

Voices from Australia: One on Armageddon, one on the Holy Spirit

Colleagues,

This week's ThTh passes on to you two items I received in recent days from fellow Lutherans in Australia. The two are not obviously on the same topic—one on Armageddon, one on the Holy Spirit. But cognoscenti among you will doubtless make connections. The FIRST is a single paragraph from Dr. John ("Joe") Strelan, retired prof (New Testament and Systematics), the dear guy who "recruited" us to teach alongside him at Luther Seminary in "Oz" (as we learned to call it) for my first post-retirement year of "not working anymore" in 1994. Joe's doctoral dissertation on Melanesian "Cargo Cults" in Papua New Guinea, drawing on his years of missionary service there, is still the classic theological analysis of the phenomenon.

In the paragraph below, Joe gently corrects me in a recent posting where I portrayed Biblical Armageddon as an apocalyptic "last battle." Not so, says Joe. Read what he says.

The SECOND segment of today's posting is a reprint (with permission) of an article in the March issue of THE LUTHERAN, the magazine of the Lutheran Church of Australia. The LCA was our most gracious host during that 1994 year downunder. Another ELCA pastor joined us during our time there, Dr Mark Worthing. At their home that year, so I remember, we gathered for a "typical" American Thanksgiving dinner on the right day in November. Which was hard to confect since Aussies don't have our kind of pumpkins!

Mark Worthing's article is about another dear colleague, Ethiopian-born Pastor Gemechis Desta Buba. Gemechis was a creme-de-la-creme student in my systematic theology classes the year after Oz (1995) when we moved from Adelaide to the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa. Gemechis, now completing a Ph.D. in the USA, has made a big splash—of all places—in Australia. Read it and Rejoice.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

JOE STRELAN ON ARMAGEDDON

Ed: Further to your remarks on Armageddon:

Rev 16:14,16 has the demonic forces gathering the kings of the earth for battle 'on the great day of God almighty'. But there is no battle reported. This is often overlooked by Christians of all stripes. There is no battle because the battle has already been fought and won – as Easter testifies. The verb 'gather' is used in Scripture (especially in Matthew) for 'gathering for judgment by God'. The irony here is that the demon enemies of God gather their forces together – not, however (as they think) for battle, but for judgment...on a day of God's choosing, since it is, after all, GOD'S great day. Because of the judgment motif in connection with Armageddon, John's hearers are warned not to be caught naked and ashamed, that is, asleep and unprepared. How do we prepare? Luther said: thru daily repentance, running back to our baptism, etc as you have written more eloquently on numerous occasions in recent months.

Summa: Armageddon means judgment, not battle.

Thanks for the easterings in recent ThThs.

Joe

Reprint from THE LUTHERAN, March 2003

“An Ethiopian pastor gets us talking about the third person of the Trinity”
SPIRITED DEBATE
by Mark Worthing

It was nine o'clock in the morning when Pastor Wayne Zweck and I arrived at the Qantas lounge of the domestic terminal of Sydney airport. We had been asked by the College of [LCA District] Presidents to meet and brief Gemechis Desta Buba, a twenty-seven-year-old Ethiopian pastor and seminary lecturer from the Mekane Yesus (Lutheran) church, currently undertaking doctoral studies in the US.

His visit to Australia last year had caused a great deal of interest (and concern) among LCA members, after a number of people either passed out or fell over while being prayed for by Pastor Gemechis during services at two Lutheran churches in Adelaide. This phenomenon is often called ‘being overcome in the Spirit’ or ‘slain in the Spirit’ (although Pastor Gemechis prefers the term ‘resting in Jesus’).

On this return visit, Pastor Gemechis’s itinerary would take him to congregations in New Zealand and to every state and territory of Australia except Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Our task was not to tell him what the Spirit may or may not do within his ministry, but rather to find out more about him and to share with him something of the history and complexities of the LCA.

Pastor Gemechis finds it somewhat ironical that he has become known in Australia for his connection to people being 'overcome in the Spirit'. He is chiefly an academic. As a seminary lecturer in Ethiopia he went to the US to complete a second master's degree and is now working on a PhD in the sociology of religion at Emory University. He was much more interested in talking with us about Lutheran theology than 'slayings in the Spirit', and he admitted that this sort of thing had not happened in connection with his ministry—though it is common in his church—until his last visit to Australia. He was genuinely concerned that the content of his message in his sermons and lectures might be lost in all the fascination with what was happening when he prayed for people. Even before our conversation with Pastor Gemechis, he was aware that this was a very foreign experience for Australian Lutherans and he was concerned that the nature of his program of flying visits meant that he would have little opportunity to work through with pastors and people the implications of such experiences.

After four hours of conversation and a light lunch together, it was time for Pastor Gemechis to continue on to Brisbane. He thanked us profusely for the courtesy and thoughtfulness of meeting him at the airport and telling him more about the history and theology of the LCA. To be honest, Pastor Zweck and I had feared he would see us as a 'God squad' sent from officialdom—an inconvenience to be patiently endured. We had not expected to be enthusiastically and genuinely thanked for our hospitality. But such is the character and spirit of the man.

During the next week I heard reports from Queensland—ranging from joy to shock—of Lutheran people and pastors being 'overcome in the Spirit', as well as one account of how very Lutheran the content of Pastor Gemechis's preaching was. He would be coming to Adelaide soon, and, among other engagements,

would spend an evening at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Aberfoyle Park, where I am an associate pastor.

I have seldom been so nervous about a worship service. Should I go up for prayer? Would I seem unspiritual if I didn't? What if I went forward and fell over? What would people think? What if I didn't fall over? This whole thing wasn't really my cup of tea. But others I knew had said similar things and had a very different perspective afterwards. I decided to decide at the time.

The evening itself began with about twenty minutes of well-presented contemporary Christian music. Then Pastor Gemechis was introduced. He preached on prayer (no mention of tongues or 'slayings in the Spirit') from a text in the Psalms. The sermon went for just over an hour.

I had never seen anything like it in a Lutheran service before. About three hundred people, including at least nine Lutheran pastors, sat mesmerised for an hour, listening to a theology of prayer being developed from the Psalms. Several took notes. This was all very un-Lutheran indeed!

After the sermon the band was invited back up and began to play, as Pastor Gemechis invited anyone desiring prayer to come forward. A few tentative souls came forward, then a few more, followed by dozens. Lay leaders from the congregation stood behind people as they were prayed for in case anyone fell backwards. Pastor Gemechis put one and often both hands on the side of the head of those for whom he prayed. Sometimes he took hold of their hands and raised them into the air above their heads. A short prayer was usually concluded with the words: 'Receive fresh anointing of the Spirit', with the word 'fresh' particularly emphasised.

At first no-one fell over, though a couple stepped back to keep

from losing their balance. From where I stood, along the side at the front of the church, I could look straight down the line. Pastor Gemechis stood very close to those for whom he prayed and seemed to move them back off their centre of gravity before letting go of them. Soon a couple of people went down. And then more. It looked a bit like those trust exercises where you let yourself fall backwards, knowing someone is there to catch you. That people fell backwards during prayer seemed all very explicable because of a combination of factors: the way hands were laid on heads, the music, the desire to experience something, and the almost hypnotic sound of Pastor Gemechis's voice, particularly as he spoke the word 'freeesh!' But then a few people simply crumpled before me.

To add to the mix, Pastor Gemechis paused on four or five occasions to say a prophetic word over someone. These were essentially words of encouragement that God was going to use them to spread the gospel or to help people going through difficult times. While the comments were fairly general, those who knew the people he spoke these words over generally agreed that they fit. This time of prayer lasted about forty-five minutes. No ecstatic utterances. No speaking in tongues. It was all very orderly. People lined up along the front, much as they would for communion. Many fainted or fell backwards. A number had tears in their eyes. When they got up again they went back to their seats to make room for others.

After the service, while Pastor Gemechis was praying individually with those still wanting prayer, a small group of us from the sceptics' corner were debriefing about what had happened. One man had commented that he had some serious concerns about the whole thing. Then someone brought Pastor Gemechis over to him. 'This fellow is facing some difficult decisions', they said. 'He needs prayer.' Pastor Gemechis asked us all to place our hands on the man as he prayed for him. I

put my hand on his shoulder to make sure he wasn't put off balance! Part way through the prayer, he simply crumpled. A few minutes later he arose in tears and rejoined our sceptics' corner. 'I have no idea what just happened', he said. 'But, praise God! I feel such a sense of peace.'

I came to the meeting hoping either to see enough to completely debunk the whole experience, or to be convinced that the Spirit was moving here in some special way. I left the meeting in two minds. On the one hand, the mood of the meeting, the expectations of those who went forward, perhaps a slight hypnotic effect, and simple physics were more than enough to account for much of what I saw. On the other hand, there were things that occurred that did not fit easily into any of my explanatory categories. I was also mindful of the fact that, just because something has a partial or even complete physical and logical explanation, it does not mean that God is not at work in what happened. I decided that I needed to wait and see what impact this had on those who experienced these things. So far, reports from congregations that Pastor Gemechis visited last year and from congregations at which he preached during his most recent visit have been mostly positive—even from those pastors who remain sceptical about some things that occurred.

For the LCA as a whole it has been a significant experience of a Lutheran tradition and style of ministry very different to our own. We experienced a dynamic preacher and teacher from a church that has known recent persecution and for which healings, prophecies and being 'overcome in the Spirit' are not unusual worship experiences. The biggest test for us as a church is how we respond to these things, to the people who have experienced them, and to those who are worried that these things have occurred in many of our congregations.

I personally believe God's Spirit is at work in the LCA,

whether we have experienced such phenomena or not. How could the Spirit not be at work among his baptised people?

I am also thankful for the opportunity to have met Pastor Gemechis and to have experienced his passion for evangelism, Lutheran theology and the power of prayer. Like many, I am not certain what exactly did or did not happen during his times of prayer ministry. One thing, however, is clear. Whatever we feel about what occurred at many of these services, there is no denying that the visit of this remarkable Ethiopian Lutheran pastor to so many of our congregations has changed us.

[Dr Mark Worthing is an associate pastor of Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Aberfoyle Park, South Australia, and is currently dean of theology at Tabor College, Adelaide.]

[Sidebar Article]

“THE GOING DOWN WAS IRRELEVANT”

Many people in our congregation felt blessed over the weekend. Many experienced the personal prayer and blessing delivered through Pastor Gemechis. Many did ‘fall down’, touched by the Spirit. This happened to me; I have never before sought or experienced this. The atmosphere was neither hysterical nor exaggerated. We simply, quite unexpectedly, found ourselves caught up in something astonishing, affirming and, for a conservative Lutheran like myself, remarkable. I received no great revelation, no vision, no trance. I did feel a little warmth and a pronounced sense of peace and wellbeing. Analysing it later that evening, I was aware that I had not willed myself to slide down; it was not part of a choice by me. Instead, I felt enfolded in peace, a sense of being ‘home’. The going down was irrelevant.

In one of the talks given by Gemechis, he spoke of the Spirit not 'infilling' but 'enfolding' the individual. I have meditated on this. I know my Lord walks both within and beside me as I go about each day. It has become an empowering concept for me. I am confident of much blessing yet to come for myself and our congregation. I give glory not to our brother Gemechis, but to our loving Lord, who chose to work through him to bless us. I know Gemechis would agree.

*Darryl Glover, deacon, Our Saviour Lutheran congregation,
Rosedale, Queensland*