

EXPECTATION AND REALITY

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AMONG BAPTISTS IN UKRAINE

by Mary Raber

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About halfway through any given academic year, it is not unusual for students at Donetsk Christian University (DCU) in eastern Ukraine to reflect on their theological education with a sense of mild surprise. They are not disappointed; they merely recognize that their studies are turning out to be something other than what they had expected. What were those expectations and how are they different from students' experience?

Most students begin the program expecting it to be a fairly straightforward enterprise: a year of formal study will answer all their most pressing questions and sharpen the most necessary skills. Instead, it turns out that the process of education tends to raise as many questions as it answers and even, in some sense, can never really be called complete. "I know less now than when I started," is a common observation at mid-year.

In addition, students come to Donetsk prepared to do their learning in the classroom, but actually end up learning more critical lessons when classes are over. The academic program, though excellent, does not have the same immediate impact on a student's life as the necessity of swabbing three flights of stairs every evening, the ethics of borrowing groceries from the communal refrigerator, or the pain of preaching at the funeral of a fellow student's infant son. In other words, the intensity of community life quickly moves theology from the abstract to the practical. On top of that, students begin to apply their learning to specific situations in their own ministries or their own churches.

Of course, there is nothing remarkable in realizing that education can complicate one's life or that some of the most profound learning experiences happen informally. Perhaps students' expectations are a little naive, which is no surprise, given their relative youth (average age is about 22). Nevertheless, the movement from expectation to reality has engendered a good deal of discussion and even anxiety, leading to adaptation and change among theological students, professors, and administrators and the church leaders and lay people who surround them.

What did people anticipate when the adventure of theological education in the former Soviet Union began a few years ago, and how have their expectations been modified?

Donetsk Christian University was founded in 1991 as a missionary training school, an institution that concentrates on the practical preparation necessary to equip men and women to present the gospel where it has either been neglected or never heard. DCU has been highly successful in fulfilling that mandate, as most of nearly 200 graduates are presently scattered across the republics of the former Soviet Union and are actively involved in some form of Christian service.

The school had its beginnings in the first tentative meetings of younger Baptist leaders in Ukraine with Denver Seminary professors from the United States during the summers of 1989 and 1990. Most of them were from believing families, drilled from childhood in Bible knowledge and church practice. The seminar participants were members of a new missionary society (then registered as a charity) called "Light of the Gospel." They had already begun innovative and effective ministry projects, from street preaching to Bible lending libraries to art exhibits, but felt that they needed to systematize their understanding of the missionary task, and asked for help from Western educators.

The response of the first students was most enthusiastic. Their initial encounter with theological education had the quality of a long-desired dream turned into reality. The mere discovery that missiology was an academic

discipline and that intelligent and cultivated people had devoted themselves to studying the problems they were beginning to encounter was a revelation.

It was a logical next step to start a permanent educational program to prepare new missionaries. Right away, the dynamics of education changed, as a residential school replaced the seminar format. Formerly, students attended sessions and left, now they would still study, but also deal with all the issues that go into living in community, both at the university itself and in the wider church community.

In addition, although many of the students came from the same well-schooled Christian background as the original seminar participants, others did not. Therefore, besides being an academic institution, DCU carried out what might be called a discipleship ministry. At one level, discipleship took the form of doing such things as reinforcing the basics of regular Bible study and prayer by incorporating time for those activities into the daily schedule. At another level, discipleship meant orienting students to the particular "givens" of Baptist life in that part of the world: issues of dress, custom, and lines of authority.

These assumptions were hotly challenged from time to time. "Must we be Baptists before we can be Christians?" demanded one student at an evening meeting. Meanwhile the college administration found itself examining issues of Christian freedom that had never surfaced before. They had to answer students' questions, develop some sort of well-reasoned policy that would be fair to everyone, and also defend the school against rumors circulating in the local churches: What were they teaching those kids over there anyway?

"This is a college! I thought I would have time to read and sit in on classes," exclaimed an administrator, "Instead, I'm fussing over a dress code!" Certainly no one had anticipated that starting a missionary training school would also mean rethinking the way Baptists were accustomed to dress or behave. Thus, at least at that early stage, contrary to expectation, the problems of establishing acceptable standards of Christian decorum were as urgent as the academic program.

Another factor with unexpected results has been the presence of Western educators and visitors, both in theological schools and in the Baptist churches. A few years of exposure have helped local Christians and foreign visitors get used to one another, but the relationship is still ambivalent. New York Times journalist David K. Shipler spoke for many of us foreigners when he wrote about his experience in Russia: "I could never reconcile myself to being vilified and coddled at the same time" (Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams).

Thus, on the one hand, foreign professors are seen as desirable friends whose very presence confers prestige and who possess the vital stores of information that will strengthen and sustain the evangelical community in the future. But on the other hand they are unknown and potentially dangerous entities who can disseminate false doctrine, weaken morals, and arrogantly usurp authority from recognized church leaders. Naturally the visitor's own attitude largely determines how he or she will be received.

For lay people and church leaders, the role of foreigners complicates the pursuit of theological education. In general, evangelical believers in the former Soviet Union have welcomed opportunities to benefit from formal training, but there is almost always a degree of caution associated with the presence of foreigners. How can the local Christians be sure of the purity of the doctrine that is taught by someone from the outside? Will Westerners, who do not share their hosts' culture, actually lure young people away from the churches? Their main concern is not whether future church leaders should be educated, but rather who sets the agenda for their education? Is that the concern of Westerners or of local churches? Bible college administrators or local pastors?

Not only that, but Western professors tend to value the ability to grapple with ideas, to think critically, and to form and defend one's own opinion. To some evangelicals in Ukraine that emphasis in education weakens the Christian faith rather than upholds it: "Those kids need to know what the Bible says, not what a bunch of writers say," observed one Baptist plumber. That is, the role of education is to answer questions, not create uncertainty.

DCU relies heavily on professors from the West who usually teach a single class for two weeks and then return home. The pattern is changing gradually, as more indigenous faculty members become available, but the short-term visiting professor is still the norm. Most do an admirable job of adapting, but suffer from the inevitable frustration of being "in the school but not of it." Because their visits are brief and translators mediate their communication a visiting professor receives only a "snapshot" impression of the life of the university and is

sometimes at a loss to understand the total context of students' lives.

A foreign faculty member arrives prepared to teach a particular subject but may be bewildered by students' questions about apparently unrelated topics that are "hot" at the moment. Many such questions are of the "What would you do if..." variety, detailing complicated scenarios for which the visitor has no context from which to form a helpful answer: "What would you do if someone in your church studied karate?" "What would you say if someone were excommunicated for alcoholism but you knew that one of the elders was an alcoholic too?" "Is it okay for a Christian to use birth control?"

Again, the urgency of practical questions brought on by the problems of daily life tends to take precedence over purely academic concerns. It is no surprise that the liveliest classes are usually those with the most immediate relevance: Spiritual Warfare, Pastoral Counseling, Marriage and Family.

In summary, when DCU was founded, students, administrators, local pastors and lay people alike expected theological education to answer more questions than it raised. They also expected that academic issues would take precedence over practical ones, but the opposite has usually been the case. The presence of educational institutions, and especially the presence of the foreigners they rely on as instructors, has challenged the practices of local churches, even as the churches have critiqued the way that theological education is carried out.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that because expectations have not been met that people are disappointed. On the contrary, the presence of theological schools is producing new and helpful alignments and exchanges of ideas and resources.

For example, in the spring of 1996 I was on the panel that orally examined a dozen students who were about to complete three years of studies at Donetsk. Each student had prepared a "diploma work," a paper that reflected some area of academic inquiry of the student's own choice. Among the examiners were two local pastors, two university administrators, and two resident foreign faculty members. The sessions were open to visitors, and a large number of students, plus a few from outside the university attended.

Several observations relevant to this article can be noted. First of all, the majority of papers presented were oriented to practical ministry, including exorcism, Christian servanthood, theological education, a program for operating a Christian children's home, and family planning. Second, the examining pastors offered some of the most useful criticism of the students' work, not denying its value, but encouraging them to continue their inquiry by investigating and systematizing the faith experience of people in the churches, which has not yet been committed to books. Third, at least three of the papers have been resources for others: the paper on children's homes has been used by a local mission that has opened just such a facility; the theological education paper was the starting point for a DCU administrator's presentation on that subject at a conference; and a work on speaking in tongues added to an American theology professor's understanding of the subject.

Clearly, although theological education has turned out to be a bit different from what anyone anticipated, it is nevertheless a useful and significant new part of evangelical experience in the former Soviet Union.