



THE PASTOR'S VOICE

Insights from Church Leaders

The Pastor's Voice Podcast Season 2: Episode 14

Transcript: A Spiritual Battle in Ukraine

Reuel Sample: Alan Eason, thank you for joining us again on the podcast. It's good to have you back.

Alan Eason: Very glad to be here, Reuel. And my congratulations on the success of your blog, your podcast, I should say. It looks like it's doing great. I've looked over a lot of the titles. You've had some great speakers or great interviewees, whatever you want to call them here. Very interesting stuff.

Reuel Sample: Well, thanks. And it's been good talking about worldview with people from a variety of different perspectives. Alan is at the number one and two spots of the all time download, so it's good to it's good to have you back. Alan is a pastor, a journalist, an entrepreneur and a former missionary to Russia and Ukraine. So he brings a unique perspective to this, this whole crazy challenge that the Western world is facing in the Ukraine. So what are those folks going through right now? Can you give us sort of a little bit of perspective of what's on the hearts and the minds of the Russian and the Ukraine people?

Alan Eason: Well, thanks for the introduction. I did missionary work in Russia and Ukraine in the early seventies particularly and on into the eighties somewhat. I would make trips behind the Iron Curtain, as we called it, then into the Soviet Union, supporting churches there, doing some evangelistic work, helping some of the people who were working there, who lived there, who weren't above ground, so to speak, some

underground people and helping them to build the kingdom of God there as best I could. And I had to go as a tourist at that time because we were considered as missionaries. We weren't let in. We told them we were tourists. But anyway, I started the first time I was ever in in Ukraine was in 1972, and especially spent a good deal of time in Lviv, which at that time they called it Lvov, because everyone was forced to pretty much use Russian words for everything, and the Ukrainian language was not really accepted by the USSR. They were trying to kind of make everybody Russian and now it's Lviv. Back then it was Kiev, now it's Kiev which is Ukrainian. And anyway, had a wonderful, wonderful time in Lviv and great experiences there. Also met Ukrainian people all through Ukraine, got arrested by the KGB in Ukraine, had a lot of experience with with different kinds of people and Kharkiv and that area as well. And then went on and we did work up in Russia.

Reuel Sample: So you're on Putin's list to begin with?

Alan Eason: I may have been, uh, I don't know. I think he's about four years younger or three years younger than me, which kind of dates me for sure. But to your point and to your question, from what I know and I have been in some contact with, I have a few Russian friends I've even heard from one since the invasion started. And they're really conflicted because parts of their family are pro-Putin and parts of their family are very much against this war and they don't know what to do. I'm sure they're having a hard time in Ukraine. I haven't heard directly from anybody since the invasion began. I have heard indirectly through a number of ministries about how they're mostly just trying to help take care of people. But I'll go back about six years to 2015, 2014, when the Russians first came in and annexed Crimea. You may remember that. And then that was when all this stuff started in eastern Ukraine with the so called separatists there, although most people are very convinced that those were actually Russian army units coming in, they claim to be just people that wanted independence for Eastern Ukraine, whatever. But I was in pretty good contact with several people in some churches there that the churches that I've been with were in fellowship with and close fellowship with. And one of the amazing things about it was even then, in fact, one of the largest churches was in Donetsk and in that area, which is in the so called Donbass, which basically just means the River Don region, which is part of that separatist area that Putin's always saying wants to be Russian.

Alan Eason: The amazing thing is that a lot of those people that I was hearing from in that church there were in such close contact with other churches in Russia. I mean, they were they were Ukrainian, but they were in close contact with a lot of their brothers and sisters in Russia. And these were, I guess you could call them non-denominational restoration type churches, as we call them, which were very simple organizationally. They weren't like the Ukrainian Orthodox or Russian Orthodox Church or anything. They were much more evangelical style, but they were praying for each other and the Russian churches were actually sending money to help the people in the Donetsk area because they they were under a lot of stress and they had a lot of refugees moving around even there. And I mean, they were just like churches are supposed to be, you know, you read about in the New Testament, doesn't matter where you are. They help each other whether they're in the New Testament was was the gentile churches rose up the ones in Greece particularly and sent money to the Jewish churches that were under persecution in Jerusalem. You know, and it's amazing. So that that's part of the subtext of all of this is I think people who are really close to Christ in this kind of a situation, they really care about each other.

Alan Eason: They care about their enemies. You know, a lot of these Russian kids and I call them kids, boys, 19, 20, 21, 22 in the Russian army that are coming down there and they're being thrown into this this slaughter by their their leaders. And they're getting there. And they're saying, wait a minute. What? These are our cousins. You know, a lot of Ukrainians and Russians, especially in that part of Europe, are mixed. They have a Ukrainian father or Ukrainian grandfather, a Russian grandmother, a Russian grandfather. They would go visit each other. They would vacation in each other's places. A lot of them would come to Ukraine because they would go to Odessa and places on the Black Sea. I mean, they're they're like cousins and here they are. Fighting against each other like this. And so a lot of the Russian army people are just they're torn up and a lot of them are deserting and all that kind of stuff. And it's it's horrible. It's really horrible. And all I can say and what I had a little bit more of my knowledge about what's going on in Ukraine lately. That I think is a spiritual under-layer to all of this. Ukraine particularly, Russia to some degree, but Ukraine particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, just had a tremendous Christian revival. Tremendous.

Reuel Sample: I was going to ask you I was going to ask you about what the state of the Christian church in Ukraine is. And you're saying that since the wall came down and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it's it's grown.

Alan Eason: Oh, yeah. I mean, when I was there, it was and I'm talking about the evangelical church right now. I don't know that much about the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which, by the way, did officially separate from the Russian Orthodox Church a few years ago. And that's a whole other discussion. But I'm talking about the evangelical church. It was very small and very persecuted when we spent those days in Lviv. We attended basically the only registered non-Orthodox non-Catholic church in Lviv, which is a pretty good sized city. And we had a tremendous reception there. They would always ask us to preach, although it had to be bringing greetings because you weren't allowed to preach if you were a Westerner. So but you were allowed to bring greetings from churches in the West. So they would say, we bring greetings and we would say, Well, how long should we speak for? And they say, Oh, about an hour.

Reuel Sample: Christians are such we're such a subversive people, you know.

Alan Eason: Oh, we're radicals. We're the real, we're the true underground. And speaking of that, there were some underground churches there, too, which we had a little bit of contact with. But anyway, back to my point that I'm saying about the revival, you know, that little church which well, I say little, they had maybe 2000 people that would come. And when we would speak, they would fill the building, which would hold about maybe 500, and they'd have another 500 out in the courtyard, in the pouring rain, listening to us. And they wanted us to come and speak every night. It was amazing. That was back in 72, 73, and and again to some degree in 75 when I went there. But another thing that happened was. The people there would continually beg us to just do more, do more, do more, spread the gospel, spread the gospel. And so that was the atmosphere under communism in the early seventies. And then come to find out Franklin Graham was there and did a Hope festival in 2015. And he had, I believe, 90,000 people in 2007 was his first one. We had 90,000 people come to it in. Levine Wow, 90,000. And then there's a YouTube video that you and maybe some of your listeners would like to look up. It's when Franklin Graham went back at 2015, the Festival of Hope and Revive. They had they filled the the soccer stadium. They filled it.

It was like 70, 70 or 80,000 people. And they had Michael W Smith leading them and singing with a Ukrainian choir of 2800 people.

Alan Eason: And it is heavenly to go and listen to that video. You listen to it ten times. It's fantastic. Of course, I like Michael W Smith anyway, but you know how he leads worship, service and and and I was just sitting there with tears streaming down my face, watching that thinking man from way back in 1972 to thi. And there were a lot of missionaries doing what I was doing, which was kind of going in as tourists and working with churches and doing evangelism, bringing in Bibles, usually not so well, easily found at the border, you know, things like that. But God's really done a great work. And then I worked with Eastern European Mission a little bit out of Vienna when I was there, and Eastern European Mission was asked by the nation of Ukraine in 2008 to provide Bibles for children because they were going to put them get this in the public schools.

Reuel Sample: Oh, no.

Alan Eason: Oh, yeah. And they had decided that they were going to have a offer. Christian ethics and all the grades from kindergarten through high school is an elected with the Bible is a text but they didn't have Bibles. So Eastern European mission started having million dollar Sundays and raised money to print and develop a children's Bible, an illustrated children's Bible in the Ukrainian language. And by 2017, they had Bibles get this in 50% of all the public schools in Ukraine. And then as of last year, it was 70% of all the public schools in Ukraine.

Reuel Sample: So listen up, Christian educators and all those folks here in this country while we're busy eradicating God from every single aspect of public life the Ukrainian government spent, it had to be millions of dollars.

Alan Eason: No! We donated them! Americans, Americans raised the money, printed the Bibles, and sent them actually had them printed in Ukraine, but raised the money.

Reuel Sample: For it and put them in the public schools. And because the public school, the government of Ukraine was saying, we're going to do this, we're going to do this right, we're going to put it in the public schools and teach our kids Christian ethics.

Alan Eason: Because they had seen what the Bible and Christian ethics did for their youth. And they wanted that. They had had decades of no Bible, no God, and seen what that did to their youth. And they wanted the alternative.

Reuel Sample: At a time when places like Canada and India are putting in No Conversion Laws, the Ukraine is busy trying to teach a Christian ethic, a Christian worldview to its children.

Alan Eason: Absolutely. And to some degree, that went on in Russia, too, although the Russian Orthodox Church and I'm not trying to put them down, but they're very Russian culture, religion centric, and they believe that the Orthodox Church is the guardian of the Russian culture. And they started turning kind of against the Western influence and their missionaries coming in, guys like me who are from evangelical backgrounds already in the end of the nineties there was kind of an open door for about four or five years. I had a number of friends that went in to live in Moscow and places like that, but they started having trouble from the FSB, which was the successor to the KGB. Already by about 98, 99, 2000. And so they kind of quashed some of that. I think, although there's still a lot of churches that in our fellowship in Russia, there were quite a few that were started and still doing well. But in Ukraine, there you've got this this openness to all that.

Alan Eason: And get this, you know, when when the Maidan revolution took place in 2014 and they kicked out Yanukovich, who was a Moscow, you know, a puppet, basically, and that was when they had the big revolution there. It's kind of violent. Almost a hundred people were killed during that, those big things they had in the square there. But then after that, that was when they really started getting more pro-Western type leaders. Well, the first person they put in as acting president was Alexander Turchinov. And guess what? He was was a Baptist minister. So this big change that Ukraine made in 2014, 2015, was had a lot to do with with a lot of Christian movement going undercurrents going on in Ukraine.

Alan Eason: And there's still a lot of that there. So bring that to the present. I don't really know what's happening with everybody there. I wish I knew more in some ways. I know I've got good friends in Poland and other places that are taking in a lot of refugees and talking to a lot of these people. But I haven't gotten any details right now. I think it's all just pray, pray, pray, pray and help take care of these people, especially the

displaced ones. But you can't help but believe that even though this is a time of great trial for the Ukrainians, it's also a time of great trial after a great expansion. And the number of people who really hold to the Bible, who raise their kids with the Bible and are doing their best to follow Christ. I'm not saying everybody I'm not saying there aren't people like that in the Orthodox churches. Of course there are. There are a lot of them, too. But I'm talking about people who just walk after the master, Jesus Christ. There are a lot of those people in Ukraine. And so with all this going on. You know, the Bible is very clear. We come under trial and we talked about this in the first podcast I did with you. We come under trial and persecution in order to solidify our faith. And it's like putting us, as Peter said, into the furnace to burn off the dross. Who knows what's coming next? But there could be a huge. Evangelism Explosion coming out of Ukraine after this is over, I'm hoping and praying that's the case. Of course I'll pray for them. Go ahead. Go ahead.

Reuel Sample: I'm hoping and praying for a huge evangelism explosion to happen in this country.

Alan Eason: Amen! You know, and I don't know if it means Canada has to invade us first. I'm only being half way facetious. No, but.

Reuel Sample: Canada. Canada would invade and then they would apologize for it. I'm going to pivot a little bit. You're a journalist. You have a journalism degree from Georgetown, which is not really a second rate school.

Alan Eason: Yeah. Bill Clinton went there.

Reuel Sample: Are we getting an accurate picture? You think of what's going on?

Alan Eason: It depends on where you get it from. I think and this is my take and I'm at odds with some of my more conservative political friends who feel like Putin may not be so bad and that the new world order stuff and all that. I personally believe that we're getting a pretty straight story on most of what's taking place. I don't just depend on the news media. And in fact, my number one go to media is BBC. And they're they're doing a real good job of coverage. Surprisingly, even CNN is doing a pretty good job. They're usually pretty good in war situations. And I think they're not doing a bad job. I think that

one of the things that may be overblown sometimes is emphasis on America and the West providing arms, which I'm in favor of. They're trying to fight and defend their country, but they talk about that so much. And then they talk about the refugees, of course, and that that's the kind of story that news media people just gravitate to, because you see the babies, you see the children. It's horrible what they're going through. And then the suffering and the hospitals in Ukraine that get bombed and things like that, it's horrible. But as far as these undercurrents about other things that have to do with besides the Ukrainians, incredible bravery, which it is incredible. And that part I know is the truth, because I was around those people enough to know. They are very patriotic and they're also very much willing to suffer because they suffered for generations under Stalin and others. They're willing to suffer for what's good because they've had a taste of something a lot better than what they had had under the Soviet system. So I have no doubt they're willing to fight that hard.

Reuel Sample: I can't help but think that that if this invasion had been over in the two or three days that President Putin had thought it would take, we'd be saying something completely different right now.

Alan Eason: Media you mean.

Reuel Sample: Our media, our politicians, even to some effect, our churches would be saying a completely different tune. But this resistance by the Ukrainians, which I have to believe is is is a spiritual battle as well as a physical one.

Alan Eason: Oh, absolutely.

Reuel Sample: That these people these people lived under Soviet rule. They don't want to go back.

Alan Eason: I don't. And it's not just economic. It is it has to do with spiritual. It has to do with the things that our country was in many ways founded upon. And that's the love of freedom and of liberty, the freedom to worship, as you will, to speak, as you will, you know, to develop your own life and your family's life without without being channeled into these I call them cattle chutes, you know, like at a rodeo or something like that. Those are spiritual principles as well. Just as our founders always appealed to God

and the providence, and they prayed in the American Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. And that was Benjamin Franklin suggestion. Believe it or not, you know.

Reuel Sample: Ben Franklin was a complicated character.

Alan Eason: Yeah, we mentioned that last time. But it shows you that when people are under great duress in their lives are at stake, they often turn to God. And I think that's a lot of the story here. I even think it's part of the story in Russia. Russia is going through upheaval right now. It's not just the economic sanctions. That's part of it. If your Visa card doesn't work anymore and all that kind of stuff and your money's plummeting in value. Sure, that's a big problem. But a lot of those people are just torn up and conflicted about what their country is doing, and they don't have any way to express it or do anything about it.

Reuel Sample: Which is an interesting point, because here in this country, we say that the rights that we have of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom to bear arms, so and so forth, are God given they're not given to us by the government. They're given to us because of our Creator. In Russia, those rights are very clearly given to the people from the government. And so we're seeing this really this clash of worldviews in Russia of people saying, hey, I'm I'm I'm speaking out against this. And the Russian government coming in and shutting down Facebook, shutting down Twitter, arresting people who have different points of views, shutting down alternative media sources. It's an interesting clash of worldviews.

Alan Eason: It is. But something very interesting is going on in Russia. Whereas previously, if the government had swung in a direction like that, like it did when it invaded Afghanistan, there would be some protests and there would be some people who would disagree, but not that many. There are a lot more now, and these people are much more aware. And I think the Internet and the availability of knowledge and information for all these years and the relative freedom in Russia since 1991 has bred an entire generation of people who I'm not going to say they're pro-Western because most of them are still very patriotic to Russia, but they have been exposed to this kind of worldview like you're talking about. And I'm not saying our American world views all Christians. It's not, but it has still a lot of very strong Christian and spiritual elements in it that founded our republic. And we know that. And they've been exposed to that same

kind of thinking. And I think there are a lot of those people who are. They're not going to be quiet. So who knows what's going to happen there? Pray for that. Pray for that nation, too.

Reuel Sample: Yeah. Oh, yeah. And that kind of leads us to where I like to spend some time in closing off our time together. Is that conflicts of this nature will always challenge our Christian worldview. I mean, war and and conflict like this is always a huge, huge challenge to to our Christian worldview. In your opinion, what are the faithful ways that Christians can respond to this particular situation?

Alan Eason: Well, I'll go all the way back to the Apostle Paul. You know, and you had churches, as I mentioned, that were on different sides of different equations, like the Jewish churches and the Gentile churches. And then you had Greece and you had Rome. You had Asia minor. You had Judea in that area and all the different places. And they were different people. They they spoke different languages, the churches. Yet the churches were united. They went through their own struggles, such as when they began converting Gentiles. And some of the Jewish Christians couldn't understand that. And you know all that story in the New Testament. But then when it came down to Paul and especially the things he would write in the letters and Peter as well, you know, not just Paul, who is more for Gentiles than Peter, who was more with the Jewish Christians. They all said they all put prayer at the top of the list and prayer for the household of God, prayer for the one body of Christ, and it is one body. Paul said that very specifically in Philippians and. So prayer and then where you can give you know he took he took a gift from the gentile churches in Greece, a monetary gift to the churches in Jerusalem, because they had a huge famine going on, too, wasn't just persecution. It was also a famine at that time. They gave they took care of each other. And those would be the top two things right now that I can think of. But prayer above all. Pray, pray, pray, pray for the churches in Ukraine, for the churches in Russia, for everywhere, for Western Europe. Western Europe is going through a wake up right now, you know, and a lot of those people are scared. Uh, if there was a war, what would happen to them? Hopefully many people are turning to God.

Reuel Sample: I would add to that that our prayers should be for our leaders here in this country so that they make wise decisions and that they that they may be following

Jesus. And I would say that it is not improper or probably even very needed that we pray for President Putin, that because obviously he is not he is not a Christian.

Alan Eason: He believes he is in the Orthodox Church, but he's sort of a cultural Christian.

Reuel Sample: He's a cultural Christian. So what we need to be doing is praying for a revival so that he actually understands who the real Jesus is.

Alan Eason: That's right. That's right. And speaking about our country here, praying for our own leadership. You know, when I was there, even in the seventies, even when it was very communist and very atheist, at least officially atheist, so many people would tell me, they would say, well, America is a Christian country, and you could just hear in their voice, even if they were pure atheist. So a lot of these young people, young students we were meeting and talking to and teaching them about Christ, we'd meet them on the streets, we'd meet them on the beach, we'd meet them everywhere. And we always got in a great conversation and it was with a certain amount of wistfulness. They still, even though they had been raised in atheism and under dialectical materialism and the things that they taught there from Marx and others, Lenin and others, they still saw America as a city on a hill. They still saw us that way, that somehow that got through. And I know the people in Ukraine look to us as a model of so many things and there have been so many Americans out over there.

Alan Eason: Like I said, half my family's been in Ukraine. It seems like at one time or another in the last 25 years helping out with a church thing here or there. Well, not that many, but a lot. And they look to us, we have a responsibility to keep our act in line in this country, because people look to us for leadership, not just for weapons, not just for clout or economic sanctions. Yeah, they want us to help. But when you talk about protect our skies, which is what everyone in Ukraine is saying, they want a new fly, a no fly zone. I'm not sure they understand what all is involved with that, but they want to protection. You know, my answer to that is, well, I can't I'm not in politics. I can share my opinion. But the real sky that needs to be protected is the spiritual sky. We need to be covering them with prayer, and then they need to know that there are a lot of Christians in America who have a lot of spiritual power in prayer.

Reuel Sample: For Americans, that's really tough. Prayer, I think, is is is our biggest challenge here in America, because we're doers. We want we want to get in there, get our hands dirty, get do something. Prayer is is, in my opinion, a an abject statement of God I have no power over this, but You do. So it's really it's really tough for Americans to do that, but it never has been more needed.

Alan Eason: Well, it may be easier with this crazy guy with his finger on the nuclear button over there. You know, before it was at least a politburo, you had four or five guys in a circle and you were fairly sure they weren't going to do anything stupid. Now we're not so sure. And so I think Americans need to be praying for our own safety, for our own survival. Who knows what might happen?

Reuel Sample: Alan Eason, always good to talk to you. Always good to have your insight. We need to do these check ins more often.

Alan Eason: Okay. Reuel. Thank you. God bless you.