as the major task of the mission work. In turn, the established centers of ministry are to assist in the mission of the work.

And it should not necessarily depend on numbers. Some of the churches which are relatively modest in numbers, such as the ones in the Baltic or even our tiny church in Siberia, have expertise and skills to contribute to the world Lutheranism by way of demonstrating how to make sure that what we plant is not a new and previously unknown Christianity but that very Church that was founded by Christ. I cannot overemphasize that Christ must be in the core of everything Church is and does. If you have Christ, then you have everything. If you lose Christ, then no matter how you look in the public and in the mass media at current time, you’ve lost. Christ is more pleased with two or three gathered in His name than with the whole multitude gathered in the name of the world

peace and solidarity or any social issues (although I must be very clear that a multitude of faithful Christians is what we pray about and hope for).

This is not the end.

The final note on which I would like to conclude my chaotic but sincere presentation is a humble recognition that we as Christians ought to be grateful to God and His Son, Jesus Christ, for what we have in the matters of public confession. Don’t take things for granted. If you have an opportunity to come to the church Sunday morning and hear a faithful pastor preach and receive the Lord’s body and blood, this is marvelous. That means your church is able to maintain or rent some place for worship. It probably means you have a place where a pastor was trained in how to preach and conduct liturgy. It means that you are allowed to freely praise God for forgiveness bestowed on us in Christ.

There may be darker times ahead for some of us. And although history does repeat itself, it is not a mechanical repetition. It may well be that those Christians who enjoyed religious freedoms for generations will become subject of persecution that neither they nor their recent ancestors have ever experienced. And so it will be a new experience to them. I truly hope that you will be spared from this turn of event, but nobody can be fully sure. Therefore, use every opportunity to strengthen your faith: Be faithful in church attendance, support the work of your church and mission department, the work of your seminaries. You must invest now in your spiritual future and the future of your children, and there may come a time (perhaps even quicker than we tend to think) when you will have to reap the fruit of your investment.

What we have on this earth is not the end. The end has already come on the cross, and when we are able to preserve the cross, that is Christ and Him crucified, in our preaching and teaching, in our approach to the ministry and mission, then we have fundamentally nothing to be afraid of. Thank you.

The Rev. Alexey Streltsov is a pastor of the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church and rector of the Theological Seminary of Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

¹⁹ Part of the struggle of Lutheran Orthodox theologians with the concept of mission in the late seventeenth to eighteenth centuries was that they thought of the missionaries as “new apostles.” Sadly, in some cases missionaries today act as though they do create something radically new, ignoring historical aspects of Christianity.

²⁰ Jude 1:3.