

The Transition of Siberian Mennonites to Baptists: Causes and Results

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I was prompted to address the transition of Siberian Mennonites to Baptist churches by numerous questions regarding this issue asked by foreign guests who visited our region. Moreover, being a member of the Baptist church and an ethnic Mennonite by birth, this issue is also important for my own personal self-identification.

Historically in the churches of the Evangelical-Christian Baptists (ECB) of Siberia there were many people of Mennonite descent. Although there is no statistical data available, a general impression is that the percentage of former Mennonites in churches of the Council of Churches of ECB is especially high.

Responses to this phenomenon range from kindly interest to disapproving comments. Ex-Mennonites are sometimes even accused of renouncing their Mennonitism. In general, such a judgment about the transition of Mennonites to Baptists is expressed rather often. (Sometimes it is facilitated by a regrettable misunderstanding arising from an inaccurate translation of a book by a reputable author.)¹ But I believe that such a conclusion may not be applied to a wide circle of Mennonites who are part of Baptist congregations.

All aspects of the transition of Mennonites to Baptist can be divided into two groups: objective causes or circumstances which contributed and in some sense caused the transition, and subjective aspects, i.e. how people responded to these circumstances. Only after that can we comment on the results and consequences of the transition.

Walter Sawatsky in *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* describes at least five external circumstances in which the Mennonites found themselves in the post-Stalinist period.

1. Mennonites who lived through the Soviet period were unfamiliar with their story because during those years their church received such a smattering blow that it survived only in name.
2. In 1923-29 about 20,000 Mennonites emigrated to Canada and South America including nearly all the leaders of the movement.
3. The majority of Mennonites who remained in the USSR were mothers and children, whose husbands/fathers disappeared when the children were still young.
4. These children lived through troubled years including ten years of camps and received very little education. An educated Mennonite has generally become a rare phenomenon.
5. Mennonites lost ties with each which resulted in the word "Mennonite" losing its religious connotation.²

It follows from these observations that the Mennonite church in the USSR ceased to exist at a certain historical time, at least as a community of organized "believers." The continuity of generations was broken. In addition the generation that lived through repressions did not have the opportunity of a proper education. If anybody managed to enroll in special secondary and higher educational institutions, the existing atheistic system insured that students would not learn about Mennonite history. And finally the remaining Mennonite groups were isolated. Mennonitism had been decapitated.

A conclusion made on the basis of these five descriptions of external circumstances may be formulated as a question: What was it that Mennonite children rejected? Did they reject what they did not know and could not have known? Can it be called a rejection? And if somebody in a private conversation claimed that he was not a Mennonite any more, can this serve as a basis for comprehensive conclusions? And there is another very important fact, a new community of people was formed in villages. If previously a religious congregation and a village community—an association of residents and free farmers—were practically identical, during communist transformations of the villages the situation radically changed. The number of people who in the post-Stalin era returned to an open confession of their faith was insignificant, or

small at best, compared to the number of people who had been part of churches in pre-Stalin times.

At the same time, new leadership was formed in villages as well as new types of relations. Relations were based on notions distant from religion. Economic issues, social life and education, i.e. everything that could influence the formation of a worldview, and in the past defined the life of the village, ceased to be Mennonite-related. Moreover, any religious development was met with ever greater resistance, not only from the imported communist leadership, but also from local village activists formed out of a nonconformist wing of Mennonite descendents. And this pressure did not fail to manifest itself. The Representative of the Council of Religious Affairs has statistical data which suggests that as of January 1, 1964 there were seven Mennonite societies and three groups with a total number of 413 believers in the Altai krai region. A year later only six societies and two groups together totaling 328 people remained.³ The statistics quoted by the Representative were certainly not always accurate, but the general tendency of decline they reveal was correctly reflected according to older church members. An undeniable and significant reduction of the number of believers was observed.

The survival of a minority religious community required consolidation of isolated groups of believers. So, what could and did become a point of consolidation? Why did Mennonite descendents who chose to return to faith not create their own religious association that would unite everyone?

In post-war times there was a real possibility for religious groups to restore their congregations within the framework of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists (AUCECB). Some Mennonites used this opportunity to legalize their congregations. However being affiliated with the AUCECB they were subject to a rather broad set of restrictions imposed by Representatives of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR. These restrictions affected vital features of congregational life and were aimed at curtailing religious activity and turning young people away from the faith. Frequently the church was not allowed to decide matters of church management. This is probably why the AUCECB did not become a consolidating factor for large numbers of Mennonite congregations. A. P. Sedeshov, Representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (SPDRK) in Altai krai, speaking in 1983 in Karaganda at the session of Representatives of the Council for Religious Affairs, noted that "... one of the reasons Mennonites transfer to the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (CCECB) seems to be the imposed registration requirements under the AUCECB. Although it has a Mennonite section, Mennonites do not recognize the AUCECB as their own."⁴

In the early 1960s, a schism took place among Evangelical Christian Baptists. A radical wing of the CCECB called *initsiativniki* declared and rather consistently implemented a number of evangelical principles that paralleled Mennonite ideals.⁵

In our area, there was no obvious point of consolidation for the decapitated Mennonitism. No one remained who could bring the isolated groups together in cooperation or ordain new church ministers, preachers and presbyters. And a movement which satisfied spiritual needs of Mennonite children was available. Issues of raising children in a religious spirit, the autonomy of the church from the state and the opportunity to train church ministers were naturally taken care of within the framework of the CCECB movement. For example, in the 1960s in Siberia, Andrei Isaakovich Zhirov, presbyter of Slavgorod Baptist Church, ordained several people of Mennonite descent who left a significant mark on the history of the evangelical movement in Siberia.⁶

When our fathers were faced with a choice between a wretched spiritual existence and a slow death and preserving and transmitting to their children a living faith in God within congregations, they united with the Baptist *intsiativniki*; they made a choice in favour of the second option. This did not happen at a Mennonite congress or a conference. There was nobody in Altai krai who could convene such a forum nor would it have been possible because of the repressions. This process took place spontaneously as a childhood memory of my mother illustrates. I still remember my mother's words as she told us children how she as a young girl searching for God, entered a Baptist meeting house in Slavgorod for the first time. Every time she told us about it, she quoted the words of a well-known Christian hymn: "I was healed of disbelief when I entered the Church of Christ."⁷ G. I. Rudovsky, secretary of the Evangelical Christian-Baptist church in Slavgorod from 1956-61, also described the spontaneous nature of Mennonites becoming Baptist. He wrote:

... In 1947 Zhiron, Andrei Isaakovich, who came from Dnepropetrovsk region, was elected not a leader but presbyter. In 1948 there was a large repentance especially among people of German background. We already numbered 230 members. ... In 1956 the church numbered about 460 members. ... At that time the preachers were brothers P. P. Isaac, I. I. Harms, A. I. Born, V. N. Rudenko, A. M. Zhevno, G.[H?] G.[H?] Schmidt, Zaika. ... The treasurer of the congregation was Peter Jacob Janz.⁸

I believe that there exist historical moments when each person faces a fundamental question: what is essential to me? Sometimes a person

has to make a choice: God or personal interests, self-protection or sacrifice, tradition or worshipping a living God. As far as the generation of our parents is concerned, it did not face a choice *between Mennonitism and being Baptist but between being Baptist and atheism*, or, to put it a little more mildly, between transitioning to being Baptist and a secularization of their way of life.

What has happened as a result of the transition from Mennonite to Baptist? Yes, naturally we have lost something. I believe that from the point of view of ethnography the transition from Mennonite to Baptist may be one stage in the process of assimilation. But as a Christian I cannot accuse my parents' generation for this. *They did it for the sake of us, their children, so that another, to my mind more dangerous, transition from Mennonite to atheist would not happen.*

Let me quote some data from the lists of prisoners of conscience convicted in the period 1961-85 in Altai krai, Kemerovo, Omsk and Pavlodar oblasts. These are regions that historically had dense German Mennonite populations. In Altai krai during the indicated period, twenty five believers from CCECB churches were convicted including at least twelve of Mennonite background, in Kemerovo oblast, out of twenty one convicted, eight were of Mennonite background, in Omsk oblast, twenty out of forty two were of Mennonite background and in Pavlodar oblast, ten out of eighteen were.⁹ These figures indicate that in joining the CCECB brotherhood, former Mennonites remained staunch advocates of evangelical faith and that they had not significantly altered their beliefs after a transition to a different denomination. These people, much like their spiritual predecessors who centuries earlier deserted a circle of Swiss reformers, were prepared to pay a high price for their convictions.

For people of Mennonite background, their transition to Baptist churches, or to be more accurate, their choice in favour of faith, strengthened their spiritual values in their perception of the world. This resulted in the potential of missionary work of a specific kind. For example, at the time when many Mennonites and Mennonite descendents left for Germany, they had significantly changed the religious landscape. Hundreds of meeting houses, unlike the empty and half-empty Protestant churches and Catholic cathedrals, were full of believers, fruitful work with young people and children had taken place and there had been much growth. All this distinguishes these congregations from many others. Many believers who remained in Siberia did so for the sake of their congregations and continue to serve in them. History will show how this missionary potential will be realized.

Notes

- ¹ Walter Sawatsky, *Evangelicheskoe dvizhenie v SSSR posle vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: 1995), 325.
- ² *Ibid.*, 327-28.
- ³ State Archive of Novosibirsk Oblast (GANO), F. R-1692, O. 1, D. 185, "Report by L. Ivanov, representative of SPDRK in Altai krai," 12.
- ⁴ GANO (finding aids missing), "Speech at the meeting of representatives of SPDRK, local Soviet and administrative organs on revealing and stopping illegal activity of present and former Mennonites," Karaganda, February 24, 1983.
- ⁵ GANO (finding aids missing), "Informational report regarding the religious situation in the Altai krai and securing control of legislation observance in 1976," Barnaul, February 10, 1977.
- ⁶ *Sibirskie nivy* (Informational publication of the Evangelism section of the Siberian branch of CCECB), 2001, no. 27, 12.
- ⁷ *Pesn' vozrozhdeniia: Collection of religious songs of Evangelical Christian Baptists* (Khristianin, 2009), 221.
- ⁸ G. I. Rudovskii, "Istoriia proidennogo puti Slavgorodskoi tserkvi Evangel'skikh Khristian Baptistov," (2000), 2, personal archive.
- ⁹ *Sibirskie nivy* (Informational publication of the Evangelism section of the Siberian branch of CCECB) 2001, no. 27, pp. 3, 14, 24, 52.