

1-1984

A New Compression of the Evangelical Christian Baptists in the Soviet Union

J A. Hebly

Utrecht University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hebly, J A. (1984) "A New Compression of the Evangelical Christian Baptists in the Soviet Union," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol4/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

**A NEW CONFESSION OF THE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN BAPTISTS
IN THE SOVIET UNION**

by J. A. Hebly

Dr. J. A. (Hans) Hebly (Dutch Reformed) was born in 1923 and received his doctorate in theology from Utrecht University. From 1951 to 1970 he served as a minister in the Netherlands Reformed Church. Since 1970 he has been the deputy director of the Interacademical Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research, Utrecht, the Netherlands. He is the author of Protestants in Russia (1976), Churches in Eastern Europe (1975 in Dutch), The Russians and the World Council of Churches (1978), Churches Within Socialism (1979 in Dutch about the G.D.R.) The Struggle for Peace (1983 in Dutch), and The New Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Christian Baptists (1983 in Dutch).

At the congress of the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB) on December 18, 1979¹ A. J. Mitskevitch reported about the work of a special commission, charged to make a new confession. He told the participants of the congress that unfortunately it would still take a long time before this confession could be presented for approval of the congress. Without further commentary, however, the very next year a preliminary draft was published in the bi-monthly review Bratskiy Vestnik² and the readers were requested to send in their comments.

The composition of the commission was not made known and no information was given about details of the discussions. But that is not surprising when one takes into account the general lack of information about what goes on behind the scenes in the Soviet Union. The fact, however, that this "concept" was published and that the believers--or at least those of them who could lay hands on a copy of their review--were asked for their comments is rather interesting.

Every confession bears the marks of the time and the circumstances of its birth. This is also true of this confession. Two questions should be kept in mind: 1) What is the influence of the fact that the church lives in a society where the Marxist-Leninist ideology is predominant? 2) What is the influence of the fact that the church lives in a society where the Russian Orthodox Church has been the ruling confession for

many centuries?

First, something must be said about the life of the church. In his report to the 1979 congress the general-secretary, Alexiy M. Bychkov, defined the Union of ECB as

a multinational fellowship, consisting of several denominations, which confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior; our fellowship confesses and practices the holy water-baptism by faith of the believers; it recognizes the general priesthood of believers (I Peter 2:9) and is open for brotherly communion with all those who love the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

God has ordained a special way and time for our witness in the vast expanses of our Fatherland. The main direction of the service of our fellowship remains the preaching of the Gospel, the Christian education of those who believe in Jesus Christ and obtainment of unity in Christ with all evangelical movements.

The Union, which was founded in 1944, consists of several denominations. One cannot here go into details of the history of the rise of Protestantism among Russians in the second half of the last century, but simply note that the Union consists of Baptists (joined by the Stundist-movement), Evangelical Christians (who originated in St. Petersburg), Pentecostals, and German-speaking Mennonites.

The most striking aspect of their history is the persecution and discrimination which they have suffered in tsarist Russia, especially before 1905, and in the Soviet Union, especially after 1929. Their existence has been marked by suppression, expulsion, forced emigration, arrest and closure of prayer-houses. After the 1930s only a few scattered congregations and a few pastors were left. During and after the Second World War the situation changed. The regime needed the support of the Christian population and allowed churches to be reopened. Those who had lived in secrecy could come into the open, albeit under many restrictions and close supervision. At the present moment, almost forty years after the founding of the Union, one gets the impression of a rather vigorous church life.

In a statement issued in 1982 by the enlarged Committee of the

All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists (AUCECB), it is stated: "We have our difficulties . . . but on the whole our brotherhood leads a healthy inner-church life."³ Then it mentions the baptism of more than 100,000 members in the last twenty years; the publication or receipt through the United Bible Societies of more than 200,000 copies of religious literature;⁴ the continuation of the Bible course by correspondence, in which more than 300 ministers participated since it started in 1968;⁵ and the course for choir leaders which they decided to set up in December 1979. So far the founding of a theological seminary has not been allowed by the government. This is a serious hindrance for the life of the church because the theological education of a qualified ministry is one of the most urgent needs. The Bible course by correspondence is not the best way for the training of pastors. Secretary-general A.M.Bychkov wrote in an article called "Eben-Haëzer"--the Lord has helped us up to now--published in Bratskiy Vestnik: "never in the history of our brotherhood have we had such possibilities."⁶ In the last ten years more than 100 prayer-houses were built and existing houses were enlarged or renewed, with the help of members of the congregation, often young people, such as in Dzambul.⁷ In the Ukraine some congregations received registration permits and in the North-West of the country thirty-three congregations existed in 1978, there were sixty-two congregations in 1982.⁸ How these new congregations came into being is not always clear. Bychkov mentioned in his report to the 1979 congress the discovery in 1979 in the North-West of the Soviet Union, twenty-two large groups of believers who belonged to the Evangelical Christians. Until then they had never had any contacts with the All-Union Council. According to him, this is also happening in other regions. This gives an idea of the specific problems which they encounter when organizing church life in such a vast country as the U.S.S.R., where services are held in twenty-five⁹ or twenty-six¹⁰ languages, but where the state-controlled communicating channels never communicate religious news items.

An increase in membership is also mentioned in a publication of the Institute for Scientific Atheism,¹¹ which attributes this increase partly to converts from the Russian Orthodox Church. This publication

notes that the number of young people and persons with a higher level of education has increased during the last ten years.

In a speech at the Rüschnikon Seminary (February 19, 1982, Switzerland), Sergey Nikolaev, a senior-presbyter of the Union, declared:

We are grateful for our present situation . . . This situation, as it is now, has been developing as part of a process that started about fifteen years ago. The state recognizes that it is not absolutely necessary that there be a conflict between religion and public order . . . During the days of Khrushchev the church really lived under pressure. He had predicted that the church should be liquidated before the eighties; we are grateful for what we have now.¹²

One encounters such a reference to the Khrushchev period not only in the official publication of the Union, Bratskiy Vestnik. A new self-consciousness appears also in the words of Bychkov in a plenary session of the All-Union Council in 1981.

We expressed our conviction that the present and the future of our church are in the hands of Jesus Christ, who makes us free from the dependence upon the ideological superstructure of our society. We participate with equal rights in the work for the wellbeing of our neighbors and of the society as a whole. We consider¹³ ourselves as an inalienable part of society.

In his report to the congress of 1979 he did not conceal, however, that there are some problematic aspects in the relationships between Christians and society. But he did not make it clear what these problems are. This, of course, is a point which we should always bear in mind when reading publications from the Soviet Union. The churches are always bound to give a positive image of church life and must condemn all critical evaluations of their situation as anti-Soviet propaganda.

One of their main problems, however, was that the inner unity of the Union gets much attention in Bratskiy Vestnik. "Discords, schisms and the propagation of false doctrines, which can create confusion among young Christians" were mentioned quite often. Sometimes even popular melodies and jazz are used in services, as well as songs which are in contradiction to the spirit of the doctrine.¹⁴ This may be a sign of a certain resistance to the paternalistic atmosphere which prevails in the

parishes and of the wish of the younger generation to find a modern style of church life. The biggest problem is undoubtedly the relationship with the Council of Churches of ECB--the so-called Initsiativniki or Reform Baptists, who separated from the Union in 1960. In a statement of the Enlarged Committee in 1982 it is said that in this Council many internal divisions exist and that mutual insinuations, the rise of false doctrines, the incitement of children against their parents, the willful creation of conflict situations with the authorities and the refusal of registering with the state often occur.¹⁵ After the enforced expatriation of Georgiy Vins (April 1979) and the emigration to West Germany of a large number of leading members of the Council, the leadership of these churches has been decimated. Some of their large congregations have asked for and obtained registration by the state (Kiev, Rostov, Riga, Brest, Novosibirsk). Twenty-two representatives of these sixty-four autonomous and registered congregations met in June 1983 with representatives of the Baptist World Alliance to discuss closer cooperation; members of the AEUCB were also present at this meeting. This was a very positive development and gives real hope that they will be able to settle their present differences. These separated groups have passed through very bitter years of persecution and a number of believers are still in prison. According to Vins, in August 1981 there were 112 imprisoned.¹⁶

Another group, namely "the Christians of the Evangelical Faith," the Pentecostals, is only in part member of the Union. Of the non-aligned parishes some are registered and others lead an illegal existence. An autonomous Union of Pentecostal Congregations has not been allowed by the government.¹⁷ There have been contacts with regional representatives of the Union in recent years in White Russia, Moldavia, and the Ukraine, but in the Eastern regions relations seem to be more difficult. The main reason for their non-alignment is glossolalia (speaking in tongues). In the agreement of August 1945, on the basis of which the Pentecostals joined the Union, it was stated that baptism by the Holy Spirit can take place with or without the signs of tongues. This seems, however, in practice to cause a lot of difficulties, although members of autonomous congregations are admitted to the Bible

Course of the Union.

There are other groups which threaten the unity. Bychkov mentioned in his report to the congress not only Jehovah Witnesses, but also Walterians, followers of Walter Koche, who seem to adhere to spiritism, and the Talinn-movement which puts emphasis on faith-healing.

The struggle for unity has been a characteristic of the evangelical movement in Russia from the very beginning and the interference of the state has been a constant influence since 1884. In that year the first congress was organized to bring together representatives of the different groups. But after two days the tsarist police put an end to the meeting.

It was the Communist government which brought representatives from the Baptists and the Evangelical Christians together in 1944 for the establishment of a Union. Some of them came directly from prison camps. The Communist government, which does not appreciate faction building in its own party, wished to unite the different groups which existed more or less illegally, so as to be able to control their organization. The enforced character of this union, which at the same time, however, was sought after by the leadership of the separated movements, has been a continuous drawback for the Union. Schisms have occurred from the beginning and their adherents have suffered harassments at the hands of the authorities. Real unity can only flourish in freedom; political and social pressure preclude a sound process of integration and do not lead to the elimination of mistrust and prejudices.

In the setting of this constant struggle for unity we have also to place the endeavors to formulate a new and common confession of faith, which up until now did not exist. The main groups of Baptists and Evangelical Christians had their own historical confessions and there was a sort of agreement to regard the confession of Kargel¹⁹ as an authoritative statement of faith "because brother Kargel was respected and admired by both the Baptists and the Evangelical Christians." I.V.Kargel (1849-1937) wrote this confession in 1913.

The new confession is clearly intended to strengthen the inner spiritual unity of the Union and to further the reunion with the separated groups. This last aspect is also agreeable to the state which

wants a unified structure with a strong leadership to be able to supervise more easily what is going on in the congregations. That might also be the reason why the publication of this confession was allowed by the authorities. In general, Communist governments do not like modern confessions of faith. They regard religion as a remnant of the past and tend to emphasize the outdated character of life and doctrine of the churches. A modern confession could be a sign of a living faith, acceptable to modern people; the Communist authorities do not appreciate this. They might have come to the conclusion that this confession after all does not deal with modern human problems for which they pretend to have the answers and that it might help the unification of the faithful in one comprehensive union.

The confession consists of 13 articles: Scripture as the inspired Word of God and the foundation of the Christian faith; God, the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit; the human being and the way of salvation; the church in its three aspects--the universal church, the local church and the house church; baptism, Holy Supper, Sunday, marriage and family; the second coming of Christ, and the relationship with the state.

As stated above it is important to look at the context in which the confession is born. The most striking aspect in this case is the fact that the Soviet society is shaped along Marxist-Leninist lines. Marxism-Leninism is the ruling ideology and the Soviet Union can be called a "confessional" state, where Christians are tolerated but at the same time restricted in the exercise of a number of civil liberties which are normal and self-evident for Westerners. The Constitution defines the freedom of anti-religious propaganda and of religious worship; the only function the church can have is to satisfy the religious needs of the faithful. But these are considered to be very limited. Organized forms of private religious education are forbidden, neither may they organize youth meetings, circles for Biblical or literary studies, libraries, study circles on social or ethical questions, or develop diaconal activities. The church is confined to a religious ghetto and has no possibility to deal in an autonomous and independent way with social and political questions.

In the confession it can clearly be noticed that there is a tendency to turn away from society and to concentrate on the inner spiritual life of the faithful and of the religious community. The world and its problems seems to disappear out of sight, the missionary task of the church is not emphasized in the article on the Holy Spirit, charity and diaconate, nor has the social responsibility of the church been mentioned. The Old Testament, with its preaching of justice and its emphasis on a prophetic witness, is scarcely quoted (43 times, the New Testament 304 times); the New Testament preaching of the Kingdom of God is not mentioned; in the article on the second coming of Christ we see a shift to premillenarian views, which may be a sign of a more negative view of history and culture than we find in older confessions. Emphasis lies on personal salvation and sanctification and an individualistic conception of the Christian faith. In the article on the second coming of Jesus Christ and the final judgment we can see the vigilant herd of the faithful, withdrawn and saved from the world and the judgment, which will come over it. All ethical questions which are not directly linked with personal sanctification are left out. The life of the church and the life of the state are of a totally different character, as is stated in the last article on the relationship with the state: "We recognize our duty to struggle against evil in society and to cooperate through a devout life and through prayer in the victory of the good, of freedom and justice and to seek peace for all people."

But this Confession does not speak about love for the enemy as did the old confession of the Evangelical Christians, probably because this idea is not agreeable to the authorities. One could have expected that in a modern confession of a church, which actively participates in the peace actions of the state and which devotes so much space to this peace work in its only publication, more should be said about the deep, Christian motivation of this aspect of its activities.

The context in which this confession was written is that of a powerful totalitarian state which has clearly defined the limits of church activities. It is, however, interesting to note that while the confession does not exceed these boundaries, neither does it adapt to the prevailing ideology. The ECB seem to have accepted their position at

the fringe of society and they try to define a certain amount of inner space where freedom can be found, small as this may be. They do not confront the ideology but refuse to be totally marked by it. They try to define their own stance amidst an ideologically uniform society. This is, for instance, clear in the article on "The Human Being." On this important point of anthropology, the church offers a clear alternative to the official ideology, which pretends to create the new human being. This creation of the new human being is happening in history. In the historical development under the leadership of the Communist Party the human being is freed from all alienation and the new human being is born. The confession speaks, however, of a birth from above as a gift of God, through the Holy Spirit. The new human being is not the final product of an historical process but fruit of faith and a gift of God. Here an alternative anthropology is put over against the official ideology and the regime, which has its own doctrines, realizes quite well that propagation of these views might be dangerous.

The fact that Christians who live in a society dominated by a Marxist-Leninist ideology are forced to live in a religious ghetto is bound to influence their Christian life. In the GDR the term "inward emigration" has been coined, which indicates a process of interiorization which coincides with a retreat from the struggle to realize Christian convictions in social and political life. It is a well-known fact that interiorization of the faith often coincides with an outward adaptation and conformism. Those who do not or can not relate their faith to the world will in the long run become secularized, in that they will conform to the current norms and values. Life is then divided into two separate spheres, a cleavage between church and world is accentuated and certain aspects of the Biblical message are neglected. In a book published in 1974 by the Museum for Religion and Atheism we find an article about the anti-humanism of Baptists' religious morals. The author attacks Baptist ethics and expresses the reproach that preaching the love of God isolates believers from society and prevents them from creating new social structures on earth.

This is a common argument in atheist propaganda. But the author also makes a rather interesting remark. He says: "It would be wrong to

suggest that the believers who hear this preaching of moral isolation from the world act accordingly in their personal behavior." And he provides examples of how believers in their lives conform to the generally accepted norms. At the same time he pointed out that the Baptists stress the affinity of their social principles with those of Communism. "Christ preached 2000 years ago those clear precepts and great principles which are now realized by the Communist Party." This would then justify their participation in the social and political life of the country and lead them not to develop their own social principles.

This conformism of the official church is especially clear in the peace work, where the church acts in total harmony with the state and never utters any criticisms in respect to the politics of their own government. It would, however, be wrong to suggest that faith in God keeps the believers away from developing their own social principles, as the atheists suggest. The reason for the inward emigration which we find in the confession is rather to be found in the repressive climate in which the believers have always lived. When the pressure seemed to lessen briefly, just after the Revolution, there came to the fore a very interesting social engagement, which unfortunately was not allowed to develop.

We cannot deal in detail with the different articles of this confession but can only indicate some major trends. What is striking in particular is the way in which the confession speaks about the church and the ministry. The confession speaks about the universal church, the bride of Christ, His body, a mystery now manifested (Colossians 1:27) and about the local congregation, but it does not mention the structure of the Union. This is an inconsistency and it is not clear at first sight why the Union "as a free Union of churches, congregations and groups" (art. 1, Statutes) has no place in the confession. Perhaps they wanted to avoid emphasizing the existing differences between the spirit of the statutes and traditional Baptist principles of local autonomy. In the practice of the Union, based on the statutes, which speaks more of the duties of the congregation and the rights of the Union-leadership than of the right of the congregation and the duties of the leadership, a rather strong hierarchical and authoritarian principle comes to the

fore. The only allusion to this in the confession is the mention of the highest servants, to whom the laying on of hands is entrusted. By the highest servants are meant the senior-presbyters, who have the supervision over a republic or a large district and who are recommended by the leadership of the Union for election in the district council of pastors. The confession keeps silent about the structures of the Union which have episcopal traits and at the same time also about the general priesthood of believers (I Peter 2:9), which is one of the basic principles of the Baptist tradition. There may be two reasons for that. One is the pressure from the side of the state, which wants a strong central leadership, through which it can control, supervise, and influence the practical affairs of the Union and the congregations. We know that the democratic principle and the influence from below are not very popular in Soviet life. With this general climate of authoritarianism there may also be the second reason, namely the influence of the great historical Orthodox tradition which has shaped the mentality of the people. The Orthodox Church has a very hierarchical structure and for many in the U.S.S.R. this may seem to be the normal way to organize church life.

The mention of the Orthodox Church brings up the last point. Is there in this confession a noticeable influence of the Orthodox tradition? We know that the variety of the Baptist religious expressions, at least in Europe, is due to the meeting and confrontation with very different national, historical churches. This is undoubtedly also the case for the Russian Baptists, who from the very beginning have lived in a constant and often tragic confrontation with the ruling Russian Orthodox Church and whose membership in large part originates in the Orthodox Church. For that reason it is not astonishing that traces of Orthodox spirituality might be found in their religious life. We may encounter them in the way in which they sing and behave during the services, in their emphasis on the suffering church, on the shedding of tears and on fasting, which is especially mentioned in this confession. But there seem to be other indications in the confession, e.g., in the Christology, the doctrine of Jesus Christ, in art. 4. In many pulpits in the prayer-houses in the Soviet Union we can read the words "We preach

the crucified Christ." But in the article about Jesus Christ we read only in the last paragraph about the Savior and His work of redemption. Here we read first and foremost about Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity. The All-ruler, the Pantocrator of the Byzantine icons is more emphasized than the Crucified, the eternal Son of God more than the Messiah of Israel, the All-present more than the friend of sinners and publicans. Here and in the emphasis on the Trinitarian doctrine we see a closer affinity to Orthodox thinking than in earlier confessional documents. In the article on the human being and salvation we also encounter a remarkable difference with traditional Baptist principles, when it is said that the human being has a free will and that it depends on him or her to accept or refuse salvation. The traditional confession of the German Baptists, which was also accepted by the Russian Baptists (Oncken's Confession of 1847), follows the doctrine of election and predestination as it is found in traditional Calvinist teachings. The new Confession seems in this respect to be much nearer to the principle which we find in the catechisms of the Orthodox Church.

However, in this emphasis on the free will one may also see a reaction to the general climate of society. One can hardly imagine what impression it makes on a Soviet citizen, who lives in a regulated society, subjected to social pressures and supervision, when he or she reads in the confession of the church, that it is the will of the Creator that he or she can really obey or disobey God, that it depends on him or her to accept or reject ultimate salvation. This will certainly convey a new dignity to him or her and a much-neglected aspect of the human personality receives thereby a new meaning.

In conclusion, it was not the intention to give a detailed description of the confession of the Union of ECB in the U.S.S.R.. What I wanted to do was to discover something of the spiritual life of this church through this confession. We usually hear about the difficulties under which Christians live in the Soviet Union, but there is more to it. There is not only a suffering church, but a confessing and above all a singing church. I am a critical observer of church life in the Soviet Union, but at the same time deeply impressed by their witness of perseverance and fidelity and by their deep spirituality of which this

draft of a new confession is a clear expression. Their struggle for unity in faith and church life is a challenge to us all.

NOTES

¹Bratskiy Vestnik (BV) [Brotherly Messenger]. 1980, 1-2, p. 42.

²BV, 1980, 4, pp. 32-54.

³BV, 1982, 3, p. 63.

⁴BV, 1981, 5, pp. 53-57; see BV, 1982, 5, p. 64.

⁵BV, 1982, 5, p. 64.

⁶Ibid., pp. 64-70.

⁷BV, 1982, 1, p. 80; Informationsdienst G2W, 1982, p. 14.

⁸Informationsdienst G2W, 1982, p. 4; BV, 1981, 4, p. 55: congregations received registration in 1980. In his speech to the All-Union Congress, Moscow 1979, Bychkov gave some statistical information.

⁹BV, 1982, 5, p. 64.

¹⁰BV, 1982, 6, p. 53.

¹¹Voprosy naučnogo ateizma (vyp. 24), Moskva 1979, p. 98.

¹²Informationsdienst G2W, 1982, 4, p. 5.

¹³BV, 1981, 5, p. 52. This is a quotation from the 42d congress of December 1979. To be found BV, 1980, 1-2, p. 31 and not as mentioned 1980. The congress of 1944--on which the Union was founded--is considered as the 37th, because the Baptists hold 26 congresses and the Evangelical Christians 10 before the Union came into existence. See BV, 1982, 5, p. 66.

¹⁴BV, 1981, 5, p. 95.

¹⁵BV, 1982, 3, pp. 61-64.

¹⁶Informationsdienst G2W, 1981, pp. 17, 20. See G2W, 1982, p. 13,

letter G. Kruchkov, 3 persons were arrested in the last months.

¹⁷M. Rowe, "The position of Pentecostals in the USSR," Keston News Service 92, 18-2-80.

¹⁸BV, 1980, 1-2. See also BV, 1978, 5, p. 29.

¹⁹BV, 1966, 4.