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Russian Protestants

BY JOHN LAWRENCE

THE Russian Orthodox Church is the main stream of Russian religious life, but the Baptists are an important and most remarkable tributary. At their first sight of Eastern Orthodoxy western evangelical Christians are generally completely baffled. The Romans seem nearer to us, and so in one sense they are, for both Roman Catholics and Protestants proceed from the individualistic Christianity of western Europe; this, however, does not guarantee that we westerners are in all respects nearer to the Bible. One of the chief things that distinguishes eastern and western Christianity is that the Orthodox gives a stronger meaning to what is said in the New Testament about the true vine and the body of Christ. For them St. John's word 'fellowship' has kept its full meaning, whereas for us it became weakened at some point in the middle ages and we are only now rediscovering its full Biblical meaning.

This is important, for it is impossible to understand the Russian Baptists apart from their background in Orthodoxy. It is often said that the Russian Baptist Church is a response to the work of western evangelists such as Lord Radstock and Dr. Baedeker. It is true that such men, and the German Protestant colonists in South Russia, played a great part in the birth of Russian Protestantism, but they are certainly not the only influence at work. Protestantism corresponds to one side of the Russian temperament and has deep roots in Russian Orthodox spirituality. The origins of Russian Protestantism have not yet been properly investigated but the movement goes back far behind the centenary recently celebrated by the Baptists.

By the end of the eighteenth century a section of the very Russian and very Orthodox schism of the Old Believers had, in spite of its complete isolation, worked itself round to a position that was very close to Protestant nonconformity. For these people it was an unexpected joy to discover that there were persons with similar views among the German settlers brought in by Catherine the Great. Among educated people the ground was prepared to some extent by the German handbooks of Lutheran piety which formed the staple of the theological instruction in the Russian eighteenth century; and towards the end of the century freemasonry reached Russia in its religious form. Families of the nobility embraced with ardour Protestant ideas received through freemasonry and, for the first time in Russian history, the upper classes began to talk about religion to their servants, who in turn passed on to their friends and relations what they had heard. In this way Protestant ideas spread like wildfire.

Early in the nineteenth century the Bible Society began its great work in Russia. This strengthened the Orthodox Church. And it

also strengthened the Protestant tendencies, but throughout the nineteenth century Russian Protestantism was comparatively small, divided into various sects and harried by the Tsarist government in the name of the state religion of Orthodoxy.

After the Revolution the Soviet Government tried for a time to use the Protestants as a stick to beat the Orthodox but the policy was reversed, when it became clear that more young people were joining the Baptists than the Komsomols. From the mid 'twenties the Russian Protestants shared the lot of the Orthodox and other Christians. Until 1939 there was an exceedingly fierce persecution of all religion but by the second world war this persecution had spent its force and the patriotic behaviour of the Russian Christians brought Stalin to abate his hostility.

At the end of the war the present Baptist Church was formed by the union of the two largest Protestant Churches, the Evangelical Christians and the Baptists, with a part of the Pentecostals. Both main groups held substantially the same doctrines and both practised believers' baptism, so the only serious theological obstacle to the union was the position of the Pentecostals; it was agreed that they could do as they wished in private gatherings but must not speak in tongues in the public worship of the church and must not proselytise for their views.

The Seventh Day Adventists and a host of small sects remained outside the union. The Russian sects vary from the wildest heresy to the soberest belief, so that it is scarcely possible to generalise about them. But from now on the Baptists represented the greatest part of Russian Protestantism. They entered on a period of rapid growth and, together with the orthodox, they enjoyed a very considerable degree of toleration for some years. However, they were not allowed to establish a seminary for training their pastors. Moreover they have been allowed to print only one small edition of the Bible. They also publish every year a few issues of a journal, the *Fraternal Messenger*. There is no other religious literature. No Sunday Schools or social work are allowed. It can be a breach of the law to allow children under eighteen to be in Church.

What sort of people are the Russian Baptists? They are nearly all very simple men and women, with gnarled faces, like something out of Hogarth, but transfigured. They are seldom educated—to be an open Christian can be a bar to education and to a good job—but they are intelligent. If you are asked to address them in church, never make jokes; start with something from the Bible and develop from it whatever theme you like; they understand everything, provided that they can recognise it as grounded in the Bible.

Besides the Sunday services there are two or three evening services every week. All services last at least two hours, people come half an hour early and many people have to stand throughout. One starts with a hymn or anthem sung by the choir; then there is a short Scripture reading, followed by a hymn, a sermon, a hymn or anthem, and extempore prayer. Then another hymn, another Bible reading, another hymn or anthem, another sermon, more prayers, another hymn, another Bible reading, another hymn or anthem, more prayer,

another hymn . . . and it might go on for ever. But three sermons is generally thought to be enough.

During prayer the whole building is filled with a strange, subdued fluttering sound as each person puts into his or her own words the petitions given by the Pastor. There is always a first rate choir and both the hymns sung by the whole congregation and the anthems sung by the choir are sung with great sincerity. Some of the hymns are Moody and Sankey or other old acquaintances, but most are of local manufacture. An enormous volume of original church music is composed and performed every year in the Russian Baptist churches; every church has a precentor and every precentor is a composer. I am not very musical but I do not think most of this music is very good. It is, however, impressive for the fervour with which it is sung and some of the hymns are unforgettable. There are no hymn books and, if the people do not know the words by heart, one of the Presbyters has to read the words of each verse before it is sung. Some of the Orthodox anthems are sung, notably the great Eastern anthem *Christ is risen from the dead, by death trampling death underfoot*.

The sermons are not the usual preaching of western Protestantism. They are more like Orthodox sermons. The Baptist churches are filled with the Orthodox feeling for 'fellowship' in St. John's sense. This comes out in their sermons. The preachers sometimes use the Bible in the same way as the early fathers. I once heard at the Lord's Supper in Moscow a magnificent sermon on manna as the type of bread from heaven and the Exodus as a type of the Passion. It was pure patristics but I do not suppose the preacher had read any of the fathers of the Church. It is just that these things are in the air in Russian church life. It does not much matter that there are no Baptist theological colleges. The tradition is passed on by continually hearing and meditating on the Word, as I suppose it was in the early Church.

Relations between the Orthodox and the Baptists are much better than in the bad old days when Orthodoxy was a state church and minorities were persecuted in its name. One still hears sharp things said on both sides but there is now much mutual respect and even an acceptance that Providence has given each Church its special task. I have heard an orthodox Archbishop say that the Baptists were raised up by God so that the Gospel could be heard where no Orthodox priest could go.

As the nineteen-fifties wore on, the Kremlin became alarmed at the growth of religion among the comparatively young, chiefly among the Orthodox but also among the Baptists. From about 1961 all Christians came under severe pressure and over half the 20,000 Orthodox Churches then open were closed by a mixture of force and fraud. It is not possible to give even approximately reliable figures for the number of Baptists or their places of worship at any moment. An increase in numbers would be likely to bring down retaliation from the State. So it is better not to 'number the people' and the various figures that have been going round for the last fifteen years or so are not even informed guesses. They are conventional numbers inherited from the 1920's, not unlike the 'twenty thousand parishes' that England was

wrongly supposed to contain in the middle ages. Moreover by no means all the congregations are registered, which means that a large part of the Baptist community is forced to exist on the edge of the law.

Soviet law concerning religion is not just but its capricious administration is worse than the law itself. If the law were fairly administered all the Baptist communities would be registered, the pastors would be freely chosen and would speak freely to their flocks. In fact none of these things happen. Registration of Baptist communities depends on the local party authorities in each case, but the party's branches have a plan to fulfill in the struggle against religion and it would not look well if the number of registered Baptist communities suddenly increased in any area. The choice of presbyters, their freedom of movement and their freedom of action are all closely circumscribed in various ways and those who fall foul of the powers that be may be prevented from holding any office in the Church or sent to prison. Many of the presbyters have spent many years in prison or in Stalin's concentration camps.

It is always tempting to say that the limitations placed on the Church's life are intolerable and that it would be better to reject the state's control and continue an illegal life, come what may. Some indeed have done this and have endured persecution. Others have sought to remain within the limits of legality and have not always escaped persecution. It is not for us to judge either those who remain in the legal Church or those who leave it. We do not know enough about their circumstances. There are strong arguments for both courses. The argument for going is that only thus can the Church's purity of principle be maintained. The argument for staying is that a legal existence makes it possible to maintain the Church's worship and witness without sacrificing anything essential to her life.

This matter came to a head in 1961 when the Baptist Church being then under heavy pressure, sent a directive to its Senior Presbyters saying *inter alia* that 'at present the main task of divine services is *not* the enlistment of new members'. This could be understood in two ways as meaning either that, if the Church's numbers are seen to grow, it will bring persecution which must be avoided, or as meaning that new members must be enlisted by personal evangelism outside the church services. This is in fact what happens and it may well be wise to avoid open appeals for conversion on occasions so public as church services.

However that may be, a section of the Church took the first interpretation and went into open schism. They are called the *Initiativniki* and they have maintained their position for seven years, building up and maintaining a nation-wide network of members in the teeth of state opposition. They have endured prison and exile, at least one of them has been tortured to death, others have had their children taken away from them on the ground that they were crippling their minds by religious indoctrination. One's heart goes out to these men for their faith, courage, resource and integrity. It is forty years since such an illegal group has maintained itself on such a scale throughout the country. But the manner in which the *Initiativniki* have

purported to excommunicate the legal Baptists is very harsh. We have not so learned Christ. The official leaders on the other hand speak in a reasonable way about the Initsiativniki whom they still regard as brothers.

There is no way of knowing how many people belong firmly to one group or the other, and how many are just bewildered, going to any place where they can find evangelical worship; but evidently the Initsiativniki are quite numerous, for they are continually and savagely attacked in the Soviet Press, which does not waste words on insignificant groups.

Russian sects can be wild enough. One of them advocates and practises castration. And other excesses are rumoured. So Soviet propaganda deliberately confuses the issue by confounding the Baptists in general and the Initsiativniki in particular with the generality of sects. There is a limit to the slander which will be believed by Russians concerning the Orthodox Church but they start with a complete ignorance about the Baptists, who are assumed wrongly to constitute an un-Russian activity. Anything can be believed about a foreign group mixed up with some of the wilder sects. So stories of child murder, not unlike those told against the Jews, are fixed on the Baptists and it may well be that some people believe them. But the Baptists are increasing and, as more people come to know them, this sort of propaganda has less and less credit. Indeed by now most of the working-class probably know enough Baptists to be able to judge for themselves but the intelligentsia have no personal contact with the Baptists. For educated Russians religion means for practical purposes the Orthodox Church or Judaism. But this could change. Those who remember the character of Alyosha, the saintly Baptist in Solzhenitsyn's concentration camp story, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, may at least wonder whether the propaganda against the Baptists is true and then acquaintance with, perhaps, a Baptist nanny, of whom there are many, may lead to further enquiry. It is in this quiet sort of way that the Gospel spreads in the Soviet Union. And spread it does.