

*This presentation was made in August 2001 at a convocation for the faculty and staff of the Russian-American Christian University in Moscow.*

## **Training Agents of Hope**

August 2001 is a memorable time in Russia since it is the tenth anniversary of the August 1991 Coup and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Communist Party. Results of a recent poll in Russia were published in the Washington Post on August 19, 2001, and they were as follows:

- Only 10% regarded the overthrow of the coup a democratic revolution that had put to an end Communist power.
- 25% now look back at this failed coup as a tragic event whose aftermath was disastrous for the country.
- When asked if their lives would be any different if the coup plotters had seized power and kept it, more than 50% said it would be the same as now or had no idea.
- The writer's conclusion: "Ten years after the end of the Communist regime Russia has not come to terms with its past. In fact, it is much more indifferent to its past today than it was 10 year ago." [Masha Lipman]

It appears to me as if Russia is still a place with little hope. Am I right? What are your reactions to this?

Let me ask you a second question: What thoughts or ideas come to mind when you think of the word "hope."

- Alexander Zaichenko [RACU Board member and economics professor] told me that the Russian word for "hope," *Nadezhda*, is very popular in the Russian language, more popular than in English, he thought. He believes this is because of the severe hardships of Russian life. Zaichenko said the Communists exploited this concept of hope with promises of a bright future, the Communist kingdom of happiness. It was a cynical attempt to give an intangible substitution for the suffering of millions of men and women under the USSR. He also thought it was the second most popular first name for women, after Mary/Maria.
- In his opinion, the Communist misuse of "hope" did significant harm to the mentality of the Russian people; now many Russians rely on fantastic and unrealistic dreams rather than their actual behavior and actions.

I have been thinking a lot about the character of hope and its relationship to the mission of RACU. RACU's essential mission is to train young Russian Christians for leadership roles in the 'New Russia.'

- Preparing young people for leadership means giving them a vision of hope, a sense that they can make a difference in their society and nation.
- This is a tough job if the context of the university is one of hopelessness and despair – or one of false hope based on superstition or fantasy.
- So let's talk about the character of hope and our job as teachers and staff to communicate this hope to our students.

### **The Character of Hope**

- It seems to me that hope is a psychological necessity for us as human beings, if we envision the future at all. Even if there are no rational grounds for it, we continue to hope or we create false hopes.<sup>2</sup>
- It is often the case in our lives when our hopes appear to be illusory and transient.
- Think of some great literature in which the classical writers and poets describe hope as "faint," or "feeble," or "phantom."
- Can you think of examples from Russian or American literature?
- The majority of secular (non-Christian) thinkers in the ancient world did not regard hope as a virtue, but merely as a temporary illusion.
- Remember the Apostle Paul's comment that pagans have no hope?  
Ephesians 2:12 – "remember that at that time you [Gentiles/pagans] were separate from Christ... without hope and without God in the world."
- Unlike the ancient philosophers, the Bible offers a very different understanding of hope.
- Where there is belief in a living God, who acts and intervenes in human life, and who can be trusted to keep His promises, hope in the Biblical sense becomes possible.
  - It is not a matter of temperament
  - It is not conditioned by prevailing circumstances
  - It is not dependent on human possibilities
  - It does not depend upon what we possess
  - It does not depend on what we are able to do
  - It does not depend on what others can do for us
- Biblical hope is inseparable from faith in God – let's examine Biblical teaching on the character of hope.

## The Training of Students as Agents of Hope

- One of my former teachers, Lewis Smedes, helped me to understand that genuine hope combines three ingredients: imagination, faith and desire.
- First, imagination. The hopeful person imagines a good state of affairs. Examples: the end of racism or pornography or dictatorship.
- In the American context, Martin Luther King's speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, was a model of this. King talked about Black Americans languishing "in the corners of society" and "struggling through the dark valley of segregation." It was time, King said, for Black Americans to start striding along the "sunlit path of racial justice." It was high time for "justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24)
- In conclusion, King spoke words which will never be forgotten in America. He said he looked forward in faith to the day when all of God's children would let freedom ring. "Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"
- Martin Luther King, Jr., had the imagination to see what society would be like when there was no racism and when all people would be free, despite the color of their skin.
- But, second, genuine hope involves faith – its foundation. The most eloquent addresses to human hope and human conscience appeal to God because it is God's program of justice and peace which invites us to live a harmonious life.
- I do not mean to suggest that discerning God's will about justice in our world is an easy task. But the Bible helps us to see beyond our own self-interest, which is our sinful nature. We are often tempted to make ourselves the center of the world. And our culture encourages to think and act this way. But the Bible, and our faith in God, teaches us to see the world through the eyes of others and to focus on their needs.
- Biblical hope has a wide-angle lens – it takes in whole nations and people, the entire created order.
- Third, Biblical hope involves passion/desire. It is one thing to imagine, it is another to ground that imagination in faith, but it is essential that there be passion and desire related to the hope. That's what the Bible teaches!

- We need the passion to redeem our culture, our societies, to make things the way they are supposed to be.
- When we view injustice and evil, we can say with conviction, “It doesn’t have to be like this.”
- Instead of cynicism, which allows us to simply walk away when we see evil, Biblical hope says these things have to be changed.
- TRIAD: faith, hope and love.
- By its connection with love, Christian hope is freed from all selfishness. The Christian does not hope for blessings for himself which he does not desire to share with others.
- Hope cannot exist apart from faith, and love can not be exercised without hope.
- These three things are tied together and comprise the Christian way of life.
- Our challenge as teachers -- and staff – is to teach these truths to our students.