

# Hermeneutics in Transition: *Three Hermeneutical Horizons of Slavic Evangelicals in the Post-Soviet Period*

Alexander NEGROV, Russia, St. Petersburg

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges of Bible study at the beginning of the third millennium is understanding how biblical studies are implicated in the process of change that is massively reshaping our context. To say that the world at large is changing is to say as well that science, technology, industry, law, politics, warfare, health, art, religion, and culture are all, individually and collectively, undergoing profound transformation. Boundaries are being renegotiated, constitutive ideas reformulated, institutional relationships redefined, and identities adjusted in the processes of technical-scientific transformation. There is a widespread perception of structural and cultural turmoil.

By using the paradigm "post-Soviet" or "post-communist," it is possible to formulate a comprehensive analysis of social-political transition in Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union, and to evaluate ideological tendencies in the region. However, the purpose of this article is not to attempt a theoretical or empirical analysis of the processes of interaction in the religious conditions of social-political transformation in Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union. The point of this article takes for granted that during the last ten years the Slavic evangelical<sup>1</sup> community has witnessed some of the most fundamental social-political change in the former Soviet Union. These events have irreversibly altered the

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this article I will associate the terms "Slavic evangelicals," or "evangelicals" with the main groups of Evangelical Christians, Baptists, and Pentecostals in local congregations (or theological schools) that are situated primarily in Russia and Ukraine.



**Alexander I. Negrov** (St. Petersburg), Ph.D. in New Testament. Currently he is Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs and Dean of Post-Graduate studies at St. Petersburg Chastain University, Honorary Lecturer of New Testament at the Department of New Testament Science, Faculty of Theology/University of Pretoria. He is a member of several scholarly societies: *Society of Biblical Literature* (SBL); *New Testament Society of South Africa* (NTSSA), *Evangelical Theological Society* (ETS). He has published a number of articles in Russian and international academic publications. His book *Biblical Interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church: A Historical and Hermeneutical Perspective*.

Russian landscape (and that of the C.I.S.). It is inevitable that religion and theology and the way theology is done in the Russian context will be deeply influenced by these changes. On the one hand, one observes a renaissance of traditional beliefs (which were widespread before the atheistic revolution of 1917) and the appearance of a qualitatively new, post-atheist kind of spirituality that places little or no emphasis on dogmatic or liturgical preferences. On the other hand, a massive shift is taking place from the great socialist project of the twentieth century to a more modern capitalist, democratic system on a Western model. Thus, the evangelical community in the new Russia must face the challenge of approaching the biblical texts in the midst of constant change related to the historic transformation that their country and society are now undergoing. Since glasnost, post-Soviet evangelicals have had to deal with the pronounced fragmentation characteristic of Western Protestantism. This unsettled context prompts a frequent reinterpretation of the biblical texts and a continuing search to discover new meanings within them.

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<sup>2</sup> The term "hermeneutics," as used throughout this work, refers to the problem of understanding a biblical text. Traditionally, biblical hermeneutics was assigned the task of formulating the rules for understanding ancient texts, especially in linguistic and historical terms. Since the nineteenth century, hermeneutics has included philosophical theories of meaning and understanding in addition to theories of literary interpretation. Nineteenth-century hermeneutic theorists such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) considered understanding a process of grammatical and psychological reconstruction; that is to say, the reconstruction by the reader of the original

The main point is that in the context of the transformational processes taking place in society and in the church, numerous new interpretations of the biblical texts have appeared, and therefore a discussion of the hermeneutical horizons<sup>2</sup> of Slavic evangelicals is appropriate. This article will not attempt to present a final word on the hermeneutical peculiarities of Slavic evangelicals, because that is a complex task demanding study on a much greater scale. However, the author hopes to stimulate those who are striving for serious study of the problems of biblical interpretation to reconstruct a "Slavic evangelical Protestant hermeneutic." May these observations lay the groundwork for further analysis and research.

Let us focus on three selected hermeneutical horizons. The first relates to Orthodox biblical hermeneutics as the ideological environment (directly or indirectly) for the hermeneutical solutions widely attested among Slavic evangelicals. The political and social context will be briefly sketched as a second horizon. It is a fact that in our days we read,

text and intention of the author. As a result, "hermeneutics in the more recent sense of the term begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition" (Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 11). Bearing this in mind, the usage and meaning of the term "hermeneutics" in the scope of the present study will be restricted to the science of Bible interpretation, while the term "hermeneutical horizon" will represent the context (and intertext) of the reader in the midst of the process of understanding the Bible.

interpret, and apply biblical texts in new countries with new values and concerns. The third hermeneutical horizon is connected with the process of theological education taking place in the newly established evangelical Bible colleges, seminaries, and Christian universities. Theological education is a "hermeneutical milieu" where "reassessments" of biblical texts regularly occur. Many special courses in Bible, exegesis, hermeneutics, and theology deal closely with the study of biblical texts. These academic disciplines give theological preparation and exegetical skills, yet at the same time they form and transform the hermeneutical horizons of the students. Analysis of the research projects of graduate students of St. Petersburg Christian University demonstrate some hermeneutical inclinations which most likely coincide with the hermeneutical horizons of the rest of Slavic evangelicals.

### **1. The Eastern Orthodox context of evangelical biblical hermeneutics**

Since it is now acknowledged that any theology is constructed from a certain position and perspective, a wide road is cleared for the Russian evangelical reading of Scripture.

Russian evangelicals attempt to read Scripture from a deliberately free perspective, breaking the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological influence of Western and of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. However, it would be incorrect to argue that the frame of reference of Slavic evangelical theology is isolated from the influence of Western theological circles and Eastern Orthodox tradition.<sup>3</sup> Even in the West, it is acknowledged that there is a certain hermeneutical resemblance between the evangelicals and the Orthodox.<sup>4</sup>

This is all the more important because hermeneutical trends are not always easily visible on the surface. Without doubt, the nature and character of Slavic evangelical biblical interpretation and exegesis were formed in the broader historical and cultural context of Orthodox Christianity. Many believers in Russia and Ukraine who belong to the relatively young Christian tradition of evangelical theology (especially the so-called Evangelical Christian-Baptists and Pentecostals) came out of the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus, rightful attention must be paid to Orthodoxy, which evangelicals keep as an integral part of themselves. Operating on a meta-level, the hermeneutics of Slavic evangelicals forms

<sup>3</sup> Nikolay Kornilov correctly indicates that Russian evangelicals are in the middle, between the Eastern and Western traditions. The weakness of this situation is that at present they are not thoroughly familiar with either of these traditions. On the other hand, the strength of their situation is that the evangelicals can accept the positive points of both these traditions. See N. Kornilov, "Kakogo roda bogoslovie nam nuzhno?" ("What kind of theology do we need?") *Put' Bogopoznaniya* № 6 (2000): 11.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Grant Osborn, "The Many and the One: The Interface Between Orthodox and Evangelical Protestant Hermeneutics," *Saint Vladimir Theological Quarterly* № 39-3 (1995): 281-304. For an analysis of the similarities between the Orthodox and Slavic evangelicals see Mark Elliott, "Orthodox and Slavic Evangelicals: What Sets Them Both Apart From Western Evangelicals," *East-West Church & Ministry Report* № 3 (Fall 1995): 15-16.

a part of the intellectual framework within which the Orthodox theological enterprise also takes place. Moreover, the former is part of the subconscious assumptions of the latter (consciously or unconsciously). On the other hand, the similarity of hermeneutical principles does not automatically indicate that evangelicals have borrowed their theoretical hermeneutical constructions directly from Orthodox Christianity. These principles are meta-Christian, i.e. common to the various Christian traditions. In order to distinctly discern the trends of evangelical biblical hermeneutics in Russia, one has to be acquainted with Orthodox hermeneutics, and, at the same time, attend to the corresponding hermeneutical solutions in the practice of Slavic evangelicals. In order to achieve an understanding of present and future directions, it is necessary to step back and see the development of Orthodox hermeneutics in the Russian context.

Steps toward a careful study of the Bible in the Orthodox Church may be identified in the early nineteenth century. Among the scholars who contributed were Metropolitan of Moscow Filaret (Vasilii Drozdov, 1783-1867); Archbishop Alexander M. Bucharev (1822-1871); Archbishop Gerasim Pavskiy (1787-1863), and many others. These exegetes are identified as "the true founders of the

Russian Orthodox study of the Bible."<sup>5</sup> In the nineteenth century, Orthodox scholars defined the task of hermeneutics as the formulation of rules for the understanding of ancient texts, especially in linguistic and historical terms (as opposed to the Western theological approach, where hermeneutics already tended to include philosophical and psychological theories of meaning and understanding). Prof. Pavel Savvaitov (1815-1895), in his *Bibleyskaia germenevtika* (Biblical hermeneutics), advocated that special attention be paid to "harmony (*soglasie*) with the rule of faith."<sup>6</sup> He emphasized the binding role of church tradition and the legislative authority of the church in establishing a final formulation of biblical theological truth. In 1891, Arch. Antony (Khrapovitskiy, d. 1936) published a book in Moscow on the fourth century Donatist theologian and exegete, Tyconius of Africa (d. about 391). In his introduction, Fr. Antony outlined his hermeneutical theory.<sup>7</sup> Its main arguments convey the following: (1) the notion of a God-given and God-directed power to understand the Bible (emphasis is on pneumatology); (2) the understanding of figurative expressions and symbols put by God into the text; (3) the self-explanatory nature of the Bible; and (4) the controlling factor of the *pronema ekklesias* (that is,

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Men', "K istorii russkoy pravoslavnoy bibleistiki," ("Toward a history of Russian Orthodox biblical studies,") *Bogoslovskie Trudy* 28 (1987): 272.

<sup>6</sup> P. I. Savvaitov, *Bibleyskaia germenevtika* (Biblical hermeneutics) (St. Petersburg: 1859), 110.

<sup>7</sup> Antony (Khrapovitskiy), *O pravilakh Tikhoniia i ikh znachenie dlia sovremennoy ekzegetiki*

(Concerning the rules of Tyconius of Africa and their validity for contemporary exegesis). A book of seven rules for interpreting the meaning of Holy Scripture, trans. from Latin, *Liber de septem regulis ad investigandam at inveniendam S. Scripturae intelligentiam in Patrologiae cursus competes* (Lugduni: 1677. Moscow: 1891), 1-22.

church tradition as a means of understanding) in the interpretation of the Bible. In his monograph *Novozavetnoe tolkovanie Vekhogo Zaveta* (A New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament), Prof. Ivan Korsunskiy (1849-1899) distinguishes typology as the most appropriate method of Orthodox exegesis.<sup>8</sup> Korsunskiy stresses the continuity and harmony between the biblical testaments, and sees Christ as the center and focus of Orthodox biblical interpretation. This is merely an outline of the Orthodox approach to biblical interpretation.

An analysis of Russian Orthodox hermeneutical and exegetical literature leads us to make several selective observations.<sup>9</sup> On some points we may draw contrasts or parallels with the hermeneutical solutions of the Slavic evangelicals.

**1.1 The patristic feature.** Without doubt, the nature and character of Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation and exegesis is deeply influenced by patristic exegesis. The patristic concept of interpretation is

agreed to be "the first and most important principle" of Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Pavel Savvaitov in his *Bibleyskaia germeventika* (Biblical hermeneutics) emphasized the writings of the Greek church fathers and indicates that up until the nineteenth century, patristic literature was "almost the single consideration of Orthodox Church teachers in the study of the Bible."<sup>11</sup> This orientation of the church to its patristic exegetical heritage is dictated by several factors. First, the patristic writings and their interpretative methodology indisputably support the authority and significance of the Bible as the communicated Word of God to the church and to society. Second, the works of the Fathers pertaining to biblical exposition and interpretation establish and maintain the most important guidelines for Orthodox tradition, teaching, and dogma. The grand theological achievements of the church fathers are, of course, one of the main arguments of the Russian Orthodox Church in favor of the validity of the patristic heritage. It is the pa-

<sup>8</sup> Ivan Korsunskiy, *Novozavetnoe tolkovanie Vekhogo Zaveta* (A New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament) (Moscow: 1885).

<sup>9</sup> On the history of Orthodox biblical scholarship see A. Men', "K istorii russkoy pravoslavnoy bibleistiki" (Toward a history of Russian Orthodox biblical studies), *Bogoslovskie Trudy* 28 (1987). On Orthodox hermeneutics see A. Negrov, "Printsipy tolkovaniia Biblii v Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi" (Principles of Bible interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church), *Khronograf* № 3/7 (2000): 105-125; A. Negrov, "Biblical Interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church," *Verbum et Ecclesia* № 22/2 (2001): 352-365; A. Negrov, "Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944): A Study in the Eastern Orthodox Hermeneutical Perspective," *Hervormde Theologische Studies*, № 58/1 (2002): 250-

263; A. Negrov, "Biblical Interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church: A Historical and Hermeneutical Perspective," *Beiträge zur historischen Theologie*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck (In Print); A. Negrov, «Bibleyskaia germeventika o. Sergiia Bulgakova: sinerghiyniy, antropologicheskii i teurgicheskii aspekty» (Biblical hermeneutics of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov: synergic, anthropologic and theurgic aspects), in *Russkoe bogoslovie v evropeyskom kontekste: S. N. Bulgakov i zapadnaia religioznaia filosofskaya mysl'* (Russian theology in the European context: S. N. Bulgakov and western religious philosophical thought) (Moscow: BBI, forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Men', *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Savvaitov, *Ibid.*, 119.

tristic heritage, for example, that provides the Orthodox Church with the framework for its theological understanding of the sacraments.<sup>12</sup> Third, the patristic approach to Scripture and the practice of "typological," "allegorical," and "spiritual" exegesis are highly appealing to Orthodox exegetes. Fourth, the church fathers establish a pattern of Bible interpretation in which a Christocentric emphasis and the idea of an unbroken and organic unity between the Old and New Testaments are closely interrelated.<sup>13</sup> Finally, patristics historically serves as the basis for Orthodox identity.<sup>14</sup>

**1.2. Ecclesiastical reading and church tradition.** A unique distinction and feature of Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation is its "faithfulness to the spirit of the Church."<sup>15</sup> This means that the interpretation of the Bible is fundamentally ecclesiastical. All inquiries, whether of a scientific or exegetical kind, presuppose that Scripture and church cannot be separated or opposed to each other. Every biblical passage that the interpreter works with must be examined within the context of the church.

Scripture finds its true understanding in the church, for the church does not speak from out of itself, but from the Holy Spirit. The Church "cannot be wrong, it does not falsify, but is the same as divine Scripture—always sinless and significant."<sup>16</sup> In line with this mode of thought, the church's reality surpasses that of Scripture (since it is the reason for Scripture's existence) and must, therefore, be the final authority in Bible interpretation. In the Orthodox view, the principle of the authority of ecclesiastical understanding is an important key to unlocking the meaning of the biblical texts.<sup>17</sup> Nikol'skiy speaks for them all: "Why should we turn to the West for the science of interpretation while we in our Church have, as in a treasure-house, the true basis for interpreting the Word of God in the commentaries of the fathers and teachers of the church, the model and source for its interpretation."<sup>18</sup>

If the principle above, the possession of "the authority of ecclesiastical understanding," is taken to be interpretive custom, then the next principle of Orthodox biblical interpretation is closely connected to it. This principle deals with the role of

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Antony, *Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* (Dogmatic theology) (St. Petersburg: 1862), 10–11; Illarion (Troitskiy), *Sviashchennoe Pisanie i Tserkov'* (The Holy Scripture and the church) (Moscow: 1914); I. V. Popov, *Konspekt lektsiy po patrologii* (Lectures in patristics) (Moscow: 1916).

<sup>13</sup> Especially in the above-cited work of I. Korsunskiy, *Novozavetnoe tolkovanie Vekhogo Zaveta* (Moscow: 1885).

<sup>14</sup> See I. V. Popov, *Konspekt lektsiy po patrologii* (Lectures in patristics) (Moscow: 1916).

<sup>15</sup> Mikhail (Luzin), *Bibleyskaia nauka: Ocherk istorii tolkovaniia Biblii. Kniga Pervaia* (Biblical science: The history of Bible interpreta-

tion. Book one) (Tula: Fortunatova, 1898), 125.

<sup>16</sup> Antony, *Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> On the history of the Orthodox doctrine of the church, see, for example: Vladimir Troitskiy, *Ocherki iz istorii dogmata o Tserkvi* (Notes on the history of the doctrine of the Church) (M.: 1912). See also Vladimir (Metropolit), "Voprosy ekkleziologii v russkom bogoslovii," (The issues of ecclesiology in Russian theology), in *Tysiacheletie kreshchenie Rusi* (Millennium of the baptism of Russia) (Moscow: 1989).

<sup>18</sup> M. N. Nikol'skiy, "Nasha bibleyskaia nauka" (Our biblical science), *Pravoslavnoe Obozrenie* 1 (1875): 188.

church tradition.<sup>19</sup> Russian Orthodox hermeneutics and exegesis are grounded on the axiom that the apostolic and ecclesiastical tradition of the Orthodox faith is the indispensable guide to the understanding of Scripture and the ultimate guarantee of true interpretation. Tradition must be understood not as an independent or complementary source of faith, but as the living experience of the church in an indivisible union with Scripture. Both Scripture and Holy Tradition give rise to and express concisely and accurately the theology of Orthodoxy.<sup>20</sup> For Russian Orthodoxy, true Christian teaching and faith are clearly evident in tradition, and in this tradition is to be found the true interpretation of Scripture. Since the Bible contains many ambiguous texts, it is tradition that helps discover the correct understanding of Scripture<sup>21</sup> and brings clarity to what otherwise would be confusing. Tradition is important to Orthodox Christianity because it frames and clarifies the understanding of the Bible,<sup>22</sup> while setting the parameters within which to conduct any spiritual or scientific investigation of it.

In the tradition of Orthodox biblical interpretation, there is little room for the individuality or self-sufficiency of the exegete. Scholars and exegetes acknowledge that the

deciding word in theology cannot be derived from the authority of any one particular expert or from a selected group of exegetes because of their liability to error. Such guidance is possible only if "it is accomplished in the harmony and agreement of all Christian pastors and teachers."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the Orthodox scholar, knowing that "spiritual" truth is above and beyond him, cannot begin his work by taking himself as the sole point of departure, but must work within the Orthodox community, within the unity of Orthodox worship, liturgy, scholarship, preaching, sacraments, and prayer.<sup>24</sup>

The church services of evangelicals similarly focus on the reading and interpretation of the Bible. It seems that there is also a special emphasis attached to the church's reading of the biblical texts. In many churches the congregation listens to the reading of the text while standing. In this way evangelicals show their reverence for the Word of God. It is also expected that the outcome of the reading and the interpretation of the biblical texts (usually done by the preachers) will transform the behavior of people and their values.

So-called Holy Tradition (in terms of Orthodox belief) is not a criterion or basis for the biblical hermeneutics of Slavic evangelicals. Nevertheless, this does not mean that evan-

<sup>19</sup> See I. Filevskiy, *Uchenie Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi o Sv. Predanii* (Holy Tradition in the Orthodox Church) (Khar'kov: 1902).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Antony, *Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, 10-11.

<sup>21</sup> Fr. Grigoriy, "Sviashchennoe Predanie ne nizhe Sviashchennogo Pisanie" (Holy Tradition is not lower than Holy Scripture), *Dushepoleznoe chtenie* III (1914): 94.

<sup>22</sup> See P. P. Ponamarev, *Sv. Predanie kak istochnik khristianskogo vedeniia* (Holy Tradition as the source of Christian understanding) (Kazan': 1908).

<sup>23</sup> Antony, *Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Concerning the intertext between the biblical texts and icons, see N. V. Pokrovskiy, *Evangelie v pamiatnikakh ikonografii* (The gospel in iconography), (St. Petersburg: 1892).

gelicals do not have their own ecclesiastical tradition. Slavic evangelicals read the Bible with accents similar to those of the church fathers (e.g. with a Christocentric, apologetic perspective, etc.). Throughout their history they have developed and recognized their own "church fathers," that is, respected spiritual figures in the evangelical tradition who contributed to the establishment of the interpretative model for reading the biblical texts. For many evangelicals, the "spiritual brothers" (or "older brothers") and their legacy are the authority that operates on a similar hermeneutical level as Holy Tradition for Orthodox biblical interpretation.<sup>25</sup> It is obvious that theological discussions among Slavic evangelicals are often done on the basis of the confessional (denominational) understanding of theological issues rather than on the exegetical reading of the biblical text.<sup>26</sup>

**1.3 The nature of the revelation, inspiration, and authority of the Bible.** The Orthodox Church defines every doctrine as truth revealed by God.<sup>27</sup> The Lord revealed His truth to the apostles, prophets, bishops, and fathers of the church, who then lived it out, and, as the Holy Spirit moved

them and as the needs of the church dictated, wrote it down. The all-important written sources that contain the revelation of God, and from which Orthodox Christian doctrines are constructed are: (1) the Holy Scriptures (Old and New Testaments); (2) the church fathers; and (3) the church councils.

God is the author of Scripture, the inspired writer is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, and Scripture is the Word of God. However, in the context of the church, inspiration is directly linked to the work of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit is involved in the formation of Scripture, the latter is of "a religious-symbolical nature, i.e. it has a religious reality."<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the Bible is "a religious myth in written form, continually shedding its divine light."<sup>29</sup> Consequently, this light cannot be seen by those who approach the Bible solely on a scientific basis, but is revealed only to those who come to it from a religious perspective. The inspiration of Holy Scripture means that "everything that the holy writers recorded, they wrote as a result of a direct quickening and teaching of the Holy Spirit; hence, being guarded from misconception, the writers received thoughts and words with-

<sup>25</sup> Cf. similar conclusions of Viktor Kuznezov: "A Perspective on Russian Evangelical Soteriology" (M.Th. Dissertation, University of South Africa, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the analysis of the problematic issue of losing/keeping salvation by G. Vyazovskiy in *V nachale: Khristianskii bogoslovskii zhurnal* #3 (2000): 18.

<sup>27</sup> Among the standard texts on Orthodox dogmatic theology, see V. Losskiy, "Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie," (Dogmatic theology), *Bogoslovskie trudy* 7 (1972); Fr. Mikhail (Pomazanskiy), *Pravoslavnoe dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* (Ortho-

dox dogmatic theology) (Novosibirsk: 1993); Fr. Sil'vestr (Malevanskiy), *Opyt pravoslavnogo dogmaticheskogo bogosloviia* (The experience of Orthodox dogmatic theology), 3 vols. (Kiev: 1892); Filaret (Arch. Chernigovskii), *Pravoslavno-dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* (Orthodox dogmatic theology) (St. Petersburg: 1882), and others.

<sup>28</sup> S. Bulgakov, *Svet nevecherniy* (The unfading light) (Moscow: Put', 1917; repr. Moscow: Respublika, 1994), 85.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



out violation of their natural abilities"<sup>30</sup> to arrange and express biblical material. Both the divine and human dimensions of the Bible are recognized in the Orthodox Church, but the inspiration of the Bible is not rooted in the letter; that is, inspiration is not based on, or fixed by, any given text or book (or even the entire Bible), but resides in the revelation that belongs to the church, the revelation of the Holy Spirit who dwells in the church.

For Slavic evangelicals, the Bible is the one exclusively compete and perfect source that gives essential knowledge of the will of God. The emphasis is on trust in the Word of God alone.<sup>31</sup> Without knowing Luther's statement, "*sola Scriptura*," Slavic evangelicals follow the principle that the Bible is the sole source and authority of Christian faith and practice.<sup>32</sup>

**1.4 The Christological basis of biblical interpretation and the unity of the Bible.** The interpretation of the Bible is interrelated with the understanding of Christ. Orthodox scholars point out that if credence is not given to the divinity of Christ and his supernatural deeds, the study

of the Bible will go down a false path, not only in all the texts directly concerned with the person of Jesus Christ, but also throughout the Bible—for the fullness of the revelation of Christ is the chief and most important theme of the Bible.<sup>33</sup>

In general, according to Orthodox teaching, the New Testament is a testimony to the Incarnation predicted in the Old Testament. Thus, the mystery of Scripture and the mystery of Christ in His indivisible human and divine aspects must be approached both historically and spiritually, and in a balanced, integrated way. Based on these presuppositions, then, the church assumes that the fulfillment of the Old Testament is found in the fullness of the historical revelation of Christ—the chief and main subject of Scripture—and, therefore, the beginning, center, and end of biblical interpretation. Similarly, the evangelical readers of the Bible tend to see all the rituals of the Old Testament as typological references to the life and deeds of Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup> Of course, in this regard we may say that the Christocentric reading of the Bible by evangelicals parallels not only Orthodox tendencies, but also reflects the indi-

<sup>30</sup> Antony, *Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, 6; cf. John of Damascus, *Tochnoe izlozhenie pravoslavnoi very* (A precise account of the Orthodox faith) (Moscow: 1998), 310.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. S. N. Savinskiy, "Baptistskoe nasledie" (The Baptist legacy), *Put' Bogopoznaniia* 1 (1996): 130-131.

<sup>32</sup> See N. A. Kornilov, "K voprosu ob avtoritete v khristianskoy zhizni," *Put' Bogopoznaniia* № 2 (1997): 14-42. For a historical perspective on the role of the Bible for Slavic evangelicals, see Yuriy Reshetnikov and Sergey Sannikov, *Obzor istorii evengel'sko-baptistskogo bratstva v Ukraine* (Survey of the history of the Evangelical-Baptist brotherhood

in Ukraine) (Odessa: Bogomyslie, 2000), 17ff. 224ff.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Archimandrit Sergii, "Otnoshenie otechestvennoy nauki k inoslavnomu bogosloviu," (The relation of native theology to non-Orthodox theology) *Bogoslovskiy Vestnik* 8 (1895): 141-156; T. Butkevich, *Zhizn' Gospoda nashego Iisusa Khrista: Otvet otritsatel'noy kritike* (The life of our Lord Jesus Christ: Response to negative criticism), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (St. Petersburg: 1887).

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Nadezhda Ruzhina, *Kniga Levit: Zakony sviatogo obshchestva* (The Book of Leviticus: Laws of a holy society), *Reshenie* №8 (2004): 31.

rect theological influence of the Protestant Reformation in Europe.<sup>35</sup>

In the Orthodox Church there is a serious attempt to deal with the whole witness of the canon—not just the New Testament, but the Old Testament as well. The church cannot be faulted for selective use of texts, for it casts the exegetical net widely. The Old and New Testaments represent a unified witness to "salvation-history." The relation between the two testaments is that of promise and fulfillment. An inner, organic unity exists between the two, such that key persons and events of the Old Testament find their ultimate meaning in the New. This fact, inherent in the historical process itself, can be described as the relation of "type" and "antitype," or "type" and "archetype." To interpret the New Testament in relation to the Old Testament, the Orthodox theologian has recourse to objective typology that links the Old Testament images and prophecies to the person and acts of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.<sup>36</sup> This is most obvious in *Novozavetnoe tolkovanie Vetkhogo Zaveta* (A New Testament commentary on the Old Testament) published in 1885<sup>37</sup> by Professor Ivan Korsunskiy (1849-1899) of Mos-

cow Ecclesiastic Academy, who asserted the legitimacy of a "new testament interpretation" (note the adjectival form!) of the Old Testament.<sup>38</sup> Such a notion is not foreign to evangelicals.<sup>39</sup>

**1.5 The role of the Holy Spirit in understanding Scripture.** The Bible, for the Orthodox, is the collection of books "written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which, therefore, are called God-breathed"<sup>40</sup> This means that the Bible has its origin in God Himself, and that the Bible is God's word, communicated to people by His Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit is involved, the formation of the Bible has "a religious reality."<sup>41</sup> This reality cannot be seen by an unreligious scientific investigator. On the contrary, it is revealed only to the illuminated religious readers of the Bible. The Holy Spirit, working in the church, is the illuminating agent that enables an earthly reader to comprehend Holy Scripture. The Spirit also restricts the individualistic impulses of the interpreter, thus avoiding misconceptions. Exegesis, then, is a divine-human enterprise based on synergy, or cooperation, between the divine Spirit and the human inter-

<sup>35</sup> I agree with Vladimir Solodovnikov that, in spite of the self-constructed nature of the Slavic evangelical community (especially of the Evangelical Christian-Baptists), the Protestant Reformation may be regarded as a source of spiritual enrichment for them. Cf. V. Solodovnikov, *Pravo slavit' Boga* (To praise God rightly) (St. Petersburg: 2001), 20.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. D. I. Bogdashevskiy, "Poslanie Ap. Pavla k Evreiam" (Paul's letter to the Hebrews), *Trudy Kievskoi Dухovnoi Akademi I* (1905): 341.

<sup>37</sup> The book appeared immediately after the publication of the author's monograph dedicated to a careful analysis of Jewish herme-

neutics in the inter-testamental period. See I. N. Korsunskiy, *Iudeyskoe tolkovanie Vetkhogo Zaveta* (Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament) (Moscow: 1882).

<sup>38</sup> I. N. Korsunskiy, *Novozavetnoe tolkovanie Vetkhogo Zaveta* (A New Testament commentary on the Old Testament) (Moscow: 1885).

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Nadezhda Ruzhina, "Kniga Levit: Zakony sviatogo obshchestva" (The Book of Leviticus: Laws of a holy society), *Reshenie* №8 (2004): 31.

<sup>40</sup> Antoniy, *Dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Bulgakov, *Svet nevecherniy*, 85.

preter. The interpretation of the Bible is possible as a synthesis of human creative efforts guided by the Holy Spirit that dwells in the church. Thus, if the exegete wishes that his efforts might bear fruit for the body of Christ, he must submit himself and his skills to the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit. A scholar who uses scientific methods without the Holy Spirit has only the right to discover the surface, outer meaning of Scripture.<sup>42</sup> In Orthodox thinking, as Fr. Troitskiy said:

It is impossible to acknowledge Scripture alone as the sole master of its own interpretation... Obviously, if this were the case, the starting point for interpretation of the Holy Scripture would again be the human mind, on which it is impossible to rely... Is there any other option but to rely on the inner illumination of the Holy Spirit in reading the Holy Scripture? *Yes, the illumination of the Holy Spirit is the best rule for interpreting Holy Scripture.*<sup>43</sup>

For Slavic evangelicals the Bible has its origin in God. The Holy Spirit and human authors were both involved in the formation of the Bible. Therefore, the twofold nature of the biblical text requires the use of historical-grammatical interpretation, realized with the help of the Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup> There is historical evidence

that at the beginning of the evangelical movement in Ukraine there was real concern as to how to control the individualistic tendency to interpret scripture based on personal spiritual illumination.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, if the Holy Spirit is the important agent in interpreting Scripture, then what are the criteria for adequate interpretation? How does the Holy Spirit lead, guide, and control the interpretative process? It seems that these questions remain quite puzzling for Russian evangelicals. There are a few recent books authored by Slavic evangelicals on the topic of biblical interpretation and these demonstrate that the topic of the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation remains superficial and undeveloped among them.<sup>46</sup>

**1.6. The scope of historical-grammatical interpretation.** It was noted above that both the divine and human ("earthly") elements of the Bible are recognized by the Orthodox Church. This conviction presupposes that the study of the Bible, in part, consists of acquainting oneself with the extent to which the human element of Scripture can be explained. Orthodox biblical scholars have always been aware that the meaning of the text must be drawn from the language according to the same laws

<sup>42</sup> Nikol'skiy, "Nasha bibleyskaia nauka," 190.

<sup>43</sup>I. Troitskiy, "Osnovaniia ucheniia pravoslavnoy Tserkvi ob istochnikakh veroucheniia," (The ground rules for the teaching of the Orthodox Church on the sources of dogma), *Missionerskoe Obozrenie* October (1897): 645 [my italics].

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Sergey Sannikov, ed., *Istoriia Baptisma. Sbornik* (The history of Baptism: A collection) (Odessa: Bogomyслиe, 1996), 472.

<sup>45</sup> *Istoriia EkhB Ukrainy. Materialy i dokumenty* (History of the EkhB in Ukraine: Materials and documents) (Odessa: Bogomyслиe, 1998), 253.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, A. Karev, V. Mitskevich and V. Popov, *Ekzegetika* (Exegesis) (Moscow, 1993); V. Popov, *Issleduyte Pisanie* (Study the Scripture) (St. Petersburg, 1999); A. Prokopchuk, *Bibleyskaia germeneytika* (Biblical hermeneutics) (Brest, 2000).

that regulate the expression of thought in that language. It is recognized that the biblical writers (1) used the codification of their day and their own particular circumstances; (2) used language in accordance with its specific usage and rules of grammar; and (3) expressed their thoughts following the sequence of their own logic, besides which their words reflected their intellectual, physical, and social conditions. This being so, Russian Orthodox hermeneutics stresses that if the interpreter wishes to fully understand the writer, he must be guided by the following quasi-criteria for determining the author's meaning: language, train of thought or context, and psychological and historical condition at the time of writing, etc.<sup>47</sup> Also, considering the above-mentioned earthly character of the Bible, Orthodox interpretation demands a historical-grammatical method. In connection with this, the commentator must always keep in mind the significance of the literary dimension that makes up the language of Holy Scripture, and strive to express the sense of its literary element, which is determined by the subject matter of the text, by its occasion and purpose, by its grammatical and logical context, and also by

parallel passages. The historical setting of the book and its author, too, have to be given due attention.

However, among Orthodox theologians there is a general belief that the Bible is not only a human document that is culturally and historically limited. The majority of Orthodox scholars emphasize the function of Scripture, and not only the nature of the Bible per se. If questions concerning various historical contexts, purpose, and main teaching of the literary composition were welcomed by Orthodox scholars, then inquiry into the issues of authorship, date, and the problems of the origin or literary composition of biblical writings would be rejected as extra-theological analysis. It has been determined that any Orthodox work of research on the questions of Christian faith and inquiry into biblical texts may never be merely scientifically critical, but must be dogmatic in character. Scholars must build their scientific studies under the guidance of the theological ideas of the church.<sup>48</sup> Disputes over questions of an introductory nature, in particular, led to the development of an Orthodox response to Western biblical criticism in general.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) stressed concern for the linguistic circumstances in which the text was written (grammatical interpretation) and called for a consideration of the character-mood-context situation of the author as the vehicle for understanding (psychological interpretation). He said, "Understanding always involves two moments: to understand what is said in the context of the language with its possibilities and to understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker," Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. by H. Kimmerle

(Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 98.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. M. D. Muretov, *Novyi Zavet kak predmet Pravoslavno-Bogoslovskogo izucheniia* (The New Testament as the subject of Orthodox theological study) (Moscow: 1915), 665; S. Sol'skiy, "Iz lektsii po Novomu Zavetu" (From lectures on the New Testament), *Trudy Kievskoi Dukhovnoi Akademii* 8 (1887): 249.

<sup>49</sup> Among the various works against Western biblical criticism see, esp. D. Bogdashevskiy, "O Evangeliiakh I Evangel'skoy istorii (protiv sovremennogo ratsionalizma)" (On the Gospels and Gospel history: Against modern rational-

**1.7. Other features.** The patristic exegetes became the model for Russian Orthodox interpreters who followed the same path in their attempt to derive ethical ideals from the biblical texts. The Fathers' task of bringing the practical and moral elements of the Bible to the church has always been significant for Orthodox exegetes.<sup>50</sup> Fr. Mikhail (Luzin) rightly concluded that the emphasis on a strong ethical element in the Bible is "an achievement of Russian Orthodox exegesis."<sup>51</sup> This ethical and moral orientation is perhaps also the most obvious influence of Orthodox biblical interpretation on the philosophical and theoretical constructs in Russian thought generally. Vasilii Zen'kovskiy, who argued that anthropocentrism is an important characteristic of Russian religious philosophy, also rightly notes that such serious attention to questions of morality, along with an intense interest in social problems, is the most constructive source for practically all Russian thinkers.<sup>52</sup>

Orthodox hermeneutics has to do both with the general theological and philosophical presuppositions underlying the system and with the development of evangelical hermeneutics in Russia in its scientific form. For example, both Orthodox and evangelical theologians are opposed to liberal influences, and their search for (theological) independence led to their isolation from wider theological developments, especially those in post-Enlightenment Europe. One of the most important consequences is the structural inability to deal with the challenge of historicism and the historical-critical method. While the history of its own tradition, and especially its formative period in the twentieth century was "canonized" and revered, the methodological tools to deal adequately with the problem of history itself and with the contingency of historical events are lacking both among the Russian evangelicals and the Orthodox. This has only led to a formalistic defense of the authority of Scripture or church

ism), *Trudy Kievskoy Dukhovnoy Akademii* 2 (1902): 269-302; N. Drozdov, "V zashchitu svobodnogo nauchnogo issledovaniia v bibleyskoy nauke" (In defense of free scientific investigation in the field of biblical studies), *Trudy Kievskoy Dukhovnoy Akademii* 11 (1902): 486-487; V. Makarov, *O Evangelii ot Matfeia: Analiz I kritika otritsatel'noy kritiki Bauera*, (On the Gospel of Matthew: Analysis and critique of Bauer's negative criticism) (Moscow: 1873); F.G. Eleonskiy, "Razbor mneniy sovremennoy otritsatel'noy kritiki o vremeni napisaniia Piatiknizhiia" (Analysis of opinions on the modern negative criticism concerning the dating of the Pentateuch), *Khristianskie Chteniia* No. 2 (1871); No. 1.2 (1872); No. 2.3 (1873); Idem., "Sovremennaiia kritika sviashchennykh Pisanii" (Modern criticism of the sacred Scriptures), *Vera i Tserkov* I (1901): 5ff; VII (1901): 4ff.

<sup>50</sup> Among the earliest, see, for example, John of Damascus, *Tochnoe izlozhenie Pravoslavnoy very* (A precise account of the Orthodox faith) (Moscow: 1998).

<sup>51</sup> Mikhail (Luzin), *Bibleyskaia nauka*, 125. The literature expounding the significance of Scripture for the moral instruction of people is vast. For our purposes it suffices to note two articles that specifically apply the moral teaching of the Bible to the Russian people. See P. Golubev, "Blagotvornoe vliianie Biblii na zhizn' narodnyiu," (The beneficial influence of the Bible on national life), *Khristianskaia radost' pri chtenii Sviashchennogo Pisanii* 9 (1892): 36-58; V. O. Rybinskiy, "O Biblii" (About the Bible), *Trudy Kievskoy Dukhovnoy Akademii* 3 (1902): 357-382.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. V. Zen'kovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1953-67), 6.

tradition on the one hand, and also to an anti-historical way of thinking on the other. For evangelical theologians in the area of hermeneutics, a kind of uneasiness caused by historical uncertainties regarding questions of origin and authorship has resulted in a shift from history to structure, that is, from the origins of the text to the text itself. Although the historical period of the Bible is indisputably valid for the hermeneutics of Russian evangelicals, historical inquiry is done from the perspective of the confessional tradition accepted by these theologians. The one cannot be separated from the other. As far as understanding the Bible, a similar hermeneutic creates a certain kind of law of trust in the worldview and teaching of the congregation. It postulates, interpreting and understanding the text the way the congregation does. This kind of hermeneutics does not reduce the understanding of a text to the question, "What does it mean for me?" It does not stress the private nature of the phrase, of "in my view." Instead, it operates according to the understanding of meaning "for the church." This principle admits no exceptions.

Traditionally, the hermeneutics of Russian evangelicals has mirrored the eastern hermeneutics of Orthodoxy in that the ecclesiastic mind is considered epistemologically superior to individual human reasoning and searching. Slavic evangelicals recognize that Bible interpretation cannot be (and should not be) done apart from the church. They are conscious that church doctrines presuppose Bible reading and that therefore it is pos-

sible to understand the text from the perspective of the church, rather than from the biblical data alone.<sup>53</sup>

## 2. Socio-political horizons

Recent events in the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian economy and politics have raised new problems and challenges: free market economic plans implemented in these countries seem to have created new and worsening structural problems of poverty, massive unemployment, and the marginalization of many people. This situation cannot help but present a twofold task for theological reflection: the necessity of entering into debate with the ideological justification of the new developments in these countries, and also (from a pastoral point of view) to offer religious and pastoral support to the large marginalized sectors of the population. Now (no less than before) Slavic Christianity is challenged to give attention to questions of social and political dominion and also to express its position on these issues. In addition, in post-Soviet countries there is a general skepticism and critical attitude toward ideology and social structures. The population is quite skeptical of any ideology, Christianity included. That is why so many people are open to different «non-ideological» and less institutionalized religious movements, such as New Age or Bahai. Perhaps

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<sup>53</sup> These issues are touched upon in the study of A. P. Valuyskiy and A. A. Tarasenko, "Kreshchenie detei v ranney tserkvi: istoriia i bogoslovie," (The baptism of children in the early church: History and theology), *Khronograf* №1/3 (1999): 71-93.

this is the reason why Slavic evangelical communities are shaken by increasing fragmentation and disunity even within their own traditions. As far as hermeneutics is concerned, an important shift was the discovery that what eventually became the dominant tradition was itself the result of a process in which the recipients of that tradition played an important role.

One example may well illustrate how the current political context determines the current hermeneutical horizon in post-Soviet Russia. In the past (and also to a great extent in the present), the doctrine of baptism accepted by the Russian Evangelical Christian-Baptist Church, was solely based on 1 Peter 3:21 in the following translation: "...baptism now saves us — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but a promise to God of a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ..." The Apostle Peter's expression "baptism...(is) a promise to God of a good conscience" (if *eperotema* is translated as "pledge"), was and is accepted by many Russian Evangelical Christian-Baptists in a paraphrased form as "baptism is a promise [pledge] to serve God with a good conscience." This paraphrased form directly implies the taking of an oath before God to live a life without sin. Interestingly, during the Soviet era such a concept did not disturb Russian evangelicals. In that era, differ-

ent social and political groups required taking an oath as the main means of expressing support for authoritative decision-making organs at all levels where the group structure functioned. According to Lenin's teaching of "democratic centralism," these pledges supplied the hierarchy with submission once a policy was set. Thus, by means of pledges, many social groups of Soviet society switched on internal mechanisms of enforcement to conform their members to the group's policy. It was quite natural that members of the evangelical community were persuasively required to take similar oaths before God and the congregation.<sup>54</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and the other countries began transforming themselves into more democratic societies. At the same time, many evangelicals started to ponder the idea that in baptism there is no other meaning that could draw people's minds away from meditating upon Christ alone. Many immediately began to doubt the concept of any kind of covenant obligation, or the registering of some kind of agreement with God in baptism.<sup>55</sup> Others, however, preferred to keep the former emphasis in order to have, literally, a lever to control believers, just like it was in "good old" Soviet times.<sup>56</sup>

Another example comes from the purely political realm. Mikhail Sergeev has recently attempted to apply the notion of "liberation theology" to:

<sup>54</sup> For a "traditional, usual" understanding of this text, see A. Prokopchuk, *Bibleiskaya germe-nevika*, 98.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Maxim Baranov, "Kreshchenie v 1 Peter 3:21" (Baptism in 1 Peter 3:21), BTh Diploma Paper. St. Petersburg Christian

University, 1997. Currently Baranov is the pastor of a Baptist congregation in St. Petersburg.

<sup>56</sup> See for example, I. V. Muzychko, "Kreshchenie po vere" (Baptism by faith) <http://www.eaaa.org> (15 October 2001).

(1) the tensions between the Orthodox Church and the atheistic Soviet state after 1917; and (2) the inner liberation processes that Russia is living through in the post-Soviet phase of its history.<sup>57</sup> In his view, there should be an appeal to “a post-Gulag theology” that could react against the pressure of both national and global capitalist networks and could protest against the spirit of disunity and conflict that prevails in the countries of the former Soviet Union. However, his “post-Gulag theology” is expressed from a point of view quite distant from Christian tradition and doctrine. What is more, he supposes that “a belief in the salvific power of the Christian religion and democratic values is just a dogmatic prejudice itself.”<sup>58</sup> In the course of his argument, he states, “a true future post-Gulag theology will be neither Christian, nor democratic.”<sup>59</sup> Sergeev’s challenge demands that someone shoulder the task of formulating and disseminating the understanding of Christianity and the gospel of Christ in the context of the lives of Slavic Christian society today.

In my view, one of the greatest challenges facing post-Soviet Russia (and other countries of the former Soviet Union) is strengthening civil society — especially in a young and emerging democracy. Only a few believers have played a role in achieving freedom from communism and in establishing a democratic era. It is sadly true that since the attainment of these ideals, the influence of evangelical theology on civil society has not increased

noticeably. Thus, it is becoming more and more clear that there is a serious need for a discourse capable of interacting effectively with society, giving answers to problems, and forming the values of civil society, that could sustain a democratic system over the long term. Only a hermeneutical framework that provides for the differentiation of audiences and their distinctive discourse will provide the basis needed to meet such a challenge.

### 3. Theological education as a hermeneutical horizon

In the past fifteen years many different evangelical theological schools have been founded in the countries of the former Soviet Union. In a majority of these schools, the nature and goal of biblical interpretation are construed in various ways. In general, the participants in “biblical interpretation” regard the biblical texts as the genuine source of theological teaching formed in the time- and culture-conditioned thought patterns of the ancient world. The teacher’s and student’s task is understood to be to discern and describe these theological truths, making them relevant for current preaching needs. This approach shares the conviction that a significant part of the Bible’s contents consists of theological statements, and that the exegete’s task is to engage in theological interpretation. Most students in these schools come from a church setting where

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<sup>57</sup> Mikhail Sergeev, “Liberation From the Soviet Past: A Reflection on the Possibility of Post-Gulag Theologies,” *Religion in Eastern*

*Europe* XIX (December 1999): 1-17.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



there is little room for the individuality or self-sufficiency of the biblical reader. It is quite common for the evangelical community to acknowledge that the final word in theology cannot come from one pastor or exegete. A final word of that type is possible only if it takes shape in the harmony and agreement of all Christian pastors and brothers. Therefore, the Bible scholar, knowing that "spiritual" truth is above and beyond him, cannot begin his work by taking himself as the sole point of departure, but must work within the evangelical community. This protects the Bible interpreter from needless mistakes and errors. Thus, the shared ecclesiastic element has a highly critical role to play in the interpretative process. However, when "church tradition" is taken as a constitutional principle and the determining factor in the "correct" understanding of the Bible, then the answers are sometimes offered before questions are asked, creativity is threatened, and difficulties are explained away with anti-intellectual excuses. Nevertheless, in theological schools the students are one way or another "removed" from their local congregations and are motivated to read and interpret ("rediscover") the Scripture on their own (together with their lecturers!). The church setting still plays an important role, but naturally the reading of the biblical text becomes more technical, more special-

ized. For many this may dangerously lead to the impression that academia is the main place where hermeneutical work is done, where the Bible is properly understood. On the contrary, it is imperative that students be reminded that the Christian Bible "belongs" to the church, which is the primary place where it is to be read, used, and understood.<sup>60</sup>

To be more specific on how the hermeneutical horizon of theological education fits into the hermeneutical horizons of evangelical students, we shall sum up the observations made from reading and marking about two hundred exegetical and theological research papers written by more than thirty graduate students of St. Petersburg Christian University (SPCU) over the past four years. These students come from a variety of geographical regions and belong to diverse evangelical churches in Russia and Ukraine.<sup>61</sup> The analysis of these graduate research papers and M.Th. dissertations will serve only as an illustration, or example, of evangelical hermeneutics. Examining these works helps to understand how Slavic evangelical hermeneutics function in the context of theological education. These papers may be taken as merely representative without assuming their hermeneutical validity for the entire evangelical community. Nevertheless, these works contain a contribution to the larger development of evangelical herme-

<sup>60</sup> Cf. G. Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 8.

<sup>61</sup> St. Petersburg Christian University (SPCU) is a theological institution that has existed for fourteen years. In addition to undergrad-

uate students, there are more than forty students studying in Master's degree programs (M.A., New Testament; M.Th., Biblical Studies) accredited by the University of Pretoria, South Africa and the University of Wales, U.K.

neutics, since we are convinced that the role of evangelical hermeneutics consists in the uniting of the ideas of many participants. No work by the students will be quoted, since they remain unpublished. There is another important point. Throughout SPCU's history, the institution has benefited from numerous visiting lecturers from outside Russia (as well as from many national lecturers who received their advanced theological education in the West). This has been vital in filling the professional and intellectual gaps in ways that SPCU could not always do from within Russia. Visiting Western professors continue to play a role in providing quality education to our students, but in the process they challenge and reshape their hermeneutics. This is also an important internal hermeneutical horizon that at once enriches and alters the personal and ecclesiastic horizons of the students. The following are several (selected) common hermeneutical features as they are reflected in the graduate research papers of SPCU evangelical students.

It is to be expected that the present social and political context of post-Soviet Russia, and also the opportunity to study theology at an educational institution, have the potential to broaden the circle of participants in the envisaged dialogue in a significant way. They do so by recognizing the validity and important contribution of voices that were formerly silent. By accepting the constitutive role of the audience in a theological educational environment, it becomes possible for students to broaden, correct, and enrich theolog-

ical discourse with the opinions of those who were formerly excluded from the dominant interpretative tradition—women, lay people, etc. In this respect, the "ordinary reader" begins to be taken more seriously. Some students have changed the way they understand the relationship between the different elements of the process of communication between God and modern people by means of the ancient text (the triad: sender-message-receiver). The traditional dominance of the "left" side has been corrected by attention paid to the "right" side, that is, the perspective of the contemporary reader, formed by a new historical context. The emphasis on "contemporary contextual theology" and the establishment of the focus of contextual theology are important manifestations of this new awareness. As the present generation of evangelical students reads and re-reads the Bible, it suddenly reveals new dimensions that no one from their tradition ever noticed before. Hence, a line is drawn between the interpretation of the biblical message by the dominant group of the past and the "new" reading from a new, different social and theological position. In this way it becomes possible to bring to the surface long-hidden aspects of the text. There is a recognition of the outsider, of the newcomer to the tradition, and also of the important contribution that he or she has to make to continue the tradition of Russian evangelicals and keep it vibrant and alive. The importance of questions concerning the reader's awareness of his or her own horizon suggests that in their hermeneutics the center of gravity is

shifting from the past to the present, from the traditional to the current. Such hermeneutics, however, may dangerously lead to insufficient support, protection, and clarification of the already accepted theological understanding of the text, focusing only on the search for new meaning.

Within the current dynamics of transformation (taking place in both church and society), students go beyond the framework of theology and exegesis into matters of everyday life. They are willing to react to the relentless changes in the social environment of post-Soviet countries and formulate their own frame of reference in order to address many new social issues (such as relations with a democratic government, taxation, new professional careers available to evangelicals, private property, questions of sufficient wealth vs. affluence, etc). Whereas earlier, reverence and respect toward God were seen in the evangelical insistence on standing or kneeling for prayer, and in the shared requirement for women's head coverings in worship, now in many theological schools such external forms of piety largely have been replaced by attention to the social structure of the early church (how they governed themselves, the types of rituals they practiced, and the correlation between ancient beliefs and social forms). Social transformation in post-Soviet Russia (for example the transition from collectivist to individualistic society, from an isolated sect to a more widely recognized movement) brings attention to social dynamics and the willingness to be informed by sociological theories for

the sake of a contemporary understanding of Scripture.

The hermeneutical tendencies of SPCU graduate students demonstrate that there is a substantial difference in respect to the Word of God as far as science and faith are concerned, even when both are established methodologically. The fact is that if the method of unbelief is equated with science, and the method of reverence characterizes religious science, then pure science is unable to see what is apparent to the religious approach. The depth of the meaning of the Word of God is endless and absolutely immeasurable in comparison to the depth of (merely) human books. Many times this thought is expressed in the demarcation of the many-sided meaning of Holy Scripture: from the literal (which corresponds to the scientific investigation of the text) to the hidden or mystical, which is uncovered only because of divine enlightenment. For SPCU students, the Bible is at the same time an ordinary book accessible to scientific study, and a monument of ancient literature, but also the Book of books, the eternal Symbol coming to light only through faith, prayer and holy reverence. SPCU evangelical students, having experience of spiritual life, testify that the Word of God has infinite and thus continually deepening meaning for them.

Despite the current trends of transformation in Russia, the evangelical interpretation of the Bible, as attested in the research works of SPCU graduate students, is to a great extent interrelated with the understanding of Christ who is the herme-

neutical key to the whole Bible. In an important way, interpretation is not only about Christ, but is also the fruit of a personal revelation of Christ (i.e. the Word) to the interpreter. The students' work indicates their belief that reliance on the Holy Spirit is necessary and this, as it did before, serves to underscore the complexity of biblical interpretation, combining, as it does, both natural and supernatural processes. On this level, the hermeneutics of Russian evangelicals maintains that there is an understanding of the text that can be obtained through hard exegetical work, applying sound hermeneutical and exegetical principles; but it also teaches that there is a spiritual understanding that cannot be obtained through intellectual study alone. The Holy Spirit here does not necessarily discard exegetical methodology as He guides the interpreter, but true spiritual discernment into the theological meaning of a text is still impossible without His illumination. Yet there is ambiguity in specifying where the guiding role of the Holy Spirit is really centered: (a) in providing knowledge to the exegete concerning the exegetical methodology/process; (b) in the empowering of the exegete with spiritual insights; (c) in confirming the results of exegesis with a particular endorsement/sign, etc.

The SPCU graduate students demonstrate that the task of delineating the practical and moral elements of the Bible for believers and unbelievers is significant for them. In this respect such hermeneutics does not center solely on the historical or linguistic aspects of the biblical texts

and does not use the biblical texts only as the means or source of historical reconstruction of biblical Israel and the church. Rather, it tends to stress the transformational process through the encounter of believers with biblical texts and with the evangelical tradition of the present. In other words, such hermeneutics is aware of the hermeneutical function of the biblical texts in relation to the reader's specific situation in the past and present. It takes the biblical text as the rationale for evangelical belief and corresponding practice. It presupposes that a properly interpreted biblical text is of practical and pragmatic importance and, as such, serves for acculturation. It stresses the concept of transformative hermeneutics, or transformative interpretation of the Bible, that does not require great learning or the use of a complex exegetical methodology, but rather emphasizes the unconditional obedience (application), demanded by the Word of God. Such hermeneutics is a reflection of how the saving message of Scripture and its normative aspects become living truth, God's living word, in the praxis of the church. The hermeneutics of Slavic evangelical communities, as it is attested in the students' work, seeks both spiritual discernment and existential access to new life. It calls the church to be itself, but not of the world; to be a spiritual movement as well as a historical institution. It drives the church to mission and service, which can be accomplished to the degree that the church itself demonstrates unity in Christ and radiates the newness of the Spirit. Transformative hermeneutics exposes this

significant fact: the hermeneutical problem is ultimately a spiritual issue for the church itself, a matter of its own ongoing health and renewal in Christ. It calls one to the Christian task of spiritualization, or of providing Christological or moral application of the text.

It should be noted that the students often demonstrate a certain straightforwardness and decisiveness in dealing with the challenge of historicism, or the opposing historical-critical method. On the other hand, they feel threatened by methodological pluralism and tend to idealize the historical-grammatical method as the only method that could lead to the "one" and "correct" interpretation of the text. There is also a quite negative attitude toward the employment of "scientific" investigation of the Bible. Naturalistic and extra-biblical presuppositions are openly rejected. The students are certain that the evangelical exegetical work of research into questions of Christian faith and the inquiry into biblical texts should never be merely scientific-critical, but theological-dogmatic in character.

Although in Russia (and C.I.S. countries) there has never been a strong tradition of mastering biblical languages and biblical linguistics, it seems that among SPCU students there is an emphasis and a serious interest in language, grammar, syntax, and structure, which creates an unprecedented interest in "structural exegesis," and narrative and rhetorical analysis. Consequently, it is possible to foresee that the next phase in the development of evangelical hermeneutics in Russia

will be characterized by a strong emphasis on literary theory (while in the West this emphasis is no longer at the center of attention). This, in turn, may well bring reception theory and reader-response criticism (in a local version) into sharp focus.

It is obvious that at SPCU and other theological school there needs to be balanced hermeneutical attention paid to the source of biblical truth (the sender, the Author), to the text which contains the truth (the message), and also to the role of the audience that receives this biblical truth (the receiver). In addition, theological education programs must emphasize that the topics of biblical interpretation among Russian evangelical hermeneutics demand further attention in connection with the changes taking place in science, technology, and society (citizenship, culture, and identity). New hermeneutical questions must be posed. First, what are the implications of technical-scientific developments for social structures, politics and power, governance, and citizenship in our countries and in a globalizing world? How, in turn, will these new contexts accommodate reading the Bible within the boundaries of evangelical tradition? Second, how will these changes affect exegetical approaches, and can they create and accept different forms of Bible interpretation? Third, to what extent will conceptions of religion and culture, body and soul, human and non-human, ethnicity and race, or gender relations have to be reconsidered so that Slavic evangelicals may preserve their unique identity in the rapidly changing context of their countries and the world at large?

## CONCLUSION

Slavic evangelicals who struggled to survive Communism now have the freedom many of their people suffered and died for. At this time when the people of Eastern Europe are trapped between the failed promises of Marxist utopianism and the often harsh realities of Western materialism, Slavic evangelicals must offer the best aspects of biblical teaching to Russian and Ukrainian society, because the Bible can help to alleviate the spiritual anxiety and suffering brought on by the painful transition.

What is the possible contribution that evangelical hermeneutics in post-Soviet Russia can offer in establishing links with evangelical theology in the rest of the world? It is always difficult to predict future trends, but it would seem that a hermeneutical model that embraces all aspects of the communication process, including the reception of information, has distinct advantages when pursuing the goal of an inclusive theological dialogue. However,

evangelical hermeneutics in post-Soviet Russia has no basic awareness of theological diversity that would facilitate dialogue. By not accepting the plurality of audiences and by not entering into contact with the other interpretative communities that form part of the wider European and East European theological discourse (which is connected with distinctives in contexts of reception) evangelical hermeneutics cannot deal with religious diversity in a constructive way. Differences in cultural expression and denominational accents are not explored as variations in reception of the Truth, while at the same time the centrality of a single tradition is retained, interfering with reception. This applies equally to the mainstream denominations and to the various contextualized post-communist theological traditions. Renewed contact with theological trends in the rest of the world and participation in this wider discourse presents a major challenge-and without an inclusive hermeneutical framework it will be practically impossible.

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