

Why the Russian Baptists Are Neither Arminians nor Calvinists

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The theological tradition of synergy (cooperation) between divine grace and free will was never interrupted in the Christian East; it remained almost untouched by the theological controversies of the West.^[1] According to the Russian philosopher L. A. Zander, Eastern Christian theology differs greatly from Western classical doctrines because it did not experience any comparable influence from Augustine's anthropology, Anselm's teaching on redemption, and the Scholastic methodology of Thomas Aquinas.^[2]

Something similar may be said about the teachings of the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius in Russia and the Soviet Union, so that sooner or later we must declare the absence of any significant relationship between the views of the latter and of the Russian-Ukrainian Evangelical movement (including the Russian Baptists, in particular).^[3] Arminius, who lived in the second half of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in Amsterdam and Leiden, was, strictly speaking, a Reformed pastor. That is, he based his views upon completely different doctrinal grounds; his thinking belonged to another system of theological coordinates in comparison with Eastern, Slavic Christianity from which the Russian evangelical movement mainly originated. What Arminius did in his life, above all, has value and meaning to Western Protestantism. Arminius was actually a *revisionist* of classical Calvinism and throughout his life he thought within its framework. The famous five points of Arminianism and Calvinism are the fruits



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^[1] See Archbishop Sergy (Stragorodskii), *Pravoslavnoe uchenie o spasenii* [The Orthodox doctrine of salvation] (Moscow: Izdatel'skii otdel Moskovskogo Patriarkhata, 1991), pp. 55, 159-160.

^[2] See L. A. Zander, *Vision and Action* (London: Gollancz, 1952), p. 59.

^[3] In this paper, we do not consider the genesis of the theological views of the Russian German Baptists, which has noticeable differences.

of the same late-scholastic thinking, the attempts to explain rationally what is, in principle, the mystery of God.

Here is just one illustration: among the main causes of Arminius' concern about the logical consequences of the doctrine of predestination was its incompatibility with the Christological teaching of the Church.^[4] If any group of people, before their birth, were predestined to heaven or hell, it limits extremely the «scope of redemption,» belittles Christ's sacrifice at Calvary (or even reduces it to making no sense at all). That is, Calvinistic doctrine is not Christocentric. To adequately understand this argument of Arminius, one must, above all, get the same classical theological education of the West, which, again, is based on the anthropology of St. Augustine and his understanding of sin, the «juridical» approach of Anselm of Canterbury to the doctrine of redemption, and the scholastic systematics «summarized» by Thomas Aquinas.

However, what we find at the core of the doctrine of salvation in the Russian-Ukrainian Evangelical-Baptist brotherhood has a completely different nature and other roots. This is neither good nor bad—it is just a different, more «mystical-apophatic» and less rational and systematic experience of theology. It would be exceedingly unfortunate if today we ignored the spiritual path of our predecessors and fathers. Even if we – to some extent – appreciate Western scholastic subtleties, this does not give us the right to cancel out the path of the Slavic evangelicals, so worthily trodden by previous generations.

It is quite often said that the Russian Baptists hold to “Arminian” theology.^[5] However, such a view, in our opinion, is inadequate to the historical experience of the brotherhood of the ECB. In fact, it is a Western classification, rather artificially applied to the Russian Baptists on the grounds of an approximate, external similarity of notions, that is, a *simplification* of the problem. In a sense, it is like comparing a comet's tail with the tail of a piglet! It is true that, technically, a «tail part» is present in both cases, but how seriously may we speak of a real connection between such different phenomena?

If one is not a Calvinist, it does not necessarily follow that one must therefore be an Arminian. Before perestroika, almost no Russian Baptists knew anything of the Dutch Arminius and his teaching (incidentally, the works of Arminius have not yet been translated into Russian). In addition, it should be noted that the ideas of European Protestantism often undergo significant changes in the Russian context under the influence of the common cultural Slavic tradition and the features of the national mentality. This is especially significant in matters relating to soteriology.

If the above is true concerning Arminianism, it is much more (or equally) the case that the Russian-Ukrainian Baptists have nothing in common with Calvinism. It is noteworthy that the only Russian Baptist Calvinist confession of faith^[6] in practice

^[4] See, for instance, J. Briggs, ed., *A Dictionary of European Baptist Life and Thought* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2009), pp. 21-22.

^[5] See, for instance, H. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1987), p. 817; M. Sidwell, *The Russian Baptists*, <http://www.bju.edu/library/collections/fund_file/russianbap.html#russ65>; etc.

^[6] *Verouchenie russkikh Evngelskikh Khristian-Baptistov* [The creed of the Russian Evangelical Christians-Baptists] (Rostov-na-Donu: Tipografia F. P. Pavlova, 1906). Later republished in Moscow as *Ispovedanie very Khristian-Baptistov* [The creed of the Christians-Baptists] (Moscow: Izdanie N.V. Odintsova, 1928).

appears to be a translation from the German creed of the Baptists of Hamburg and was not especially widespread in Russia.^[7] As far back as the most authoritative early Russian creeds by I. S. Prokhanov (1910) and I. V. Kargel (1913), declarations were included about the synergy of God and humanity in the process of salvation.^[8]

In 2006 the author of this paper participated in a project in which over a hundred well-known, elderly ministers and members of Baptist churches from all over the former Soviet Union (now living mainly on the Pacific coast of the USA) were interviewed. All of them, apart from everything else, were asked about the so-called «Calvinist-Arminian» theme. The vast majority of interviewees (except for two or three people) said that they knew nothing about Calvinist doctrine before perestroika. Some of them had heard the term «Calvinism» before, but they did not understand its meaning. As for Arminianism, if we set aside the external similarity of ideas (the «tails»), none of the respondents had ever heard of such a doctrine, nor even the word “Arminianism” itself before the perestroika era. If we have respect for the principles of social science, we face a hard fact here: Russian Baptists historically are neither Arminians nor Calvinists.

From whence did their own, very specific and, most importantly, *common* views on salvation come to the ECB brotherhood? For a difficult but honest answer to this question, apparently we should look around and remember historically in what country we are living. Then a simple comparative analysis of soteriological doctrines will show that the Russian-Ukrainian Baptist communities are not far removed from traditional (and ancient) Russian Orthodox teaching. Yes, there are some similarities with medieval Arminianism, but again, they are rooted in completely different historical and theological contexts. Russian Baptists have always wanted to emphasize the supremacy of faith over works, which indicates their involvement in the Protestant world, but at the same time they were infinitely distant from the Calvinist doctrine of salvation dominant among the Western (European and American) Baptists.

It is important to note that Russian Baptist authors teaching on predestination and free will and criticizing Calvinism, never even mentioned Arminianism as a theological alternative;^[9] this affirms again that the Russian Baptists are not Arminians. In 1966, the official periodical *Bratskii vestnik* [Fraternal bulletin] stated that the Soviet Baptists “know nothing” about theological discussions between Western Calvinists and Arminians.^[10] This was probably the first mention of the word “Arminianism” in the Soviet Baptist context, but it was done without even including a brief definition of the term.

^[7] S. Savinskii, *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov Ukraini, Rossii, Belorussii* [History of the Evangelical Christians—Baptists of the Ukraine, Russia, and Belorussia (1867 – 1917)] (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 1999), p. 314.

^[8] See *Izlozhenie evangel'skoy very* [Statement of the evangelical faith], in S. V. Sannikov, ed., *Istoriia baptizma* [History of the Baptists] (Odessa: OBS, 1996), pp. 444-445; *Verouchenie Evangel'skikh Khristian-Baptistov* [The creed of the Evangelical Christians—Baptists], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 4 (1966): 16.

^[9] See, for instance, A. Karev, “Chto govorit Bibliia o predopredelenii” [What does the Bible say about predestination], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 1 (1964): 55-57. While working on his dissertation, the author of the present study had the opportunity to get acquainted with almost all the issues of *Bratskii vestnik* (AUCECB) and *Vestnik istiny* (CCECB) that came out before perestroika.

^[10] “Doklad General'nogo Sekretaria VSEKhB A. V. Kareva” [Report of the Secretary-General of the AUCECB, A.V. Karev], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 6 (1966): 17.

The point here is not so much in the use of what would be an exotic word for Russians, but in the fact that immediately behind it stand the fundamental differences between Western Reformed theology and the Orthodox-Molokan environment that nurtured the Russian Baptists. Struggling against the Calvinist doctrine of election, the Soviet Baptists opposed it with the traditional Eastern Christian teaching on salvation, which is based on God's fore-knowledge of man's choice. It is characteristic that the name of the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius was mentioned – probably for the first time – in *Bratskii vestnik* in 1984.^[11] Since then, some elements of the Arminian doctrine proper, with its scholastic formulas, began to be *mentioned* in Russia. However, note that this took place during the perestroika era, in a period of very different historical realities. That is, Calvinism and Arminianism practically simultaneously – during perestroika, and not before – made themselves known among the Russian Baptists.

At this point for the sake of comparison it is necessary to say something about the Russian Orthodox doctrine of salvation according to their authoritative doctrinal works. Moreover, this will be useful to relate to the material that was traditional among the Russian-Ukrainian Evangelical-Baptist congregations before perestroika. These sources include sermons read from the pulpit, baptismal classes, lectures during church courses for preachers, etc., that is, particular elementary truth that contains the essence of everyday theology taught in the ECB before the early 1990s.

Briefly, the Orthodox teaching on soteriology—which undoubtedly had some influence on Russian Baptist doctrine, because it was impossible for the two largest Christian communities in Russia and the Soviet Union to live side by side for more than a hundred years and remain completely independent of each other—could be summarized as follows:

God loves everybody and desires the salvation of all people on earth; therefore anyone's predestination to eternal death is unthinkable. Predestination is based on God's prescience of people's conversion to Christ. Human beings possess genuine free will, which was seriously damaged, but not completely lost because of original sin. The process of salvation includes both God's side and humanity's side. Salvation is possible only by the working of grace, which, nevertheless, does not violate the moral freedom of the individual. When a human being, inclined by grace, responds to God with repentance, that person enters the way of salvation and becomes predestined to God's Kingdom. The one who rejects God's grace, in fact, deprives himself of salvation.^[12]

St. John of Damascus writes in his *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*:

^[11] S. Nikolaev, "Reformatskaia tserkov'" [The Reformed Church], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 1 (1984): 48-49.

^[12] See, for instance, Metropolitan Makarii (Bulgakov), *Pravoslavno-dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* [Orthodox-dogmatic theology], 2 vols. (Moscow: Palomnik, 1999), vol. 2, pp. 263-274; Archpriest J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), pp. 143-146; Archbishop

Sergy (Stragorodskii), *Pravoslavnoe uchenie o spasenii* [Orthodox teaching on salvation], pp. 203-217; N. Berdyaev, *Tsarstvo dukha i tsarstvo Kesaria* [The Kingdom of the Spirit and the kingdom of Caesar (1949)] (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), pp. 324-327; P. Leporsky, "Blagodat'" [Grace], in S. Averintsev, ed., *Khristianstvo: Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar'* [Christianity: Encyclopedic dictionary], 3 vols. (Moscow: Bolshaia rossiiskaia entsiklopediia, 1995), vol. 3, pp. 333-336.

We ought to understand that while God knows all things beforehand, yet He does not predetermine all things. For He knows beforehand those things that are in our power; but He does not predetermine them. For it is not His will that there should be wickedness nor does He choose to compel virtue. So predetermination is the work of the divine command based on foreknowledge.^[13]

Archbishop Sergy Stragorodskii summarizes the main Orthodox principle:

Salvation cannot be some outwardly-judicial or a physical event, but necessarily is a moral action; and, as such, it surely supposes, as the inevitable condition and law, that man accomplishes this action himself, though with the help of grace. Grace, though, ... accomplishes everything, but necessarily does it within freedom and consciousness.^[14]

Orthodox authors state repeatedly that though God created man without his permission, to save anyone in like manner is not pleasing to Him. And that is why, when someone throws a rope to a drowning man and he does not grab it, he will inevitably sink.^[15]

The serious distinctions in approach to the problem between Western Protestants and Eastern Christians are evident. If, first of all, God is independent of His creation, then we arrive at “legal relationships.”^[16] A law is given, commandments are uttered, and God has no spare time to fiddle around with the changeable will of man. The wicked will be punished and the righteous will be rewarded. And the doctrine of absolute, double predestination naturally enough fits this approach. The legal conception of “crime – punishment” is certainly grounded in Scripture, but by no means reflects all its fullness (God, for example, is not only the Judge, but also the good Shepherd, Teacher, Friend, etc.).^[17] If God is independent through the prism of His love and mercy, this is a kind of His “self-restraint,” corresponds to the Eastern Christian moral sense and leads to many important consequences. The relationship of the Lord to humanity is constructed on a gracious and confidential basis.^[18] He has infinite time to teach and draw every sinner to salvation. And only those people who reject God’s great mercy after many opportunities for reconciliation presented to them—only those will perish forever.^[19] The teaching confessed by the Orthodox Church has no place for the Western doctrine of double predestination.

On the whole, the Evangelical Christians-Baptists in the territory of the former Soviet Union held very similar soteriological views during the period that preceded perestroika. Thus, A. V. Karev noted that the Bible teaches only about predestination

^[13] St. John of Damascus, *Tochnoe izlozhenie pravoslavnoi very* [Exact exposition of the Orthodox faith], (Moscow: Lod’ia, 1998), p. 187.

^[14] Archbishop Sergy (Stragorodskii), *Pravoslavnoe uchenie o spasenii*, pp. 161-162.

^[15] See Archpriest A. Belotsvetov, “Usloviia spaseniia s nashei storony” [The conditions of salvation from our side], in P. Dudarev, ed., *Sbornik propovednicheskikh obraztsov* [Collection of preaching samples], (St. Petersburg: Izdanie I. Tuzova, 1912), p. 474.

^[16] See Losskii, “Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie” [Dogmatic theology] in *Misticheskoe bogoslovie* [Mystical theology] (Kyiv: Put’ k istine, 1991), p. 330.

^[17] See Ibid.; Archbishop Sergy (Stragorodskii), *Pravoslavnoe uchenie o spasenii*, p. 83.

^[18] See V. Losskii, “Po obrazu i podobiiu” [In the image and likeness of God], in V. Losskii, *Bogovidenie* [Vision of God] (Moscow: Izd. ACT, 2003), pp. 632-645.

^[19] Makarii, *Pravoslavno-dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, v. II, pp. 587-588.

to salvation and that God predestines no one to perdition. He said, “God foresaw the Fall of the first man and introduction of sin on the earth, but He did not predestine sin and did not intend it... But salvation from sin was predestined, intended by God before creation of the world, in the person of the Lamb of God without blemish and without spot.”^[20]

We see that Karev follows here the traditional Eastern Christian line of argument. In other words, such was to no small degree the common soteriological viewpoint of both Orthodoxy and the Russian Baptists.

One of the fundamental truths of Orthodoxy is the following: as God has freedom, so humanity, created in His image and likeness, has genuine freedom, too.^[21] This is not moral pride: owing to the teaching on humility as the main virtue, Eastern Christian theology escapes the Arminian extremes in the approval of free will.^[22]

The Russian Baptists taught the same: man, as the image of God, has free will and certainly with humility of heart participates in the work of his own salvation; man has free will, which is considered damaged, but not lost after the Fall; so man is fully responsible before God for all of his actions, and “saving faith is unthinkable without works.”^[23] Chapter 6 of the Project of the Russian Baptist Creed (1980) includes the free will of man as the basic belief. Declaring salvation by faith, the creed adds, “Good works also testify about the true faith.”^[24] The approved Russian Baptist creed (1985) declares the synergy of divine grace and free will of man, and then repeats the same words on the importance of good works.^[25]

These words halfway open the door into traditional Russian piety, broadly represented in the Russian Baptist communities, for instance, by constant reading of Scripture, strict fasting, kneeling for prayer, night vigils, giving alms, enduring many sufferings for Christ’s sake (which also was always highly valued in the brotherhood). This once again demonstrates the «Russian soil» of the national Baptists and such an emphasis on good deeds that would hardly be acceptable for Western Protestants, not only for Calvinists but also for Arminians. In 1985, *Bratskii vestnik* tried to find a balance in the theme of faith and good works in the following remarkable way: “Good works confirm our faith... If we want to be sure of our salvation, let us look at our life...”^[26] (That is, though faith is declared here, and works, relatively speaking, are expelled «at the door,» they immediately return through the «window»). Sometimes the Russian Baptist understanding of the importance of good works drew so near to the Orthodox point of view that Luther’s teaching on justification by faith was transformed beyond recognition. A well-known minister of the AUCECB said, “We should not exhibit a

^[20] A. Karev, *Dukhovnye stat'i* [Theological articles], (Kornal: Svet na vostoce, 1974), p. 56.

^[21] See Makarii, *Pravoslavno-dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, v. I, pp. 454–457.

^[22] G. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 224.

^[23] See A. Mitskevich, “Iz Evangel'sko-Baptistskoi dogmatiki” [Extracts from Evangelical-Baptist theology], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 5 (1956): 48; “Chto takoe blagodat'?” [What does grace mean?] *Bratskii vestnik*, Nos. 5–6 (1960): 114–116; *Dogma-*

tika: Zaochnye bibleiskie kursy [Dogmatics: Bible correspondence courses], (Moscow: AUCECB, 1970), pp. 90–91; S. Nikolaev, Reformatskaia tserkov' [The Reformed church], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 1 (1984): 48–49; K. Somov, “Vera i dela” [Faith and works], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 2 (1963): 53–55.

^[24] *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 4 (1980): 39–41.

^[25] See *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 4 (1985): 38–40.

^[26] “My sozdany vo Khriste Iisuse na dobrye dela” [We are created in Christ Jesus for good works], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 1 (1985): 15–16.

‘faith of straw,’ as Luther says, but faith with good works... Let us hurry to do good because it is possible to be too late...”^[27]

Such was in general terms – whether we like it or not – the traditional doctrine of the ECB before perestroika. And it is exactly from this point that we need to proceed today, determining the future direction for the development of Russian Baptist theology. If we initially erroneously define our theology as «Arminian,» in the first place we act unscientifically, ignoring unfoundedly our actual cultural and religious grounding; and in the second place we break the chronology of events and, finally, act contrary to all logic (after all, «Abraham begat Isaac,» and not vice versa).

If we want, let us say, to visit Kyiv, we need to find out, first of all, where we are now. Because if we are, for example, in Prague at the moment, we should move in one direction and if we are somewhere in Omsk, we should go in a different direction. Now, imagine that we have determined our location incorrectly. For example, the idea that we are in Prague now for some reason is much more attractive to us than the idea that we are somewhere in Omsk. After that we – it seems to us – begin to move in the direction of the desired Kyiv. However, if we initially incorrectly recognized our location, we will be actually moving away from Kyiv, not coming nearer to it. Therefore, the sooner we realize our mistake the better. The mistake is that we somehow have decided that we are Arminians (or Calvinists), i.e. a kind of Reformed Protestants, and not a part of the Orthodox world by birth (with its fundamentally different way of thinking, worldview, philosophy).

Even if we proclaim that we give priority to the «Bible alone,» it is, above all, the Russian Synodal (i.e. Orthodox) Bible, in which, as the specialists and researchers say, many “extreme Protestant” passages of the New Testament on salvation by grace alone were evidently moderated— probably for their better adequacy to the traditional Orthodox understanding of the soteriological value of good works.^[28] That, in the end, inevitably affected the ECB brotherhood, which used mainly the same Orthodox translation of the Scripture. There is one illustrative example more: the unpleasant word *vziatka* (“bribe”) occurs only four times in the Russian Synodal Bible,^[29] while the same word *bribe* is used in the New American Standard Bible twenty-six times.^[30] The cause of such a discrepancy is that the Synodal Bible often substitutes the softer and more “polite” words *gifts*, *donation* (for corruption). Behind this rather amusing instance, nonetheless, serious difficulties in the interpretation of Scripture and the striking distinguishing features of the Eastern Christian mentality open up. These features are fully developed among Russian Baptists.

Of course, some echoes of Reformed ideas could penetrate through the Iron Curtain from the West to the USSR, besides which some of the older Russian brethren could remember certain elements of such teachings from the 1920s or even from the

^[27] I. Tatarchenko, “Dukhovnaia lestnitsa” [The spiritual ladder], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 6 (1969): 47.

^[28] See I. Apatova, *Germenevtika Sinodal'nogo perevoda* [Hermeneutics of the Synodal translation], (Diploma thesis, Moscow Theological Seminary of ECB, 2006), pp. 109-123.

^[29] *Polnaia simfoniia na kanonicheskie knigi*

Sviashchennogo Pisaniya [The exhaustive concordance of the canonical books of the Holy Scripture] (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 1996), p. 99.

^[30] *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Holman Bible Publishers, 1981), pp. 173-174.

time before the Bolshevik revolution, when there were still quite a number of contacts with Western Baptists. However, such cases were rare, and they did not set the tone. For example, one of the leaders of the AUCECB, S. Fadiukhin, expressed his concern in the 1970s about the teaching on predestination in some congregations.^[31] However A. Bychkov, the Secretary-General of AUCECB, declared on this theme, “We... do not preach the principle ‘once saved, always saved’ and do not detract from the merit of the fight of faith. We are consistent, on the basis of the Word of God, on this theme...”^[32] (But – let us say it again here – the Word of God of the Russian Baptists was in the Orthodox translation, in agreement with the Eastern Christian tradition). Let us compare this also with the words of another well-known Baptist minister of that period, A. K. Sipko: “Russian Baptists, keeping to the simple Gospel, with fasting and praying, remained faithful to their Lord and His Word without any predestination.”^[33] One should think that such declarations can be adequately estimated only if we look at them not from the point of view of the Western, Calvinistic-Arminian theology (which would be extremely fallacious), but rather in the context of Eastern Christian soteriological teaching. In other words, the Western influence on the theology of the brotherhood of ECB should not be overestimated. Anyway, in the end, we borrow from other nations only that to which our heart responds. And it responds primarily to the words and motives that were put into it since childhood, with its mother’s milk. Everything else is rejected in most cases (of course, there may be some exceptions, but that is the general rule).

Before perestroika, the Soviet Baptists almost unanimously taught that a Christian, under certain conditions, is able to refuse the Lord and his salvation,^[34] to fall away from grace,^[35] to be blotted out from the book of life in heaven.^[36] The common explanation of this statement was the following: to *lose* salvation (incidentally) is impossible, because God is faithful to His promises and saves His children; but man is able to *refuse* salvation (by a conscious and volitional decision), and therefore he can perish^[37] It happens that there are people frozen in the cold who can be warmed,

^[31] S. Fadiukhin, “Ob osoboi Bozh’ey liubvi k izbrannym” [On God’s special love to the elect], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 5 (1978): 17.

^[32] A. Bychkov, “Iisus Khristos – Spasitel’” [Jesus Christ is the Savior], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 1 (1986): 16.

^[33] A. Sipko, *Derzhis’ obraztsa zdravogo ucheniia: Sbornik stat’ei* [Keep the pattern of sound teaching: Collection of articles] (Spokane, Wash.: NCG Inc., 2010), p. 138.

^[34] See, for instance, A. Karev, “Chto govorit Bibliia ob otstuplenii” [What the Bible says about apostasy], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 1 (1964): 57–59.

^[35] See, for instance, V. Meshcheriakov, “Spasenie po blagodati” [Salvation by grace], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 6 (1977): 39–41.

^[36] See, for instance, V. Kulikov, “Raduites’, chto imena vashi v knige zhizni” [Rejoice that your names are in the book of life], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 2 (1991): 13. The Russian Baptist belief about the book of life was briefly the following: when a person

believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, his or her name is recorded in heaven; if Christians fall away from God, they are blotted out from the book of life; those who do not believe in Christ are never put down in this heavenly book. See also S. Fadiukhin, “Ispovedanie nashei very” [Our creed], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 5 (1970): 50. Calvinism, by the way, explains very well the initial presence or absence of a person’s name in the book of life, but it is not able to clearly explain the idea of its deletion, although this idea occurs in the Bible.

^[37] See, for instance, V. Slobodianik, “Voprosy dukhovnoi zhizni” [Issues of spiritual life], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 4 (1965): 29–31. See also a historical review of the theme in the Russian Baptist context: C. Prokhorov, *Opyt otechestvennogo evangel’skogo bogosloviia* [An introduction to Russian evangelical theology], (St. Petersburg: Mezhdunarodnoe khristianskoe izdatel’stvo “Titul”, 2009), pp. 160–166.

un-benumbed, but it also happens that there are those frozen to death who cannot be saved by any warmth; the same is true of apostates.^[38]

Incidentally, this was a sensitive question not only in theory, but also in practice in Communist times. By the middle of the 1960s, about 200 Orthodox priests had openly denied their rank.^[39] Collaborating with Soviet atheists, many of them wrote anti-religious books and articles. A similar process of apostasy took place among Soviet Baptists as well.^[40]

Some editorials in *Bratskii vestnik* in the 1970s^[41] attract attention by their exceptionally Eastern, and so-called «spiritual-moral» approach to the subject of sin. For example, human sin is shown there more as a spiritual illness than a crime against the Lord,^[42] which evidently contrasts with the traditional Western approach to the theme of redemption, including the Arminian tradition. It should be added also that the numerous references to the famous Eastern Fathers and teachers of the Church (especially to St. John Chrysostom) already had become a certain spiritual norm for Russian Baptists before perestroika. Of course, ECB authors also wrote about salvation by grace through faith only (the traditional Protestant angle), but at the same time always appended that grace does not save anyone by force.^[43] This in no way was a depreciation of the power of divine grace, but simply the common Eastern-Christian explanation of the approach to the problem; for example, the Lord is more greatly praised by the Bride who is happily following her Groom-Christ, but not doing it by force.

Simultaneously the Russian Baptists taught, as a rule, contrary to Orthodox tradition, on the *assurance* of believers in their salvation.^[44] Many elderly Baptist church members testified in interviews about their assurance of salvation under the Soviet regime^[45] and quoted their favorite hymns, for instance: “Yes, I am saved! That is not a

^[38] A. Karev, “Voprosy veruiushchikh” [Believers’ questions], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 3 (1966): 21.

^[39] M. Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’ pri Staline i Khrushcheve* [The Russian Orthodox Church under Stalin and Khrushchev], (Moscow: Krutitskoe Patriarshee Podvor’e, 1999), p. 370. This competent author, making reference to some archival documents of the 1960s, states that “many of the apostates who rejected their priesthood... became hard drinkers, committed suicide; some of them asked their hierarchs for forgiveness.” All of the apostate clerics were excommunicated. See also *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, No. 2 (1960): 27; Archpriest V. Tsy-pin, *Istoriia Russkoi Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi, 1917-1990* [History of the Russian Orthodox Church, 1917-1990], (Moscow: Izdatel’skii Dom “Khronika,” 1994), pp. 155-157.

^[40] See, for instance, V. Golubovich, ed., *My byli baptistami* [We were Baptists], (Moscow: Gospolizdat, 1960). A.V. Karev commented on the appearance of this book as follows: “It is a collection of twenty-eight Baptist denials of the faith!” in “Dnevnik A. V. Kareva” [A.V. Karev’s diary], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 1 (1999): 47. Baptists from the former USSR who were interviewed also have some-

thing to say about those who were apostates before perestroika; see the testimonies of deacon Ia.S. Shevchuk (INT, Los Angeles, California, USA, 2006); presbyter A.T. Evstratenko (INT, San Diego, California, USA, 2006); presbyter M. P. Zakharov (INT, Sacramento, California, USA, 2006), and others.

^[41] See, for instance, *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 4 (1975): 24-26.

^[42] See, for instance, A. Karev, “Grekh i pobeda nad nim” [Sin and victory over it], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 1 (1972): 18.

^[43] See, for instance, E. Mad’iugin, “Blagodat’ Bozh’ia” [The grace of God], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 1 (1989): 22-23.

^[44] *Dogmatika: Zaocnye bibleiskie kursy*, p. 138; “Uverenost’ v spasenii” [Assurance of salvation], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 4 (1972): 56-59; I. Sergey, “Uverenost’ v spasenii” [Assurance of salvation], *Bratskii vestnik*, No. 4 (1991): 16.

^[45] For instance, the testimonies of the spouses Tsvirin’ko who lived in Latvia (INT, Fresno, California, USA, 2006); minister from Alma-Ata, V. V. Zinchenko (INT, Sacramento, California, USA, 2006), and others.

word of pride,” etc.^[46] At the same time, some traditional, popular Russian Baptist hymns contain less clear statements on the subject.

Please, tell me, my God!
 Have I been counted in
 On the shining pages
 Of the eternal book of the saved?
 ...Whether I am counted in there,
 In the book of the eternal Kingdom?
 ...Where the angels glorify You,
 Whether I am counted in there?^[47]

Similar uncertainty sounds in the following hymns: #27 (“No, carry me out!”) and #85 (“Disperse my doubts”) from *Sbornik dukhovnykh pesen'*; #744 (“Can I really be without fruit?”) from *Pesn' vrozozhdeniia*, etc. Also, the hymn #170 (*SDP*), written as if to proclaim assurance in salvation, actually says that Christ “will give me salvation on the day when He comes again...” (i.e., the Christian is not saved now). Apparently such songs in some measure reflected the views of the Russian Baptists who were “not so assured” in their (“easy”) salvation and who asked themselves, for example, the following anxious questions: “Were there not ten virgins gone out to meet the Bridegroom? But the five of them only were worthy to come to the marriage”;^[48] “Do you say that you are saved? God grant it!.. But why does the Lord ask whether He will find faith on the earth during His Second Coming?”;^[49] “We all, the Christians of the last time, have to keep watch because it is written: two people will be in one bed, or grinding grain together, or working together in the field, but only one of them will be taken to the Lord...”^[50] etc.^[51]

From our point of view, the Orthodox teaching that Christians living on the earth are merely on the way to their eternal salvation, since “in hope we have been saved” (Rom. 8:24),^[52] could better clarify the reason for such rather incoherent Russian Baptist views on assurance of salvation. Perhaps they represent an echo of the frequently quoted (by Russian Orthodox authors) words of St. Elder Agatho, “I am a man, and I do not know whether my works will be pleasing to God... I do not presume, except I come before God: for the judgments of God are not the judgments of men.”^[53] In fact, the same idea appears in a hymn of the ECB, “Have I been counted in on the shining pages (of the eternal book of the saved)?”

^[46] *Sbornik dukhovnykh pesen' Evangel'skikh Khristian-Baptistov* [The songbook of the Evangelical Christians – Baptists] (Moscow: AUCECB, 1968), pp. 209-210. See also *Sbornik dukhovnykh pesen'*, #15, p. 17; #160, pp. 112-113; #244, p. 169; #262, p. 180; *Pesn' vrozozhdeniia* [Song of revival], (Izdanie Soveta Tserkvei ECB, 1978), #166, 169, etc.

^[47] *Sbornik dukhovnykh pesen'*, #566, p. 377.

^[48] Mt. 25:1-13.

^[49] Lk. 18:8-9.

^[50] Lk. 17:30-36.

^[51] For instance, the testimonies of such experienced presbyters of the ECB brotherhood as V.N. Khot'ko (Petropavlovsk, Kazakhstan, 2000); I.A. Kabluchkin (Omsk, Russia, 2009), etc.

^[52] See, for instance, the following authoritative Orthodox source: *Tolkovaia Bibliia* [Study Bible], ed. by A. Lopukhin, v. X, p. 474.

^[53] *Dostopamyatnye skazaniia o podvizhnichestve svyatykh i blazhennykh Otsov* [Memorable stories about the asceticism of the holy and blessed Fathers], (Moscow: Pravilo very, 1999), pp. 67-68.

One of the AUCECB leaders, V. E. Logvinenko, illustrated the process of salvation as follows. «Yes, we are saved,» he said, “It is like a drowning man who was pulled from the water and placed in a rescue boat; but as long as we are alive, the boat in which we sit has not yet reached the shore, and therefore we should be awake in order to not be shipwrecked and, despite our salvation, not to perish.»^[54]

In *The Creed of Odessa Theological Seminary*, the first seminary of the Russian Baptist Union, S. V. Sannikov wrote at the beginning of the 1990s in accordance with the spirit of the Eastern Christian tradition:

The idea of sovereign, but not arbitrary Divine election underlines the justice of God, who owed to nobody to save everyone, but by virtue of His love, put all people in an equal position, even those about whom He knew beforehand that they would not accept salvation. Thus, He gave the possibility to everybody to be saved... Submitting himself to God’s will, a believer has the joy of salvation and assurance of eternal security, which means that nobody and nothing from the outside can separate him from grace... However, deliberate sin and conscious disobedience to God’s will, permanently ignoring the divine warnings and reluctance to abide in Christ compels God who respects the freedom of the human person, after frequent reminders, to remove from Himself the one who behaves in such a way...^[55]

Thus, in contrast to, for example, the Anglo-American or German Baptists, the Russian ECB brotherhood is historically on different theological ground. That is why, by the way, we have so many «Calvinists» today who actually believe only in the fifth point of Calvinism (that it is impossible to «lose salvation»), but they simply refuse the fact that this is the logical consequence of the four preceding theological assertions. It is the true Russian way – the wholehearted perception of the theme emotionally rather than rationally. That is why the Russian Baptists so graciously accept and often quote the well-known words of the Russian Orthodox poet, pointed in a way, perhaps, against Western rationalist theology: “I pity people who do not know God; I pity people who know all about Him.”^[56]

Western Protestantism, which is frequently (and, one should think, deservedly) accused of excessive rationalism, as a matter of fact, has remained indifferent to this problem.^[57] At the same time, the thinking of the late Soviet Baptists was surprisingly apophatic. The following are characteristic quotations from issues of both the official *Bratskii vestnik* and the underground periodical of the CC ECB *Vestnik istiny* [Bulletin of truth].

^[54] Testimony of V.E. Logvinenko (Odessa, Ukraine, 1995).

^[55] S. V. Sannikov, ed., *Nashe kredo: Odesskaya bogoslovskaiia seminariia ECB* [Our creed: Odessa Baptist Theological Seminary], (Odessa: Bogomyslie, 1993), pp. 11-12.

^[56] Hieromonk Roman, *Stikhi* [Poems], <<http://tropinka.orthodoxy.ru/zal/poezija/roman/index.htm>>.

^[57] It is significant that even such monumental Protestant theological dictionaries, as for example,

The Encyclopedia of Protestantism, 4 vols., ed. by H. Hillerbrand (New York: Routledge, 2004), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), *Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, ed. by J. Melton (New York: Facts On File, 2005), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 4 vols., ed. by H. Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), etc., do not include articles on apophaticism.

We do not understand... the inner mystery of Divinity but believe Him according to the Word of God... God's nature is above all understanding, not only of men, but of angels as well; because God dwells in unapproachable light, and nobody has seen or can see Him (1 Tim. 6:16).^[58]

Our human mind is simply unable to penetrate into the divine mystery... Christ... is unapproachable, inexplicable, and unfathomable for our mind – the Light, as well as unfathomable and inexplicable God Himself... What are we able to know about the essence of the true heavenly Light?..^[59]

The impossible task fell on me to speak... about the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. I tremble at the thought because I am not capable of this... There are so many great and deep truths here that it is impossible to retell them in my whole life... God! This name is unfathomable... The limited human mind cannot comprehend it... Heaven is the place where God dwells in unapproachable light...^[60]

Such humility before God, the open expression of human inability to comprehend the essence of the heavenly mysteries are notably different from the rationalistic tendencies among the early Stundist and Baptist communities at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, when the first Russian-Ukrainian evangelical preachers willingly entered into complicated theological debates with educated Orthodox priests and missionaries and, allegedly, “routed” them.^[61] After World War II, such naivety among Russian Baptists was already a much rarer occurrence. It seems by that time they had approached in some measure their recognition of—in common with Orthodoxy—the Eastern Christian world-view as well as the unsatisfactory nature of emphasis on the rationalistic method of knowing God so common among Western Protestants.

With this historical and theological background, it would be advisable to pay attention to the rather primitive nature of the disputes that move about in the circle of «five-point Calvinism” as extremely impoverishing regarding the untold mystical relationship of God and man present even in a simple prayer, and all the more in seeking God's will throughout human life. So-called «monergism» (classical Calvinism, which does not acknowledge synergy, i.e. the cooperation of God's will and the human will in the matter of salvation, but emphasizes the omnipotence of God, His will only and not man's) is actually not much different from the old *monothelitism*, which in ancient times asserted the presence of God's will only in Jesus Christ – to the detriment of the volition of man. Imagine how convincing the following authentic, ancient comparison probably sounded in the Monophysite and Monothelite sermons of that time: just as a drop of water on a red-hot blade immediately evaporates, the human nature (or the human will) disappears at once in contact with the Divine...^[62] However, the Ecumenical Councils fairly recognized all such ideas as false teachings, underestimat-

^[58] I. Motorin, “Uchenie Biblii o Boge” [The Bible's teaching about God], *Bratskii Vestnik*, No. 1 (1960): 62-63.

^[59] B. Shmidt, “Khristos – Istiny Bog” [Christ is the true God], *Vestnik istiny*, No. 1 (1982): 11.

^[60] N. Baturin, “Da budet svet...” [“Let there be light...”], *Vestnik istiny*, No. 2 (1992): 4.

^[61] See, for example, G. Mazaev, *Vospominania* [Memories], (Korntal: Svet na vostoce, 1992), pp. 35-66; V. Popov, *Stopy blagovestnika* [The steps of an evangelist] (Moscow: Blagovestnik, 1996), pp. 60-66, etc.

^[62] Cf. V. Lossky, *Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, p. 318.

ing the greatness of Golgotha's exploit and the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ, the true God and, at the same time, the true Man.

In this short work we have merely pointed the direction, following which, however, sooner or later, we come to the conclusion already mentioned above: fundamentally and historically the Russian-Ukrainian Baptists are neither Arminians nor Calvinists. This is our unique and distinctive feature in comparison with Western Protestantism. Even the Communists indirectly assisted in this process, hanging the «iron curtain» that divided not only the socialist East and capitalist West, but which once again drew the line of demarcation between Eastern and Western Christianity as a whole. At the same time, Orthodox Christians and Baptists within the USSR objectively entered into a situation in which they were alike persecuted and mutually attracted to one another. These are the important, formational moments which we cannot ignore in any case, although we, of course, have to move on, to develop and refine our theology. However, this must be done only after our correct orientation on the map of history: who we are and where we are today in reality. Only then may our brotherhood of Evangelical Christians-Baptists really become a kind of small bridge of some use as a connecting link between Eastern and Western Christianity.

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