

# **Toward an Understanding of Russian Baptist Counseling**

**by**

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## *Table of Contents*

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	5
Purpose and Scope of Paper 5/ Importance of Issue 5/ Approach 6/ Order of Paper 6/ Disclaimer 6	
<b>I.PRINCIPLES OF BAPTIST COUNSELING</b>	7
Nature of Problems 7/ Solutions to Problems 10/ Nature of Counseling 11	
<b>II.PRACTICE OF BAPTIST COUNSELING</b>	14
Preparation of Counselors 14/ The Counseling Approach 15	
<b>III.COMMON PROBLEMS REQUIRING COUNSEL</b>	18
Problems of the Individual 19/ Problems in the Family 19/ Problems in the Church 20/ Problems in the World 21	
<b>IV.ATTITUDES TOWARD WESTERN COUNSELING</b>	22
Requirements for Effective Western Teaching 22/ Response to Western Psychological Principles 25/ Western Practical Help Requested 26	
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	27
Summary 27/ Recommendations 29	

# **Toward an Understanding of Russian Baptist Counseling**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1. Purpose and Scope of Paper**

This paper presents an inquiry into the normal practice of counseling in Russian Baptist churches. Several comments are necessary in order to provide you with a proper perspective of the limited scope and purpose of the study that resulted in this paper.

The primary focus of this study is to begin to understand, first, how Baptists counsel their members, and second, why they counsel as they do. The study is thus concerned primarily with practical issues. There is only a very limited attempt to probe into issues of psychology, mainly because the development of the field of psychology has been very limited among those who do counseling in Russia. The direction of the paper follows the paths taken by Baptist leaders in describing their counseling ministries.

I want to emphasize that this is an introductory study. It is in no way meant to be a comprehensive treatment of the issue. The analysis is not intended to be a deep one. Rather, it presents my opinion of the key issues as I have discovered them through my conversations and experience among Russian Baptists. There is much more work to be done to comprehend the history, recent practice, and current changes in counseling among the Baptists. This paper could perhaps be read as an initial guide to assist those doing further work.

There are at least four separate unions of Baptist churches in Russia. A few differences exist between them in their principles and practice, some which may concern counseling. I have made no attempt to distinguish between those groups in this paper, but I consider that the issues presented are general enough that Baptists of all kinds will appear very similar to any outsider. In spite of this, it must be said that the results of this study will have been primarily influenced by the approach of the registered Baptists in the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists.

The primary information for this paper has been gathered in Moscow. However, though there are differences between practices in Moscow and other cities, and particularly villages, the central conclusions of this paper should generally relate to all Russian Baptists. I was careful to speak with key leaders that had experience in several locations, and who were aware of features that may be unique to Moscow or to villages.

### **2. Importance of Issue**

As is true with pastors in the West, pastoral counseling is an important ministry of Russian Baptists. Although they have been operating for many years without formal education for counselors, there has been an ongoing tradition of Baptist leaders counseling members in their churches. With the opening of Russia to outside influences, training for the ministry of counseling has been arriving from the West. In many cases, foreign instructors have been uninformed about the beliefs and traditions of Russian Baptists concerning the ministry of counseling, and as a result have often failed to deal with some of the most important issues.

Because of the language barrier, evaluations of the methods and styles of Russian counselors has been largely inaccessible to Americans who are teaching counseling. Unless there is a concerted effort to listen through a translator to counseling sessions of students (which would in almost all cases be very impractical), it is very difficult for trainers to evaluate the progress of their students. As a result, many trainers may be left to trust that their students will

take what they have learned and apply it in their own counseling. Yet this approach may be assuming a "blank slate" in the minds of Russian students - which is a false assumption. Although there has not been a great deal of formal training, the informal traditions are often very strong and even dominating within the churches. A Western trainer may not be aware of a number of underlying beliefs that have caused the rejection of several of the points he has taught.

Another critical issue is the controversial nature of counseling theories and the use of general principles of secular (or even "Christian") psychology in the Church. Many theories that have neither stood the test of time nor been proven from scripture are being tested in Russia. The results have often been poor. Russian Baptists are becoming more aware of the controversies, and will often be resistant to many forms of counselor training.

In order to promote better training in the area of counseling, any instructor should bring at least a basic knowledge of the background and assumptions resident in his students. This paper attempts to bring to light several of these cultural and spiritual issues.

### **3. Approach**

The general approach I took in my study was to gather a series of issues and questions that would then be explored through observation and interviews. The major portion of the questions were taken from a study of several texts on biblical counseling. I designed an initial interview form, and arranged interviews with Baptist pastors and leaders. I was forced to alter and reorganize my questions a few times as a result of the unusual directions discovered in the interview process. Also, as key issues emerged through the interviews, I also pursued these in further interviews. The notes from this process form the basis of this paper.

### **4. Order of Paper**

My original intent was to organize my paper along the lines of my interview questions. The same discoveries that led me to change my interview questions also led me to alter my intended order and contents for this paper. Seeking answers from a perspective of Western counseling principles proved to be an unfruitful way to develop the topic, so I created an outline that would present my findings in accordance with Russian Baptist perspectives I discovered.

In general this paper follows an order from the more general to the more specific. After a discussion of general principles of Baptist counseling, the actual practice of counseling is explored. Then follows a practical section regarding the current common counseling issues faced by Russian counselors in their ministries. The final section looks into issues of Russian responses to Western counseling ideas. The conclusion contains a few primary recommendations that I would make as a result of this work.

### **5. Disclaimer**

As alluded to above, this paper is not intended to be comprehensive in scope or scientific in research. Although it is based on my own experience of three years in Russia, and utilizes the insights of key leaders in the Baptist Union, most of the conclusions demand further study. Since all the principles have been derived from opinions of Baptist counselors, however, they can at least serve as issues to highlight in the preparation of notes for teaching counseling, if there are no other studies readily available to you.

## I. PRINCIPLES OF BAPTIST COUNSELING

### A. Nature of Problems

**1. Sin and Responsibility** - The foundational presuppositions held by Baptist counselors are relatively simple and direct. Spiritual problems relate to one's personal accountability to live in communion with and obedience to God, and each person is expected accept this responsibility.

**a. The Source of Problems** - In general, personal disobedience to God is the most commonly diagnosed cause of personal problems that lead people to seek counsel. However, a distinction must first be made between external and internal problems. Many people face difficult life situations, including bad relationships and desperate circumstances. These may or may not relate to one's own disobedience, and each situation will need to be judged separately. It is one's internal response to these external problems that will be the issue in counseling. In cases where one is not to blame for his environment, he is still considered at fault if he has responded sinfully or followed the bad example of other sinners. There is thus no attempt to reduce personal responsibility by seeking out extenuating circumstances for blame.

It is also commonly understood that God sends trials to believers in order to test and increase their faith. Often one seeking counsel is wanting to know how to respond spiritually to that trial. The problem can thus be one of a lack of spiritual understanding or of faith. In all such situations, the general assumption is that an individual's weakness of faith contributes to his problems.

**b. The Role of Guilt** - There are two aspects to guilt generally recognized among Baptist counselors. The first is genuine guilt that comes from the Holy Spirit as a believer sins. This is a ministry of God that is similar to physical pain, and is used to help direct the believer to repentance and restoration of fellowship with God. This kind of guilt would rarely be minimized or explained away. Rather, the source of the guilt would be sought out for exposure, so that it could be dealt with directly.

The second kind of guilt would be considered "false guilt." This can arise due to a believer's ignorance of his forgiveness for past sins. One example given is that of a woman who in the past had an abortion, and still feels deep guilt today in spite of the forgiveness of God. An attempt would be made to help her know and appreciate forgiveness that came through the blood of Christ. There would be a recognition that often this is a temptation by Satan, who wants to keep believers mired in unnecessary guilt, breaking their fellowship with the Lord.

One interesting issue related to guilt is the tendency to react against ideas that are too "Calvinist." Among many there would be a tendency to downplay the issue of false guilt, because it may lead to the idea of license for sin, a charge often leveled against Calvinism by the more Arminian theology of Russian Baptists. There is a strong awareness of the problem of those who have deep sin and yet feel no guilt at all. Therefore the spiritual battle against those who are self-righteous may tend to outweigh the desire to free the conscience of those who are weighed down by their guilt.

**c. The General Solution** - It is generally accepted that the Christian must confront and examine himself as a course of life, and thus root out sin. Therefore his **will** is the central issue, and he must consider obedience to the Lord as his personal responsibility. With the help of the Holy Spirit, and through his association with those in the body of Christ who counsel him and walk with him as fellow believers, he has been given an opportunity by God to change his life. The wise counselor will be adept at helping the believer sense and take hold of his personal responsibility before God, with the result that his life becomes one of obedience to the will of God.

**2. Spiritual versus Psychological** - Perhaps one of the issues with the most potential for controversy and disagreement is that of the relationship of psychology to pastoral counseling. This is as true in Russia as it is in America. However, some aspects of Russian Baptist life and history have brought about a few uniquely Russian features in this controversy.

**a. The Development of Psychology in Russia** - One major factor influencing this issue is the general lack of development of the field of psychology in Russia. Access to theories from the West was severely restricted under communism, and there was much less emphasis on this field of study in Russia. In fact, psychoanalysis was banned in the Soviet Union for decades. There may have been individuals studying psychological theories, but there was no culture of psychological therapy developed. Going to any sort of specialist for psychological problems was either unknown or unavailable to the common person.

Under these conditions, there was no competition present between various approaches to counseling available to a pastor. Leaders were not trained to sort out problems in a spiritual/psychological framework. The result is a leadership that has very little general ability or discernment when it comes to determining what is psychological and what is spiritual. However, there is also a great deal of disagreement regarding whether or not there is in fact a need for this kind of training, and especially the kind that is coming into Russia from the West.

Today, with the freedom to develop the field of psychology, the secular Russian approach tends toward the highly mystical and supernatural, in response to the expectations of the Russian soul. The naturalistic framework that forms the basis of much of Western theory is largely absent in Russia. The highly individualistic approach found in the West, dealing with an individual's background and personal characteristics, and performed over many sessions, even years, is also rejected. Russian people are looking for immediate, almost magical, results - even on the first visit to a psychologist.

**b. General Attitudes Toward Psychology** - Among Baptist pastors, the general attitude toward theories of psychology is one of cautious interest. Many feel that a good knowledge of psychology would be helpful, but they often mean by this something other than a teacher of counseling from the West might think. Pastors generally consider themselves to be practical spiritual guides, and have little time to devote to the kind of study that would be required to develop new counseling theories and approaches. And in fact, the resistance to this would be all the greater if the theories could not be clearly reconciled with Biblical teaching. A resistance to things new and Western could combine with a conservative avoidance of extremes to make any new teachings in this field difficult to introduce.

Another issue of resistance is the common view regarding the pastoral gift. A man called by God to pastoral work is gifted with spiritual insight and sensitivity to see into the problems that are brought to him. This insight is difficult to explain, and cannot be learned from a book. A man could master the principles of psychology and still be a failure as a pastoral counselor. A man's walk with God, with the resulting common sense and wisdom gained from his life experience, forms the most important training for his counseling ministry. An approach that would propose to replace this with classroom scholarship would be met with general skepticism.

The knowledge of psychology that is more generally desired is that which would help pastors with practical, concrete issues they face in their ministries. The pastor would be looking for help in dealing with issues topic by topic, as opposed to seeking out any alteration to his overall viewpoint about the nature of counseling.

It should be noted here (and this principle will hold true throughout this paper)

that the younger pastors are in general more open to learning from the West. It remains to be seen how strongly tradition will hold out over desire for things Western, and the area of pastoral counseling will be one of the more interesting testing grounds.

**c. Common Views on the Distinction Between Spiritual and Psychological** - There are many opposing opinions regarding the nature of spiritual problems versus psychological ones. There are two opposing directions followed among leaders regarding this issue.

The first direction would be toward considering every internal issue as a purely spiritual issue with spiritual solutions. Among this group would be found a deep distrust of any teaching that promoted psychological aids to counseling. Proponents would see themselves as being the more Biblical in focus, and the more trusting in God to supernaturally overcome all problems. Opponents note that this group often considers every feeling to be a spiritual movement of God, leaving no room for the natural individual workings of the soul. They charge that a form of fanaticism results when people have no understanding of basic psychological issues common to man, and that people are often left unhelped by such an approach.

The second direction would be toward desiring a careful distinction between the spiritual and the psychological in every situation. An example offered was the case of a person who suffers from claustrophobia. Can this person be labeled as spiritually oppressed? Another illustration is that of a woman who denies her husband physically, not understanding the natural problems that this will cause. At this point it would be considered that there is both a spiritual and a psychological dimension, and both need to be addressed. Opponents to this viewpoint argue that any attempt to deal with problems apart from the Holy Spirit is counterproductive.

There is a spectrum in between these two directions, but it seems to me that it is much narrower than that which exists among American Christian leaders. Even the Russian Baptists who are open to psychological solutions consider these to be only supplemental to their already clearly defined spiritual ministry. That is, psychological principles are simple tools that a godly man can have at his disposal as he counsels his flock. They would not consider that a separate psychological ministry would exist to help those who are not believers. The only true help for any problem would be seen as coming directly from the believer's relationship with God.

**3. Demonic Influence** - The issue of demonic influence in a person's life is one that is only recently gaining attention. Baptists are Bible believers, and as such of course believe that there are demonic forces at work in the world. People can be under the control of demons in various ways, and this none would deny. However, among Baptists the problem was very little dealt with under the 70 years of communism. The topic was mostly excluded from the churches, especially in Moscow. As a result there is today a great lack of knowledge about the subject. On the other hand, there is a growing interest in learning more about the nature of demonic influence and how to deal with it.

One reason for this growing interest is that Baptist pastors are commonly encountering this problem. More people are complaining about demonic influence or being tormented by demons. A general observation is that these problems are more frequent outside of Moscow and the other major Russian cities. The influence of witchcraft, superstition and the occult is more commonly found in smaller towns. The practice of casting out of demons would also be found mostly in these more rural settings.

As with most new areas of teaching, Baptists are generally cautious in their approach to this issue. Since it is considered a complicated issue, pastors will feel a need to be very careful in what teachings or practices they will accept. There is an underlying assumption that not all problems are connected with demonic attack, nor is every unusual phenomenon the result of

demonic influence. Teachings that are grounded more in imagination and subjective experience as opposed to the Bible will meet with a great deal of skepticism.

The most accepted approach to dealing with demonic influence is fasting and prayer, with the goal of liberating the person from the attack. Examples from Biblical texts, such as those in James, would be considered the best model to follow. Demonic power would not be overstated or treated with more attention than necessary, the power of the Lord being more than sufficient for dealing with any demonic attack.

**4. Environmental Factors** - One of the factors to consider in counseling Russians is the difficulty of normal life in Russia. This has been true for the general population, who have had to suffer through periods of very poor life conditions, but is especially true for believers. Those in the church have had to endure a history of persecution on top of the normal difficulties of life. Pastors must often deal with the environmental aspects of people's problems.

In general counseling focuses on identifying what is the responsibility of a believer within his or her circumstances. There are indeed those who have thought that their problems were caused by the difficulties of Russian life, and some have thought that leaving Russia would solve their problems. The pastoral response has most commonly been that one must respond in a godly way to whatever life circumstances come his way, relying always on the assistance of God. This is an especially critical perspective in light of the many deep family problems that exist in the church, most particularly between believers with unbelieving spouses.

Pastors value the ability to gain good understanding of each individual situation, seeking wisdom from God to know how to answer. A good knowledge of human nature and spiritual life, which is only gained through life experience, is essential to dealing with people and the problems surrounding them. It might also be noted here that this is one of the areas where those from the West are considered largely incapable of truly ministering to Russians. The complaint is often voiced that, "They just don't understand what our lives are like." The understanding possessed by a person who has successfully lived through similar difficulties is a prerequisite to a fruitful counseling ministry in Russia. Clinical, professional, office-style approaches would generally not be trusted.

## **B. Solutions to Problems**

The common Baptist perspectives regarding the normal solutions to life problems can largely be deduced from their beliefs regarding the nature of the problems themselves, as discussed above. Counselors seek a combination of obedience and divine assistance to bring about the desired results from counseling. A few points can be made under both headings.

**1. Obedience to the Word of God** - On this point there would be virtually universal agreement: The Bible is the central focus in any guidance and counseling. The Bible is the complete Word of God for us, and has God's answers to our problems. The believer should not expect new revelation from God, nor should he wait for a supernatural voice or sign from the Lord. This would be seen as a Pentecostal approach, and would be rejected. Rather, the Bible itself will provide at least the right direction, if not a specific verse to answer a specific problem, and the believer is urged to obediently follow that direction. Without this step of obedience, there will be no solution to his problems.

Any proposed solution to life problems that introduces principles not clearly derived from Scripture will be met with a great deal of suspicion, and will be rejected outright by most. The Bible is seen as God's perfect tool to provide light to the disciple. God will not overcome the problems of the believer apart from the believer's faithful obedience to His Word. Since the believer's obedient actions are seen as the proper solution to his problems, the counselor uses the

Bible as his primary tool for counseling.

**2. Prayer and Divine Intervention** - The believer's obedience is one part of the solution; the other part is the direct intervention of the Lord. All acknowledge that God has no limitations, and can do all things for the believer. But the actual intervention of God is a personal response to each individual. If a believer tries to solve his problems by himself, even through applying the Bible to his life, and is not also actively engaged in prayer, there will be no real solution to his problems. Prayer and fasting are highly valued in the Christian life, and Baptist pastors will often direct people to pray and fast, both alone and with their families. Without faith it is impossible to overcome problems. God's direct assistance is indispensable.

Included in this viewpoint is the presumption that impersonal practical principles, apart from the personal help of God, are not effective. A counselor is not expected to map out a life program, but to guide the believer to a closer walk with God. If a person will trust God and do what God directs, God will work together with the Christian to overcome the problem. Again, every solution will be accompanied by greater faith on the part of the believer, without which it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11: 6).

### **C. The Nature of Counseling**

Given the nature of believers' problems, and the basic solutions that are expected, what is the basic philosophy of Baptist counselors regarding the nature of the counseling ministry?

#### **1. The Role of the Counselor**

**a. Pastor as Counselor** - Perhaps the most significant statement of the Baptists understanding of the counseling ministry is the equation of counseling with pastoring. The man called to oversee the spiritual condition of his flock is, as part of that calling, expected to guide them in their lives. The role and gift of pastor and counselor are thus one and the same. Due to the strong authoritative role of Russian Baptist pastors in the lives of their members, the ministry of overseeing often involves a very directive form of counseling.

The precise nature of the counselor relationship varies based on the spiritual gifting and outlook of the pastor. Some see their role as that of comforter and encourager. Others think of themselves as a sort of physician of souls. Still others assume the role of a spiritual director. In each case, however, the relationship would be that of a more mature and wiser older brother who is called to spiritually shepherd those under his pastoral care. Furthermore, the notion of a distinct "ministry of counseling," involving specially trained people who only do counseling, is nonexistent in the Baptist churches. The ability to counsel presupposes the ability to pastor, as well as perform the other of duties involved in the pastoral ministry.

**b. Counselor as Spiritual Guide** - Consistent with what is stated above, the counselor sees himself primarily as a provider of spiritual guidance to other believers or seekers. As such, he does not give advice out of his own opinions, nor the theories of men, but offers the wisdom of God found in Scripture. When someone comes to him for counsel, his role is to deliver to that person God's practical answers from God's Word.

As a spiritual guide, the counselor must thus primarily be a spiritual man. Only one who has walked on the spiritual path is qualified to guide others on that same path. One pastor stated that he would rather demonstrate the life he was explaining to his flock than simply dispense information about it - information that might prove to be wrong if his understanding were not in line with the Word of God. The notion that a separate kind of guidance is needed, apart from the spiritual light of the Bible, would be a foreign notion to Baptist counselors.

**c. Counselor as Brother** - A pastor/counselor in a Baptist church is always involved to some degree in the lives of his flock, a feature indispensable to his role as a spiritual guide.

How can he provide guidance in people's lives if he does not know the details of those lives? And the details of lives can only be learned in fellowship, in actual life situations.

Though the brother is a leader and guide, that role should never detach him from close fellowship with his people. The notion of a professional analyst, dispensing clinical advice based simply on conversations held in a controlled setting, is completely foreign to this perspective. The Baptist pastor has no sense of the fear, often found among Western counselors, that involvement in the lives of those he counsels will somehow impair his effectiveness.

**2. Effective Counseling** - If the counselor is a pastor, spiritual guide, and brother, then what personal characteristics and practical demands are implied in these roles in order to assure effective counseling?

**a. Personal Qualifications**

**i. Ability in the Bible** - The spiritual guide must possess good Bible knowledge, along with practical wisdom in applying it to life situations. The need for practical wisdom is an especially important point in light of the number of fresh graduates coming out of Western Bible training programs in Russia. Baptist pastors often recognize that these young men have indeed gained some Bible knowledge, but cannot apply their knowledge due to their lack of spiritual experience.

**ii. Spiritual Maturity** - Counseling requires abilities and wisdom that only come through God's normal means of bringing a man to mature spiritual life. It follows that quality of life is more valued than extent of academic attainment. What a man knows should be seen in how a man lives. As this occurs, he will gain a good reputation among the flock, opening doors that will allow him to use his spiritual insight to help others.

Spiritual maturity is accompanied by spiritual discernment. This is critical in light of the many forms of spiritual literature that have come into Russia in the past several years. Several have noted how new teachings have often been taken up by young people who do not have the ability to sort out what is Biblical from what is not. They then gain a zeal for spreading the teaching, often with harmful results. They have become "poisoned" by the teaching, partly because it contained food too heavy for them to digest. They had first required the milk of the Word of God, but had bypassed this in favor of attractive "guru-type" teachers. Only a great deal of time learning and applying the pure Word of God to one's life can bring a man to the level of the maturity required for taking into his care the soul of another person.

**iii. Spiritual Authority** - Beyond his personal maturity, the man must also have become a leader of people. If he is a minister in the church, he will have gained some level of spiritual authority as a result. In Baptist churches, men rise to levels of leadership based on recognition of their skills and maturity, not based on academic degrees. The idea of authority is very important in the church, as it is in the Russian culture, and people will generally neither seek nor receive counsel from one who has not earned a measure of this authority.

**iv. Knowledge of and Love for People** - The good counselor will have a great love for people, combined with a strong desire to always help, and not hinder, with his counsel. A gracious manner that grows out of love will make a man approachable, and will give his words weight. Good insight into people, which is considered a gift from God, is required due to the many different kinds of people and problems in any church. A loving man with good experience will be able to discern how to deal differently with each situation that confronts him in his counseling ministry.

Several have admitted that this is an area of concern among many Baptist churches. There are often those who have a shortage of both insight into people, and the required

gracious manner, but who nonetheless counsel people. The results can be harmful when simplistic thinking and zeal for tradition are stronger in a man than his merciful manner. Unbelievers who have entered Baptist churches have often been approached and rebuked by such men (and women) if they are wearing makeup or earrings, or if they smoke outside after the service. Now leaders are feeling a need for developing the ability in their counselors to sensitively nurture people rather than simply focusing on externals.

**v. Education** - Although formal education has historically been considered not so important for church leaders, the opening of opportunities for gaining good general education has raised the stature of education in the minds of many in the churches. There will be many varied attitudes toward the importance of this education in the life of a pastor, but the younger generation will most likely have a higher regard for getting formal training than have their elders.

Specifically regarding formal counseling education, it may be too early to say exactly how formal education and the counseling ministry will work together in the future.

Here again will arise the question of the acceptability of Western training regarding such topics of study as psychology and sociology. Many feel a need to learn from these disciplines, which will result in a call for training. However there is a strong demand that anything taught in this form of education should reflect a Biblical view. Training is greatly lacking, and a need is felt, but caution regarding new teaching may make introduction of new ideas difficult.

**b. Practical demands** - The basic practical demand on one who would counsel is that he be centrally involved in the church. This follows from the fact that counseling is not seen as a separate ministry, but rather the outgrowth of spiritual leadership. As a spiritual leader, he will need to have close involvement in the lives of those he counsels, which can demand a great deal of his spare time. And it must always be noted that spare time in Russia is not very abundant.

The more godly and competent is a man, the more he will be sought out for counsel by members. His ministry of counseling will be seen more as an ongoing, informal discipling process as opposed to a session-oriented interview process. Good Christian fellowship is the primary foundation of his counseling ministry, not professionalism. As a result, his life will have many demands, and a sense of responsibility for spiritual lives will become his burden.

It must be emphasized here that Russians are known to keep their problems inside, and are slow to open them up to others. Good relationships in the Russian culture are built over time, perhaps much more so than in many Western countries, especially the USA. In order for a counselor to have access to one's heart, and thus his or her problems, a good relationship of trust must be gained, a relationship that does not grow in an office setting. Thus the number of people that one can effectively counsel will be necessarily much less than that of a Western counterpart working according to a more professional model.

**3. The Goal of Counseling** - For counseling to be effective, it must have clearly defined goals. Baptist counseling defines these goals along the lines of Biblical change.

**a. Repentance** - Of those who come to leaders for counseling, some percentage will be people who are not believers. The counselor will want to discover the presence or lack of true faith in a person early in his ministry to him, because no real change is considered possible without the work of the Holy Spirit to change the heart. Thus evangelism is an understood potential goal of every counseling opportunity. This will, of course, be generally more relevant for those with whom the leader is not already well acquainted through his ministry in the church.

An issue affecting a Baptist pastor's evangelism in counseling is the Arminian basis of his theology. A believer who has fallen into sin can fall away from Christ and be lost

again, according to the prevailing Baptist belief. Thus even a longtime church member, one who was previously baptized and considered saved, could be in need of repentance and salvation again. This belief cannot help but affect the relationship between a pastor and those in his church who have to some extent or another backslidden.

**b. Discipleship** - Assuming the one being counseled is considered to be a true believer, the normal goal of counseling will be to guide the person to behavior and/or attitude change to come into line with the Word of God. In this sense, counseling is simply discipleship directed at a specific life issue. The answer to a person's internal problems is a proper relationship with God, and the answer to external problems is to respond to them as the Bible directs. The counselor is the more mature, wiser guide who leads the less mature, by means of the Word, into these proper responses in his life.

Thus it can be summarized that the basic aim of counseling is maturity in Christ, measured by the extent of realization of the Word of God in one's life. Whatever the problem, Jesus Christ is sufficient to overcome it either directly or in cooperation with the obedience of the believer.

## **II. PRACTICE OF BAPTIST COUNSELING**

### **A. Preparation of Counselors**

There is not much more to say about the preparation of counselors than that which was stated above - namely, that preparation for church leadership is preparation for counseling. Those who become appointed as pastors or deacons have historically been the ones who counsel in the churches. More or less all the leaders in the church do counseling, with the main distinction between them being that of experience level required for dealing with different levels of difficulty in counseling situations. In addition, anybody else in the church who is seen as being spiritually mature may be approached for counsel. All counseling, as will be discussed further on, is fairly informal. Those needing help are not first thinking about finding a "trained counselor," but rather a mature and capable spiritual leader.

As mentioned above, it was historically difficult to get specific education in Russia in the area of counseling, and there was no established cultural tradition in counseling. Beyond this, Baptist leaders were often without a high level of general education, in many cases having been denied access to it due to their faith. Many who have carried out the role of counselor were simply those who qualified for church leadership, regardless even of the level of biblical training possessed. The result has often been a low level of ability to provide effective counsel. The new generation of pastors is better educated in general, but still without specific training in counseling.

There has been no specifically defined training to be a pastor, other than the normal process of maturing as a believer and proving oneself through service in the church. It is difficult for many to say how to "become" a pastor, except through an informal process. In this informal training there has been no specific training for the counseling portion of pastoral work. One is considered to simply "grow into" the role. Beginning with the solid foundation of general Bible knowledge, a counseling ministry grows as a man grows, and his own ability to live a godly life becomes the basis for his counseling of others in that same path.

A resistance to modern methods of counselor training is present among Baptist leaders, especially those currently leading the more established churches. One pastor referred to the process occurring in seminaries as a quick "baking" of leaders. The result is seen to be harmful both to the man being trained and also to those whom these "so-called leaders" lead. They are not

truly prepared to be spiritual leaders, and commonly fail in their immature attempts. Modern problems of spiritual divisions and diseases are often traced back to this faulty approach to training. This can be an especially dangerous situation with counselor training that is currently carried out in seminary settings. Such "baked" counselors who lack adequate biblical training and life experience are apt to misdirect those who seek their counsel.

## **B. The Counseling Approach**

**1. Counseling Arrangements** - When a person in the church needs counsel, it is primarily up to them to approach one of the leaders in the church. If the person belongs to a particular group within the church, it will be very common to seek counsel from the leader of that group (one prime example of this is young people seeking counsel from youth leaders). Since there is no special group of "counselors," a person with needs will approach a person considered to be the best source of help for that need. Informal counseling often begins in small prayer meetings of the church, and simple problems can be dealt with at that level. People are then directed to seek out a pastor if those at the meeting are not able to provide answers to the problem. The general attitude is that a person's problem should be solved in his own church, but in larger cities a person may go to a pastor in another Baptist church for help. This option will be most available in Moscow. Most cities have only one Baptist church.

Although the most common counseling approach is a one-to-one visit with a pastor or deacon, several other venues are utilized, including: (1) A small group of leaders meeting with a person or a couple; (2) meeting with the Brothers' council to discuss the problem; (3) a church council meeting as the next level, and finally (4) the whole church meeting to discuss the problem. This hierarchical approach will most commonly be seen in issues regarding sin and discipline, as will be discussed below. However, any problem that is too difficult to be resolved at one level will generally be referred to the next level. The hardest problems will often find their way into one or another council for group discussion, assuming the lead pastor is not able to solve it alone.

The counseling setting can vary greatly, and is rarely confined to a pastor's office. In fact, close involvement in the lives of the church members demands that a pastor will often visit them in their homes, and the home setting will commonly be used for counseling. This is especially true in villages, where pastors know all the families in their churches. It is a common practice in all churches for a pastor to visit the home of a new member early on, and to stay closely involved with them afterward. This provides a natural venue for ongoing counseling. Pastors expect that a gradual, step by step approach is going to be required, especially with new believers. The Russian culture has been used to keeping problems inside, and people are slow and cautious in opening up to others. Much time and much prayer will normally be involved in the process.

## **2. The Counseling Process**

**a. Atmosphere** - Consistent with what has been discussed above, the counseling process itself is informal. The typical meeting would have no clinical or professional atmosphere to it. Again, many of the meetings would take place in the home of the member, often over tea and/or a meal. This natural approach is not necessarily a studied plan, but rather is the simple method passed down over a few generations of pastoral work among Baptists.

**b. Means of Discerning Problems** - The pastoral relationship demands that the pastor come to his conclusions by observing lives. The spiritual law of knowing people by their fruit is the active principle. The pastor must always be watching behavior, not simply listening to explanations in an office. He can then see how words match lives, particularly in members'

relationships with others and with the world, and judge better what is needed. Passive counseling would be seen as unnatural, and prone to a great deal of deception. The natural human tendency to try to conceal sin must be overcome by a deeper level of personal involvement with the pastor and other believers in the church. By this level of involvement, the problem will inevitably surface and become clear, helping the pastor give wise direction.

**c. Purpose** - The main issue in counseling believers is to provide practical answers and directions in response to their problems. Counseling is very directive. The idea of non-directive listening and allowing a person to come to their own conclusions is totally absent, and would be seen as a foolish approach.

This directive approach to counseling must be seen in the light of the understood Biblical roles of the member and the pastor. The Christian life is one of obedience to God. Church life demands that the body of Christ is living in obedience to God, and it is one of the pastoral roles to call directly for this obedience. Church members owe their obedience to their leaders, who are held responsible for them (Heb. 13:17).

The directive approach is a feature of the whole Russian culture, which can be very quick to provide life instructions to each other. It is common for a mother to be told by Russian grandmothers on the street if she is not taking care of her baby in the proper manner. A sickness is an open invitation to receive directions for home remedies (often even prepared and given without having been requested). Total strangers will comment on the apparel of newcomers visiting a church. The "live and let live" attitude of the West is not a feature of Russian culture.

**d. Means of Direction** - Pastors providing counsel have every right to confront sin in the one he is counseling and give direct, even blunt instructions. Though it is possible to abuse this right, it would be universally accepted as a pastoral responsibility toward those in his care. If the issue in the counseling is sin, and the behavior is not altered, the natural next step would be to begin the discipline process. In all other cases, the pastor can be expected to direct the person in many ways, including calling for fasting and prayer. In cases where there is not a question of sin and church discipline, pastors will take different paths, depending on their view of their authority. Some will recognize that they cannot demand conformation in those areas, but others will give direction in even the details of the member's life. The Baptist tradition would certainly allow for a great deal of involvement which would be seen as "meddling" in the West.

The main approach to giving this direction will be to hear the problem, go to Scripture, and provide either the direct Biblical answer or the principle from Scripture that best addresses the issue. One pastor mentioned that he commonly gives examples (without names) of others who have faced the same choices, and what happened with those who obeyed and those who did not. He also would try to encourage the person that he and others have faced the same kinds of problems, so that the person will not feel isolated or unique. The particular use of the Bible will be discussed more at length below.

**e. Spiritual Means in Counseling** - Since spiritual guidance and counseling are seen as one and the same, and the counselor role is a pastoral role, it follows that prayer is central to the counseling process. The pastor will always pray for and with those who come to him, and in fact it would be an irregularity if there were no prayer in such a ministry. The pastor will often offer to provide other direct help that may be needed, or will find others in the church who can help the person. The pastor will continue to pray for the person throughout the course of the problem, and will commonly enlist the prayer of others. The approach underscores the strong spiritual perspectives and assumptions that control the thinking of leaders in their approach to

counseling.

**f. The Use of Scripture** - Although all pastors would consider the Bible the source of all practical direction in counseling, there are different perspectives on exactly how to use the truth of Scripture in counseling. One approach taken, which is considered a shallow point of view by many other pastors, is to believe that the Bible will provide direct answers to every problem. In some cases this may take the form of a mystical approach, in which the words of the Bible are reinterpreted in such a way that gives a specific answer to the specific problem. In these cases the original context and audience of the written word are ignored in favor of its spiritualized application to a particular situation.

Another related approach would be to consider the Bible as a set of concrete recipes for life, which results in a formulaic approach among many people. One problem that many pastors have to deal with is a special Russian way of thinking that draws people to the Bible only when they want to solve problems or receive good things from God. The need is then to get people to read and meditate on the Word of God rather than treating it almost as if it were a book of magic.

The approach of those with more Biblical education is to learn the spiritual principles from the Bible, and learn how to apply them to various circumstances. Wise counsel will start from a comprehension of the spirit of the Bible, expecting it to provide general guidance in those cases where it does not provide direct, concrete answers. Here the pastor depends much on his gifting from the Holy Spirit to be able to discern both the message of the Bible and the processes going on inside those who come to him for counsel. It is very common for the pastor to take time to research out of the Word of God how to respond to people after they have first heard about their problem, assuming it is a problem he has not encountered before.

Regardless of the exact approach, all pastors would agree that the Bible is the authority for knowing the causes and solutions to problems. Knowledge of and obedience to Scripture are the prerequisites to a good ministry of counseling. There must be some form of Biblical support for everything that is said and done in the counseling process. All believe that if the Word of God is realized in a person's life, his inner problems can be overcome, regardless of what happens with outer problems over which he has not control. The common mission is to direct people away from seeking selfish and destructive ends by exposing them to the requirements of God, which are created to give them freedom from the tyranny of self-centered living.

**g. Use of Psychology** - Only a simple repetition is required here. Pastors very rarely know about and utilize principles of psychology in their counseling. Any use of such principles may become more common as pastors are exposed to such teachings. However, as mentioned above, there will be much caution and resistance.

**3. Baptist Counsel and Church Discipline** - The connection between counsel and discipline has been mentioned briefly above. A few fundamentals of the relationship between the two will be discussed here. However, a complete treatment of church discipline would require another paper.

**a. The Role of Counsel in Discipline** - Since a person seeking counsel is speaking with his spiritual leader, those facts in his life which are exposed through counsel become the business of the body of Christ. The concept of confidentiality is not considered an absolute protection of privacy, especially when the issue is ongoing sin. In many cases the person seeking counsel is willing to repent from sin, in which case the problem can be resolved in private. In every case the counseling process is a potential first step toward discipline for those who are

living in sin and are unrepentant.

**b. Stages of Counsel in Discipline** - The normal approach in the case of unrepentant sinning members is to bring increasing influence to bear on them through progressive steps. This would normally start with bringing another Brother into the counseling process, then bringing the issue to the Brothers' Council, and so on until the issue could even be brought before the entire church. Continued refusal to repent can result in expulsion from the church. Before this final step is taken, the person would first be excluded from communion and from serving in the church, in the hope that this would bring them to repentance and restoration. Even one who has repented may be excluded from taking part in the church service for a period of time as his life is observed to detect that his repentance was real.

One area of differing opinion is the process of requiring those who have sinned to confess that sin before the whole church. There are cases of open sin that would be dealt with openly by most churches, and a readiness to bring members before the church, if necessary, is always present. However, some churches have had a practice of having all sin confessed before the whole church. At the end of a service, several members may come forward and confess their sins to God and the congregation, a microphone normally being held to their mouth as they pray. Those who are against this practice consider this too harsh a measure, and often one that results in a sort of spiritual "striptease" that can confuse the souls of others. They would rather first attempt to deal with sin in private, with the pastor, only bringing the most severe cases before the body. The result is better relationships among people and less potential divisions.

### **III. COMMON PROBLEMS REQUIRING COUNSEL**

The difficulties of life, for which a Russian person will seek counsel with a pastor, spring out of several sources. Some are the normal spiritual problems that face believers in every culture. Others are problems that have specific Russian cultural sources, and thus for which a good understanding of Russian life is required of a counselor. Life problems will vary greatly by a person's age, gender, and marital status. An attempt to list all such problems is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I will list only some of the most commonly reported problems that pastors are currently dealing with in their ministry of counseling. The focus will be on the specific Russian flavor of these problems.

#### **A. Problems of the Individual**

**1. Falling into Sin** - Certainly this is a problem of people in all cultures. A person who is under conviction due to sin will seek out direction from a pastor. Yet with Russian Baptists the issue has more serious overtones than in most Western evangelical churches. The process of becoming a believer is defined by the term "repentance," and the central issue is that of turning away from a life of sin. This is combined with an Arminian theological perspective that assumes a true believer can lose his salvation. The result is that many will see their very spiritual life hinging on how they respond after sinning. They will come to a pastor with the question, "What should I do now?" This may have been one of the very sins that they had repented of to come to Christ. What can be done now that they have fallen back into it, or indeed become trapped in it again?

In many cases the believer will meet and pray with the pastor many times over such an issue. In all cases he will be directly exhorted to leave this sin, exercising faith that God will give His assistance. In some cases, depending on the church, a repentant believer will be required to confess before the church body, as mentioned earlier, as part of his repentance.

**2. Spiritual Weakness** - In addition to particular sins, a believer may be plagued by

strong feelings of spiritual inadequacy. The person may have repented and been baptized, but then experiences an ongoing lack of faith, joy, and ability to minister. Although young believers everywhere experience this, there seems to be something in Russian culture that makes this lack of power a special problem. Because of the mystical nature of Orthodoxy, Russians have long looked to the spiritual world for a kind of painless and almost magical deliverance from problems. Even with some Biblical training this perspective can be difficult to overcome. The new believer may have thought that his joy and spiritual drive, so strong at first, would continue of itself. Later manifestations of weakness can be very discouraging. Such believers need instruction from Scripture regarding the true nature of the spiritual life, counteracting their inbred cultural assumptions.

**3. Spiritual Warfare** - The Russian culture contains a confusing mixture of materialistic atheism, traditional Orthodox mysticism, fascination with things occultic, and enthusiasm for everything from the West (particularly the most worldly of influences). A person coming into the Baptist church out of the world often brings with him a plethora of residual problems to be overcome, which stand out in stark contrast to the very conservative, even legalistic lifestyle found in the Baptist culture. The process of spiritual, emotional and mental renewal and cleansing is not completed rapidly. Pastors must spend many hours with these new believers, working carefully through these troubling issues. Prior occult connections in particular can lead to strong ongoing spiritual struggles which can baffle many pastors.

#### **B. Problems in the Family**

**1. Mixed Families** - This is a particularly large problem in Russian Baptist churches. One pastor reported that 90% of his members were from a family with only one believing spouse. There are relatively few complete families of believers. Many relationship problems result, and a large share of a pastor's counseling load will be concerned with such issues. Believers often need Biblical instruction on how to behave with family members who are not Christians. The problem is further complicated when an unbelieving husband is an alcoholic - an extremely common problem in Russian society. In addition, adultery is so common among Russian men that it is virtually expected among perhaps the majority of Russian women. But for the believing wife, the result is a great deal of turmoil and need for guidance and encouragement.

Some problems of mixed families must be viewed through the lens of Soviet history. The anger of the communist government caused the whole family to suffer when even just one member became a believer. Often young people would be forced by their parents to choose between the church and the family. The parents feared for their child's future as a believer in a communist state. It was hard for a person known to be a Christian to get a good education. For believing parents, the threat existed that others could get custody of their children if it were known that they were teaching the Bible to them at home. These old problems, though not a factor in Russia today, can still cause a general resentment of the Christian faith among many, which results in problems for new converts.

**2. General Marital Problems** - Problems in relating as husband and wife are common even among believers in Baptist churches. Although many of these are problems common to believers anywhere, several aspects of Russian life can tend to aggravate the issues. First, there is a general lack of literature and tradition in Russia that helps to train men and women about how to live as a Christian couple. One of the most common requests coming from Baptist churches is family life instruction. Much of what Christian couples in the West might take for granted regarding Christian marriage and family life is largely unavailable and unknown to Russian Christian couples. Often pastors themselves are not well equipped to deal with these, and may

have several of the same problems in their own marriages. This represents one of the most critical needs for training in Russian Baptist churches.

A second influence against marriages is the society's poor support of families, a legacy of Soviet times. It is largely assumed that both husband and wife must work full time in order to support a family. Although the wives thus take on another role as partial breadwinners, the husbands have on the whole failed to take on family responsibilities to compensate. The life of a wife and mother can thus be extremely hard. In additions, married couples have usually had to start out their marriage (and often endure the whole of it) in the home of one of their parents (or sets of parents). The grandmother in Russian society has in most cases had the main responsibility in raising children. Relations with in-laws have been a major difficulty putting strain on marriages. The combination of financial problems, poor living situations, and extreme time pressures have been a major burden for church families. Then when one or the other spouse is demanded for church responsibilities in addition to all this, marital conflicts can result. Pastors are very often called into the middle of these situations to try to mend relationships.

**3. Single-Parent Families** - One result of marital strain is the extremely high rate of divorce in Russia. There are a very large number of single mothers in the churches, who live with great difficulties trying to run their households without a husband. A commonly encountered Russian household today has a mother, a grandmother, and the mother's children. The failure of male leadership has helped contribute to a rapid moral decline in Russian society. Often these women come to Christ after their husbands are gone, and bring with them into the church a multitude of problems.

### **C. Problems in the Church**

**1. Fellowship Problems** - Relational problems between church members take up a good deal of the attention of pastors. There may be several reasons for this, some of which would be common to believers everywhere. It seems, however, that lack of attention to common social and relational skills may tend to escalate normal relational problems between Russians. The Russian culture tends to be very abrasive on the surface, and Russian people tend to be more emotional than their Western counterparts. Combine this with a tendency to interfere in the affairs of others, and a recipe for interrelational problems has been created. The flip side to this issue is that good fellowship among Russian believers tends to be much deeper than that among Westerners. These confusing extremes of the Russian character have baffled many Americans living in Russia.

**2. Time Problems** - The Russian believer hears many messages on giving their lives into God's service, as do believers in other countries. Many feel an added weight of conviction that they are not fulfilling this mandate. How can we devote our lives to God, they often ask, when we have so little time and so little resources? The pressures of simply living their daily lives usually leaves them with very little left over. If they define their Christian service as what is done outside of their work and family life, they may feel that they are not serving God at all.

Problems of this sort have escalated since 1991, and many are feeling lost about what to do. This has especially affected older believers. Under Soviet times they had stable pensions. Although the money they received was not much, it allowed for a relatively predictable life. Under current conditions this stability has been destroyed. Many young people feel a great deal of anxiety over their unpredictable futures. Pastors often give them advice against jumping into one of the many get-rich-quick schemes that have appeared in Russia.

### **D. Problems in the World**

**1. Relationship Problems** - Most of what was said about relational problems in the

church could be echoed here, but on a greater scale. Added to the normal relational problems would be those caused by opposition to the faith of the believer. In addition, there are a great number and variety of situations a believer finds himself in where he is tempted or expected to compromise his integrity. Public ethics are very weak in Russian society, causing a person who holds to Biblical ideals to often stand out in stark, even startling contrast. Many will come to a pastor with reports of problems with their bosses at work, seeking practical solutions about how to relate to them in this or that situation.

**2. Financial Problems** - With the instability following the breakup of the communist state, many have been plunged into tremendous financial difficulty. Salaries are often insufficient to cover the needs of life, and many of the services that were formerly free are now unavailable except at high cost. This is especially troubling when a medical problem occurs. Although medical care is supposedly provided by the state free of charge, very little service of actual benefit comes to a patient without substantial payments. Education is supposedly free, but an education that is of much value in opening doors to opportunities will always cost parents a great deal of cash. These patterns are repeated in many sectors of society, and many Russians feel tremendous financial pressures in their everyday life.

**2. Orthodox Conflicts** - This is a particular problem faced by Russian evangelicals. After perestroika, it seemed that every Russian suddenly "became" Orthodox. They remembered their infant baptism, started to wear crosses, perhaps visited a church (and perhaps rarely, it might be added). Religion had become fashionable again, but only at a very surface level. Nationalistic feelings equate Russian spirituality with Orthodoxy, and any other spiritual movements are often seen as alien to the true Russian heart. This thinking is promoted openly by Orthodox leaders, without apology. Those who go to Baptist churches are often labeled as "traitors." They are accused of selling their souls to Americans (even though Baptists have been in Russia for 100 years, and did not come from America). As Orthodox influence in society has advanced, this anti-evangelical thinking has escalated. Most Russians cannot sort out the issues of Russian/non-Russian versus Orthodox/Evangelical. Anything not Orthodox is often considered to be simply a cult - a foreign sect.

There are those Baptist families that have been in the church for a few generations, for which this problem will not be so acute. Yet today there are many new believers whose families are at least nominally Orthodox. The resulting conflict cannot be escaped in the Russian society of today, and Orthodox conflicts are simply an ongoing part of life for Baptists and other evangelicals. Pastors must be able to guide their flock in how to understand issues of Orthodox teaching and how to respond to the Orthodox challenges they will face in their lives.

#### **IV. ATTITUDES TOWARD WESTERN COUNSELING**

Principles and practices brought in from the West are still relatively new to Russian Baptist pastors. Since these men were isolated from outside influence for many years, they developed their own ideas about counseling from their knowledge of Scripture and their accumulated experiences in applying the Bible to Russian life. It is out of this context that they now evaluate that which they are hearing out of the West. There has been a great deal of quiet criticism of what teachers from the West have taught regarding counseling, and so the section that follows will be much heavier in criticism than in praise.

To select even a sampling of the issues for which there are strong Russian opinions would require a much deeper study, and would cover the whole range of possible issues in the ministry of counseling. This section will only focus on issues that seemed to me to be some of the most

important, and which help to illustrate the nature of Russian thinking about Western approaches.

### **A. Requirements for Effective Western Teaching**

Related to the attitude of Russian Baptist leaders to Western counseling principles are several issues regarding how these theories have been developed, packaged and presented. These issues need to be discussed first, because they can even overshadow issues of the actual principles themselves. Primarily, they help us understand several of the common reasons why many of the ideas begin taught are met with skepticism or outright rejection in the first place.

**1. Biblical Foundations** - This is the primary issue governing the response of Russian Baptist leaders to Western teaching. The question always arises regarding the source of the ideas being presented, and their agreement with Biblical teaching. Westerners are often seen as being too ready to depart from Scripture and tradition to grasp at anything new. Biblical conservatism runs much deeper among the Russians, and teachers must prove the authority of their principles based on Scripture first, not based on man's authority or experiences.

A common manifestation of this issue is the resistance of the Baptists to modern and popular terminology. Several terms discussed below, such as self-forgiveness and self-esteem, are immediately questioned due to their lack of Biblical origin. Even if a concept itself could be shown to be based on Biblical teaching, the modern label would still arouse skepticism. The true issues of life are Biblical issues, and Biblical terms must be used to describe them - terms such as sin, joy, desires, grief, faith, and repentance. As mentioned before, there is not a great deal of interest in Western psychology among the Baptist leaders, and therefore it has no inherent right to speak to Russian problems.

**2. Depth** - Americans, who are used to packaging ideas in ways that will be easy to understand, will find Russians unresponsive to this technique in presentations of ideas about life and God. Russians are strongly inclined to appreciate the great mystery of God and the inner life of the individual. They tend to seek ideas that are deep, beautiful, complex and mysterious. They are deeply influenced by their great literary tradition, and like their discussions to be philosophical - even in ministry. Baptists consider much of modern "pop psychology," which has found its way into Western churches, as being too shallow and simplistic, too cut and dried.

A primary example of this problem has been the American way of attempting to place every truth into a formula, a graphic, or a simple definition. When this approach is used in teaching, the result can often be a lack of trust in the explanation. The speaker could be in danger of being regarded as simple-minded or superficial. A man must recognize that ideas too great for an adult to grasp should not be placed in terms designed for children. Westerners are used to receiving their teaching in very schematic ways (like a "Windows" program, as one Russian leader commented). Russian are not used to simplistic formulas, and have a particular distaste for them. They instinctively know that the subtle movements of the soul are more complex, and can be offended when taught in a way that denies this assumption. The method was characterized by a Russian man in this way: "Do you have anger? Well, here is what you do: 1,2,3!"

**3. Practicality** - Since all the Russian counselors are church leaders, they are most of all interested in help that will translate into practical action in their ongoing ministries. Much of Western teaching has been considered too academic, too much dependent on a lecturer and a passive audience. A great list of ideas is commonly presented, in general terms, with no time to discuss in depth and develop the ideas together as a group. Of course, the difficulty of carrying on this kind of teaching through a translator makes it impossible for most Western teachers to do it. Yet without it, the students come away from such courses and seminars with dissatisfaction.

Courses that have been appreciated involved solid Bible study with application to life

situations encountered in counseling situations, followed by a discussion forum. In the forum, counselors could sit down together and discuss not simply theories, but their own personal life struggles and ministry situations. Most appreciated as teachers have been men who were wise and experienced pastors who could share their successes and their mistakes. Clinical theorists have a very hard time reaching the felt needs of the Baptist leaders.

One factor related to the need for practicality is the desire to train all believers in the church to do counseling. As mentioned earlier, more serious problems would be referred to church leaders. Yet the lack of conviction that counseling need be a separate ministry (let alone profession) mitigates against the development of a class of counseling "intelligentsia" that hold the keys to specific counseling theories and terminology. If counseling teaching is practical, it must be accessible to the average believer.

**4. Insight into Russian Life** - Counseling is by definition highly contextual, requiring a good knowledge of the way people think and live. Much of what is brought over from the West has been developed by those who have worked with Westerners in their counseling. Russian culture is built on very different foundations than Western culture, resulting in uniquely Russian requirements for solving Russian problems. The result is that much Western teaching either is too general to be of any practical help (as mentioned above), deals with problems with which Russians cannot relate, or takes pathways to solutions that are based on Western life philosophies.

There are two general requests coming from Russians in relation to this cultural distance. First, those from the West are urged to spend time studying Russian history, language and culture if they wish to reach the "Russian soul." Second, they should focus on training a few key Russian leaders with fundamental principles, and let these leaders adapt the principles to the practical realities of Russian culture. The Russian leaders should then be the trainers of the next level of students.

**5. Respectful of Russians** - One very harmful attitude conveyed by some Western teachers is that of the inherent superiority of Western thinking. Those who have communicated in some way that Russians have been going about things all wrong, and that Westerners have now come to set them straight, immediately lose their audience. Much harm has been caused by Americans who have acted as if they had come as saviors to a third world country. A more humble attitude is required of any teacher who will connect with the leaders of Russian churches.

American teachers are often fooled by seeing the backwardness of Russian economic life and projecting that backwardness to Russian thought life. This is a serious mistake. Russians have a very deep cultural tradition, built upon some of the world's best literature and poetry, and developed in a very rich and expressive language. (Many Western teachers are ignorant of the depths of their own English spiritual and philosophical traditions, let alone Russian ones.)

Russians can tend to talk down about themselves and their country, but this must not be misconstrued. They have a very deep love and respect for their history and culture. When Americans come exalting themselves and accepting exaltation, Russians can and have become deeply offended by such disrespect for Russia.

It is true that the church has been denied access to spiritual literature for many years, and that there is a demand for good literature to help in ministry. However, there has been very little attempt to discover good literature written by Russians with the goal of publishing it. The unspoken assumption is that they could not have developed any good literature of their own, and that which was developed in the West will be better at any rate (ignoring the issue of the cultural irrelevance rampant in popular American literature published in Russia). Russians lack the

resources to get these materials published, although they would like to do it since they believe that the materials are of good quality and would be acceptable to the Russian reader.

**6. Realism Regarding Student Mix** - Western teachers who want to have an impact on the ministry of counseling in Russia would do well to do some research into the components of their student base. Many teaching goals will not be realized because the teacher has the wrong audience or else doesn't know how to adapt to the particular students in front of him. Student responsiveness and ability to influence church life is affected by several factors.

One factor is the age group of the students. The irony of the situation is that the men most able to effect change in counseling ministry are the ones least open to learning new ideas. The Baptist churches are strongly controlled by the elders, who are in fact older in age. The majority of these men are considered almost impossible to influence. If they have gotten along for several decades without this teaching, why do they need it now? It is very difficult to sharply alter traditions in the Baptist churches. Conversely, the young men who are most open to Western ideas are the ones least able to introduce them into the churches. Teaching that is not clearly in line with church traditional understanding of Biblical principles can often simply get the younger men into trouble with their elders.

Another factor to consider is student goals in attending such teaching. In the worst case scenarios, Western or Korean schools have paid student stipends for attending classes, and the results have often been "mercenary" audiences who lack either the motivation or the ability to carry on the teaching. Others attend training simply because it is free and available, without any special conviction about putting it into practice.

The key to effective teaching, then, is to identify leaders who are open to learn, and who can actually influence their church. Then, assuming adherence to the other principles listed above and below, a good ministry of training in counseling can be carried out.

## **B. Response to Western Psychological Principles**

Although Russian Baptist pastors have not gone out of their way to learn about principles of Western psychology, they have encountered many of these principles through television broadcasts, seminars, and visiting teachers. Different men will have various responses to what they hear, but most will test the teaching against the Bible (as mentioned several times above). The following are common responses to only a representative list of the principles that pastors have heard and evaluated. The principles discussed do not relate to any one particular school of counseling thought from the West - they are just various ideas exported in many forms that have come across the ears of Russian Baptists.

**1. Self-esteem** - Pastors have a general distrust of all of the terms used in the West that describe a supposedly healthy self-concept. Pride is the enemy of the Christian's heart, and to spend any thought on thinking better of oneself is to waste effort on the wrong focus. Rather, the believer should focus only on Jesus Christ, loving and serving Him and one's neighbor, at which point he will not have any "self" problem. He is too occupied with ministering to others to worry about himself. It is the unbeliever who is seen as having this self-centeredness, which self-importance keeps him from repentance. One would have a hard time explaining how such terms as "self-esteem" differs from selfishness.

For the believer, any sort of attachment to self is seen to lead to self-protection and the avoidance of sacrifice. The believer must be ready to abandon his own personal interests (as many Russian pastors often did under Soviet persecution - this was not simply a theory). If a man begins to love himself, he will then disregard his neighbor. He will feel too sorry for himself to enter into Christian self-sacrifice, and will lose out on spiritual life. By trying to save his life, he

will lose it.

It was also mentioned to me that it is not a traditional Slavic idea to be receptive to self-respect. It is an idea that takes root and flourishes more in Western culture with its individualism and competition. It has been rare among the Orthodox traditions to try to build up self in any way, an idea that has overtones of independence from the Spirit of God, on Whom the believer depends, in mystical union, for the humble life of a spiritual man.

**2. Positive Thinking** - Some of the earliest religious transmissions available to Russians were the broadcast teachings of Robert Schuller. In the days when there was a great curiosity about all ideas Western, the idea of positive thinking as a means of overcoming problems found many followers. However, after more time reflecting and sorting out the issue, the idea fell into disfavor and most Russian people lost interest. This is a story that has repeated itself many times as things from the West come into Russia. An initial "honeymoon" period ends, and early acceptance gives way to the realization that the product wasn't "Russian" enough.

The basic problem of the individual is seen as a lack of faith in God. This is not a general positive outlook that provides impersonal inner motivation, but rather a settled conviction that God is loving and omnipotent and must be trusted to help us overcome our problems. Yet it is clearly understood that this side of Heaven, with the world, the flesh and Satan all against us, there is no way to eliminate external evils from one's life. No form of positive thinking will change that reality. Deep trials are just as important to leading us to spiritual growth as is our positive or proactive stance. The historic Russian outlook accepts that deep struggles are a natural part of life, and this is too deeply ingrained into the culture for positive thinking approaches to take hold

**3. Success Theology** - One influence that has entered Russia with a message of counsel to individuals is the idea that God wants everyone to have material success. Russian Baptists often equate this with Korean ministries, since so many of them in Russia have been based on these principles. The concept is tied to faith, but sees faith as the way to attain: with faith you can do anything. Russians Baptists expect that a life of following Christ will mean suffering, and are appalled when they hear missionaries teach something that sounds like using God to make one's life more comfortable. Such teachers present Christian giving as a way to get rich. These ideas, spawned in affluent societies, ring hollow in a country like Russia with its widespread struggles to make ends meet from month to month. Of course there are those among Russians who listen and follow, but Russian Baptists have had little patience with these ideas.

**4. Calvinistic Guidance** - Many ideas that teachers of counseling present as means of helping people are rejected because they are regarded as "Calvinist." There is much to be said about this, but one central impression of Calvinism held by Russian Baptists is that it teaches a form of antinomianism. That is, people accept Jesus Christ as savior, and then are told that they can do whatever they want to do and will still be saved. Thus a person seeking counsel may be comforted when he ought to be brought to repentance. Though this is based on a narrow view of the actual Calvinist positions, it is a very strong point of resistance among the Baptists. For this reason, many Western counseling notions throw up "red flags" as soon as they are voiced.

Perhaps the primary application of this would be the question of how to deal with a believer who has fallen into sin. Many who believe in the doctrine of eternal security also take every confession of faith at face value, and see as one of their central counseling purposes that of assuring the person of his acceptance by God. Russian Baptists would see this as a disastrous approach, because it denies the possibility that the person may have fallen away from the faith. The counselor is better off to help bring to repentance all who have fallen back into sin, without

offering potentially misleading comfort.

**5. Individualism** - There is some overlap here with a few of the issues listed above, but one more general statement can be made about counseling approaches from the West. These approaches tend to treat a person in a way that is considered too individualistic by Russians. The life of a believer must be closely intertwined with the body of Christ, yet many Western counselors encourage people to "be their own person" or "stand out from the crowd" in order to have emotional health. On the contrary, such an approach would be considered by Russians, with their view of society being much more communal than individual, as being an unhealthy way of life.

### **C. Western Practical Help Requested**

One attitude that is not uncommon among Russian Baptist pastors is that only a few selected things can be received from the West. One pastor told me that he wouldn't take anything from Americans regarding issues of spiritual life. He didn't see that this was an area in which Americans were strong, being in general too worldly and shallow. On the other hand, he saw that Americans were quite capable in knowing how to get some practical things accomplished, and this is knowledge that he would receive from them. There are many shades of this attitude, and on the other hand there are some younger men who willingly accept all things taught from the West. Yet in probing among pastors the most common things sought from Americans (beyond financial help) are general practical ideas that Russians could then take and adapt to Russian culture. The following are just a few of the requests for assistance that I have heard.

**1. Working with Cult Problems** - It would not be very helpful for an American to come to Russia and say to the Baptists, "Here is how you should respond to problems with Orthodoxy." This has been a Russian Baptist problem from the very beginning, and they have far more knowledge than Westerners. However, the many cults that have invaded Russia have introduced many new counseling difficulties for Russian pastors. Many have asked for guidance in better ways of ministering to the unique situations that occur with cults that are new in Russia. Also, many occult practices are rapidly spreading which were rare in Russia in the past, and pastors would like to be helped in dealing with people who have been involved in such practices.

**2. Working with Physical Illnesses** - When people have come in the past with physical problems, Baptist pastors have had few alternatives. Now they would like some help in developing a practical approach to providing assistance. Russian medical practices have fallen far behind those in the West, but

**3. Administrative Guidance** - To continue the point above, it is the acknowledged capability of Americans in organizing and administering projects that could help counselors develop new networking ministries for special needs such as physical illnesses. This could involve passing on experience that Westerners have had in developing referral networks. American know-how from experience in a free society can help pastors develop solution to this kind of problem as well as others that face pastors in their counseling work.

**4. General Practical Issues** - This is a catchall category for general advise being sought in how to effectively counsel from a Biblical perspective. Russian pastors often desire to know "how" American pastors deal with various counseling problems that come their way. They are often willing to glean ideas for their own ministry from the West, assuming that they can successfully adapt them to the Russian realities. Assuming that all the principles mentioned above are followed, practical advice from wise and experienced pastors will arouse good interest and response.

## CONCLUSION

### **I. SUMMARY**

The guiding presupposition of Baptist counselors is that the only healthy life is the one lived in obedience to God. This kind of life will have peace and joy, even if enduring difficult trials from external sources. The believer ought to be continually learning how to live in accordance with God's will, a training that is received in the church. When a believer sins or lacks faith or knowledge to respond properly to trials, he experiences guilt as a form of spiritual "pain," and in those cases will often seek out one who can provide the remedy. The pastoral counselor, knowing that the solution to problems is to root out sin and follow Jesus Christ, acts as a human agent of the Lord to assist those in his care to live according to God's eternal spiritual laws.

The almost complete absence of development in the field of psychology in Russia has left the Baptist counseling ministry virtually uninfluenced by theories developed outside of the Bible. Baptist pastors have not been trained to think about problems in a spiritual/psychological framework, and most do not see the need for a psychological counseling approach. Even the psychology that is coming into the secular Russian public is of a very mystical sort, a world apart from that which is offered by their Western counterparts. Baptist pastors see themselves as spiritual guides, depending on the gifting of the Holy Spirit for this ability. Therefore the central prerequisite for counseling ability is spiritual maturity as opposed to knowledge gained in a theoretical setting devoid of Biblical support. When pastors express an interest in learning more about psychology, they generally mean they would like to know more about how people operate in the natural realm. This knowledge would help them provide spiritual answers to those natural phenomena. There would not be seen to be a middle ground; a kind of "emotional health" that was a prerequisite to spiritual health, requiring a separate psychological treatment. The only true help for anyone is going to come from the Lord.

Dealing with demonic influence is also an area of counseling largely undeveloped among Baptist leaders. As with issues of psychology, issues taught in this area to Baptists will need to square directly with Scripture to be acceptable. There is openness to learn, however, especially in the face of the greatly expanding influence of the occult in Russia, a country ripe for such trouble due to widespread mysticism, superstition and Biblical ignorance.

The effect of environmental problems on personal problems is especially significant among Russian believers, who have historically dealt with heavy persecution. Two main issues emerge in this area. First, the believer is expected to respond in obedience to God in the midst of life, regardless of the circumstances. Second, the effective counselor needs to have personal knowledge of people and their problems, a requirement that makes it difficult for a foreigner to counsel a Russian at a level of any depth.

Solutions to problems brought to counselors are sought in a combination of human responsibility and divine assistance. The Bible is the source of guidance for life, and thus the text for the counselor. The believer must walk in obedience to the Word if he expects to see solutions to his problems. A central part of this obedience is a life of prayer, seeking the direct intervention of the Lord (a model perhaps seen most clearly in the Psalms). Virtually every counseling direction given will include the call to prayer, and often to fasting as well. Impersonal practical life principles that leave faith and the active involvement of God out of the picture are rejected.

The ministry of counseling is equated with the pastoral ministry in Baptist churches, and the notion of a separate ministry of counseling is unheard of. Any man who is a pastor must be capable as a spiritual guide, and this is central to the notion of what a counselor is. As a spiritual

guide he must act as a brother, getting involved in the lives of those whom he guides. The idea of a detached analyst as counselor is foreign to the Baptist thinking.

The personal qualifications required for being a good counselor are therefore identical to those required for being a good pastor. Biblical knowledge and spiritual maturity are primary. The person who does counseling must also be looked to as a spiritual authority, especially important in the Russian culture with its expectation of strong leadership. The notion that formal education would be required is historically absent, although modern opportunities are leading many to get formal training - yet that training would mainly be in pastoring, not specifically in counseling. In the long run, it is a man's actual experience among people that form the core of his counseling ministry.

The practices of counseling closely follow the principles as outlined above. A pastor is sought out for counsel by a church member, and the expectation is that the purpose will be to gain specific directions. If repentance is needed, or growth in obedience and faith, the pastor is free to dispense his directives very boldly, without treading lightly. Prayer and Bible reading are essential components of the process. Beyond these basic essentials, the exact approach taken by the pastor will depend greatly on the individual, since there are no standard counseling techniques to which to adhere.

Counsel and discipline exist together on one continuum in the Baptist churches. Those who come to counsel in a repentant mood can often be helped without any further level of confrontation. However, the unrepentant person can be taken immediately through steps of church discipline without the thought that this would violate his or her privacy.

Attitudes toward Western counseling principles and practice are limited at this time, since the exposure has not been great. However, that which has been heard through media or seminars is often rejected if it is not clearly Biblical. In addition, Americans are often seen as too formulaic and shallow to reach the Russian soul, and lack knowledge of Russian culture that would make their teaching more practical. Most harmful has been a common attitude of superiority exuded from many Americans who have taught in Russia. This attitude is a virtual guarantee that whatever is being taught will be met with skepticism or outright rejection.

The responses to particular Western counseling principles depends largely on three factors. First, as repeatedly stated above, is the question of Biblical agreement. Second is a sensitivity to Calvinist principles, which are rejected by Russian Baptists. Third is the issue of relevance to Russian culture, a culture not nearly so individualistic as Western, and with many other very wide distinctions setting it apart from the culture for which Western counseling material was originally written. In spite of this, there are some very practical kinds of help being requested by Baptists, and a teacher who does not violate any of the principles above can have an effective ministry among Baptist pastors.

## **II. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**A. Recognize the Challenge** - The issue of counseling people is far more dependent on matters of culture than most people realize. There is a great deal of study to be performed regarding the contrasts between Russian and American culture. Beyond this, the field of counseling in the USA is in great turmoil over many issues. To bring one's favorite counseling techniques and philosophies to Russia, without deep reflection and adaptation, is a certain plan for disaster in ministry. A small following can be gathered for almost any kind of teaching, but if one desires to assist the churches and thus the culture, a very large task looms ahead. Each one hoping to truly minister in this area must carefully examine his motives and abilities.

**B. Test Ideas Against Scripture** - If your goal is to minister to Russian Baptists, anything you teach will be compared against your audiences knowledge of Scripture. If you have definite ideas that you believe will help Russians counsel each other, examine your sources and be ready and able to show how your teaching is a Biblical teaching. Russian Baptists politely listen to many kinds of teaching from the West, but don't accept new ideas unless they can be supported by the Bible. Prepare anything you have to say with this in mind.

**C. Learn About Russian Culture** - One enters the fast lane to irrelevance by teaching to Russians as if they were an American audience. People often hold to the mistaken notion that their values are universal values, simply because they are strong central values of their own culture. Russian and American values have many wide differences. Outsiders from many countries agree that the Russian culture is difficult to fathom. The ministry of counseling others is difficult enough without this added handicap. The more understanding you have about Russian life, the more you will be eliminating from your teaching notes, and the more you will desire to research in order to provide relevant assistance.

One common illustration of this is the tendency of Americans to put a high value on orderliness. When they see the relative disorderliness of Russian society, they automatically feel it is their mission to alter Russian culture. And this is a humorously pitiful quest. A Russian might counter that Americans are on an orderly and busy track to nowhere meaningful, or that they have no ability to follow the quiet guidance of the Lord due to their hyper-control of their lives. To know more about Russian thinking is to challenge your own American thinking, and to look for ways to minister that will be helpful without being culturally snobbish.

**D. Respect Russian Intelligence** - Russian literature and art often elevates the mystery and great subtlety of emotions and relationships. Although not systematized in the manner an American may want to see, the cultural consciousness on the whole tends to make American culture appear naive and shallow. Although the culture has gone in for many of the flashy products of the American pop culture, they tend to be treated more as exciting curiosities than objects of any enduring value. Much teaching about counseling will likewise have a hurdle to overcome, and may not clear it if it is packaged in a way that says in effect, "Here is something simplified for you that you can understand."

**E. Eliminate Formulaic Approaches** - As was mentioned earlier, Russians are often offended by the easy outlines and graphs that can dominate the American approach to solving problems. Russians are not looking for something in an simple and pretty package that can be handed out and then passed to others like an aspirin pill. Rather, be prepared to dig deeper and give fuller explanations of what you are teaching. If you cannot go more than a step or two beyond your graph, you may not be qualified to minister such concepts in such a difficult cross-cultural environment. On the contrary, if you are capable of engaging the subject with depth, then don't resort to diagrams to make what is deep look simple.

**F. Train Through Relationships** - The Russian culture (including the economy, as many frustrated American businessmen have discovered) works primarily through relationships. Your studies and qualifications will not open doors for you in the same way in Russia that they do in the West. You will need to know somebody and be known by them if you are to have introduction to a platform from which to have lasting ministry. It is true that many American speakers are ushered to pulpits, but a guest speaker does not have automatic access to Russian hearts, especially in the Baptist church culture. Strive to get past the level of guest "talker" if you want to have any sort of lasting impact. Since counseling is a deeply relational work, you cannot avoid relationships and still claim a ministry of counseling or training for counseling.