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A Vision for Theological Education for Difficult Times*

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In addressing this topic one immediately faces the question: does one focus on 'difficult times' or on 'vision'? What I am going to do is make a few general remarks about how I see the task of theological education within the larger mission of the church in our world.

Under Marxism, religion was defined as a 'private matter' which was to be kept locked in the realm of our subjective feelings and within four walls. As evangelicals in a communist country, Yugoslavia, my fellow-believers and I developed a subculture, a terminology and so on which pushed us into what some would call 'ecclesiastical irrelevance', in some ways almost validating the Marxist claim that religion would wither away and disappear.

When our nation was still Yugoslavia under Tito's rule, we were rather privileged compared to other socialist countries of Eastern Europe. From the mid-1960s on, our borders slowly opened and we were able to travel, translate and publish some literature and start theological schools. I have been involved with theological education for 26 years now. Twenty-one of them were in pioneering and leadership roles. It's not that I am that old; I just started out young. In 1967, I had the privilege of being the first Yugoslav to go abroad and study systematically for ministry. Before that I was involved in evangelism.

I found that although I had a burning heart and a great vision there was a world out there that did not understand our Biblical language. There was world of secularised young people (especially in the universities). It became clear that one needed to gain a better knowledge of both the Word of God and the world of man in order to move from the text, the revealed Word, the written deposit of our Christian faith, to our context.

The desire to evangelise, to take the gospel into universities, into the marketplace, then led me to want to receive theological education. I came to Germany, where disappointments came as they do to many of us: many of you have travelled to the West, and you may have thought the West was Christian. If so, you will have experienced similar disappointments. I found that in the theological faculties of German universities the most popular theology was that 'God is dead'.

I was thus presented with my first dilemma. I had come with a burning heart, hoping that theology would answer my questions. But I found that those radical liberal theologians actually agreed with our ideological opponents, the Marxists, that there

*This paper was originally delivered at an Overseas Theological Council conference in Moscow on 12 February 1993. The conference involved some 75 representatives from Protestant Bible and theological schools, about half from Russia and Ukraine and about half from the USA and some other western countries.

was no God. God was irrelevant. The idea prevailed that religion, the Christian faith, was an obscure, outdated, unscientific, irrelevant way of thinking that belonged to ages past.

You will no doubt be surprised to hear that at that time, when the ‘God is dead’ theology was popular, help actually came from a Marxist. A Czechoslovak philosopher by the name of Vitezslav Gardavsky was teaching philosophy at, of all places, the military academy in Brno. He wrote a series of articles in a secular Czech newspaper which became a best-selling book, published around the world. The English title was *God is Not Yet Dead*.

Events in Eastern Europe, especially since 1989, have proven Gardavsky more correct than the atheists in power who were setting out to build a new society without religion. We have witnessed the wholesale collapse of communism. Communism proved unable to provide what it promised, although it did function for a while as a substitute religion. A tremendous search for some kind of ‘god’ ensued – for any kind of idol, ideal or ideology that would provide truly reliable answers.

And now here we are a few years later, at a consultation dealing with the challenges of leadership training and leadership formation. We are indeed facing all kinds of challenges today that look somewhat different to the challenges in 1989 or 1990. The time of euphoria is over. We are undergoing a very difficult and painful transition, in the former Soviet Union just as much as in the former Yugoslavia.

One painful transition is at the political level, from one-party totalitarian regimes towards some kind of multiparty parliamentary democracy. The expectations were so high that they have inevitably been followed by great disappointment. You may say that this has no relevance to our theological consultation. I would argue that it does, because theological education, just as the mission of the church, does not take place in some kind of vacuum, in some kind of a remote, safe area up in the clouds, but always in a particular context, and this is our context.

The transition to democracy is difficult because we have not had democratic institutions and traditions and have not yet learned the democratic ABC. Transition is equally if not more painful in the economic area. Moving from one centrally planned command economy towards some kind of free market or at least mixed economy is no easy matter. Any knowledgeable economist or analyst will tell you that in this area in many of the formerly communist or socialist countries things will have to get worse before they can get better. In many places huge bureaucratic structures have not yet been dismantled. Creativity and initiative, the genius of a market economy, are generally lacking except in the case of a few young, gifted entrepreneurs. But then a law-based state with a civil society has not yet fully developed either. Mafia control and corruption go along with all kinds of social problems, such as growing unemployment, which could become conducive to new kinds of dictatorships. This last danger is reinforced by the fact that one single communist ideology has been replaced by a range of nationalist ideologies – and conflicting nationalist ideologies at that.

You know the details of your situation and I hope you are reading the signs of the times seriously as the Bible commands us to do, so as to focus your mission. I happen to believe that Evangelical Christians – authentic Biblical Christians – are in a unique position to provide correctives and to be the salt of society. In these difficult times well-trained, committed and well-informed leadership is the key. That is why it is important to know what kind of leadership we are, or should be, training in our schools.

I nearly got into serious trouble some fifteen years ago because I wrote an article, which was published and republished in former Yugoslavia, in which I said that the

new society, the socialist dream, will remain an illusion without a new humanity, without the new man. Joseph Țon in Romania was arguing along similar lines and has paid the price for that. I think that we are now presented with the opportunity to intervene with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to talk about the new man and the new creation. To do this, we will of course need to have a fully fledged Biblical theology that is socially, culturally and politically relevant. We will need to face the challenges of the postcommunist mindset of secularisation and urbanisation. We need to develop models of cooperation which will be a strong testimony in these times.

Here it is relevant to talk about another area where we are experiencing a painful, difficult transition: in the sphere of religion. Under Marxist regimes, Marxist atheism functioned not only psychologically and socially, but also as a kind of (substitute) secular state religion taught through educational institutions, through the media, from kindergarten to university. I remember a visit to this country, I think it was in 1978, when I brought back to our library 46 volumes on scientific atheism, many published by the Soviet Academy of Sciences. At that time I said, 'Who says there is no theology done in the Soviet Union? There is: an atheistic theology, an antitheology.'

This state of affairs obviously now belongs to history. So where do we go from here? In a truly pluralistic society, every individual has full freedom of conscience and can choose to believe or not to believe, to belong to this church or that church or to no church at all. Many of us are disappointed that that kind of freedom has not come. It seems to me, if I read the situation right, that we are moving backwards. There is a renaissance of the old national state religions: 'if you're Russian you're Orthodox'; 'if you're Polish you're Catholic'; 'if you're Croatian you're Catholic'; 'if you're Bosnian or a citizen of Turkistan or Kazakhstan, you're Muslim'. The church historians would probably tell us that we are seeing a revival of Constantinian or neo-Constantinian models.

In your country, Protestantism has historically been viewed as a western religion, as an intrusion and a threat to national, religious and cultural identity. In every Eastern European country, there are former communists who have changed their ideological cloaks and have retained public positions or power. They now go to church and want bishops on their committees. The strength of the evangelicals is their freedom to organise themselves in a number of ways, without hierarchical structures. In the present circumstances, however, this may appear to be a great weakness in that we are fragmented and do not have joint common platforms or cooperative programmes and networks. That is why I am so glad that we are discussing cooperation here at this conference. If a minority is to influence the majority in any significant way – and Evangelical Protestants are a minority in all of these East Central European countries – they had better work together.

Theological education is certainly one key area in which we can work together. Here, I think, we must talk to our western friends. They should not export from the West all their denominational, theological and sectarian divisions, and fragment the churches in the East even more. They should work with us so that we can discover the fully fledged Biblical Gospel and its relevance for our time and for our specific cultures here.

I would like now to mention briefly a number of tasks related to the formation of leadership in these difficult transitional times.

The first task is to redefine the Christian faith. As we have just noted, the Christian faith is now once again defined along the lines of national allegiance. If you are not Orthodox, for example, the question is being raised as to whether you are a 'real' Russian. We as Protestants must come to grips with these facts. It is not just a question of what 'they' are doing to 'us'; it is a question of where we have gone wrong in failing

to appreciate our culture, to gain a knowledge of our history including Christian history, to enter into dialogue with the Orthodox Church and to study patristics. If our students are going to work in Macedonia or Serbia, for example, they must know patristics, as this study will take us as close to Biblical Christianity as possible and provide us with a bridge to other denominations. As Evangelical Christians – or as Christians or whatever denomination – we must work hard, then, on the definition or redefinition of our Christian faith. And the Christian faith must be defined at its Biblical sources and not within our culture, our liturgical form or national ethnic allegiance. This is the cry of the Reformation again: back to the sources. We must work on non-sectarian, non-denominational ways of presenting the Christian faith, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In teaching laymen and pastors who have not had a theological education, you have to use pictures. I compare Christianity to a river. There is a source of clean fresh water where you can drink and be refreshed and rejuvenated. But that source, Biblical, apostolic Christianity, then enters history. And of course human history is marked by sin. As the river grows bigger, especially from the time of Constantine onwards, all kinds of mud are thrown into the river, sometimes even poison. Then there arise distortions of Christianity, reductions of Christianity. The Greeks, for example, reduced Christianity within a framework of philosophy. Philosophies are relative, however. I have my philosophy; you have yours. The Romans also redefined Christianity. They created powerful institutions, the most powerful being the Roman Catholic Church. Institutions are powerful but also immobile. The greater their power the less anything can grow in their vicinity or under their shadow. Western European history redefined Christianity along cultural lines. Although that synthesis of the Christian religion and culture has largely broken down, especially since the Enlightenment, a truly authentic Biblical Christianity has not reemerged. The American temptation has been to reduce Christianity to a kind of business concerned with dollars, big structures and big programmes. Scandals involving television evangelists are extreme examples of what happens when Christianity is defined in business terms, for businesses are corrupt.

What is going to define the Christianity of the future in Russia and Ukraine? This in my view is the key question that we as theological educators have to face. In addition to evangelism and church planting, we must also see our task as being to call so-called Christendom to Biblical accountability, so that Christianity will cease to be defined in terms of national or ethnic identity or cultural history and liturgical forms, but will once again be defined as it was when people were first called 'Christians'. The followers of Jesus Christ would then be identified by Biblical criteria, historically reliable, verifiable by experience, in the way they lived the Gospel of Jesus Christ as individuals and as families, as communities, at school, at work. As I mentioned earlier, this is why I think it is so important that in this great task of saving souls we should not lose people's minds. We should develop Christian thinking that demonstrates the relevance of Biblical teaching not only for our churches but also for our societies, in the context of public morality.

This is the context in which we must address the second task: to reclaim the historical reliability and truthfulness of the Christian faith. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a saving Gospel. It is the power of God, the hope of the world, primarily because it is true. I think it was William Temple, the great Archbishop of Canterbury, who said the Gospel is true for all if it is true at all. One great missiologist has said the only reason for being a Christian is the overpowering conviction that the Christian faith is true. We have to introduce into our consumer-oriented society, where people are asking

primarily what they can get out of it, the idea that the first question about religion is not whether it is useful, but whether it is true. We must ask this question before we try to answer the question as to what its relevance and usefulness is in our day.

All this of course has enormous implications for the kind of curriculum we develop and the way we teach future pastors, evangelists, and theological teachers. The Christian faith involves the communication of knowledge: knowledge of the foundational facts of the Christian faith as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and centred in the life, person, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church would be in much better shape if our evangelists were our theologians and our theologians were our evangelists. But I think we can keep the two together. It seems to me that many of our friends in the West have already lost the focus. We cannot uncritically copy western models where truth is separated from practice and where the world of 'academia' is separated from the world of 'ecclesia'. Instead of being accountable to the church, the search for religious truth becomes a selfish, elitist, academic exercise that has its own goals rather than that of promoting the glory of Christ and seeing His Gospel build up the church. This, of course, is relevant not only to our theological education programme but also to the kind of literature we print.

The third task in the formation of leadership is to renew the credibility of the Christian witness. All the students in our programme must be out with their teachers three weekends in four ministering in the churches, either in the pioneering ministry or in existing churches. I think that as Evangelicals, as Bible-believing Christians, we must put the restoration of credibility at the very top of our agenda, in education and in dialogue with the Orthodox or the Catholics or the intelligentsia in our universities, where we need to get involved in interdisciplinary discussions and intelligent witness.

The fourth task is to renew not only the credibility of the Christian faith in its claim to truth but also the intelligibility of that faith and therefore its relevance. In the story of the sower in Matthew 13 we read that the birds came and collected the seed, and there was no growth. Why? Interpreting the parable, Jesus says there was no growth because the people did not understand. Coming to faith is not only a question of experience, of emotion, it is also a question of understanding. There is a content to the Gospel, a truth that is communicable. It is vital that we as theological educators (and, I hope, practising churchmen and evangelists) show that teaching is very important. It is part of the Great Commission: not only go and preach the Good News but teach people to obey 'all that I have commanded you'. We have to call evangelists to accountability, to show them that their task is not just a question of stirring emotions and, God forbid, manipulating souls, but of building a solid Biblical foundation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let me now move on a step. The word 'Gospel' is mentioned 76 times in the New Testament. It is a key word. As the Apostle Paul says, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not something that man made up, but was received by revelation from Jesus Christ. Now it is important to note that this word is never mentioned in the plural in the New Testament, but always in the singular. There is no American Gospel, Russian Gospel, Baptist Gospel, Pentecostal Gospel, there is only the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is by the power and authenticity of this Gospel that we are judged. Some of us need to be converted from narrow sectarian interpretations of the Gospel and back to the Biblical Gospel. The Apostle Paul is ready to call 'anathema' on those who would preach a different Gospel or a distorted Gospel.

At the same time, we see Jesus Himself and the New Testament evangelists using considerable flexibility and creative freedom in adapting, translating and variously communicating the Gospel in different political and cultural settings. There are no pre-

packaged, universally applicable formulations of the Gospel given for indoctrination, as if there were some magic power in the language itself. The missionary vocation of the church, including training for the ministry of the church, today faces the task of bringing the Biblical message to the Biblically illiterate, secularised, technological, postcommunist age.

John Stott's book *I Believe in Preaching* has been translated into Russian. One edition of this book has been given a new title: *Between Two Worlds*. The preacher is a person between two worlds: the Biblical world and the contemporary world. We are not fulfilling our task of training if we are not equipping men and women of God to be able to bridge that gap. This is why I agree with those who say that in addition to a good grounding in the Bible we need some training in social sciences, in psychology, philosophy, sociology and so on. The minister needs to be the best equipped person in his community. I often stress the fact that now democracy and freedom have arrived a minister of the Gospel, if he is to be an ambassador of Jesus Christ, must be not only a pastor of this or that church and a preacher in that pulpit on Sunday, but also a public figure. The way he represents the kingdom of God will to a great extent depend on what kind of mental perception the people who meet him gain about the church he pastors. The Gospel must be preached afresh to every generation. There are core questions that are true for every generation; but again, every generation also has its unique questions. As Helmut Thielicke, a German theologian who was an Evangelical and a preacher, once said, 'the Gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence.' The recipients or potential recipients of the Gospel in this part of the world have been changing their ideological, philosophical and cultural addresses so quickly in the past few years that deep confusion reigns. This confusion is a challenge to us and to our programme of training for evangelism.

I would now like to point out two dangers inherent in the process of communicating the Biblical Gospel in a relevant, understandable way to the modern generation.

The first danger is related to the 'God is dead' theology. People who have a neurotic anxiety about being 'relevant' betray the very content, the very core of the Gospel. The result is a loss of transcendence, a this-worldliness where holiness, revelation and miracles are alien concepts. We all know of liberal Protestants and even some liberal Catholics and ecumenists who have given in to this temptation.

The second danger, however, is what I call pious 'otherworldliness', characterised by communicative rigidity. The preacher is so faithful that he belongs to centuries past. He preaches to generations that have already been buried. He lacks creativity and flexibility and fails to address the questions of his own generation.

Both of these dangers betray the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A preoccupation with modernity and relevance, in its attempt to make the Gospel more palatable and attractive to secular minds, renders that Gospel powerless. You have a modern Christian message but it lacks the power of God which changes lives and produces new communities – believing communities with a hope for eternity. On the other hand, an overly pious otherworldliness involves speaking a religious language that nobody out in the world understands, singing songs and hymns that say nothing to the modern generation. There may still be power in the Gospel, but the Gospel will become meaningless for the majority of our generation. And that is our parish, the world out there.

We face, therefore, the task of contextualisation: of remaining faithful to the Biblical Gospel, open to the Holy Spirit, but also of being open to learning in a continual dialogue with our society, with our culture, with our contemporaries, with

our university people, with our working class in the factories. The salt of the Evangelical Gospel in Russia or Ukraine needs to enter the Russian or Ukrainian social and cultural soup.

Finally, let me mention a fifth task: to promote the unity of the family and cooperative ministries wherever possible. Whatever your denomination, whatever your job, whatever your school, if you have been born again you are brothers and sisters whether you like it or not. If we don't accept this, we are offending our Father and we are causing Him pain. I am not talking about some ideologically inspired ecumenism. I am talking about Biblical injunctions and the Biblical teaching on ecclesiology. Biblical metaphors about the church include the body and the family. These and other metaphors are very important. The family needs to come together, just as it is coming together here at this conference. In your own region, gather together the teachers of religion once a month. I surprised some people in our country fifteen years ago when John Stott came at my invitation and I said, 'It would be selfish to have him teach only at our school. Let's organise an interdenominational pastors' conference and invite everyone. Let's not keep our treasures and secrets to ourselves, let's share them in a Gospel-like manner with everyone so that we can overcome divisions as far as possible.'

Several times at this conference we have talked about unnecessary duplication of activities, which very often borders on sin. Remember that producing Christian literature, especially theological textbooks, and running theological schools is a very, very expensive business. Wherever it is possible to do these things together we are under a holy mandate of stewardship, integrity and credibility to try to do so. Where we cannot do these things together, for denominational or geographical or other reasons, let us still work together, wherever we can, in the exchange of programmes, textbooks, staff members and so on. Let us move from competition to complementarity.

In conclusion, let me emphasise that we need to talk in long-range terms. We need to ask not 'how can I impress someone with my school today'; but 'if Jesus tarries, what will things look like in ten years? Or twenty years? What will be the lasting fruit for the Kingdom of God?' We don't need to impress these Americans who come and visit us and bring us a few dollars. We cannot do what we have to do without them; but they cannot do it without us either. We must above all impress our Lord and become an instrument of the Kingdom of God in our societies at this time, or both God and history will judge us.

Again and again, then, we must redefine our priorities, set clear goals. We must make sure that in evangelism and in whatever else is taking place there is consolidated growth in understanding and in maturity and in our commitment to take the whole Great Commission seriously, rising to the challenges of our media, our universities, our scientific institutions, our culture and the whole of our society.