

Toward an Understanding of Russian Baptist Preaching

by

Mark J Harris

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**Mission Consulting Group
1605 E Elizabeth Street
Pasadena, CA 91104**

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INTRODUCTION

1. Purpose and Scope of Paper

This paper represents an inquiry into the normal practice of preaching in Russian Baptist churches. Several comments are necessary in order to provide the reader with a proper perspective of the limited scope and purpose of the study that resulted in this paper.

The primary focus of this study is to begin to understand, first, how Baptists preach in their regular worship services, and second, why they preach as they do. The study is thus concerned primarily with homiletics. The issue of what Baptists preach, which would demand more attention to theology and ministry emphasis, has been examined and discussed in only a very limited manner. In particular, the issue of Russian Baptist theology is a very complex issue that would be better left to a complete study of its own.

It must be emphasized that this is an introductory study. It is in no way meant to be a full or comprehensive treatment of the issue. Rather, it presents my opinion of the key issues as I have discovered them through my conversations and experience among Russian Baptists. There is much more work to be done to comprehend the history, recent practice, and current changes in preaching among the Baptists. This paper could perhaps be read as an initial guide to assist those doing further work.

There are at least four separate unions of Baptist churches in Russia. A few major differences exist between them in their principles and practice, some which concern preaching. There has been little attempt to make distinctions between those groups in this paper, and I consider that the issues presented are general enough that Baptists of all kinds will appear very similar to any outsider. In spite of this, it must be said that the results of this study will have been primarily influenced by the approach of the registered Baptists in the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists.

Although personal impressions of preaching have been gathered in several cities of Russia and Ukraine, the primary information for this paper has been gathered in Moscow. However, though there are differences between practices in Moscow and other cities, and particularly villages, the central conclusions of this paper should generally relate to all Russian Baptists. Care was taken to speak with key leaders that had experience in several locations, and who were aware of features that may be unique to Moscow or to villages.

2. Importance of Issue

As with all Protestants, the preaching of God's Word is a central ministry of Russian Baptists. Although they have been operating for many years without formal education for preachers, there has been an ongoing tradition of creating new generations of preachers in the Baptist churches. With the opening of Russia to outside influences, training for the ministry of preaching has been flowing in from the West. In many cases, instructors have been uninformed about the beliefs and traditions of Russian Baptists concerning the ministry of preaching, and as a result have often failed to deal with some of the most important issues.

Because of the language barrier, evaluations of the methods and styles of Russian preachers has been largely inaccessible to Americans who are teaching homiletics. And, unless there is a concerted effort to listen to sermons of students through translators, it is very difficult

for trainers to evaluate the progress of their students. As a result, many trainers may be left to trust that their students will take what they have learned and apply it in their own preaching. Yet this approach may be assuming a "blank slate" in the minds of Russian students - which is a false assumption. Although there has not been a great deal of formal training, the informal traditions are often very strong and even dominating within the churches. A Western trainer may not be aware of a number of underlying beliefs that have caused the rejection of several of the points he has taught.

In order to promote better training in the area of homiletics, any instructor should bring at least a basic knowledge of the background and assumptions resident in his students. This paper attempts to bring to light several of these cultural and spiritual issues.

3. Approach

The general approach I took in my study was to gather a series of issues and questions that would then be explored through observation and interviews. The major portion of the questions were taken from a study of "Biblical Preaching" by Haddon Robinson. An initial interview form was designed, and interviews arranged with Baptist pastors and leaders.

After only a few interviews it became apparent that I was dealing with an entirely different direction of thinking from that which my questions were following. In order to continue the process, the questions underwent a thorough purging and redesign.

As key issues were uncovered through the interviews, these were also pursued in further interviews. In addition, I listened to several sermons with the aid of a translator and took notes to compare with the findings of the interviews. The notes from these processes, cross-referenced and organized, form the basis of this paper.

4. Order of Paper

My original intent was to organize my paper along the lines of my interview questions. The same discoveries that led me to change my interview questions also led me to alter the intended order and contents of this paper. Seeking answers from a perspective of Western preaching principles was not a fruitful way to develop the topic, so I created an outline that would present my findings in accordance with Russian Baptist perspectives I discovered.

In general this paper follows an order from the more general to the more specific. After a discussion of historical, cultural and Baptist foundations, the actual methods and styles of current preaching are presented. The final section looks into issues of Western versus Russian preaching. The conclusion contains the primary recommendations that I would make as a result of this work.

It must be stated that there is a largely unavoidable overlap in several of the issues, and I have not taken great pains to eliminate redundancy. The categories are intended to be logical, but the subject matter has not obediently fallen in line with my simple categories.

5. Disclaimer

As alluded to above, this paper is not intended to be comprehensive in scope or scientific in research. Although it is based on my own experience of three years in Russia, and utilizes the insights of key leaders in the Baptist Union, most of the conclusions demand further study. Since the principles have been derived from opinions of Baptist preachers, however, they can at least serve as issues to highlight in the preparation of notes for teaching homiletics, if there are no other studies readily available to the reader.

I. FOUNDATIONS OF BAPTIST PREACHING

A. Russian Cultural Issues

Preaching in Russia is in part a product of the surrounding culture. Although Russia has a very proud and famous literary history, its history of public speaking is poor by comparison. There are at least two cultural issues in Russian history that have contributed to this fact.

The first issue is the nature of Russian Orthodox preaching. In contrast to the oratorical cultures within Protestant countries, the Orthodox culture was and is highly liturgical, formal and ceremonial. The small amount of preaching that occurred was both prescribed and prewritten for priests. Needless to say, this is not the kind of situation that promotes sermon development as a discipline. Historically, virtually all Russians grew up under the Russian Orthodox influence. Evangelicalism is a relatively recent phenomenon in Russia that had no standard of excellence to which to compare its own preaching.

The second issue relates to Russian politics. Oratorical traditions have tended to flourish under various forms of democracy, where it is necessary for a speaker to command attention, arouse interest, and bring his listeners to the point of conviction and action. If the development of good public speaking was hindered under the Tsars, it was virtually lulled to sleep under communism. With the exception of the first revolutionaries, creativity and passion were not the main issues in public speaking under Russian communism. Rather, public speakers were trained (and forced) to speak in party-controlled formulas. The result was a 20th century tradition of meaningless and unbearably dull and boring speeches. This not only harmed the speakers, but the listeners as well, who learned to sit passively and at least feign attention for long periods of time. One famous joke asks, "Can you wrap an elephant in "Pravda" (the party newspaper)? The answer is, "Yes, if it has one of Kruschev's speeches in it."

Therefore, within a culture that lacked both ecclesiastical and secular traditions of good public speaking, the oratorical art was neither developed nor taught in Russia. This is a condition that has continued to the present time. When notions of developing homiletic excellence in preaching enter Russia today, the idea is a novel one which must be built on very little foundation. Other than the issue of remaining biblical, notions about homiletic principles are not deeply developed.

These cultural factors have contributed much to what has been called the historical weakness in Russian Baptist preaching. From the beginning, there were not high expectations for the homiletic development of pulpit ministries. There existed low standards in the surrounding culture, and virtually no competition with the established Orthodox oration. These judgments should not be understood to mean that Russian Baptist preaching has been devoid of effectiveness. On the contrary, it has been greatly used by God. Rather, the issue is the development of preaching as a ministerial art and skill.

One other issue of Baptist preaching that may have been strongly influenced by Russian culture is the role of the preacher in the church. Perhaps reflecting the authority and honor granted to Orthodox priests, Baptist preachers, particularly the elders, have been given a great deal of spiritual authority in the churches. It has been noted that Russians in general desire to have very strong leaders. The culture has a image of itself as being naturally unruly, which has led to a felt need for a strong hand to bring control and order to society. This has been seen clearly in the field of politics, but it seems to carry over into the churches as well. The positive effect has been that Baptist pastors have taken much responsibility upon themselves for the care of their flock. The negative effect has often been a tendency for leaders to "lord it over" members rather than to be a servant. A man's image of himself as a leader will certainly affect how he

preaches. This will be discussed in more detail below.

B. Baptist Historical Issues

In order to understand the current state of preaching in Baptist churches, it is critical to be aware of several key issues regarding the history of Baptists in Russia. These historical issues will help to explain a great deal of the analysis found in this paper. Each of these issues relates to the nature of Baptists' lives under persecution in Russia. This persecution existed under Orthodoxy as well as under communism, so one could say that the entire Baptist history has been one of life under oppression. The following are a few specific ways that this persecution has affected preaching.

1. Evangelism - Particularly under communism, preaching was forbidden outside the walls of the churches. Of course Baptists, as evangelicals, wanted to reach others for Jesus Christ. It thus became common to repeatedly preach salvation within the church services. Some have noted that a very basic level of preaching dominated in many churches, and the limitations enforced on the ministry of Baptists may have strongly contributed to this reality. Another reason for a strong focus on evangelistic preaching may have more of a theological foundation, in that Russian Baptists have a strong Arminian tendency. As a result, the notion that at any time some members may have backslidden and fallen away dictated weekly calls for repentance by preachers.

2. Edification - Under communism there was a chronic lack of spiritual literature, even including Bibles. The result was that church members had difficulty in getting a variety of input to help guide them spiritually. This in turn tended to elevate the importance of preaching, as it became the primary means of receiving biblical teaching apart from personal Bible study (assuming one owned a Bible). This point may seem to contradict the point made above about evangelistic sermons. However, as will be noted further below, there are several sermons in each Baptist service.

3. Lack of Preachers - If there are many preachers to choose from, the most gifted will usually be utilized more extensively, and the quality of preaching in general will rise. Baptist churches, on the contrary, have historically had a relatively small population of men compared to women. A great deal of this problem can be traced to WWII, when a major percentage of the Russian male population died. During communist times, preachers were considered to be "active believers" and therefore dangerous to the regime. Being a preacher was risky, and many spent time in prison for it. There may also be several other reasons, but the result was a small selection out of which to develop preachers. Thus many men with no special gifting have been preachers in Baptist churches, hindering a general increase in quality.

4. Low education - One tool of communist persecution was the control of educational opportunity. Once a man was known to be a Christian, doors to good education were generally closed to him. Although this would not necessarily affect his ability to minister the word of God, it contributed to a common perception of Baptist preachers that they were intellectually weak. It would also contribute to a shortage of general skills that would aid a preacher, such as good training in Russian language. Today there may be disputes within Baptist circles regarding the importance of this lost education, and perhaps an anti-intellectual bias could be present. At any rate, it should not be taken for granted that every Baptist leader feels that the loss of educational opportunity harmed preachers.

5. Lack of time - Communists viewed any man receiving his salary from religious work as a parasite on society. Beyond this, poor economic conditions placed a burden on any church

that would want to support a pastor. Historically, therefore, only a minute number of men were supported for ministry, and the vast majority of preachers held full-time jobs elsewhere. Add to this the general difficulty of life in Russia, which forced people to wait in time-consuming lines after work for life essentials, and one can see that very little time was left for in-depth development of sermon preparation. Even if the desire had been present, the practical realities prevented it.

6. Planning - Russian Baptists historically do not plan ahead a great deal for preaching. There are certainly cultural and theological reasons that contribute to this, but the history of persecution must also be considered. There were many years when the church simply couldn't count on knowing who was going to show up for a service. It became important that every potential preacher would come to a service ready to be called on to preach that day.

C. The Making of Preachers

Several points can be made, beyond the general historical points above, regarding issues of training and preparing men for preaching in Baptist churches. The historical approach taken to this task has continued without much alteration to the present day.

1. Requirements - It seems that there are only two formal and objective requirements for being allowed to preach in a Baptist church: one must be a man, and one must have been baptized. Informal requirements would include that the brother show some level of ability to speak, and that he display spiritual maturity. And of course one would also need to be a member in good standing, and not under church discipline. A brother who would be observed living contrary to his preaching might be confronted, and could be disqualified from preaching for serious breaches of conduct. There have been no educational requirements placed in front of prospective preachers.

2. Training methodology - As mentioned earlier, general educational opportunities were often denied to Baptists under communism. Beyond this, formal religious education was even more severely limited. Few methods of formal training were thus available to preachers. There was a course offered in an extension school, but apparently few took the course. Therefore, by necessity, informal training was the dominant method.

One interesting phenomenon to note is that among many men a lack of felt need for formal training in preaching seems to have developed, which remained even later when training became available. There is simply no settled conviction among Baptists that formal training is in fact necessary to prepare a man to preach. This belief seems to have resulted from more than simply a resignation to the conditions existing under persecution: Within the churches the approach to preacher development made little use of formal methodologies which **could** have been utilized, such as direct mentoring or the passing on of a set of objective principles by which sermons could be evaluated. Personal gifting and maturity carry much more weight than knowledge of principles learned in a classroom. One cannot assume that all men, especially the older brothers, are even interested in gaining such formal training.

Serving to counterbalance the lack of formal training was a strong tradition of brothers meeting together to discuss and deal with biblical ideas and difficulties. Though informal, this process served to help preachers gain better ability to interact with biblical ideas and think more clearly when discussing or presenting ideas. Perhaps the Russian cultural love of discussion and debate served to help hone the ability to think and speak that was not formally developed.

3. Typical process - A potential preacher (which would include virtually any man in the church) would primarily gain his ideas about the content and delivery of sermons by observing

the preaching of others. For a young man growing up in the church, one could say that his classroom for homiletics was the church meeting hall, and his lessons were the sermons he heard every week. Due to the use of multiple sermons in Sunday services (both morning and evening) and sermons in meetings during the week, he would hear a great number of messages each month. Add to this the number of ways in which the man would be taught the Bible outside of the services, and you would have the complete preparation that most men would have prior to preaching their first sermon. The listener would not be consciously analyzing exactly **how** the man preached, or the structure of his sermons, but would just be gaining a general idea of what to do and (perhaps more importantly) what not to do in preaching.

Leaders in the church would always be involved with their flock, and so the lives and gifts of potential new preachers would certainly be observed. If a man had obviously no ability or desire to preach before people, which may be discerned by his general conversational ability and his behavior in meetings, he may not be asked to preach at all. However, an attempt was generally made to give all qualified men an opportunity. Once the pastor noted that a man possessed a Bible knowledge which reflected involvement in the word of God, maintained good fellowship among the members, and displayed an active spiritual life, he would be considered a candidate to join the corps of preachers in the church.

In order to test a man's ability in an environment with lower pressure than a Sunday service, a man would first be asked to prepare a minor presentation, perhaps for a weekly devotional meeting. If he performed well he would be able to continue doing this, and then later move up to a more responsible level. There could be several levels to go through before being asked to preach on a Sunday. His first sermon on a Sunday would most likely be the short "call to prayer" sermon at the start of the service as opposed to one of the other two or three sermons of greater length. It was considered an honorable duty to preach on Sunday as a regular minister of the church - a privilege not to be bestowed lightly. By an informal agreement, having "paid his dues," the preacher would arrive as a regular preacher of the church - though there would be no formal certificate or even verbal declaration of that fact.

Most of the steps along the path just described have been controlled strongly by the senior pastor of the church. He would usually be the one that would decide whether and when a man would preach. The pastor might discuss with the preacher the content of his sermon, often very pointedly. It has been noted that the feedback would normally point out problems with the sermon as opposed to compliments on its good points. (This is entirely consistent with what seems to be a strong Russian cultural tradition in all forms of education.) Other brothers would also have input, but the stronger the pastor, the more he could monopolize the feedback on the sermon and the decisions of future use of preachers. Although he might make comment on particular illustrations used in the sermon, his overall focus would be to critique the content of the sermon as opposed to its structure or style. The evaluation should be seen more as a control of doctrines and ideas rather than a promotion of general preaching skills.

It must be noted that training opportunities have greatly proliferated in Russia, and particularly in Moscow, since perestroika. Mainly the young men of the churches have been the ones to receive homiletic training, and the results have been mixed. Some have noted that the classroom training has tended to produce very theoretical and often dry sermons, long on intellectual approach to ideas and short on practical application. Some of this can be attributed to the lack of life experience of the young preachers, but at times the bookish training may have promoted a certain youthful arrogance, arising from the possession of knowledge that older preachers have not had. On the other hand, there are also good examples of young men who have

taken sound homiletic principles and applied them to their already mature desires to communicate biblical truth. Success in gaining a strong following for formal homiletic training, especially in the eyes of the current generation of Baptist leaders, will largely depend on the showing these young men make of themselves.

II. BAPTIST PREACHING AND CHURCH LIFE

A. The Place of Preaching

Following the Protestant outlook that historically give birth to their movement, Baptists have held firmly to the centrality of the Bible in all their ministries. As a result, the preaching of the Word has always been critical and central to church services.

Beyond the Protestant roots, the history of persecution has contributed to the exalted place of preaching in Baptist churches. As noted earlier, access to biblical teaching was very limited under communism. The sermons preached in church were often the primary means for believers to study the Bible - perhaps the only way. The most diligent would take extensive notes from sermons and then later study them. It was considered a tragedy if there was no preacher for a church. Requests were often heard, "Pray for us to receive a preacher." The used of multiple sermons in a service is one visible illustration of the importance to Baptists of preaching. It would not have been considered good to have hymns and praying only - a service must have preaching.

One other element of the place of preaching relates to a combination of the authority of the preacher, as discussed below, and the spiritual expectation of members. Many looked to sermons as their means of discovering God's will for their lives, expecting the Lord to speak to them through the preacher. An expectation for more specific guidance beyond the general guidance of the Bible seems to be a fairly common feature in the spiritual outlook of Baptists, and would thus contribute greatly to the kind of attention given to sermons. A reverent and obedient heart is the expectation for those hearing sermons.

Beyond the expectation of learning and guidance, a strong group is looking to sermons for encouragement, a sense of belonging, and a means of drawing the body of Christ together. Overall, it could be stated that the emphasis on preaching is in several ways stronger in Russian Baptist churches than it is in their evangelical counterparts in the West.

Preaching is still today the main factor in the spiritual growth of members, in spite of the many other opportunities for learning that have arisen in the past several years. People look to be spiritually filled with good quality sermons, and a common outlook is that spiritual growth is even defined by sermons. People are still generally not solid Bible students on their own, with only a small percentage of them actively doing personal Bible study. They look to preaching to meet that need. Some young preachers are beginning to emphasize that the preacher and his sermon are only one part of the overall ministry of the body of Christ to each other, wanting members to see their part in ministering the word to each other also. However, as in every area of Russian Baptist tradition, attitudes will be very slow to change.

B. The Authority of the Preacher

The place that preaching holds in the lives of church members has much to do with the authority that is granted to pastors and preachers. In Russian Baptist churches, an authority is inherent in the pastoral role that would seem extensive by western standards. This authority varies according to several factors in different churches, but is generally much higher than in churches in the West.

The first thing that must be said about the authority of the preacher is that it is most definitely subordinate to the Word of God. The Bible is the ultimate authority for all believers, including the preacher. One who preaches and pastors never has authority to place himself above Scripture, as is understood in all evangelical churches that hold to the infallible authority of the Bible. One anecdote illustrates how preachers are held to this standard. An older sister was always sleeping during one preacher's sermons. One day he asked her why she always slept when he preached. She answered, "Oh, I know that you won't say anything wrong, so I can go ahead and sleep."

Having stated this, it must be noted that strong authority is a deep Russian cultural reality that manifests itself in Russian churches. It has been stated that if you have two Russians, you have three opinions. Russians consider themselves very difficult to steer, being historically and naturally unruly people. They are more likely to express their public displeasure and go their own way. The traditional thinking is that a very strong hand is needed and expected in order to keep this unruliness in check. A "khozyayin" or "master" is considered to be needed. If this kind of person is not present, the result will be anarchy and troublesome disorder (as many would quickly point out is in evidence under the new political freedoms in Russia). A strong authority is accepted in the role of pastor in Russian Baptist churches, and it is common to see a strong hand exercised in how pastors relate to their people. The authority of the pastor generally extends beyond doctrinal issues and enters into the personal lives of the members. One example given was that a newly married couple who still had no children after two years would hear from the pastor about it.

Since only one of the preachers would be the senior pastor, the issue of authority of the preachers is a mixed issue. The bulk of the authority rests on the senior pastor, and any authority of other preachers is subordinate to the pastor's. This shows up in the order of preaching. Early sermons in the service are usually preached by younger men, giving the senior pastor an opportunity to give verbal correction or a change of focus in the final sermon if he felt the younger preacher had been off in some way. This is just one mechanism of control and fine tuning that would always be in the hand of the senior pastor. As mentioned earlier, the senior pastor appoints the preachers for each Sunday, and will discipline those who do poorly in their preaching task.

Even with this tendency for a strong authority, the pastor's actual authority in lives remains in part dependent on his relationship with his people. The opportunity for abuse of power is mainly going to be counterbalanced by the spiritual integrity of the leader himself. And the results of this issue of balance will therefore vary from church to church.

C. The Purpose of Sermons

It was mentioned above that preaching holds a very central place in the lives of members of Russian Baptist churches. Guidance for lives out of the Bible is what the believer is generally listening for. It follows that preachers have as a general goal to provide that guidance.

For reasons that will be further discussed later, Baptist preachers do not normally think along the lines of well-articulated and planned purposes for their sermons. This is not to say that the resulting sermons lack effectiveness, but simply that there has been no textbook approach to gathering all the elements of the sermon within a concrete statement of purpose. To present the Word of God to the congregation is the basic and sincere desire of every sermon. What is presented, and the purpose of presenting it, comes mainly from an informal process of the devotional life of the preacher - thus the purpose he feels that God had for him becomes the

purpose for the congregation. One preacher stated that the normal attitude could often be summed up as, "This is what God has told me, and I am going to tell it to the congregation."

Despite the lack of clearly stated purposes for sermons, preachers are able to identify at least four basic overall purposes identifiable in Baptist preaching:

1. Practical Exhortation - The usual and most common focus of a sermon is to encourage believers to live by Christian principles. A practical biblical text would commonly be utilized as the foundation, and the congregation would be informed how it is to be applied in their lives. The value of having a practical approach, so that believers know how to use truth for ethics and behavior, is thus most commonly in the mind of those who prepare to preach.

2. Call to Repentance - Sermons are also regularly aimed at unbelievers who may be present in a service. The good news of the gospel is explained, and the people are called on to repent at that moment. Time is often taken during the service if people come forward, to pray with them in front of the congregation. At times a microphone is even held to the mouth of a person, and his prayer of repentance is heard by everyone. The call to repentance is also made to those who, in the understanding of Baptist theology, were once believers and have fallen away. It is common that there will be at least one call to repentance in every service. These practices are reminiscent to some of typical "holiness" churches in other countries.

3. Doctrinal Explanation - Although becoming more common today, it has been rare to hear strictly doctrinal sermons in Baptist services. The normal practical sermons do indeed follow Baptist doctrine, and explain truths in order to combat error and ignorance in the listeners, but specific and detailed explanation of doctrine is normally left for other kinds of meetings, such as the catechism given in preparation for baptism. The delivery of doctrine would be considered more of a "discourse" as opposed to a sermon. It might be summarized that sermons are not seen as primarily means of educating people, but rather of "moving" them. Strictly educational speaking would be handled in other venues.

4. Call to Prayer - This is not an optional kind of sermon as those above, but rather a special sermon that is commonly preached in the first part of a Baptist service. It is a shorter sermon that is followed by two or three from the congregation praying aloud, followed by the preacher's closing prayer. Thus the main purpose of this kind of sermon is to stimulate and call for the ministry of congregational prayer in the service.

III. PREPARATION FOR PREACHING

A. Spiritual versus Practical

One foundational issue that helps in understanding how Baptist preachers prepare their sermons is their understanding of what is "spiritual." More particularly in this case, how does being spiritual relate to orderly and practical preparation of the contents of sermons?

Consistent with the mystical approach to spiritual things commonly found in Russia, largely an inheritance from Russian Orthodoxy, Baptists have been known to hold to a form of spirituality where the mind is not considered as centrally important as the heart, and where reason is not as critical as intuition. Direct illumination from the Holy Spirit is often valued as the best means of gaining comprehension of biblical truth. This belief does not at all rule out study of the Bible, but seems to have a strong effect on the particular approach to Scripture that a preacher will take as he prepares himself to preach.

It is common for preachers to expect that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to give them the message that they will preach. A common application of this expectation is the belief that it is not good to be too systematic. The preacher should expect the Lord to direct. If a man has too

strong a plan and purpose for his sermon, it would be suspected that the resulting message was not from God. It should be readily seen that this kind of thinking would not produce preaching that is systematic in content or structure. And for the most part it has not.

One young Russian preacher I spoke with has been through Western training in sermon preparation, and articulated many good points about how the sermon should be designed in order to reach its goal of changing lives. Yet in spite of his exposure to systematic preparation, he still held to the need to limit his preparation in order to leave himself open for further unanticipated directions that his message may take as the Holy Spirit worked through him in the pulpit. The expectation of direct divine influence is thus a strong deterrent to careful sermon preparation.

B. Bible Study and Exegesis

Although the goal of this paper is not to analyze Bible study methodologies, it is helpful to consider a few key ways in which the study methods used by preachers affect their sermons.

One powerful undercurrent affecting biblical exegesis is the aforementioned mysticism that is often recognizable in Baptist thinking. The "mystery of the faith" is an idea that can tend to create a natural aversion to the literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic that is generally followed by evangelicals in America. One professor in the West taught that one should approach the process of interpreting the Bible in the same way as one would approach a daily newspaper (except that the Bible was without error). In other words, a reasonable man applying laws of language and logic should come to proper conclusions regarding the meaning of any particular passage. This idea would be understood by Russian Baptists as leaving the Holy Spirit out of the study process. The Holy Spirit is generally expected to give the interpretation to a believer as he meditates on the Word of God, even if that interpretation seems to stretch the laws of logic or language.

The mystical approach to spiritual life has a definite effect on Bible study methods, but the historical situation must also be considered. For many years Baptists were left largely without Bible study tools and formal training. A concordance may have been used if one had access to one, but no biblical commentaries were available. Even if there had been a less mystical way of thinking, the development of systematic approaches would still have been greatly hindered. These two factors working together, however, probably tended to multiply the effect.

On the other hand, many have commented that the lack of tools and commentaries had some beneficial effects, forcing men to dive deeper into the Bible itself rather than relying on the opinions of others. A practice of extensive reading and contemplating of the Bible led to a very strong general Bible knowledge, if not a knowledge of systematic theology. As a result, it has been noted that it can be much easier for Russian Baptists to come up with a sermon on the spur of the moment than it is for their American counterparts. General knowledge would provide the basis more than would specific preparation for a particular topic or passage.

Although it may not be completely formulated and documented, Baptist dogma was widely understood and followed by preachers. Some preaching was seen to be based on dogma as opposed to personal exegesis. Much study was based on a deductive approach to texts based on what was learned from Baptist doctrinal presentations or sermons. The attempt to start from a position without presuppositions and apply an inductive approach was not a valued study method.

The general approach taken to study has been informal. A man would gain many opinions through informal or formal discussions and the sermons of others, and look at the

passage himself to see if those opinions fit. He would use his own intuition and come up with his understanding of the passage (being careful to stay within Baptist doctrine). The approach would not be labeled as systematic exegesis, although at least in theory many rules of hermeneutics would be considered. For example, "Give honor to the context" was a stated principle, even though it may not be often practically followed. The idea of "circles of context," which would enforce a hierarchical rule of closer context over remoter context, was not widely known. No tradition existed to carefully follow the argument of the author and build one's own exegetical model (and subsequent sermons) after that original argument.

One result of this study method has been a commonly observed phenomenon among Baptists of "proof-texting" in arguing over biblical truth. Many passages will be referenced to prove a point, often without carefully considering the context of each one and constructing a systematic theology of the topic that would help in cross-referencing and interpreting according to sound hermeneutic principles. This observation would be disputed by many Baptist students of the Bible, of course, but has been made by many Americans who have taught in Russia.

One practical result in preaching has been a tendency for many sermons to come only artificially from the text. The biblical text is often a "launching pad" for the sermon, but the argument of the sermon has not been derived specifically from that text. This, by the way, does not mean that the sermon would not be true to the Bible, but only that it was not based directly on the passage cited. If there has been a weakness in Russian preaching commonly noted, it is that of not remaining in context and not following the flow of the text. The resulting sermon may not really be from any particular text, reference to which may be more of a rhetorical device rather than a basis for the message. However, as noted above, it may still be true to scripture as a whole, and thus result in sound understanding of truth, if not sound exegesis of the passage at hand. Consequently, expository preaching is not encouraged by typical Russian Baptist exegesis.

C. Sermon Planning and Passage Selection

The common Russian Baptist concept of spiritual versus practical, as describe above, is observable in the issue of planning ahead for preaching. The expectation that the Holy Spirit will give messages to preachers tends to place limits on their preparation. It is virtually unheard of to prepare a series of messages on a certain topic that would spread out over several weeks. The practice often seen among American preachers of planning their messages a month or several months ahead of time would be seen as too greatly man-controlled.

In general, a man's devotional time is considered adequate to prepare him to preach to an audience. In the course of his normal meditation on the Word, a brother will be moved by a particular issue. This may have happened even a day or two prior to the Sunday service in which he may preach. His actual preparation may consist simply of spending time praying and thinking about the issue and mulling over how he will speak about it.

One practical impediment to detailed planning is the Baptist approach to planning their services. The most common time to select preachers for Sunday is in the brothers' meeting just prior to the service itself. Although some churches are beginning to plan a week ahead for the preaching duties, historically a man would never know for sure if he would be called on to preach on any particular Sunday. This selection would generally be the job of the senior pastor. Several men would come to church with a sermon in mind - it was always good to be ready. If he were not called on, then he may or may not save his ideas for a future sermon. The potential preacher would also not know how much time he would be given for his message. It could be 15 minutes or 45 minutes, or some other variant. He may be called on to preach the "call to prayer"

sermon, in which case he would need to change the focus and length of his message on the spot. Even if he had prepared his ideas, it would have to have been with a very flexible product in mind.

The most common style of preaching that has come out of this approach could be called a semi-extemporaneous devotional talk, very informal in structure. This will be discussed in further detail later. It must be said, however, that this style and approach is not necessarily considered a weakness by the preachers or the people listening. The ability to stand up without notes and speak with conviction and practical application on a topic out of one's own study is a valued ability. It can be seen as a key difference between a mature man of the Word and an immature one.

Exposure to Western preaching and training has caused a number of preachers to begin to prepare themselves several weeks ahead before being ready to preach a given sermon. Yet even among men who have stated this desire to plan ahead, however, the normal method still used is extemporaneous preaching, with topics coming out of their lives and their recent devotional reading.

D. Normal Sermon Methodology

Consistent with the nature of sermon planning, with messages coming out of devotional study, sermon methodology has not followed a systematic, expository approach. The overwhelming (and in some cases exclusive) choice of preachers is to preach topical sermons. It must not be assumed that this has been a selection by default, given the lack of time for preparation. On the contrary, the topical approach has often been considered a higher class of preaching than the process of moving through the scriptures paragraph by paragraph, expositing each text. A good topical sermon would be considered "real food," in contrast to the less nourishing textual analysis.

As will be discussed further below, the more Western analytical approach to constructing sermons is not found among the Russian Baptists. An American preacher might prepare a topical sermon, but would be more likely to prepare the points in a logical and orderly manner. The Russian brother would follow a much more informal approach, speaking right out of his flow of thoughts as he faces the text and topic at hand.

If there are expositions of books of the Bible, they would be much more likely to occur in other settings, such as Bible studies. The atmosphere required would not be that of a worship service, but that of a "Sunday school." To deliver a detailed exegesis from the pulpit would seem out of place to the preacher and the listeners. It would sound too much like "teaching," and would not be well received. The tradition for keeping this topical and informal methodology is very strong, and people are slow to change. One must never assume that bringing exposition to the pulpit would be a welcomed "enlightenment" to the Baptist churches.

There is some movement among the younger preachers, who have had exposure to training from the West, to begin preaching expository sermons. Some are even beginning to work their way through books. Yet even those who are doing this have noted that it takes courage to introduce such a change of method - and especially in the older churches. If such a method were to take hold, it would be more likely to occur in one of the newer Baptist churches which has a larger percentage of young believers.

III. THE STRUCTURE OF BAPTIST SERMONS

A. The Sermon Idea

A commonly taught homiletic concept in the West is that a sermon should follow a single idea. The idea would be formed with two elements, the subject (what I am talking about) and the predicate (or complement - what I am saying about the subject). Although there is a very general idea present in Russian Baptist preaching that it is good to have thematic unity in a sermon, in practice there is no strong tradition to develop a structure that so clearly follows one single idea or theme.

I have mentioned earlier that preparation for preaching is quite informal, leaving room for "inspiration" to occur in the pulpit. The preacher knows what his subject is, and what he is going to say about it, but often finds that his words in the pulpit stimulate creative ideas to be explored. Although many would say it is not good to follow major "rabbit trails," the pursuit of such trails is a common tendency, especially among older preachers. A sermon may "take off" from one text, moving in one direction, but soon alter its course and explore more than a few "flight plans." The basic plan of sermons is commonly very general, and a freeform meditation is the result, going through many ideas in the style of a normal conversation.

Among those who value unity as a principle of communication, the application is still more general than the "single idea" formula. A single subject would be followed, and the idea would be framed with an introduction and a final point. Yet the loose meditation format would dominate in between. One preacher said that it would not be considered a value of preaching to be able to summarize your sermon idea in one statement. He suggested instead, "perhaps it would take more like a paragraph."

B. The Sermon Outline

Based on the Russian Baptist attitudes toward preparation and sermon unity as mentioned above, it clearly follows that it is very uncommon for preachers to follow specific outlines in their preaching. There are no traditional values for limiting the number of points of a sermon, or for clearly stating them in order to allow listeners to follow the sermon direction. In addition to the reasons suggested above in other sections for this, a few comments can be made to specifically explain the lack of clear structure observed in Baptist sermons.

1. Spirituality - The first comment is an application of the principle of being led by the Holy Spirit. Often preachers feel that if they completely planned out what they were to say, they would not be available to God's guidance in the pulpit, and would not be trusting Him to lead them. It would be commonly considered a sign of spiritual weakness to have such a detailed plan that included a fixed number of points, planned transitions, etc.

2. Ability - It is commonly considered a sign of weakness in speaking ability to rely on planned outlines. A good preacher should be able to speak extemporaneously. Perhaps a young man lacking confidence would go to the pulpit with notes and outline, but as he grew in ability he would put these aside. It is thus uncommon to see a man carrying detailed notes to the pulpit, and virtually unheard of that a sermon would be manuscripted.

3. Organization - A common Russian trait is a seeming distaste for things that are too orderly. When people hear about the "Four Spiritual Laws," or "Three things God says about how to pray," or the "Seven Laws of the Learner," the common response is distrust. "Who says that there are four laws?" A simplistic formula is seen as the sign of a lack of depth of thought. Such confident outlining betrays a lack of respect for the mysteries of God and His truth. American preachers who often recapitulate the previous points of their sermons (in an attempt to

make their sermon outline more obvious and easier for listeners to remember) seem to be insulting the intelligence of their Russian listeners. Irritation and boredom may result.

4. Logic - Westerners value linear logic, and so like to see ideas put together in points that are moving in one direction with clear linkage. Russians are more influenced by an Eastern approach, and see logic more like the branches of a tree. They all fit together, but in a way that involves beauty and mystery. There can be a resistance to the Western approach of taking every truth apart and rearranging it in a systematic fashion. One Russian friend told me "this is too *German!*" It is more natural to let ideas flow down natural channels rather than to imprison them in man-made and artificial structures. This shows a preference for synthesis over analysis in coming to understanding.

Of the young Russian men that have been exposed to Western training, some are beginning to think more about putting structure into their sermons. Some are moving strongly to the Western approach, some are resisting, and others are adapting the Western ideas to a more Russian approach. Of the latter group, it is common that an outline will consist only of the scripture passages the preacher plans to use in his sermon. Others prepare an outline, but always feel free to divert from it if, in the words of one young man, "God gives me inspiration in the pulpit." A creative freedom to make changes in the midst of preaching is a strongly held value that will not pass away easily, if at all.

C. Sermon Development

Given that a preacher has a general sermon idea in mind, what ways does he normally use for developing that idea? The lack of a developed homiletic science has meant that Russian Baptist preachers are not normally analyzing themselves to see what methods of sermon development they use or should use. However, several observations can be made about the normal forms of development one will find in their sermons.

The most common means of sermon development is to start by looking at a biblical text and then move into an explanation of how it applies to life today. The precise direction that is taken depends on the particular style of the preacher. An Old Testament story is often followed, with comments and applications along the way. The preacher would not be thinking that he is using one kind of development or another, but would simply be talking about the text, the biblical idea, and how we can use it today. He may move back and forth from brief explanation to talking about the implications of the passage, but largely in the freeform meditative style mentioned earlier. A few comments can be made about particular means of development that he might use:

1. Illustrations - These are always valued in sermons, and preachers try to utilize them often. One specific Baptist approach is to prefer biblical illustrations as opposed to coming up with ones own examples. They are inclined to believe that all necessary examples of biblical truths have been recorded in scripture. The Old Testament is particularly scoured for life illustrations, and the stories become very familiar due to their constant utilization in sermon illustrations.

2. Explanations - Apart from explanations of the meanings of words, which is common, it is not common to spend much time on detailed textual explanation. The aim is generally to illustrate and apply the principle of scripture, not to spend a great deal of time exploring the concept itself or proving it to be true from a scriptural exploration. Again, doctrinal explanation is not seen as the role of the sermon, but of the classroom education.

3. Restatement - The development of an idea through restatement in other words is not a

common approach. If it is used, it would rarely be used formally or explicitly, but only as a natural way of explaining a text or statement when needed. It would not be thought of as a kind of "tool" of homiletics. Any restatement would not be done using literal repetition, which would be seen as simplistic and unnecessary - as mentioned above.

4. Facts, statistics and quotations - It is not common to move away from scripture and gather outside information to embellish sermons. There are at least two reasons for this. First, there has been a historical resistance to using news, current events, and quotes from modern men as biblical illustrations. It is better to stick to the text. Second, such information has rarely been available to the average preacher even if he had wanted to use it. It would normally be better to stick to commonly observed life illustrations and examples than to bring in too much information that cannot be confirmed by the listener.

5. Cross-referencing – A preacher may mention several different short texts in various parts of the Bible that all relate to a certain word or topic. This may be showing his strong commitment to proof-texting, but some have wondered if perhaps this preacher may be showing that he knows a lot of Bible verses.

D. Introductions and Conclusions

The introduction and conclusion of a sermon are usually treated as separate homiletic topics due to their unique importance. The introduction must gain attention, and the conclusion must drive home the point. Among Russian Baptists there has been no such detailed homiletic analysis such that preachers think consciously "this is my introduction" or "this is my conclusion." The vast majority of attention is paid to the body of the sermon. However, it is possible to make a few summary observations regarding normal methods of starting and ending sermons.

1. Introductions - By far the most common method of sermon introduction is to go immediately to the text at hand, read it, and then launch right into the sermon. There is a large variety of ways of getting into the body of the sermon, from giving a story or illustration to posing a question. But the sermon has by then been in effect introduced by the fact that the listeners know the topic from the Bible passage quoted.

There is a growing understanding among the more progressive preachers that it is necessary to gain attention at the beginning. Starting well and capturing the interest of the audience is a value that is normally well received by Russian preachers, as long as the specific technique is not seen as a shallow gimmick. Most are especially aware of the need for good introductions when addressing an audience containing many unbelievers. In those cases a good story that has strong general appeal may be told prior to the reading of scripture, to avoid losing attention or causing boredom. Furthermore, stories are especially well received, as being very clearly within Russian cultural tradition.

One minor point to be made about introductions is the common occurrence of visiting preachers. When a man is preaching in a church other than his own, he will always begin by bringing greetings from his church before beginning his sermon.

2. Conclusions - The abruptness of sermon introductions is normally matched or surpassed by that of the conclusions. A common conclusion is to find a convenient stopping point and go right to prayer. There would rarely be a studied or prepared conclusion to a sermon. Most would agree there should be a good summary of one's main point, but in practice this is not often done. Given the potential for a rambling structure in the sermon, it could be difficult to give a concise summary without adding significant length to the sermon.

It should be said that this is a commonly recognized weakness of sermons, and most are receptive to learn better ways to conclude. One young preacher gave the illustration of an airplane that needs to take off well and land well - yet most accidents occur in the takeoff or landing. A common poor "landing" seen in sermons, other than the abrupt "crash landing," would be the "false landing." In this, the preacher is obviously winding down, coming to the end of his sermon. Then he suddenly remembers another example or idea and makes another pass or two before finally "landing." This practice is seen to cause stress in the listeners, making the sermon much less effective.

As a result of exposure to Western preaching, many are seeing the need to bring sermons to a close with positive and inspiring conclusions that give people hope and courage for action. Partly due to the difficult historical circumstances mentioned earlier, there has been a tendency among Baptist sermons to simply fade at the end, and often leave a sad impression, even possibly discouragement, in the minds of listeners. The attitude may be like, "So, we will always suffer, so go out and keep suffering faithfully, amen." Many young men want to change this tendency. Since Russian Baptist preachers have no difficulty with giving strong and direct personal applications to their sermons, and are open to learning better how to do this, there is a solid base upon which to build a good tradition of excellent sermon conclusions.

V. THE PREACHING ART

A. Preaching Style

The style of language that has developed in Russian Baptist preaching has resulted more from natural than from studied causes. There is no written and specific value for the use of a specific style of language in the pulpit. Yet in spite of the general freedom in selection of style, two factors seem to have kept a certain conformity in the kind of language heard in the churches.

The first factor is the informal nature of preparation for preaching. The development of higher, more artistic styles depends a great deal on specific formal training, as well as adequate preparation time for the careful selection of words. In contrast, untrained Russian men with only general preparation have stood in pulpits for many years, and their style has always tended toward the more simple, frank, conversational style of a devotional discussion. To be sure, this has been an important contrast to the high style of Orthodox speaking, which may be one reason that any tendency toward loftiness would have been prevented. Yet the resulting simplicity has often been considered very plain, and preachers have been criticized because their style hasn't been rhetorical or intellectual enough. This is, of course, the danger on the opposite extreme from complex loftiness. The traditional Baptist value which has prevailed is that the sermon should be delivered in a personal style that is not aimed over the heads of the listeners for whose benefit it is being preached.

The second factor to be considered is the association of spirituality with solemnity among Russian Baptists. The language of preachers is expected to project a strong and sober image. The quiet and mature man is the one that attracts the Russian listener. He is thus expected to use dignified and serious speech as opposed to lightness and superficiality. Though his words may be simple and conversational, they are expected to carry weight in them. The serious style is a deeply embedded cultural value, and Russians look for this in their leaders.

One issue of style that reflects regional Russian issues is that of grammar. Those who live in Moscow especially value the purity of the Russian language that their city believes it is preserving. The kind of language that might be heard in villages, or even in cities in other parts of Russia, is often looked down upon in Moscow. This may be an issue that influences the

quality of communication most specifically in speaking to cultured Muscovites. Many intellectuals don't respond well to preaching when an uneducated man uses less than proper Moscow Russian in his sermon. On the other hand, the Baptists might counter that this uneducated preacher knows and is speaking the truth, and those honestly seeking would not be turned away by his simplicity of expression.

An issue that has been overlooked in the past, but is becoming more important today, is that of altering one's preaching style to reach the culture at large. In addition to the issue of grammar, the notion of simplifying one's vocabulary to speak to the common man is gaining popularity. This will be seen more often among young preachers who have grown into maturity since perestroika, and who thus have had many more opportunities to speak openly.

B. Sermon Delivery

There is a bit more to be said about issues of delivery than there was about style. Several key issues about how a sermon should be delivered come from strong notions about the nature of preaching in a church service. The foremost issue seems to be that a preacher must view himself as a mediator of the Word of God, and as such he must not allow his delivery to draw too much attention to himself. He must avoid anything that makes him appear like an actor on stage. A subdued, dignified approach is thus called for. This overall philosophy manifests itself in several aspects of sermon delivery, including the following.

1. Emotion - A dignified delivery calls for solemnity and self-control, and these are the earmarks of Russian Baptist preaching. A preacher's tone should be steady and serious. If there is emotion expressed, it must be a natural emotion, connected with the content of the sermon. It should be noted that the desire to avoid being branded as "Pentecostal" is one of the controlling factors in the guarding of emotion in the pulpit. On the other side, a sermon must not sound too much like a lecture, lest the listeners become sleepy or inattentive. If Baptist listeners were to feel like a man was "putting on" extra emotion simply for effect (as is not uncommon among Western preachers) they would be less likely to respect him as an authoritative mediator of the Word.

2. Body Movement - Subdued movements and thrifty gestures are valued and respected as indicative of dignified sermon delivery. The preacher is expected to stand upright and hold his Bible almost stiffly in front of himself (or lay it on the pulpit if using one). Failure to display this form of dignity has caused many Western preachers to lose respect among Baptists. When they have wanted to move back and forth on the stage, holding the microphone in their hand and making sweeping gestures with their arms, Baptists have been nervous and embarrassed. The perceived lack of decorum has made them very uncomfortable. Some extreme cases of this have led at least one Baptist brother to inform me of a new unwritten rule: "A preacher shouldn't jump." Others have watched TV with shock as Jimmy Swaggart holds his open Bible with one hand and makes rapid gestures with it. ("Has he no respect for the Bible?") In an attempt to display the popular casual style of the USA, American preachers have stood up front with one or both hands in their pockets - a clear breach of dignified decorum. Of course, Americans are allowed to be American, and rarely would anything be said to them about such behavior. But many Baptist listeners have been lost to preachers who don't understand these cultural issues.

3. Appearance - The preacher is virtually always to be dressed well, including wearing a tie, and usually with a suit. Often tradition has recommended a tie in the same color as the suit. It

should be noted that a rival tradition exists among many unregistered Baptists, who considered it a sin to wear a tie, believing it to be a worldly decoration. These preachers simply buttoned the top button of their shirt. Whether this tradition holds today would need to be examined in each individual church.

As with the other aspects of Western homiletics, younger Russian preachers are being influenced to rethink some of the issues of delivery. The first attempts, especially if displayed in older churches, are met with resistance. Even so, exposure to TV preachers may be causing a softening of opinion regarding some aspects of emotion and movement. Whatever the outcome, it is almost certain to remain much more subdued than what is seen in the West.

VI. RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVES ON WESTERN PREACHING

A. Openness to Learning and Change

This issue has been discussed somewhat in prior sections, so this will be a summarization of the factors affecting the readiness of Russian Baptist preachers to learn from Westerners, and particularly Americans. The following three factors seem to be the most important in helping to understand the current presence or lack of openness.

1. The Generation Factor - As would be true in any culture, the older generation is not actively seeking further education. This is especially true in the practical field of preaching, since older men have been developing their own style and approach over many years. One could identify no precise divisions into age groups, but in general the younger the man is, the more open he will tend to be toward new ideas about preaching. Most of the receptiveness toward (and resulting application from) homiletic training has been in Western-directed courses that have been aimed at young men with only modest preaching experience.

Since the older men are still in power in the vast majority of the churches, young men have often been put into difficult positions when they have learned new preaching ideas. It has often taken a good deal of courage to use what they have learned because: (1) Young preachers depend on these older men for their permission to preach in the church, and so are afraid to do something in the pulpit that might offend them, and (2) Young preachers do not have the experience required to introduce a new style in an acceptable manner. People in the churches are generally not ready to receive new methods, and so it takes a very talented man to gain favorable response to new kinds of preaching. Until the younger generation begins to assume more positions of direct leadership in churches, they may continue to face this dilemma.

It must be noted that openness is also a personal issue, and one can find very conservative young men as well as flexible older men who will not match the general pattern. Some men are simply more teachable than others.

2. The Effect of Exposure - Until a few years ago, many Baptist believers had gone through their whole Christian life having heard only the Russian Baptist style of preaching. Many may have held to the assumption that there was no other option. Beginning mainly with the broadcasts of Billy Graham's evangelistic preaching, and continuing now through a string of Western TV preachers, Baptists have been exposed to new styles of preaching, much of which is from men that they respect. This has softened the resistance of many people, opening the doors to the entrance of new styles of preaching into the churches.

There has also been a great deal of direct exposure to live Western preaching in many of the churches, particularly in the big cities. In fact, for a time in Moscow it became more common than not that one of the preachers on Sunday would be from the West. However, this exposure has also often closed as many hearts to Western preaching as it has opened, for reasons that will

be explored below. Inherent resistance to foreign methods has often been confirmed by some brands of American preaching that have left negative impressions.

Whether the impact has been positive or negative, exposure to other traditions has caused many Baptist preachers to become sensitive to their overall lack of information about the field of homiletics. This sensitivity has been further stimulated by the many courses and materials that have become available, presenting perspectives that they had not considered before. Whether the resulting desire for more understanding leads to practical changes will depend on the other factors mentioned above and below.

3. Russian Culture and Tradition - Unlike the common American love for new things, the Russian culture tends to hold much more to tradition. It was noted above that younger men tend to be more open to change. That principle must be understood in the context of the power that tradition has over the whole culture - including the young. Though a young man may respond favorably to new ideas, he will be just as likely to alter them in a way that will be acceptable to his cultural traditions. This may happen even when there are no older Russian men with control over how he applies what he has learned. He knows that if he introduces something foreign to his listeners' ears, they will be very likely to respond with a very common Russian phrase: "It's not *ours*." (If it is new, and it is not Russian, then what is the reason for it?)

All Baptist preachers recognize that their approach must be the type that will reach *Russian* hearts. Preaching that is an artificial copy of Western methodology will not be well received. Since an important measure of good preaching is the response of the audience, why would a preacher institute new communication devices that are almost certain to alienate his congregation? The result is that openness to learning Western homiletics is constantly blended with a strong determination to allow Russian culture to be the arbiter regarding what will be selected and what will be rejected from the new teaching.

B. Aspects of Western Preaching That Have Been Accepted

Although among Russian Baptists one finds the above mentioned resistance to change and the predisposition to reject non-Russian ideas, one also finds a readiness to receive ideas and approaches that will not violate culture and tradition. Russian Baptists see themselves as primarily people of the Word, and have no reason to reject those things from the West that help them in the way that they already want to go. The following is a short list of some of the more readily accepted aspects of Western preaching that Baptists have seen.

1. A Gracious Manner - American preachers who have come to Russia with humility, and who have projected warmth from the pulpit, have refreshed many Russian congregations. At times Russian preachers may have become a bit stiff and unrelaxed in their attempt to remain dignified, and the contrasting gentle and personal manner can be illuminating. This may be especially appreciated if Russian preachers have been influenced by the kind of Soviet haranguing that people have found tiresome. But in general the fact is that Americans come from a more relaxed and open culture than what has been experienced in Russia, and the exposure to this personal style can be a good example to Russian preachers.

2. Inspirational Messages - The difficulties of Russian life have often led to a form of preaching that has been short on joy and hope. When American preachers have preached on the joy of life, illustrating how even the common things of life are to be received as good gifts from God, this has often been wonderfully refreshing. One Russian preacher noted that American optimism acts as a counterbalance to Russian cultural pessimism.

One especially appreciated aspect of this form of encouraging preaching is the presence

of a very strong and hopeful conclusion that says, in effect, "God says it, and we can do it!" Russian sermons have often closed with a message to the effect that, "we don't know what will happen tomorrow, we should always be prepared to suffer, we are weak," and so on. One Russian preacher noted that he was not taught to give hope and offer solutions to problems, and so lacked the experience and wisdom on how to close a message in this way. He said, "we open wounds, but don't give hope and healing." Western sermons, with strong affirmations that the certain answer to our struggles is found in Jesus Christ, have been found to build courage in members. One time I had been invited to preach at a Baptist church. In the Brothers' meeting, an older Brother asked me if I was to preach. When I told him yes, he said, "Good! There will be inspiration." He assumed this would be the case without knowing the subject of my sermon. I heard an account of a pair of young women who had been used to hearing Baptist sermons. They went to an American-Russian service with American preaching and marveled that at the end of it, "we came out feeling good!" This was unusual for them. For the new generation, messages of hope are especially critical.

It should also be noted, on the other hand, that some aspects of American optimism have been culturally insensitive. Americans have often preached messages that show a lack of feeling for the ongoing difficulties of Russian life. Sermon illustrations about shopping malls, golf courses and cellular phones are some of the more pitiable blunders. Americans have spoken about life difficulties that are trivial compared to what faces their Russian listeners every day, with the result that encouragements to be hopeful have fallen flat. "They just don't know about our lives," is the common response. Spiritual hope must be built on the right foundation, and often it will take the testimony of a Russian believer to make this hope real to another Russian.

3. Careful Methodology - Russian preachers have expressed appreciation for the thoroughness with which many Western preachers treat their subject matter. They have noted that they would like to learn how better to plan their sermon so that all sides of an issue have been brought out, and that appropriate commentary, illustrations, observations, and other elements all work together well within the message. Some have mentioned that they want to learn how better to plan for the most effective use of whatever time they are given to preach.

All this is interesting in light what has been mentioned above regarding the lack of planning before preaching. The simple fact is that much of what is required to create this completeness is the painstaking preparation and outlining that the Russian preacher will tend to resist. There could be a tendency to try to reproduce systematic coverage of a truth without systematic preparation. On the other hand, admiration of the organized result may lead to motivation to enter into the hard work of the organizing process. As with other aspects of Western preaching, impressive modeling will lead to some measure of adoption.

C. Aspects of Western Preaching That Have Been Rejected

Some of the rejection of Western practices and ideas arises from the simple practicalities of Russian life. For example, training for a method of sermon preparation that takes several hours is seen to be ignorant of the lack of time available to Brothers who preach. Usually none of these men are vocational ministers, and all of them are extremely busy. Most of what is rejected, however, is rejected because it is considered poor in style or immature in character, for one reason or another. The following is a brief list of some of the more commonly rejected aspects of Western preaching that the Baptists have seen.

1. Issues of Content and Style

a. Overstructured Messages - Both sides of this issue have been discussed above in

other contexts. To summarize: Even as many Russian men want to be more effective in how they present the truth, which will involve some better organization of ideas, they will feel that too much structure in a sermon is overly binding and restrictive both intellectually and spiritually.

b. Oversimplification - Americans, who are used to packaging ideas in ways that will be easy to understand, will find Russians unresponsive to this technique in presentations of ideas about life and God. Russians are strongly inclined to appreciate the great mystery of God. They tend to seek ideas that are deep, beautiful, complex and mysterious. They are deeply influenced by their great literary tradition, and like their discussions to be philosophical - even in ministry.

A primary violation of this principle has been the American way of attempting to place every truth into a formula, a graphic, or a simple definition. When this approach is used in sermons, the result can often be a lack of trust in the explanation. The speaker could be in danger of being regarded as simple-minded or superficial. A man must recognize that ideas too great for an adult to grasp should not be placed in terms designed for children.

Of course, this attitude can be taken to an extreme. A good deal of the Russian public holds to the idea that the gospel itself is too simple. A speaker must be able to show that God has spoken with clarity, but that the ideas themselves are greatly profound.

c. Gimmicks - In addition to simplicity, Americans often use oratorical techniques that are at times embarrassing, possibly even insulting, to Russian congregations. For example, the repetition of the same phrase over and over again causes irritation among Russian listeners. It is the same irritation that they may feel in listening to trite advertising slogans (many of which are also inspired by American thinking). Americans that are convinced that this is an effective tool in preaching may find it hard to accept that their approach is considered tiresome and unintellectual.

Another form of gimmick that displays cross-cultural ignorance is the use of alliteration and word play. Both of these methods are completely lost in translation, and what sounded interesting to the speaker simply evaporates by the time it reaches the Russian ear. In fact, in many cases what he said has been unintelligible to the translator, who then makes up a simple statement to try to summarize what might have been said. The result sounds very stiff and disjointed. One American preacher had what he thought was a clever play on the word "Devil," using each letter to describe a thing he hated about the Devil, replete with rhyme and meter. The translator was baffled, and simply repeated, "He really hates the Devil. He really, really hates the Devil." His elaborate, overly cute gimmick made his preaching appear foolish.

2. Issues of Maturity

a. Frivolity - One of the most common objections to American preaching is the tendency of some to behave too much like comedians. Although tasteful humor is not completely rejected, the telling of jokes simply to "warm up the crowd" is considered a mixture of the profane into the sacred. Informality that borders on silliness is considered a great misuse of the pulpit, where serious dignity is required of one who will deliver God's Word. Once a speaker has indulged in such lightness, he will not be able to gain respect for anything heavy he may later try to communicate. He will have already lost his listeners.

This same lack of formality is often seen in gospel tracts that Americans publish in Russia. The unserious style utilized betrays a small idea of God. Russians expect spiritual literature to portray the greatness and mystery of God, and the commonly used humorous and cartoon-style tracts are viewed with distaste. Russians respond most favorably to depth and artistry, and believe that this is an issue of spiritual character, not simply culture. In order to

respect this spiritual value in the pulpit, a preacher must be serious and dignified, never frivolous. He is not an entertainer.

b. Emotionalism - In addition to frivolity, over-emotionalism is considered a violation of the dignity of the pulpit. This charge is most likely to be leveled against charismatic television evangelists. When Jimmy Swaggart is seen shouting and crying as he preaches, he is repulsing the Russian Baptist audience. Yet the charge may also apply to any American who seems to be using a loud voice simply for effect, or who projects wild movements behind the pulpit. Though he may think this style reflects power in speaking, it is so distracting to his Baptist listeners that his message is actually having the opposite of its intended effect.

c. Pride - Sadly, many American preachers come to Russia and show a total lack of humility. Some seem to project an attitude that says, "Well, we've arrived. Now you can finally hear God's Word preached." This is a display of great ignorance of the Baptist history. One of the most common practices is the preaching of simple gospel messages to mature Baptist congregations, as if it were the first time they had heard these words. Some have said about such Americans, "They think they've come to a third world country!" One young woman asked me, "Don't they know we are Christians?" Many preachers seem to automatically assume that a message from America is a higher class of message, and offer simple milk as if it will be "meat" to the Baptist listener. Many Russians have been disappointed from such experiences.

Another manifestation of pride is seen in the pulpit demeanor of some Americans. They appear too self-assured, and speak from an apparently lofty position. With a confident tone of voice, they speak of the ministries they have come to Russia to carry on. When they are also accompanied by a group of traveling Americans who are taking photos and shooting videos of his message, the effect can be chilling.

d. Naiveté - There is a tendency for Americans to be a several years behind in their knowledge of the current events and spiritual conditions in Russia. Reports from the early 1990's made many think that there was a massive spiritual revival occurring in Russia, and that Russians were just waiting for someone to come and tell them how to be saved. Often the resulting surge of preachers came fueled more by a spirit of adventure than by a serious commitment based on mature understanding. Although there was in fact a great deal of interest and response to outside preaching in the period of 1987 to 1992, the vast majority was based on the natural curiosity of a people long kept from open spiritual input of any kind. Many were brought to Christ, but only a tiny percentage of reported "conversions" ended up in churches. Preachers with no cross-cultural experience, who also didn't take the time to inquire into the spiritual realities of Russian people, took back to America glowing reports of multitudes being saved, simply because they had come forward at a meeting.

Baptists have observed these events, and concluded that Americans in general have very little spiritual discernment. Such visitors to Russia are often deceived because they come expecting instant success in their work. If they had only asked those who had been Christians in Russia for many years, they would have realized that coming forward, raising hands, and even allowing someone to "lead them in prayer" is a common Russian response that says very little about their spiritual state. Of course, Baptists who may have said this would have been considered less than evangelistic in their hearts. However, the meager results of a few years of Western evangelistic efforts (which have spent millions of dollars in the process) have vindicated those who counseled caution.

Admittedly Russian Baptists, although a part of their culture, have been stunted in their ability to conduct effective outreach and communicate to many Russian unbelievers.

Americans have often come in with commendable zeal for the gospel and reached segments of the Russian public that Baptists have not been able to assimilate. The main problem is that Americans have often come to Russia not to learn and cooperate, but only to teach, direct, and run their programs. By failing to make use of the godly wisdom of established groups like the Russian Baptists, simplistic and even foolish approaches have abounded. Many "hit and run" preachers have probably done more harm than good.

It must be stressed that these objections do not apply to every American preacher. Many have been warmly welcomed and deeply appreciated. At all times it can be concluded that those most appreciated are those who are culturally sensitive, humble, and servants at heart. Baptists always counsel Americans: "Learn about our culture and history!" The need for constant repetition of this exhortation is evidence that many have not been listening.

CONCLUSION

I. SUMMARY

In order to be properly appreciated, Russian Baptist preaching must be viewed through the lens of culture and history. The art of preaching was developed without the benefit of a strong oratorical tradition in the surrounding culture. In addition, persecution by Orthodoxy and Communism conspired to further hamper normal development. Although preaching was of primary importance in evangelism and discipleship, there was always a shortage of available men and training for those men. Even those who were available had a lack of time for the kind of preparation of sermons that preachers in the West have enjoyed.

Under these circumstances, informal training dominated in the Baptist churches. Under the control of a strong senior pastor (himself not a vocational minister), men moved up through the ranks toward becoming one of the several church preachers under a loose mentoring system. No formal requirements hindered any man who had the desire, maturity, and ability to preach.

Preaching has always been a dominant force in Baptist church life, remaining even today a central means of Bible learning and spiritual guidance for church members. The pastor has particularly wielded strong influence, not only through the pulpit but in his personal authority in the lives of the members. Strong leadership was reflected in the normal preaching focus, which was that of practical exhortations and calls to repentance as opposed to doctrinal expositions.

The approach to sermon preparation was based on a mixture of practicality and mysticism. The lack of time and training may have prevented elaborate sermon preparation in any case, but the strong belief in the role of the Holy Spirit in providing direct guidance was further reason for limiting preparation. The spiritual man would expect to receive his message from the Holy Spirit in the midst of his normal devotional life, and would further expect to be led in the pulpit in the actual delivery of that message. The result was a non-analytical and topical methodology of preaching the Word of God, delivered in a conversational manner.

The actual structure of sermons was consequently loose and at times even wandering. Structured outlining would have been seen as too confining, preventing the work of the Holy Spirit. A basic unity under one subject would be the norm, but there was much freedom for unexpected directions. As an informal devotional presentation, there was a lack of self-conscious development from introduction to body to conclusion.

Sermon style and delivery were influenced strongly by a spiritual outlook that valued sobriety and solemnity in the pulpit. Though the style would be informal, it would never be light or whimsical. A serious tone would be matched by subdued emotions and gestures.

These features of Russian Baptist preaching have continued to the present time, and are

slow to change. Exposure to the West has opened many to new kinds of preaching, but usually only the younger men are ready to experiment with changes to the historical approach. The love of Russian culture and tradition tends to hinder any rapid changes in the churches. Western preachers have made some favorable impressions with their gracious manner, inspirational messages and careful treatment of biblical subjects. Yet others have done the opposite with too much frivolity, emotionalism, pride or naiveté in the pulpit. Teachers of preaching have often presented an overly structured approach that is unacceptable to most of their students. Methods that have utilized gimmicks and simplistic formulas have also been rejected.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. For Teachers

1. Consider Your Presuppositions - As you prepare to teach a course in preaching, take time to think about the homiletic principles that you value. How many of them can you clearly defend from Scripture, and how many have come out of American culture? You should not disrespect the informal approach taken by the Russians. It allowed men to develop a personal style, and strengthened their ability to "think on their feet."

2. Prioritize Your Principles - Once you have decided which principles you want to pass on to your Russian students, put them in an order of priority. If you could only get one major lesson across, which would it be? Major most on that issue and other high priorities, and less on lower priorities. If you plan to teach too many new ideas, you may leave behind very little that will be retained. There can be a good response to many general principles about preaching, but even so you may need to explain why each principle is important.

3. Adapt your Material - Based on the cultural values discussed in this paper and those you discover from other sources, be able to alter your teaching based on what will be accepted in the Russian culture. You are not likely to change Russian culture, and will do your best work if you help Russians further develop that which is already strong in their culture.

4. Prepare to Deal With Mysticism - Much of what is taught in American homiletic courses does not directly address the issue of the work of the Holy Spirit in the process of study and preaching. Your students' mystical presuppositions may cause them some cognitive dissonance as they hear your teaching. You may need to reconcile their ideas of the Holy Spirit giving messages versus your insistence on detailed exegesis.

5. Prepare to Defend Planning - Even if you deal with mysticism, you may still run into a resistance to the notion of detailed sermon planning. If this is part of your goal, you must prepare to "sell" your ideas, not merely teach them. In the same way, you will need to defend and sell the idea of outline and structure in a message, which demands that a message be constructed prior to stepping up to the pulpit, and that it must follow a predetermined pattern.

6. Prepare for Resistance to Exposition - The preference for topical messages is strong, and expository preaching has no tradition in Russian church culture. Can you clearly defend the notion of the expository approach? Also beware of promoting any method that is too intellectual and dry, with too great an emphasis on doctrine as opposed to application. It may be that you should require a course in How to Study the Bible as a prerequisite to any course on preaching. Principles of hermeneutics and exegesis best prepare a man to understand the value of expository preaching. Teachers should note to students that the expository method is one of several, and not the only one – and not always the "best" method.

7. Be Sensitive to Russian Realities - You may want to teach some methods that require much less formal preparation time, given the fact that most will not be able to carry out extensive

planning. You should also remember that the older men are still in charge, and take care that your teaching should not be construed by them to be subversive in any way.

B. For Preachers

1. Come With Humility - Recognize that many people to whom you speak have endured great persecution for their faith. They have spent many hours over many years considering the truths of the Bible. What they have lacked in materials they have often made up for in zeal and concentration. If you have come to humbly serve alongside them you will be welcomed - but an American attitude of superiority will quickly damage your chance to minister.

2. Preach Strong Content - Don't make the mistake of talking down to your Russian audience. Don't think, "How can I give a simple message that they can understand?" This is a mistake. Preach your best sermons, with deep content and strong application. There has been a common assumption among American preachers that they are saying something unique that Russians have not heard before. Since many do this, the same simple ideas and greetings are delivered by Americans in Baptist churches over and over again, ad nauseam.

3. Examine Your Illustrations - You may need to change your sermon illustrations for many reasons. Some may be culturally insensitive; others irrelevant to the listeners. If you don't know the Russian culture well, your illustrations should be as universal as possible. For this reason, actual illustrations from biblical texts can be the best.

4. Simplify Your Expressions - You may have developed your sermon with the sound of the words in mind, in order to interest English-speaking listeners. Realize first of all that these will be completely lost in translation. Alliteration will be useless; rhymes, plays on words and catchy phrases will melt away. You are simply not in control of your style, as it will sound to the Russian ear. In addition, many of your clever phrases will be unknown to all but the most Americanized of Russian translators. You will be mistranslated, often with strange effect. Go through your sermon and take everything out that is not a straightforward English expression of a truth. You cannot be clever through a translator - just try to be understood.

5. Avoid Repetition - This is a popular rhetorical device among Americans that is more of an irritant among Russian listeners. It will make your sermon sound like a nursery rhyme to many ears. And note this - even phrases that you repeat with a slight change of words, for effect, will probably be translated with the exact same Russian words. Your translator will not be able to find a Russian variant with a similar nuance on the spot, so will just repeat your prior phrase.

6. Eliminate Jokes - Don't plan to tell any jokes just for the sake of humor. You may be able to give a personal illustration that brings some laughter from identification, but even this should be done sparingly. Otherwise it will begin to sound to much like entertainment. Russian culture is rich with humorous anecdotes - you don't need to educate them about what is funny. The point is that you are in a pulpit, and must treat it with respect.

7. Subdue Your Behavior - You may need to do just the opposite of what you were taught in homiletics (that is, to use bigger than normal movements and tone changes). You need to very consciously control yourself as you speak to a Russian Baptist congregation. Project warmth and grace, but with a serious tone and demeanor. It is the dignified man to whom people will listen, not the most expressive man.

8. Learn About Russia - The more you can read and experience regarding Russian history and culture, the better off you will be in your preaching ministry in Russia. Russians tend to talk in negative ways about their country, but hold deep inside themselves a great love for what is truly Russian. If you can learn to love that same Russia, you can communicate. If not, you could become just another loud American noise with no redeeming effect.