CHURCH, STATE, AND CULTURE:
On the Complexities of Post-Soviet Evangelical Social Involvement

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A CASE STUDY

The Sacramento (California) metropolitan area has a peculiar, closely-knit community made up of about 75,000 Slavic-speaking immigrants, mostly Ukrainians and Russians, who have left the Soviet Union since the 1980s and moved to the same area.[1] A majority of them are members of baptistic churches.[2]

During the last decade of the Soviet Union's existence, about 400,000 Soviet Jews and evangelical Christians were allowed to immigrate to the United States on grounds of religious persecution.[3] Whole congregations started a new life in a new country while retaining the old community's mentality and practices. Thus, in a way, they live in two worlds. One is the new American culture; the other has been, so to speak, transported from the Soviet Union. For the older generation of immigrants, the latter is their primary world. The younger part of the community, be-

[1] "Grief Grips Sacramento's Ukrainians." On-line available. http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/americas/newsid_1504000/1504176.stm (February 1, 2002).

[2] Here and further the term "baptistic" is used as an umbrella term for a variety of believing communities practising believers' baptism and demanding radical moral living, such as Baptists or Pentecostals. For an extended explanation of the term see James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "The Believers Church in Theological Perspective," in Stanley Hauerwas et al, eds, *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 309-26. Cf. McClendon's earlier account of the theological heritage of baptistic (or "baptist") communities in *Systematic Theology: Ethics*, Vol. I, rev. ed. published posthumously (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 17-34 (originally published in 1986; see pp. 17-35). For a collection of baptistic writings see Curtis W Freeman et al, eds., *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999).

ing much more keen and interested in accepting the dominant outside culture, are bringing the new world into their homes. In this way the community is being immersed in a larger culture, which significantly affects the sub-culture of the Slavic evangelical immigrants.

On 20 August 2001 the Sacramento Ukrainian community underwent a shock. Nikolay Soltys, a 27-year-old immigrant, killed six members of his family, including his pregnant wife and a three-year-old son by stabbing them and slashing their throats. He was hunted by the police for ten days until he was finally arrested while hiding in the back garden of his mother's house. Soltys was a member on probation of a local evangelical church.[4]

About the same time, a choir director of a local Russian-speaking Baptist church confiscated a package of drugs worth about $500 from a boy in the church. The boy demanded the drugs back and, when they were not returned, shot at the choir director, injuring him severely.[5] Just a few months later, another boy from this church was beaten to death by some of the other youngsters in his youth group.[6]

These shocking events, alongside other incidents in the Slavic immigrant community, prompted the writing of an appeal by the Russian Baptist church in Bryte. The appeal was addressed to the Slavic Community Center of Sacramento (officially a public, not a religious representative of the local Slavic minority communities) as a cry for help.[7] It starts with a description of the disquieting behaviour of the younger generation of immigrants: their failure to abide by the law, violent conflicts, use of drugs, etc. The appeal then goes on to urge the directors of the center to take all possible measures to change the situation:

> We ask you to use all your influence, all your authority, all power and resources, all ties and contacts with various

demic journals, and has translated several theological books into Lithuanian. Her monograph, *Involuntarily Free or Voluntarily Bound: Singleness in the Baptistic Churches of Post-Communist Europe*, was published recently in the Occasional Papers series of IBTS.

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[3] "Grief Grips Sacramento's Ukrainians."

[4] The church was not willing to accept him fully as a member because of the lack of a proper recommendation from the church to which he previously belonged. "Spotlight on Ukrainian-American Community," online available. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2001/08/21/sacramento-immigrants.htm (February 1, 2002).

[5] Personal letter from G.B., an eyewitness report and reflections. (August 27, 2001) Available through the author.

[6] Konstantin Yuryev, "Why Did They Kill My Son?" («За что убили моего сына?») (*Вестник*, 6 января 2002 года).

[7] Interestingly, however, the Board of Directors of the Center consists of the pastors and leaders of the local churches. This is reflected in the composition of the editorial board of the center periodical, *Вестник*, a sign of the major role that the church plays in the public life of this enclaved immigrant community. Personal letter from G.B., an eyewit-

adjunct professor at several universities and seminaries in Europe. He currently serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, and is a member of the Division of External Relations of EBF, the Commission on Christian Ethics of the Baptist World Alliance, and of several academic communities in Europe and the U.S. He has published a number of scientific articles and books, as well as theological articles.

American organizations and agencies to create and establish a diversified programme for saving our children.[8]

The appeal is striking in its irony. The church does not seem able (and recognises the fact) to control its own backyard. It realises its need for someone else's help. The United States government, as such, even in its local representation, is too distant an element of social life for this community. Instead, the Slavic center serves as an icon of a "government" that appears more real and effective. In certain ways, it is seen as functioning in the same manner as the Soviet government back in their home country.

Is such an attitude of looking to "government" for help in times of social crisis something unique to the Slavic community in Sacramento? Hardly. Rather, it seems to reflect a confusion of church-state relationships common in post-Soviet evangelical churches, a confusion present both in indigenous congregations and in immigrant evangelical communities of Soviet origin.[9] Why should this be the perception (which appears incongruent even to an outsider) of a church whose theology implies that believers are exemplary in contrast to the rest of the world, but which is nevertheless unable to control social relationships *within* its structure? And why should this perception be so pervasive amongst the gathering communities?[10]

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ness report and reflections (February 20, 2002) Available from the author.

[8] "An Appeal to the Slavic Community Center of Sacramento" («Обращение к Славянскому общественному центру г. Сакраменто», *Диаспора*, 6 января 2002 года): 7. (Translation ours).

[9] An explanation of terms is due here. "Soviet evangelicals" might be somewhat confusing since the word "evangelical" is so broad that it typically requires some descriptive adjective, such as "fundamentalist," "mainline," or "radical." Here the definition of "Soviet evangelicals" corresponds to the gathering church concept, a topic to be picked up in the last section of this work. In practical terms these are mostly Baptists and Pentecostals, as in Walter Sawatsky's use of the same term in his work, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981). The following discussion excludes the new churches that have sprung up under the influence of some Western movements after the fall of the Soviet Union. Their history and theology differs in significant ways and requires a separate study. For the difficulties in neatly defining Eastern and Central European evangelical communities and, more generally, the development of European Protestantism in traditional Western theological terms, see Parush Parushev and Toivo Pilli, "Protestantism in Eastern Europe to the Present Day," in Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 155-60, and Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks, "Introduction: Protestantism – the Problem of Identity," ibid., 1-19.

[10] In this paper, we are continuing to explore some of the themes touched upon in our earlier works, that is, the life of evangelical churches in the post-Soviet context. Ourselves being "insiders" should account for some of the claims that would otherwise require some substantiation.

Reasons for the Social Passivity of Post-Soviet Evangelicals

Background

With the crumbling of the communist regime, Soviet evangelicals experienced the opening of a previously-unfamiliar door: the freedom to express themselves as a believing community publicly and visibly. Yet the possibility of engagement with the surrounding culture and its actual appropriation were separated by a sea of uncertainties, both theological and social. Many years of suppression and disguise have nurtured a mentality of seclusion and secrecy. The quieter you were, the more effective you could expect to be as a church—at least in terms of the church's survival. Circumstance created the situation at first, but the situation was then overgrown by theological convictions that served to confirm it. The situation has radically changed, but the presuppositions that framed the experience of persecution and suppression are harder to alter.

On the other hand, the rapid changes in the culture of the last decades have created numerous holes in its social fabric. The social welfare system is not able anymore to meet the needs of citizens who are, in fact, *not* used to the struggle of the survival of the fittest. The previous common goal of building communism, or even the alternative goal of resisting the Soviet regime, among other unifying societal factors, are gone without anything similar in degree to replace them. The fragmentation in these societies and the prevalent hopelessness are especially acute because of the sharp contrast with the previous life, specifically during the last decades of stagnation, in an ideological system that provided its members with a sense of security and movement toward a goal. Security and the grand vision are gone, but not the in-bred habits of passivity of the common Soviet citizen and his or her dependency on public structures. This means that in the context of social issues *the authority of the state is still expected to have the final say*. Evangelical churches are not much different in this respect. Thus, it is no wonder that they could easily adopt a stance that allowed the churches to oppose the ideology spread by the government, while at the same time embracing and benefiting from the social security system (which necessarily entailed a certain lifestyle and a kind of trust in the authorities) created by the same powers they condemned and opposed.[11]

Theological Presuppositions

Glen Stassen has pointed out an important connection between the way the church perceives its mission and such variables of moral perception as threat and authority, as well as issues of loyalties, interests, and trust.[12] All of these factors influence the church's theology, and fail-

[11] For a fuller picture of European evangelicals' social perceptions in general, one must take serious note of the subversive appeal of the Marxist egalitarian social vision.

[12] Glen H. Stassen, "Critical Variables in Christian Social Ethics," in Paul Simmons, ed., *Issues in Christian Ethics* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 68-74. Recently Stassen

ure to account for them will leave one working on the superficial level of stated doctrines that represent expectation of a result, rather than anything actual. It would make an interesting study to work in detail with all the variables he has suggested. Here, however, we will only mention some of them in passing to give an initial spur for rethinking the convictions underlying the theological presuppositions of post-Soviet evangelicals.[13]

We have already touched on the issue of authority. The realm of social problems was relegated to the "state," or any institution that would take responsibility. This is why, as the state is now largely unable to respond to the social needs of the people, a social initiative can easily be undertaken by a business fostering certain interests, a religious group from abroad with its own agenda, etc. This is related to the dichotomy of evangelism versus social responsibility, which, in its turn, is connected to the dichotomy of soul versus body, with the well-being of the first separated from the well-being of the latter.[14] To save souls for eternity then becomes a much higher (and much easier?) priority than clothing the naked and feeding the hungry (Jas 2:16). Thus, during Soviet times, the prohibition of evangelism was viewed much more seriously (and opposed much more vigorously) than the prohibition of social involvement. As we have seen, believers accepted the proposed pattern of social life rather painlessly. In fact, some were (and still are) actively seeking the benefits of the government-run welfare system. Concern for justice, so prevalent in Scripture, had to be circumvented and spiritualised. Authority in matters of social problems lay with the state.

The experience of hatred on the part of the "world," both on the official level as well as the ridicule and harassment from common citizens, powerfully reinforced the notion of the segregation of the evangelical churches from the rest of the people. Such an understanding of threat went both ways: a) the world hates us; b) we should, for our part, have nothing in common with sin (which, by implication, equalled the surrounding culture). This experience formed convictions that can be termed the "trench mentality:"[15] The church

elaborated on his earlier insights providing a more comprehensive account of the nature of moral discourse in Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 99-124.

[13] We are using here "convictions" theologically as suggested and defined by James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and James M. Smith, *Understanding Religious Convictions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975) (Rev. ed. published as *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* [Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994], chap. 4.). On the relation of Stassen's critical variables of moral discourse and the concept of convictions, see Parush R. Parushev, "East and West: A Theological Conversation," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* (Vol. 1 #1, 2000): 31-44.

[14] For a theological analysis of the results of such dichotomy, see Nancey Murphy, "Beyond Modern Dualism and Reductionism." *IBTS Occasional Publications Series*, Vol. III (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 24-40.

[15] Linas Andronovas, "Lithuanian Baptists: A Struggle For Identity In the Post-Communist Era" (Unpublished thesis, Klaipeda: Lithuania Christian College, 2001), 21; Lina Andronoviene, "The Suffering Faith: Towards a Theology of Suffering in the Context of the Lithuanian Baptist Church" (Unpublished

learned to function as a peculiar minority in an environment of suppression. Thus, the peculiarity of the Soviet evangelical theological perspective on social involvement comes directly from its main difference from the other Christian traditions, namely the perceived distinctiveness of the gathering community as sharply contrasted to the rest of the culture. Coupled with society's mistrust and ostracism, it is one step from adopting heroic martyrdom theology. Moreover, the fall of Soviet ideological foundations produced a frustrating chaos of violence, corruption, and hopelessness. Therefore, in the new situation it became even easier to function in "the-world-is-corrupt-beyond redemption-and-we-have nothing-to-do-with-it" mode. The result is continued withdrawal from the surrounding culture. The fruits of such withdrawal are best seen over a longer period of time, when a particular community exemplifies the frozen culture of the time when the repudiation of culture was initiated, such as in the example of the Old Order Amish.[16]

The "we-should-have-nothing-in-common-with-sin" stance is directly connected to the emphasis on the holiness of the church as its major goal. Such an understanding of the church's mission directly leads to the trench mentality. Social involvement is perceived as a threat to this holiness: It is messy; it requires taking risks; the complex nature of social problems does not allow for a conservative propositional theological framework, but demands flexibility and openness to change. In short, it cannot provide the security that the primary vision of holiness demands, either on the ethical or the theological level.

Yet such holiness is illusory; it should suffice to remember the Sacramento events. A major problem in the Sacramento community, as well as in many evangelical churches in the CIS and the Baltic states, is the failure to see the influence of the surrounding culture on the peculiar culture of the church. Ironically, fighting "the world" was a large part of the agenda for these churches during Soviet times, yet they failed to see how much of this "world" easily, naturally, and, in fact, necessarily, made its way into the corporate life of the church and the private lives of its members. Indeed, "[m]uch of [the] societal influence on moral character operates at an unconscious level, and goes uncorrected by persons who lack clear principles of justice and peacemaking with which to assess them."[17] Without such an understanding of culture's influence, the churches have often tilted at windmills of sin without noticing its presence within and among the fighters themselves.[18]

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thesis, Klaipeda: Lithuania Christian College, 2001), 51. Available through the authors.

[16] Cf. Glenn E. Hinson, *The Integrity of the Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), 80.

[17] Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics,* 75.

[18] Miroslav Volf, "After the Grave in the Air: True Reconciliation Through Unconditional Embrace." IBTS Nordenhaug Lecture Series, 2001. *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, Vol. 2, # 2 (January 2002): 9. Volf observes that "...one of the reasons why this is so is because our identities, our personal and collective identities, are not simply self-contained and internally determined; rather, they are always shaped by interaction with other people."

Is there a different way for the church to account for its theology? We will now explore this possibility.

Reflections on Convictions

People's behaviour is guided by their convictions—beliefs held so firmly that they form, and are an expression of, a person's (or community's) identity.[19] But how are convictions formed? The first and most immediate force in most cases is the family. (In this respect, consider the central role of family, especially of the mother, in a child's character formation and education in the Jewish tradition.[20]) Apart from family, each of us also has a community that we hold dear and to which we pay our ultimate loyalties, a community where our convictions are affirmed or confronted. For Christians this ought to be the community of the church. Yet, apart from family and church we also live in a society where some of our convictions are formed and others are contested. The greatest part of a person's life is spent in spheres of social life that constantly provoke and challenge Christian convictions. If these convictions, inherited from family and church, do not mature and are not critically examined, they will begin to alter according to society's pressures.

Convictions tend to be subtle, as well. They are not likely to have a handy propositional expression, but rather are encoded in a person's or a community's character. Indeed, they are best expressed by being lived out as virtues of character formed by the everyday practices of life. In fact, virtues are the result of repeated enactment of certain practices that become so natural to a person's or community's life, that they constitute that very life.[21] In other words, the web of interrelated practices constitutes the life of a person or community. It is from attentive study of this web that a personal or communal set of convictions can be eventually discerned and their relationship with the larger culture disclosed.

Sooner or later, therefore, the church is forced to recognise the culture's influence on the convictions of its individual members, as well as on the corporate character of the church. The shock and crisis that a church undergoes as it is faced with its own "unholiness" is hardly bearable. Alasdair MacIntyre has termed this experience "an epistemological crisis,"[22] that can be solved in one of two ways. Either traditional convictions are revised and reinterpreted on the basis of the community's resources (and possibly partial incorporation of insights from sister tradition[s]), or the particular tradition is abandoned for a rival one which seems to have better resourc-

[19] McClendon and Smith, *Convictions,* 5-7.
[20] David Hilborn and Matt Bird, eds., *God and the Generations: Youth, Age & Church Today* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 151-2.
[21] Cf. McClendon, *Ethics* (1986), 172ff.
[22] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative: Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 138. Although the crisis of this sort is first of all of a moral nature, it is epistemological because it is a discovery of the shattered formative convictions of the community.

es to answer the needs raised by the crisis.[23]

In the last part of this paper, we will be concerned with the first option. There seems to be enough potential in the tradition of the post-Soviet evangelical churches to withstand the test of changing times. What is there in this tradition that should be reinterpreted or emphasised? Moreover, what is there to be learned from a "sister" tradition? In other words, we will look at the evangelicals' own resources, as well as seek ways to enrich and enlarge them ecumenically in conversation with the larger Christian tradition.[24]

Resources for Change in the Christian Tradition

Evangelical churches in the former Soviet Union constitute a minority. The dominant religious environment varies from Islam in Central Asia, to the Orthodox Church in Russia, to the Catholic Church in Lithuania, to Lutheranism in Estonia (and to a peculiar combination of traditions among the immigrant communities in the United States, such as in Sacramento). There seem to be certain insights in the heritage of these traditions that could be of help to the evangelicals as they struggle to be faithful to their calling in a time of change.

Of special interest here is the potential within the theological framework of "sister" Christian traditions to allow for the appropriation, nurture, or sustenance of what we see to be of practical value to authentic Christian social engagement in the current realities of post-Soviet evangelical churches. In other words, the focus is on certain theological insights (not necessarily practically implemented) of the wider Christian tradition that evangelicals should heed. Thus, we do not claim a thorough investigation.

We will follow the pattern of distinguishing three historical types of ecclesiology. Broadly they may be named catholic (including Roman Catholic and Orthodox), protestant (including Lutheran and Reformed), and the so-called "baptistic" or "gathering" churches of the Radical Reformation (most of the evangelical churches of the former Soviet Union fall into this last category).[25] The latter strand of churches has a distinct identity compared to that of the catholic and protestant traditions.[26] After turning to the latter

[23] Nancey Murphy and George F.R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 242.

[24] On "traditions" and "Tradition" see John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 21ff.

[25] Lower case "c," "p," and "b" here designate a church type, not a denomination. For the use of the term "gathering church" see James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Doctrine, Volume II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 327ff. For an extended treatment of the term see Keith G Jones, *A Believing Church: Learning from Some Contemporary Anabaptist and Baptist Perspectives* (Didcot: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1998), and his article, "Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*" in the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, Vol. 4 # 2 (January 2004), forthcoming.

[26] Although it is still sometimes accounted, even by the representatives of the gathering churches themselves, as a part of Protestantism, there are enough differences that call for seeing the gathering church movement as a distinct tradition. Cf. Lesslie Newbigin's "Pentecostals" in *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friend-

two for possible theological resources, the last section will highlight some authentic tools for social involvement that are present within the gathering church tradition.

Catholic Vision: A Hope for the Whole of Humanity

The catholic outlook, with its intrinsic inclusive stance, the emphasis on communal sacraments, and the notion of common good, provides a stimulus for social action that is largely lacking in the perspective of post-Soviet evangelical churches. If the church is viewed as a sacrament, it necessarily upholds a pastoral role for the world. As Henri de Lubac has put it:

> If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ...she really makes him present. She not only carries on his work, but she is his very continuation, in a sense far more real than that in which it can be said that any human institution is its founder's continuation.[27]

The church as primordial sacrament, then, becomes Christ's body with a mission of extending God's grace to *all creation*. Taking a lead from St. Ignatius of Antioch, the renowned Orthodox theologian Fr. Dr. John Meyendorff contends that "...the 'catholic' Church was that Christian assembly which had accepted the whole of the divine presence in Christ... and had assumed a mission directed at the salvation of the whole of God's creation."[28] Accordingly, the catholicity of the church "transcends practicality, as it must also transcend history, geography, and culture."[29] Of course, there is a very fine line between an attempt to serve the whole world and the goal of incorporation of the world into the church, or "Constantinianism."[30] However, a tuned understanding of the sacramental mission for all humanity may provide the post-Soviet gathering churches with the vision of their priestly role for the people[31] and at the same time save them from the dan-

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ship, 1954) or James Wm. McClendon's overview of the terminology used in respect to this tradition in his *Ethics* (1986), 18-20; and McClendon, "The Believers' Church in Theological Perspective," in Stanley Hauerwas et al, eds., *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 309-226. Nigel G Wright summarises the gathering church tradition as a distinct combination of convictions: "the doctrines of the sole headship of Christ over the church; the church as a fellowship of believers; believers" baptism; the competence of the local congregation; freedom of conscience; and the separation of the church from the state so that it might be self-governing. All of these are directly rooted in the New Testament as the normative and binding witness to God's will for the church." Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), p.15. Cf. S V Sannikov, *20 Centuries of Christianity: 2nd Millenium* (*Двадцать веков христианства. Второе тысячелетие*) (Odessa/St Petersburg: Bogomysliye, 2001), 230-231.

[27] Qtd. in Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), 63.

[28] John Meyendorff, *Catholicity and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), 7.

[29] Meyendorff, *Catholicity,* 62.

[30] Cf. John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical,* Michael G. Cartwright, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), *passim.*

[31] Cf. John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), *passim*. Concerning the role of religion in society, even secular political theorist Michael Walzer admits the need of religious communities to mediate divine grace as "a social good." In *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 243.

ger of attempting an unqualified rejection of "the world."

It is worthwhile to look at the notion of common good, traditionally a strong emphasis in catholic theology. Seeking common good requires the contribution of individuals and groups to the well-being of society as a whole.[32] Although the catholic understanding of the amount and the kind of contribution required might differ from the understanding of the gathering churches, the point need not be stressed so much as to create a conflict.[33] The benefit of making use of the notion of common good in the context of post-Soviet societies is that it helps avoid the inclination to individualism and fragmentation. Given the legacy of the Soviet past and stressful current realities, the inclination to disregard the common good is rather tempting, especially for the gathering churches with their stress on the distinctiveness of the Christian way of life.

Protestant Vision: The Spur of Personal Hope

One of the changes protestantism sought to bring into the church was the abolishment of the idea of different degrees of holiness achieved among different groups within the church. It proclaimed the possibility (as well as the need) for any Christian to attain right relationships with God *and* others. The notion of "spiritual equality" and the independence of one's relationship with God from mediators affected the traditional social pyramid of catholic understanding that attached different degrees of worth to different layers of society. The ordinary individual in a church was given more significance, a theological stance that (again, not necessarily in practice) had an implicit message of social egalitarianism. In its turn, it gave an impetus to social mobility and social activity.

This is an old story; the world has seen many developments since the Protestant Reformation. Yet the movement away from the preservation of the status quo, from natural theology, and the medieval appreciation of authority, hierarchy, and structure (while still retaining scholastic clarity and the drive for systematisation) towards the significance of the person, an embryo of later, full-fledged individualism, has become important again in the post-Soviet countries. For one thing, Orthodox and Catholic churches are the majority religions in most post-Soviet areas. For another, the traditional passivity of the individual is one of the similarities that these two churches share with the Soviet mentality of the masses, of the absence of personal responsibility and personal initiative. The combination of the two makes the issue especially pertinent

[32] For an extensive treatment of the issue of common good and its relation to human rights, see, for example, Catholic theologian David Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), and Orthodox theologian Stanley Samuel Harakas, *Living the Faith: The PRAXIS of Eastern Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1993).

[33] A thoughtful critical evaluation of the possibility of a fruitful Orthodox-Baptist dialogue is presented in Ian M. Randall, ed., *Baptists and the Orthodox Church: On the Way to Understanding. IBTS Occasional Publications Series, Vol. I* (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003).

in post-Soviet societies, which have lost the old direction and are not sure of the new. The emphasis and practical implication of this aspect of protestant theology could be especially useful in countries such as Latvia or Estonia, as well as in smaller islands of active protestantism elsewhere. In a way, social egalitarianism is present in the evangelical vision as well, yet it is, especially in post-Soviet countries, largely limited to the confines of the churches, whereas in the protestant vision it extends to include secular structures.[34]

Another helpful insight is the protestant belief in the divine ordination of the "worldly," particularly of the Reformed tradition. "Whereas monastic spirituality regarded vocation as a calling *out* of the world into the desert or the monastery, Luther and Calvin regarded vocation as a calling *into* the everyday world."[35] The evangelical churches in the post-Soviet context, with their concentration on evangelism, easily drift into the spiritualization of the believers' work in the world and therefore miss the realm of social involvement as an inseparable part of the church's mission.

Protestantism keeps its balance on two key beliefs: The fallenness of creation and the regenerative power of God's grace to those who believe. In terms of social ethics, protestantism puts the question of social involvement into a specific framework.[36] The world, and therefore its social structures, is fallen. Yet God's grace empowers believers to seek changes. But the issue is qualified once again: The world is fallen, *including* believers. Reinhold Niebuhr's theology is an excellent example of this kind of stance. [37] "Indeed, Niebuhr's Christian realism may be understood in part as a creative retrieval of the Reformed doctrine of sin in the midst of economic depression, totalitarianism, and war."[38] This view, connected with the de-emphasis of natural theology, both provides a stimulus for involvement as well as putting it within certain limits. It might not need to be stretched to the same extent as in the case of Niebuhr and traditional Protestantism; what is realism for Niebuhr might be counted as pessimism for the gathering churches. Yet the protestant reminder is still valuable. God's grace provides ways for change. But the world is fallen. The warning has also been reinforced by the failure of communism: the social work of the church alone, however needed, will not progressively bring the Kingdom on earth.

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[34] See, for instance, Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, Roy A. Harrisville, trans. and ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 246.

[35] Alister McGrath, "Calvin and the Christian Calling." On-line available. http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9906/articles/mcgrath.html (February 15, 2002).

[36] Cf. Douglas F. Ottati, "The Reformed Tradition in Theological Ethics," in Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress, eds., *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 52.

[37] Cf. his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Touchstone, published by Simon & Schuster, 1995 [First published 1932 by Charles Scribner's Sons]); *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Vols. I & II: Human Nature (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1996 [First published 1941/1943 by Charles Scribner's Sons]).

[38] *Ibid.*, 52.

The Gathering Church: Mission Starts From Within

Since the church is understood to be "a little flock" (Lk 12:32), the gathering church originally has disassociated itself from the concept or longing for "Christendom."[39] This has crucial implications for ecclesiology and the understanding of mission: the church is never the world; the world could never be expected to become the church.[40] The community of believers has no vocation to function as a chaplain of society[41] —the issue has already been touched in the description of the post-Soviet evangelical terrain. The social focus of the church, then, is not on the task of perfecting society, but on practising Kingdom ethics (which will necessarily be connected to various social issues), first of all, *within* the church and from there on impacting the surrounding culture. Since Troeltsch, this kind of "radical" ecclesiology has been tagged "sectarian." Despite the negative connotations, the term is rather accurate since it reflects the gathering churches' understanding of their distinctness, or the smallness of their "flock" culture, in relation to the surrounding world.

Why would this notion need to be re-emphasised in the post-Soviet era? Although in many places the post-Soviet evangelical communities are still a small minority, in some areas the growth and public presence of the evangelical churches has been so big during the last decade that the church can practically begin to feel its power.[42] Constantinianism suddenly becomes very real and tempting as the church shifts its focus from living out Kingdom ethics in its own community to the enforcement of its understanding of morality on the society at large.[43] We do not mean to suggest that the church should not try to make an impact on society. The question is one of focus and the expectations it has regarding the possibility of implementing Christian practices in a secular society.

The understanding of the distinct nature of the gathering community and the particularity of its ethics is expressed in the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. For the gathering churches the Sermon is seen as directly applicable to all who are a part of the believing community, in contrast to other traditions.[44] The protestant social ethic largely discounts the Sermon on the Mount as an impossible ideal. In traditional

[39] On an extended critique of the Constantinian residue in church life from the evangelical perspective see Nigel G Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jurgen Moltmann* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).

[40] Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward A Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 109-110.

[41] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Witness,* Vol. III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 87.

[42] Public visibility of the Baptists in Ukraine and Moldova is a prime example. Moreover, some local evangelical churches rise to prominence because of the personal relationships that develop between church leaders and influential public persons.

[43] Cf. McClendon, *Ethics* (1986), 237.

[44] David E. Garland, "Sermon on the Mount," in Watson E. Mills, Gen.ed., *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997 [1990], 810-11; Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics,* 128-45.

Lutheranism, it applies only to one part of the two-kingdoms ethic, namely private relationships, but not public life. Here one has to consent to the principle of the fallen world. In Calvinism, the function of the Sermon on the Mount traditionally has been just like that of the law—to convince us that we are incapable of fulfilling these precepts and thus bring us to acknowledge our sinfulness and repent. Catholicism traditionally applied different standards for lay believers, monastic communities, and the clergy.[45]

Interestingly, the interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount typical for other traditions have made their way into Soviet evangelical ethics largely, perhaps, due to the influence of different dispensational theologies. In some instances, and especially in larger churches, the ethical standards of the Sermon are required from those serving in teaching, preaching, and leadership ministry, yet the requirements are softened for "lay members" (again, a concept indeed foreign to gathering church ecclesiology). In more cases, however, the two-kingdoms stance is appropriated. Life in the church and life in the public realm are separated. This is especially true in the post-Soviet states where religious persecution in the past has been the most severe, such as Belarus, Russia, or Ukraine, as well as in the churches that allowed for a greater degree of accommodation to Soviet realities.[46] While the old regime fell, the dualistic ethics stayed much longer. This is an area where the churches, faced with a moral crisis, should turn back to their own sources to recover the actuality of Kingdom ethics which is so essential to the gathering church tradition. The reinterpretation of the applicability of the Sermon on the Mount will have a direct impact on evangelical social involvement and prophetic political activity[47] in the culture of the world.

This notion of the nature of the gathering church is tightly connected to the emphasis on the communal character of the Christian life. Whereas, in its extreme, catholic theology emphasised the inclusion of all, and protestantism, in essence, stripped away everything but the individual's spiritual freedom and enlightenment, the communal dimension of life was always important in the gathering church tradition. It is likewise important in the post-Soviet era, as evidenced by the increasing significance of tightly-knit, communal sub-cultures in the post-modern world. Yet the temptation to individualism is still very appealing: After all, the individual's freedom was so much repressed during Soviet times that the notion of succumbing to the judgement of some community easily stirs rejection. The radical and, indeed, "sectarian" nature of stressing the communal is yet to be appropriated in many post-

[45] The gathering churches function, in a way, as the voluntary monastic orders in Catholicism. But instead of being a "church within a church," they see themselves, rather, as surrounded by a world foreign to the Kingdom of God.

[46] A short illustration may be fitting here: one of the authors recalls how the children of (registered Baptist) believers, on coming home from school, would change their clothes, undo the red Pioneer's tie, and go to church for a prayer meeting or a Bible study.

Soviet evangelical churches. This kind of appropriation, guided by the practice of the Sermon on the Mount, makes them a distinct and transformed social reality:

> The Sermon, by its announcement and its demands, makes necessary the formation of a colony, not because disciples are those who have a need to be different, but because the Sermon, if believed and lived, makes us different, shows us the world to be alien, an odd place where what makes sense to everybody else is revealed to be opposed to what God is doing among us. Jesus was not crucified for saying or doing what made sense to everyone.[48]

This statement makes the point that life in the believing community should serve as a starting point for social activities outside the church. Moreover, the very particularity of the story that forms the Christian community seems to make it unlikely that its ethics will be easily accepted by a world formed by a different story. For any hope of transformation, "[t]he primary social structure through which the gospel works to change other structures is that of the Christian community."[49]

The Gathering Church: The Guiding Vision for Social Involvement

It seems, then, that the best a Christian community can hope for a secular society is that it will mimic and eventually adopt the subversive spill-over effects of faithful Christian living:

> The experience of the Christian community is a *paradigm* in the simple sense. The Christian community does things which the world may imitate. The Christian community feeds the hungry and cares for the sick in a way which may become a model for the wider society.[50]

Paradoxically, another feature of (authentic) theology of the gathering church is what McClendon has called "the baptist vision,"[51] a conviction that whatever was true for the community of the first disciples of Jesus should also be true for his followers *now*. The same applies to the eschatological vision: The future

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[47] Parush R. Parushev, "European Baptist Considers Church-State Matters: Problem vs. Vision." On-line available. Column on "News & Society" in www.ethicsdaily.com (March 25, 2002).

[48] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 74. Hauerwas and Willimon reflect one side of the ongoing debate concerning the role of communitarianism as it regards the social involvement of the gathering church. How much can the church expect to influence the society? Not much, they argue; hence the idea of a colony. Some other authors writing from the perspective of the gathering church, such as Glen Stassen or John Howard Yoder, hold this to be a wrong dualism. (Cf., for example, Glen Stassen's Foreword in Duanne K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture* [Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2000], 8.) They are more optimistic in their proposals for the ways for the church to impact the larger society. (Cf. for example, Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), *passim*.; Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 369-446.)

[49] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994 [First published 1972]), 154.

[50] Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 195.

[51] McClendon, *Ethics*, 31-35.

is also in a very real sense *now*. As regards the possibility of any real changes in society, there is a conviction of the wholeness of the new life in Jesus, inwardly as well as outwardly, or in interpersonal relationships as well as in participation in public life. Therefore, alongside the realisation of the possible rejection of the Kingdom of God by society goes reliance on God's power to bring about changes *in the whole of life*. This hope of change, however, is formed by convictions about the distinct nature of the church of Christ and its ethics.

What does it all mean in practical terms for post-Soviet realities? How can a church respond to the poverty and despair of its own members and the people of its surrounding community and, more broadly, of society? How much should the church expect from the state? If it can ever expect any Kingdom ethics to be workable, it must be workable *in* the church. That is the starting point. Only if it is practised among the believers can social ethics make an impact on the wider society, and encourage broader social involvement that will take various shapes depending on the specific context of the church. Yet if the church feels helpless in working out the problems within its own community, as in the example of Sacramento, it has no hope of trying to ease the pain of society.[52] It then ceases to be "a foretaste, a testing ground, and a model of the Spirit's socio-political work."[53] If the gospel is the good news, it is good because it has already started in the lives of the believers and continues to unfold in the broader social context. And it will necessarily spill over into that context simply because it is social in its very essence.[54]

This is a short overview of what we see to be the major support points for the gathering church theology of social involvement. From this overview, the major challenge to the vision of the gathering church should also be evident. Much more than the catholic and protestant communions, the gathering churches are able to adopt the stand that it is necessary and, what is more, possible to reject the culture of "the world" as such. Any social involvement, then, becomes hardly possible. The church might forget the paradox that its very particularity and distinctiveness, and even its rejection of certain cultural practices, is *for the purpose of service to the world that God so loved*, not for the church's own ends. The history of Soviet evangelicals is a good illustration of the danger of self-serving seclusion. It is for this reason that a constant critical reassessment of the theology and practices of the post-Soviet evangelical churches is needed, as well as an openness and willingness to draw lessons from the wealth of the larger Christian tradition.

CONCLUSION

Now we may summarise our understanding of a proper dynamics of social involvement. Obviously, to have social involvement the church must be present in the immediate culture. The church's presence necessarily

[52] Cf. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 105.
[53] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 228.
[54] Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, 104.
[55] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 155.

means a way of life that does not comply with all aspects of the culture, yet has enough points of connection to communicate with it. This is the "saltiness" of the church's life. On the other hand, such presence requires transparency that undermines secrecy and sectarianism. Practising presence[55] forms a virtue[56] that defines a positive attitude towards the surrounding culture.

Yet presence is the minimalist social involvement of the church. As a minimum, it is reductionist. The natural extension of presence, therefore, is involvement in practical terms with some (not all) aspects of the culture. Social involvement is not a goal in itself; it is a natural witness to the value of the Kingdom for the world as it is now. Well-measured involvement of the church in acute social problems, and the offering of a possible remedy for them, is perhaps the soundest way for the church to do mission. It might seem a very ambitious project for minority communities, but here is where the ecumenical extension of the world-wide evangelical community comes into focus. An insignificant church community may not have the necessary resources to engage vast social problems, but it can always be a trustworthy channel or a connecting link between donors willing to share their resources and those most in need, bypassing corrupt secular bureaucratic structures.[57] This is how the "light" of the church can be shared with the community.

The assessment of social involvement should include, in our opinion, measures to avoid attaching strings to social help. Social help is exactly that: Assistance, not a Constantinian attempt to force evangelism or control needy church members. Unfortunately, the churches are very susceptible to such temptations. Yet, by providing a witness, there is a natural evangelistic side to social assistance, which brings us to the third practice of social involvement: that of fellowship. The value of long-lasting fellowship expresses the true essence of Christian care for the world created by God, and inevitably leads to the sound witness of missional engagement with the world. This is how the "world" will see the deeds of the church and give glory to the Father in heaven (Mt 5:16). These three interrelated (and contextually balanced) practices—presence, assistance, and fellowship—define holistic social involvement.

It might seem that what we have argued does not change the situation much since there is rather little encouragement for more active social involvement. If our suggestions were taken into account, probably they would not result in great resurgence of social activity. Yet the grounds, both for activity as well as for abstaining from it, would be different. That is where the study and acknowl-

[56] McClendon, *Ethics* (1986), 106.

[57] It is worth noting that even liberal democracies with a long history of charity and aid are using the church as the partner. For instance, several governments within the European Union have used ecumenical aid and development agencies in membership with the Association of Protestant Agencies (APRODEV) as channels of development assistance to countries in the two-thirds world. The receiving agency in the developing country is generally an ecumenical agency of the indigenous churches. We are thankful to the Revd. Keith G. Jones for this helpful insight.

edgement of history, loyalties, interests, perceptions of threat and authority, and the like, begin to play an important role. If the church avoids social involvement because it values holiness more than compassion, it is on a straight road to legalism and formalism. But if social ethics start from within, if the church attempts to bring the social politics of the upside-down kingdom of the Sermon on the Mount to life first of all in the gathering community, then even the little projects it attempts to do for society will have a serious impact. Such a community will be an example of what the Kingdom of God is like; a living parable, so to speak, and therefore a powerful witness for the Kingdom, as well as an influence for change in society. Since the church's social ethics will have to start from within, this will also mean that the most important level of social involvement will be that of the local church, not that of denominational policies and strategies.

In order to change their attitude towards social involvement, which we have claimed to be defective, post-Soviet evangelicals will need to assess their own tradition critically, as well as be open to the theological resources of other Christian families. In this respect we come close to McClendon's argument for "true," not political, ecumenism.[58] Hopefully, the churches will be open to changes that will allow them to become better (social) workers of the Kingdom.

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[58] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 336-337.

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