

Reflections On My Russian Trip

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

As I think about my recent speaking tour in Moscow (May 13-28), what wells up within me is the declaration of the prophet: *Behold your God!* Isaiah proclaimed those words with wonder (40:9), when he realized the Lord's sovereignty and the good news of promised salvation.

Reflecting on the remarkable doors which God opened for the ministry of SCCCS in Russia, I too want to cry "Behold your God!" for He has displayed His sovereignty and grace in a way which calls for thanks and praise from all of us.

Very positive contacts were made within the Protestant, Russian Orthodox, and Old Believers communions -- including the synodical head for education of the Russian Orthodox church, editor of their periodical, the president of the Union of Evangelical Christians, and editor of the Old Believers magazine. All three groups desired further teaching materials from the study center and/or asked permission to publish in their official periodicals essays that I have written.

The fact that God opened doors to all three groups for me is itself a wonder because of the tensions which exist in Russia between these three expressions of Christianity. Christianity was introduced into Russia from the Eastern Orthodox Church with the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 988, and the Russian Orthodox Church became autocephalous in 1459, considering itself thereafter "the third Rome." Resistance to liturgical reforms introduced by Patriarch Nikon in 1653 (particularly the dispute over crossing oneself with two or three fingers!) led to the schism of the "Old Believers," who were subsequently persecuted and often martyred.

Protestantism (evangelicals come under the broad rubric of "Baptists") has of late become a distinct thorn to the Russian Orthodox, judging from the separate discussions of "the protestant problem" laid on me by the Patriarch, Abbot and Dean of the church! I believe, by God's grace, that I was able to lessen resentment and opposition to Protestantism with these officials, who ended by saying they were pleased my ministry had come to Russia.

At the International Conference on Religious Liberty which was held in Moscow while I was there (ironically, in the former Communist Youth Association building!), humanist principles of religious relativism and secular politics were advocated by adherents of various religions (from Islam and Hinduism to Roman Catholicism and Seventh-Day Adventism). The spiritual atmosphere was so abominable that neither I nor the missionary with me would participate at the

common banquet table. When the time came for my lecture, I argued strongly and apologetically that religious liberty in Russia could not be founded successfully on relativism and agnosticism, but only on the absolute truth of Christ. Religious relativism actually permits, rather than preventing, persecution. I observed that the illusion of cooperative good-will between participants at the conference was created only by excluding Branch Davidians, Satanists, violent Shi'ites, warriors of Kali, etc. etc. This created quite a rumbling in the audience.

Amazingly, three speakers later it was a Russian Orthodox priest who took over where I had left off! He even cited 2 Corinthians 6 about light having no fellowship with darkness. We spoke afterward, and he told me how pleased he was to hear me because he was not accustomed to "foreign protestants speaking with such principle as you did." We praise God for this favorable reception.

One of the largest non-church periodicals in Russia, *Science and Religion* (circulation 8 million+), will run an interview with me which had a good, confrontational-apologetical character about it. And the publication *Policy* of the Russian Academy of Management, the key institution attempting to teach capitalism, business principles and law in the new open atmosphere of Russia, will publish an interview in which I argue that without the moral foundations provided by Christianity, a free market cannot work in Russia or anywhere.

The Russian organization called "Ratio" (roughly "Mind" or "Intelligence" in English) is made up of members of the Moscow City Council, scientists, and business leaders who wish to promote scholarly exchange and funding of scientific projects which promote medical and industrial advances. They invited me to address them on "The Revitalization of Russia" at the Moscow City Council building one evening. I spoke of the need for religious revival in Russia because apart from Christ there could be no true liberation. In turn, I argued, transcendent principles revealed by God must limit the civil government -- and in particular, the free market was vital to economic, scientific, and industrial progress. In the question period following, one of the council members asked if I would not please read my lecture to President Yeltsin! (Wish I could have.)

I spoke on "Higher Law, Limited Government," and another lecture on "The Irrationality of Atheism" at the State Humanities Academy in Moscow. At the Russian Orthodox University I explained to the students how to do apologetics, utilizing "Dostoevsky's Problem of Evil."

At the International Conference on the Humanization of the Military (Russians want to move away from the brutal and dehumanized approach to military service for which the Soviets became infamous), I was the only participant with a Bible in hand, among top military leaders from around the globe. At a parallel session I said that the "first" international conference for humanizing the military was when John the Baptist answered the question of Roman soldiers about what they must do to "bring forth works worthy of repentance." (A leader for training cadets in the Russian army told me later, with tears, that he had been waiting all his life for someone to speak these truths in his country.) Many were taken back when I explained that if the Russians turn from Bolshevism to humanism now, they will be like a man who divorces his wife for being ugly -- and then marries her twin sister.

Perhaps the most antagonistic crowd I addressed was made up of philosophers (no surprise!) at The Institute of Man, many of whom are still deluded by Marxism as a theoretical system. My lecture, which the moderator attempted to cut short, was on "Marxist Anthropology and Economic Reality." I argued that Marxism had a view of man which was in reality an alternative religion to Christianity (with similar key concepts and concerns). Although Marx called religion the "opiate of the masses," economic realities in Russia have shown that it was Marxism itself which was a false utopian dream. This brought forth stimulated opposition! (Do Russian philosophers not read the newspapers about conditions all around them?) Praise God for the opportunity to honor His name.

The most heart-warming of my speaking opportunities was my first with a Russian translator, a sermon for the Evangelist Baptist Church (a congregation of 300 working-class Muscovites). After preaching that the congregation and I were not really foreign to each other because we were all citizens in the kingdom of the ultimate Sovereign, and that His word must permeate all areas of Russian (and American!) life if true liberation was to come. I was thrilled and gratified to hear a man pray (my translator telling me what he was saying) -- and repeat the main points of my sermon perfectly! The word of God was actually getting through. As Isaiah declared: "Behold your God!"