

Metamorphosis, Part 1 (End of the Cold War)

Scripture: John 15:19–20; 1 Corinthians 3:10–15

Code: B100205

The world of 1993 was another time in many significant ways. That was a unique year, strikingly different from the rest of the 20th century—but also nothing at all like the Internet era, which was just about to begin.

History will no doubt always remember the early 1990s as a pivotal time in human history. In 1992, conservative op-ed commentator George Will published a compilation of his newspaper columns written over the prior three years. He titled the anthology *Suddenly*, which perfectly captured the spirit of the day. Suddenly, confusingly, *everything* was in flux. Worldly fads and philosophies were changing faster than ever. The changes were global and profound, affecting everything from art to zoology. Ideological changes, societal changes, political changes, and moral changes were the order of the day. The shifting of so many opinions and boundaries all at once was both drastic and disorienting.

No wonder. Every important worldview built on “modern” thought was now utterly discredited. Some of the most basic presuppositions modern secular society had staked out as true and certain were left totally in tatters.

A major turning point had occurred on November 9, 1989, when the Berlin wall fell literally overnight, signaling the failure of European Communism. The end of Lenin’s legacy came very quickly—and so did other monumental changes, all with stunning speed. Gorbachev, Glasnost, and the Gulf War dominated the news at the start of the 90s, but the Gulf War ended in early 1991 and the Soviet Union collapsed in August of that same year. Boris Yeltsin boldly defied an attempted coup, took the reins of Russian power, and began the formal dissolution of the Soviet empire.

By 1993, the world was emphatically renouncing the values of the Cold War. We were watching our parents’ concept of “modernity” quickly fade in the rear-view mirror. The word *postmodernism* was just starting to be used here and there in popular discourse—but the set of ideas it stands for were already evident everywhere. Before most people even realized we had witnessed the end of the modern era, postmodern values had completely altered the way the world thinks and talks about truth.

There was, of course, a positive side to the end of modernity. For one thing, many modern presuppositions *needed* to be debunked—starting with the notion that science and human reason are reliable arbiters of truth and falsehood. Modernity, nicknamed “The Age of Reason” by its earliest advocates, more or less began with a rejection of Scripture’s authority and the elevation of the human mind in its place. The fall of every major modern ideology exposed the hubris of that way of thinking, and that was unequivocally a good development.

Besides that, the worldwide remapping of political alliances opened wonderful new opportunities for ministry. I was privileged to make numerous trips to the former Soviet Union, teaching groups of

pastors and preaching in Russian and Ukrainian churches. I went at the behest of Soviet Baptists and formed relationships with them that endure strongly to this day. During my earliest visits to that part of the world, I was absolutely amazed to see the strength and vitality of evangelical churches there. Their worship services were the very picture of austere simplicity—just the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the ordinances, totally devoid of the flash and entertainment being touted as essential tools for the times by all the “experts” back home. That got me thinking more deeply than ever about how the Lord builds His church and what it means to be a wise master builder (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

By the early ‘90s American evangelicalism was shamelessly imitating virtually every worldly fad. Church leaders and church-growth strategists openly described the gospel as a commodity to be sold at market, and the predictable result was a frantic attempt to make the gospel into the kind of product most buyers wanted. The conventional wisdom was that sophisticated marketing strategies were far more effective than gospel proclamation for reaching the “unchurched” multitudes. No one, it seemed, wanted to challenge that notion, which was buttressed with countless opinion polls. And who could argue with the obvious “success” of several entertainment-oriented megachurches?

Western evangelicals had been gradually losing interest in biblical preaching and doctrinal instruction for decades. The church in America had become weak, worldly, and man-centered. Evangelical ears were itching for something more hip and entertaining than biblical preaching (cf. 2 Timothy 4:3), and business-savvy evangelical pundits declared that it was foolish not to give people what they demanded. Without pragmatic methodologies numerical growth would be virtually impossible, they insisted—even though such pragmatism was manifestly detrimental to *spiritual* growth.

Churches were starving spiritually while overdosing on entertainment. A few prosperous megachurches masked the tragedy with incredibly large attendance figures, but anyone who took time to examine the trajectory could see that Western evangelicalism was in serious trouble.

By contrast, the beleaguered Iron-Curtain churches were hungry for biblical teaching, steadily gaining spiritual strength, and growing numerically on the strength of bold gospel ministry. After years of communist oppression, they were finally free to preach Christ openly, and that is precisely what they did. They were flourishing as a result.

Most Russian pastors had no formal training, so they sought help from the West in the areas of hermeneutics and doctrine. (That’s how I got involved with them.) The most mature and discerning leaders in the Iron-Curtain churches were wary of influences from the West. Frankly, I shared their concern and appreciated their caution. I was convinced that even the weakest of *their* churches could teach evangelicals in America a lot about the biblical approach to church growth. They understood that no legitimate church-growth strategy should ever fail to recognize the truth of John 15:19-20: “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.”

When the Iron Curtain fell, however, “missionaries” from the West flooded the former Soviet Union, not so much with gospel-oriented resources and Bible-study tools, but with highly questionable evangelistic strategies—and with the same poisonous philosophy of church growth that had made Western evangelicalism so superficial and worldly. Russian church leaders were appalled that so

many tawdry trends came into their culture from the West under the pretense of evangelism. I was offended, too—and embarrassed.

I remember watching glitzy American televangelists with comically big hair peddling their health-and-wealth message and other false gospels on Russian television during my earliest trips to Moscow. They probably had little effect on healthy Russian *churches*, but they injected a seriously false gospel into the public perception, totally confusing millions. Soviet people had been indoctrinated with atheism and shielded from the truth of Scripture. They therefore had no means of distinguishing truth from falsehood in religion. So much false Christianity on television no doubt inoculated multitudes against the real gospel.

I also remember seeing a parade of “student missionaries” from America putting on a variety show in a public square in Kiev, using every circus trick from jugglers to clowns, and every wordless type of entertainment from mimes to interpretive dance, all claiming to communicate “the gospel”—or *something* spiritual-sounding—across the language barrier. I frankly could not be certain what the actual message was supposed to be. I have a fairly good grasp of the gospel as Scripture presents it, and that was not the message being pantomimed in Independence Square. Again, I was embarrassed for the church in the West.

Back in America, these performances were being reported as serious evangelistic work. Judging from the numbers of supposed converts claimed, we might have expected churches in the Iron-Curtain countries to be doubling and quadrupling on a monthly basis.

Russian and Ukrainian Churches were indeed growing, but the evangelistic buskers and street artists from the West had nothing to do with that. Those churches grew because Russian Christians, now free to proclaim the gospel openly, preached repentance from sin and faith in Christ to their neighbors. The response was remarkable. I sat in many Russian worship services for hours at a time, hearing convert after convert publicly repent—renouncing former sins and declaring faith in Christ to the gathered church, always in standing-room-only crowds. It was the polar opposite of what American church-growth gurus insisted was absolutely necessary. But it was just like watching the book of Acts unfold in real life.

As a matter of fact, most of the Westerners who rushed to the former Soviet Union when communism collapsed missed the real signs of church growth in those years because they completely ignored the churches that were already there. They started parachurch organizations, opted for pure media ministry, sponsored Punch-and-Judy shows in the public square, or tried to start new churches modeled on Western worldly styles. Most of the visible results of that sort of “evangelistic” and church-planting activity proved to be blessedly short-lived.

What *did* last was by no means all good. Americans injected into that culture a style of worldly evangelicalism that is now gaining traction and causing confusion within the Russian-speaking churches. Those churches that had weathered decades of government harassment and public ridicule now have to contend with something much subtler but a thousand times worse: trendy methods from American evangelicals—gimmicks and novelties that diminish practically everything truly important in favor of things that appeal to people’s baser instincts.

By far the most subtle and dangerous Western influences came in through church-growth experts, missiologists, and professional pollsters. Unlike the televangelists and street performers, these

academicians managed to gain a platform within Russian-speaking churches. They were trusted because they were writers, career missionaries, seminary professors with credentials, and even pastors. They brought loads of books and ideas, virtually all of them advocating a highly pragmatic approach to ministry that was foreign in every sense to a church that had lived under communist persecution for the better part of a century.

One struggles to imagine anything more grossly inappropriate than the fad-chasing pragmatism that was deliberately injected into Russian and eastern European churches by Westerners tinkering with theories about contextualization. But the influx of shallow evangelicalism into Russia in the early '90s was barely the tip of the iceberg. Thanks to various means of instant, inexpensive mass communications, the stultifying influence of dysfunctional American religion soon inundated the entire world. The Internet in particular suddenly opened the floodgates so that it became impossible to contain and control such nonsense. Within just a few years, evangelical gimmickry became the most visible and influential expression of Western "spirituality" worldwide.

The poison of religious pragmatism is now an enormous *global* problem.

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