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**FISHING IN THE NEIGHBOR'S POND:
Mission and Proselytism as Challenge to Theology and Church Life
in Eastern Europe**

by Miroslav Volf

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1. "Mission" vs. "Proselytism"

A good way to describe the situation in Eastern Europe today is to say that yesterday's dreams have turned into today's nightmares. This holds true in politics and economy, but is no less true in church life. One need not be an expert in Eastern European Christianity to know that at the very center of the turmoil churches are experiencing are the issues of "mission" and "proselytism." What precisely is the problem? One way to put it is to say that what Protestants (here mainly of the evangelical kind) consider legitimate and mandated 'mission,' Catholics and Orthodox (whom I will call in the rest of this paper 'established churches') consider illegitimate and culturally damaging 'proselytism.'

For all churches in Eastern Europe the peaceful revolution of 1989 seemed a dawn of a new era. They were discriminated against and even persecuted under Communist totalitarianism; now under democracy they were hoping for unhindered flourishing. Instead, new conflicts emerged, this time not with the government, but with each other. Churches were now politically free to pursue their respective goals, but they became trapped in the battle over their own colliding goals.

Catholics and Orthodox were hoping that some of the significant social influence they had before the communists came into power would be regained. After all, for centuries they served as guardians of various Eastern European cultures, preserving the identity of their peoples. Hence to be Croatian was to be a Catholic Christian, to be Serbian was to be an Orthodox Christian, etc. Yet the years of communist domination has partly de-Christianized Eastern European cultures. Moreover, the new democratic order has brought a wide variety of other cultural shapers (both Christian and non-Christian) into play, and guarantees them the right of existence. The same historical change that freed established churches to exert themselves again as a major cultural force has provided space for a wide variety of other forces which compete with the established churches. Conflict was pre-programmed. It was only a question of how it would be carried out: within the bounds set by new the democratic order or using the skills honed in the totalitarian past, through civil dialogue or brute force, with regard and love for one another or with indifference and even hate.

Evangelical Protestants, always a small minority in Eastern European countries, also had great hopes for democracy. Above all, they wanted freedom to worship God and proclaim the Good News to non-Christians. The trouble was that their definition of who were 'non-Christians' included most members of the established churches. What compounded the trouble, however, was the zeal of various Christian groups from abroad who saw the 'lifting of the iron curtain' as the unique opportunity to proclaim Jesus Christ within what they used to call an 'evil empire.' In a 1993 study, the Center for Civil Society in Seattle determined that approximately 760 different western religious groups, churches, and parachurch organizations were at work in former Communist nations of Europe. There were 200 to 350 different groups in the Commonwealth of Independent States, for instance, and 120 to 200 in Romania.

What seemed a 'mission' to Protestants was seen, of course, as proselytism by the established churches of Eastern Europe. The following statement by Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia at the Conference of European Churches in 1992 expresses well their sentiment:

We thought with certitude that after we received freedom, the solidarity of our Christian brothers in the West would help us to organize and restore our witness to Christ in our country, and our catechetical and missionary work in order to enlighten those educated in atheism and still ignoring Christ. And this would be in the spirit of the manifestation of the "joint witness" to Christ excluding and condemning any proselytism . . .

And the long-endured and desired changes for the best came. The atheist totalitarian system of prohibiting the free witness to Christ broke down. And what happened?

When the territories of central and eastern Europe were opened for the public missionary endeavor and evangelism, the peoples rooted in millennial Orthodox traditions became objects of proselytism for numerous zealots calling themselves missionaries and preachers who came from outside to the new markets. We had a different idea about the joint Christian witness and the brotherly solidarity in strengthening our preaching of Christ and promoting cooperation in the ecumenical community in conditions of freedom. . . . Of course our people will also survive this invasion, as it survived even worse times of persecution and attacks from the atheist propaganda. We withstood at that time, we shall withstand also now, since God was with us at that time and will be with us now.

From the perspective of the established churches, foreign missionaries, equipped latest fishing gear, are eagerly fishing for poor souls in the Orthodox pond left partly unattended because of the decades of the Communist rule. It is understandable that the Primates of the Orthodox Churches would issue a Message which states that "the consideration of these (Orthodox) countries as 'terra missionis' is unacceptable, since in these countries the Gospel has already been preached for many centuries" and insists that genuine mission is properly "carried out in non-Christian countries and among non-Christian people."

From the perspective of Protestants, on the other hand, the negative reaction of the Orthodox (and Catholics) to what they believe is the 'Gospel' just confirms that they need to be evangelized. When the statements by Patriarchs are given political legitimacy by legislation which prohibits or strongly curtails work of Evangelical groups then these groups feel that their fears are confirmed-the 'black Mafia' may turn out to be more hostile to genuine Christianity than the 'red Mafia' ever was; the established churches are interested only in democracy when it serves to consolidate their power.

Before I go on to isolate some significant differences between Protestant and established churches in Eastern Europe that contribute to the conflict over mission and proselytism, I want to underline that this is not the only place we encounter the problem of proselytism in Eastern Europe. On the one hand, there are non-Christian religious groups (like Moonies) looking to establish a foothold in the space that has been opened after the fall of the iron curtain; here proselytism is from the established churches to the non-Christian sects (with established churches sometimes unable and occasionally unwilling to distinguish between Evangelical organizations and non-Christian sects). Here the problem of proselytism is an inter-faith issue.

On the other hand, there is a good deal of proselytizing going on within the Protestant churches themselves. Pastors of the Baptist and Pentecostal churches often complain about independent charismatic churches coming into their cities, buying out either their best (or the most troublesome) co-workers, stealing their sheep (especially the young ones), and in the process maligning the old sheep-fold as unspiritual and culturally backward (because they do not believe in quite the same amount of miracles as the newcomers and will not tolerate more contemporary styles of worship and dress). Here, for the most part, the problem of proselytism is an issue of personal power, cultural taste, generational difference, and financial independence; the differences in theology are secondary.

2. Differing Perspective

Though proselytism exists on various levels, the most disturbing problems surrounding the issue of proselytism in Eastern Europe occur in relations between established churches and Protestants. Here are some significant differences between them that contribute to the conflict over mission and proselytism.

First, *differing perspectives on the relation between church and culture*. Established churches consider themselves as guardians of the existing cultures and peoples, who need to be freed both from Communist and negative Western influences. They want to preserve the Orthodox or Catholic character of their cultures. Protestants in Eastern Europe tend to see themselves as addressing individuals, often with the purpose of freeing them from the weight of traditional culture. They see the Gospel for the most part in contrast to existing culture.

Second, *differing perspectives on the relation between church and state*. Established churches in Eastern Europe have, for the most part, not yet consciously accepted of all

the implications of democracy as a political system (such as cultural pluralism and market of goods and ideas); they still do not see themselves as only one of the players in the social game. Evangelical Protestants, I believe, are split on the issue. Those more rooted in Eastern European traditions tend to welcome democracy because it means freedom but desire to have it without pluralism and competition; their understanding of the basic pattern of relation between state and church is the same as that of established churches; only the Evangelicals and established churches find themselves on opposite sides as to particular issues. Those more influenced by Western ideas tend, on the other hand, to accept plurality as a good that needs to be protected and competition of ideas as a value to be cherished. Their understanding of the basic pattern of relations between state and church tends to be different from that of the established churches.

Third, *differing perspectives on what it means to be a Christian*. Established churches are like mothers who embrace all children born to them-i.e. all those who were baptized. There are various degrees of belonging to the church; there is a place for saints, and there is a place for sinners; are all welcome. Protestants, on the other hand, are like stern fathers and accept only those who behave-who actively believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and act in accordance with their belief. Hence for Protestants, all those who do not 'behave'-believe and act-are legitimate objects of evangelization. Moreover, they ought to be encouraged to leave the places they are not challenged to 'behave' and join the communities of 'behavers'-the true believers.

Fourth, *differing perspectives on the church*. For established churches 'the church' is one; if there is in fact more than one church (or bodies that call themselves 'church'), this is a serious problem that must be solved by ecumenical efforts (or, in some more conservative circles, by joining the one true church which existed through the centuries). Switching from one church to the other is not allowed on theological grounds. For Protestants the church that is one is invisible; there are many visible churches. Some are bad, and ought to be left; others are good, and can be joined if they suit one's personality, interests, and needs. Switching from one church to the other, provided they are 'bible-believing' is not unlike switching from 'Pepsi' to 'Coke' (or, if you are like many Eastern European Protestants and prefer beer, not unlike switching from 'Budweiser' to 'Heineken').

These, I believe, are four major differences between established and Evangelical churches that need to be discussed as we approach the issue of mission and proselytism in Eastern Europe. A closer look at them will reveal that they are not simply theological in nature; they have an important sociological dimension. The internal culture and institutions of the established churches in Eastern Europe are to a large extent still more fitted to the pre-modern than modern societies, whereas this is exactly opposite for the Evangelical churches. Since the Eastern European societies are caught in transition from pre-modern to modern societies, social conflicts involved in such transition are also felt in the life of the church. Some conversions at least, though deeply spiritual, are also triggered by important social factors-they are protests against the old social status quo in favor of more flexible and pluralistic democratic social structures.

Instead of addressing these major differences between established and Protestant churches in greater detail, I want to indicate three related tasks facing Protestant churches in Eastern Europe. First is developing contextual theology; second is dialogue with the established churches; third is promoting reconciliation between cultures. If Protestants (I will identify with them in the following and speak in first person plural) place the mission to proclaim Christ along with the pursuit of these three tasks, there is hope that the conflict between established churches and Protestants over mission and proselytism will be significantly reduced.

3. Contextual Theology

It is a responsibility of Protestant churches in Eastern Europe to develop a theology that, in addition to being rooted in the Holy Scriptures, is sensitive to the needs, struggles, and aspirations of the churches and the peoples in diverse Eastern European countries. This will be a *contextual* theology, to use a term that has become popular in recent decades around the globe.

When we talk about contextual theology I find it helpful to make a simple but important distinction between contextual products and contextual advertising. Let me give you an example. An international firm, such as Coca-Cola or McDonalds, comes to Eastern Europe with a ready designed product which it wants to sell. In order to sell it, however, it has to persuade locals to buy it. So it may use local people and local symbols to lure locals into buying a non-local product (though often local youth tend to buy the product *because* it is Western). This is contextual advertising. In contrast, a contextual product is when a firm in Romania or Russia designs and makes a product for use in Romania or Russia.

What we need, I propose, is not a 'Coca-Cola or McDonalds kind of contextualization,' not contextual advertising but local products. Our theological schools should not be simply import agencies and local advertising firms for foreign theological companies. I am not suggesting that we should not import, translate and publish important works produced elsewhere. But this is not all we should do, and this is not the main thing we should do. We must learn from our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, from those who have a centuries long and rich tradition of Protestant theological reflection (as in the West) and those who live in similar contexts as ours (those in the so called Two-Thirds World). For a while it will be good to have some of them even on site as expert consultants. We cannot isolate ourselves from others because there is only one Lord and the church of Jesus Christ around the world is one. But in communion with "all the saints," we should create and disseminate our own products. If we do not, we will rightly be criticized by our compatriots as 'foreigners' or, in some countries, as 'westernizers.' Our churches and theological institutions should be places where local products are developed, products that can be shared with the rest of the world.

Let me qualify what I am saying here. In a very important sense, we, the followers of Jesus Christ, are not supposed to be inventing anything new; the Gospel is one and the same for the whole world. It is the story of our Lord Jesus Christ who came into the

world to proclaim and enact the good news, to die and rise for the salvation of the world. When we talk about contextual products, we need to keep in mind that the Gospel is first of all something *given to us* rather than created by us. Yet, our own context requires that we preach the one Gospel in our own language and think with our own heads how the Gospel intersects with the specific cultures in which God has placed us. The voices that respond to the voice of the one Good Shepherd are shaped by the cultures from which they come.

Let me give an illustration. I was at one of the many conferences organized in the wake of the downfall of communism whose purpose was to explore the mission in Eastern Europe. I profoundly appreciate the enthusiasm and efforts of such gatherings, though occasionally the zeal is misplaced. A first-rate video presentation was shown at one of the conferences I attended. A line from it stuck with me. With pictures of Red Square with its beautiful church on the screen, the narrator insisted with much passion that we "need to bring Jesus" to Russia. That was probably an innocent comment, but it set me thinking about how Western Christians talk about the mission and how they sometimes carry it out. I understand, I thought to myself, the need to preach the Gospel in Russia. But what kind of a poor little Jesus would that be whom we would have to bring to Russia (or to any other part of the globe for that matter)? Shall we put him in a box like some idol, write on it "Fragile, handle with care," and transport him over, hoping for his safe arrival? I could not help wondering, who is serving whom when people carry their gods into the foreign lands.

Even in the furthest regions of the world, Jesus Christ is already there before we ever set foot on them, though he may not be recognized or worshipped. In Eastern Europe Jesus Christ has been not only present but also worshipped by millions of people for centuries. Maybe he was worshipped in a wrong way, maybe only half-heartedly, maybe even only with lips. Yet he was there and he was worshipped. We need to recognize this when we talk about the mission in Eastern Europe and about theology in Eastern Europe. Jesus does not need to be brought to Eastern Europe. What we need to do is to *wash the face of Jesus*, that beautiful face that has been dirtied not only by Communist propaganda but also by so many compromises our churches-both the established and Evangelical-have made through the centuries.

If one aspect of our mission is to wash the face of Jesus, an important aspect of our Evangelical theologizing must be to rediscover the authentic Eastern European faces of Jesus. Does Jesus have Eastern European faces, a Moldavian or a Macedonian face, you may ask? Yes, he does. He is "the true light, which enlightens everyone"; he is the unconquerable light that "shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it." When he comes into any culture, he does not come to a strange land but 'to what is his own.' This holds true even if that culture holds him a stranger, even if only a few receive him and "believe in his name" (John 1:5.9.11.12). The eternal light of God shines in the darkness of our world refracted through the prisms of our multiple cultures. To change the image, our task is not to import Jesus, like some exotic article from a foreign land. We must proclaim Jesus and, in obedience to his message of salvation, (re)discover the Croatian or Slovakian, Hungarian or Serbian face of Jesus.

4. Hearing the Truth, Speaking the Truth

The need to (re)discover the Eastern European faces of Jesus brings me to the second task for Evangelical Christians. It concerns the religious context in Eastern Europe. The culture of most Eastern European countries has been shaped profoundly and indelibly by Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism. Since I am dealing here mainly with Eastern Europe (as distinct from Central Europe) I will concentrate my comments on the relation between Protestants and Orthodox. The same applies, however, for the relation between Protestants and Catholics.

As I indicated at the beginning of my paper, presently there are serious tensions between the Orthodox Church and various Protestant Churches in Eastern Europe. There are many reasons for these tensions, some theological, others sociological, one of them being the uncertainty of the Orthodox Church in dealing with the processes of democratization currently going on in Eastern European countries. I have mentioned some of these earlier in the paper and instead of elaborating on them here, I want to concentrate on how we as Protestants should deal with the tensions.

In the heat of the battle, especially when one finds oneself cornered as a weak minority, it is difficult to do anything else but fight back. But we, the followers of the Messiah who, when abused did not abuse, when suffered did not threaten (1 Peter 2:23), should have both the courage and the strength not simply to 'cross the sword' with our presumed enemy but to extend him our hand. It is sometimes tempting to repay theological abuse with theological abuse. Orthodox believers call Protestants "intruders" and "innovators." They will not recognize Protestants as a church, insisting that they are a dangerous sect. What do we do? Protestants call Orthodox priests "power-hungry" and denounce them as promoters of false human traditions, and insist that they are an apostate church.

I think Protestants need to do all they can to resist being drawn into such an exchange of theological abuses. We should rather suffer violence than inflict it; we should return insult with blessing (1 Peter 3:9). From the perspective of pop psychology or quasi-revolutionary rhetoric, such a refusal to fight would be at best described as unhealthy and at worst thought of as worthy only of "despicable rubble" (as Karl Marx has put it). In fact, it speaks of sovereign strength and sets a profound and genuinely Christian revolution in motion. In all our relationships we need to be trained in this revolutionary refusal to let our behavior be defined by our enemies but to follow in the footsteps of the crucified Messiah.

Most Protestants in Eastern Europe would agree with this. They know better than to go after the Orthodox with the sword in their hand. But I am not so sure that they are willing to extend to them a brotherly or sisterly hand. The impression one gets from various publications and speeches is that Evangelical theology stands in almost complete opposition to Orthodox theology and that Evangelical churches stand in total opposition to Orthodox churches. To pick up the terminology from 1 Peter that I used earlier, Protestants do not abuse them as the Orthodox seem to abuse Protestants, but neither do they bless them. What would happen, however, if we repaid their seeming abuse with

blessings, as 1 Peter teaches us? What would happen if we started praying for a spiritual renewal within the Orthodox church, a renewal that would not be without a precedent in Orthodox history? What would happen if we praised them for preserving the right doctrine about Christ and the Trinity, and fighting strenuously today against the forces that find these doctrines wrong and oppressive? What would happen if we admired them for preserving the memory of some profoundly Christian men and women whom we would do well to emulate?

Of course, Orthodox theology differs from Protestant theology on many issues. The question is, what should we do with these differences? One thing we certainly should not do is pretend that they do not exist or that they are unimportant. Whoever disregards differences in the name of some superficial love, will trip over those differences in surprising places. Yet the way to deal with differences is not to state what we believe and tell the Orthodox Church that we are absolutely right and they are absolutely wrong. Why not? Because even if God's word is absolute, our knowledge of God's word is not. Why not? Because we are not gods but limited human beings, who are sinful to boot.

How, then, should we proceed? First we need to *listen*. We need to listen to what the Orthodox Church says about itself. If we disagree with Orthodox theology, we should disagree with what they actually believe, and not with what we imagine they believe, or even with what we have read in one or two of their books that they believe. Moreover, as we want to portray to them the best possibilities of our theology, we should listen to the best presentations of their theology (while not disregarding how sometimes good theology gets corrupted when translated at the popular level). In addition to listening to what they say about themselves, we should listen carefully to *what they say about us*, to their criticism of our theology and practice. Often those with whom we are in conflict distort our image, but sometimes in their distorted image of us we can discover a truth about ourselves that we and our friends are too blind to see or too cowardly to say.

Second, we must *testify*. This second step is as important as the first. We must testify to the Orthodox Church about what we believe to be the truth of God's Word as intelligently as we can, as gently as we can, and above all as faithfully to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as we can. Jesus said: "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me" (John 7:16). How much more is this true of us, his disciples. Our teaching is not ours but belongs to the one who sent us. We are not at liberty to change what we believe to be true in order to reach some cheap consensus; we have a mandate "to testify to the *truth*" (John 18:37) not to find the least common denominator. Truth does not necessarily lie half-way between two opposing opinions. And it does not necessarily lie in either of the opinions, nor in both of them (as some master-dialecticians would want us to believe). Truth lies where it lies, and our task is to point to it, wherever it lies, with us or with others. For it is the truth that will set us free.

If we put the two things together-the need to listen and the need to testify-and apply them not only to the Orthodox Church but to culture at large, the results, I believe, will be astounding. If we are persistent, there will emerge among us indigenous theologies that let the Romanian or Russian face of Jesus Christ shine upon Romanian or Russian lands.

The question is, do we have enough humility, discernment, and courage to speak the truth and to hear the truth when spoken to us? It is the possession of *theological virtues* of humility, discernment, and courage, more than the right perspectives on any single theological issue, that we need in Eastern Europe today. Our churches must be training grounds for humble, discerning, and courageous people who will fearlessly put their minds in the service of God's kingdom for the good of God's people and of culture at large.

5. Breaking Down the Dividing Wall

With respect to culture at large many Protestants in Eastern Europe highlight the need for moral education and social involvement as the key issues that need addressing. They are right to do so. In Marxist societies both moral reflection and moral behavior have seriously atrophied. Moral reflection, we were told, was the bourgeois thing to do; the socialist thing to do was to change the structures. Moral behavior, though officially encouraged (what society can afford not to encourage it?) was seriously undermined by lack of philosophical grounding, irrational laws, and corrupt officials. As Christians we need to recover the moral vision and build communities which will embody moral practices. To live virtuous lives, in addition to the union with Christ, we need communion with our brothers and sisters. The church, as a community of those who follow Christ, provides what sociologists call "plausibility structures" which make transmission of moral values and moral practices effective.

There is one theme touching social involvement that I do not find addressed by many Protestants and which is absolutely crucial in Eastern Europe, as it is in the rest of the world today. It is the theme of *social conflict and reconciliation*. Official Marxist ideology told us that we lived in the best of all worlds from which all causes of social conflict have been removed. We knew, of course, better. Under the lid of official ideology and secret service surveillance, conflicts were brewing.

There is one particular area where conflicts have exploded in Eastern Europe. The feelings of ethnic belonging (often associated with religious belonging) which were repressed for decades have reasserted themselves with a vengeance, not only in former Yugoslavia but also in many other parts of Eastern Europe. Let me make some comments on this issue because I believe that the problem of proselytism is closely related to it. As James H. Billington commented recently about the Russian context, nationalist extremists will seek "to co-opt the Orthodox Church, to empty it of distinctively Christian content and to use its prestige to legitimate the reimposition of social discipline and centralized control in an authoritarian state." The pressures in the direction of instrumentalization of the established churches are present in many countries of the Eastern Europe. To the extent that they give in to such pressures, any presence of non-Orthodox (or non-Catholic) forms of Christianity would be unwelcome, any public proclamation of the Gospel by them construed as proselytism, any of their attempts to influence public affairs understood as unwelcome foreign intrusion.

As is well known, ethnocentrism of nation states is one of the most dangerous political phenomena. It breeds totalitarianism in which the priests of the nationalistic idolatry are ready to place everything on the altar of national interests. In relation to other states, nationalist totalitarianism "acts solely in its own self-interest, breaking treaties when it sees fit, waging wars when it finds the advantage, thumbing its nose at international conventions and organizations. National self-assertion is its only goal. All that restrains it is a balance of terror." Within its own state, nationalist totalitarianism knows only of the rights of a particular nation, not of the rights of individuals-not of the rights of individuals that belong to the dominant ethnic group and even less of the rights of those who belong to ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities, who live mixed with the dominant population in all nation states, are left with "only two choices: either to emigrate, under varying degrees of duress, or to accept the status of second-class citizens, with varying degrees of deprivation of rights and repression. *There is never any other choice.*"

What we need is an effective response to the problems of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts which are tearing Eastern European societies apart and leaving a trail of blood and ashes. This is not a place to develop a theology of ethnicity. I should say here only that in addition to theological explorations of this topic, we need common church commitments, something like what the Barmen Declaration was-a document that the Confessing Church under the leadership of Karl Barth produced in the struggle against the Nazi regime. Imagine all of our churches, established and Protestant on either side of the firing lines, acting in accordance with the following confession, for instance:

"You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

All the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures, have been redeemed for God by the blood of the Lamb to form one multi-cultural community of faith. The "blood" that binds them as brothers and sisters is more precious than the "blood," the language, the customs, political allegiances or economic interests that may separate them.

We reject the false doctrine, as though a church should place allegiance to the culture it inhabits and the nation to which it belongs above the commitment to Jesus Christ and the brothers and sisters from other cultures and nations, servants of the one Jesus Christ, their common Lord, and members of God's new community.

6. Patterns of Conformation

We Protestants need to discover the Eastern European faces of Jesus, I have argued; we need to listen to what our brothers and sisters in established churches have to say to us and testify to them to the truth of the Gospel; we need to break down the wall of hostility between cultures and nations. If we attend to these theological tasks, our mission in Eastern Europe will be enriched and we will find ourselves more at peace with our neighbors who belong to Orthodox and Catholic traditions. In conclusion, let me point

out one major danger that lurks in a project of discovering the Eastern European faces of Jesus.

When I was a boy I used to read the Old Testament and be amazed at how easily the Israelites would abandon Yahweh and follow after strange gods. "How could they do such a thing, after God has led them through the Red Sea, settled them in the land where milk and honey flowed, and took such good care of them," I used to ask myself. Little did I know how dangerous my question was. For the question is not "how *they* could do such a thing" but "how *we* repeatedly do the same." To ask simply about them, means to be blind about ourselves.

When I was a young student of theology I was shocked to find many theologians giving up basic Christian doctrines. I used to ask myself, "How could these 'liberal' theologians accommodate so shamelessly to the spirit of the age when the plain truth of the Gospel has been revealed to us in God's word?" Little did I know that the question of the student about 'liberal' theologians was as dangerous a question as the boy's about the faithless Israelites. I thought accommodation was *the problem of liberals not of conservatives*. What I did not realize was that whereas I saw their accommodation clearly, I was either blind toward mine or at least lenient with it.

No doubt 'liberals'-and here in Eastern Europe, Protestants would say, Catholic and Orthodox-have accommodated too often. I am sorry for their accommodations, but what I fear more are our own accommodations. Let me take an example from a different part of the world-the question of race in such a good Evangelical denomination as the Assemblies of God in the US, as analyzed recently by Cecil M. Robeck in a paper entitled "Historical Roots of Racial Unity and Division in American Pentecostalism." To make the story short, in 1945 the denomination made an official resolution "that we encourage the establishment of Assembly of God churches for the colored race." The wording would make one believe that the denomination was seeking to overcome racial divisions that plagued U.S. society and recover the biblical vision in which there was neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free. But this was not the case. In the same official document we can read: "Conforming to American Law and society our work amongst *the Colored People will remain distinct and separate*, and the Colored Branch when formed shall be under the supervision of the Home Missions Department." The whites kept separate from the blacks and made sure that they were in charge.

Contrast this with the birth of the Pentecostal movement in Azusa Street, Los Angeles. The founder of Pentecostalism, if there is such a person, was William J. Seymour, an African American preacher from the Southern U.S. who moved to California. For him, the Gospel overcame the boundaries between people, between black and white, rich and poor, Mexican and Chinese. And this is how the Pentecostal movement lived at least in its first years. "People of all nations came and got their cup full," we read in the document *The Doctrines and Disciplines of our Church*. Though even then "some of our white brethren" had "prejudice and discrimination," the movement insisted that "we must love all men as Christ commands," a Christ who "takes in all people in his Salvation" and who "is neither black nor white man, nor Chinaman nor Hindu, nor Japanese, but God."

As the Pentecostal movement grew, however, it started moving away from its original Gospel vision of racial unity toward the conformity to U.S. social practices of racial segregation. What is equally disturbing as the insistence on separation and division, is the kind of justification given for it in the official documents of the church: "*Conforming to American Law and society* our work amongst the Colored People will remain distinct and separate," the minutes read. The original holy conformation to the Gospel vision has been replaced by the godless conformation to 'American Law and society,' and this was done in good conscience by good Christians that believed in the Bible as the infallible Word of God, affirmed all Evangelical doctrines, and desired to live holy lives. They accommodated, and they even explicitly stated that they accommodated, yet they seemed to have been unaware of doing so. They were trapped inside their own culture but believed they were free followers of Jesus Christ alone.

Being trapped inside our own cultures and our prejudices with the Bible in our hands is what I fear for Protestants in Eastern Europe (as I do for Christians in other parts of the world).

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, let us return briefly back to the issues of mission and proselytism. The vitality of religious commitment both on the part of established churches and Protestants, their abiding theological differences shaped by traditions that have diverged for centuries, and the increasing social tensions in societies caught in vortexes of transition from closed to open and pre-modern to modern societies make it unlikely that the conflicts over mission and proselytism in Eastern Europe will go away any time soon. We need to work to overcome these conflicts because they are a counter-witness to the world. If the church is itself profoundly divided it cannot be a sign of God's reconciliation in a world torn apart by social and ethnic hostilities. Our goal must therefore be to end the strife of churches over mission and proselytism and proclaim together the message of Jesus Christ as the one Lord of the one world.

Our immediate responsibility in relation to the conflict over mission and proselytism, however, is twofold: we must insure that our continuing disputes over mission and proselytism are not over our prejudices but over the truth of the Gospel and that they are carried out in the spirit of humility appropriate to the followers of the crucified Messiah. Hence we must talk to each other, and that not only at international ecumenical gatherings, protected by distance from the noise of our tragic battles, but in the trenches- in each country, each city, each town.