

WILLIAM FETLER, MY MENTOR

My friend and mentor, William Fetler, was born in Talsi, July 28, 1885. His mother was German. His father was pastor of a Baptist church in a small town in Kurzeme (Courland). At the turn of the century, Fetler went to study in London at the Spurgeon's Pastors' College, graduating with honors in 1907. During his studies, he was strongly moved by the Welsh Revival movement, led by Evans Roberts. This profoundly altered his later ministry. He was banished from Russia in 1912 by the Tsarist government, at which point he moved to Latvia and for a time to the pastorate of the Golgotha Church.

Eight years passed, the years of World War I and the two-year war of Latvian independence. The Golgotha Church in Riga had, meanwhile, been under the leadership of a man by the name of Aboltinsh, an effective pulpit speaker even though he was not especially trained in theology. Aboltinsh emigrated to Brazil with the Revivalists in 1922, along with most of the well-to-do members, leaving the church quite disheartened. Some deacons held prayer services for the remaining members, but it was difficult to maintain good spirits. The small congregation held the gloomy belief that the doors of salvation were closed and that the antiChrist would soon take over the world. Fetler took charge again in 1923. He brought along a Canadian from Toronto, the enthusiastic J. Oswald Smith of the Peoples' Church, whose special interest was to reach the Slavic peoples with the Gospel.

Upon their arrival back in Riga, they held several weeks of Gospel meetings. They met in the morning with existing congregation and held city-wide evangelistic meetings in the evenings. Smith and Fetler encouraged the people to trust the Lord and His saving grace and to reject false teachings and prophecies of shaky origin. Their actions were not in vain. The Golgotha Church, which could hold a thousand, was again filled to the last seat. Dr. Smith's powerful preaching reinforced my determination to learn English so I could understand and read his many books on faith and theology. Smith came to our rescue in another occasion, when C. C. Shields ruined Fetler's Missionary Society and thus cut off our support. He assumed financial responsibility for the work in Latgale. I have no idea what happened to C. C. Shields. He faded into oblivion after his destructive work.

With the help of local friends and British supporters, Fetler bought an empty Russian barracks church. It was put up for sale after the garrison had been moved to another part of the city and the Russian Orthodox authorities neglected to take action to restore their temple. A minor glitch was that Baptists did not have legal right to own property back then. Fetler got around this obstacle by having three businessmen act as trustees on behalf of their congregation. When the Orthodox learned that sectarians (as Baptists were called by the Russians) had taken over the building, they tried to close it down, and for a time they succeeded. The Baptist group worshipping in that temple renamed it the Bethany Baptist Church. It later became Golgotha Baptist Church, and the building "Dom Golgotha."

Following the purchase, Fetler began to hold Revival meetings for the Bethany congregation in the newly acquired church building. It was during one of these meetings that Father first met Fetler. He came home full of stories about this brilliant orator—he was obviously very impressed. He told us: “I was blessed to meet Pastor Fetler. They have a huge meeting hall now. It holds fifteen hundred people, and every meeting is filled to capacity. The meetings last for hours, and it seems like minutes.”

I met William Fetler in the Golgotha Church in Riga, where he was holding two weeks of Revival services. He was a fiery and charismatic speaker. We had long talks in between services. I told him of my wanderings, of my attempts to spread the Gospel in the places where the Revival had begun, now oddly silent and empty. Fetler did not believe that the emigration to Brazil had come from the Lord, and he was not shy about saying so. At his behest, I wrote a story of my experiences during and after the Revival. It was published in the Christian Messenger (Kristigs Vestnesi).

With a group of dedicated followers, Pastor Fetler opened a “Revival House.” This was an empty movie house with some five hundred seats plus a corridor the whole length of the hall. It could accommodate a hundred or so standing. He opened the place for Gospel meetings. The services were held in Latvian and in Russian because the place was located in the eastern part of the city which had a sizable Russian population. A large room in the front was converted into a bookstore and editorial room where the Latvian monthly, Kristigs Vestnesis (The Christian Messenger) and the Russian language paper, Goskj (The Visitor) were produced. Three of us young evangelists, Karlis Grikmans, Augusts Korps, and myself, were Fetler’s helpers. We maintained the building and saw to the publication of Kristigs Vestnesis. Anna Glumm, a nurse, was in charge of the bookstore. A capable woman, she spoke German, Russian, Latvian and English.

The Mission and Bible Institute had three sections. Two were located in Riga, with Russian and Latvian divisions. The Russian students came from Poland, the Latvians from local Baptist churches. The third section was the English department, located in London. The four of us who were studying in England were actually counted as being part of the English contingent. The Institute lasted approximately ten years. Eventually it was disbanded due to the drying up of American support. Approximately one hundred ministers were educated at the Institute during the ten years of its existence. Nowadays (1985) there is no theological education available anywhere in the Soviet Union. The nearest thing to it are correspondence courses originating in Moscow. Bible lectures are mailed to individuals and they mail back their answers. Thus began Fetler’s very effective, international evangelistic work.

When Fetler returned from the States in 1924, flush with financial support, he founded the Missionary and Bible Institute and began work on the “Salvation Temple,” a huge building to be erected on 117 Lacpesa iela. Since all instructors held various university degrees, his Institute was fully accredited by the Ministry of Education.

Two of the teachers came from the University of Moscow. A man called McCaig was the chancellor. He was well educated in various universities.

Upon his return I was free to take up again my work as itinerant evangelist. I served as interim pastor for the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Liepaja-Libau, a sea port city two hundred and twenty km SW of Riga. It had a congregation of several hundred, mostly Revival people, and a very good choir.

Augustus Korps had a colorful history. He was a blacksmith's son who served in the Red Army and came home to Latvia after the Riga Peace Treaty of 1920. He accepted Christ as his savior in a Revival meeting, was baptized, and moved to Riga. He met Fetler in 1922 in one of the Golgotha Church revival services. By the way, those meetings lasted for three weeks, and the auditorium was filled to its capacity of 1,000. In order to expand, Fetler opened the Revival House on Catholic Street, a movie house turned house of worship.

The local folk did not know what to make of us. They considered us heretics at worst, awkward and strange at best. I do not understand to this day why Fetler chose us. We made a decidedly odd pair—a blacksmith's son and an ex-farmer, both poorly dressed and not especially gifted orators. We brought cartfuls of Kristigs Vestnesis from the printer to the Revival House, pulling the two-wheeled cart ourselves. Some thought I was the "priest" because the Catholic church was across the street from our place. Korps was thought to be the janitor since he expelled ruffians from the services and swept the sidewalk.

A deacon of that church put me to an odd sort of test. He brought in a vagrant from the streets to observe how I dealt with him. This was his way of finding out whether I was suitable to be their pastor. I did not get very far with the man, who was too drunk to hear what I had to say or to make any coherent reply. The deacon did not wait to bring the man back in a sober state. I felt sorry for the deacon—as well as the street person.

After some discussion, they put out an invitation for me to be their pastor. However, when Fetler was asked to release me from my work at Revival House, he refused. He needed me, he said. How narrow minded we all were in those days. I was denounced to Fetler for praying on one knee instead of two like the others: Brother Tarziers does not kneel properly! When confronted, I asked Fetler where in the Bible is a kneeling position prescribed, and how much does the Bible say the knees should be bent? And, by the way, what about the hands, how should they be held? Fetler dropped the matter.

I was happy to serve at the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Liepaja. I was especially pleased at the availability of good-looking young women. I was rather handsome myself, with wavy blond hair curling around the collar. The girls liked me, except one who sang alto in the choir. She did not welcome my attentions. I thought, who cares, there are plenty of cute young things to choose from. The girls were quite eager to

respond to our appeals to decide for Christ, and this in turn appealed to our egos. How much sincerity there was in their faith, I cannot guess. But, who knows—God’s Hand works in strange ways.

Pastor Charles Grickman was in charge of the Russian language services. He was a Russian-born Latvian, from the Novgorod Latvian colony south of Leningrad. This was a flourishing colony established before World War I. The climate was similar to that of Latvia and the soil very fertile. They became quite wealthy, but the communist revolution liquidated the colony and forbade all religious activities. No church is left there today. During German occupation in World War II, families that had survived moved back to Latvia. A couple of these joined the Golgotha Church, including the Grickmans.

On Sunday mornings it was my turn to lead services in the Latvian language. Attendance was small, because the east part of the city was largely populated by Russians. The main rail line divided the city. To the south was the half-mile-wide Daugava; to the north, the main rail line and the Latvian population. Since Korps and I were the “odd couple,” we did not attract large crowds. We were pretty clumsy, too. One incident that I still regret, decades later, was the reprimand of a Helme Pakshe, a young Latvian office worker. Baptists were very strict in those days and did not allow women to use makeup or hair color. When Helme accepted Christ and came forth to be baptized, she literally put on her best face for the occasion. She powdered her pretty face, applied eye shadow, rouged her cheeks. Thinking we must put an end to the cosmetics, I sent clumsy Korps to set her straight while the church was discussing the candidates for baptism. I guess Korps did all right, but it really would have been more appropriate for one of the elderly female parishioners to talk to her. Happily, Helme forgave us, was duly baptized, and years later married a Baptist pastor.

Behind the bookstore was a small kitchen with a stove and, on top of it, the projector left over from movie house days. A large iron cot turned this small space into our austere living quarters. It was unheated, cool in the summer but freezing in the winter. Brother Korps and I slept curled together under our overcoats in the minus ten degree temperatures. We did not even undress to go to bed, or bathe often for that matter. We visited the public bath house once every two weeks or so.

Anna Glumm prepared what little food we ate. Fetler, true to his Kurzeme upbringing, loved Skaba putra, a type of soup from that region. Anna usually kept a large iron kettle of skaba putra simmering in the kitchen. One evening, following a lengthy service at the Golgotha Church, we found a kettle full of freshly made, deliciously aromatic soup on the stove. We were hungry, and in no time at all we scraped the last spoonful of soup from the bottom of the kettle. When Fetler arrived a couple of hours later, no doubt hungry too, he went straight to the stove. Lifting the cover, he found the empty pan scraped clean. He asked, “what happened to the skaba putra?” We had to confess that we’d eaten the whole thing. Maybe he was tired from an evening of sermons. He merely said, “Is that so,” and walked out.

Occasionally a mother with a daughter of marriage age invited us available bachelors to their home. We would then eat to near bursting, enough to last us for a couple of days. Once I was asked to play the piano at a wedding. Oh, how I played and ate, ate and played! I especially remember the delicious Kuze chocolate. I didn't get paid, but I left with a full belly.

Both Fetler sisters were rather fond of me. The oldest sister, Nelly, was what we call an old maid—she was much older than I, but the younger one, Irma, was closer to my age. Irma lived on the fifth floor of an apartment building. Brother Korps, who worked as janitor for Fetler's Revival House, was in charge of chopping wood for Irma's apartment and to carry it up to her place from the basement where it was stored. Now, Irma usually had a box of Kuze chocolate on her desk, and Korps had a passion for chocolate. Having observed her interest in me, as he entered the apartment with his armful of wood he would tell her, "Irma, Brother Tarziers sends special greetings to you." He told me that her eyes would light up and she would open the box of chocolates: "Brother Korps, sit down for chocolates and tell me more about Brother Tarziers." Truth be told, I never sent her greetings. Fake greetings were Korps' ticket to the chocolate box. I knew what he was doing, but the fact that she liked me tickled my ego, and I would just as soon Korps got to eat some chocolate. So I let it go on for a while.

One of my character flaws is the sharpness of my tongue. On occasion I went too far, in this case with Nelly Fetler. I knew that she'd had a suitor in St. Petersburg, before World War I, a Baptist preacher called Hermans Redins who happened to be an acquaintance of mine. He was pretty sore when she did not return his attentions, so he told me that her previous boyfriend had a chronic runny nose which dripped mucus on his vest. On one unfortunate day I blurted out to her: "Nelly, Brother Redins told me that your boyfriend had snot all over his vest." Well, she went into a rage. She spit fire and brimstone. But, in spite of my boorishness, she did not seem to hate me permanently.

After opening the Revival House, early in 1923 Fetler left the country for a trip to the United States. The entire run of the Revival House at Katolu iela 30 was left to the "troika," that is, Grikmans, Korps and myself. I took over the Latvian services; the Sunday evening Gospel meeting in the Russian language fell to Karlis Grikmans. Our Latvian membership was rather small, since not many Latvians lived in that part of the city. Karlis did better than I. His Sunday evening meetings were full to the last seat. They were noisy also—young hooligans from the neighborhood would gather in the hallway to create a ruckus. Brother Korps, a massive fellow, became our bouncer. He would grab the noisemaker by the scruff of the neck and carry him outside.

The building was like a Noah's ark. Since it had been a movie theater, it had no windows on the sides. The only source of outside light was a skylight in the center of the roof. Unfortunately, it was not watertight, so when it rained the congregation had to leave an island in the center of the hall where the rain came down. Korps was in charge of mopping the floor.

In the winter of 1924 Fetler returned from the States, bringing financial support for his mission. He launched what became the Missionary and Bible Institute to train evangelists and pastors. He brought in Dr. McCaig, former head of the Spurgeon's Pastors' College in London, as principal of the school, since it was necessary for the head the Institute to be accredited with a PhD from a reputable university. The Institute as set up offered a three year standard training for ministers. In addition, Fetler established a branch of the school in England. It started with four students from Latvia and several from Poland. Along with Karlis Grikmans and Augustus Korps, Osvalds Blumitis and myself comprised the Latvian student body—four handsome, intelligent and eligible men ready to take England by storm.

When war clouds gathered over Europe, William Fetler wisely rounded up his thirteen children and left for the United States, thus avoiding the fate of his brother Robert, who was sent to the Gulags of Siberia after Russian occupation in 1941.