

POST-SOVIET PROTESTANT THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: COME OF AGE?

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From not a single Evangelical seminary in the Soviet Union in 1986 to over 100 on its former territory today, and from no residential students to some 3,000 today—this has to rank as one of the more dramatic developments in leadership training in the history of Protestantism. The opportunity for a fresh appraisal of this phenomenon came with a conference of Protestant theological educators, held near Kyiv, Ukraine, 9-12 September 1996. Ninety-four delegates (64 from the former Soviet Union and 30 from the West) celebrated the graduation of nine seminarians from the first-ever Russian M.A. program in Protestant theological studies, a joint effort of Odessa Theological Seminary, St. Petersburg Christian University, and Donetsk Christian University. (See the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 4 (Fall 1996), p. 14, for the names of candidates and titles of theses.) Delegates also witnessed substantive theological discussion, growing indigenous leadership, and the launching of a Protestant theological accrediting association with a wide-ranging, ambitious agenda.

Among indigenous conference participants, the average number of years of involvement in theological education was three—a startling illustration of the infancy of the movement. Nevertheless, Western observers who had attended the first such gathering in February 1993 in Moscow and the second in October 1994 in Oradea, Romania, commented on the rapid maturation and growing sophistication of the indigenous leadership.¹

One theme that seminary representatives frequently voiced was the need for close ties to the church. Peter Penner of St. Petersburg Christian University (SPCU), in his "Current Analysis of Theological Education," stated,

Seminaries need to work with the church. The question is how closely. At first, St. Petersburg Christian University did not emphasize church relations. Then we

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came to understand that we exist for the church; the church does not exist for the seminary. Now, the president of the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Union of Russia is on the SPCU board. Now we emphasize student work in churches and church recommendations for students. SPCU has had conferences for the pastors of its students and has asked pastors how SPCU can help students not to become arrogant.

Aleksei Melnichuk, Donetsk Christian University, made similar points in his review of "Issues in Church/School Relationships," as did Anatoly Prokopchuk of Kyiv Evangelical Christian Baptist (ECB) Seminary: "Be close to the church. It doesn't matter what the level of education of the school. Independent schools produce graduates 'who are on the street' with no church to go to. ECB churches may not accept these graduates."

As the present massive level of Western assistance subsides over time, the new seminaries will become ever more aware of their need for close ties with local churches, not only for reasons of placement, but for financial support. At present, however, church contributions to theological education in the former Soviet Union are quite limited. As Aleksei Melnichuk noted, many churches are in building programs that are stretching their capacities to the limit. In addition, a lack of a tradition of stewardship and current chaotic economic conditions spell limited financial support from believers for local churches, much less for more distant seminaries. At present, for example, the vast majority of Evangelical churches do not support full-time ministers. All but six of 75 ECB pastors in the Odessa region have secular employment. Gregori Kommendant, president of the Ukrainian ECB, hopes half of the churches under his charge will support their own pastors by the year 2000. Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries sponsored a first-ever Protestant conference on stewardship in Moscow, 24-26 October 1996, but more such efforts will be needed.

Peter Penner noted that "Many schools live just one day at a time. Many administrators just settle immediate crises." One of these crises that received attention at the Kyiv consultation concerned enrollment. Pressure is mounting to enlarge student bodies, not to increase revenue from quite modest tuition, but at least partly to justify each school's existence in the eyes of Western benefactors. As a result, schools increasingly are competing for students. Two Western doctoral candidates currently researching post-Soviet Protestant theological education have shared with this reporter that academic standards have suffered in the process. Peter Konovalchik, president of the Russian ECB federation, contended, quite justifiably, that the need now is not to start more schools, but to strengthen existing ones.

In a debriefing session for Western participants, Jack Graves, Director of Research for Overseas Council for Theological Education, observed that "schools need quickly to move from dependency to financial independence for there to be true independence." Indigenous speakers in general sessions made the same argument. Anatoly Prokopchuk, for example, urged self-sufficiency: "We thank our brothers from the West for help. But now we need to think of supporting ourselves. And our Western brothers will rejoice, too."

One reason Protestant leaders in the former Soviet Union fear the present overwhelming Western influence upon theological education, quietly if not publicly, is theological. Although the issue did not emerge in plenary sessions, they do consider a minority of Western instructors to be liberal. Especially troubling to them are those guest professors

who they feel question the authority of Scripture. Also, Protestant leaders recognize that a majority of Western instructors are Calvinists, which is not to their liking. Anatoly Prokopchuk put it bluntly: "We have a problem with liberalism and Calvinism." Aleksei Melnichuk explained it this way:

Seminary graduates often criticize [Russian and Ukrainian] Baptist traditions. Western teachers are seen as the source of much of this criticism. Students will ask a Western professor about eternal security and students will accept the Western professor's eternal security teaching over their home pastors' freewill position that is not argued in an educated manner.

It should be noted that the majority of Western Evangelicals active in post-Soviet ministry are Calvinists, although most do not emphasize the fact and many incorrectly presume, consciously or unconsciously, that *Evangelical* and *Reformed* are synonyms. That Wesleyan-Arminian and Pentecostal interpretations may equally be deemed Evangelical often does not occur to Calvinists in the West. For their part, a majority of Slavic Evangelicals, Baptists as well as Pentecostals, are Arminian, although they typically do not use this term. Naturally, this difference gives rise to considerable tension, and nowhere more quickly than in Western assistance to post-Soviet seminaries.

Slavic Protestant leaders contend not only with Western theological influences that they consider harmful, but they also contend in their own ranks with strong anti-intellectual currents that view all theological education with suspicion. Pavel Damiani, a Christian publisher from St. Petersburg, noted that many pastors still feel that the only book their congregations need to read is the Bible. Sergei Rybikov of the Christian Missionary Union in south Russia reiterated the "negative view of education" in many churches. Peter Penner shared that he had written ninety pages defending the spiritual value of instruction and study. In contrast, the opening address of the conference by a Baptist elder statesman launched a thinly-veiled attack on study in the West, modern Bible translations, and "intellectualism" in general. While one might be disappointed with this lack of understanding of the life of the mind in the service of Christendom, it is sensible to be wary of Western theological education for Slavic seminarians en masse, and it is sensible to be wary of unwarranted prestige that can lead believers to prefer professors over pastors. Dallas Seminary professor Mark Young noted, "If [seminary] teachers have little contact with churches and pastors, then most students will want to be professors, not pastors." One Western doctoral candidate surveying post-Soviet seminarians has already documented an alarmingly widespread preference among Slavic seminarians for teaching over preaching.

Yet concern over Western influences in seminaries is not only theological; it also is political. Some leaders fear the loss of control as Western notions of democratic procedure and freedom of speech seep into the consciousness of newly-educated pastors. One delegate at the conference, fearing that church members might contract false notions from various new publications, asked the head of Ukrainian Evangelical Christians-Baptists, "Is it possible to control the literature we are printing?" When Rev. Kommandant responded that today it is impossible, applause followed. He continued, "What fruit is sweet? What is prohibited? Some books should be burned, but we cannot do that.

Freedom is freedom." At the same time, Russian ECB president Konovalchik volunteered a more traditional attitude: "We need some control. For example, I saw a Pentecostal book in a Baptist kiosk. We cannot trust all publishing houses."

Konovalchik's negative reference to Pentecostals leads to a shortcoming of a conference billed as interdenominational: 76.5 percent of participants were Evangelical Christians-Baptists but Pentecostals, arguably as large as the ECB in the former Soviet Union, accounted for only five percent. On the one hand, conference sponsors, Overseas Council for Theological Education and Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries, sincerely desired broad representation from all Evangelical denominations and all Pentecostal seminaries and Bible institutes received invitations. On the other hand, the indigenous organizing committee for the conference and the program itself included no Pentecostals. This reporter learned after the conference, Pentecostals perceived the function to be a Baptist undertaking and most apparently declined to participate as a result. While many Western observers at the conference were pained by various critical comments from Baptists about Pentecostals—not to mention about Calvinists—it must be noted, sadly, that Pentecostal disdain for non-Pentecostals in the former Soviet Union is at least as intense.

On a more positive note, after considerable discussion, the conference voted to establish a Protestant accrediting association that will be interdenominational rather than exclusively Baptist. In addition, lest the organizing committee be all ECB, Genadi Sergienko, a young professor from the Moscow ECB Seminary trained at Dallas Seminary, nominated Pentecostal Anatoly Gloukhovsky, who was duly included. Others named to the organizing committee were Aleksei Brinza, R. Kheibulin, Nikolai Kornilov, Aleksei Melnichuk, Fyodor Mogan, Peter Penner, Anatoly Prokopchuk, Vladimir Rialuzov, Sergei Rybikov, and Sergei Sannikov. The new Protestant theological association will seek affiliation with the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICEETE).

NOTES

1. The present report is a continuation of the author's study of the history of and current developments in Russian Protestant theological education: Mark Elliott, "Protestant Education in the Former Soviet Union," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18 (January 1994): 14-22; and Mark Elliott, "Theological Education After Communism: The Mixed Blessing of Western Assistance," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 50 (Spring 1995): 67-73. For a Russian reprint, see: "Bogoslovskoe obrazovanie v postkommunisticheskiĭ period: polozhitel'nye i otritsatel'nye storony zapadnoi pomoshchi." *Put' bogopoznania*, no. 1 (1996): 17-25.