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LESSONS FROM PROTESTANT MISSIONS TO RUSSIA
by Donald M. Fairbairn, Jr.

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A look back at the tumultuous period from 1980-2012 in the Soviet Union and former Soviet Union leaves one with much to ponder, but what stands out to me the most is the speed with which the attitudes of the Russian people toward evangelical Christianity changed. I lived and worked in Georgia in 1990, during the initial declarations of independence by the Soviet Republics, and I was in Ukraine from 1992-96 during the initial flurry of openness to all things Western, including Protestant Christianity. I remember Georgian Bibles selling on the streets of Tbilisi in 1990 for six-months’ wages and the contagious excitement of my Russian and Ukrainian students at Donetsk Bible College in 1992, as they marveled that they were actually able to study the Bible openly on a campus that had been a Comsomol camp just a few years earlier. I was there before the “rush for Russia” began, with CoMission and other groups pouring people and resources into the country. Who would have ever thought in 1985 that the situation would be so drastically different in 1995? But then it seemed as if the clock struck midnight on the party of missions in Russia, as the Duma, under heavy pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church, passed the infamous law in 1997 restricting religious freedom for “non-indigenous” religious groups.

In light of those stunningly fast transitions, my plea is that we look carefully at the second one, the sudden end of the Russian love affair with Western evangelical spirituality. Why did it happen? Why did the Protestant message so thoroughly fail to take root in Russia and its environs, despite an unprecedented openness in the early 1990s? It would be easy to cite Russia’s deeply entrenched commitment to Orthodoxy, the dissonance between the Russian soul and the Western mind, or other such factors.

But I wonder whether Western Christians might have contributed far more than we realize to the 1997 crackdown on Protestant Christianity. We went into Russia with a big splash, lots of publicity, and huge expenditures of money. But one could argue that we went in with very little substance. I remember an Orthodox deacon complaining in print in 1994 that America sent only the most superficial of its Christians to Russia. And more than once in the early 1990s, I had to field questions from my Russian and Ukrainian friends who asked why Americans were doing such superficial work. In light of those sentiments at the time and the events that later took place, I wonder whether a more measured movement into Russia, one with more attention to the long-term consequences of our Western actions, might have forestalled or even prevented the Russian counter-reaction that came in 1997.

I do not write this as a criticism of the intentions of the Western missionary force. By and large, the mission agencies and the people whom they sent worked in good faith, with a great zeal for the progress of the gospel. But they also worked under a sometimes insufficient understanding of the complexities of Russian history and society, and certainly with a lack of foresight about the unintended consequences of their actions. And indeed those unintended consequences need to be
studied.

Today, other parts of the communist world show stirrings similar to those of the Russian domain in 1991. China is increasingly open to the Western world, and even North Korea, the world’s most isolated socialist nation, may soon be open to missionary work. There are lessons to be learned from the mistakes we made in Russia 20 years ago, and we need to learn them well before we leap at the next great opportunity for missions.