

# Ebenezer

## The Hymn Two Bad Boll Men Gave the Church

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*Ebenezer is Hebrew for “stone of help.” It is also the name of a Welsh tune that two Bad Boll men turned into one of the Missouri Synod’s best-loved hymns. Did the conferences have anything to do with “Thy Strong Word”? The documents say more than a coincidence and less than a cause.*

In the seventh chapter of First Samuel, after a battle the Israelites had expected to lose, the prophet Samuel set up a stone between Mizpeh and Shen and gave it a name: *Ebenezer*, from the Hebrew *eben ha-ezer*, “the stone of the help.” His explanation is one line long: “Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.”<sup>1</sup> A stone of help is a marker set up afterward, where the help was received, so that people who come later will ask what happened there.

The name travelled to Wales, where it stood over the doors of a great many chapels, and one of them, Ebenezer Chapel in the village of Rhos, gave it to a tune. EBENEZER, a vigorous minor melody by Thomas John Williams, who worshipped in that chapel, was written, by his own account, in 1896, and was in print by the following year.<sup>2</sup> It came with a better story than most. In Wales it was called *Tôn-y-Botel*, “the tune in the bottle,” because it was said to have been found sealed in a bottle washed ashore on the Llŷn coast. A London paper printed the legend. The truth, as the Methodist hymnologist J. T. Lightwood later told it, was that a young man, asked at a private engagement where the tune came from, had laughingly told his friends a tall tale, and

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 7:12 (King James Version).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Herl, Peter C. Reske, and Jon D. Vieker, eds., *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 1:640–41 (no. 578, tune). The earliest printing is in the Welsh Baptist monthly *Yr Athraw*, October 1897, p. 312, under the name EBENEZER, attributed to “T. J. Williams, A.C. Rhos”; Williams’s own account (he lived until 1944) dates the tune to 1896 (Rhidian Griffiths to Joseph Herl, September 8, 2011, cited there). The chapel is in Rhos, near Pontardawe. The date 1890, found in older reference books, is not supported.

the tale travelled with the tune as it spread from one Welsh village to the next.<sup>3</sup> Tunes, like families, get the origin stories they deserve, and not always the ones that happened.

That is worth remembering, because the hymn that made EBENEZER a Missouri Synod possession has an origin story too, and this post is about testing it.

### THE STORY AS IT IS TOLD

“Thy Strong Word Did Cleave the Darkness” is no. 578 in the *Lutheran Service Book*.<sup>4</sup> Its text is by Martin H. Franzmann, professor of New Testament at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, and its origin can be told, unusually, in the words of both men who made it. On October 7, 1954, the seminary’s students sang it for the first time at morning chapel, and the preacher that morning was Walter E. Buszin, the seminary’s professor of church music. “After we had chosen this tune,” he told them, “we contacted Prof. Martin H. Franzmann of our Seminary faculty and requested that he prepare for this tune a text which might relate itself closely to our Seminary.”<sup>5</sup> Franzmann built the text on the seminary’s motto, *Anothen to phos*, “The light comes from above.”<sup>6</sup> Nineteen years later, writing to Buszin’s widow after his death, Franzmann said he had been reminded of him most forcibly when the seminary sang the hymn, “for which he suggested the melody and for which he encouraged me to write the words.”<sup>7</sup>

Buszin’s daughter, Constance Buszin Seddon, who grew up next door to the Franzmanns on the seminary campus,<sup>8</sup> supplies the rest. Her sister Barbara remembered a story their mother told: Buszin, at work in his study on some large project, came upon the Welsh tune and ran out the front door and across the yard to the Franzmann house

<sup>3</sup> Fred L. Precht, *Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 346 (no. 328), giving J. T. Lightwood’s account. The *Companion* (1:640 n.) explains the legend by the tune’s having circulated widely without its composer’s name.

<sup>4</sup> *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), no. 578. The text is copyright Concordia Publishing House and is identified in this paper by its opening words only.

<sup>5</sup> David O. Berger, “Thy strong word did cleave the darkness,” in Joseph Herl, Peter C. Reske, and Jon D. Vieker, eds., *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 1:633–41 (no. 578), at 633, quoting Buszin’s chapel address of October 7, 1954 (Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, biographical files for W. E. Buszin). Buszin went on: “we were not at all surprised to see him base his hymn on three Greek words [the seminary motto] which for us overflow with theological implications.”

<sup>6</sup> Berger, *Companion*, 1:633; Precht, *Hymnal Companion*, 346. The motto is *Ἀνωθεν τὸ φῶς*.

<sup>7</sup> Martin H. Franzmann to Margaret Buszin, July 9, 1973, Buszin correspondence file, Concordia Historical Institute; printed in full in Constance Buszin Seddon, “Memories of the Franzmann Family and the Origins of the Franzmann Hymn ‘Thy Strong Word,’” in Daniel Zager, ed., *Celebrating the Life and Hymns of Paul Gerhardt and Martin Franzmann* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2008), 139–53, at 148 n. 17, a paper given at the Good Shepherd Institute in November 2007. The letter is also quoted in Robin A. Leaver, ed., *Come to the Feast: The Original and Translated Hymns of Martin H. Franzmann* (St. Louis, 1994), 110, and in Robin A. Leaver, “Walter E. Buszin and Lutheran Church Music in America,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 153–94, at 185 n. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Seddon, “Memories,” 140.

with it. “Can you do something with this? I’m too busy right now.”<sup>9</sup> The hymn was wanted for the seminary’s baccalaureate procession, and four stanzas proved too few. In her telling, Buszin also told Franzmann it lacked a stanza on the cross, and Franzmann supplied “From the cross Thy wisdom shining,” now the fourth stanza; the one contemporary document is the autograph Franzmann sent him, headed “To W. Buszin, Cross-stanza.”<sup>10</sup> A closing doxology followed in 1959.<sup>11</sup> Ten years later the Synod’s Commission on Worship put the whole hymn into its *Worship Supplement* as no. 747, and a misprint there turned the singers’ “hope” into “hopes,” as it has stayed ever since.<sup>12</sup> The hymn’s reception, she adds, drew Franzmann back to hymn writing, a gift he had let lie since the 1930s, and it led the seminary’s procession every year until 1997.<sup>13</sup>

Fred Precht’s companion to *Lutheran Worship* agrees on the year and the motto, though it does not mention Buszin.<sup>14</sup> There is, at least, no bottle in any of the accounts.

## TWO MEN FROM BAD BOLL

What none of these accounts connects is that both men had been to Bad Boll.

Franzmann was a Missouri Synod essayist at the conferences in 1949, and again in 1953, when he read “Christ, the Hope of Glory” in Paris and at Bad Boll.<sup>15</sup> Buszin went in 1951, with other professors from the seminary. It was his first journey to Europe, and he read a paper in Strasbourg, at Bad Boll, and in Berlin under the title *Das Wechselverhältnis von lutherischer Theologie und christlichem Kultus*, “the reciprocal relationship between Lutheran theology and Christian worship.” It was never published.<sup>16</sup> He

<sup>9</sup> Seddon, “Memories,” 143; the passage is also quoted in Berger, *Companion*, 1:635.

<sup>10</sup> Seddon, “Memories,” 143–44. The autograph is in the Franzmann Papers at Concordia Historical Institute; the *Companion* (1:634, 636, 638) dates it to about 1955 and agrees with Seddon, against Leaver, that the hand is Franzmann’s. Seddon’s evidence for Buszin’s wish for a stanza on the cross is his description of church music as *musica crucis*, “music of the Cross,” in what she calls “an early paper”; her note identifies it as his Valparaiso essay of 1956, which is later than the stanza.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, *Companion*, 1:634–35: the earliest datable copy with all six stanzas is the Concordia Seminary commencement program of Wednesday, June 3, 1959. The *Companion* suggests that the doxology, too, may have been Buszin’s suggestion.

<sup>12</sup> *Worship Supplement* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), no. 747; Berger, *Companion*, 1:639, where the 1954 reading is “And our lives our hope confess” (compare Ephesians 4:4) and “hopes” is judged “likely to have been a typographical error.”

<sup>13</sup> Seddon, “Memories,” 144–45. The *Companion* (1:635–36) records the hymn as the commencement processional every year from 1955 to 1997 and occasionally since.

<sup>14</sup> Precht, *Hymnal Companion*, 346.

<sup>15</sup> Martin H. Franzmann, “Christ, the Hope of Glory,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24 (1953): 881–900; the editorial note on p. 881 records that it was read at the free conferences in Paris and Bad Boll. Franzmann’s part in the conferences of 1949 and 1953 is treated in Albert B. Collver III, *Bad Boll: Missouri at the Crossroads* (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute, forthcoming), chaps. 6 and 7 and Appendix C.

<sup>16</sup> Kirby L. Koriath, *Music for the Church: The Life and Work of Walter E. Buszin* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2003), 24, and the list of Buszin’s lectures there; the bibliography in Johannes

was for many years chairman of the Synod's Commission on Worship, Liturgics, and Hymnology, the body that would eventually put "Thy Strong Word" into its first hymnal, the *Worship Supplement* of 1969.<sup>17</sup> When the Bad Boll commissioners met in the seminary on September 26, 1951, to hear the reports of that summer and plan the next, Buszin and Franzmann were both in the room.<sup>18</sup>

That is a convergence. It is not yet a connection. Seminary colleagues who live next door to each other collaborate whether or not either of them has crossed the Atlantic. The question is whether anything from Bad Boll can be found in the hymn itself.

## THE QUESTION BAD BOLL KEPT ASKING

It can, and the route runs through the subject the conferences argued about more than any other: Holy Scripture.

From the first summer the Germans pressed the Americans on verbal inspiration. Martin Hein's evaluation of the 1948 and 1949 conferences records the objections plainly: "Verbal Inspiration is a Roman Catholic doctrine. It is a Calvinistic teaching."<sup>19</sup> It does not do justice to the human side of Scripture. Wolfgang Schmidt's report of 1949 in the *Lutheran Quarterly* gives Helmut Thielicke's form of the charge: "Does not the doctrine of verbal inspiration create a shallow, legalistic conception of the Bible?" The Americans answered, Schmidt wrote, by explaining the human side of the Bible "as a condescension of the Holy Spirit."<sup>20</sup>

In the winter of 1954 the same questions came home. Students at Concordia Seminary asked for a fuller discussion of verbal inspiration than the classroom allowed, and nearly four hundred of them took part in six hours of discussion.<sup>21</sup> Franzmann's contribution, printed that October in the *Concordia Theological Monthly*, reads like the reply to a German colleague across a conference table. It is often said, he writes, that verbal inspiration neglects the human side of the Bible, but "the fault does not lie in the terms or in the basic intention of the doctrine."<sup>22</sup> The doctrine, rightly held, is "an

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Riedel, ed., *Cantors at the Crossroads* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), lists the lecture as unpublished. See also Constance R. Seddon, "Three Generations of the Family Buszin: Part Three," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 83 (2010): 22–64, at 50–51.

<sup>17</sup> Leaver, "Walter E. Buszin," 185 n. 8, gives 1949 to 1966; *Cantors at the Crossroads* dates the chairmanship from 1951.

<sup>18</sup> Paul M. Bretscher, unofficial minutes of the meeting of the Bad Boll commissioners, September 26, 1951, Concordia Historical Institute; see Collver, *Bad Boll*, chap. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Hein, *An Evaluation of Bad Boll 1948 and 1949*, trans. J. T. Mueller (1949), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Wolfgang A. Schmidt, "A Theological Discussion with the Missouri Synod in Bad Boll," *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (1949): 78–85, at 82.

<sup>21</sup> Richard R. Caemmerer, headnote to "Essays on the Inspiration of Scripture," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 25 (1954): 738.

<sup>22</sup> Martin H. Franzmann, "The New Testament View of Inspiration," in "Essays on the Inspiration of Scripture," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 25 (1954): 743–48, at 746.

act of thanksgiving and adoration.”<sup>23</sup> It speaks of “that mighty condescension of God” by which God, speaking in the words of men, restores those words “to the primordial power, adequacy, and truth with which He endued them at the Creation.”<sup>24</sup>

A strong word, in other words, that at its first speaking cleft the darkness. The essay and the hymn come from the same year.

## THE PAPER AND THE HYMN

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## Christ, the Hope of Glory

By MARTIN H. FRANZMANN

EDITORIAL NOTE: This is one of the papers presented by members of the Missouri Synod delegation at the Free Conferences in Paris and Bad Boll in the summer of 1953. The fact that it was one of two eschatological essays given on the same day (the other being “Christ the Judge of the World”) accounts for the fact that the Judgment is not treated here.

FIGURE 1. The opening page of Martin Franzmann’s “Christ, the Hope of Glory,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24 (December 1953), with the editorial note that it was read at the Free Conferences in Paris and Bad Boll that summer. Scan: Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary.

The closer match, though, is the paper Franzmann read at Bad Boll itself. “Christ, the Hope of Glory” (*Concordia Theological Monthly*, December 1953) is organized under five marks of the Church’s hope: it is centred on Christ, it waits for God’s own act of deliverance, it hopes for the whole person and the whole creation, it is practical, and it is doxological.<sup>25</sup> All five are in the hymn. The chart below sets each stanza beside the passage it most resembles, with a line or two from “A Ransom for Many,” the paper on the Ransom that Franzmann prepared for the same summer’s conferences.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Franzmann, “New Testament View,” 743.

<sup>24</sup> Franzmann, “New Testament View,” 747–48.

<sup>25</sup> Franzmann, “Hope of Glory,” 881.

<sup>26</sup> Martin H. Franzmann, “A Ransom for Many: Satisfactio Vicaria,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 25 (1954): 497–515. The 1953 conference program lists Franzmann on “the Ransom,” though the article does not itself name the conference.

*Because the text of “Thy Strong Word” is under copyright by Concordia Publishing House, we cannot reproduce it here word for word. We encourage you to take down a hymnal and read it for yourself: it is no. 578 in the Lutheran Service Book (no. 328 in Lutheran Worship). The chart gives only the opening words of each stanza, so that you can follow along.*

Two notes keep the chart honest. The four stanzas marked 1954 are the original hymn; the other two came afterward. The fourth stanza was added for the procession and sent to Buszin, whose daughter remembers him asking for the cross; but its theology is already in the Bad Boll paper’s claim that the cross is the foundation of glory, written a year before the stanza. The sixth stanza came in 1959, so its likeness to the paper’s closing sentence shows how long the thought stayed with Franzmann, not what he had in mind in 1954.

### WHAT THE EVIDENCE WILL BEAR

Here is what cuts the other way, set down before anyone has to find it. The light that shines through every stanza is not in the essays; it comes from the seminary’s motto, exactly as the reference books say. No letter, minute, or reminiscence yet found says that Bad Boll had anything to do with the hymn. Neither Buszin’s chapel sermon, nor Franzmann’s letter, nor his daughter’s loving account says anything of Bad Boll in connection with the hymn. And a theologian carries his theology everywhere; Franzmann would have believed in the hope of glory had he never left Saint Louis.

What remains is this. The hymn’s movement, from justification to a glory already given and still awaited, from the cross to bodily praise, from creation to the end of all things, is the movement of a paper Franzmann wrote for a Bad Boll audience a year earlier. Its confidence in the strong word is the confidence he defended, in the same year, against the objections Missouri had heard at Bad Boll since 1948. And the stanza that joins the two was written for, and sent to, the other man from Bad Boll. That is not a cause. It is an influence, minor and indirect, running through documents anyone can read. It is also one of the few places where the conferences reached the pews without passing through a convention resolution.

### HITHERTO

The organ piece that opens and closes the *Thursdays at Bad Boll* podcast is written in the idiom of EBENEZER. It was chosen in August for the sound of it. Only in choosing it did I stop to ask whose hymn the tune carries, and this post is what came of the asking.

Congregations will sing “Thy Strong Word” again this Sunday, most of them without a thought for Saint Louis in 1954 or a spa in Württemberg in 1953, and that is as

TABLE 1. “Thy Strong Word” (*LSB* 578), stanza by stanza, beside Franzmann’s papers for the 1953 conferences: “Christ, the Hope of Glory” (read at Paris and Bad Boll; *CTM* 24, Dec. 1953, 881–900) and “A Ransom for Many” (*CTM* 25, July 1954, 497–515), with his 1954 essay on inspiration (*CTM* 25, Oct. 1954, 743–48). Stanzas are identified by opening words only.

“HOPE OF GLORY”: FIVE MARKS OF THE CHURCH’S HOPE (p. 881): 1 Christ-centred · 2 God’s own deliverance · 3 total consummation, body and creation · 4 “practical” · 5 doxological — all five are in the hymn.

| STANZA                                                                          | THE HYMN’S THOUGHT                                                                     | FRANZMANN’S BAD BOLL PAPERS, 1953                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | FIT                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 1 “ <i>Thy strong word did cleave...</i> ”<br>ORIGINAL, 1954                    | God’s word makes light at the Creation                                                 | HOPE OF GLORY The “Very Good” of Creation “must resound once more” (p. 896). ALSO: 1954 ESSAY FROM HIS BAD BOLL WORK ON SCRIPTURE God restores men’s words “to the primordial power ... with which He endued them at the Creation” (pp. 747–48).                                                                                           | Moderate                                     |
| 2 “ <i>Lo, on those who dwell...</i> ”<br>ORIGINAL, 1954                        | Light breaks on those in darkness and death; God breathes his life into them           | HOPE OF GLORY Hope looks for God’s own act, “above all, deliverance from death”: Ezekiel 37, the opened graves and the Spirit given to the dead (p. 888). In the resurrection “life burst forth victoriously” (pp. 883–84).                                                                                                                | Good                                         |
| 3 “ <i>Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous</i> ”<br>ORIGINAL, 1954            | Declared righteous; glorious now, yet pressing on to glory; our lives confess our hope | HOPE OF GLORY If God has justified us in Christ, “then surely He has also glorified us in Him” (p. 884); faith “now knows itself justified, but yet looks forward to the hope of righteousness” (p. 886); hope is “practical” (p. 881). RANSOM God “acquits guilty man in the name of the Crucifixus and declares him righteous” (p. 511). | Closest                                      |
| 4 “ <i>From the cross Thy wisdom shining</i> ”<br>ADDED 1954–55, SENT TO BUSZIN | Wisdom and glory break forth from the cross                                            | HOPE OF GLORY Faith in the Cross is “the necessary foundation of the hope of the glory of God” (p. 886); “the definitive and unambiguous breaking forth in judgment and grace of God’s glory” (p. 899). RANSOM Jesus’ death is “a victory and triumph” over the demonic powers (p. 511).                                                   | Strong; the cross already in the 1953 papers |
| 5 “ <i>Give us lips to sing Thy glory</i> ”<br>ORIGINAL, 1954                   | Lips, tongues, throats, mouths: the body made to proclaim its hope                     | HOPE OF GLORY Redemption comes “not by books fallen from heaven nor by spiritual angel voices, but by the physical pens and the bodily tongues of men” (p. 895).                                                                                                                                                                           | Strong                                       |
| 6 “ <i>God the Father, light-creator</i> ”<br>ADDED 1959                        | Mortals and angels praise the Trinity for ever                                         | HOPE OF GLORY, LAST SENTENCE The end of all things is “that intra-Trinitarian liturgy to which a redeemed mankind and a redeemed creation do all speak their loud and eternal ‘Amen’ ” (p. 900).                                                                                                                                           | Strong, but written after 1954               |
| R Refrain: “ <i>Allluia...</i> ”<br>THROUGHOUT                                  | Praise without end                                                                     | HOPE OF GLORY The Church’s hope “is doxological,” the paper’s fifth and closing head (pp. 881, 899–900). RANSOM The “for many” of the ransom saying “becomes transparent only in the doxology of the redeemed” (p. 513). ALSO: 1954 ESSAY Doctrine as “an act of thanksgiving and adoration” (p. 743).                                     | Strong                                       |

What the chart does and does not show. The hymn’s theology follows the 1953 Bad Boll papers; its light imagery comes from the seminary motto, not the papers. No document ties Bad Boll to the hymn directly. The claim is a real but indirect influence, running through texts anyone can check. Hymn text © Concordia Publishing House; see *Lutheran Service Book* 578 (*Lutheran Worship* 358).

it should be. Hymns are for singing, not for footnotes. But a stone of help is set up so that someone will ask what happened there. Samuel's stone answered with a single line, and so, in its way, does Franzmann's hymn: hitherto the Lord has helped us, by a strong word that is still being spoken.

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