

Praying for a Russian Revolution

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

The land and people of Russia are desperately in need of a revolution -- spiritual, intellectual, ethical, social, economical, political. Life, starting with the heart, needs to begin again -- needs to be regenerated -- both individually and corporately.

Christians in the West have enjoyed a theological heritage which holds the potential for activating just such a new revolution in Russia -- but ironically, at a time when few in our own society now appreciate the full Reformational faith which has been our blessed possession.

The Unraveling of Communism

Two years ago, in the December issue of Penpoint for 1990, I wrote about the divinely ordained failure of those who had hoped for "A World Without Religion," alluding to the first worship service held in the Kremlin since the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Now, standing on the threshold of a what is hoped to be a speaking tour in Russia for SCCCS in March of this year, the words of that column bear repeating:

The intellectual circles of Europe in the nineteenth century experienced the exhilaration and pride of an aggressive rationalism which trusted in the guiding and saving strength of man's reason. Unaided by divine revelation, and spurning any superstitious faith in God, human intellect could answer the ultimate questions of life and discover the solution to our enduring social problems.

The French Revolution had enthroned the goddess of Reason. Hegel, who had once admired the French Revolution, taught that the culmination of the progress inherent in history would be the "world-mind" (Weltgeist) -- the Absolute. Feuerbach turned Hegel on his head by teaching that history is the development of matter, not mind (or idea). According to him religion is simply the "dream of the human mind."

Karl Marx was in turn influenced by Feuerbach and advocated an enforced socialism which banished God from consideration. Religion was no better than "the opiate of the masses." Such delusions needed to be eliminated in favor of a rational world where men solve their problems without "Outside" intervention.

Such hostility to religious faith was given practical implementation by the Russian Revolution of 1917. Russia would become history's guinea pig for scientific socialism. The last religious services celebrated within the walls of the Kremlin were conducted in October, 1917.

Until this year. October, 1990, witnessed Patriarch Alexi II lead Christian worship in the Kremlin for the first time in 73 years. Praise God! In his first meeting with the Roman Catholic Pope, Mikhail Gorbachev told the pope that his mother had baptized him in the Orthodox Church. In a recent speech, the Russian leader contended that "The Soviet Union is suffering from a spiritual decline."

These are amazing words and amazing events in the amazing time through which we are living. My point is not at all to endorse the theological errors of Romanism or the Orthodox church -- much less to trust Gorbachev's assessment of spiritual matters. My point is that it is amazing that the political bastion of atheism can now see such things happening or being said. Religion could be oppressed, but not vanquished. The spiritual nature and longings of man cannot be removed, even within the most hostile anti-religious political regime of history.

Atheism can be legislated. It cannot be lived. Men's hearts will remain restless (as Augustine once said) until they find their rest in the living and true God. What is transpiring in eastern Europe these days is not simply a confrontation with cold economic reality, it is a renewed confrontation with the reality of our Creator and Redeemer. Atheism continues to be the great failure of history. It is Jesus Christ "whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, which shall never pass away nor be destroyed" (Daniel 7:14).

Today and Tomorrow

Now even Gorbachev is consigned to history, and who can say what the future holds for the unstable scene in Russia? Boris Yeltsin presides over an unpredictable political house. This much we know: the Lord Jesus Christ holds the future of Russia in His hands, and it is His dominion which will hold sway.

Many Christian (or professedly Christian) groups have seized the opportunity and are trying to make inroads to Russia. Some have, sadly, settled for mere "photo-opportunities." Some have acted like boorish Western tourists, with little sensitivity to the differences between the two cultures or little appreciation for what practical life has been like for those under the Communist fist. Some groups have peddled a gospel which is no gospel at all. The influx of Western "Christians" has created an atmosphere resembling a religious bazaar.

Nevertheless, many sincere Bible-believing groups have dispatched teams to Russia to share the genuine good news about God's grace and the Savior Jesus Christ with the confused and downtrodden people of that land. Some preach on corners, while others try to build up congregations; some ignore the established Orthodox church there, and others try to cooperate with it. We should continually pray for God to bring about thousands of conversions through these efforts. Those who have suffered so much in this life and do not respond in faith to Christ will suffer infinitely more in the next life. Russia needs evangelism. Russia needs revival.

But Russia needs more

Russia also needs a thoroughgoing religious reformation which will spark nothing less than a new revolution in that land. It needs an intellectually cogent defense of the Christian worldview and a vibrant presentation of the widespread, practical implications of that worldview. This has been (by God's grace) the particular strength of the ministry of SCCCS and others of like faith and practice. This has been the special gift and Church. In a recent speech, the Russian leader contended that "The Soviet Union is suffering heritage of Reformed Christianity from the days of Calvin. It provides the seeds we hope to sow in Russia. Toward that end our targeted audience will be pastors, university professors, and government officials. They need to have a defense of the Christian philosophy of life, the challenge of Biblically-base systematic theology, as well as a clear presentation of how the gospel changes everything from lifestyles to public policies. It is that vision that we wish to share.

Yesterday and Tomorrow

Ancient Russia stood outside the Roman empire and its intellectual or cultural legacy. When Christianity came to this region it was by means of Byzantium, not Rome. From the split of the eastern and western churches in 1059, Russia was effectively cut off from European Christianity. The great struggle of the Middle Ages was for Moscow to eliminate the burden of Mongol rule, which left little room for intense intellectual ferment.

Peter the Great (b. 1672) opened Russia to the influence of the West, on the heels of the grand days of Puritan thought and influence in Britain and America. Yet Russian thought still strove for harmony with eastern orthodox theology (free of western rationalism), as we find in the celebrated philosophy of Vladimir Solovyev (1853-1900). Even Catherine the Great's fascination with French Enlightenment thinkers was but a fad for the dilettante circle. When western intellectual influence finally prevailed on a wide scale, it was the ideology of Marxism, not Reformational Christianity, which captured Russia. And nearly destroyed it, as time did eventually tell.

In God's gracious providence the unraveling of communism opens a very significant window of opportunity for Russia's future. We must pray for a new Russian revolution. Will you please help us sow a revolutionary worldview there?