

Fresh Skins for New Wine: *On the Structure of the First Russian Baptist Congregations in South Russia*

© J. Dyck, 2006

Johannes DYCK, Lemgo, Germany



Johannes Dyck was born in Siberia and grew up in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, where he was baptized in the ECB church in 1972. In 1981 he joined the Historical Committee of the AUCECB. Since 1989 he lives in Germany, where he serves as one of the ordained preachers in the Mennonite Brethren Church in Lemgo. This article was presented in 2005 at the Directors' Conference on "Baptist Histories in Eastern Europe" at IBTS (Prague) where the author is working on his M.Th. thesis.

Introduction

One of the last books of antireligious propaganda produced by the Soviet state contains a remarkable statement about Baptists: "The popularity of the Baptist [movement] in many respects can be explained by its *specific organization* ... It can be said that especially the Baptist [movement] shows the highest abilities for reproduction under conditions of a socialist society" (emphasis mine).¹ The atheistic state knew well how to deal with the "discretion and valour" of Baptists, to use Trevor Beeson's expression,² but it acknowledged helplessness in fighting against the structure. The Baptist structures in the Soviet Union were more stable and survived better than the other denominational structures in the country, and therefore deserve special attention.

This paper identifies *structure* using an inductive approach. In the social sciences, the term *structure* refers to "discernible patterns, observed regularities and noticeable configurations"³ which indicate a certain order. Order, in turn, is inherent to the concept of *system*, which has been successfully applied to a broad range of disciplines, including the social sciences⁴ as well as historical⁵ and Biblical⁶

¹ *Protestantizm: slovar' ateista* [Protestantism: The atheist's dictionary], s.v. "Baptisty" (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1990), pp. 47-48.

² Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour: Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe* (London: Fontana, 1974).

³ Peter M. Blau, ed., *Theorien sozialer Strukturen: Ansätze und Probleme* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1978), p. 11. [German translation of: Peter M. Blau, ed., *Approaches to the Study of Social Structure* (London: Open Books, 1976)].

⁴ Rainer Prewo, Jürgen Ritsert, and Elmar Stracke, *Systemtheoretische Ansätze in der Soziologie: eine kritische Analyse* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1973); Blau (ed), *Theorien sozialer Strukturen*.

⁵ Hans Küng, *Strukturen der Kirche*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1963).

ecclesiology. The concept of structure can also be helpful in analyzing the origins of Baptists in Russia and Ukraine. This paper restricts examination primarily to the Ekaterinoslav and Kherson provinces, which at the time of the early Baptists in the 1860s were part of South Russia. Today these territories belong to the Republic of Ukraine.

1. The Way to Baptist Structures at the Level of Individual Faith

1.1. Pietism and the Origins of the Baptist Movement in South Russia

Pietism, the local version of which was known in Russia as Stundism, was primarily a movement of lay people. It is considered to be a significant element in the beginnings of the Russian and Ukrainian Baptist movement, both by adherents of the indigenous genesis theory as well as by supporters of the hypothesis of foreign planters. The former view, represented by Ukrainian Baptist historian Iurii Reshetnikov, claims that around 1867, having developed “Baptist views *on their own*, Ukrainian be-

lievers began to look for how and through whom they could be baptized” (emphasis added).⁷ A good illustration of the latter view is found in the voluminous document collection from the first decades of the Baptist movement in Russia, compiled by a strong opponent of Baptists at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This collection begins documentation of Russian Baptist history with events in the German colonies in Ukraine in 1862.⁸ Rather than evaluating Pietism/Stundism in terms of a successionist approach, seeking the roots of the Baptist movement solely in Russia, this paper examines typical patterns of Pietism and their impact on religious life in South Russia.

At the time of Baptist beginnings in South Russia, Pietism in Germany already had a history of nearly two centuries. With rare exceptions, Pietism, as a rule, did not create new churches. Even if new church structures emerged, they did not depart from the framework of Protestant theology and territorial division into parishes, as demonstrated by the example of the Herrnhut Brethren [*Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine*] under Count Zinzendorf.⁹

⁶ Josef Hainz, *Ekklesia: Strukturen paulinischer Gemeinde-Theologie und Gemeinde-Ordnung* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1972); A. Gilmore, ed., *The Pattern of the Church: a Baptist View* (London: Lutterworth, 1963).

⁷ Iurii Ie. Reshetnikov, “Stanovlennia ta diferentsiatsiia ievangel’skogo rukhu v Ukraini” [The formation and differentiation of the evangelical movement in Ukraine’] (Dissertation, Insitut filosofii im. H. S. Skovorodi Natsional’noi akademii nauk Ukraini, Kiev, 2000), p. 78. See also Iurii Reshetnikov and Sergei Sannikov, *Obzor istorii Evangel’sko-baptistskogo bratstva v Ukraine* [A survey of the history of the Evangelical-Baptist brotherhood in Ukraine] (Odessa: Bogomyслиe, 2000), p. 59.

⁸ Episkop Aleksii [Dorodnistyn], *Materialy dlia istorii religiozno-ratsionalisticheskago dvizheniia na iuge Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XIX-go stoletiiia* [Bishop Aleksii, Materials for the history of the religious rationalist movement in southern Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century] (Kazan: Tsentral’naia tipografiia, 1908).

⁹ Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf was a leader of the eighteenth-century Moravian Pietist revival in the town of Herrnhut, on his estate of Berthelsdorf, Saxony. The Herrnhut Brethren followed the Lutheran Church organizational structure dominant in the area. Johannes Wallmann, *Der Pietismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

Pietism was above all a religion of the heart, and it produced several fractions within the Protestant church body in Germany. The Pietism of the common people in Wurttemberg, as well as the Pietism of the academics in Halle, demonstrated its ability to activate the laity in the church, a feature important from the viewpoint of structure. Philipp Jakob Spener, known as the “father of Pietism,” organized the *collegia pietatis*, additional meetings of “true believers” within the main church body, which produced a new pattern in church life — a pattern of fellowship¹⁰ alongside the pattern of a regular worship service. This fellowship became an important mark of Pietism. Pietism did not change the normative base of decision-making in the church (combining tradition and interpretation of Scripture by university-trained clergy) nor the parochial structure.

Russian and Ukrainian Baptists had actually a very short period of Stundism in their pre-history, before the organization of their first congregations.¹¹ Nevertheless, it is helpful to explore the religious patterns of German emigrants in Russia because of the structural similarities between German Pietism and Russian Stundism. The common classification into old and new Pietism¹² is very

schematic and is based primarily on differences between the chiliastic and common Pietism in its Wurttemberg form. The latter strongly accented conversion. It has also been claimed that all of the stimuli leading to the pietistic revival in South Russia came from common Pietism, including the preaching of pastor Eduard Wust in 1845-59, the work of Johann (1824-39) and Karl Bonekemper (1867-77), and the writings of Ludwig Hofacker.¹³ However, the reality was more complicated. Recent research has brought to light that several Mennonite communities in Russia were under strong Herrnhut influence,¹⁴ though it did not lead to the formation of a new church pattern.¹⁵ Even in the small space of the Mennonite colonies, Pietism had many faces.

Stundism arose among the Russian and Ukrainian population through meetings which took place apart from the liturgical services of the Orthodox Church, in the same manner in which German Pietists living nearby practiced their piety. The term *Stundism* originates from the German word *Stunde*, meaning *hour*. Though Russian Stundist meetings had taken place since 1861-62,¹⁶ the local government drew attention to the secret nightly religious meetings in the Odessa area only in March

¹⁰ Throughout this paper, the word “fellowship” refers to the Russian *obshchenie*, which emphasizes close personal and spiritual relationships and the sharing of a common faith.

¹¹ Reshetnikov, “Stanovlennia ta diferentsiatsiia ievangel'skogo rukhu v Ukraini”, pp. 53-56; *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR* [History of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists in the USSR] (Moscow: Vsesoiuznyi sovet evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov, 1989), pp. 62-66.

¹² *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR*, pp. 39-42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41.

¹⁴ John Friesen, “Mennonite Churches and Religious Developments in Russia 1789-1850”, in John Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia, 1788-1988: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lorenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 43-72, 64-66.

¹⁵ P.M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Rußland (1789-1910) im Rahmen der mennonitischen Gesamtgeschichte* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911), pp. 79-80.

¹⁶ Reshetnikov and Sannikov, *Obzor istorii*, p. 76.

1866,¹⁷ considering them a threat to the public order. The governor of Kherson did not regard the phenomenon as worth reporting to the Minister of Internal Affairs until 2 June 1869.¹⁸ Nine days later, the Mennonite Brethren elder Abram Unger baptised Efim Tsimbal upon profession of his faith.¹⁹ This day marked the beginning of a strong Baptist movement in South Russia. The short period of Stundism among Russians and Ukrainians had come to a conclusion.²⁰

1.2. The Core of Pietism: Personal Faith

Pietism focused on personal faith and its expression in the believer's life. Spener succeeded in establishing conditions for the development of personal faith within the Lutheran Church, avoiding the danger of separatism and spiritualism propagated by some of his co-workers.²¹ A new accent on moral sanctification made lay people responsible for proper Christianity in the same manner as clergy. Also, from its early days, Pietism stressed revival and personal conversion. According to August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), the path to true Christianity led through the experience of a breakthrough in a battle for the salvation

of the soul.²² Such a conversion experience played a decisive role in a believer's life and was a measure of spirituality.

It is quite natural that revival preachers such as Pastor Wust, with their message of repentance and conversion, gained enormous popularity in the German colonies in South Russia, which had already experienced the influence of Pietism. With revival in mind as the main factor of church life, the Pietist Wust has been considered in Mennonite history to stand second only to Menno Simons.²³ From this point of view, as the famous Mennonite historian P.M. Friesen explained, the main emphasis of the Christian life is, "having Christ dwelling in one's heart through faith, to be with one's life an open letter of Christ, spreading His name to the ends of the earth, and 'to win the world for Christ, even if with one's own lifeblood (Menno Simons).'"²⁴ In this way, through Pietist influence, *experience* as a primary manifestation of faith found its way into the Mennonite communities in Russia.

The Russian and Ukrainian peasants at the cradle of Russian and Ukrainian Baptism, including Fedor Onishchenko, Mikhail Ratushnyi and others, all went through the phase of

¹⁷ "Donesenie mirovogo posrednika 2 uchastka Khersonskago uezda Khersonskomu gubernatoru ot 14 marta 1866 g. No. 88", in Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, p. 47.

¹⁸ "Vypiska iz predstavleniia Gubernatora ot 2 iunია 1869 g.", in *Istoriia evangel'sko-baptistskogo dvizheniia v Ukraine: Materialy i dokumenty* [History of the Evangelical-Baptist movement in Ukraine: Materials and documents] S. I. Golovashchenko and Iu. Ie. Reshetnikov, comp. (Odessa: Bogomyslie, 1998), p. 13.

¹⁹ "Donesenie Ispravnika Elizavetgradskago uezda Khersonskomu Gubernatoru 16 iunია 1869 g. No. 30", in Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, pp. 71-72.

²⁰ While Stundism in this sense ended when congregations began practicing believer baptism, the Russian Orthodox Church continued to use the term "Stundist" into the Soviet period. See *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR*, pp. 62-66.

²¹ *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, K. Galling, ed., 3rd ed., vol I s.v. "Spener, Philipp Jakob" (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1957), p. 1553.

²² *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, K. Galling, ed., 3rd ed., vol VI s.v. "Bußwesen", p. 239.

²³ Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft*, p. 174.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

the personal experience of salvation. This was the strongest reason and argument for their faith that they could provide their opponents, and, at the same time, it was the most difficult for their opponents to understand. This misapprehension put its mark on the subsequent history of Baptists in South Russia.

Personal involvement in matters of salvation assumes an increased personal responsibility. Not accidentally, the Baptist beginnings in South Russia coincided with the emancipation of peasants from serfdom in 1861.²⁵ The emancipation prepared the social environment for spiritual revival and provided a new self-understanding for the large group of peasants in the Russian Empire. At the same time, Russian society was not prepared to accept the consequences of emancipation in the form of religious dissent. The first Russian Stundists were therefore necessarily pushed to the periphery of society, which was not uncommon for Pietism in general. No depiction of the Baptist beginnings in South Russia misses the starting point of revival, making Stundism the first phase in Baptist history. The requirement of a similar experience of faith, i.e., conversion, in the later Baptist movement promoted homogeneity and similarity, evidence of the continuance of the early structure.

²⁵ *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR*, pp. 43-44.

²⁶ "Svedeniia o sostoianii raskolov v Khersonskoi gubernii, trebuemykh tsirkuliarom ot 3 oktiabria 1868 goda # 584" in Golovashchenko and Reshetnikov, *Istoriia evangel'sko-baptistskogo dvizheniia v Ukraine*, p. 15; "Obshchestvo shtundovykh na iuge Rossii. (Zapiska g. Znachko-Iavorskago, predstavleniia general-gubernatoru, P.E. Katsebu, 1867 g.)," in Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, p. 61.

²⁷ "Svedeniia o sostoianii raskolov v Khersonskoi

1.3. Fellowship: The Driving Force of Pietism

One more structural element should be considered: Pietism usually reproduced personal faith in an environment of fellowship. *Collegia pietatis* became from the very beginning the *modus vivendi* of Pietism. In South Russia, the new faith among the Russian and Ukrainian populations began to gain a firm footholds with the formation of groups of believers. Often the traditional strong closeness of a rural community was transferred onto the new community of faith. One example is a group of twenty-seven men and twenty-one women (half of the village!) who joined the new faith in Osnova near Odessa.²⁶

From the very beginning, the meetings of the new faith communities emphasized fellowship. A local official who attended Stundist meetings in Ignat'evka and Osnova in 1869 reported that the believers primarily sang and prayed.²⁷ While the songs did not draw the attention of the visitor, the manner of prayer, as well as the way the meeting was conducted, was highly unfamiliar to him. The people sat on benches "like in the Roman and Lutheran Churches". Group prayer was led by one person, and the atmosphere was very emotional. By building emotional ties, the community was united and prepared for a totally different way of life. Fellowship was one of the main sources of power of this new movement.

Pietism promoted egalitarian structures of fellowship, rather than hierarchy. German colonists in Rohrbach [Rorbakh], when meeting their pastor Johann Bonekemper at Pietist

meetings, came to know him as a brother in Christ. In the same manner, for the Stundists in Osnova, their leader was one of them. The equal treatment of leaders and members is a significant factor contributing to vitality during times of oppression and persecutions, which have often occurred in the history of the Russian and Ukrainian evangelical brotherhood. This egalitarian attitude was inherent to the movement from its early days.

Pietism promotes a very strong self-identification of individual members with the group, but does not guarantee the stability of a faith community or even permanent involvement of its members. The membership of the group in Osnova decreased after an initial phase of high interest.²⁸ Wust's revival preaching produced only a temporary splash of activity in his own parish. A generation later, no significant Pietist activities were reported there. Moreover, at the end of his activity some of his most enthusiastic followers separated from Wust to form a group with a dubious reputation. Personal convictions and authentic sincerity alone are insufficient for the stability of a group. Here Pietism showed again its deep dependency on persons rather than principles.

From the viewpoint of structure, Pietism did not change the traditional patterns of leadership and authority, nor did it alter the pastor's role in the church. The Reformation focus on *sola scriptura* and mechanisms of tak-

ing decisions in the church did not change significantly, although the strong orthodox Lutheran hermeneutics became weaker. The interest in church structures within Pietism fell short against higher interest in mission, revival and personal faith. This helps to explain why Pietism did not produce its own theology of the church.²⁹

Even while in opposition to the mainstream Lutheran Church in Germany, Pietism remained an integral part of that church structure, and did not exist outside of it. Russian Stundism, on the contrary, was from its very beginning considered a foreign body within the Russian Orthodox Church. The old wineskins were not prepared to hold the new wine. The new faith community needed a new church structure.

2. From Fellowship to Church: a New Structure for the New Faith

2.1. Origins of the Structure of Russian Baptism

Developing a congregational structure in the 1860-70s, the first Russian and Ukrainian Stundists had the opportunity to either create something absolutely new or — more unconsciously than deliberately — follow established patterns. The first adherents of the new faith initially stayed in the Russian Orthodox Church. During this period, it slowly became evident that the potential existed for

gubernii, trebuemykh tsirkuliarom ot 3 oktiabria 1868 goda # 584" in Golovashchenko and Reshetnikov, *Istoriia evangel'sko-baptistskogo dvizheniia v Ukraine*, p. 15.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Volker Brecht, *Zwischen Landeskirche und Freikirche: Die Suche der Gemeinschaftsbewegung nach einem eigenen Gemeindeverständnis* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 2002), p. 23.

deep conflict between the totally new kind of personal piety and the liturgical manifestation of faith. The definite turn towards Scripture as the main source of faith meant at the same time strict rejection of traditional expressions of faith.³⁰ The distance of the new believers from the main church resembles the distance of the Lutherans (or even Anabaptists) from the Catholic Church during the Reformation. From their very beginnings, Russian and Ukrainian Stundists were branded a sect, making it impossible for them to identify themselves with the Orthodox Church. The external causes urgently induced a need for Stundists' own church structure. Well-meant advice from German Pietist pastors to remain within the Russian Orthodox Church³¹ simply did not take into account the fundamental differences between the structures of the two churches.

In principle, Ukrainian and Russian Baptists could have assumed the structure of the Molokan communities, which was a genuine Russian model of a faith community apart from the Orthodox Church. Molokans, with their denial of church hierarchy, were much nearer to the newly emerged Baptist congregations in terms of church structure. However, especially in Ukraine, the first Baptist congregations formed by people coming from the Orthodox Church did not

choose the Molokan pattern. The Baptist beginnings in the Caucasus in a Molokan environment in the 1860s constitute a different story, but this exceeds the frame of this paper.

Remaining examples of church structures include German Baptists in Ukraine, which in the 1860s strongly resembled the Mennonite Brethren, and the Mennonite Brethren themselves. In the early years, the borders between these different religious groups were fluid, and they considered themselves one body, sharing similar views, and working closely together. The Mennonite Brethren Church, being a fruit of the seed of Pietism on traditional Mennonite soil, came into being in 1860.³² The structural pattern of the church produced by the early Mennonite Brethren came from the well-established Mennonite Church order, which had a long tradition since the time of the Reformation. Whereas the years before 1865 were shaped by extreme Pietistic developments,³³ the period of the late 1860s and early 1870s was influenced by a striving for order and instruction. In this quest for order and stability, the Brethren were supported and even partially led by German Baptists. The recognized differences in church structure and theology between Mennonite Brethren and German Baptists were marginal at that time.

³⁰“Vypiska iz predstavleniia Gubernatora ot 2 iunია 1869 g.”, in Golovashchenko and Reshetnikov, *Istoriia evangel'sko-baptistskogo dvizheniia v Ukraine*, p. 13.

³¹ *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR*, p. 59.

³² John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Fresno, California: Board of Christian Literature, 1975),

pp. 32-33; John B. Toews, “Baptists and Mennonite Brethren in Russia (1790-1930)”, in Paul Toews (ed), *Mennonites and Baptists: A Continuing Conversation* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1993), pp. 81-96.

³³ Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of The Mennonite Brethren Church: previously unpublished manuscript by one of the eighteen founders* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1973), pp. 33, 39.

The ties that bound these two movements weakened after 1869.³⁴ The Brethren did not want to lose their Mennonite identity, and increasingly stressed their non-resistance and non-violent position, being afraid to lose their privilege of exemption from military service. As is well known, Baptists were not opposed to military service.

The organizational pattern of a free church in its Mennonite interpretation suited the Russian and Ukrainian Baptists well. Its similarity to the model of Johann Gerhard Oncken³⁵ (although they were not identical) made it easier for Russian Baptists to find a common basis with Caucasian Baptists, whose leader Vasilii Pavlov was a disciple of Oncken, including in matters related to church leadership and church order. For example, access to the pulpit in Tiflis was far more restricted than in Ukraine, and the closed church organizational meetings occurred far more often. At the same time, the development of the Russian and Ukrainian Baptist movements was different enough from the Anglo-Saxon or later German Baptists to form a distinctive branch in the world Baptist family.³⁶

Leading Russian Baptist historians acknowledge that the Russian and Ukrainian Baptist church structure

was borrowed from its spiritual neighbors. Russian Baptist historian Sergei Savinskii writes: "From whom could our brethren adopt the organizational forms of local churches, if not from those with whom they lived as neighbors and maintained spiritual fellowship? ... They were children of a single epoch of evangelical awakening in Russia".³⁷

2.2. Personal Faith in the Believers' Church Context

Where Pietism stopped, the believers' church continued. In a believers' church, personal faith is a required condition for obtaining church membership. Pietism, in contrast, omits the *demand* for conversion in confessions of faith, as shown in the example of the "Short rules of faith of Christians of the Evangelical creed called Molokans of the Don persuasion."³⁸ Moreover, the requirement of baptism upon profession of faith constituted an unambiguous form of confession of faith which symbolizes decisive commitment, burning all bridges behind. The non-obligatory participation in Pietist fellowship hours was changed here to the binding nature of a "promise in good conscience," as formulated in the "Rules of the confession of faith of the new-

³⁴ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, pp. 72-73.

³⁵ Oncken introduced a model in which authority rested on an individual, whereas Mennonites tended toward group leadership. See Hans Luckey, *Johann Gerhard Oncken und die Anfänge des deutschen Baptismus*, 3rd edn (Kassel: J.G. Oncken, 1958), pp. 167-190; Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, pp. 610-611, 614.

³⁶ Waldemar Gutsche, *Westliche Quellen des russischen Stundismus: Anfänge der evangelischen*

Bewegung in Russland, 2nd edn (Kassel: J.G. Oncken, 1957), p. 9.

³⁷ S. N. Savinskii, *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorussii (1867-1917)* [History of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Ukraine, Russia, and Belorussia (1867-1917)] (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 1999), p. 126.

³⁸ "Kratkii pravila very khristian Evangel'skago veroispovedaniia, nazyvaemykh molokanami Donskago Tolka", in Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, pp. 485-495.

ly-converted Russian Brotherhood”,³⁹ a document discovered by a police officer in 1873, hidden in Ratushnyi’s home. Historians consider it the first known confession of faith of the newly founded Baptist brotherhood.⁴⁰

The new faith, embedded in the context of a church, exhibited a clear indication of authenticity: new life. The Christianity of the non-Baptist churches was now believed to lead to eternal destruction. Considering the binding nature of the “Rules,” it is evident that repentance had become a necessary condition for acceptance into the “system” of the Baptist congregation. Repentance is by its nature less of a theological confession and more of a spiritual, personal experience, making the criteria for admittance comprehensible for to the whole congregation, and not just for church leaders. Combined with missionary zeal, repentance and conversion very soon became the center of faith and measure of piety among Russian and Ukrainian Baptists.

In the practice of baptism, the church as a system created very sharp boundaries, making unambiguous the difference between people inside the church borders and those outside. These boundaries were of such immensity that often they were mixed up

with the system itself. For example, during the Reformation, the act of believer’s baptism provided the name for the Anabaptist movement, but it took considerable time before it was recognized that there was an entirely new church structure behind the name.⁴¹ Even inside the movement itself, it took time for a self-image as a church to develop. This was certainly also true of Baptists in South Russia.

2.3. The Believers’ Church as Organized Fellowship

The first baptisms in South Russia were soon followed by the organizing of local congregations with their own members, presbyters,⁴² and evangelists. In the Ekaterinoslav region, congregations had existed in one form or another since 1870.⁴³ The establishment of the first Baptist congregations in the Odessa region is relatively well-documented and demonstrates that the brethren knew well what to do and how to operate as a church. The dynamics are remarkable: on 8 June 1871, Mikhail Ratushnyi was baptized here by Ivan Riaboshapka, along with fifty others.⁴⁴ On 8 October, Ratushnyi made his own copy of the “Rules of the confession of faith of the newly-converted Russian Brotherhood”⁴⁵; on 28 November of the same

³⁹“Pravila veroispovedaniia novoobrashchennago Russkogo Bratstva”, in Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, p. 479.

⁴⁰ *Istoriia evangel’skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR*, p. 438.

⁴¹ Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*, 2nd edn (Boston: Starr King, 1958), p. XVI.

⁴² “Presbyter” has in Russian a different lexical meaning than in English and stands for the head

of a congregation. The term “pastor” was not used among Russian Baptists until the 1990s. The Russian translation of the New Testament uses “presbyter” where the English translation uses “elder.”

⁴³ *Istoriia evangel’skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR*, p. 63.

⁴⁴ Reshetnikov and Sannikov, *Obzor istorii*, p. 99.

⁴⁵ “Pravila veroispovedaniia novoobrashchennago Russkogo Bratstva”, in Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, p. 482.

year Ratushnyi informed his archbishop of his desire to leave the Orthodox Church. Shortly after 3 August 1873, Ratushnyi wrote about the establishment of church order in a letter:

We have chosen church officers [*tserkovnosluzhiteli*]. They can baptize adults, but we do not baptize newborns; they also may marry believers with the consent of bridegroom and bride, the desire of parents on both sides, and the agreement of the Church... In addition they have the authority to baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, marry, bury and conduct the business of the Church.⁴⁶

Only two years after the first baptism, Baptists in the Odessa region clearly viewed themselves clearly as a church.

The above-mentioned "Rules" consist of ten sections. Three of them deal directly with the topic of church structure. Designed according to the pattern of "the first Apostolic Church," the visible church consisted of true believers only. Positions of primary responsibility such as presbyters, teachers, and deacons, were chosen from within its midst. Excommunication was included as a means of maintaining order in the church, as well as restoration of those who repented. Sections are also included on repentance, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. The imagery of the Body of

Christ and the holy temple of the Lord (Eph 2:20-22; 4:11-16; and 1Pe 2:5) were used in this document as structural patterns of the church.⁴⁷

According to Archbishop Leontii, the "Rules," "containing an exposition of Reformed faith,... expose their compiler to be a well-educated theologian not completely competent in the Russian language."⁴⁸ Aleksii mistakenly ascribes authorship of the rules to Karl Bonekemper.⁴⁹ The truth can be found in a thirty-four-page document written by Johann Wieler, now in the archive of St. Petersburg evangelical leader Vasili Pashkov at the University of Birmingham, England:

In Odessa, Wieler picked up the threads of his earlier activity and was soon able to establish a small congregation of Russian and German believers in the city... For a long time already, the Russian brethren have accepted the teaching of Wieler on the questions of baptism and establishing congregations... Finally, the brethren decided to make a complete break with the Orthodox Church and form a fellowship of their own according to God's Word. A number of brethren met in Wieler's home... From this resulted the drawing up of a confession of faith including ten articles, which set out the principal points of the Christian faith. It agreed essentially with the statement used by

⁴⁶ "Pis'mo M. Ratushnago Nikolaiu Liashkovu, pisariu kantseliarii Chernigovskago voinskago nachal'nika ot 1873 g.", in Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, p. 189.

⁴⁷ Cf. Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), p. 164; Avery Robert Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 2nd edn (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), p. 20.

⁴⁸ "Iz pis'ma Arkhiepiskopa Odesskago Leontii k Ober-Prokuroru Sinoda grafu D.A. Tolstomu 30 apreliia 1875 g.", in Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, p. 240.

⁴⁹ "Pravila veroispovedaniia novoobrashchennogo Russkogo Bratstva", Aleksii, *Materialy dlia istorii*, p. 477, footnote 1.

Baptists in Germany. The brethren then submitted copies of the statement to all their groups for discussion and approval. With few exceptions, all the members agreed to form a Baptist fellowship based on this declaration.⁵⁰

According to this document, the “Rules” were accepted in January of 1870. Wieler’s role as architect of the Baptist church structure in South Russia is clearly identifiable.⁵¹ Fluent in Russian and Ukrainian, he joined the Mennonite Brethren in his early twenties during the first years of their existence, and worked until 1865 in a government office in Odesa, and then as a teacher in Berdiansk. After spending 1868-69 in Switzerland and Germany with Oncken, he was ordained in 1872 by Unger. Beginning in July 1883, he worked full-time for the Russian brotherhood, with full financial support from Pashkov.⁵² The next year, 1884, Wieler became the first president of the Russian Baptist Union.⁵³ After 1885, he worked in hiding from the Russian police. In 1887, he left Russia to become pastor of the Baptist congregation in Tulcea (now Romania) and died there in 1889.

The “Rules” emphasize the role of church leaders, acknowledging their responsibility in the fields of instruc-

tion and exhortation. Taking the “Rules” as an example of giving directions, we observe that a large part of the document consists of full-text Scripture quotations with short explanations. On the one hand, this method gives the reader the impression of solid biblical foundation. On the other hand, this approach corresponds to the readers’ understanding of Scripture and fits their needs exactly. Even if this straightforward approach is sometimes regarded as “primitive,”⁵⁴ it was effective in providing additional strength to the young Baptist movement.

The “Rules” and practice of the churches did not include any special rights or privileges for leaders. Neither were there formal requirements for leadership other than spiritual criteria. This made the transition into the status of leader open to almost every man skilled in preaching and explaining the Word. The only way the authority of a leader was enforced was through his personal integrity and pastoral abilities, combined with simplicity of proclamation and quality of exhortation and fellowship. This made the church structure very flexible and adaptable to severe circumstances.

With the shift from Stundism to Baptism, the congregations became characterized by a kind of institution-

⁵⁰ Cited in: Lawrence Klippenstein, tr. and ed., “Johann Wieler (1839-1889) Among Russian Evangelicals: A New Source of Mennonites and Evangelicalism in Imperial Russia”, *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 5 (1987), pp. 49-50.

⁵¹ See Hans Kasdorf, “Die Mission der Mennoniten in Russland”, in Gerhard and Julia Hildebrandt, eds., *200 Jahre Mennoniten in Rußland: Aufsätze zu ihrer Geschichte und Kultur* (Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany: Verlag des Mennonitischen Geschichtsvereins, 2000), pp. 123-151, 135.

⁵² Klippenstein, “Johann Wieler (1839-1889),” p. 55.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 48-49. See also Oksana V. Beznosova, “Pozdnee protestantskoe sektantstvo Iuga Ukrainy (1850-1905)” [Late Protestant sectarianism of southern Ukraine (1850-1905)] (Dissertation, Dnepropetrovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, Dnepropetrovsk, 1997), pp. 88-89, 212.

⁵⁴ See Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. XVI.

alized Pietism combined with baptism by immersion and an established leadership structure. This stage in the formation of congregational structure was entirely complete by 1884. The next steps of building centralized vertical church structures were made by Wieler's successor as president, Dei I. Mazaev⁵⁵ and discussion of this falls outside the framework of this paper. Nevertheless, the role of a local church as the main point of missionary activity and spiritual nurture, as well as the autonomy of the local churches, remained untouched.

3. The Long-term Impact of Church Structure

3.1. Church Structure Has a Long Life

Church structure is usually a very stable factor and changes slowly, which can be confirmed by Russian Baptist history. Attempts to establish a congregational superstructure in the form of a union with a strong central leadership, made by people like Dei Mazaev or Ivan Prokhanov,⁵⁶ did not touch the structure of the local congregations in the Russian evangelical movement. The turmoil of the Revolution and civil war affected only the union's superstructure in Russia, which broke into several local unions. The structure of the congregations remained unchanged from the 1870s into the 1920s. According to Waldemar Gutsche, an active Baptist worker in the 1920s,

The practice of church eadership in Ukrainian and Russian Baptist congregations most of all resembles the order in the Mennonite Brethren church. The presbyter, together with preachers, deacons, and experienced brethren, all of them elected by the congregation, constitute the brethren council, which discusses and, together with the congregation, decides all questions of spiritual and practical life. There are very few presbyters and preachers who are fully paid by the congregation, but a lot more union or regional itinerant preachers who are two months on the road and one month at home. These itinerant preachers were ordained and often were equal in rights with presbyters. They were very effective when settling difficult topics in churches. In their home churches their role was less significant.⁵⁷

During the partial restoration of Baptist life after the catastrophe of Stalinist repression in the 1930s, the congregational structure, as well as the union work, was re-established. Evidently a strongly centralized church structure was considered by the government to be the best means to apply regulatory mechanisms. Yet even this reduction of congregational autonomy positively influenced church life.⁵⁸ During the post-Stalin thaw, fellowship as the foundation of congregational life helped to integrate new believers and old ones who returned from prison. At the same time, tendencies toward fellowship caused

⁵⁵ See Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals since World War II* (Kitchener: Herald, 1981), p. 79.

⁵⁶ *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v*

SSSR, pp. 155-158.

⁵⁷ Gutsche, *Westliche Quellen*, p. 129.

⁵⁸ Beeson, *Discretion and Valour*, pp. 97-98.

conflicts with existing church leaders⁵⁹ who had adapted themselves to the restrictions of the times. The establishment of centralized control over a large system consisting of a many satellite systems with their own degrees of freedom is a difficult undertaking. The next wave of oppression after 1958 only confirmed this.

3.2. Church Structure and Oppression under Khrushchev

During the late 1950s, Khrushchev's church policy took shape, and the entire Baptist structure on all levels — from leadership of the union to ordinary church members — was exposed to immense pressure. It seems that religion had been made the sole ideological enemy of Soviet society. A decision of the Council of Ministers of the USSR of 16 March 1961⁶⁰ delegated to regional authorities the responsibility for fighting against religion. In this way, local congregations and individuals became the focus of oppression. Every level of Baptist structures fought for survival, sometimes at the expense of neighboring parts of the structure. As a result, the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) in December 1959 issued new church statutes and a "Letter of Instruction"⁶¹ producing a "storm in the congregations", as AUCECB general secretary Aleksandr Karev put it.⁶²

The key role in the further development of Baptist church life passed

from the union level to the leaders of local congregations. They had to manage a balance between fellowship-oriented activities (such as attempts to create an underground union of youth)⁶³ and government pressure. This conflict showed once again that the main strength of the Baptist movement consisted in local congregations, with their relatively loose structure and patterns of close fellowship, rather than in the leadership structures of the central leadership of the Union.

The crisis was not resolved completely and had grave consequences. A split in the Baptist brotherhood occurred and a second center was established, the Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists, representing the so-called Reform Baptists. Work under conditions of conspiracy and other circumstances led this branch of Baptists in the Soviet Union toward a highly centralized structure with a very strong center. The price of this process was the diminished independence of the local congregation. Nevertheless, the fellowship patterns at the local level did not disappear altogether.

After oppression declined, the main line of church development, at least in the AUCECB, consisted in a gradual and cautious return to team leadership. Structures promoting fellowship increasingly gained ground, until a complete layer of church activity — namely youth ministry of the 1970s and later — was built entirely

⁵⁹ *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR*, p. 239.

⁶⁰ See S. N. Savinskii, *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorussii (1917-1967)*. (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 2001),

pp. 305-306.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 322-327.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁶³ Reshetnikov and Sannikov, *Obzor istorii*, p. 191.

on the principle of fellowship. The generation of today's leadership completely went through these fellowship activities, maintaining them until the present time.

Conclusion

Content without form is not concrete, while form without content has no life. Both are interdependent and have a structure. In the best cases, they correspond to each other. The revival among the Russian and Ukrainian peasants in southern Russia produced the Stundist movement, which was closely related to the Pietism of their German neighbors. Common to both was the high value placed on fellowship among converted people, fellowship based on their common relationship with their Lord. This emphasis on fellowship finally provided the unique touch to Baptists in southern Russia and determined the way of life of these new communities of faith.

With the organization of Baptist congregations in southern Russia, genuine Stundist/Pietist fellowship did not diminish, but became the driving force in the Baptist movement. The congregational structure of these churches integrated the strength found in fellowship, giving it a binding nature and using it as a regulating force. The newly converted believers, who were to be known as Baptists, did not need to use trial and error to search for the best structure. The path towards this structure had been prepared for them by their brethren of Mennonite origin, who had remained in the Free Church tradition since the Reformation. Community structures change slowly. The Russian and Ukrainian Baptists have maintained their congregational structure for over a century. Due to their congregational structure, their steadfastness has been preserved throughout times of trial and long periods of suffering and victory.

Bibliography

- Aleksii, Episkop [Dorodnistyn], *Materialy dlia istorii religiozno-ratsionalisticheskogo dvizheniia na iuge Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XIX-go stoletiiia* (Kazan: Tsentral'naia tipografiia, 1908).
- Beeson, Trevor, *Discretion and valour. Religious conditions in Russia and eastern Europe*. (London: Fontana, 1974).
- Bekker, Jacob P., *Origin of The Mennonite Brethren Church: previously unpublished manuscript by one of the eighteen founders* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1973).
- Beznosova, Oksana V., "Pozdnee protestantskoe sektantstvo Iuga Ukrainy (1850-1905)" (Dissertation, Dnepropetrovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, Dnepropetrovsk, 1997).
- Blau, Peter M., ed., *Theorien sozialer Strukturen: Ansätze und Probleme* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1978).
- Brecht, Volker, *Zwischen Landeskirche und Freikirche: Die Suche der Gemeinschaftsbewegung nach einem eigenen Gemeindeverständnis*. (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 2002).
- Dulles, Avery Robert, *Models of the Church*, 2nd edn (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988).
- Friesen, John, "Mennonite Churches and Religious Developments in Russia 1789-1850", in John Friesen, ed.,

- Mennonites in Russia: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), pp. 43-72.
- Friesen, P. M. *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Rußland (1789-1910) im Rahmen der mennonitischen Gesamtgeschichte* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911).
- Gilmore, A., ed., *The Pattern of the Church: a Baptist View* (London: Lutterworth, 1963).
- Gutsche, Waldemar, *Westliche Quellen des russischen Stundismus: Anfänge der evangelischen Bewegung in Russland*, 2nd edn (Kassel: J. G. Oncken, 1957).
- Hainz, Josef, *Ekklesia. Strukturen Paulinischer Gemeinde-Theologie und Gemeinde-Ordnung* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1972).
- Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR* (Moscow: Vsesoiuznyi sovet evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov, 1989).
- Istoriia evangel'sko-baptistskogo dvizheniia v Ukraine: Materialy i dokumenty* S. I. Golovashchenko and Iu. Ie. Reshetnikov, compilers, (Odessa: Bogomyслиe, 1998).
- Kasdorf, Hans, "Die Mission der Mennoniten in Russland" in: *200 Jahre Mennoniten in Rußland*. G. and J. Hildebrandt, eds. (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 2000), 123-151.
- Klippenstein, Lawrence, tr. and ed., "Johann Wieler (1839-1889) Among Russian Evangelicals: A New Source of Mennonites and Evangelicalism in Imperial Russia", *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 5 (1987), 44-60.
- Küng, Hans, *Strukturen der Kirche*, 2nd edn (Freiburg: Herder, 1963).
- Littell, Franklin H., *The Anabaptist View of the Church: a Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*, 2nd edn. (Boston: Starr King, 1958).
- Lucky, Hans. *Johann Gerhard Oncken und die Anfänge des deutschen Baptismus*. 3rd edn (Kassel: J. G. Oncken, 1958).
- Minear, Paul S., *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).
- The Pattern of the Church. A Baptist View*. A. Gilmore, Ed. (London: Lutterworth, 1963).
- Prewo, Rainer, Ritsert, Jürgen, Stracke, Elmar, *Systemtheoretische Ansätze in der Soziologie. Eine kritische Analyse* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1973).
- Protestantizm. Slovar' ateista*. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1990).
- Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vols I-VI, 3rd edn (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1957-62).
- Reshetnikov, Iurii Ie., "Stanovlennia ta diferentsiatsiia ievangel'skogo rukhu v Ukraini" (Dissertation, Insitut filosofii im. H. S. Skovorodi Natsional'noi akademii nauk Ukraini, Kiev, 2000).
- and Sannikov, Sergei, *Obzor istorii Evangel'sko-baptistskogo bratstva v Ukraine* (Odessa: Bogomyслиe, 2000).
- Savinskii, S. N., *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorussii (1867-1917)*. (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 1999).
- *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorussii (1817-1967)*. (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 2001).
- Sawatsky, Walter, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Kitchener: Herald, 1981).
- Theorien sozialer Strukturen*, Peter M. Blau, ed. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1978).
- Toews, John A., *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, 1975).
- Toews, John B., "Baptists and Mennonite Brethren in Russia (1790-1930)", *Mennonites & Baptists: A Continuing Conversation*. Paul Toews, ed. (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1993), 81-96.
- Wallmann, Johannes, *Der Pietismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).