

WHY IS THERE NO RUSSIAN "PROTESTANT" THEOLOGY IN RUSSIA? A PERSONAL OUTCRY

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Introduction

Today in Russia, nationalistic ideas are often stronger than rational ones, even in the evangelical Church. In recent years, Western aid of any sort, to Protestants has been accepted, expected and even demanded. But today among evangelicals new ideas are developing about our connections with Western theologians and Western missionary agencies. In particular our thinking is developing regarding their influence on Russian Christian thought. As I have listened to discussions among Christian educators, theologians and Western missionaries who work in our country, I frequently hear comments about the critical need for Russians to develop their own "Russian theology." These statements are often subconsciously understood by Russians from a somewhat nationalistic perspective. Many who are party to the discussions are not speaking merely of the development of "theology within Russia." They do not aspire to the development of a God-centered theology, but envision the development of some form of "Russian-centered theology." The result of such an endeavor is little more than sophisticated anthropology.

Let me hasten to say that, in this essay I am not attempting to address the influences of foreign missionaries on Russian "Protestant" theology. Nor am I specifically discussing the distinctives of our theology. This essay will address several issues related to the modern Russian Protestant Church, issues especially related to the development of its theology. The main objective of this essay is not so much to summarize the issues above but to raise questions about the difficulties involved in the development of Russian Protestant theology. The tone of the essay is admittedly personal. I do not presume to be a spokesman for all Russian Protestants. I offer my own observations and questions about Russian Protestant theology as issues which deserve contemplation.

First, and most importantly, I must ask the question as to whether at the present time in Russia we have a Russian theology which merits development at all. A quick look at our history provides understandable explanations as to why our theology is not yet formulated or systematized. Protestantism came to Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. Until that time, the only Christianity known in Russia was Orthodox Christianity. Admittedly, among Orthodox thinkers were those whose views were similar to Protestant views. However, Protestants were never perceived as being truly "Russian," always regarded as something coming from the outside. They were never seen as belonging to Russia. No one paid much attention to them. For that reason, to speak of "Russian Protestant theology" would sound very strange to Russian ears.

The second question which I address relates to the hindrances which exist in the development of Russian Protestant theology. Because this question is very complicated, I must address the topic selectively, not exhaustively. I will divide my thoughts in this essay into three parts, discussing first external problems, then internal problems, concluding with a return to the chief obstacle. The foundational proposition of this essay is that there is an urgent need for the development of Russian Protestant theology. It will happen only if the Protestant Church will acknowledge and face the issues involved.

External Problems

One of the most important external problems that we face in developing Protestant theology is our distance from an intellectual approach to theologizing. During seventy years of persecution under the Communists the majority of Protestant believers were detached from and denied higher education. Serious theological study was impossible. Atheism was a great obstacle in the development of our theology. The Protestant Church was forced underground. Pastors were imprisoned. Writing was, for the most part, forbidden until the beginning of the nineties. Unfortunately, our theology was not developed or collected during those seventy years. Church leaders in those years did not have the courage or the enthusiasm to introduce theological education in Russia in the same way as it was done in other Eastern European countries under an identical communist regime. The majority of pastors were not theologically trained. As a result, today we lack experienced mentors in theology.

The second problem originates with those who "offer help" in the process of developing theology. At the present time in Russia, one does hear the voice of theology makers, that is, those who are "doing theology". They are the former professors in state university departments of atheism, Marxism, and religion. These people, often collaborating with Orthodox priests, are publishing articles and theological books which discuss theology from a liberal perspective. Ten years ago, these same people wrote papers against the very idea of God. But our country has changed. If they wrote such papers today, they would lose their jobs. Today they write a just enough about God so as to retain their positions in the University. They have changed from departments of atheism to departments of world religion. It is they who claim to be the ones who are writing Russian theology.

When they gather at conferences to discuss theology, seldom is a place given to a Russian Protestant. Perhaps a Western theologian will be invited, but the relationship between the Russian Protestant theologians and the former professors in departments of atheism is a stark, *black/white* contrast. We Protestants are not accepted. In September, 1993, a conference on textual criticism was held in St. Petersburg. Scholars such as Bruce Metzger, and Johannes Karavidopoulos, were invited, but not one Russian Protestant was invited. Perhaps the assumption was that none of us were either prepared for such a task or interested in the conference. At that conference there were few Russians who had healthy ties to Christianity at all. Nevertheless, it is those people, those present at the conference, who are the very people who are publishing Russian theology today. Is it surprising, therefore, that Russian theological thinking may be developing in a liberal stream?

The question arises, where are the Christians, pastors, and priests who should be writing our Protestant theology? The situation is further complicated because in Russia, in order to be accepted and read, a Russian theologian must present himself as a philosopher, a writer, or a poet. Such a person must also be academically trained if he is to be accepted. That is why today, most of what exists in the field of Russian theology originates in the "philosophical religious clubs" of our day. Those who proclaim themselves as Russia's theologians belong to a religious life that proclaims belief, but in actuality lives free from belief. In turn, their readers may read, but often do not believe what is written.

The state of current religious thinking in Russia is the third of the problems external to the development of Russian theology. In Russia, faith is often taken as nothing more than intellectual agreement with what is logical and acceptable to government, authorities, and society in general. Indeed, Russian Christianity is deeply influenced by what is happening in modern Russian society. For many years we had no private magazines, stores, or businesses. Today we have much freedom. The Orthodox Church has seen the opportunity to popularize Christianity, assuming the role of sanctifying businesses, jobs, and restaurants. There is no distinction between the sanctifying of those that produce drugs and those that produce cars. A Russian Orthodox leader willingly prays at the opening of an orphanage -- or in a military center producing nuclear weapons. This is not the popularization of beliefs, but the popularization of Russian Christian influence. Religious leaders will take every opportunity to extend their influence into society. As theology is developing, rather than proclaiming "Thus says the Word of

God," we hear little more than the further development of patriotic Russian tradition.

Some Protestant leaders, too, have seized the opportunity to extend their influence in Russia by organizing seminars led by wealthy businessmen, who present themselves from the perspective of "a different economic spirit." The focus of the teaching is always on how to make a lot of money in Russia and then to live happily with those riches. These leaders are more concerned about material health and wealth for Russians than the edification and sanctification of believers through the Word of God. This is not the popularization of their beliefs, but the popularization of Christian influence in a materialistic world, using the tools of this world.

Internal Problems

To our shame, the Russian Protestant Church remains very separate from contemporary life in our country today. We seem to care very little about politics, the economy and even the needs of people. We are very certain that our theology is "basic and correct." But we shrink from even acknowledging the role of the gospel in society. I am not saying that the final goal of the gospel is the explanation of deep theological issues or the creating of systematic theology. I think that the final goal of the gospel in Russia is to convert our people to a Christ-like life. This transformation is possible only on the basis of teaching from God's Word. However, because we have not systematically organized what we believe and what we should hold as true, people who accept the good news know little about the wonderful riches of fullness of life in

Christ. This leads me to an overview of hindrances that impede the development of Russian Protestant theology. I will speak of four hindrances.

First, there is the lack of systematic teaching in the Church. In the six or seven years since the end of outright of persecution under the Communists, we have had the freedom to preach, to write, and to educate. But we have not been developing our theology. Our focus has been on the birthing of spiritual babies. In the early days of freedom, many people came to church, some with sincere interest, others out of curiosity. They came looking for answers to perplexing questions. Some received salvation, but did not grow. Perhaps it is because we did not feed them. Pastors were satisfied with the fact that people came. They provided new believers with the basics, assuming that if a convert was faithful in the initial steps, they would continue to grow. But little investment was made in the discipleship of new believers. There was no one to show them how to continue. Those who might have led new converts to maturity during the last few years were preoccupied with evangelistic campaigns. Those who were not involved in evangelism were spiritually weak and thirsty themselves. All people heard was the message, "Come to Christ!" They became bored, never realizing that there was so much more to know, learn and experience. They were not systematically taught who God is, what He wants from us, how we can relate to Him, and what it means to be a part of the Body of Christ. Many are already leaving the Church today. We have never offered them solid teaching on doctrines and how to apply them in daily life. If we are to see the development of Protestant theology, we must teach our people systematically, introducing them to the whole will of God (cf. Acts 20:27).

Second, we Protestants today are concentrating on forms not on beliefs. When I discuss the development of theology in Russia, my mind immediately turns to the need for the development of sources, materials, and approaches to working with people so as to feed them efficiently. To carry the culinary image of feeding a little further, I think about the "spiritual kitchen" in which some of us work today. As we "stir the theological pot" in Russia, the theology which emerges has a strongly apologetic flavor. Rather than proclaiming what we believe, we use what we know to fight with each other. We use our new knowledge to defend our beliefs and accuse someone else of error. Unfortunately the fight is not over the content of theology, but merely over the forms: forms of Christian expression, forms of worship, and forms of Christian service. During the years of persecution, Protestant churches experienced divisions over what they believed was serious, theological error. Today Churches are experiencing disunity because of forms

as well as the longing to be independent. The most important discussions we engage in tend to revolve around issues such as how we should sing, pray, or preach in the Church. This is a serious problem, a problem rooted in our lack of a developed theology.

Third, Protestants attempt to keep peace and unity at any cost. While some churches experience disunity over forms, there are churches which seem to be at peace, living without any problems. But underneath the supposed calm is often a pastor's commitment to "peace at any cost." Too often theological error is not confronted, not because the Truth is not known, but because of a fear to confront. In one church, during a night of prayer, I heard a lady who stood up to speak, actually defending Universalism. She blatantly proclaimed that because God is so merciful, everyone would be saved. Rather than directly and publicly addressing her error, the pastor's public response gave his listeners the impression that he agreed with her. She was a new Christian and did not know the Truth. The people that night were not clearly instructed in the Truth. For the sake of "peace" and a fear of offense, error was not confronted. Another pastor told me that in his congregation there are many intellectuals. "Although these people are not strong enough in their theological convictions," he said, "I am very delighted that they are members of our congregation." He admitted that one day during prayer meeting one of those intellectuals was begging for God's salvation for some dead Russian writers and poets because of their contribution to Russian literature. After the prayer meeting the pastor did not refer to it directly or indirectly because of fear of contradicting the convictions of the individual who had spoken.

On the one hand we are overtly apologetic. On the other hand we are fearful of making distinctions among Christians on the basis of theology. In this regard we fail. We must establish our distinctives, not merely in terms of forms but in terms of beliefs. Our beliefs should demonstrate who among us are true followers of Christ. Our lives, that is, our ethical behavior, should likewise demonstrate who are true followers of Christ. Our lifestyle ought to be rooted in our theology.

A fourth hindrance is a little-recognized one, rooted in our ecclesiology. It is interesting that the shape of our theology is rooted in our ecclesiology. In the Protestant Church in Russia today, the rule of the pastor continues to be a more decisive factor than theology. The pastor's authority is not questioned. He alone is the "maker of weather," theological weather. What he says is often received, without question, by the people in his church. In the Orthodox Church, on the other hand, tradition is the decisive rule. No one cares much about what the pastor thinks or says, even if he declares some very fundamental things. People place their trust in Church tradition. An Orthodox priest may be very progressive, but people pay little attention to him. What matters most is what the Church fathers or the Russian Orthodox priests of centuries past have said.

That is to say, while the Russian Orthodox Church is a cult of the "theology of former leaders," the Russian Protestant Church is a cult of the "theology of a single leader." This actually means that today's Protestant leaders in Russia should have more opportunity to develop theology, because people are willing to listen to them. They have a great opportunity to influence people, because within the Protestant subculture, there is deep respect for its present-day leaders. Their word is heard. But the question remains, where are the writers of our theology?

In Russia, our approach to development in any realm has always been spontaneous. It is difficult for us to think of developing something systematic, even a systematic theology. We know so little about planning in our country. It is not a part of our culture. It is reflected in our way of teaching people from the pulpit. On one Sunday there will be a message on one subject, on the next Sunday, a message on another. In another church, within one service there may be three messages which have absolutely no relationship to each other. And yet we acknowledge that our congregations need and want systematic feeding. In general, our thinking is not logically derived, as we perceive Western thought to be. We think more symbolically. Our theology is a theology of poetry and of story telling. Too often examples from our personal lives are given more importance than what the Bible says on a theological issue. We fail to offer the systematic development of ideas on critically important topics such as the Trinity, the Holy Spirit,

angels, Satan, sin, and salvation. We neglect suggesting a theological point of view on many societal, ethical and moral matters. Perhaps we do so because we know that our listeners prefer to hear our personal stories. A preacher would have to be brilliant in order to incorporate theological teaching into such an approach to preaching.

The challenge for theological schools which are developing in our country is to teach Russians to preach theological messages in a systematic manner. Graduates of those school must be prepared to revitalize doctrinal issues for Russian Christians in modern society. In Russian churches the sermon is still the most acceptable way of teaching. Few churches have adult Sunday School classes. Therefore, the sermon is the primary vehicle for communicating Truth. Today it is still the pastor's responsibility to feed his people. If our students were taught to preach theological sermons in our churches and contextualize them for contemporary life in our country, people would not go away hungry and unsatisfied.

The attitude of many Russian Christians today is that evangelism takes place within the Church on Sunday. Too often what happens is that church goes invite non-Christians to church, hoping that the pastor's message will bring that person to repentance. The pastor, who may have prepared well to preach theologically that morning, sees two or three unbelievers in the congregation. Immediately he changes his message and preaches an evangelistic sermon. The pastor seems to bear the full responsibility for evangelism. He has also taken on the full responsibility for the follow-up of new believers.

But no pastor can possibly disciple all who come to Christ. No pastor can move all of his people from the "listening and knowing" stage to the "doing" stage. That is the task of the whole people of God. If the people in the pew were trained to do discipleship, pastors who know theology would have time to write.

Furthermore, the doing of theology and the contextualization process must go hand in hand. Unfortunately theologians address theology to people who lived in days such as the dark times under the soviet dictator, Stalin. We do not address it to people who are alive today. Theology and contextualization must develop together. The Russian Orthodox Church lives by a tradition that is hundreds of years old. They focus on history. But today's society has little use for that history. We Protestants fail in a similar way. We are still preaching about how to endure persecution and different types of criticism. We still have not recognized our freedom in Christ. We preach about faithfulness to a denomination and independence from the government. But we need not be limited to those topics. Such messages are not what our society needs. The Mafia is not restricted by government pressures! Neither is the Church of Jesus Christ! In these times of great freedom, we must live out our great freedom.

In Russian society today there is an upper class of the, so-called, "new Russians," those who are immeasurably moneyed. In my opinion, there should also be "new Russian Christians," those who live and preach in harmony with the Word of God, experiencing the immeasurable grace of God and offering Christ-like love to their contemporaries.

The Chief Obstacle

Behind both the internal and external problems suggested above there is a primary problem. Today's Protestants have lost the "idea" which would stimulate the development of Russian Protestant theology. Again, I speak to those who are involved in theological education. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, not only has our country changed, but the mentality of our people has changed. During the Communist era, we lived by what we called "idea." This was our safeguard against the challenges by atheistic thinking to our Christian beliefs and practice. Under Communism, we heard much about Communism as ideology. Democrats, in their turn, dreamed of democracy. They lived for a country free from Communism. For Christians, faithfulness to God was the "idea" that gave meaning to life during seventy years of oppression. Indeed, theology as "idea" was what carried us through those years. It was not fancy churches or wonderful programs that united us. We had no dazzling sermons, sophisticated

youth camps, or seminars for married couples. We were sustained by "idea." We had theology. But as we moved into the nineties, many Christians ceased to believe in "idea" any more. The idea of communism died; democrats became dictators, and Christians lost the passion for that which they once believed. We have turned to forms, preferring to focus on programs. In those days, our theology had not been systematized, but we had a voice in society. Today there is no voice of theology. What we believe is not being strongly stated in society and sadly, sometimes not even in the Church. We have no voice today, no strong assurance that what we believe and declare is correct.

Instead, as theological education develops, a new professionalism is emerging. Christianity is becoming a new job. Young people suddenly realize that if they go to one of the new theological institutions, perhaps they can earn their living by doing ministry. Often there is little commitment to beliefs, but there is a great commitment to salary. What will result from such a situation? What kind of theologians will be produced?

We must not forget that down through history evil ideas have produced righteous ideas. The Protestant Reformation gave to the Scriptures more authority in the lives of people. Our fathers and grandfathers belonged to underground churches. But they had "idea." And it was "idea" that sustained them through seventy years of difficult times. During those years, a pastor would walk to visit his people. Then, in the early nineties, someone came and said, "You cannot do that without a car! You have no facilities! Your salary is too small!" "Idea" seemed to disappear. Facilities began to take a primary place in his thinking. Today he has no "idea" and he still has no facilities. It is sad that today Christianity reflects a society without a constitution to follow and without "idea" to motivate them. During the elections of this year, people were suddenly interested in politics, not because of what the different candidates actually represented, but because of a fear of a return to Communism. Today's Russians are a people without "idea."

After perestroika, we in the church failed to reinforce "idea" in the people who were already in the church. Many new believers were added to the church, but they were never given the "big idea." They were never taught or allowed to experience the passion for "idea."

In the world of publishing, a similar situation exists. Today in Russia, it is difficult to publish a book with "idea." After all, a book has to sell! It must be rational and profitable. Such a standard is not a Russian standard. Although it may contradict present day standards for writing, and perhaps it cannot always be logically explained, we are still obligated to print works that will illuminate people's hearts and minds, recommit them to the service of Christ and His Church with an enhanced sense of mission and meaning. Books of this kind will meet needs in our Churches and will provide the most current perspectives in theology. Otherwise, Christians will grow accustomed to a somewhat foreign mentality which does not express the theology which our country desperately needs to hear.

Only "idea" will motivate a person to follow Christ and serve Him all of his lifetime. Only "idea" will motivate a person to go where Christ has not been named. What does this "idea" incorporate? Three bodies of knowledge are needed in Russian churches today. We need an understanding of who God is in Himself, who God is in relation to mankind, and how men and women must live, knowing who God is and what He desires from us. Calvin said that man cannot know God without first knowing himself. Knowledge of self would open to us the knowledge of God. But knowledge of God would open to us who we are. If God is holy, I too must be holy. We may study sociology and anthropology, but neither will help us if we do not know who God is. Neither will help us if we do not know who God is in relation to modern Russian society.

Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to address issues related to the modern Russian Protestant Church and the difficulties involved in the development of Russian Protestant theology. Speaking of "Russian

Protestant theology" may sound strange to many Russian ears but it is meaningful to many Russian hearts. While there are manifold hindrances to the development of Russian Protestant theology the situation is not hopeless.

I conclude by making several proposals. The first is that Russian Protestants must strive to understand the times and situation in which they live and seek to develop a long-term strategy for this situation. The second proposal is that educational institutions at all levels (from Church Sunday schools to seminaries and Christian Universities) must prepare Christian workers and leaders who are able to develop a high level of doctrinal knowledge throughout contemporary Russia. Third, I propose that Churches must acknowledge the need for systematic teaching and develop appropriate ways to meet that need, solutions which involve both the pastor and the whole congregation. The final and the most important proposition is a call for Russian Protestants to pray, beseeching God for spiritual revival among believers. Only when that happens will we witness the development of a God-centered theology for our country.