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Factors Influencing Baptist Church Growth in Romania
by Denton Lotz

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The Baptist Church in Romania has experienced phenomenal growth in this century. From a mere 2,000 in 1900, it now has an adult membership of 160,000 and a community of 300,000.

A professor asked me about the growth of Baptists in Romania and ended by saying, "And don't tell me it is because of the Holy Spirit!" He did not want a theological answer, but a sociological one. Believers would ultimately say that a church grows because of the Holy Spirit, and, apparently, the Spirit wants to move in Romania. Why the Spirit is not moving in other Baptist Churches in Eastern Europe (except in the U.S.S.R.) with the same numerical growth remains a mystery. Having emphasized that the growth ultimately is a spiritual question, one must try to answer the professor's question, seeking in all areas of God's workings reasons for this Romanian Baptist growth.

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS WITNESS ALREADY PRESENT

The dominant religion of Romania has for centuries been the Romanian Orthodox Church. Its importance was not only religious but cultural. As most of the State Churches of Europe, it was the bearer of culture and national identity for centuries. In Romania this role was even more important because of the many years of Turkish rule. Thus the church preserved Romanian culture and nationhood. This was and is a positive achievement of the Romanian Orthodox Church. On the other hand, the inherent danger in such a role is that culture and the Gospel often become so entwined that it is difficult to see the distinctives of each. (This could also be said of other Balkan countries as well as of Catholicism in Poland, or Lutheranism in Scandinavia.) The opposite danger of the Free Church tradition is that of sectarianism, where culture is not only dis-
missed, but in fact denounced. Thus Christianity is divorced from this world and is seen as an escapism into some type of inward piety, irrelevant to life in this world.

Baptist witness in Romania is therefore in a country whose understanding of the Christian faith is largely shaped by Orthodoxy. Exceptions to this are the Hungarian-speaking Romanians who are Catholic or Reformed and the German-speaking Romanians who are Lutheran. The growth of the Baptist Church from a few thousand at the end of the century to a community of at least 300,000 today (including sympathizers and children) shows that obviously Orthodoxy has somehow not met the religious needs and aspirations of some people. An in-depth study would require a closer scrutiny of Orthodox theology to determine where its strong points and weaknesses are, but for our purposes it is sufficient to observe that whereas Orthodoxy often preached a cosmic, other-worldly Christ, the Baptists emphasized the experience of Christ today as a personal Savior. (An analogy with John Wesley's conversion through the Moravians is not unrelated. When Wesley was asked if he believed that Jesus was his Savior, he replied, "Yes, I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of the world." But, when asked, "But is he your personal Savior?" Wesley could not respond positively.) Thus, the Baptist faith and witness of Jesus as personal Savior and Lord that one can experience today has evoked in the hearts of many Romanians an affirmative response. This personal appeal to conversion over against a mystical, transcendental religion is one of the main reasons for Baptist growth in Romania. (Catholicism in Poland is better able to deal with the personal needs of its believers. Through its many public festivals, adoration of the Virgin, private confessions, rosary piety, and lay Bible-reading, a personal involvement is present in Catholic piety that is often missing in Orthodoxy.)

THE NATURE OF THE ROMANIAN PEOPLE

A Romanian Baptist pastor told me hyperbolically that all Romanians are either poets or composers. Poetry and music are very significant parts of the worship services and public expressions of faith among Romanian Baptists. Originally without any musical training, the German Baptists in the 1920's sent several Romanians to their seminary in Hamburg for training in music. They brought back a good knowledge of music and soon developed outstanding choirs. No matter how large or small the congregation, one is always moved by the singing of the choirs and congregations in Romania. For instance, a worship service in Arad began with a brass band playing, then a 100-voice choir joined in, and finally at the end 2,000 people were singing--many of them standing in the street and others
leaning in the open windows! Although many of the songs are the revival hymns of the 19th century, today a much larger percentage have indigenous words and music. This music seems to speak effectively to the emotional feelings of the Romanian people. (The same could be said of the music in the Baptist churches of the USSR.)

Also, the reading of poems with a spiritual and emotional appeal is a very significant aspect of Baptist worship in Romania. Young teenage girls or old men stand up and recite poems that they themselves have written. The poems are usually stories with a strong appeal to come to Christ. Or, they are poems based on biblical themes or stories. Whole congregations can be in tears after the recitation of such poems.

It was said that Luther sang the Reformation into the hearts of the German people. In like manner Romanian Baptists are bringing the Gospel to large groups of people in Romania.

THE NATURE OF THE COUNTRY'S MORALE

In one sense, Romania is an old country, but yet in another sense it has the vitality of a new country. The socialist government after World War II has taken a mainly agrarian society and formed it into a technological society. One perceives in Romania progress and the growth of a young nation. This has led to the building of a larger "middle class," the old aristocracy having been dismantled by the government. Thus a new "middle" class of young factory workers, artisans, doctors, and university graduates has appeared. The standard of living is constantly improving. One pastor commented while passing through a little village that before the war when he lived in this area there was little food and no doctors available. Now there is ample food and good medical coverage. Very often members of this new "middle" class were the ones alienated by the former state church, having had little emotional commitment to it. Furthermore, the democratic setup of Baptist congregations encourages congregational participation in all levels of church life: whether singing in the choir, playing a musical instrument, directing a choir, being a deacon, helping to build one's "own" church building, leading Bible study, preaching, or offering public prayers.

This is not to say that the Baptist believers are all from this "middle" class. On the contrary, many are from the "lower" class (peasants), but the Baptist ecclesiology seems to meet their needs and compares with the striving toward upward mobility evident in all other secular spheres of life.¹

¹ This is a personal observation and intuition. Romanians might disagree with this evaluation completely.
A LAY MOVEMENT

In sharp contrast to Orthodoxy, which is a priest-oriented movement, the Baptist movement is largely led by laypeople who after many years may eventually work themselves up to be preachers of their local congregation. This follows the dictum of the German Baptist leader J. Oncken, "Every Baptist is a missionary." Thus, witness and evangelism are not delegated to official clergy, but every Baptist is seen as a witness. A government official once asked a pastor how they got so many people out to their meetings. The pastor replied, "We tell a blind, deaf, old lady that tomorrow an evangelist is coming and the church is full." Thus a mechanic in a factory witnessed to his co-laborer, and eight other men in the factory were converted and baptized. Such is the witness in Romania. There is really no "famous" Baptist preacher, but all churches from the smallest to largest congregations are experiencing growth because of this lay witness by word and deed. The holy life of the believer should not be underestimated as a forceful means of evangelism. Perhaps mocked and made fun of, or joked about, a holy life impresses even secular persons in their more serious moments and causes them to say, "See how they love one another."

METHODS OF EVANGELISM

In addition to the emphasis on music and poetry, the emotional and personal appeal of the preached word, the almost entirely lay-involvement, the holy life of the believer, one could also add the emphasis on biblical preaching, prayer, and loyalty to the local congregation, all of which make for a very committed congregation. It is a moving experience to see how a congregation will have spontaneous public prayers for more than an hour. These prayers are often accompanied by public acknowledgment of "yes" or "amen" throughout the entire period of prayer. Here prayer is not only a pastoral function on Sunday morning, but a life lived in hope and expectancy that God is trustworthy and answers the petitions of God's people. Though Romanian preachers often lack current biblical training and education, the Bible's centrality has preserved the life of the church. This often embarrasses those of us in the West whose knowledge of biblical scholarship is not always combined with as effective a proclamation as that of many of the uneducated Romanian lay-preachers.

This is not to discourage education or good solid scholarship. On the contrary, the Romanian Baptist churches have now grown to such an extent that, if their seminary does not reach a higher level of scholarship and academic achievement, their pastors will disappoint many second-generation Baptists whose faith and life require a deeper and more sound exegetical basis! Obviously the 30 students now
studying at the Baptist seminary in Bucharest do not suffice for the needs of the churches.

CONCLUSION

One can draw one's own conclusions as to why other churches in Eastern and Western Europe have not met with the same rapid growth of the Romanian Baptists. Obviously, the situations are different. France for example, has a higher degree of secularism than Romania. Even though Romania is a communist country, the belief in God is still held by the large majority of the people, and apparently even members of the Communist Party! In France, secularism, the belief that one can understand the universe without God, seems to have carried the day. Preaching in this situation and to this type of individual requires quite a different approach and method than in Romania where secularism is not so prevalent. In Poland the Baptist interpretation of the Gospel did not meet with as large an appeal as in Romania, because Catholicism seems to be able to meet the religious needs of the people.

Can other churches learn from the Romanian Baptist model? Obviously one can not take over completely their methods, since so much depends upon the local religious situation, as well as the culture. Nevertheless, the strong lay movement, personal appeal, and emotional experience (in the most positive sense!) of the Gospel are all signs of what the Holy Spirit can use to awaken life and build new churches!