

THE FUTURE OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION WITHIN THE EUROPEAN BAPTIST FEDERATION.¹

by Karl Heinz Walter

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INTRODUCTION

If we speak about theological education in Europe, we still have to see this in the East - West context or conflict. I am aware that if I have to generalize you will have a lot of exceptions. But nevertheless I want to try to draw a line to where we are today and of course I want to reflect on the fifty years of the existence of International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) and what has happened since the war.

In the second part I want to give you some examples about issues which I think shall be the focus of theological education discussions in the future.

EAST EUROPE

I begin with the situation in the East of Europe. It was in one of the early years of my service for the European Baptist Federation (EBF) as General Secretary when my wife and I were traveling in the former Soviet Union. One of the leaders from the former Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists (UECB) in the Soviet Union, who is still in a leadership position, said to me when we were talking about the situation of the churches, the pastors in the churches and about theological education: "You must always understand that between you and us is a difference in theological education of more than 70 years, which we have to bridge. You must also understand that many of our pastors have not had much basic school education before they became pastors. The highly educated mostly did not become pastors", he said to me, "since they were able to get jobs even being Christians."

I cannot and will not judge the situation but I am quoting what he was saying. But as an underlining experience we met a situation in the Siberian city of Krasnojarsk. My wife and I made this very interesting trip to Siberia together with Patsy and Stanley Crabb. It ended up at the wonderful Lake Baikal. If you ever have the chance to go to Lake Baikal, you will have a

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deep yearning to return to this marvelous place on earth. But when we came to Krasnojarsk we became aware that we were probably the first delegation from the EBF and BWA at this city. Krasnojarsk has been a closed city. Rockets and spacecraft had been built there and probably atomic warheads as well. So you had in this city a great number of people who had academic training. We came to the church, a large church of about six hundred members at that time. They were building a new church. We were asked to have a meeting in the evening with what was called the youth group at that time. These were not only youth of an age as we are used to, but a good number of other people, young adults at least. We asked them questions and found out that many of them had a higher education, High school or College, a lot of them were engineers and doctors. We had two hours of very interesting questions from their side as well.

The first question they started with was."Is psychology devilish?"

Questions of the kind came up all the time and at the end we had some personal conversations. One of them said: „We are grateful for your coming. Our pastor is not answering these questions!" The next morning we were sitting together with the pastor in the church. When he began to speak, he seemed to be very tired and not quite healthy. The first thing he told us about was how difficult the situation had been for him during the communist times. He had to face personal persecution and had very often to defend his faith before the police. And then a little sentence slipped in which revealed to me what was really his situation, when he said: “and I had only four years at school!" Imagine that at that time he was the only pastor of the church in the region. In the meantime they have other pastors in the region and several pastors in that church. But “I had only four years of school!" and he had to live with a church where almost all had a higher education. At that time I understood, what was explained to me and I found further examples on all my trips.

We must also remember that Theological Education happened mostly through courses by extension, though very well planned courses. A lot of people have attended these courses. They came sometimes to Moscow for examinations and to talk about the program. If you ask today even where pastors have received their training, you will find very many who will answer that their theological education was done through these courses. What I discovered was, that the subjects or main issues of the teaching were mostly what I call a “Survival Theology” which had strong elements of the minority situation and the persecution.

I know that “Survival Theology” is not a traditional theological term, but I have not

found any other word by which I can describe this. So it may be my invention. It means that the people need to have a Biblical knowledge and an understanding which would help them to survive in the many difficult situations they had to face in order to survive in a broad meaning, spiritually and physically. The church was their home and a home of relative freedom. So you went to the church in the morning, even if you had to walk a long, long way. It was the place which was called home. There you could feel free and learn from the others and experience relief for a short time. It did not matter how long the service would last, you even stayed for the whole day and then in the evening would go back to your own place which very often was not very inviting anyhow. But what I found out was that when communism fell they all had a wonderful knowledge about everything they needed to survive in those years.

We very quickly forget or have forgotten that communism lasted for seventy-eighty years and not for a shorter period. I feel that we have developed a sense that this was a much shorter period. But it was a long time, too long, coming immediately after the era of the Tzars, which in many cases was not much different [for Baptists]. So this is why I call what they have learned “Survival Theology”, knowing that this is not an official term in theological thinking and teaching.

The other fact is that this teaching had mainly an inward direction - not so much a concern for the world. I remember that after the fall of communism I tried to explain to our brothers and the churches that they are now in the position to join the other Baptist churches in the mission in foreign countries. In the first years I was not understood at all. Most of the unions have not picked up this idea. The Baptist Union of the Ukraine is now doing this and has understood it. But this has something to do with the fact that this kind of theology had to do with a survival and not so much with a concern for the world. They had to protect themselves and others over against the world in order to survive.

A conflict in the past arose when issues of political life also became issues of the “proclamations and activities” of the leadership of the unions. This happened when there was the great split, the break off during the sixties, with the later so called Initiativniki- Initiative Baptists and the UECB of the Soviet Union. This was, as far as I understand the conflict and as far as I am informed, initially over political issues. Only later it became also a theological issue or a theological judgement, when one group began to judge over the other. We in the West also had our difficulties with those Baptist leaders who were involved in the so called “Peace

Conferences", because this was another instrument where our people became involved in the political world and were manipulated. It was very hard to reject the invitations to these peace conferences. But it was more than evident that these conferences were not directed from the religious side but from the political side. So the conflict always came up when political issues also became issues in the life of the leadership of our Baptist leaders in the East.

You also know that there had been other conflicts arising from the fact that there had been brothers who had become instruments of the KGB and the secret police. But I believe this is no longer an issue among Baptists today.

Today in my observation all the institutions in the East firstly try to secure a good knowledge and understanding of the Bible and a thinking in theological terms is only developing slowly. This is something where I hope that there will be a very rapid progress. It is one thing to study and to teach the Bible and it is another issue to begin to think in theological terms. Just to give you one example: every time we begin to discuss the question of "Women in Ministry" you notice that there are quotations of a few selected texts from the Bible but the whole context of the passage is not really understood. But I want to strongly underline again, that we must not forget that the changes in the East began only ten years ago and theological education began even later.

WEST EUROPE

With reference to Western Europe, let me begin after the war, when IBTS Ruschlikon [Switzerland] was founded. The situation was completely different. In Germany, the place I know best, there appeared a book by Prof. Thielicke (published 1948) with the title: *Questions of Christendom to the Modern World*. For some reason I happened to look into this book again recently. What Thielicke did in 1948, was to explain the basic issues and message of the gospel, to the world, to the then modern world. He was demanding that the gospel is the only possible foundation to reestablish a war stricken world. I think it was also translated into English. So he wrote a very aggressive book telling the world: "There is a message we have to bring to you, a message from Jesus, and this is the only answer after all the damages during the time of the war."

This was the attitude of many Christians and even others who returned from the war. They had the conviction that the gospel of Jesus is the answer to so many spoken and unspoken questions not openly answered. So the first task of theological education was to reestablish basic

theological and ministerial training to address the many burning questions which came out of the experience of the war. I will not list these questions because they are similar to those of today after the Kosovo experience. There are questions we cannot answer.

But there was one question, which many Christians brought home and that was the question of the relationship to other churches and Christians, especially in Europe where we are all living in minority situations and in most places we are treated as minority churches. When I was a young boy, I heard this from many who came back from war and prison camps. I heard it from my own father when he returned. I heard from them: "We have been one on the battlefield, why do we need to have a different relationship now?"

This happened also in the Concentration Camps and it is therefore not astonishing that the ecumenical movement had its real beginning and had its strongest period immediately after the war. It was guided and directed by those who came out of the experience of the war. This is only one example, there have been other issues.

The next development is one I wish we could make much clearer to all our brothers and sisters in the East, especially to those in leadership and in education. In the Western World it became very important that the Theology in the West had then to pass through all the basic changes and questions of the society in the sixties. It was not only the time of the "Youth Revolution" but there were a lot of issues which emerged in the West of Europe, which were really absolutely new and which were hitting our churches very much and for which they were unprepared. There was the "New Morality". A book appeared with this title, but it was not the time for theory. Everybody began to practice this immediately. Then there was the question of the role of women, which changed completely in the sixties. We had the peace movements, which became very active. And the burning question for the young people was the development of the third world. Nobody who did youth work in our churches could avoid these questions. When I was youth director in Germany, a great part of what we dealt with were these questions and what we had to do about them. Then we discovered group dynamics which came from America during that time. Group dynamics in our personal life, in the church, and society. This was sometimes very frightening for a lot of people. You will remember the antiauthoritarian movement and programs and you can add some other issues from that time. These things have changed the western world dramatically and for a long time my impression was that theology did not react but just continued with teaching their basic programs as if nothing had happened.

I can give you an example out of my own experience. When I was director of the German Baptist Youth Department, this new morality spread quickly. Young people lived together without being married. The whole sexual behaviour changed, supported by the new developments in the field of medicine. Our department, my whole team, was confronted with all these changes and the many questions and demands from the churches and the parents. We lived with our department on the campus of the [Hamburg Baptist] Theological Seminary and I pleaded with our teachers there: "Please, we have to deal with all these questions, please give us your theological assistance in these things." And the answer I received was: "No, no we don't have time for that. We just have to do our normal work and teach the introduction to New Testament and Old Testament, etc." So it happened that I had to provide answers, and I tried to do so at the assembly of one of our associations, where I was invited to speak. I tried to tell the audience that not all young people who are living together are bad sinners. Along that line I said something about a new understanding of sexuality. After that evening the president of that association wrote a letter to all the churches and dissociated immediately from what I had said. When I returned to Hamburg and we read that letter at the next meeting with the theological teachers, they all stood there and said: "But you should not have said this!" This was one example which made me aware that in the West until today we are very often very slow to react to modern issues. I will come to this later again.

Today, I wonder if some people will write a book: *Questions of the modern world to the Christian Church* - do you still have a message and if so, what is the content and the evidence of its worth and importance? It is very interesting that some years ago during the communist period here in Prague one of the best books about Jesus and the Christian faith was written by a communist.

This is only a brief picture I want to give of the different developments in the East and in the West. But if you accept this you will also understand that there is still a gap, a gap which we have to bridge. And I must say that I am happy that during the last ten years we have stayed together and talked about these issues, even if they are controversial. But we have reached a point where we believe in the other's faith, even if we don't agree.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IS NEEDED TO OVERCOME THE GAP BETWEEN EAST AND WEST.

It is in this context that we have to see the gift of IBTS in Ruschlikon. We must see that it played an important role at this time. But we also must not forget that this was due to the fact that it was an international place. Students came from many places and shared their questions and problems and had to face all of these with their own experience and life.

In 1949 there were about 10 - 12 other [Baptist] theological seminaries in Europe, but most of them were just trying to reestablish the program. I remember that in the summer of 1950 I was invited to a work camp in Hamburg where we were trying to help the old seminary building to be rebuilt. It was a hard time in a hot summer and I had to learn Scottish English at that time, which was a great joy, I must admit. After three weeks I could understand almost everything and our Scottish pastor gave me a blessing in front of everybody when I had to leave a day earlier and go home with my bike to the town where I lived.

Today we have beside IBTS Prague more than 35 institutions with different levels of education. We now have some problems which became much more difficult because of outside influence from Baptists but mostly from para-church organizations and missions, e.g. the controversy between fundamentalists and liberals and conservatives and modernists and whatever it is, was mainly brought to awareness from outside, not from inside Europe, because it was always related to influence, money and those things. We in the western part of Europe could never compete with the dollar.

Theological Education must play an important role to overcome and bridge the gap. It will not only be important to have a higher basic education, which many young people in the Eastern countries already have. Because many things in which we are diverse and disagree are also a question of education and knowledge - as in America and other places.

I remember on one trip John David Hopper recommended to me the book *Baptist Battles* by Nancy Ammermann. I studied the book and upon reading all the statistics in it about the education of Baptist pastors in America I gained more insight to the problem, and that much had to do with the lack of education and training. I am not saying this with any kind of judgement.

But I must say, having been involved here in the work and especially in Eastern countries, I was sometimes deeply hurt by the arrogance of Westerners over the East. Even at this institution I had to suffer that by some faculty, in the Board of Trustees. Sometimes I heard the sentence: "You and your Easterners." This was not easy to accept. The West may have the better theological education, but do we in the West have the better Christian life?

It hurt me when one day I heard in this building: "They should change and come to our point of education and then the problems would be solved". One of the great mistakes we have made in Germany when reunification came was, when the Westerners said to the Easterner: "Just become like we are and all the problems will be solved quickly!" We are still suffering from this attitude. This attitude has also caused many problems between East and West in general.

TASKS BEFORE THE EUROPEAN BAPTIST FEDERATION

1. We have to help to develop and strengthen theological education on the national level by several different programs and activities. And with all that I will mention I see an important role for IBTS here. I am fully convinced that the basic ministerial training must be done on the national level and in one's own national and cultural context.

There is a great need for a graduate program for students from all seminaries. This must continue. David Coffey and I made a very interesting visit in December to Kazakhstan. Two young men came to see us. They are graduates from the seminary in Odessa. One is heading the theological school in Almaty and the other is working up in the north of Kazakhstan. After only a short time in their present positions they came to us and asked about the possibility for further education, noticing that what they had brought from Odessa was not sufficient. This does not say anything against the education in Odessa. But they asked us if we could help them to reach internationally recognized degrees. It was not only because of such a degree. I understood that they felt they needed more education.

I think the second urgent task in Europe is to educate or further educate theological teachers by providing a kind of marketplace for theological trends, new books and actual issues. To invite theologians who have written remarkable books or given special lectures. To teach the teachers will not only be important but we will have to bring them together to get to know each other and talk with each other. It is our own experience that through talking about these issues face to face it does really change attitudes and understanding. One of my wishes for the future is that the EBF Theological Teachers Conference will not stay as it is at this moment, namely a predominantly Western meeting. I know it has to do with money and travel costs but we need to have this larger mix.

Teach the teachers was one of the major issues when we had to change the program of IBTS. This means we have to help all those, who have started just with a Bachelor of Theology

degree to teach in many institutions, and they do a great job, a great job. But when you talk with them you hear: "We need more, we need your help." In the future the official recognition in many places will only be given if the teachers will have higher degrees which qualify them for teaching.

2. We need to concentrate on Pastoral Theology and Counseling in a broad sense. This is what will be desperately needed and it is in many places only at the beginning stage. We have to teach the importance of the human being as an individual but also in various forms of relationships within the society. Counseling, the questions of marriage, of children in the family, these issues are very important.

I once spoke at one of the congresses in Kiev. When I came to the pulpit, I looked into the faces of the many pastors there. I saw in their eyes and in their faces the loneliness they brought with them. So in my Bible study that time I emphasized the issue of loneliness. Afterwards I noticed how deeply moved they were. What was expressed afterwards showed how lonely they were. Many came from places and situations that we may not be willing to go to be a pastor and minister. So I think that Pastoral Theology and Counseling is the second task which lies before us in theological education.

3. I would appreciate very much if we would understand it to be very important to teach the History of European Theology. What has happened during the last 50 years in European Theology in East and West? We have to teach this in order to achieve a better understanding for each other because of the different developments which I have tried to show in the first part of my paper. We had different developments in the past but we are now reaching the point where the same questions and tasks lie before us. If we forget our history we will probably always run parallel and I think this will not be helpful.

4. The fourth I want to mention here is, that there are diverse issues among Baptists in Europe. We have to talk about these. We cannot avoid them. There is the issue of Women in Ministry. This theme is not coming to rest. We have to talk about Ethical issues and ethical and moral standards with the intention that we learn to teach our people how to find and develop ethical and moral standards according to the teachings of Jesus for themselves, and not by producing a list of what is good and what is wrong and then give it to them. Our fathers had a very simple question: "What would Jesus have done in this situation?" And this was helpful for many. But we have today many questions in our life, where we cannot draw direct answers from the scripture.

Therefore we have to help to get a deeper understanding which will help to develop ethical standards.

Another subject which we need to study is to better understand Baptist Theology and Lifestyle in the cultural contexts. I think we have neglected this cultural context very often - many things in our diversity have something to do with the cultural background. Only afterwards did we look into scripture and tried to find some justifications for our behavior and tradition. This is something we have to examine without prejudging others. What has a cultural background and what is really Biblical? This we need to find out together.

5. Some Modern Issues. We have to study together the change from the rural society to urban societies. This was said very often but little has happened. When you go to the Mega-Cities, when you go to Moscow with the eleven million people living there, Berlin is expected to have six million people in a few years, what is life in a Mega-City like?

The church in Mega-Cities, the changing family structures, marriage and sex in the urbanized world, are still open issues. But we have this problem in common in the East and the West, in the North and in the South. But in my opinion it is still a very underdeveloped issue in our praxis and theological thinking.

Sociology tells us, and I am repeating this again and again, that there are three main problems all over the world in every society. They also say if a religion will find a way to answer these problems they will find open doors. These three are: a) loneliness and self-isolation. This has to do with the organization of our society. How many old people are dying in their homes in Europe and nobody is taking notice of this. And what kind of loneliness if you go to one of these big apartment buildings in Moscow where you have to have a guide, because you cannot read the names at the bells.

b) The problem of security through a better understanding of the world. Many and not only older persons lack an understanding for the many changes which have taken place during the last ten years alone. When I began ten years ago, it was just the beginning of the fax-machines, believe it or not. Who had knowledge of e-mail and Internet ten years ago? These things are so common today that if you have no knowledge you are seen as someone from a different planet. If you merely try to remember what has changed in the world during the last ten years in medicine for example. Those who are working in these areas have said: "You theologians have forgotten us and our world." But they have to make daily ethical decisions and often stop talking with us

because their strength is barely enough to do their job.

So I think security does not only mean that people can go out at night without any risk. It has to do with a better understanding of our daily life. Some have also said that the whole present world is a matter of faith, faith in the man who is repairing the washing machine or the TV etc. We don't understand, but we have to trust them.

c) To find a meaningful life, especially in the daily personal context. What is the meaning of the many daily things, the boring work we have to do, and the many negative news we are confronted with in our life? These are the three things about which you read and you can find them all over the world.

Under these modern issues we include Business Ethics in the globalized economy of our modern world. But this is not only for business people. My concern is for the average man on the street and the members of our churches. I gave a paper last week at the BWA Council in Dresden and I was surprised that we had a very intensive and good discussion for more than 1½ hours, a very helpful discussion for me, which gave me a lot of new insights. My point was: why should the business world look for new ethics, when we as the average people, the men on the street, have accepted for our daily life, the standards for business life. In the churches you hear people saying: „What does it bring me? What is the profit coming out? Is my investment in time and money worth it? Does it give me what I expect or do I have to go to another church? The work performance of this pastor is just very poor." Some said: “You can be very happy if people are making a commitment just for one year. You cannot expect more." You will find that in many ways we are using as ethical standards not the terms of the Bible which we learned, when I was young. A lot of terms originate from business life.

Another issue that theological education has to address is to find out how to reach the next generation in a way that they will stay or survive in the church even when they become older than 35 years of age. This is a real concern, where we are struggling in both the East and in the West. In the East they are still reaching their own young people but in many places they are not reaching the young people from outside the church. They are facing the same situation as we in the West in this respect.

Finally, we need to find out what the church of the next century will look like, a church which is world-oriented and not self-concerned, and lives in a world of an almost perfect communication system which often creates loneliness. There is no doubt that the church will

survive. It is the church of Jesus Christ, our Lord. But the church will be different and we should be involved in this question. I am amazed by some of our young pastors here in Europe, from parts where the mission is so difficult, how they are really trying to reach out to people in a modern way. This they do in spite of not causing happiness among the old believers. But they consequently go for the unbelieving people. I think the church will have to change.

I will finish with a personal remark. My main concern, and I hope to deal with that just for myself, maybe also for others, but I think the main concern and task for the next years of our Baptist churches will be to recover a clear Christology. Sometimes as I listen I ask myself, is what I hear still the Jesus of the gospels. I was beginning to think about the question of Christology when a good friend asked me during a meeting, listening to a lecture: „Do we know Jesus through Paul or do we know Paul through Jesus?" I hope you understand the difference. For me the message of grace also belongs to Christology. Philip Yancey's books, *The Jesus I Never Knew* and *What is so Amazing About Grace?* are very timely and appropriate. Currently I am reading his newest book: *Church, Why Bother?* I had the privilege at the recent EBC - Conference in Interlaken to hear Philip Yancey. In his final address he spoke for an hour about grace. He said this is his main issue.

I noticed while listening, sitting by myself, that this message of grace had a healing effect on me. I think we need to examine ourselves and find out if our message about Jesus is still the message of the Jesus of the gospel and what is our message when it comes to grace.