

**The Problem of Communication  
in  
Short-Term Evangelistic  
Campaigns to Russia**

by

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

>From the perspective of world missions, the 1990's could be called the "Russian decade." There was perhaps no other time in church history when such a large number of short-term Christian workers flocked to one country to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. The affluence and mobility of the American people had a great deal to do with this, but the main factor seems to have been a particular notion about the people of Russia who became the objects of these evangelical efforts. The popular belief was that Russia was a country wide open for the gospel, and that anybody with a personal testimony and the funds to travel across the ocean could go to Russia for a week or so and lead dozens or more people to Christ. This notion was fed by the reports of a great number of individuals and groups who returned from such visits with glowing reports of a "huge revival" in Russia that was in need of anyone who can go and share Christ.

This notion was not without some basis in truth. The fall of communism made possible the open communication of the gospel to multitudes who had never heard it. The curiosity of the Russian people was immense, and early evangelistic meetings met with packed theaters and stadiums. Numerous churches were planted and grew. Many Russian Christians today point to that particular period as the time of their conversion.

On the other hand, the excitement of early travelers to Russia was often communicated without much attempt to put those remarkable events in perspective and utilize a bit of spiritual discernment. American evangelicals have enough of a history in cross-cultural ministry to have learned many lessons about the difficulties and dangers inherent in doing such work in unknown cultures. Yet it seems that most of these lessons were forgotten in the "gold rush" type of zeal that drew such huge numbers of untrained Americans into Russia in the early days of openness.

We need to remember that a Russian is not a different kind of human being. He or she is subject to the normal human processes created by God. Russian people must be taught, trained, and examined by the same principles of Scripture as any other people. The failure to follow principles of effective cross-cultural communication resulted in many failures alongside the successes of evangelistic work in Russia. Some of the greatest disappointments were experienced in the context of short-term campaigns of two weeks or less, in which evangelists or large groups of Americans came to Russia on evangelistic crusades.

The purpose of this paper is to take a short series of propositions about the nature of communication and use them to help evaluate these short-term evangelistic efforts in Russia. These propositions were taken entirely from the book, "Creating Understanding" by Donald K. Smith (Zondervan, 1992). The applications and observations are based upon my own seven years of living and ministering in Russia. I personally experienced most of the features of short-term campaigns that I describe in this paper, and the desire to learn from my shortcomings was the major impetus behind the study that resulted in this and other papers.

I have often heard from Russian pastors about the "tragedy" (in their words) of American Christian groups who came to Russian cities, caused a lot of excitement among the people, and then who abruptly left the country when the work was just beginning, leaving none who could carry on the work. Russians report that many turned away from God due to their confusion and disappointment in the wake of such campaigns. Many others ended up in the cults that are always ready to swoop in and snatch up people who have been stimulated but not deeply ministered to. Some Russians estimate that only 1% of the reported "converts" from American evangelistic efforts ended up in evangelical churches. I would use the analogy of fishing to describe this effect. It is almost as if some Americans came to a large lake filled with fish, but

threw a bomb into the lake instead of using wise fishing methods. Some fish were caught intact, but many were destroyed, and the water was made foul for others who would come in to fish behind them. This does not describe all such works, but those who have come and worked wisely are considered, by the Russians with whom I have conversed, to be the exception.

The principles of effective cross-cultural communication can help in interpreting these results, and can point the way to methods that are wiser and thus more fruitful. This paper contains only a very small number of those principles that apply most directly to short-term evangelistic efforts.

### **Assumptions**

The principles presented in this paper are often complicated, and must be understood within several contexts. I must avoid deep discussion of too many contexts in order to focus on principles of communication and avoid wider issues beyond this narrow scope. Even so, a few of these broader issues are critical, and I want to make a few brief statements about my assumptions in this paper regarding these issues.

1. The laws of good communication hold true under normal human circumstances, even though God may perform special works in order to bypass them (such as with the apostle Paul). In order to avoid having to make this caveat under each principle, I will state it once here. I acknowledge that God is able to do anything He desires in the heart of a man by the power of his Holy Spirit. He can bring about interest, conviction and willingness to act in ways that would seem to violate the principles presented in this paper. The assumption in this paper is that this is not God's normal way, any more than it is God's way to reach lost people without a human preacher. The question is what has God chosen to do, and my assumption is that he wants us to be wise in how we deal with people, becoming skillful communicators that do not cut with hacksaws when scalpels are required. For this we must sharpen ourselves, and the tools of proper communication are some of the sharp tools that we need in order to be effective in evangelism.

2. God's work in the heart is inscrutable and beyond the scope of our understanding. This principle is related to the one above. We acknowledge that God's Holy Spirit is working the whole time that we are doing the ministry that He has given us. But whether or not God is doing an unusual work in a heart or is working largely through natural processes is beyond our ability to grasp. We cannot discern God's ways in the heart, nor can we distinguish how the Holy Spirit, the heart of the sinner, and the actions and words of the evangelist all work together. All we know is what our responsibility is: to pray, to love, and to instruct from God's Word. None of the principles discussed in this paper should be understood as eliminating the need for the work of God in bringing about understanding and conviction. And, of course, regeneration simply does not exist without the Holy Spirit. Though we recognize the limits of our abilities in the process of evangelism, we must recognize that it is our responsibility to be wise, knowing that God will always do His perfect work beyond the scope of our understanding.

3. The message of the gospel must be clearly understood by the evangelist. This is an entire topic by itself that I have not discussed at any length in this paper. Many failures of short-term work in Russia have been due to improper understanding of the gospel by those who have preached or conversed. One with a deep grasp of the gospel can make errors in cross-cultural communication that hinder his ministry, and that is the focus of this paper. One can also fail because he does not truly comprehend God's message, and good communication skills will not help that person to evangelize properly. This second issue must be left for other discussions.

## **I. DEEP COMMUNICATION REQUIRES INVOLVEMENT**

Human communication of any sort demands that there is a means of expressing, transmitting, and receiving information in a way that results in the receiver arriving at the same or adequately approximate meaning intended by the sender. This is a fundamental principle of communication that is often not well respected in cross-culture evangelistic ministry. Humans have a great deal in common, but are also separated from each other in many ways. When there are broad gaps between people, these must be bridged effectively or else communication will be hindered. This is most obvious in the case of people of different languages, but the differences run far deeper than this. A good level of involvement is normally required in order to cut through differences between people and promote proper understanding of the message of Jesus Christ. The following are at least a few of the principles that explain why this is so.

### **A. Comprehension of Meaning is Developed Within a Context**

**1. Meaning is internal and individual** - An idea is not like a physical object that can be easily handed from one person to another. Meaning is not transmitted directly, but is rather developed inside each individual based on his personal experiences. His mental models and patterns of thought are not apparent to any onlooker, and his internal meaning is not to be equated with any symbol or set of signals that is developed in order to communicate that meaning from one person to another. For example, one person wears around his neck a small cross on a chain. In his mind may be a vast reservoir of meaning which has become attached to that symbol, or it may hold no particular significance to him at all. Or, one Christian presents a small, carved wooden fish to another Christian after the two had worked together in an evangelistic work for several months. The one who receives the fish considers that it holds a special, deep meaning. But this fish is only a symbol, holding no meaning of itself. The meaning exists within the two people, and the fish simply represents for them that meaning. An uninvolved onlooker sees no such significance, and meaning would not be transferred to him if the fish were to be handed to him.

One who would communicate anything about Jesus Christ must constantly remind himself that his goal is to see a person come to a personal understanding of the meaning of his message. His focus in communicating must thus be centered in the listener. It is possible to do evangelism in Russia and start off on the wrong foot from the very beginning, considering that the goal is to "give" the gospel to the Russian people. Such an approach would count success by the number of gospel "presentations." Such communication is focused on the speaker. Rather, evangelists must start with asking themselves whether or not they have a means by which Russians will truly understand the message that they are bringing.

**2. Symbols of meaning vary by context** - Since people cannot convey meaning directly, they must develop among themselves symbols that represent reality. The most commonly used symbol is the word, spoken or written. One person can only communicate with another if the "referent" of the word (the meaning to which it refers) is common and understood by both parties. For most common interactions this is not a conscious process, because the symbols and referents were matched together within a common context. Informally and over time, people in that context have said, in effect, that this or that symbol will stand for this or that reality. Thus conversation can be efficient, without having to stop and identify the referent of each word spoken.

Within any single-language context, different groups that spend more time isolated together will develop a few of their own unique systems for symbol/referent relationships. Thus,

even though two people speak a common language, they may not completely understand each other because they have acquired differing referents for the same words. Most Christians are encouraged to break out of their church-based terminology when talking with unbelievers for this very reason. Words such as "sin," "conversion," and "saved," to name only a very few, are used by Christians to refer to meanings that have been developed within a very particular context. They allow for more efficient speech among knowledgeable believers, but prevent clear communication with listeners who have not had the benefit of the teaching which attached particular meaning to those terms. Other groups may have even developed contrasting meanings for those same referents, creating the illusion of communication between two people that do not realize they are referring to different realities by use of the same symbol.

The major problems related to communication of referents by symbols result when there are increased levels of abstractness for the referents. Most English speakers are likely to share very close understanding for the sentence, "President Clinton kicked a soccer ball." The referents are very concrete and subject to little interpretation. The subject, his action, and the object are commonly known. However, the sentence, "Jesus died to save sinners" is loaded with far more meaning, and thus is subject to far more misinterpretation, than many Christians realize. The increased level of abstractness results in a need for far more context in order to arrive at a common understanding. A great deal of teaching was required for a Christian to understand that sentence, and he needs to remember this when trying to communicate to others.

The problems mentioned above are magnified when two different languages are being used in the communication process. Within the same language, an abstract word can refer to a range of meanings, and have several synonyms. In a second language, the ranges of meanings have often been attached to words in very different ways. Thus abstract words rarely have one-to-one correspondence between languages. Americans that have never learned another language tend to be ignorant of this fact, and expect that a translator is simply taking each of his words and substituting the foreign word equivalent. The reality is far more complicated than this. The translator must understand the particular referents of a set of words by understanding the context, then be able to select combinations of words in the second language that will help the listener gain understanding of the intended meaning. This process is as much an art as a science. To be an effective translator, a person must clearly understand two different contexts.

When doing evangelism in Russia, communication of ideas is crossing each of the contextual barriers mentioned above. First the translator must share a common understanding of the meaning of the English terms used by the American speaker. Then he must be able to properly communicate those ideas in his own language. Finally, he must share a common understanding of the Russian words that he uses with the listener. Three sets of symbol/referent combinations are being utilized, in any of which the intended meaning can be lost. In many cases, short-term evangelistic teams are utilizing unbelieving Russian translators that do not understand the principles they are translating, to communicate with Orthodox-influenced listeners who already have particular understanding of Russian religious words. In such cases, it would be surprising if good communication were to result. Predictably, it often does not.

**3. Life meanings are developed in a life context** - As mentioned above, abstract terms require more context to facilitate explanation and understanding. But beyond this, the meaning of many abstract terms simply cannot be understood apart from life experience. Language is not complex enough to communicate the subtleties of life, regardless how precisely it is used. Often the only way to communicate a life principle is to illustrate it by living examples that have been experienced by the listener. The more concise the abstract statement, the more incomprehensible



it can be apart from illustration. One example is the simple phrase "God loves you." One develops an idea of the identity of God partly through a complex combination of concrete and abstract analogies. One develops an idea of love almost entirely through illustrations and experiences of relationships. Thus this phrase by itself is subject to an enormous variety of interpretations.

The elements of culture all work together to help people understand life and to interpret statements about life. The way that families interact, the traditions and belief patterns of a people, and many other cultural issues provide the framework within which individuals within that culture shape their ideas. People use the terminology and symbols of their own culture to order the way they think and talk about life, and unfamiliar approaches can cause confusion. Much knowledge is gained by analogy from what one already understands, and so a good communicator must know the culture of his listener well enough to know what analogies to use.

In order to introduce a new concept about life, one must often be able to demonstrate the principle in action in front of the listener. A few acts of love will communicate more deeply than pages full of words, especially since the symbols of language can largely be bypassed in favor of direct demonstration. One demonstrates life principles in the context of a relationship, and the further from life situations is the interaction (such as in a classroom), the less likely that the life principles will be communicated properly. What a person really needs is to see what Christian love looks like in the midst of situations that he understands.

The issue for an American doing evangelism in Russia thus revolves around the question, "what do I have in common with them?" In order to create understanding, the areas in which the American and Russian share commonality should be utilized. The more universal the human issue, the more commonality that naturally exists. Yet it must be kept in mind that common ground exists mainly on a superficial level. Americans doing evangelism in Russia tend to work quickly toward deep and complex issues, not realizing that there is not enough common context between them and their audience in order to have common understanding at this level. The more an American knows about the Russian context, the better he can shape his message to promote understanding. Sadly, many Americans on short-term visits know almost nothing about the Russian people or the Orthodoxy which has influenced them. The way they shape, defend and illustrate ideas comes from an American context and feels very foreign to a Russian. By becoming involved with Russian people, commonality is developed on deeper levels, allowing the common understanding required to speak about spiritual life.

## **B. Feedback and Interaction is Critical to Gaining Understanding**

How can a communicator really perceive how well a person is understanding his message? The obvious answer is this: by observing his response. But is a communicator able to interpret response properly and assist the listener toward refined comprehension? Such ability requires involvement with the listener. The difficulty in arriving at meaning in issues of life demands wise and honest interaction in order to complete the communication process.

**1. Refinement of understanding requires interaction** - The communication process is not complete until the listener has good understanding of the message spoken to him. Because of the principles mentioned earlier regarding the nature of meaning and its acquisition, it is almost always a necessity that several rounds of question and answer follow an initial presentation of a complex idea before understanding is gained. Differing referents for words must be eliminated until a commonality is reached. This process is especially difficult when two languages are concerned. And the presence of a translator further complicates matters, requiring that the

translator understand the questions and the answers, as well as the nature of the refinement that is required. Complex ideas regarding life and God evoke also a great deal of difference of opinion and conviction, and one must often wade through a plethora of misconceptions and half-truths in order to explain the gospel.

Many American methods of evangelism ignore this need for interaction, and instead follow a direct route of proclamation and simple response. The American may share his testimony of how he became a Christian, and then go through a list of questions that can be answered yes or no. The questions may be designed to lead the person to the conclusion that he should then do the next action requested in order to become a Christian. Or, in a large meeting, a person may be asked a question and asked to raise his hand or repeat a prayer. But in most cases the person is not really tested to determine whether or not he truly understood what had just been communicated to him. It seems that many Americans are almost afraid of such interaction, since it may surface confusion or an objection. Yet, if a listener's questions are not answered to his satisfaction, he is not truly ready to make an informed and convinced decision.

**2. Feedback is not always what it seems** - A lack of knowledge of people often leads to misinterpretations of their responses to communication. This is a chronic problem of ministry across cultures, and is especially evident in Russia. I will present just two of the common reasons in Russia that feedback is often not what it seems.

**a. Misunderstanding** - If the communication process has been faulty, the receiver has not fully understood what has been communicated. This may be due to any of the features already discussed above. When the point comes for some form of response, it is very common that the listener will not understand what he is to do nor why he is to do it. One way to respond without understanding is to give a favorable response to the wrong question. The question may be, "Do you want to become a Christian?" The listener has understood a different question in his heart, such as, "Do I want God to help me?" It is to this question that he is actually responding. He hasn't yet the comprehension to know the difference between these two questions, and will quickly raise his hand or pray a prayer when he is asked. The American may assume that he has understood, and considers that a conversion to Christ has taken place. Another way to respond without understanding is to give an unfavorable response to the wrong question. The same question as above may have been asked, but the listener understands the question to be, "Do I want to become a Baptist?" His fear of the Baptists causes a negative response, although he is positive toward Jesus Christ. A good deal of interaction is required to overcome the many kinds of misunderstanding that promote misinterpreted feedback.

**b. Dishonesty** - Assuming that the listener has understood the message, it is not to be assumed that his response is truly from his heart. There are a few reasons that a Russian may perform the action requested in a public or home evangelistic meeting besides the reason that he is truly responding to the call of God. Russians have a large amount of influence from Eastern cultures, and one of these tendencies is that of pleasing one's guest. As long as a request is not too intrusive, many will respond favorably out of their belief that it is a polite thing to do (there is no need to offend a guest unnecessarily). Other Russians may respond favorably, but mainly for the purpose of sending you on your way so that you won't bother them any more. The same people will often solemnly promise to show up at a later meeting, but then fail to come. This has happened to many Americans who do door-to-door visitation. Russians are reluctant to give an outright negative response to a request, and Russians do not strongly hold each other to certain kinds of promises. Americans are offended by this because they do not understand the culture.

**3. Interpretation of feedback can lack wisdom or integrity** - It is natural that Americans sharing the Gospel are anxious to see positive response among Russians. Indeed, many reports coming out of Russia have generated high expectations due to the great numbers of conversions counted. This expectation has led to a great deal of wishful thinking and reluctance to question the nature of the positive responses to the gospel. Furthermore, pressure to report great results from evangelistic campaigns has, in my opinion, caused many who have known better to report results that had no real substance. Those competing for funds from American donors have little motivation to come out with statements that there were few verifiable results from a campaign. The results discovered by Russians after a campaign is over should be the actual ones reported - and these are frequently very modest, and in some cases dismal.

Not much of a relationship with the Russians would be required to learn the true nature of the feedback on short-term evangelistic campaigns. In two afternoons of interviews with Russian Baptist leaders after a campaign in a central Russian city I was given a great deal of insight into the nature of the campaign results, as well as good reasons for these poor results. American leaders of short-term campaigns must become more willing to honestly evaluate the campaign results and alter strategies where required.

Another factor in misinterpretation of results is a lack of wisdom regarding the gospel itself. Many Americans don't take much time to ask the question, "What kind of response would be a reliable indication of conversion?" Just about any kind of positive movement tends to be accepted as a "profession of faith," when there is no Biblical warrant for such naive optimism. Such attitudes result in a common result: The Americans leave Russia at the end of a short-term campaign, and hand over to the Russian leaders several hundred or more sheets of paper with names and addresses of those who had reportedly trusted Christ. The Russians often don't have the time or the experience required to meet with and follow up on each one of these people. In most cases the people are called and invited to church, though in a few cases nothing is done with the names. It is often assumed that these people know where the church is located, and will come to it if they want to. Russian Christians doing "follow-up" have commonly met with coldness at the doors of people that had supposedly experienced spiritual rebirth during a campaign. Faced with the prospect of experiencing this result hundreds of times in the post-campaign ministry, it is not surprising that the Russians will expect those who are truly converted to take a bit of initiative themselves. Otherwise those doing the follow-up are actually having to begin the evangelistic process anew. Just a bit of discernment on the part of the Americans who did the evangelism would have led them to try to qualify the list of names, aiming for quality more than quantity.

### **C. Receptiveness to Information is Not Automatic; It Must be Earned**

The message of the gospel can be understood, assuming that the proper contexts are utilized, as mentioned above. However, a listener must be ready and willing to receive such a message, and will tend to ignore or filter out messages he does not want to hear. Even a message that is completely contextual is only a seed, and must have soil that is receptive to it. Developing this receptiveness is a major part of the ministry of communication.

**1. Barriers close hearts to messages** - Barriers that prevent listeners from the attention required to understand and deal seriously with the gospel fall into several categories. The following are a few of those most relevant to the Russian experience.

**a. Distrust** - The gospel message is very intrusive, and calls for a radical change of life. If people resist sales of expensive products because they don't know if they can trust the

salesman, how much more will they be careful with a message that calls for the greatest expense of all? Lack of trust can happen at any level, even between people who are close acquaintances. On the cross-cultural level the ability to trust others is a much greater problem, and this fact is often greatly magnified between Russians and Americans. A long history of distrust has affected how Russians think about Americans, even though they have been deeply curious about America. Many blame America for the deep economic and moral problems afflicting Russia after the fall of communism. Many also question the motives of Americans who have flocked to Russia to make converts to what they consider "non-Russian" religions. Warm Russian hospitality and intense curiosity often work together to mask this fundamental distrust of Americans (especially at the spiritual level), so one must not assume that he has the trust of his attentive Russian listeners.

**b. Lack of identification** - Another barrier awaiting Americans is the general assumption by Russians that "these rich, pampered Americans cannot possibly understand what our Russian life is like." Certainly the gospel deals with all people in all cultures, and that understanding of what God requires can be passed between people of opposite lives - but if a listener feels that the speaker cannot identify with his life, he will often not listen seriously to the speaker's message. His first question in listening is, "what does this have to do with me?" Identification must be established in order for communication to follow, and very often this identification must be on a level deeper than that of common humanity.

The problem of identification has often been magnified by a few common practices of Americans coming to Russia to evangelize. Americans often come to Russia with fear and distaste of many things Russian, and tend to live in an American "bubble" while they are doing their work. They stay in expensive hotels (by Russian standards), ride in their private bus, make brief forays into homes, institutions and evangelistic meetings, but always return to the safety of their non-Russian environment at night. They take a day for shopping, and each one of them spends what for most of their Russian friends would be at least a month's salary. Russians looking on at all of this tend to view the Americans as being on a vacation, even if it is one that has a purpose. Though each of these practices may have been designed to make the American experience more comfortable and efficient, the result is often to create a large distance between them and the people they are trying to work with and reach.

**c. Disappointment** - A new barrier has been erected for Americans coming to Russia in the wake of several years of high-visibility American evangelistic efforts. Russians were intensely curious about spiritual matters right after the fall of communism, and flocked to any evangelistic service that was offered. A great number of them wanted some hope for their newly uncertain and always difficult lives. They grasped at literature, raised hands, prayed prayers, and in many other ways said "yes" to God. Yet the ingredients required for truly entering into spiritual life were commonly misunderstood, and the opportunity for receiving this life was commonly offered to them in a way they were not ready to accept. As a result, only a minute percentage of the reported "conversions" in Russia have ended up in any church. Moreover, a great many Russian people have been left disappointed, concluding that these Americans didn't really have anything to offer after all. The blame for this result can be shared by many factors, but the ignorance of Americans of the proper way to work in the Russian culture ranks high among these. The result has been a growing number of Russian people that want nothing to do with American evangelism.

It must be noted that this disappointment extends into the Russian churches as well. Russian leaders and church members have also been disappointed by the failure of some

Americans to live up to their promises. Leaders have been promised support that has not been sent. Young believers have been promised letters that were never mailed. Americans went back to the USA reporting how hundreds had "come to Christ." Yet the Russians participating in the evangelistic campaign often did not see even one of these people coming to their church. After one American evangelistic campaign in a central Russian city, one pastor said that he would never again participate in an American-style evangelistic effort.

**2. Relationships soften hearts to messages** - None of the barriers mentioned above are insurmountable. In very many cases in Russia the message of the gospel, delivered in the context of a loving relationship, has resulted in new and growing spiritual life. The environment that most promotes movement in spiritual matters is a trusting relationship. People have very often been deceived, used and abused by strangers, and are reluctant to open their hearts to one they do not trust. Good relationships promote this trust and allow the gospel to spread. Americans who have worked on short-term evangelistic efforts in Russia have usually made far more impact on their Russian translators than they have on any of the people with whom they spoke about Jesus. The commonality and warmth built over the course of their work together softened the heart of the translator to receive the message that was being spoken.

In the Russian culture, very little of importance happens without good relationships. Most Russians prefer to do business with friends, and close networks of relationships are the means used by Russians to get along in life. American businessmen have often been frustrated in this environment, because Russian businessmen want to spend so much time getting to know their prospective foreign partner before they will come to any business decisions. To use this analogy, the gospel can be seen as a form of a "transaction" that will not easily take place outside of an established relationship with the one delivering the good news. Americans expect Russians to trust in the "product" regardless of the lack of relationship with the one offering it, but this is not the normal Russian way.

For these reasons, many Russian believers do not believe Americans on short-term trips to Russia are able to do effective evangelism among the general Russian population without being in close partnership with a mature Russian Christian. Evangelism that results in actual baptisms and church members is actually relatively rare for Americans, and particularly those on short-term campaigns. When results occur, they can most often be traced to the presence of a good relationship between the new convert and a Russian Christian. Random visitations and open meetings have resulted in many "decisions," but the task of developing relationships deep enough to evaluate and support a true new life in Christ is very often left unfulfilled. An approach to evangelism in Russia that ignores the need to establish relationships is likely to be very ineffective.

## **II. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS A TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS**

If effective communication requires involvement, as explained in the first part of this paper, it is obvious that it also requires time. Relationships require time to develop, and every reason that good communication requires involvement is also an argument that good communication requires time. Every relationship goes through stages, and so does the communication process. Attempts to accelerate either process reduces its effectiveness. The progressive, time-consuming nature of communication argues for a cautious and deliberate approach to evangelism under normal circumstances, even though God is certainly able to cause dramatic and rapid movement forward in ways that are mysterious to us.

## **A. The Communication Process Takes Time**

Good communication is a process that is never contained in a moment of time. Effective communication is the foundation of making disciples. Assuming that these two propositions are true, it is clear that those who do short-term work in Russia, which by its very nature takes place in a moment of time, are not truly capable of making disciples, and should have much less ambitious goals. Many methods employed in short-term evangelism in Russia seem to ignore this time element, assuming overly optimistic and unrealistic expectations for what can happen in the course of a few days.

**1. Knowledge and convictions tend to ripen, not "flash"** - Gaining true understanding is not a totally objective process like transferring electricity to an electrical appliance. Although each person has the "God-shaped vacuum" in his heart that evangelicals assert, the human heart is very complex. Ideas take time to "sink in." The process of coming to understanding is in fact mysterious to us, and we disrespect this inscrutable process by trying to package truth in a neat bundle that can be quickly handed over to another person. And if knowledge takes time to ripen, this is even more true for convictions. People need time to come to settled beliefs based on the truths of God, and evangelistic methods should respect this reality.

Short-term evangelistic campaigns in Russia are often founded on the belief that the population of Russia, having been denied teaching about God for so many years, is "ripe for the gospel," and that all that is required is to fill in the final piece to the puzzle for them to be ready to respond to Jesus Christ. This belief greatly underestimates the ignorance and overstates the willingness to change that is resident in the average Russian person. Widespread curiosity should not be mistaken for adequate preparation for the gospel, but this mistake is often made in Russia. The deceptive responses to the gospel mentioned earlier have perhaps caused many to falsely interpret the reality in Russia and assume that normal communication principles do not apply in that country. However, the actual results discovered after short-term workers return home serve to affirm that this assumption is false.

**2. Trust is usually earned over time** - This proposition is closely related to the one stated earlier that relationships soften hearts and overcome mistrust. Here it only need be stressed again that the kind of relationship that builds trust is one that is built up over time. Russians are very aware that there are many people in the world that are not trustworthy, and they have been betrayed enough times to become cynical on this point. The "Russian way" is to develop a few close relationships over the course of time, and Russians are slow to trust others. They recognize that it is very easy to speak words of love and commitment, but quite demanding to prove the reality of the same in one's life. The best way to test people is to observe how they behave over time. The pretender will eventually be exposed when he has dropped his guard. The trustworthy man remains steadfast over time, and gains the trust of those to whom he is communicating. There is no shortcut to be taken, no way to accelerate this process, and those who try to do so create anxiety for the Russian person they are trying to "push."

The problem for Americans on short-term campaigns is that they tend to feel an inside pressure to "keep moving" and reach as many people as possible with the gospel. In many ways they reflect the mentality of a salesman who wants to quickly "close the deal." In contrast, their Russian hosts immediately want to make tea, spend time in conversation and start establishing a relationship. To refuse this warm hospitality, which some unfortunately do, is to insult the gracious host and put a barrier up to communication. Russians have a different sense of time than Americans do, and consider spending time with people to be a high priority in their lives, worthy of a leisurely approach. American evangelism tends to be centered on the truth

principles that they have brought to the door of the Russian, and Americans tend to have trouble with patiently waiting until the time is right for each step of communication.

**3. True results reflect previous time taken** - When clear understanding or readiness for a decision are present at the end of a short period of communication, a person has normally been engaged for some time in considering the same issues prior to this latest interaction. In other words, the fruit had already ripened, and was ready for a harvest of some sort. In short-term campaigns where many true believers result, it can be demonstrated that a great deal of preparation had gone before the evangelist arrived. This is especially true in Russia, where there were many people who had been considering the Christian message for a long period of time, but who had remained in the background during communist times. In the early days after the fall of communism, many people did in fact come to Christ in the early campaigns that took place in Moscow and other large Russian cities. One young Russian church leader who was among those early converts compared that early harvest to "shaking the tree" in Russia. In his view, the fully ripe fruit fell with a simple shake. Following that early harvest, a time of normal, time-consuming communication was required to reach Russians who were not so ripe.

Americans who were full of joy and zeal after witnessing these early results were often not very wise in interpreting them in the overall context of Russian culture and history. Many messages were sent out proclaiming that the whole country was ready to respond to the gospel, and all that was needed was to send more Americans to carry on more evangelistic campaigns. Large groups of untrained American Christians began to flood into Russia, and in some cases (especially in areas being visited for the first time by evangelists) good fruit came from the simple proclamation of the gospel. In many other cases a great many "decisions" were recorded without any lasting results. Many Americans with no experience of cross-cultural communication assumed that they could simply arrive in Russia and people would flock to hear them and respond to their message. With no time to develop relationships or evaluate actual results, successive groups returned with the same exaggerated accounts of "conversions." Meanwhile, the Russian Christians that returned to visit these "converts" found people that were not really interested in continuing discussions of spiritual matters. Americans assumed that the sharing of the gospel had been fulfilled, when in fact it was only beginning.

## **B. The Communication Process is Progressive**

Another reason that communication requires time is that there are various progressive steps involved in gaining understanding and conviction. Evangelistic work should take into account the nature of this progression and follow it carefully.

**1. People go through steps on the way to understanding and convictions** - Growth of any sort is a continuous process without sharply defined stages, but there are recognizable phases that occur prior to other phases. For example, we can recognize phases of childhood, adolescence and adulthood in a human, but need not define an exact point when one moves from one to the other. In communication that leads to a decision (which in our discussion is the decision to believe in Jesus Christ), the listener must "grow" through a few key phases. He must first of all have the basic maturity, language and context required to receive the information in the first place. Then he must become generally aware of Jesus Christ and the gospel message. He must have enough interest in order to gain understanding of what is required of him, then consider the gospel invitation personally, growing in desire until the point of a decision to act. This is not a technical presentation of the steps or phases, but simply a recognition that, by definition, some internal events must precede others.

**2. Each interaction must be seen in context** - The longer a person has lived, the more he has stored up knowledge, experiences and attitudes related to life. The way that he receives new information relates heavily to all that has gone before in his life. In order to know what to say to a person regarding the gospel, as well as how to say it, one must be able to find out where he is on the path to knowledge and understanding. The first task for one sharing the gospel should not be to proclaim, but to listen. Much time can be wasted because of communication that is not on target for where the listener is on the path. A great process has gone on before, and the speaker is only one person in a long chain of communication. He must take time to find out where his listener stands before he knows what to communicate to him.

The approach of many short-term evangelists is to launch directly into the gospel in a very general way, without taking the time to find out what his listener is thinking. This discovery would be a time consuming process, and time is one thing the short-term evangelist is lacking. Furthermore, many think that it is not necessary to delve into the background and perspectives of a listener, since the gospel will speak for itself, and applies to every person regardless of his current situation. Such an approach treats every person alike, and tends to design an evangelistic approach that is identical for every situation. Russians have many experiences in common, but are not a homogenous group. It is greatly beneficial to know whether or not one's listener has an Orthodox background or an atheistic one, and what they know about the gospel as well as where they got that information. Then one's communication can be on target, because he has a better idea how far along the path this listener is.

One time I was sitting in a Russian church where an American preacher was visiting. This church was relatively young, but was filled with solid believers. The preacher announced that his topic was "The Gospel of Jesus Christ." He then proceeded to give a very simple gospel message in the American style, followed by an invitation. As a result, many were offended or embarrassed. He hadn't taken the time to find out where his audience was, and gave a message that was far behind them on the path. One young woman in another church where this was done asked me, "Don't they know we are Christians?" With a little inquiring and listening before speaking, one can avoid messages that are either ahead or behind his listener or listeners.

**3. The Most Effective Results Follow the Natural Progression** - Once a person's location on the path of understanding is known, it is worthwhile to be careful to walk with him in an orderly progression through the various steps of communication. Perhaps he has an awareness that Jesus lived, and that he somehow relates to God. He may be simply curious at this point. He feels a particular need, but his need relates initially to receiving input for the very next step. He lacks understanding, and needs more explanation. This explanation is the next natural step for him, the one for which he has the proper capacity and interest. Effective communication meets him right at the point of this need as opposed to other needs of which he may not yet be aware. Once he has grown into the next level, he is ready to make further steps.

One failure of American evangelism is an impatience with natural processes. The task of evangelism is equated with that of gathering "decisions for Christ" - and these decisions are almost always the final decision to trust in Jesus for salvation. Yet it must be said that there are many decisions to be made before this climactic one, and each of them is important. Moreover, helping one to move from one step to another is every bit as important as the final "harvesting" step, and should be satisfying to the Christian worker. One cause for anxiety in witnessing is the internal pressure one feels to bring a person to the point of conversion - an anxiety matched by that felt by the listener who is often pressured to move faster than he is ready to move.



### **C. Bypassing Time or Steps Can Have Deceptive or Damaging Results**

**1. It is rare to make major progress in one meeting** - Because of the many factors listed above, it should not be expected that one can cover a great deal of ground with a person in one evangelistic meeting. This should be the guiding assumption when meeting someone for the first time and speaking to them about Jesus Christ. The case of people being truly ready and believing in Christ at a first meeting should be considered the exception - not to be denied as a possibility, but not to be expected.

Among the many problems of short-term evangelism in Russia is the tendency to turn every contact into an opportunity to ask for a decision to trust Christ for salvation. Perhaps a personal testimony is shared, the "Four Spiritual Laws" are explained, a simple survey might be used with yes/no answers, and then the person is expected to make an eternal decision. How many phases of the communication process were glossed over? How rapidly was the listener expected to hear and respond at each step? Perhaps the one doing this kind of evangelism has forgotten his own process of coming to Christ, and as a result has no respect for the process that must occur in front of his eyes with another person. In many cases the evangelist will feel that he has failed if he returns at the end of the day without a few "professions of faith." The pressure to avoid the natural progression or else move rapidly through it prevents much solid evangelistic work from being done.

**2. Decisions to act are often not related to true readiness** - An evangelist has a goal in his mind when he is presenting the gospel, the goal of seeing a person make a decision for Christ. Some form of action is expected that will express that decision. It may be the action of raising one's hand, walking forward at a large meeting, or other public actions. Whether in public or in a home, the most common action would be to repeat a "sinner's prayer." In a great many cases, the evangelist has bypassed the inner working of the Holy Spirit by placing a simple action in front of the person that will supposedly bring the divine transaction to a close. In such cases many reasons may present themselves to the listener for following through with the action suggested, and some reasons are in fact a form of avoidance of truly dealing with God. Compared to true faith and repentance, it is actually relatively simple to mouth a prayer or make a simple public profession. Performing such actions without true conviction can actually become a form of inoculation against later exhortations to follow Christ ("I already made a decision for Christ, I already prayed the prayer."). When immediately followed by congratulations and assurances of security, a great damage to the soul of the person may have resulted.

Many who do short-term work in Russia act as if they are not aware that an external action is no guarantee of an internal reality. Eternal life is at times almost treated as if it were a "trap," and that an evangelist can lure people close enough so that some action on the part of the person will "catch them" for the Kingdom of God. Then if they later change their mind, it is too late, because they already belong to God. Perhaps none would state this, but their method of doing evangelism bears this appearance. They fearfully avoid any questions or distractions that may divert the person from praying the prayer, especially once they sense that the person is open to performing that action. To stop and "count the cost" would be considered a diversion from the task of evangelism as opposed to a central factor of true conviction.

**3. The nature of the heart is revealed naturally, after any "decision"** - If the time or steps required to bring a person to adequate understanding and true conviction have been skipped, this fact will reveal itself following the steps that the person made in order to respond to the gospel message. Many evangelists are reluctant to examine people after their "decision," but simply take it for granted that "God will take care of them." This is no way to treat even a true

babe in Christ, let alone one whose conversion is suspect. God "takes care" of people by using other people. It is difficult work to deal with the life of one who is hovering somewhere around regeneration, and many avoid it in favor of the more "exciting" ministry of seeing people make "decisions." Yet this is some of the most critical work in making disciples, analogous to the great care taken for a physical life during pregnancy and in the initial period after birth. Even if time and care was taken in communicating the gospel, and true readiness seemed to be present, much discernment is required in dealing with people in this most critical of times of their lives.

It is a commonly observed phenomenon that those who move very quickly toward a decision often become conscious that they have acted against their better judgment, and pull back later. In these cases the reversion was not a change of heart, but a revelation that the heart had not been truly changed in the first place. Evangelists should be as concerned about those who make rapid decisions as they are about those who stubbornly hold out against the gospel. Often those who feel that they were manipulated to perform some action later become hardened against the gospel and bitter against Christians. Failure to deal with them in wisdom and love has had damaging results. Others who decide quickly may become part of a visible group of believers without true conversion, and thus cannot become fruitful members of the body. In addition, they often remain insensitive to the call of the gospel. A third group may become involved, but remain conscious of their doubts, later coming to a true repentance which must be renamed by others to take into account their prior "conversion." In all of these cases the damage has been done by being too quick to acknowledge conversion after a simple visible action.

The fruit of short-term evangelism has been available for inspection for several years now, and the commonly dismal results support the contention that many of its methods are unsound. Russian evangelical leaders have been trying to communicate this fact to Americans, but their counsel often falls on deaf ears, especially when evangelists are restricted to their methodology for one reason or another. Those who do such work must be courageous enough to question their methods of communication of the gospel and make the adjustments necessary to ensure sound ministry - even if it means reporting far fewer conversions to the American Christian public. True results, not apparent results, should be the aim of all Christian workers.

## CONCLUSION

The principles of communication discussed in this paper surround two related issues: taking time and building relationships. By definition, short-term ministries are limited in their ability to do either of these things. Although so limited, there are many good ministries that can be performed on short-term visits. The ministries that have had the most effect are those that focus on the existing believers in Russia, with whom American Christians can have rapid rapport. Much less time is required to build a close relationship with another believer, as many on these campaigns have learned. A focus on training (in a deep way – not simply with simplistic methods) and encouraging Russian Christians to do the ministry of evangelism will bear much more long-term fruit than any evangelism done directly by Americans. Sister church relationships have been launched with success when groups of Americans have come and minister side by side with their Russian brothers and sisters. It should be communicated to Russians that the task of reaching their countrymen is their task, and it cannot be taken over by Christians from any other country.

The task of training Russians in ministry cannot be performed at a very deep level by Americans with very little understanding of Russian culture. Universal principles can be passed

on, but the Russians themselves should be the ones to develop means to apply these principles in their own cultural setting. Approaches developed for the American culture rarely transfer directly into a Russian setting. When Americans go to Russia and do the work themselves in an American way, the Russian believers are often left with a feeling of helplessness. If they equate the American way with the Biblical way, they may feel that they will never be ready to do this work themselves, and the American team may be to blame for this wrong attitude.

Good things have come from American short-term evangelistic campaigns in Russia, and this is one of the reasons that they have been continued. Yet the many things that have been done poorly have caused more problems for existing Russian churches than Americans realize, and one main culprit is the lack of skill in cross-cultural communication. With adequate training and more moderate goals, short-term works can and have had results that please both the Americans and the Russians. If such workers will put away their illusions and work soberly and carefully, the eventual results of wiser methods (whose results appear more modest in the beginning) will far outdistance the *apparent* results of methods that promise great things but too often end up in disappointment.

May God grant us all the wisdom and courage to do what is right in Russia.