

# OPENING EYES, OPENING HEARTS

## RUSSIA AND THE RESTORED GOSPEL

by Gary Browning

Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997

377 pages, \$21.95

## THE MORNING BREAKS: STORIES OF CONVERSION AND FAITH IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

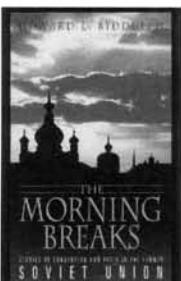
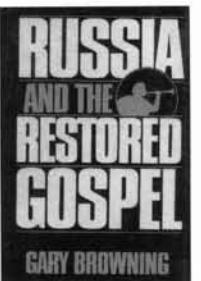
by Howard L. Biddulph

Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996

212 pages, \$15.95



Reviewed by Tom Rogers



*These two books by former mission presidents are likely to open one's eyes to the essential goodness that the restored gospel awakens in people's lives.*

YEARS AGO, at Yale, I heard a public address by a living relic, Aleksandr Kerensky, the leader of Russia's pre-Lenin era provisional socialist government and, by then, a very old man. Mentally, I kept pinching myself as I looked and listened. His actual presence made everything that had happened after him all the more real. I now wish that I could have been as aware of the key role various Church members I came to know in St. Petersburg had earlier played in the establishment of the gospel in their native land—the curly-haired, Russian towhead who appeared in my mission president's office to be released at the end of his mission to northern Utah, just weeks after my arrival as mission president, and whom I later called to be a branch president; our faithful district president in Vyborg; our mission's customs

specialist; even the brilliant student who had been in my Dostoevsky and Tolstoy seminars at BYU, Adam West.

From Gary Browning's impeccably researched chronicle, *Russia and the Restored Gospel*, I learned, or was reminded, that the first of these—that Russian towhead—had not only been the first member to be baptized in Russia since the Revolution, but the first, full-time Russian missionary ever; the Vyborg district president had been the first Russian citizen to receive the Melchizedek priesthood and, with his family, to be sealed in a temple; the customs specialist had been the first Russian, with his wife and daughter, to be baptized in this century (in Budapest), the first Russian branch president, and one who was particularly instrumental in helping the Church procure official status and institutional recognition from the Russian government. Nor could I have foreseen that our wise, senior district president in St.

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Petersburg, who rescued me from innumerable pitfalls, would, within a year, be called to Ekaterinburg as the first Russian mission president. Adam West, I discovered, had, among his other equally memorable accomplishments as a missionary, been the first to baptize anyone in Moscow.

The names of so many other students who have come to my classes (both before and since their missions) also leap out from Browning's pages—as they also do from the pages of the Ukraine mission president, Howard L. Biddulph's *The Morning Breaks: Stories of Conversion and Faith in the Former Soviet Union*—each name a pioneer in those critical early years at the turn of this decade. As one such missionary put it, "Once in Russia, I learned by experience that there were many more trials than there was glory in being a 'pioneer'" (Browning, 307).

The Russian Duma's recent, renewed threat to curtail the activity of "non-traditional" religious bodies betrays the country's still unstable and precarious democratic foundations. It also reminds us that the Mormon presence in the former USSR over the past decade has afforded the Church a rare window of opportunity, however tenuous and long- or short-lived. The accounts by these two early mission presidents—Browning and Biddulph—are an invaluable record of an extraordinary moment in the Church's global expansion. Biddulph's account vividly and fervently reflects his experience as president in Kiev between 1991 and 1993. The book's moving epigraph, an Easter poem written the year before Biddulph's call to serve in Kiev, uses spring imagery that, in its final stanza, bespeaks both his eager faith and his sense of the precious moment:

O while this wond'rous season lasts,  
We would bear witness through the  
land—  
From Leningrad and Tallinn, east to  
Magadan;  
Along the Dnieper, Volga, Don, to  
Yerevan;  
The River Ob, the Yenisei, and south to  
Samarkand—  
Proclaim again the joyous salutation:  
CHRIST IS RISEN!  
(Biddulph, v).

Biddulph's account is largely devoted to "remarkable stories of conversion" that took place in Ukraine and Belarus between 1991 and 1993. Like those stories solicited by Browning, which so forcefully enhance his thorough documentation of Church-related events in Estonia and Russia, beginning a year earlier, Biddulph's provide a rich medley of personal and family histories of consider-

**"Both authors convey that what is accomplished transcends individual efforts. People are the medium that carries the Spirit into others' lives, and that process is reciprocal and symbiotic."**

able inspiration and human interest. Besides being the principal "pioneer" heads of missionary work in Russia, the Baltic republics, Ukraine, and Belarus, both authors are, by profession, academic specialists on Soviet politics and Russian literature, respectively, with years of personal, first-hand involvement in the cultures of those nations. Their backgrounds significantly augment the events they chronicle.

With far fewer missionaries than would come later, the early Eastern European Church missions attracted, for all their physical hardships and political barriers, a proportionately larger ratio of investigators and converts than they would later draw. Whereas St. Petersburg, where it all started, at first led the way with more members and congregations, Moscow, with twice the population (nine million), caught up and took something of a lead in 1993. For some reason (greater persecution by the government? a poorer, more desperate economy?), the Ukrainian response was, throughout this period and in subsequent years, twice as strong. Though there are still only two missions in the former Ukraine (there are now six in the former Russia), Biddulph, by my count, helped open more cities than were proselytized during the same period in all of Russia. His history highlights the grassroots charitable service of Ukrainian members (including the establishment of a medical service council in Kiev) and the large, highly effective body of young, local district and full-time missionaries, whose American counterparts assigned to Ukraine were numerically restricted and for long intervals de-

nied visas. These local missionaries baptized, in one critical instance, enough converts to enable the Church to remain in Odessa.

Both authors movingly describe the first trips by members in their missions to temples in the West, and both describe the trauma of the ominous 1991 coup attempt, which led to the rise of Yeltsin and the complete downfall of the former Soviet regime (which reminded me of what I had felt during the subsequent attempt, in October 1993, to dethrone Yeltsin, and his bloody firing on the White House in Moscow). Both also recount the difficult effort, despite encouraging legislation, to win initial governmental recognition for the Church in both lands. Indeed, a prevailing, underlying theme of both accounts (and of my own later experience) was the tenuous status of civil rights legislation in both countries and the difficulty not only to register the Church at various levels but to procure missionary visas, facilities for Church meetings (mostly on a rental basis), as well as permission to import Church literature (and, later, humanitarian aid), and to receive favorable media coverage. Clearly, like so many of their missionaries, both men and their wives expended themselves unsparingly.

Though both accounts are important and complementary, Browning's is clearly the more thorough (with 377 compared to 212 pages, including full names and exact dates) and well worth the additional two years he took to write it upon the completion of his mission assignment. It includes a useful and detailed chronology and a history of the Church's connection with Russia, beginning

with the remarkable mission call of Orson Hyde, in 1843, and elucidating the fate of a single early member family, the Lindelofs, who had been baptized in St. Petersburg in 1895. Browning also offers an excellent account of magnanimous Finnish missionary couples, the first Estonian members, and the earliest Russian branches in Leningrad (later St. Petersburg), Vyborg, and Moscow, all of whom played key roles in the Church's early Russian effort.

Browning is ever gracious, acknowledging the contributions of his predecessor, President Stephen R. Mecham, as well as those of President (later Elder) Dennis B. Neuenschwander, who from Vienna orchestrated the earliest proselytizing efforts in Moscow. Like Mecham, Browning commuted from Helsinki until his third year of service. By the end of his mission, Browning had assisted in bringing the number of Church branches in Moscow and Zelenograd from one to fifteen, with a combined membership of 624; he could truthfully say that "An organization was in place that could sustain the growth of the Church in the capital of Russia" (Browning, 312). He and his associates had also established the Church in Voronezh and Nizhni Novgorod, as well as in Samara and Saratov, which now constitute a separate mission. The Church in Estonia, Vyborg, and St. Petersburg, for which Browning was also directly responsible from 1990 until February 1992, had meanwhile also grown apace, with nine branches in St. Petersburg by 1992.

Browning's graciousness extends to those—both Russian and American—who, with enthusiasm and sacrifice, assisted in



laying those early foundations. Some of those members are actually no longer active or in good standing. Without identifying them as such, Browning has included the powerful testimonies that some of them at one time shared with him. He candidly observes,

A few letters are from early members who may not currently be active. I am hopeful that under more ideal circumstances, even if beyond this life, most will return to full communion with the Saints who, like them, struggle along toward perfection. . . . During our mission there were setbacks, of course. About a third of our baptized members apparently fell away—but who knows what yet lies deep in their hearts. Many others battled great odds to persevere and endure. Given their backgrounds and current pressures, our Russian leaders and their members were steadily becoming more saintly, and I felt invigorated and humbled to be among them. (Browning, ix–x, 258–59.)

Meaningfully, Browning adds that “the nearer one can approximate true accounts, the more inspiring they will be because, for all of us, experiences are complex and contradictory”

(Browning, xi).

I hope that the first-person accounts of members’ conversions that so richly adorn both books don’t lose their force for those who have not made their direct acquaintance or because of their difficult sounding names for readers unfamiliar with a Slavic language. Here are just a few of the singular declarations that stood out for me and that coincide with the deeply felt affirmations I remember so often hearing from the lips of those we had known in St. Petersburg:

- “For more than seventy years . . . there was little understanding about charity and loving one another. Love just seemed to have evaporated. . . . [At the temple:] This was for me an immense blessing, because I saw our Saints there, our Russian Saints. I saw them before they went to the temple and I saw them after. . . . And I saw how they were growing, how they were changing and becoming stronger, more committed. They truly understand that through their strength, the Church will develop.” (Browning, 28.)
- “I am very glad that we have been given these boys from different continents to help us learn the Holy Scriptures. . . . They are bringing light into our darkness. Over the former years we lost

much. We lost our spirituality, our morality. . . . we had much harshness, falsehood. People became coarse. There was little love. But when you are with the boys in church, you feel like you want to become a better person. You want to strive for perfection.” (Browning, 45.)

- “Do you know how Russian Mormons differ from an ordinary Russian person? We have learned to smile.” (Browning, 95.)
- “I investigated other churches as well, but they didn’t satisfy me. . . . Now I can more precisely define my feeling. I didn’t sense the joy that comes with the fullness of the gospel.” (Browning, 200.)
- “After I was confirmed a member of the Church and had received the gift of the Holy Ghost, the first thing that I saw when I opened my eyes was a light. This light was everywhere and it was very bright and joyful. I looked around. The missionaries who had confirmed me were surrounding me. I no longer thought of them as Americans, rather they were like my own people, and I loved them sincerely. I had never been so happy.” (Browning, 202.)
- “As soon as I saw the faces of the two missionaries standing at the entrance to the meeting place, a voice inside me told me that I had finally found my friends, that I had found those who live by the very same ideals for which my soul had been longing. For the first time in my whole life, I felt as though I was among my own kind.” (Browning, 221.)
- “I especially remember their [the missionaries’] faces: big smiles and clear eyes. You could see right away as you looked at them that they knew why they were living on this earth.” (Browning, 259–60.)
- “My life changed. I became more tranquil, tolerant, and patient. Problems in our family life gradually diminished. For the first time in my life I understood the meaning of the words ‘quiet happiness,’ that is to say, harmony with one’s self—peace of mind.” (Browning, 294.)
- “When I went to one of our sacrament meetings for the first time. . . . I felt love, I saw love, I heard love. . . . That which seemed impossible to me before my conversion is now possible. I love people. I want to serve them. That which has transpired with me in my life



*“Well, bishop, since 70 doesn’t necessarily mean 70, and 12 doesn’t necessarily mean 12, I figured that 10 percent doesn’t necessarily mean 10 percent, either.”*

is a miracle, and is much more powerful than anything I could have ever dreamed of." (Browning, 303–304.) As Biddulph puts it, "Over and over the Saints would thank the missionaries in their public testimonies 'for teaching us how to love one another'" (Biddulph, 166). Recalling members who, on a cold rainy day after an Easter service, resisted departing from each other, even outdoors, Biddulph adds, "We realized that the Latter-day Saints of Kiev had, indeed, become a spiritual community—a people of God" (Biddulph, 168).

What strikes one about all these statements is the constant human factor—that people are invariably the catalyst, the medium that carries the Spirit into others' lives, and that the process is reciprocal and symbiotic. What the missionaries impart to others is reflected back and reinforces the same in them—hence the essential role of collectivity, of fellowship in one's spiritual life. As, in agreement with my own long-held view, Browning correctly avers,

I have been impressed again by the compatibility of Latter-day Saint ideals with those developed by Russians through the ages. . . . The Russians highly value a feeling of community, "a shared culture" and "economic interdependence" that create "a strong sense of belonging together." (Browning, x–xi.)

A recurring, correlative theme is the way the members' associations with one another have enabled them to overcome self-absorption and find happiness through becoming involved with, and caring about, others. Echoing my own experience with missionaries, Russian members, and investigators, both authors further convey that whatever is accomplished transcends individual efforts. Striking parallels come to mind not only of the circumstances and response of Restoration-era Saints, but of Saints at the time of Christ and the first apostles. These parallels strongly attest to the Church's and the restored gospel's universal import: the profound appreciation and unqualified acceptance of the missionaries' message; the radical change that manifests itself in the lives of many; the obvious fact that, apart from holding a conviction of the deepest sort (i.e., testimony), such persons would have no reason to become involved in the Church in the first place.

The bold response of these Saints sadly contrasts with the prevailing mood among many contemporary Wasatch Front Saints, which tends to take one of two extreme forms (both of which may grow from the same root): dutiful complacency or disaf-

fected, divisive criticism. Witnessing the powerful, whole-souled reaction of these recent European converts is likely to open one's eyes to the fundamental and essential kindness and goodness that the restored gospel awakens in people's lives. As Robert Rees, former *Dialogue* editor and, more recently, counselor in the Baltic mission presidency, has so astutely observed in a conversation in St. Petersburg in 1996, "When you're working in a primary way with the basic issues of the gospel with people who are learning them for the first time and employing them in their lives, there is no room or luxury for criticism or negativity. People who leave the Church have lost their memory of that primary witness from the

Holy Ghost. It is nevertheless the genius of the Church that it provides so many ways to reinforce it [if, I would add, we keep allowing it to do so]. People who take extreme positions at either end of the critical spectrum also tend to lack charity."

Browning and Biddulph forcefully convey the extraordinary, foundational events, both religious and socio-political, upon which later missionaries and members would build. How are the now longer-term members enduring? What are the current patterns in Church growth there? How are current local leaders ministering to the present flock? The answers to those questions will comprise an equally arresting sequel that, at some point in time, deserves telling. ☐



## SIC TRANSIT

Weary of humans,  
I sat on a park bench  
throwing crumbs to the pigeons.  
  
And behold! a sparrow  
appeared in their midst.  
  
And it came to pass that the pigeons  
smote him sorely  
and cast him out.  
  
But he darted back and  
seized the largest crust in his beak  
And rose up as on eagle's wings,  
For the race is not to the swift  
Neither the battle to the strong.  
But lo! his fellow sparrows  
did fall upon him to despoil him,  
  
Upon which seeing,  
I decided I might as well  
go back to the office.

—KARL SANDBERG