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The Problems of Euro-Asian Theology for the New Millennium

by Sergei Nikolaev

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I am very glad to have this opportunity to share with you some thoughts about the problems of evangelical theology at the turn of XXI century.

The last decade was marked by an enormous breakthrough in the sphere of evangelical theological education. For 75 years our churches did not have the right or possibility to open theological schools. But within the last ten years there appeared scores of different schools aimed at teaching the theological sciences. To call a school a seminary does not ensure, however, that it will truly become a seminary. At issue is not only the number of programs offered and the number of books in the library.

Well-advertised ideas for founding schools attracted the attention of sponsors and there began a mass drift to establish theological institutions in which its organizers were not at all expert. Yet all that happened according to God's providence, so today there are not only theological schools but we now have an accreditation agency also. We have gone through many troubles and difficulties – having overcome *thousands* of problems and at last we can see light at some distance ahead. Our sponsors did their best and we thank them very much, also because many leaders of schools received theological education and found their calling during this period.

Now it seems that what we really need is to solve some current matters of coordination, standards and criteria in the work of our schools and all the rest will be fine. But despite our accomplishments I would risk raising a number of questions about problems that do exist, which we have to deal with quickly and decisively.

Academic Education and Demand for a Final Product

What kind of a theology graduate does a contemporary church want, what do they expect to receive today?

We know that the requirements of the market are determined by the needs of the society. In the course of the last ten years Russia and other countries of the former USSR have changed irreversibly, not only in the economic, political and social spheres but also in their religious perception. This territory became free, people gained the freedom to travel, to see and learn about the world. The nature of life has changed also. It may be the same city and the same region but the atmosphere and values are new.

The church could not evade this progress either. Look attentively at lay people today – they are different from those who attended churches some ten, twenty or thirty years ago. There are no longer only elderly women, but quite a new kind of people. Both the parish membership and its leadership became much younger. That is a good reason for joy but it raises the question whether everybody understands that such changes do bring in new expectations and requirements also. People go to a particular church not because they cannot find another place to attend. Church has become a matter of choice, a thoughtful and weighed personal decision. The mentality of the crowd cannot influence people as much today. Everyone decides for himself where his place is in life, in society and in religion. We should not discount these considerations.

At the same time everybody wants to be in a place where *he or she* (not other people, but *me* personally) would feel at home. This feeling is created by the community as a whole, and by the leader of the community, i.e. a pastor. So, by choosing a church a person also chooses a pastor. I emphasize it again, the person *chooses!* That choice depends a lot on what a person comes for and what the market has to offer to him. As a rule, a perfectly introduced product in great demand would be the biggest hit in society.

But what do people desire today? Public opinion polls in St. Petersburg showed what motives have people today. I touch this subject because some church and denominational leaders delude themselves into thinking, “*They have no way out and they will have to come here anyway*”. Dear friends, people *will not come* simply because you think so. They will select where to go! Today they have a rich choice of places where they are welcome! In big cities there are scores of evangelical churches

and missions. Today people have a choice, today there is a market at their disposal, and today there is a possibility to find whatever a person wishes to find.

So what demand do people have? I can see a few key answers to this question:

- People want to be proud of their church (*what kind of a church is it to be then?*)
- People want to be proud of their pastor (*what kind of pastor is he to be then?*)
- People want to belong to their people and their culture (craving for overseas toys has ended)
- People want to love and be loved; understand and be understood (i.e. to have the right to be what they are)
- People want to know the truth in its wholeness, wishing to get answers not only to what, but to why, how and when (in other words *they want to be confident that they have found the right road* and have certainty they are getting the maximum in minimum time!)

People do not ask these questions in public or in a group but in private. Therefore let's see what theological education can offer to us and *how we can make our graduate a minister capable of meeting the requirements of the present time.*

First of all we must realize where we are and what society we belong to. Theological schools must be native. We have the right *to be proud* of our roots and history. We have the right to expect that our views will be respected. Nobody except the Russians knows what Russia is and what she needs; nobody knows the Ukraine and Byelorussia better than the Ukrainians and Byelorussians. Our schools must be a place where students would get knowledge about their own land, their own people and their character. Jesus Christ did not teach His disciples to sow in the Holy Land the way it should be done in China or India. He taught them to be successful witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and only after that at the ends of the earth.

The problem of Protestantism in Russia lies in the fact that we teach people universal truths, lead them to the ends of the earth but do not notice that they have not learned to walk in their own land. We set our people amidst an alien culture and teach them methods which they often cannot understand and accept, thus losing the most creative and thinking members of the society – the intellectuals.

Conformity of theological education with the historical and cultural roots of the society is a vital and urgent task. After graduation our students are unlikely to go to New York or Paris, Hamburg or Houston, South Korea or Africa – they will go to Siberia and the Far East, to different parts of Russia and Ukraine, Byelorussia and Kazakhstan, Georgia and Ossetia. They will serve their own people, so they should be prepared, trained and formed for that purpose. Recently I visited a church where a very interesting young man of wide reading, a graduate of a Russian theological institute was preaching. People were very attentive and listened to him with enthusiasm. In his sermon the young pastor quoted Spurgeon and Moody, Lewis and Berghoff, Stevenson and Barth and I was carried away by his vast knowledge. But he did not even mention Solovyev or Bulgakov, Prokhanov or Florensky, Dostoevsky or Kargel. How is it that he knows authors of foreign growth and does not know those of his motherland? Why does he think that Lewis and Barth have better answers to the hopes of his countrymen than do Solovyev and Alexander Men?

It is impossible to fruitfully serve your own people if you do not know your culture! To be able to communicate with people in comprehensible terms we have to find an effective way to combine the enormous experience of evangelical theology of the West with our native religious quest.

What we offer is determined by the demand. If we do not research the demand then our production will not be profitable. By and large, our schools and their future do not only depend on financial support but on a generalized and integral image of our graduates. We have to learn to hear society for which we produce graduates.

Who Takes on the Charge to Teach Those Serving Our People?

That is the second and very significant problem of theology. Who is going to teach those who will serve our people?

Theology in a way becomes an equivalent of our attempt to explain God's revelation. But too often become blind as we go along this path, not recognizing Him. Perhaps today we should think of theology as a kind of training, or as the building of a nest for the acquisition, perception and retention of God's presence and for understanding God's activity among the people. Maybe we should be more ready to

accept the surprises God has prepared for us – for teachers and disciples, in teaching and learning.

Our tragic lack of qualified faculty capable of teaching future leaders and theologians is just a part of the problem. Many schools have nurtured and started using their own graduates as teachers but too often they are experts in a narrow field of knowledge.

The Strength of a School is in its Faculty. What role does the faculty play in the leadership of a theological school? What skills and virtues should teachers and administrators possess to successfully perform their part? What sources can they use to develop necessary features?

The process of training leaders for Christian communities is the main subject and purpose in the work of a theological school. It means that a seminary is directly subordinated to a church in its structure, work and activity. But a theological school is at the same time an academic community whose activity is dedicated to education, research and study. So a seminary is to be accountable in two aspects for it is, first of all, an academy, and second, it exists to open the advantages of an academic life to a church out of its deep love for the church.

This double responsibility of a seminary brings about significant tension as it attempts to accomplish its work through the development of a syllabus for leaders' education. In his excellent book, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*¹, Edward Farley showed that up to the eighteenth century, theological education was considered successful if the students adopted God-inspired, wise knowledge and were educated in the sphere of practical Christianity acquiring Christ-like character.

Professors of British and North-American seminaries could influence their students both in moral and spiritual matters and in the questions of formation of their character that found its expression first of all in the fact that the students trod in steps of their teachers. In many seminaries the teachers were ordained ministers and participated in establishment of regulations, order, ethics and duties for students and

¹Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, pp. 37f; see also Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge. Theological Education in the Church & the University*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

faculty. At Princeton University, for example, at its beginning professors in particular were by all possible means to inspire, cherish and develop the prayer life and personal piety of their students, warning and protecting them against formalism and apathy on the one hand and, on the other hand, against boasting and religious fanaticism. Teachers at Andover had to live at the university and were responsible for the *direct care and edification of students*. Aside from the correction of mistakes in grammar, methods, speculation, style and opinion, the teachers were to interpret difficult texts of the Scriptures, solve matters of conscience, take parental care of health and admonish in students' way of life. With all possible consideration and by Christian methods they had to work towards the development of piety in students' hearts and consult them in men's interrelations and on other aspects of life. They had to teach them as future ministers of the meek and humble JESUS to be able to appeal to God and deal with a man both in the gathering of saints and in the face of illness and death.

Thus ordained ministers were an example of parental and purposeful care which assumed close relations of cooperation between teachers and students. At a minimum the authority of faculty as pastors and teachers in its essence can be called moral and spiritual authority. That was a precious form of teachers' supervision that extended beyond classrooms and penetrated into students' homes.

In our Russian theological educational establishments we had a similar system where teachers played the role of confessors and spiritual fathers for their students. The documents of one of the early Russian Orthodox seminaries read as follows, *"The importance of the unity of piety and scholarship in sacred service is one of those basic principles of spiritual wisdom that finds its confirmation throughout the history of the Church. In training of students for Christian ministry high learning of teachers must go hand in hand with their ardent piety."*

We should not repeat the bitter experience of the modern West when the authority of the faculty was not based on the *unity of piety and knowledge* but only on knowledge of a specific scientific discipline. The alliance of the spiritual and theological must play an important role in the life of our theological schools. Teachers should see and find themselves as ministers serving one common evangelical cause. Then we will see growing interest of the faculty towards those

research and educational projects that originate from a church for the school, but not from a guild of experts.

A Theological Environment

The problem of today's theological education in many ways is determined by a lack of a proper environment where our teachers might be developed. Theologians need to get a chance to discuss *openly* their problems not only in the framework of one particular school but through the fellowship of different theological schools in general. They must be able to be shaped and grow both in the realm of professionalism and science and in the sphere of piety and spirituality. For that they should meet one another.

In connection with this we offer the following: *in the nearest future to organize a workshop conference for leading faculty members of theological schools on the subject: "Our Place in the Future Theological Education."* St. Petersburg Theological Academy is ready to take the initiative for convocation of such gathering and to house the conference in the beginning of the next academic year.

A great achievement of the evangelical movement in Russia is an interconnection of spiritual life and theological science even though in its primitive form. We must do EVERYTHING possible to preserve that interconnection and to prevent theological schools from becoming strong bastions of science cut off from the realities of societal and church life.

Therefore as never before we are called on to perceive and to resolve still another very important problem.

Theology is the Only Answer to the World.

Theological education cannot be any more merely an academic practice or a church matter. Evangelical theological science must face people's needs and find a proper language to be able to communicate its answers to basic questions of existence: life, death, famine, poverty, corruption, violence, family, home, society, wars, suffering. Theology must give answers to everything happening around us and inside us. Historical processes and events of today must find their interpretation.

- Thus far, nobody has given a theological evaluation of 75 years of the Communist genocide of our own people.
- When a fatal accident killed a dozen innocent people on Sennaya square in St. Petersburg, neither churches nor pastors had anything to say.

Theological education is called TO CHANGE the attitude of the Russian people towards real values of human life. Theology cannot be just knowledge about God, it must become God's teaching capable of changing man's life and transforming the society. Our society is rapidly falling into secularization and a materialistic ideology. But all it needs is LIGHT that is our Lord Jesus Christ, Savior of the world. That is why theological education must always be Christ-centered.

Christology is a criterion of realized Theology. It must help us penetrate into a new, fresh and deeper experience of discipleship. On the basis of this experience there can be a radical transition from words to deeds that should acquire the form of service to each other and service to the world around us. Service to Jesus Christ!

An Evangelical Theology

Theological education must become evangelical in its essence. *Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.* Praise the Lord, in our society now everybody or nearly everybody knows where he or she belongs. Probably the time is coming when we can decide how we should live together and cooperate in common space.

Evangelical theological schools must function *as a connecting link* in an inter-confessional dialogue. Many leaders of denominational unions are not yet ready to communicate with each other, but I am sure they will bless theological discussions with great joy. This refers also to the necessity to start a dialogue between the evangelicals and the Russian Orthodox Church. Today the Orthodox believers are not a homogeneous mass of people and we have many friends there. We have concentrated enough intellectual strength to conduct a dialogue with the traditional Russian church.

We are entering an epoch that has a huge number of surprises in store for us and that exceeds all imagination. In some 5-10 years modern technologies and processes in the society will make it unrecognizable. The former republics and

regions of the USSR are catching up with the rest of the world in its development and will not be able to escape being in this process.

Our present computer age of high technologies will enable people to get limitless access to everything. We feel amazed now, seeing how much our society has changed during the last 10-15 years. But in ten years we will still feel like “*dinosaurs*” from prehistoric times. Contemporary boys and girls have technocratic type of minds and their ability to live and orient themselves in virtual realities will make our society similar to the rest of the world in progress and in uniformity of mentality. Access to information of any type will become reality for everybody. Time will be compressed and squeezed and highly valuable, by the way!

Why would people go to a church? They will go there to receive the things they otherwise will not get elsewhere. In this present computer age they would like to see a renovation of the spirit and restore the feeling of belonging to their families, homes and spiritual values and to a human genetic code, all of which will be more and more displaced by high technologies and abstract mentality (billionaires without real money). In that world of illusions, fairy-tales and unreality there will be a felt need for institutions that help people return to human values and realities. I think that the Church and our graduates will gain the lead among such institutions.

Therefore today we as the leaders of theological schools assume a huge responsibility not only in leadership or guidance but also for our own faithful following. The last ten years have witnessed much labor and many accomplishments. Praise the Lord, God let us fulfil the dreams of those who came before us.

But we must go on dreaming. For dreams give birth to visions. And we can realize what we see. Theological schools must become a hotbed of dreamers and thinkers ready to live all their lives “in flight.” Success depends on what place theological schools will occupy in the most important subject – *knowledge of God*. Not knowledge about Him, but knowledge of God Himself!

So let us with God’s help do our best to place theological science in our country and regions on due academic level, evangelical in spirit and church-oriented in essence.

So let there be - “Unity in the essentials, Freedom in the secondary, and Love in all!”