

**A Response to Gennadiy Sergienko’s “Unlearned Lessons from the Past”  
April 5, 2010**

*In a recent edition of a newspaper published by Christian book publisher Mirt, Gennady Sergienko, pastor of Moscow’s Second Baptist Church, wrote a highly critical article about the state of the churches in the city of Samara, Russia, and about the “Help for Preachers” program hosted by Samara’s central Baptist church, Transfiguration Church.*

*That article, entitled “Unlearned Lessons from the Past,” can be found in Russian here (<http://gazeta.mirt.ru/?2-7-985--1>). This article is not the first from pastor Sergienko in this vein. A similar version, “A Conversation with Rev. Gennady Sergienko,” appeared in English on the website for the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in November 2009, found here (<http://www.baptistrelations.org/page1.php>).*

*Because pastor Sergienko has now written about his concerns repeatedly and in different contexts, it is fitting to issue a response in order to provide context and correct errors in pastor Sergienko’s characterizations. An open, personal letter to pastor Sergienko has already been written by Victor Ryaguzov, pastor of Samara’s Transfiguration Church, and is accessible here (<http://www.propovedi.ru/2010/03/ryaguzov/>). What follows below is the official response from the leadership of Transfiguration Church, Samara.*

It deserves mention at the outset that criticism almost always contains a grain of truth. We agree with the author of the article, pastor Gennadiy Sergienko, that the training program hosted by our church—the curriculum as well as the instructors and students—are not perfect. We are still learning—and sometimes relearning—lessons, and on a daily basis are reminded of our inadequacies. Add to that cross-cultural nuances associates with a ministry partnership between western and Russian churches, and we see that the challenges to fulfilling the commission of 2 Timothy 2:2 are considerable. As we have often said, any true benefit that we have provided to the almost 300 men who have studied in our program over the last ten years is due only to the grace of God.

It is that grace which also continues to lead us along in the process of refinement. By the grace of God there has been growth in wisdom over the past ten years of our training. The goal has always been for our students to embody the apostle Paul’s instructions in 1 Timothy 4:12 in their local church ministries. But we understand more profoundly today than we did ten years ago about the need for emphasis on patience, endurance, humility, and the appreciation for the sacrifices of previous generations of saints. We are still growing.

At the same time, it must also be noted that criticism almost always also contains grains of subjectivity, exaggeration, and sometimes outright error. This is also the case with the criticism of pastor Sergienko, and it deserves correction.

First, two observations must be made about the nature of pastor Sergienko’s research and the tone of his language.

It is noteworthy that the author himself has not visited Samara for many years, has never conducted interviews with those in Samara against whom he writes, has never attended a seminar or conference sponsored by our training program, nor has he conducted a thorough study of a broad cross-section of those who have studied in our program. This is a grave omission in light of the nature of pastor Sergienko’s far-reaching criticism, and casts significant doubt on the objectivity of his sources as well as his conclusions.

Regarding the tone of the criticism, the language is extreme. The strongest in the list of troubling statements the author makes is found when he compares churches in Samara to “a totalitarian sect” and “Islamic fundamentalism.” Not only does this again prove the author’s ignorance of the situation in Samara, it again proves the weakness of his opinions. If one must resort to radical language to try to convince his audience, beware. Sadly, we have heard such accusations all too often in *other* contexts—specifically in response to the preaching of the gospel to the unbelieving world.

We must agree to avoid cultural catchphrases which can easily lead to detrimental consequences. In fact, the use of this very language often leads to the very practice it claims to condemn by actually *cultivating* intolerance and slander. As James 3:13 says, “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.” That is wise counsel for all of all parties in any debate.

Second, five responses must be given in response to the author’s five main points of criticism.

(1) First, pastor Sergienko lists an emphasis on the absolute authority of Scripture as a symptom of spiritual illness (which he labels as the “Samara syndrome”). He rejects this emphasis because it leads, in his mind, to the transfer of absolute authority to *the one who interprets* Scripture. He describes this characteristic as belonging to “fundamentalists” of the West who are given over to extremism, chauvinism, and the like.

We too reject the notion that Scripture’s inerrancy and absolute authority can be transferred from Scripture to the interpreter himself. That has never been part of our teaching and we would never support anyone who would advocate it. But to deny the *transfer* of this absolute authority must never lead to the denial of the absolute authority of Scripture in the first place. That is simply not logically consistent. Most importantly, Scripture itself is clear about its own authoritative and inerrant nature—and about our fallibility. Secondly, one need only study the history of the evangelical movement to see the consequences that follow a rejection of these important doctrines.

A helpful resource that explains the importance of biblical inerrancy and authority is the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,”<sup>1</sup> crafted by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy three decades ago in response to the encroachment of liberalism into the evangelical church. The statement was signed by a large group of evangelical pastors and scholars from all around the world,<sup>2</sup> and is a good summary of the convictions we hold to in Samara about the nature and role of God’s Word.

Pastor Sergienko is also critical of an emphasis on the ultimate authority of Scripture because he believes it redirects attention away from Jesus Christ. While we heartily agree that the focus of Scripture is centered squarely on Christ (John 5:39), we strongly disagree that an emphasis on Scripture’s authority and inerrancy leads to a *diminishing* of Christ. After all, how did pastor Sergienko himself come to know that our center of focus should be Christ, if not by taking Scripture’s assertions as accurate and authoritative?

Again, the lessons of history are important. You will not find Christ exalted and known in His majesty among movements that have rejected Scripture’s authority and veracity. Why?

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<sup>1</sup> [http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI\\_1.pdf](http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> [http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI\\_1\\_typed.pdf](http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1_typed.pdf).

The moment the authority and veracity of Scripture is denied, Scripture becomes a wax nose that can be molded into whatever shape the reader prefers. In time Scripture is abandoned for other supposed sources of spiritual enlightenment.

Yes, when studying Scripture we must have the right heart—pure, humble, hungry, prayerful. But the affirmation of Scripture’s authority and veracity is essential in providing us with the right context in which to learn about Christ and live by Him. It certainly is not *less* respect, *less* attention, *less* trust, or *less* study of God’s Word that will open to us Christ and His glory.

One is immediately reminded of the Psalter, and Psalms 1, 19, and 119 in particular. The writers are not at all ashamed of their love for the *very words* of Scripture (“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”—Ps. 119:103). They repeatedly express their love for God’s Law. They study it day and night. They beg for understanding of it (“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law”—Ps. 119:18). Yet can they be accused of substituting God’s Word for God Himself? Can they be described as men deadened by the letter of the Law?<sup>3</sup> Absolutely not! These were men of God who enjoyed intimate fellowship with God *through His Scriptures*. Oh, that we would be *more like them!*

(2) The author of the article also describes Samara as a place where church leaders are taught to exercise totalitarian control over those under their care. This criticism, too, is hollow.

While you will not find perfect leadership in Samara, you will certainly not find the extremist behavior which the author claims. We affirm that Scripture clearly teaches both the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9) and that all believers are given by God spiritual abilities to serve in their local churches (1 Peter 4:10-11). Scripture also teaches the need for spiritual leaders in the church (Eph. 4:11-14). These leaders must be biblically qualified, capable of leadership, and able to teach sound doctrine (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Church members are called to submit to such leaders (Heb. 13:17) and imitate their good example (Heb. 13:7). Leaders are not in any way to abuse this office, but to lead sacrificially (Matt. 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-3), recognizing that their authority is only good to the degree to which his character and convictions correspond to the divine standard revealed in Scripture. While church discipline is required for unrepentant sin (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-2), there is to be patience and humility in dealing with those who oppose (2 Tim. 2:24-26). When differences in taste or secondary issues arise, believers can freely transfer membership to other evangelical churches and there is no emotional or physical repression.

The totalitarian traits to which pastor Sergienko refers simply do not exist, and in light of the serious attitude local authorities take to such allegations, we strongly request pastor Sergienko to find better ways to express his disagreements over church leadership. Ultimately, we pray that God would give more leaders to the church who would exhibit profound godliness, sacrificial commitment, and great ability consistent with the picture of a leader painted for us in Scripture, and illustrated so beautifully in Jesus Christ.

(3) Pastor Sergienko describes another symptom of spiritual illness associated with Samara as the emphasis on small groups within the church to the detriment of the whole church. We

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<sup>3</sup> When the apostle Paul says that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Kor. 3:6), he is not referring to the letters of Scripture as they are, but specifically to the letter of the Law of Moses, which had the purpose of condemning all men under sin (e.g., Rom. 5:20).

heartily agree with the author that the central focus of the church is on corporate gathering for prayer, singing, giving, serving, the Lord's Supper, and the preaching of the Word. To minimize or ignore this is a direct violation of Scripture (Heb. 10:24-25). Corporate worship is the center from which all other ministries flow.

Yet an emphasis on the corporate gathering of the entire local body does not at all require that small group meetings within the church be considered a dangerous threat to unity. Everything has its own place. Not all believers are able at the same time during the regular week to meet together in the same place. Should this prevent them from meeting in a smaller context in their homes? Moreover, when it comes to meeting practical needs, cultivating accountability, providing personal encouragement or admonition, applying the Scriptures, and exercising spiritual gifts, small groups provide a remarkably effective context.

Additionally, to characterize home Bible studies and small group ministry as a special characteristic of "the Samara syndrome" is not consistent with present reality, history, or biblical teaching. Growing numbers of churches in Russia emphasize small-group ministry despite any connection to Samara. The RUECB itself has recognized small-group ministry as a necessary area of focus among the churches. And church history tells us that such an emphasis certainly did not originate in America among "fundamentalist" churches.

Ultimately, pastor Sergienko appears to confuse our desire to minister genuinely to people with the desire to establish totalitarian control. Such a correlation is without basis.

(4) A fourth characteristic of this "syndrome" that pastor Sergienko lists is the criticizing of leadership. As was stated in the beginning of this article, we acknowledge that we have not delivered perfectly in our training of men for ministry. Not always was enough done during the training process to work with young, developing leaders on this pervasive problem that haunts all leaders.

In light of this problem, however, several things must be remembered. First, pastor Sergienko's characterization that we are *not* sensitive to this problem again runs contrary to the realities on the ground. We believe and have always taught that God stands against the proud (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5); that the proud will be brought to disgrace and destruction (Prov. 11:2; 16:18); that the poor in spirit inherit the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:3); and that pride is never acceptable among spiritual leaders (1 Tim. 3:6). We emphasize now more than ever that exegetical skill, theological knowledge, or homiletical ability can never provide a place for pride to find safe haven.

Second, there is always a danger of giving knowledge and sharpening skills. Education has been likened to giving someone a sharp knife. He can use it to rip and slash, or to carve something beautiful. And often, how a student will use his training can only be truly known after he has received it. Some students inevitably contradict with their lives that which you have attempted to form in them, even though they began that training with high recommendations and expectations. This is a reality and a risk that is well known to educators the world over. Yet just because knowledge can make a man arrogant (1 Cor. 8:1) does not mean the problem is with knowledge itself.

Third, with any training program you can find a proportionate number of students who do not reflect the heart of the training program itself. We have had almost 300 ministers who have participated in our training, and we challenge pastor Sergienko's characterization that (a)

arrogance marks the majority of these men, (b) when arrogance is a problem the teaching in Samara is its origin, and (c) nothing similar can be found with other training programs across the country.

Fourth, an assumption is sometimes made that humility equals uncertainty and conviction equals arrogance. If a man preaches with conviction, he is arrogant because he imposes his views on others. If he holds to the principle of single-meaning in interpreting Scripture, he is arrogant because he supposes that he can satisfactorily know that single meaning of the text. If he preaches against sin, he is arrogant because he submits his hearers to psychological pressure and fails to take into consideration their extenuating circumstances. If he asks another preacher to explain his view better from Scripture, he is arrogant because he questions the opinion of another man. This is the spirit of our times. All is acceptable except that which is taught with conviction. G. K. Chesterton once said, “What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed.” Arrogance can and does raise its ugly head in far too many disagreements, but we must be equally aware of the tendency—especially in our relativistic age—to confuse another man’s heart-felt conviction with the sin of pride.

Fifth, working through issues of pride is part of the learning process. This is an important leadership reality. With or without education, young ministers turn into wise, experienced ministers by battling pride. This is how it has always been and will continue to be. It is because of this that the patience and understanding of the elderly, experienced leaders in the church is so crucial. No one would commend the inexperienced minister who walks into a leadership meeting and announces to the elderly men that “they have had it all wrong all along.” Yet these experienced leaders have a choice at that moment: they can either extend patience and love, an ear to listen to his concerns, and time to learn from his mistakes, or they can rise up and castigate him on the spot, turning him into a life-long enemy. So much is dependent on the reaction and attitude of the elderly brothers.

Sixth, while theology students certainly do enough to bring grief upon themselves, can we truly say that only they are susceptible to the temptation of pride? In the heat of theological disagreement is it automatically those who have studied doctrine who should be considered automatic offenders? Based on pastor Sergienko’s article, one is lead to assume the answer yes. We cannot afford, however, to paint with such a broad brush. Stereotypes like these will inevitably lead us to diagnose pride where it does not always exist, and turn a blind eye to it where it just as easily does.

Pastor Sergienko identifies the source of this new movement of theological arrogance with training in Russia that has been sponsored by the West—particularly by American churches. Yet rather than providing helpful suggestions about how the benefits of this relationship can be better realized, or commending the good intentions of generous American churches to share in their resources, he sounds the alarm that this “American faith” poses a clear and present danger to the Russian evangelical church that must be averted.

It must be noted that pastor Sergienko’s criticism of American generosity here is especially confusing. He himself has studied extensively in the United States and to this day continues his studies at Fuller Theological Seminary<sup>4</sup> in the Los Angeles area. While he criticizes those

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fuller.edu/>.

who establish relationships with American churches that do not have “Baptist” as part of their name, the seminary where he studies is itself non-denominational and has numerous professors whose convictions differ significantly from what has been traditionally held by the RUECB. In fact, Sergienko’s criticism of biblical inerrancy and authority discussed above appears to follow more closely Fuller Theological Seminary’s own views on those doctrines than it does the historical position of the RUECB. (For a look at Fuller’s abandonment of inerrancy, see George Marsden’s *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism*<sup>5</sup>).

(5) The final characteristic the author uses to describe the “Samara syndrome” is the humiliation of women and the odor of male chauvinism in everyday church life. Once again, pastor Sergienko’s criticism falls short of reality. To compare our attitude toward woman with that of Islamic fundamentalism and to say that we believe woman to belong to a different category of being is so far-fetched that one wonders if pastor Sergienko is joking or if he really does want us to take him seriously.

Perhaps there is more to this accusation. After all it is not new. It is common in feminist Western churches to use the same rhetoric against those who do not appoint women to positions of leadership over the church on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15. Such churches are “chauvinists and extremists.” The issue, therefore, is really not about women *in ministry*, as pastor Sergienko suggests. Women are busy serving in the Samara churches and pastor Sergienko knows that. Rather, it is about women *in leadership*. And while pastor Sergienko may imply that refusing to appoint women to positions of spiritual leadership is nothing more than male chauvinism, in the end it has nothing to do with this at all but with our desire to obey the wisdom of God revealed in His Word.

(For further study, a recommended resource in the Russian language is Alexander Strauch’s book, *Men and Women: Equal Yet Different* [Shandal, 2004]. The book provides a help exposition of biblical texts relevant to the gender debate.)

Pastor Sergienko begins his article with a parable about an 80-year old man who suffered for Christ in Stalin’s prison camps, a 25-year old seminarian, and Lermontov’s famous poem, “In a Difficult Moment of Life.” The grandfather ponders, “Perhaps Lermontov is among the redeemed in heaven . . . ?” According to pastor Sergienko’s parable, the arrogance of the young seminarian is so vividly illustrated in his sarcastic condemnation of Lermontov to hell because he was not a Baptist, as well as his disrespect for his grandfather’s appreciation for this stirring poem that meant so much to him. Pastor Sergienko then closes his article with a warning against over-confidence in ministry, especially in the “difficult questions of life.” We might indeed find Lermontov among the redeemed in heaven and even sing his song there, says pastor Sergienko.

On the one hand we would not disagree with pastor Sergienko’s rebuke of this young theology student. How can anyone who has studied the doctrine of hell so flippantly wish anyone to burn in it? On the other hand pastor Sergienko’s warning against certainty falls terribly short. While it is not our role to answer definitively who is in heaven and who is in hell, the uncertainly stops there. We can know with absolute certainty—and we must know—the answer to the most important question of life: “What must I do to be saved?” And the answer to that question is not found in writing stirring poems.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/Reforming-Fundamentalism-Fuller-Seminary-Evangelicalism/dp/0802808700/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1270040273&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Reforming-Fundamentalism-Fuller-Seminary-Evangelicalism/dp/0802808700/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1270040273&sr=1-1).

May the realities of hell and confidence in the good news of eternal life motivate us to minister in the fear of God, with all conviction, and in the humility of Christ.

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