Freedom, Truth, and Peace

Believers Church and Political Involvement

by Johannes Reimer

Believers Church and Party Politics

Christians have undoubtedly contributed to both democracy and peace in the world since the Reformation. This is true not only of Christian individuals but also of political parties formed by those individuals. Religious rights scholar John Witte points out in his book on Christianity and democracy, "Concurrent with this missionary movement [in the 1940s, 1950s, and beyond] in Africa, both Protestant and Catholic political activists helped to restore democracy to war-torn Europe and extend it overseas."[1] Such Christian political activism emerged among Protestants inspired by the social gospel movement and neo-Calvinistic teachings in many European countries and also in North America. Christian-Democratic Unions in almost all European countries are a classic example of this. Similar developments followed the encyclical Rerum Novarum of Pope Paul VIII, with its distinct Catholic social teachings.[2]

> Both Protestant and Catholic parties inveighed against the reductionist extremes and social failures of liberal democracies and social democracies. Liberal democracies, they believed, had sacrificed the community for the individual; social democracies had sacrificed the individual for the community. Both parties returned to a traditional Christian teaching of "social pluralism" or "subsidiarity," which stressed the dependence and participation of the individual in family, church, school, business, and other associations. Both parties stressed the responsibility of the state to respect and protect the "individual in community."[3]

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1 John Witte, *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), 9. Witte refers to the missionary movement that followed the Second World War.

2 See the full text in English: https://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html (29.07.2018).

3 Witte, *Christianity and Democracy*, 9.

Today, Christian parties operate in many countries of the world.[4] And active Christians are involved with a variety of political parties. This includes classic evangelical churches, which tend to support conservative, sometimes even rightwing, parties. Take examples in the United States, Guatemala, or Brazil.

Believers churches,[5] especially with an Anabaptist background, have also been involved in partisan politics, although rarely with major support from their constituency. Too often the membership of those churches adhere to nonconformist, apolitical teachings on the relationship between state and church. Any involvement in shaping and running society and state is considered theologically unacceptable.

As a result, members exclude themselves from participation in transforming society and lose the power to protect the poor and the needy, and even themselves, from evil political forces. I would even argue that they miss their divine calling to be God's *ecclesia* in the world, called out of the world to accept responsibility for the world (Mt 16:18) and to be salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5:13–15), making nations to become disciples of Christ (Mt 28:19). To be *ecclesia* means to shut down the gates of hell in a city, orienting and introducing the society to the values of the kingdom of God; that's what Jesus teaches his disciples in this passage and others.[6]

Ecclesia is and should be an agent of social transformation. Thus, political involvement by God's *ecclesia* is crucial. But does the church need parties in order to introduce peace and well-being to a society? Is party politics an instrument of her success? The Bible does not really teach partisan church involvement, so is the church not a party? Should she support her members in considering partisan political engagement as an arm of her mission? To encourage a debate on this issue, I will present a case of a believers church missing a historic chance to disciple a nation largely because of their nonconformist attitude and noninterest in a stronger participation in a parliamentarian democracy.

4 See listing: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_democratic_parties (29.07.2018).

5 The term "believers churches" stands for churches that stress strict active confessional membership. In countries with a state-church past like Germany or Russia, such churches are usually called free churches, indicating their relationship with the state.

6 See more in Johannes Reimer, *Missio Politica: The Mission of Church and Politics* (Carlisle: Langham, 2017).

Giving Democracy a Face: A Russian Story

Believers churches involved in party politics can make a substantial positive difference, even when such involvement is possible only for a short duration. Here is an example from Russia to ponder.[7]

In 1905 the political situation in Russia was marked by upheaval, protest, and revolutionary, anti-tsarist movements. That year, leading men from the Mennonite, Baptist, and evangelical Christian denominations established the first evangelical Christian party in Russia. The party was named Union of Freedom, Truth, and Peace (UFTP).[8]

Historians call the years 1905–1907 "the first Russian revolution." At the beginning of that period, Tsar Nikolai II signed a number of decrees offering civil rights to his population. On April 17, 1905, he signed a foundational law of religious rights that granted all religious groups of Russia the right to freely exercise their religion.[9] Six months later, on Oct 17, he signed other laws as part of a so-called October Manifesto guaranteeing, among other things, the freedom of consciousness, public speech, and organization of social structures.

For the first time ever, evangelical groups were free to publicly confess their beliefs and to organize their own structures of public engagement. Despite massive persecution by the state, the evangelicals had grown considerably in the decades before. The change of legal status promised new chances for evangelism and church growth. According to the Soviet historian L. N. Mitrokhin, this motivated some evangelical visionaries to attempt an open political engagement.[10] The initial group of leaders included Peter M. Friesen (Mennonite) and Nikolai V. Odintsov (Baptist). They met in Sevastopol, Crimea, where Friesen lived, on October 21, only four days after the official release of the tsarist Manifesto. There they discussed and released the "political platform of the 'Union for Freedom, Truth and Peace' of those who oppose all violence and promote continuing progress in civil, economic and spiritual-moral matters."[11]

The program appears to have been discussed and prepared beforehand by Friesen. He had spent a quarter of a century, while also serving as a leading min-

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7 The term "evangelical"—in Russian, "Evangel'skie"—is exclusively used for free churches of Protestant origin. In this article, I use "evangelical," "free," and "believers church" interchangeably, fully aware that this may not apply elsewhere in the world, especially in Western Europe and the United States.

8 In Russian: Союз свободы, истины и мира.

9 Ukaz, „Ob ukreplenii natshal veroterpimosti".

10 L. N. Mitrokhin, *Baptism: Istoria I sovrmennost'* (St. Petersburg: RKHGI, 1997), 251.

11 In Russian: «Политическая платформа „Союза свободы, истины и мира" противников всякого насилия, сторонников постоянного прогресса—гражданского, экономического и духовно-нравственного».

ister, collecting and evaluating archival documents before publishing a massive history that was considered fair by all sides, of the Mennonite experience in Russia.[12] Fluent in Russian, he had many friends among Russian evangelicals. Since Friesen had moved to Sevastopol, his house had become a center of evangelical activity in the city. The city administration also watched his place.[13]

The foundation of the UFTP was announced in the local newspaper, *Krymski Vestnik*, spurring the local population to talk about the "Frizen-Party."[14]

Friesen saw the new freedom of movement in Russia and must have been concerned with the growing disability of his own denomination to properly reply to the winds of political change. He states that the vast majority of the Mennonites were less concerned with change, since they were economically far better off than the Russian masses.[15] In fact, most of them strongly supported the monarchy since it was the tsar who had granted them special privileges in the times of Paul I.[16] Consequently, they also supported political parties in favor of a constitutional monarchy, such as the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) or the Union of the 17th October (Oktobrists).[17] This does not mean, however, that Mennonites blindly supported all the injustice produced by the regime of Nikolai II as Soviet historians have again and again falsely repeated.[18]

According to the platform, the newly formed party proposed to support

- the constitutional monarchy,
- free election,
- the creation of area parliaments,
- a stable and uncorrupt government,
- a strong national defense army—excluding, however, any invasion into other lands,
- engagement for a reform of the juridical system,
- free education for all children,

12 Peter M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Rußkand (1789–1910)* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911).

13 „Sektanstovo v sevastopole," in *Tavricheskie eparchal'nye vedomosti* 30, 1906, 1187–88.

14 Dikii, „K predstoiashim vyboram," in *Krymski Vestnik* 38, February 17, 1906.

15 Peter M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Rußkand (1789–1910)*, 525.

16 George K. Epp, *Geschichte der Mennoniten in Russland*, Band I: Deutsche Täufer in Russland (Lage: Logos Verlag, 1997), 223–25.

17 Epp, 526.

18 See, for instance, V. F. Krestianinov, *Mennonity* (Moskva: Izdetel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1967), 36–39.

- a steady reduction of state subsidies for any religious organizations,
- the freedom to preach the gospel, and social engagement in "deeds of love,"
- freedom of speech, of conscience, of organizations and public assemblies,
- sufficient land distribution to farmers, allowing them a reasonable living and legal norming of large, private agricultural complexes.

The strong Christian character of the party was especially expressed by the statement in the last plank of the platform—namely, that the party aimed to realize all teachings of Jesus Christ and rejected all aggressive violence.

The majority of initial party members were Mennonites from the South of Russia, yet four Russian Baptists from Sevastopol are especially mentioned: I. M. Staroverov, N. V. Odintsov, S. T. Spak, and P. E. Judin. A board was formed consisting of seventeen members. The Baptist Odintsov and the evangelical Christian Prokhanov (later) were elected to the board, and Peter Friesen became the first president of the union. The central office was to be located in Sevastopol.[19]

The new party decided to join the planned election to the first Russian Parliament—the Duma. They appealed to the evangelical electorate with the following words: "Time is precious, and the matter does not allow any delay; therefore, let's build one holy and great family, joined by freedom, truth, and peace-loving instead of strife, stealing, destruction, and other similar disorders to which we are called by the anarchists and revolutionaries."[20]

The appeal underlines one of the major motifs of the initiators of UFT—the peaceful change of society toward democracy. Whereas anarchist and revolutionary movements proposed violence, the UFTP rejected any violent proposals toward a more just society.[21] This was, of course, deeply rooted in the confessions of all free-church denominations around the table. In addition, the party advertised as a non-ethnic, non-class, even non-religious, national party for justice and peace.[22]

The appeal did not receive much public support, however, which forced the leadership to slightly revise the program. On November 28, 1905, they made the

19 Alexander I. Klibanov, *Istoria religioznogo sektanstva v Rossii (60-e gody XIX—1917 god)* (Moskva: Nauka, 1965), 259.

20 Klibanov, *Istoria*, 259.

21 Lew N. Mitrokhin, *Baptism: Istoria i sovremennost'* (St. Peterburg: RChGI, 1997), 255.

22 Peter M. Friesen, „Pis'mo v redaktsiu", in *Krymski vestnik* 44, no. 24 (February 1906).

party sound more specific and liberal.[23] The changes followed the program of the constitutional democrats (Kadets), obviously in view of joining hands for the election. Friesen himself announced the envisioned cooperation.[24] Further changes followed with the joining of Ivan S. Prokhanov, the president of the Union of Evangelical Christians. Prokhanov was well known not only among the evangelicals but also in liberal parts of society.[25] Winning him for the board seemed to promise more success.

The alliance with the Kadets, however, broke apart just two months later because of the obvious leftward move of the constitutional democrats—their support of the social democrats with their declared violent position, according to Friesen.[26] The Kadets, however, blamed Friesen for moving rightward and supporting those Mennonites in favor of rightwing monarchists.[27]

These moves did not stabilize the party. In fact, most of the Mennonites withdrew their support. In a December 12, 1905, article (published in February 1906), Friesen tried to convince some of them of the following: "Many will find our political program far too radical—on the women's right to vote, on the land question—but we are right in the center of the events; we see and hear what the people want; we believe (our program) is the very minimum of what alone can pacify them, and we find nothing here that contradicts the Holy Scriptures."[28]

But his appeal failed. The first evangelical party in Russia did not seem to support the Mennonites' specific ethnic or religious interests. And rich Mennonite landowners massively opposed governmental land distribution.[29] Plus, voting in favor of a strong self-defense force—the army and police—the rich Mennonites ran completely against their dogmatic convictions.

The other evangelical denominations might have been less strong in their support for the tsar, but political involvement as such was a strange concept to most of them. So support did not come from them either. Even with Prokhanov joining the board at the end of 1905 and with the revision of the program, the UFTP faded toward dissolution. This happened even before the first Duma elections took place.

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23 *Der Botschafter*, 14, no. 28 (November 1905): 2–4.

24 Peter M. Friesen, „Ot central´nogo biuro ´Soiuza svobody, pravdy i miroliubia", in *Krymskii Vestnik 298, no. 29 (December 1905): 3.*

25 *Der Botschafter,* 4.

26 Peter M. Friesen, „Pis´mo v redakciu".

27 Klibanov, *Istoria*, 317–20.

28 Peter M. Friesen, "Zur Geschichte der politischen Platform", in *Der Botschafter* 19/1906, 3; 20/1906, 2. Trans. Martin, *Mennonites*, 19.

29 See the discussion in Terry Martin, *The Mennonites and the Russian State Duma 1905–1914, The Donald W. Treadgold Papers in Russian, East Euriean, and Central Asian Studies, 4, January,* (Washington: University of Washington, 1996), 18–.

We know little about the impact of UFTP. The last reference to the party was in 1906. The UFTP was obviously dissolved as a result of very limited support by their own Mennonite and evangelical constituency. And the party members themselves seemed fractioned regarding what a Christian party could stand for.[30] The Mennonites were involved in an intensive Duma debate in the years 1906–1914 and in experimenting with different strategies to politically secure their own status without establishing their own political party.[31] Peter Friesen's attempt to give democracy an evangelical-Christian face failed not because there was no need for such a voice in society but because of the inability of the evangelical constituency to enter the public space with political concepts reflecting both the context of sociopolitical reality and their own confessional stances. Most of the Mennonites, for instance, avoided any theology of community, merely seeking to protect their own interests.

A New Start in 1917

The dream of some influential evangelical leaders did not die, however. Ivan S. Prokhanov and a group of twenty evangelical Christians around him, just after the Duma phase (1905–1917), founded the party "Resurrection" on March 17, 1917. Prokhanov was elected president.[32] The program of the party was published in *Utreniaia Svezda*, a newspaper founded by Prokhanov.[33] It included a variety of suggestions for transforming socioeconomic life in the country, targeting especially the life conditions of peasants and the working class.

Among other proposals, the program suggested the following: a just land redistribution to poor farmers by de-privatizing state- and church-owned properties; support of the working class in their right to strike in a peaceful manner; legal guarantee of the eight-hour working day; full and equal rights for women; and equal access to education for young people. The program also supported the establishment of a "World Union of States" to guarantee world peace. Human rights—especially the right of freedom of speech and of conscience and of religious practice—were clearly stated and a de-clericalization and elimination of a state church in society proposed. The program followed the line of the UFTP but also expanded some issues in light of the new conditions.

The party program was presented May 17–25 in Petrograd to the delegates of the fourth Congress of the Union of Evangelical Christians. The congress did not follow Prokhanov's suggestion to adopt the party. To the contrary, their res-

30 Nils Sundgren, *Gottes Volk in der Sowjetunion: Ein Überblick über sechs Jahrzehnte sowjetischer Religionspolitik* (Witten: Bundesverlag, 1978), 66.

31 See the discussion on the issue in Martin, *Mennonites*, 20–56.

32 *Istoria EChB v SSSR* (Moskva: Izdel′stvo VSEChB, 1989), 187.

33 *Utreniaia Swezda*, January 1917, 7.

olution clearly stated a basic rejection of engaging churches in politics, although it would allow individual members to get involved in party politics.

The Resurrection party was also declared a private initiative of some active church members.[34] For the founders, this meant a major disappointment. But Prokhanov did not give up on politics. The Resurrection party took part in the elections to the St. Petersburg regional parliament (Duma) with considerable success; it gained more votes than the Social Democrats with their candidate Grigori V. Plekhanov (1856–1918).[35]

Similar to the evangelical Christians, the other leading evangelical denominations—the Baptists and the Mennonite groups—withdrew from direct party support. The Baptists, for instance, in their monthly publication *Slovo Istiny* even interviewed their members as to whether or not a Christian should be allowed to be involved in politics. Responses were quite diverse,[36] but the vast majority rejected any political participation in principle.

Instead of joining Prokhanov's party, the leaders of the Baptist Union—M. D. Timoshenko and P. V. Pavlov—explained publicly the Baptist position on the matter, and Pavlov published their statement in an article titled "Political Requirements of Baptists."[37] In all its main positions, the statement followed the program of Resurrection, elaborating some details—on the right to a public burial, for instance—and stating clearly that a transformation of society is reached not by political engagement but through the changed lives of individuals.

It became obvious that evangelicals did not support partisan political engagement. One year after the start of Resurrection, the party ceased to exist. Even Prokhanov himself years later in his autobiography avoided talking about the two Russian parties he was instrumental in starting. He claims that he and his co-brothers decided to say "no to politics and yes to the gospel."[38]

For the Baptists, their founding president Vassili G. Pavlov (1854–1924) wrote in his famous article "Truth about the Baptists":

> We do not believe in any improvement of society by violent turnovers. The method of Christianity in this regard does not follow the ideas of science-cen-

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34 *Istoria EChB*, 187. See also Jakov K. Dukhonchenko Archive, File: „Periods 1917 po 1929 god" (Moscow: Archive of the Russian EChB).

35 Ivan S. Prokhanov, *V kotle Rossii* (Chicago: Vsemirnyi sovet Evangel'skich Christian, 1992).

36 Neotlizhnaia zadacha, in *Slovo Istiny*, April 1917, 63.

37 *Slovo Istiny*, January 1917, 1.

38 Ivan S. Prokhanoff, *In the Cauldron of Russia, 1869–1933*: *Autobiography of I. S. Prokhanoff; The Life of an Optimist in the Land of Pessimism, Together with an Interesting History of the Russian Evangelical Christian Union* (New York: All-Russian Christian Union, 1933).

> tered socialists who propose to gain power and then reorganize society through directive laws. This is a method of revolution implying to introduce peace by using violence. . . . Our relationship to the working classes is determined by the gospel. . . . We must tell the people that a new age will only come through born-again people and that there is only one just Ruler—Jesus.[39]

Post-Soviet Evangelical Involvement in Society, But How?

In the years after 1917, evangelicals in Russia developed many socioeconomic activities, such as forming agricultural collectives or urban collective enterprises (artel). Even communist political leaders admired their economic projects among the poor and the have-nots, and the group's moral influence on the youth in the country. The president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Kalinin, was one among many of such leaders.[40]

The admiration, however, turned into bloody persecution under Stalin's rule in 1929. Soon all social and economic activities under the banner of religion were banned; the evangelical collective production plants were closed and put under Soviet anti-religious leadership.[41] And the Golden Age of evangelicals in Russia ceased to exist. An amazing socio-transformative movement had been crushed.

Was it right to give up on political involvement on a party level, as the evangelicals in Russia did? Would their enormous sociopolitical role in the first years after the revolution combined with a power position in parliament have determined a more positive outcome for Russia? This is at least worth thinking about. By sticking to a rigid nonconformist position of ecclesial non-involvement in a critical political transformation of a whole country, the church of Christ in Russia instead saw the "gates of hell prevail." Didn't Christ promise us something else? Surely, but on the condition that his church actively live as his *ecclesia*, as a true agent of discipling a nation to live a life of God's kingdom-people.

Some people may argue that this sounds too optimistic. They can rightfully point out that the Stalinist regime crushed all party activity outside of the one and only Communist party, introducing a violent antireligious system and leav-

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39 Vassili G. Pavlov, Pravda o Baptistach, in *Baptist* 46/1911, 363.

40 Sundgren, *Gottes Volk,* 88–90. See more on the subject in *Olga Iu. Red'kina: Sel'skokhoziaistvenye religioznye trudovye kollektivyi v 1917-m - 1930-e gody: na materialakh evropeiskoi chasti RSFSR* (Volgograd: Gos. Universitet Volgorod, 2004); Tatiana Paavlovna Nazarova, *Blaagotvoritel'naia deiatel'nost' zarubezhbykh mennonitskikh organizatsii v sovetskom gosudarstve (1920–1930gg)* (Volgograd: Gos. Universitet Volgograd, 2010).

41 Sundgren, *Gottes Volk*, 91–92.

ing us with many difficult questions: how should the evangelicals have arranged themselves with such an aggressively acting regime, for example?

And yet, the evangelicals, too, positioned themselves against the state. Common sense dictates that joint action requires the ability to establish middle grounds, but the evangelicals left little space for any compromise in their statements, except in the party programs examined in this article. To work with the people for the common good, instead of alienating them by programmatic unwillingness to cooperate, may create space for evangelical involvement even where such is not wanted by the ruling party. In Putin's Russia today, for example, such involvement would be welcomed by the people.

To date, however, only a very few Christians have joined political parties; an evangelical party that would work for the common good is not in the line of vision for most Christians. It is time for Christians around the world to reconsider.