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RECENT PROTESTANT DEVELOPMENTS IN UKRAINE AND RUSSIA

By William Yoder

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Ukraine Baptist Union Breaks Its Ties with John MacArthur

Appearances can deceive. On March 7, 2019, the entire top leadership of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (RUECB) was photographed with John MacArthur during a gathering at his office near Los Angeles. This event involved President Peter Mitskevich, Senior Vice President Viktor Ignatenkov, and Chief Administrator Vladimir Miskevich and was later posted on Miskevich’s Facebook page. Yet only a day previous, on March 6, 2019, the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists had officially parted ways with John MacArthur. MacArthur is the long-time pastor of “Grace Community Church” in Sun Valley, California and president of the nearby The Master’s University and The Master’s Seminary.

The Ukrainians’ lengthy statement from March 6, 2019, reports that a significant number of teachers—but not the rector—will be leaving the Union’s 1999-founded Irpen Biblical Seminary (Irpin in Ukrainian) near Kiev in order to form a new schooling center strictly under MacArthur’s leadership. The Master’s program of this institution was, in terms of content and finances, 100 percent under the support of MacArthur’s Master’s Academy International. According to this statement, the conflict over “theological, moral and ethical questions” will lead to the American partner “completely dropping its financial support for the seminary.”

¹ A journalistic release for which the author is solely responsible. It is informational in character and does not express the official position of any church organization. This release is reprinted with the permission of the author. Releases #19-02, 03, and 04.

Since the early 1990s, the theological work of the Calvinist MacArthur has been known in virtually all Ukrainian Baptist congregations. Yet, in the meantime, according to this statement, the initial “adulation has been replaced by open criticism and a tendency towards division.” However, Union leadership assures the theological debate between the centuries-old Calvinist and Arminian traditions does not need to result in division. The theological dispute between them can even be productive. Yet in this instance, theological “radicalness, proselytism“ and an unacceptable “spirit of separatism” have won the upper hand.

This paper contains a “list of sins” with eight points. Theological assertions such as limited atonement, “which we have never supported,” are being pushed constantly. Nearly all books, printed and disseminated, stem from a single author (MacArthur). Congregations were planted which never intended to join the official Baptist Union. “Financial support was used as a means to force decisions in matters of dogma.”

Point Seven assures, “We in Ukraine do not want a repeat of the situation we observe in the Slavic congregations of the United States and Russia (. . .) We prize the unity of God’s people and see no sufficient or justified reasons for a policy of separation. We do not share the position of a so-called ‘Biblical separatism.’” The closing point reports that MacArthur supports a plan to “found a new institute without any connection (to our Union) while still intending to teach our members. We regard it as untenable to recommend an education at this center to our pastors and members, in case it is created.”

Commentary

This paper cancels an unspoken arrangement which has been practiced in the former Soviet region for more than two decades. A Baptist Union receives financial support from the United States if in return it grants MacArthur’s teachers access to its youth and educational institutions, which essentially has been the agreement at MacArthur’s preachers’ institute in Samara, Russia. This model is now to be expanded to include Ukraine. An institute independent of the Baptist Union is to

school Baptist pastors, which one could call “Samara II.”

The Union’s paper states clearly that Illinois’ Slavic Gospel Association has been given the task of finding new supporters for the Irpen seminary. The Slavic Gospel Association’s new president is businessman Michael Johnson. His predecessor, Robert Provost, who held this position from 1994 until April 2017, was closely allied with John MacArthur. It should soon become evident whether Johnson is equally dedicated to MacArthur’s cause.

In a public note on his Facebook page, the Moscow theologian Gennadi Sergienko had congratulated the Ukrainian Union for breaking with MacArthur and asked, “How long will it take for the leadership of the Russian Baptist Union to come to a similar conclusion?” The theologian stresses that this argument is not with Calvinism, *per se*, but rather with a “neo-Calvinist fundamentalism possessing an exclusive claim on truth.” Sergienko has cautioned for more than a decade of a virus of division nestled within the Calvinism propagated by MacArthur. He now fears the same separatism evident in Samara—the creation of a second church within an existing one—will occur in Ukraine. Sergienko, who obtained his doctorate not far from MacArthur at Pasadena’s renowned Fuller Seminary, is Russia’s best-educated Baptist theologian. He is the dean of Moscow’s National Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists’ Seminary. He and others are convinced that small free churches in an occasionally hostile diaspora are ill-advised to push an anti-interconfessional and anti-Pentecostal agenda. MacArthur is known to have described the efforts of the Argentinian Pope as “satanic,” and it is natural to conclude that his stance towards Orthodoxy is similar. His adversaries include Franklin Graham and Rick Warren. In addition, the Kremlin is becoming less enchanted with Western-financed church initiatives. That’s one reason more why Baptists in Russia have qualms regarding the photo of RUECB-leadership in California.

Evgeny Bakhmutsky, Russia’s best-known national supporter of MacArthur, is making political progress, and the congregations planted by him in the Moscow region are growing. Following his recall as the RUECB’s senior vice president in 2014, he—in contrast to other former leadership members—has refrained from publically criticizing Union leadership. He is consequently

in discussion as a possible successor to President Peter Mitskevich, yet that issue will only become acute in 2022 or 2026. The arrival of a convinced Calvinist would undoubtedly accelerate the ongoing exodus from the RUECB. This Union still has roughly 70,000 members; the choice of a pro-MacArthur president could lead to the departure of half of its remaining congregations. The All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists has 113,000 members. Valery Antoniuk has been its president since 2010.

Seminary Suspensions in Russia; Moscow's Baptist Seminary is Back in Operation

As of April 1, 2019, the RUECB's flagship, Moscow Theological Seminary, is again up-and-running. For roughly the last 18 months, Protestant institutions of learning have been under considerable state pressure in Russia. Beginning last November, seminaries have been closed, usually for 60-day periods. During this time, they were expected to rectify any violations of building codes, as well as medical and educational standards. Such a suspension hit this Moscow seminary on January 25, 2019. It was a particularly draconian one, for the building was sealed and non-educational events, such as religious services held by groups renting a room in the building, needed to be held elsewhere during this two-month period. Its hostel services for short-term guests were also suspended.

Considerable public confusion exists regarding the extent of the restrictive measures taken. In its lengthy report on March 25, 2019, Oslo's Forum 18 News Service appears to claim that only two Moscow seminaries, including the Baptist one, had been closed. On the ground in Moscow in late March, the author was told repeatedly that all Moscow Protestant seminaries had been shut down except for the interconfessional Moscow Seminary of Evangelical Christians headed by Alexander Tsutserov. This institution, opened in 2007, has always been supported by One Mission Society (OMS)—formerly Oriental Missionary Society.

Forum 18 reports that the majority of Protestant seminaries never had state accreditation, and they were nevertheless closed. A quote concerning the situation explained, "Religious

educational institutions are under no obligation to acquire state accreditation, and many have operated for years without it.” These also include Lutheran and Roman Catholic seminaries. The Baptist seminary listed above has re-opened without any state-accredited courses. Apparently, seminaries can function without state accreditation, but not without a license. Only basic, non-institutional teaching does not require a license.

One should note that Muslim and Orthodox schools have also been subjected to close scrutiny. Indeed, the clamp-down on theological institutions is part of a larger wave leading eventually to the closing of nearly all non-state schools. Government centralization is afoot; private universities (for ex. International University based in Moscow and Kaliningrad) and even reputable language schools (in Elektrostal near Moscow) have closed their doors for good.

According to Barrister Vladimir Ozolin, the actions taken by the State against seminaries have been "systemic and intentional." Ozolin represents the major Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical-Pentecostal Faith (ROSKhVE). Its Moscow seminary was also shut down. Observers in Moscow assure that, thanks to a multitude of layers in legislation, sufficient reason can be found to close down anyone. They see no obvious reason why Tsutserov's institution should be open while others have been forced to suspend operations.

Commentary

The Russian government appears to be pushing seminary training in a direction it had already begun to take on its own accord. Seminary education has always been suspect to the faithful in what Americans call “fly-over country.” Those with higher-level theological training have customarily ended up in large cities or in the West—or they tend to pitch theologies incomprehensible to those back home. The key trend now involves training those who are already pastors—not those who simply aspire to become pastors. Distance education, which was the Soviet model, appears to be the past and future one.

Seminaries are already particularly suspect for nationalists because their levels of foreign

financial support are traditionally much higher than the average—nearly 100 percent in some cases. As a “non-essential” to those in fly-over country, they would not exist without foreign sources. That dependency makes them most susceptible to the “meddling” of foreigners.

New Inter-Confessional Body in Ukraine

Sometimes difficult to prove, but political logic would indicate that the close alliance of Ukrainian Protestants with the Kiev government has serious negative repercussions for their brothers and sisters in next-door Russia. Baptist lay pastor Oleksandr Turchynov was instrumental in the founding of an “All-Ukrainian Council” of churches on January 22, 2019. Its founding members include top Baptist and Pentecostal leaders, such as Valery Antoniuk and Mikhail Panochko. Turchynov, the Council’s coordinator, is currently serving as the country’s minister for security and defense. He is regarded as the new organization’s founder and financier. Leading Baptists, including Turchynov, were voting for Poroshenko in the recent national elections. Turchynov himself hails originally from the camp of Yulia Timoshenko. He is accused of being most responsible for Kiev’s military attack on the pro-Russian Donbass rebels in April 2014.

Of course, Ukraine’s Protestants and the politics of Hillary Clinton are not an exact fit, but current-day Trump fits the situation better. In his opening address at the Council, Turchynov stressed that the Council was non-ecumenical, for family values, and against any form of gender politics. In an article published on the Ukrainian Baptist Union’s website, Turchynov attributes the West’s support for homosexuality to the influence of Marxism. In my opinion, Turchynov thereby makes the same mistake currently prominent in the USA: using “liberal” and “leftist” as if they were synonyms. But post-1945 communism in Eastern Europe was leftist—not liberal. Brezhnev, Mao, Stalin and Castro were leftists—not liberals championing the rights of sexual minorities.

Ukraine’s newly-recognized, breakaway Orthodox confession—once subservient to Moscow—is no less pro-Kiev than the Evangelicals. But Russian Orthodoxy is, of course, much more capable of defending itself within Russia proper. The Russian Orthodox Church has been wounded

by its major losses in Ukraine, and it will want to insure itself against any further losses to Evangelicals or Catholics on Russian turf.

Surviving Past—And Future—Blockades; A Russian Prayer Breakfast Met in St. Petersburg

On March 12, 2019, the St. Petersburg branch of Russia's Prayer Breakfast movement celebrated its tenth anniversary. The topic was about the German blockade of WWII, and elderly guests told emotional stories about their efforts to survive and the need for current solidarity. Moscow's Vitaly Vlasenko, an ambassador to the Orthodox for the World Evangelical Alliance, found the descriptions helpful. He reported that the city's German consul, Eltje Aderhold, was moved nearly to tears in her response.

Yuri Sipko, the Russian Baptist Union's president until 2010, was of a different opinion. On March 15, 2019, he used his Facebook page to condemn Protestant collusion with the current Russian state. "It was sad, I must say in all honesty. Spiritual leaders fell into the trap which they themselves had created. Intending to influence the government, they succumbed instead to its influence and followed its lead. That is clearly a tactic for losing. That tactic has already lost out in Moscow; this year's Breakfast there will not take place. Playing with Lucifer does not lead one up the holy mountain."

Peter Sautov, the head of the small Russian Association of Independent Evangelical Churches, has been removed as chairman of the national Prayer Breakfast movement. He has been replaced by Orthodox businessman Andrey Vassilevich Gaidamaka, a long-time manager with Lukoil. Apparently, the Breakfast's board is committed to giving the movement a more Russian face. Sautov had been known for his strong contacts in North America. Reports state that a Moscow Prayer Breakfast may still take place in May—two months later than usual. But the likelihood of this occurring is decreasing.

Commentary: Franklin Graham in Moscow

After conferring with Metropolitan Hilarion and other Orthodox leaders, Franklin Graham, head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and the humanitarian Samaritan's Purse, met with a select group of Protestant leaders in Moscow on March 4, 2019. The press service of the major "Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical-Pentecostal Faith" (ROSKhVE) quoted its president, Bishop Sergey Ryakhovsky, on March 15, 2019: "There are many persons in the USA who speak out against confrontation and for dialogue. I am certain that joint projects attempting to protect persecuted Christians and to help the needy are the best we can do in the current situation."

Though Graham spends most of his time in Russia with Orthodox dignitaries, his organization does retain its headquarters in Moscow's Second Baptist Church. But Protestants feel left out. One frequent reaction can be described as: "Graham's efforts barely affect our circles, but it is good that he is still coming. We need voices supporting understanding between Russia and the West." Graham continues to envision a coalition of conservative North American Evangelicals with Russian Orthodoxy for the cause of protecting and supporting traditional family values. Russian Evangelicals usually support the same view.

A Bridgebuilder between East and West: Siegfried Springer Has Died

On February 16, 2019, Bishop Siegfried Springer passed away shortly before his 89th birthday. A memorial service was held in his hometown, Bad Sooden-Allendorf/Hesse, on March 9, 2019. Born in the Caucasus city of Mineralnye Vody/USSR in 1930, he needed to come to terms with the execution of his father and a grandfather seven years later. His ethnic German family lived in Ukraine after that; their flight to Germany began in 1944. He was finally able to set up house-keeping in West Germany in 1947. He later studied theology and became a pastor in the provincial Lutheran church of Hanover. Commuting between Germany and Russia, he served as bishop of the Evangelical Church in European Russia from 1992 to 2007.

Siegfried Springer was one-of-a-kind. As a pietist, he moved constantly between the German church mainstream and the confessionalist Lutheran denominations. This refers to the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) along with the United States' Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) on the one side and the German *Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche* (SELK) with the Missouri-Synod (LCMS) on the other. He always saw Lutheranism in its entirety. He was able to converse and joke with everyone; virtually no one was taboo. But he went his own way based on his own theological convictions, which insured that he did not only have friends. However, he had a loyal following within the ELCA—which was less true within the EKD's foreign office in Hanover. That relationship in any case became more difficult as the foreign office came to be increasingly "open" and syncretic.

The deceased was very much honored among the Lutherans of Russia—he was after all one of them and was a father figure for many. He understood very well that Russian-German Lutherans were virtually all pietists and he acted accordingly. He knew they had little understanding for single-sex marriage and "scientific" theology as practiced in Germany. During his last years as a bishop in Russia, he even spoke out against the ordination of women. But his reasons were primarily pragmatic; ecumenical considerations in the context of an Orthodox Russia make the pastoral service of women complicated.

Bishop Springer was also courageous. When he was still single, he traveled to the Soviet Union in 1957—the first time for him since the war—without any guarantee that he would be allowed to return westward. Allied agreements at war's end had freed the USSR from any need to recognize new citizenships acquired during the course of the war. (Of course, those who lived full-time as committed Christians in the USSR were more courageous.)

At the World Youth Festival in Moscow in July and August of 1957, the Soviet Komsomol youth organization then asked him and the budding Evangelist Klaus Vollmer (1930-2011) to participate in a debate on the question of God's existence. The two of them were thereby able to preach to thousands at Stalin's massive VDNKh exhibition grounds. Following the exchange, their

atheistic hosts even conceded that the guests from Germany had won the debate! Springer reported on this in his memoirs from 2013, “Closer to Heaven in Russia.” (They have also appeared, or are appearing, in Russian and English.)

The return of ethnic Germans from Russia played a major role in his work and thinking. He regarded leaving as entirely normal, as a matter of course. He did not criticize those thousands and was always concerned to ease their integration into German church life. This irritates some of who have chosen to remain in Russia. His efforts to aid evangelical pastors from Romania emigrating to Germany during the 1980s were also controversial. He believed they should be permitted to continue their work as pastors within the EKD. He had in any case a big heart for the suffering and needs of others.

He was nevertheless also committed as no other to the restoration and growth of Russian Lutheranism after 1991. He paid little attention to his own health; he traveled thousands of kilometers with a heart condition. He was a bridge between those who had left Russia and those who remained at home.

Bishop Siegfried Springer will not be easy to replace—a pastor at home in two worlds. May persons with a similar amount of passion and attention to detail be found willing to commit many years of their lives to service in Russia. Russian Lutheranism needs them badly.