

FILLING THE VACUUM:

Selected Factors in Coming to an Understanding
and Appreciation of the Gospel,
as Identified by Young Russian Evangelical Converts
in the Greater Moscow Area

by

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I. INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

A. General Introduction - Much of the Western evangelistic effort among Russian youth has resulted in nominal joiners rather than true disciples of Jesus Christ. Part of the reason for this result is that many evangelists trying to reach this group have not taken the time to discover much about the religious context of these young people. The purpose of this research is to inform Westerners (and perhaps some Russians as well) regarding the religious context of the young Russians that they are striving to reach with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The results of this study could help Christian workers in Russia to utilize approaches that take into account this context, with the effect that there will be more solid, fruitful converts in the new churches.

B. Background - I began asking questions about Western evangelistic efforts in 1993 as I gained personal experience in following up after Western evangelistic campaigns in various Russian cities. Many hundreds of conversions had been reported at the end of these campaigns, but my informal research revealed that a minute number, if any, of those who had "made decisions" were in the churches. I also observed churches that had been planted in Moscow. Every Sunday a number of people supposedly made decisions for Christ, but very few of these people stayed in the church. This was a special problem with Russian youth, among whom, apparently, a new subculture was developing – one that was not so open to the gospel as the adults of Russia who had experienced communism first-hand. The new youth were easy to talk with, but hard to reach deeply. Westerners didn't seem to be sensing this difficulty well enough, and very few people were questioning their basic assumptions about evangelistic methodology. Uncontextualized messages and methods continued, and many initially interested Russian youth were not brought into the fold. *This new generation of Russian youth needs to be studied more carefully so that their perceptions regarding life and religion can emerge and be dealt with by those attempting to communicate to them regarding the gospel of Jesus.*

C. Research Approach – As suggested above, the purpose of this research was to discover the central biblical and cultural issues that have affected the true reception of the gospel in Russia. I sought to discover and describe the factors that Russian youth themselves identified as those which characterized their religious orientations prior to hearing the gospel and its call on their lives. I used a series of individual interviews to gain this information. In my research, I was most interested in hearing young Russian people describe how they used to believe, think, feel and act in the religious sphere prior to coming into contact with the gospel. I was trying to answer this basic question: What kind of "soil" is found among Russian youth, upon which the gospel seed is being sown? This question was answered by Russian converts themselves as I interviewed them and sought their personal testimonies of their lives prior to hearing the gospel.

D. Research Boundaries - I confined my study to ethnic Russian young people, male and female, between the ages of 14-25, who are now active parts of Western-planted churches. There were no other social boundaries within the above limits. I looked only for those that did not grow up in Christian families, and who had come to Jesus Christ between 1991 and the present (although I was more selective concerning those who had been converted very recently – I required pastors or leaders to be confident that there was good evidence of life transformation in brand-new believers to be a part of my research group). I did a total of 43 interviews of young men and women within these parameters.

E. Limitations of Findings – The results of this qualitative study may not be able to be generalized beyond the particular boundaries mentioned above. Young Russians from areas remote from Moscow may not share all the characteristics of Russian youth within close reach of Moscow. The research may be subject to other interpretations than those I offer, but sought to let Russian youth speak for themselves as much as possible, minimizing my own personal interpretations beyond that which is self-evident. There could be several other specific responses to each question that I did not discover in my interviews, but the chances are low that these would be common, since my 43 interviews represent a significant sample of this population.

F. Other Introductory Notes

1. This is a qualitative research study, and not quantitative. That is, I was not looking for statistics to prove the proportions of young Russians who had this or that view. The value of the research is in displaying something of the variety of responses a Christian may encounter in communicating with Russian young people. A youth worker will benefit from being prepared to respond to each of the quotations found in this paper.

2. Only a sample of the quotes possible under each section have been inserted into this paper. Much more could be said about each point, but I have selected the key ideas that I discovered in my research.

3. Many of the young people have negative things to say about Orthodoxy and Western religion. These are their own opinions, and they are not speaking for anybody but themselves when they make these comments. Nothing in my questions was designed to suggest any expectation of positive or negative attitude by the young people.

4. The reader should keep in mind that each of these Russian youth later converted to evangelical Christianity, mainly through Western influence. Certainly this fact is going to color some of their attitudes. However, I pressed them to recall their attitudes and beliefs prior to coming in personal contact with the gospel through Westerners, and to attempt not to "read back" into their prior experience anything that was actually a product of understanding and attitudes gained by exposure to the gospel.

5. The interviews were conducted in Russian or English, depending on the ability of the young person. For those quotes in English, I have edited the interviews for grammar, and at times for word usage, and have rearranged some cumbersome sentences in order that the final result be readable and clear. The translation of the interviews in Russian is partly that of my interpreters and partly my own.

6. In order to protect the identities of the young people I interviewed, I have used a code for each person. The code consists of four parts: (1) A 2-digit number for the age of the young person at the time of the interview, (2) One letter for gender, male or female, (3) A 2-digit number for the year of conversion of the young person (as near as could be recalled or estimated), and (4) One letter for religious background: A = Atheist, O = Orthodox, J = Jewish, and M = Moslem. (It must be noted that these are not always easy to assign – many young people defy categorization here. The main point is their family background, and the closest identifier was chosen if there was some question). Thus the code (16F98O) would represent a 16-year-old girl who was converted in 1998 from an Orthodox background.

7. This paper is the second of four papers on four separate topics regarding Russian youth. When completed, the next two papers will cover: (1) Experiences of conversion, and (2) Evaluations of Western evangelism in Russia, with suggestions of young Russians for the improvement of the evangelistic approach of Westerners.

II. RESULTS OF RESEARCH

A. Heart Preparation for Receiving the Gospel

The first factor to be examined in the process of hearing and responding to the gospel is the openness of the heart to receive the message. As will be seen later, this is not a reliable indicator of who will or will not respond to the gospel. However, the nature of spiritual seeking in young peoples' hearts, along with the recent important events of their lives, provide an important background to their receptivity to the message of new life.

1. Spiritual Seeking – The presence or absence of a seeking heart is one important issue of a young person's life context. The young people I interviewed fell along all points of the spectrum in this regard.

a. Complacency – A common comment heard among Russian young people is that they weren't seeking anything – religious or otherwise. "I wasn't really on a search for truth, and didn't think about where to look for it." (21M96A) "I never viewed religion as an option, so I was not seeking anything." (27M91A) For many of these young people, this complacency was due largely to a love for the world. "I wasn't seeking more spiritual things – I was more into the world." (19M97O) "I was a very progressive girl, and went to discos. I didn't care about God and I didn't care about anything. I was seeking more worldly things. I was just enjoying myself, and this was the credo of my life." (18F99O) In some cases, their complacency was due to their opinion that they already had what they needed, without regard to further religion. "I wasn't seeking anything spiritual. I thought that how I was living was better than what I saw in churches." (17M99O) "I didn't really care about religions at all. I figured that God is in my heart, and I can worship Him according to the knowledge that I had in my heart." (18F99O) "I didn't need anything. That's why I wasn't searching for salvation, and didn't see the need." (27F95A)

This complacency can also be found among those who identify themselves as Orthodox. Many could say that, because they were Orthodox, "I would have said that I was a Christian, for sure." (22F95O) This was commonly connected with a national identity. "I am Russian, and I thought that I was Orthodox because I was Russian." (21F96O) One young woman explains in detail a reason for not wanting to seek more: "I was interested in knowing the truth, but I was never interested in the area of religion. It's like with everyone else in Russia – you know Russia is an Orthodox country, and you know what you need to know. But you don't go deeper. That's the mentality. After a certain point, I didn't want to know anything more. In Russia, if you want to know something else, and you do the research, you will be noticed. And that's what people don't want. So even without thinking, people just don't go any further than they think they should, or that they are allowed." (21F93O) This caused an inner turmoil in some, who felt an inner void, but were turned away by what they thought was religion. "I didn't seek anything more spiritual in my life, because I didn't want to be like those babushki in scarves. And that's how I understood what it meant to be 'spiritual.' But I had an emptiness inside, and I was looking for something to fill it. But I didn't think that spiritual things would fill this void." (15F99O) Or else a young person might desire to be right with God, but not enough to sacrifice for this in the way he or she interpreted was required in Orthodoxy. "I didn't want to sacrifice anything for God. I wanted to be accepted by God, but yet I knew that I wouldn't be, because I didn't want to sacrifice for this. And this was in my mind whenever I would go to an Orthodox temple. I knew that I had no hope, because I knew that there was no way I would ever sacrifice my life like that. I

would never spend my life in a monastery, and I would never live as Christians did, because I wanted to enjoy the pleasures of the world." (19M95O)

b. Non-Religious Seeking – Some of the seeking described by young people was of the vague and unreligious type. "I wasn't on a religious seeking path at all. Maybe I was seeking something, but it wasn't God." (26F92A) "I wasn't seeking spiritual things. I was seeking something, but didn't know what it was. I knew something was missing, but didn't know what." (15M99O) Some of this seeking had to do with escaping a bad lifestyle. "I was seeking at that time, because I knew I was bad inside, though I didn't know the word 'sinner.' I was drinking alcohol and going to all-night parties and all that. I wanted to be different, so I was seeking a way to become good. But my seeking was in no way associated with religion." (21F92A) For others it was just a general, passive seeking of something meaningful in life. "I had a feeling of being at a dead end in my life. I wished there was something that could give me an answer, but I didn't have it at the time. So I just kept wondering about it. It was more of a wondering that it was an active seeking." (23F92A)

Several young people described a more specific search for utopian ideals, especially in light of all the bad things happening around them. "I was always expecting that if I would do good to people that they would return the same to me. And often it wouldn't happen, and I would have a lot of pain over this. So I was seeking for truth and justice." (26F92A) "I felt, from a young age, that I wanted to help many people, just for peace on earth and things like that. And I was trying to find something or someone that would help me achieve my goal." (22M94A) One girl had utopian dreams after reading one of C.S. Lewis' works, not knowing it was analogous of Christian teaching. "I was thinking that there is something more to this life than I saw, and I dreamed about it and was searching inside myself. I read about Narnia in 'The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.' And I remember thinking that I wished somebody would die for me, like the lion did in the story. So I decided to believe that there is such a beautiful country, and that maybe some day I would find it." (19F96A)

Other versions of Utopia centered around being a part of true love and real fellowship. "I was searching for a different circle of people. I didn't know if there was any such kind of people, but the people I was around didn't satisfy me, and I was looking for something better. Maybe those people would have more education and they would be smarter than me, but it would just be a different society, and I wanted to find it so badly. And I remember feeling that there was no hope to find such people. It was just a utopian dream. A lot of people dreamed of such a Utopia." (27F95A) Young people could be found seeking for ideals that were Christian, but without including God in the equation. "I thought that nobody liked me, and that there was nobody in the whole world who could understand me or support me. I felt that I was seeking for a friend, a best friend who would understand me. When I was 14 years old all my classmates were seeking music, drugs, immoral relationships, and thought about guys or girls. I was seeking for joy, for eternal love. I had no idea where this could be found. I wasn't looking to God for this, but for a human who would have these characteristics." (17F96O)

c. Seeking Answers to Problems – The problems that cropped up in their lives caused many young people to seek specific answers to those problems. Some focused in on the specific problems themselves, sometimes connecting them to spiritual issues and sometimes not. "I was looking for something that would tell me the truth about things. I had some psychological problems, and wanted to resolve them, but I don't think that I was really

looking for spiritual truth." (21F96O) "I felt lonely. I was looking for good friends, and some way that I would not be alone." (23F96A) "I was seeking to cleanse myself from the unpleasant feeling of an accumulating bad conscience." (20F94A) For many these problems rose up in adolescence, helping to explain why so many sought spiritual answers in that turbulent time of life. "When I was a little girl, I was satisfied with what we had. But when I got to be 14 or 15 I was seeking for something more. I wasn't happy anymore, and I didn't know why. I wasn't happy with my friends, and I started to have some hard times with my mother for some reasons, and I didn't know why – I just thought that she didn't understand me. I knew that I wanted to find something, but I didn't know for sure what I needed." (22F95O)

Others saw their personal problems on a wider screen, and were asking bigger questions about the meaning and purpose of life. "I was very quiet and shy, and my family had no money. Because of this I didn't have any friends or anything to do in life. I started thinking, 'Why am I here?' I wondered what was my purpose to be alive on this earth." (21F93O) "I was questioning, as I had from childhood, why things were the way they were in the world. And this kept growing in me, and I kept wondering how to live." (29F92O) "I felt that I had a kind of emptiness in me, and was thinking, 'Why am I alive, and what is the purpose of all this?' I had these ultimate questions about why everything happens. I wasn't actively seeking answers, but was just thinking about these things." (15F99A) It was possible for this problem of living without purpose to become acute after finishing school and not knowing what to do next, or where to find direction: "I was seeking for something at that time. I had studied well at the institute, but as soon as my exams were over I felt no aim in my life. While I was studying, I would forget about things around me. But as soon as my studies were completed, I didn't know to whom I should dedicate my life. So I was aimless. I was looking for purpose for life. This was a spiritual search. But I didn't think I could find this purpose in my Orthodox church." (21F98O) "I didn't see any sense or purpose for life. The people whom I asked about their goals all had very small and insignificant goals. So I wondered why people exist. And then I was disappointed with life, and there was no way out. I was looking for a large purpose, a significant one, not like those of others." (20F94A)

It was also common to have short bursts of spiritual seeking that lasted only as long as the problem lasted. "When I had troubles, I would think of God, like everybody else. But when the problem was over, of course I would thank God, like everybody does. And I would think that I wanted to be closer to God and do everything right, but then I would just return to my sinful life. This was a normal approach, like everybody else took." (19F99O) "We are all believers when we are in difficult situations, but when it is all over we forget about God, and we don't care." (29M92A)

d. Active Religious Seeking – Most of the truly active religious seeking took place in the early 1990's, and most of this came from youth that grew up in atheist families, whose world views had shattered with the fall of the Soviet Union. "I had fully believed in communist ideas. But around the time of Perestroika we became more and more disillusioned, and I became pretty much a spiritual seeker. The reason was that I was really starting to ask myself questions about the meaning of existence. We first believed in communism, which answers the need to know the purpose for your existence. When that crumbled, one started to be seeking." (28M92A) The late 1980's and early 1990's was a time of great openness and curiosity. "The youth in our generation were very progressive. We read a lot and knew a lot, and were always looking. All of us were searching, and there was a time

we started talking about God. Some would go to Orthodox churches, and would learn about God, and then later in the dorm they would tell us about it. And I was trying to think about whether or not I believed it was true." (27F95A) Many young people point to the first part of the 1990's as the time of their spiritual crossroads. "I felt that I was somehow interested in God, and in faith in god. I remember that I had this feeling, 'Whenever I am in despair, God is there. But when I am not in despair, where is God?' And I felt that this was wrong – I should identify myself. Do I really believe that there is a God, or not?" (29M92A)

Since these young people had been raised on a steady stream of materialism, it was a major step for them to come to the point of accepting that there is more to the universe than can be sensed naturally. "Basically, I recognize that this was my first breakthrough, when I stated that, 'All that you see is not all that exists.' That became clear." (28M92A) Such breakthroughs came in various venues. "I was studying at the medical school, and my studies in physics and chemistry started convincing me that there *should* be a God – there must be some kind of intelligent creator. Then, when Perestroika broke out there were more books available about different religions and spiritual practices, and I was really much into it. And by the time I heard the gospel, I was already convinced that there is a God, and I was trying to find out more about Him." (32F92A) "One time my friend and I sat on the beach and looked at the stars. I said, 'Dima, there must be something up in the stars – there must be *something*. We can't just be people on this earth and that's it – there must be something there.' But I didn't know what it was." (27M92A)

The most common questions that these young people were asking related to death. "I wanted to know about life after death and those things." (27M92A) "I was seeking spiritual things. I was trying to find something that would help me to better understand death, or give me some hope for after death." (22M94A) The search did not necessarily involve religion for them, but certainly opened them up to whatever would bring the answer. "I was seeking an answer to the question of what happens after death. It doesn't mean that I tried different religions, but I was just searching for this answer." (15M96A)

e. Discouraged Orthodox Seekers – It was rare to find an Orthodox young person that was actively seeking to increase in religious knowledge or devotion. Those few that were seeking would report one type of discouragement or another. "I didn't have any answers to my questions when I would ask priests or other religious people." (22M94O) One young woman had a question in her heart about what to do next when she had become an active seeker: "We decided to go to a church. Because what do you do? You just go to church. And because this was like Russian thinking – you go to an Orthodox church, because this is the church that all Russians go to. But in Russian churches they didn't really teach you about doctrine or anything. They didn't teach me anything about salvation or repentance." (21F94A) The lack of understanding drove some of the young people away from Orthodoxy. "I was seeking spiritual answers always. But I was blaming both myself and God for my problems. I was wondering why God wouldn't hear me and wouldn't help me. Then I began to question whether things were right in the church. I was searching where to go and what to do, and had decided that I wasn't going back to the Orthodox church, because I didn't understand anything there." (29F92O) Some who have gone to more progressive Orthodox churches have reported learning much more, and also have reported that teaching has increased in the later 1990's in regular Orthodox churches. But none reported gaining satisfying answers to their questions about salvation (which is natural enough to expect, since they all later became evangelicals).

2. Life Events and Experiences – For several of the young people I interviewed who were seekers prior to hearing the gospel, their spiritual seeking was triggered by particular life events and experiences that had brought them to a point of questioning, discouragement or despair. One of the most common experiences was the death of a friend or relative and the crisis of truth provoked by it. "When I was in medical school my friend died, and so I started thinking about death." (32F92A) "There was one person in my school who was my age. This guy lived nearby me, and he committed suicide. And that really shocked me, and made me think. I was thinking, 'You can just end your life, just like that.' And it was kind of pointless." (23F92A) For some, the question of death was connected more specifically with the question of life after death and their potential destination. "My dad died, and I had thoughts about this, because I didn't know where my dad was after that, and that made me very scared. I felt that my dad went to Heaven, but I thought, 'What about me? Will God take me?'" (19F92J) "I had a friend in school who was only 17, and he got into an auto accident and died. And that's the first time that I started thinking about death. I thought, 'What would happen if I died?' And then three days after this my great aunt died. That was really hard, and I was afraid to die, because I didn't know what would happen to me." (21F92A)

Crises take many forms, and several kinds were reported as being instrumental in preparing young people to hear the gospel. One common situation was that of being alone and lonely after high school, when friends had dispersed. "After my last year of school my friends went away to other cities to study. I didn't enter at that time, and stayed in my town alone with no friends. I started to wonder why this had happened, and who could help me." (23F96A) "I was a first-year student at the university (moving from far away to Moscow), and I had gone through a kind of crisis of personal beliefs. I believed in friendship, but now I didn't have many friends. I felt lonely, and was facing my difficult life pretty much alone." (27M91A) Another crisis was caused by illness. "I ended up being in a really bad physical condition, and that's when I started looking for answers." (21F94A) Other crises related to personal relationships. "I had nothing in my life that was really important, but the god that I had created was my relationship with my boyfriend. And when this ended, I didn't have anything important at all. There was a vacuum." (19F99O) "I got married, and my husband was behaving himself very badly. And my life went totally downhill. I wanted to commit suicide, but I was too scared because I believed that for this I would go to Hell." (29F92O)

Experiences of despair caused by personal sin also played a factor in the lives of some young people. Some had simply had their fill of the world. "I had had enough of the fun of the world such as nightclubs and whatever. I had tried almost everything. But I knew that it was empty without God. It wasn't that I was looking for anything in the worldly life, but rather that everybody was doing all these things because they were fashionable and cool. So I kind of felt that this is what I should do also. And I had disillusionment in all these things, as well as some bad experiences." (19F99O) One young man who had tried to overcome sin through Eastern methods came to despair in the attempt. "You had to practice morality in order to get through to enlightenment. So I tried to be my best, in terms of being very moral. And what God did was to show me that I was incapable of doing this. I tried to control my sin, and I tried to love, but I really saw that I hated. I tried to be spiritual, and found that I was completely worldly." (28M92A)

B. Means of Exposure to the Gospel

The main purpose of this short section is to illustrate the great variety of means by which young people were exposed to the gospel. Since this research was not quantitative, I am not providing any sort of statistics regarding the prevalence of one means over another that was instrumental in reaching young people.

A number of statements can be made about means of exposure. First, young people were very often exposed to the gospel through a variety of these means prior to becoming Christians. Second, there were some cases where the very first means of exposure was the one identified by the young person as his or her point of conversion. Third, each of the means listed below was given as the key means of coming to an understanding of the gospel by at least one young person. Therefore this is not an exhaustive list, nor is it ranked. Not even every young person that mentioned each means is noted, since I did not ask each person for an exhaustive list of all means by which he or she heard the gospel. The list simply shows the great variety of means that were mentioned as important by the young people that I interviewed. More detailed descriptions of how young people came to better understanding and more positive attitudes toward the gospel through these means is the subject of further sections of this paper.

One other note should be made here. My main purpose is to point to the means used by Western evangelical groups to reach young Russian people. However, there were a few young people who mentioned that one of the steps along their way to responding to the gospel happened in an Orthodox setting or with an Orthodox believer. These were never mentioned as being the critical turning point in the conversion process, but were important for a few people toward gaining better understanding or more conviction about God.

1. Literature

- a. **New Testament** (21F94A, 28M92A, 21F92A, 27M92A)
- b. **Bible story book** (18F99O)
- c. **Evangelistic literature** (28M92A, 27M91A, 22M94O)

2. TV Broadcasts

- a. **Superbook cartoon** (21F93O, 27M92A)
- b. **Western preaching** (19F96A, 22M94O)
- c. **Christian testimonies** (29F92O)

3. Public Events

- a. **Jesus film** (25F93A)
- b. **Christian music concert** (27M91A, 22F98M, 17F96O, 18F99O)
- c. **Street preaching** (29M92A)
- d. **Special evangelistic meetings** (17M99O)

4. Special Events by Invitation

- a. **Christian conference** (26F92A, 15F99O)
- b. **Special youth meetings** (21F93O, 21F94A, 19M95O)

5. Evangelism at School

- a. **English teacher at Russian school** (21M96A, 21F93O, 21F98O)
- b. **Missionaries visiting school** (20F94A, 15F99O)

6. Summer Camps

- a. **Special English camp** (19F96A, 13F99O, 15M96A, 17M99O)
- b. **Regular Christian camp** (15M99O, 17M96O)

7. Home Meetings

- a. **Home Bible study** (28F91M, 26M94O, 23M98O, 23F96A)
 - b. **Youth group meeting** (15M99O, 15F99A)
- 8. Church Meetings**
- a. **Regular church service** (29M92A, 32F92A, 22F98M, 15F99A)
 - b. **Special seekers class** (25F93A)
 - c. **Church youth group** (17M96O, 17F98O, 16M97A)
 - d. **Evangelistic church meeting** (28F91M)
- 9. Personal Contacts**
- a. **Family member encouraging** (27F95A)
 - b. **Other believer encouraging** (19F99O, 23F92A, 15M99O)

C. Coming to an Understanding of the Gospel

The testimonies of young Russians regarding how they came to understand the gospel contained many normal responses that would be expected, but also several surprising features. In fact, the means and timing of this process defy precise patterns, each young person having his or her own unique path. There are some overall themes to the comments, however, and I have organized this section into four of those major themes that emerged through the interview process.

1. The Gaining of Understanding as a Process – There is a tendency among some to consider that simply the delivery of the message results in understanding. In reality, as my interviews illustrated, the road to comprehension is a complex one involving several factors of the communication process – not the least of which is the hidden world view and mental processes inside the receiver of the message. All would agree that it takes time to learn about the Christian life and the nature of God. But time is also required to understand the very basics of the gospel message, which require more context than is often assumed.

a. Exposure Does Not Equal Understanding – Many young people reported a lack of comprehension the first time or times that they heard the gospel or read a gospel tract. "After the concert I read through the Four Spiritual Laws, and it didn't make much sense." (27M91A) "Every time I would meet with my friend (who had become a believer) she would also talk with me about the gospel. And she said I needed a New Testament, and that Christ had died for our sins, but I didn't understand that very well." (27F95A) "I started to attend the church. I liked being there, but I didn't understand much of what was happening there." (29M92A)

It was not just initial presentations of the gospel that were not understood. Protracted periods of hearing without understanding were not uncommon. "I had been going to the meetings for several weeks, but I hadn't understood the messages being given." (19M95O) "They (in the home group) would explain the gospel using several different messages. But it was maybe a year and a half from when I started coming to this group that I really understood the message." (23M98O) Some who had worked as translators came to their understanding only after translating many messages. "We went to several places, and I had to translate several messages, so the message got into my mind even deeper, and I started thinking more about it." (22M94A) "During the campaigns I was an interpreter. So I got to rehearse the gospel many, many times. That really got my understanding deeper." (28M92A) A few were already studying in a Bible school before really understanding the message. "Once we started at the college, we had Bible studies where they would teach biblical principles. And that's where I started to understand more and more of the gospel." (19M95O)

b. Context is Required for Understanding – The point of several of the quotes above is that comprehension of the truth took time to synthesize in the minds of the listeners. Since several of these young people were of college age at the time, lack of comprehension was not due to any lack of intellectual capacity. Further, as will be discussed more below, many of them were avid seekers. Understanding emerged through a process, in which listener readiness and careful construction of truth worked together over time. Several spoke of foundations that had to be laid piece by piece, often starting with very simple fundamentals. "I had been hearing, but I didn't understand the meaning of the gospel. But at one point, which didn't happen right away, I got the idea that now I believed that Jesus Christ was a historical person who lived on the earth." (27F95A) "I went to the home of some Christian people. There I heard about God and about Jesus. And after that I understood that God loved me. I visited there about nine or ten months, but then I went away. I didn't really understand Him or the gospel at that time." (23F96A) When one young woman came to a more adequate understanding, it was the result of a synthesis of parts previously understood, and even then it was not yet complete: "I had been given various pieces of the gospel that I understood before this program, but it had never been all put together as it was at that time. At that time I understood more clearly that Jesus Christ came to earth to die for me. And the next thing was, 'How come?'" (21F92A) Others had been prepared by other circumstances and seeking, so their understanding at their first real hearing of the gospel was actually a consummation, not a beginning. "They did a full gospel explanation, beginning from Adam and Eve. It was done really well. And it all impacted me. It was the first time I had heard the gospel, but God had been bringing me to that point, and so I understood and received everything. This was just the final stage for me personally." (21F93O) "I had looked for so long, and I became a fanatic when I found it. I would have believed and done whatever they told me. I understood salvation internally from that time, but every year after that I gained a deeper understanding of what salvation really was." (29F92O)

c. Barriers to Understanding Exist – One reason that coming to understanding of the gospel is a process is that young people commonly had to overcome many hurdles to achieve this understanding. For example, those who were starting from atheism had a large gap in their knowledge of religion in general. They had very little foundation on which to build. Those who had been in Orthodoxy had some preconceptions about God and faith that hindered them from receiving a different understanding. Their foundation often had to be torn down in order for new comprehension to be built. A common barrier for all young people of either sort was simply the time barrier. Building understanding takes time, and the short-term evangelistic events staged by some Westerners rarely had deep impact. "I heard about some friends going to some Sunday services in a theater. I was interested, and went there. There were Americans there who shared the gospel. They handed out books and sang songs. They split us into two groups, adults and children. They told us about Jesus, and gave us gifts and candy. After that they moved to another place, and I forgot all about them." (17M99O) A less common barrier mentioned by some who heard the gospel in English was their confusion due to the language barrier. "The things that they talked about were all very new to me. And my English wasn't so good as far as American phrases and statements went. I didn't understand what they were saying. But I just listened and observed, and was very confused." (23F92A)

The most commonly mentioned barrier to understanding was the Synodal translation of the Russian Bible. "I tried to read the Bible, and it made some kind of sense to

me, at least the New Testament did. But not much, because of the translation." (27M91A) "There is no way to understand the Synodal translation for a new believer." (22F95O) "I got a New Testament in simple form in simple Russian language. That actually really helped, because I couldn't understand the Synodal translation." (25F93A) Several modern translations, of varying quality, have since become available in Russia, and more are on the way. However, the Synodal version is still widely used, and is distributed by many Westerners, so the issue of difficulty in comprehension may continue for some time.

2. The Importance of Guidance and Interaction in Gaining Understanding – The second theme that emerged from the interviews was the important role of personal interaction with believers. Young people did not come to understanding by their own, undirected initiative. Believers with understanding were used by God to lead them to that understanding.

a. The Difficulty of Gaining Understanding Directly from Scripture – Much is said about the clarity of the Bible, and its ability to lead a person to salvation – a proposition that I accept. However, in practice it is rarely the Bible by itself that does this work, but rather the "guided tour" provided by a believer, who understands the gospel and can demonstrate it from the text. With the young people I interviewed, their first exposures to the Bible through independent personal reading did not produce clarity. "I started reading the New Testament. I tried to read in several places, but thought that it didn't make much sense at all." (27M91A) "The first (Scriptures) I received were the Gospel of John and Romans, together in one book. And I was told, 'Just read it, and God's word will change your thinking.' So I started reading it, but at first I didn't quite understand what it was talking about." (21F92A) When understanding was gained through reading, it was usually with the aid of notes or literature that organized and explained the message of the gospel. "I came to a part in the New Testament booklet that was methodical instructions for spiritual workers. It contained a sample dialogue between a believer and an unbeliever. The unbeliever was asking questions, and the believer would answer. The questions were very reasonable. I would read them and say, 'Yes, I would ask this.' And then I read the answers, and they were very reasonable too. They made sense. Then I tried to re-read the New Testament, but I didn't get much out of it." (27M91A) "I received my clearest explanation of the gospel not through the Bible, but through books about Christ and the gospel." (28M92A) Even simple highlighting in the Bible was an important aid to understanding: "The first verse that I really understood was John 3:16, because it was highlighted in the booklet. I would read such verses over and over again to understand them." (21F92A) The point of all this is that, especially in the early stages of evangelism, guidance was always required to navigate through the Bible and receive a proper understanding of the gospel message.

b. Inadequate Understanding in the Absence of Guidance – The message of the Bible becomes very clear over time to a mature student of the Word. Such a person may forget how a seeker can be ignorant of very basic truths, and neglect to test and guide that seeker. Taking for granted that young people understood these basics often left them in the dark. "At that time I didn't even know if I should trust the Bible, because nobody told me that I should. I just took it as a book – I didn't take it as revelation from God. So I didn't even know if I should obey what is written there." (27M91A) "We would go into schools, and I would translate. And I still wonder why, but I didn't get the question, 'Are you saved?' until maybe a month or a month and a half into my working with them. I guess they automatically assumed that if you are a translator then you are saved." (23F92A)

c. Understanding Promoted by Personal Interaction – The converse of what was stated above is that many young people pointed to direct conversations as being the most potent factor in their arrival at gospel understanding. Preaching was appreciated, but the more intimate settings, where interaction was possible, were more helpful. "I started coming to a Bible study, and I think that did a lot more for me than the church service did." (25F93A) "After the camp I had many questions about God and about the Bible. I started to go to the youth group. Sometimes I would have talks with the leader. I asked my questions, because at first I was just trying to find out what this all was about. And as I came to this group, I started to grow in my understanding of the Bible and of the gospel." (15M99O) One young woman described her experience, when she was able to spend significant time with an American friend, as follows: "One night we stayed up talking very late, and she was asking me all those questions. This was the first time that I remember that I was able to ask questions when I wanted to, and where it was one on one, and where I felt comfortable." (23F92A) A young man who had been visiting Bible study meetings for some time found the personal touch to be most helpful: "One of the Americans suggested that we meet together during the week, just to discuss the Bible. I agreed. It was through these meetings that I came to understand the basic doctrines." (27M91A) A normal order of coming to understand the Bible was first to be guided by a believer, and only then to see the truth for oneself. "My friend was telling me about the gospel at this time. At the beginning I really liked it. And then I understood that it was the only right one, because I started reading the Bible. And then I understood clearly from the Bible that this was so, and that I could even know this by myself from the Bible." (19F99O)

A common means of promoting personal interaction was by gentle probing or direct confrontation of those seekers that had already gotten involved with believers to some extent. "I was at a Bible study, and I was asking the leader some questions, and then he started asking me questions to verify if I was understanding how people are saved." (25F93A) One girl who had been assumed to be a believer was exposed by a direct question: "I was talking with my friend, and she came to the question, 'Are you saved?' And I said, 'I don't think that I am, because I don't really know what it means.' That's when she went into the whole explanation of salvation." (23F92A) This girl had been around believers for quite some time, and had heard many messages. One young man with a similar experience explains it in more detail: "I still felt that my life would be put in the balance after my death, and that the good deeds would be measured according to (some standard). The concept of Jesus Christ paying for all my sins and washing them all took me a year to understand. At that time one person asked me, 'Are you sure that you will go to Heaven after you die?' And I said, 'Well, no.' And he asked me why, and I said, 'Well, you have to balance my good works and my bad works.' And he explained to me that this was wrong thinking. His simple question helped me to understand that I was thinking differently about the Christian life. He shared with me, and it took me another couple of days of reading to myself all alone, and after that I became confident (about this teaching)." (22M94A) Note that this was a year after this young man had been already considered converted, and it was only when he was probed that his faulty thinking was revealed.

3. The Interaction of Faith and Understanding – One fascinating feature emerging from my interviews with youth was the unexpected order of processes in the inner person. It is natural to assume that understanding is built to a point of clear gospel understanding, after

which receptive hearts are converted. But this was rarely the case in reality. Understanding and faith interacted in many different ways.

a. Understanding "As Needed" at Conversion – It is the Word of God that brings forth faith (Rom. 10:17). But how much of the Word is required? To answer this requires a more theological debate. But based on my research, I would have to say that one could not equate conversion to Christ and gospel understanding among these young Russians, except on a very basic level. That is, their understanding at the time they identify as their conversion was usually minimal. However, the little that was understood was believed, and this became the turning point. "I didn't really understand the gospel at that time. I just wanted to know if there was a God or not. And I simply understood that He existed. God gave me the understanding that He exists, and along with this the desire to thank Him, pray, and read the Bible. My understanding of the gospel came gradually. At one point I realized that I am a sinner, and that I had been cleansed of my sins. It was all step by step. I didn't understand it all at once." (20F94A) For this girl, belief in the existence of God was a profound step. For two another young men, just one key truth changed their hearts. "I don't remember being told what to do to be saved. I just remember that I heard that Christ had died for me. That's all I remember, but that's all I needed right then." (29M92A) "At this time (identified as the time of his conversion) I knew that Jesus was my Savior, and that's about it. I didn't know anything else." (21M96A) Another young girl received inner understanding of her key truth even after she had begun to pray to enter into a relationship with God. "I really realized that I was a sinner the evening when I prayed to God. I asked Jesus, telling Him I wanted Him to be my friend, and I started crying, because He revealed to me that I was a sinner. Up until that point I was still thinking that I was a good person, though everyone was saying we are sinners. Then I knew that I couldn't go to Heaven without Christ, because I was a sinner. I had only wanted Jesus to be my friend, and hadn't asked Him first to forgive my sins. But at that time He revealed to me that I was a sinner, and that only through Jesus could I be saved. So He gave me the answer at the same time." (19F96A) For these and others, it was truly believing a bare minimum that was the point of transformation.

b. Faith as Preceding Full Understanding – When most young people spoke of their conversion to Christ, they placed the bulk of understanding of the gospel after the point at which they had been converted. One could question whether or not they were truly saved at that point, but the fact is that their lives had come to a turning point, and no further great points of decision followed. That is, if they were not a new creature at the point they mentioned, there was no other outstanding or even discernible point later to which they could refer as a definite conversion. One young man described a dramatic conversion experience based on responding to the basic teaching in the Four Spiritual Laws booklet. He was alone after that, and said, "I didn't tell anyone about this, because I didn't really know what to tell. I didn't know what had happened to me, and didn't know how to explain it. I didn't know all the right words." (27M91A) Others spoke of similar lack of understanding. "At the time I accepted Christ I didn't even know that much about the basics. I didn't really understand the whole idea of Jesus dying on the cross for us and things like that." (23F92A) "At the time I prayed I don't think that I understood the gospel message clearly. I understood the part about the repentance, but the part that I did not understand back then was that I had been given salvation and eternal life, and that I would be with the Lord forever. I knew that I had received forgiveness, but I didn't know that I was totally saved for eternity. I remember the moment later when I realized that I actually had eternal life." (21F94A) Those who were very

young didn't think very deeply about it, and thus had limited understanding. "I understood the facts of the gospel automatically, because I was pretty young (about 13). I received what was told me. There was much that I didn't understand. The understanding of the gospel came later." (19F92J) And who is to deny that they were born again? They began to follow Christ with just a small bit of knowledge – but it was enough.

c. Faith As Making Understanding Possible – Perhaps one of the keys to unlock the mystery of faith and understanding is the symbiotic relationship of the two. Some level of understanding is required to be able to believe, but faith from God is required to be able to receive true understanding. The process is hidden in the heart, and perhaps is also inscrutable to the human investigator. Several young people spoke of how they experienced this. Some who heard clear gospel explanations were not prepared to even process it due to their lack of belief. "I started reading the books that they had given me. I thought, 'This would be nice if there were a God, but since there is no God, what are you talking about?'" (27M91A) "I was at a conference, sitting and listening, but was maybe getting a tenth of the material. Maybe I heard the gospel, but I never comprehended it. Because, first of all, I didn't believe in God." (26F92A) But once such people had decided to believe, they went through a process in which they simply received whatever was taught to them from the Bible. Their small seed of faith opened their hearts to receive the truth, and understanding came rapidly. "I understood salvation internally at that time, but every year after that I gained a deeper understanding of what salvation really was. But from the beginning, whatever I found out was in the Bible I immediately believed and received." (29F92O) "I don't remember any point when I realized the gospel and accepted it. I had accepted God and everything connected with Him. Only later I remember being in church, and realizing it bit by bit and taking it in." (26F92A)

d. Understanding Coming Through "Discipleship" – A very common result of this faith/understanding relationship is that young people came to understand the gospel once they were in the process their leaders considered to be discipleship. However, since they were on a path of new life and growth, their limited understanding was not any kind of barrier. They had decided to believe, and the rest was simply learning that to which they had already committed. "I didn't understand much when I made this decision (to follow Christ), but by regularly going to the youth meetings I gathered understanding little by little, and with it a hope of salvation." (19M97O) "After believing I went to this Bible study. We memorized Ephesians 2:8-9. I was amazed by the words that it was not from you, but it is a gift from God, not of works, that none can boast. Maybe this was the first time that I comprehended at least a part of the gospel." (26F92A) These young people definitely had inadequate understanding of the gospel, but this was all corrected over time as they gained more Bible teaching. "I had to overcome a lot of misconceptions, but it was maybe for me more gradual and natural than for many around me. Because this period from salvation to becoming conscious of and understanding (Christianity and life change) took me about two years." (25F93A) In the case of these young people, they had not accepted a false gospel, so that later biblical light would drive them away. They had believed, which meant that they would receive whatever was in God's word. And they were alive, so drank in the milk of the Word, and grew from it. "I didn't understand much of the gospel at that time (when I believe I was saved). It was in the Bible college that I came to an understanding of the gospel. Up until then I didn't have much knowledge about God. But whatever I learned I received." (18F99O) "I received my understanding of the gospel in the church. At the concert I just received the fact that God exists. Then, once I believed that God existed, after the concert I began to think

about God and about Jesus. Step by step, whatever I was hearing in the church after the concert I was accepting." (18F97A)

4. Conversion as Not Always Requiring Instruction – A key to understanding the gospel is to comprehend the requirements to be saved. Whenever the gospel is preached, some form of instruction is almost invariably given to the listener. To detail and compare the various kinds of instructions that were given to the young people I interviewed would require a different kind of study, and would call for much theological discussion. It is enough to report that the same kinds of instructions that are given in the USA are commonly given in Russia, and often these are quite shallow (even according to several of the young Russians that I interviewed). I believe that some of these instructions, especially ones that equate conversion with the repeating of a "sinner's prayer," have resulted in a huge number of false assurances of salvation. (On the other hand, those who were being saved were often taken through such a prayer, and were brought to Christ as a result).

My limited purpose in this short section is to report that several young people came to Christ without having been given any specific instructions in how to do so. "I don't remember being told what to do to be saved." (29M92A) It might be more accurate to say that they were given no specific, outward action to perform in order to be saved. They understood it more internally. "Before (I was told to 'pray a prayer') I already knew that you had to believe in Jesus and follow Him. Nobody told me that I had to be 'saved' or whatever, because in fact I already believed Christ and was following Him." (28F91M) One young man, in retrospect, feels that the directions being given to seekers were inadequate, and was glad that he was not so directed. "Nobody really told me exactly what I needed to do in order to become a Christian, and I think that this was one of the most important things for me." (22M94O) I will have more to report on this overall issue in a later paper, but the main point is that the acceptance of a particular *action* to take "to become saved" was not always a feature of the thinking of young Russians who came to Christ. I would also add that this seemed to be more prevalent in the early 1990's, when seekers were more aggressive, than it is today.

D. Misconceptions and Points of Confusion Regarding the Gospel

As noted above, understanding of the gospel came through a process, and that process began and continued seemingly independent of an *identified* point of conversion. As a result, misconceptions and confusion could be discovered on either side of the time when the young people would identify themselves as being saved. This section, therefore, is located in this paper with the understanding that there is no strict outline-type order to the conversion process described by young Russians. The main point is that young people had to overcome various kinds of wrong thinking about the gospel, especially in the period surrounding their conversion. I have grouped them below in the categories most often discovered in my interviews.

1. Confusion About Grace and Law – Probably the most common type of confusion related to the grace of God in salvation. The idea of personal merit was in the minds of many, and was hard to shake. Seekers often had this way of thinking when they first heard the gospel. "After about two months (of visiting Sunday School) our teacher explained how we could receive Christ. She said that if we wanted to have eternal life, we had to receive Christ. But I was still thinking that if I want to have eternal life, I have to behave well and do as many good things as possible. That was how I thought." (19F92J) Others had considered themselves converted, yet still thought in this way. "Even though I had asked Jesus to come

into my heart and life, for another year or year and a half I still felt, as they teach you in the Russian Orthodox Church, that my life would be put in the balance after my death. So I still felt that I had to do many good things, so that my good things would cover my bad things. The concept of Jesus Christ paying for all my sins and washing them all took me a year to understand." (22M94A) Feelings of being a debtor to God, and needing to make repayment, confused some young people. "I had a struggle between faith and works. I felt that I should repay God. I should start doing something for the things that He did. My evangelistic efforts were done in an attitude of trying to pay God back." (29M92A) Others felt hanging in the balance because their lives did not measure up. "I still had questions, because one time they asked the question, 'What percent do you believe that you will go to Heaven?' And I was answering 'Around 25% sure.' And then somebody explained to me that you are either 100% or 0%, and then I understood. I hadn't understood everything about the gospel, and so I didn't know exactly where I was. I knew that Jesus had died for me, but I also knew that I was still a bad person, so I couldn't be 100% sure that I would go to Heaven. I understood the idea of repentance earlier, but was missing an understanding of faith in Christ. I was still carrying an Orthodox way of thinking about Christ and the church. They don't teach that you are totally saved." (19M97O)

2. Confusion Regarding the Nature of the New Life – Confusion about the spiritual life of a Christian took many forms among the young Russians. There were those who weren't aware of the need for a new birth at all. "I wasn't denying that there is a God, and figured that I could worship that God. But I didn't know what He was to me. I guess I thought that you just automatically became a believer when you just accept these things – but in your mind, not in your heart." (23F92A) Others didn't understand the idea of the new birth as a complete change. "I didn't understand the idea of new birth, but thought more like this would bring new life into my old life. I felt that my life would just continue, but just with having Jesus in my heart." (22M94A) The problem could take the form of a low view of sin. "In my life I was still thinking that I was a fairly good guy, and what happened was that I just added Jesus to myself. So to kind of 'good' me, I added Jesus." (27M92A) The opposite problem also occurred, however, in those who expected too much from the new birth, in the form of a removal of sin. "I thought that I would be a new person, and would have a new life, and would be much different than I was. The biggest sin that I had and have is pride, and that is hard to overcome." (17F96O)

Other confusion related to the issue of new lifestyle. This also took various forms. Some were unaware of life change. "I didn't understand that I would have to change my lifestyle at that point. It took some time for me to realize that since I am a Christian, things would change." (21F94A) A distorted sense of liberation sent one girl in the wrong direction initially: "When I became a Christian, I felt that I was free, and that I could do anything. Before that I had a fear before my parents and neighbors, worrying about what they would think of me. But when I turned to God, I felt free, and that there was nobody to whom I needed to give an account of myself except to God. And I knew that God loved me. I felt free, and that I could do anything I wanted to do. And I started to go around with friends that weren't good, and my life started going downhill. So it was actually when I became a believer that I started to try some bad things which I hadn't tried before." (20F94A) Another young woman was held back from growth initially because of an overly restrictive notion of the new lifestyle. "My misconceptions were that you should pretty much forget about your life altogether, forget all the pleasures of life and everything you enjoy. For example, being a

Christian would mean that it would be completely wrong to be beautiful. These ideas came from the images of these old ladies with their heads covered with shawls. It was not specifically taught to me." (25F93A)

3. Confusion Regarding Eternal Life – Some young people coming to Christ did not have in their mind the idea of life after death, and so the idea of eternal life was not primary in their thinking about the gospel. "I had never been thinking about eternal life – it was so important to have Him here, because I knew that I couldn't handle it in this life without Him. I knew about Heaven and Hell, but I never thought about it. It was more important for me to know the purpose of this life, I guess because I was struggling with that issue before I came to Christ." (21F93O) "I did not understand that I had been given salvation and eternal life, and that I would be with the Lord forever." (21F94A) The lack of understanding of one young girl was slightly humorous: "I didn't know that being in Heaven meant eternal life. I didn't think that far. I learned this later. I just knew I would be in Heaven – but how long it would last, I didn't know." (19F96A) But the confusion of another young woman seems almost unexplainable: "I still didn't know that I was going to go to Heaven (after converting). It was maybe over two years later, through the practice of growing, that I came to understand that I was going to Heaven. I didn't have assurance, but mainly because I didn't understand. But I knew that I was saved." (27F95A)

4. Shadows of Orthodoxy – Several young people brought with them into their understanding of the gospel ideas they had gained through Orthodox practices. These ideas covered many different topics, some of which have already been mentioned above. A few more merit some attention here. One young woman tried to enter into a form of repetitive prayer when repentance was explained to her. "For me it was hard to understand what faith was. Because at the Orthodox church it was like, 'Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me,' and that is all. So I started praying, 'I believe, I believe, I believe,' and so on. I didn't understand what faith was. I just kept praying, 'I believe, I believe, I believe, Lord, I believe.' I just forced myself to keep repeating this. I didn't know how to believe." (29F92O) Another girl, under stress not long after her conversion, had a related understanding: "I thought that if I would just pray this Jesus prayer ten times, then somehow the situation would go away." (25F93A) One young man told about his friend who had come out of Orthodoxy and could not escape old patterns: "Before understanding what it was to know God, his life was like 'confess, repent, confess,' etc. And he would call me and say, 'Well, I sinned, and I'm going to tell you what I did.' He would tell me things like, 'I said something wrong, and I thought these things,' and so on. And he had a really pressured life of sinning and repenting, and it was like Orthodox confessing. And I was like the one listening to his confession." (22M94O, speaking about 23M98O) Another girl who came out of Orthodoxy didn't realize that she was now part of the body of Christ. "Before I started going to any kind of fellowship, I thought that it was enough just to talk to my brother and to his Christian friend, and to read the Bible. I didn't think that I needed to go anywhere." (19F99O)

5. Simplistic Formulas – It was not only through Orthodoxy that confusion came to many young people. Protestants brought with them many shallow presentations regarding salvation, and young people were confused by these. Several told of the misuse of rituals such as the "sinner's prayer" as the accepted sign of salvation. "In our church, a 'believer' was a person who had prayed the sinner's prayer. Whether it was mechanically or sincerely didn't matter. If he just prayed this, then he is okay – God is going to give him the Holy Spirit." (23M98O) These young people took these ideas and passed them on without trying to really

understand them. "What I thought I understood formerly were only the things that I was told. It wasn't that I sought for these things and learned them, they just told me and I thought that I knew." (21F96O) But at the time, these young people didn't have any other sources, so if they were taught a simplistic idea, this form shaped their thinking. "I didn't really have much understanding. I just thought that I was a believer, and I started sharing that, and that now I know how to find God. But it was only after another year that I came to understand the idea of salvation. Since I hadn't understood it, I couldn't really explain it, and so I had used the Protestant terms and ideas." (22M94O) One may object that Protestantism doesn't call for such simplistic teaching, but this was the impression left with some Russian young people.

E. Attitudes Upon Exposure to the Christian Faith

Coming to an understanding of the gospel message is only part of the process of conversion, as the previous section illustrates. Attitudes must change as well, or else one is left with comprehension without appreciation. In this section I will discuss the attitudes that characterized young Russians' responses to Christians and the Christian faith, especially in the early period of their exposure to the same. These attitudes give clues to the underlying values of these young Russians.

1. Motives For Attending Gospel Activities – It would be a naive assumption that most young people come to gospel activities out of spiritual interest. This did happen among the young people I interviewed, but only in a minority of the cases. Most often some other motive was involved which had nothing to do with spiritual interest. Some of the motives, because they gave birth to an enthusiasm for interaction, could easily be (and often were) mistaken for the motive of interest in the message. And yet, as many reported, this initial motive did give way to spiritual interest (inevitably in the case of my subjects, since they all eventually came to Christ). "The first time I came was because of this (other motive). Every other time was because of my desire to go to church." (25F93A) "After a few weeks in the beginning (of attending meetings for another reason), my motive began to be to seek Christ." (21F92A) Among the young Russians I interviewed, the following were the most common motives for attending activities in the 1990's. In many cases a combination of the following motives worked together.

a. Gaining English Skills and Related Career Options – The most common motive for going to an American Christian activity was the very strong desire among so many young Russians to acquire English skills. "I was in the 2nd year at the university. And studying English but not hearing it was real hard. For me going to the meeting had nothing to do with the Bible, believe me." (28F91M) "My first connection with the church was an opportunity to study language." (25F93A) Many young people actively looked for ways to connect themselves with Americans at these meetings. "I thought that it would be a great thing to go (to the meetings) to form relationships with Americans. I never thought that there would be some Christian topic, because at that time I didn't realize it was a Christian organization. So I just went there and sat down to listen. And for the first two or three weeks I was just running around and talking to Americans, and I didn't want to sit in the auditorium listening to people speaking. I saw this as a good opportunity to work on my English, and perhaps get a chance to go to the States, or travel around with them. This was my motivation to communicate with them." (22M94A) This desire to work on English skills was usually inextricable from the motive to gain work opportunities, especially in the early 1990's. "At that time I was still thinking about my career, of becoming a wealthy businessman. And my relative (who was

just such a wealthy person) had started as an interpreter. So I thought, 'Hey, this is my chance.'" (19M95O) English opportunities have greatly increased since the early 1990's, and such young people are not as likely to hang around American Christians like "English groupies" as they did at that time. However, special English programs, such as camps, still attract young people who come with no initial spiritual motives. "At first I didn't know that this English camp was a Christian camp. I went for English." (13F99O) "I went to an English camp in April of 1996. They told me that it would be a good camp, and Americans would be there, and I would be able to get to know them. They said that they were all Christians. But I didn't think that they would be teaching Christian things. I liked the camp a lot, but especially the language lessons." (15M96A)

b. Other Interest in Americans – Common in the early 1990's was a great curiosity about Americans, since Russians had rarely seen them in person. This was a big draw of any evangelistic event at that time. "I wanted to go to the meeting because it would be nice to listen to an American. Our city was a closed city, and foreigners were only allowed to come there when I was in the 2nd year of the university." (28F91M) "I liked meeting with the group, and I liked hanging out with this particular American guy. There was some excitement about being around a foreigner, because this was only the second time that I had really talked with a foreigner." (27M91A) This strong curiosity has waned with the passing of the decade and the prevalence of Americans in Russia, but has not completely passed away. "I decided to go to their concerts, because I wanted to practice my speech and learn more about American life and American people." (18F99O)

Many young women in that time were looking for a way out of Russia through marriage. "I had a friend that I had known for a long time, and she always wanted to marry a foreigner. She called me one day and said, 'I have met some foreign believers. They meet at a local movie theater, and we should meet them there.' She wasn't looking for God, but for a foreign man." (29F92O) Others were looking for new foreign friends, and were incredulous at others who would actually believe what was being taught at the meetings. "One girl who was my friend, with whom I went to the conference kind of believed in God with me, and went to the church several times. But then she left and started laughing at me. She said, 'Oh, you are crazy, you are a fool! I might just pretend to believe, to get in there and get some friends, but I would never believe it myself – but you did!'" (26F92A)

Many young people used Americans as contacts with the West. "Some of the young people were in the church just because of the Americans. Some of them had had American teachers who had shared the gospel with them at school, and they had brought them to the youth group and had left to go to the USA, and those kids who were still friends of the Americans would use (the American youth leader's) e-mail to write to them. But you could tell by the way they talked about the Bible and related to other people that they were not believers." (21M96A) Others were more subtle in their lack of sincerity. "I thought, 'If they want me to go in there and sit down and listen to this, I am willing to do this. If they see me sitting there, maybe they will take me to the States.' That was my motivation. My attitude toward the messages was nothing but the desire to show myself attentive to them. I wanted to appear attentive and responsive." (22M94A)

c. Looking for Entertainment – The draw of free entertainment was a major motive for going to various kinds of meetings, especially in the early 1990's. "I went to the Jesus Film just because it was free." (25F93A) If the attraction itself was also desired, this made for an irresistible combination. "At that time it was almost overwhelming to see an advertisement of

a rock and roll concert at a university facility. And on top of that, it was for free. And I thought, 'Wow, that's great!' and I decided to go. This was around the time of Easter in 1991, but I couldn't care less about Easter at that time." (27M91A) Food was an additional prize for many. "We came, and there was this Bible study, and there was this good American food. And that was in 1991. These were the days when we had to stand in line for bread. And suddenly he had this tuna fish and other things, and we were really happy to eat well. When I was there I felt that most of the guys were coming for the food." (28F91M) "At the church they were taking kids to Sunday School class and giving them pizza. And that was one thing she really liked, and that she wasn't getting at home. So sometimes she would go to church to get her pizza." (25F93A) Although some of these motives have greatly abated with the change of the times, the desire for entertainment has always been a draw for young people who have nothing else to do, or else who respond to the attractions. "I went to the student meetings because I was bored. It was Fall, and I didn't have much homework, and nothing to do. That was my main motive." (20F94A) "My original motive to go to the concert was just to go hear the music." (17F96O) "I visited the Sunday services a few times, because they gave gifts." (17M99O) "This missionary came to Russia, and he invited us over. I thought it would be a party, and it turned out to be a Bible study group. I figured I would just sit and listen, and then afterwards we would have cookies and stuff. I was just 'hanging out' there. (19M97O)

d. Wanting a Vacation – This motive is closely related to the one prior, but also taps into the strong desire of young Russians to get away from things. A subsidized vacation was especially attractive in the early 1990's. "My girlfriend and I decided to spend a vacation at this conference, because we only had to pay about 1/30th of the expenses, and the organization paid for the rest. They kind of 'bought us' into the hotel. We could pay a small amount of money and spend a month in a good place away from home – this was pretty attractive for young people to get away from their families." (26F92A) Getting out of school was another strong attraction. "The organization invited me to get involved in ministry with them, translating for them when they visited schools. And I said 'Okay, no problem.' I knew that it was a good way to skip my school." (22M94A) Summer camps are another attraction that draws those who want to rest and have fun. "This missionary invited me to go to the Black Sea with him and the other teachers. It was just for a rest and to have fun. In my mind it didn't have anything to do with religion." (19M97O) "I went to the camp just for the rest." (15M99O) "I went to the conference just for a vacation, and not to hear about God." (15F99O)

e. No Personal Interest – Young people showed up at events for a variety of reasons, and often they weren't personally interested in what was happening there. It may have been just a date. "First of all, I went to this meeting because I wanted to go out with this guy. And, all the dormitory would see me going out with him – which was important." (28F91M) Often family members had been invited, and so the young people just went along. "My grandparents had visited the church, and they would invite our family once in a while." (21F96O) "My dad was invited by these students to come to the meeting. My mom and dad decided to go, and I just went along." (22F95O) One girl just gave in to persistent invitations. "I was invited to come to the youth group. I gave her a lot of reasons why I didn't want to go. One time she called, and I again told her, 'No, I have some things to do at school today.' And she said, 'Maybe you simply don't *want* to go.' And I felt bad about this, and I said, 'Next time for sure I will go.' The next time she invited me, I thought, 'Well, I don't know anybody

(at the group) except her, but I will go.' I just felt ashamed that she had invited me so many times and I hadn't gone. I couldn't come up with any more excuses not to go." (15F99A)

f. Intellectual Interest or Curiosity – Some of the expressions of interest that drew young people to meetings were intellectual rather than spiritual. "I was told that we would be studying the Bible. I was thinking, 'Well, at last I will approach this book, and there will be some help, so I won't be alone in studying it.' So it was interesting for me to get more intelligent than I was before, and I decided it would be interesting for me to study this book." (26F92A) "I went to the lectures because I was interested in new knowledge. I saw on the invitation that it was a Christian concert and lecture, but that didn't really mean anything to me." (18F97A) The intellectual interest could have also been more passive. "The missionary family invited me to come to church. I went with them because I was curious." (19F92J)

g. Some Form of Religious Interest – Finally, there was a group of young people that came to their first meetings for reasons of spiritual interest. "I was invited to an English camp. I was told that it was a Christian camp as well, and I was pretty much excited, because I wanted to learn more about God." (19F96A) In almost every case, however, it was because they were already active seekers, and didn't know what to do. "I went to the meeting because I was interested in these things at the time. I knew it was a Christian missionary, and I wanted to find out what they had to say." For some, finding out about a meeting was even a fulfillment of a quest. "I had watched a program of testimonies about how peoples lives had been changed (by God). And I sat and wept and said, 'Lord, I also want this. Where are you, where can I find you? I also want this.' Then two months went by and my friend invited me to a meeting of foreign believers. And I thought, 'We need to go there!' I was looking for God." (29F92O) One young woman had been exposed to young Christians at a concert, and this created a question in her heart: "I originally went to the meetings because I wanted to know what it was that these young people had. I was so impressed, and I would tell them how they had done such a great job, and they would tell me, 'It's the Lord – it's Christ.' And I started thinking, 'I need Christ.' So after a few weeks in the beginning, my motive began to be to seek Christ." (21F92A) One young Orthodox man was trying to escape the influence of his friends. "This Christian guy found out I believed in God, and he asked me if I wanted to meet believers. Then he took me to his home group. It was pleasant for me to get in the fellowship of believers. Because at that time I was surrounded by people who would listen to heavy metal music and who considered themselves Satanists, and I was tired of it." (23M98O) Besides these few examples, there was very little spiritual interest that guided young people to come to initial gospel activities. Spiritual curiosity is not at all a strong feature of their culture.

2. Initial Attitudes to the Gospel Itself – All of the young people interviewed for this research eventually believed the gospel and followed Christ. However, very few of them had a strongly positive attitude to the gospel when they first heard it, and several had very negative attitudes.

a. Dismissal Specifically Due to Unbelief – Those young people who started with an atheist background often dismissed the message outright due to their rejection of the existence of God. "If God didn't exist, then none of it made sense. I couldn't accept something in this way, out of logical sequence. First, God exists. Then He did this and that. If God didn't exist, then I wouldn't even agree to think of other things." (26F92A) Their modernist viewpoints presented a barrier to reception of the gospel. "One little girl stood up to testify that Jesus had saved her life and had forgiven her sins. And I was thinking, 'How

can this be that she believes in Jesus, whom I don't even know about except from those cartoons (they were showing on TV at the time)?' And I wondered how there can be any connection with 2000 years ago and the present time. And how can God be real today?" Some could accept the Eastern religions that others were into, but not the gospel. "When she was into yoga stuff, it was pretty clear to me what she was doing. But when she became a Christian, and she would try to explain the gospel to me, it was so far from me." (27F95A) This kind of attitude was more common among young people hearing the message in the early 1990's.

b. Dismissal Due to Lack of Interest or Appreciation – For several, an apathetic or negative attitude to the gospel wasn't necessarily connected with unbelief in God. They simply had no interest in what was being said. "These missionaries would come and tell us about God, but I didn't listen to them. I just sat there. I didn't want to hear anything about God." (20F94A) "When I first went, I thought that it was the most boring thing in the world. I must have heard about the gospel for the first time then, but I didn't think about it, and I thought that I would not come back, because it was just too boring for me." (21F94A) Young people in the later 1990's were more likely to disdain the message. "I was inwardly scoffing at the message when I first heard it at camp." (17M96O) "At first I thought that what I was hearing was kind of strange." (13F99O) "At first, at the camp when they would talk about God I would think, 'Huh – about God – pooh!'" (17M99O) "An American missionary came to our school to teach English. He started inviting me to come to his place. He would tell me about Christ, but I didn't really care about what he was saying. I was like, 'Yeah, right.'" (19M97O) Some felt that their shallow knowledge was enough, and weren't interested in more. "At first I was tired and bored with what he was teaching us. I already knew everything that he was saying. I was aware of Jesus and that He existed." (21F98O) In one case, students who heard the gospel in school even took action against the teacher. "My English professor was a Christian. During our classes she would take every opportunity to speak about Christianity, or belief, or God, and we really didn't like that. We even wrote a letter to have her fired, and she was fired." (25F93A)

c. Difficulties With Issue of Justification – Some young people who may have been otherwise interested in the message of the gospel had difficulties with the ideas of unworthiness and gracious forgiveness. The difficulties came from two directions. Some were not ready to accept that they were unworthy sinners. "The message didn't penetrate me, as far as I was still considering myself to be more or less a good person – a good person from a good family, more or less acceptable." (29M92A) "It was hard to admit that I am sinful from birth. I wasn't believing it at first." (22M94A) Others came from the other direction, wondering how they could be acceptable to God. "I liked the teaching as I heard it, but I was kind of afraid that I had done too many bad things, so I thought I was not good enough." (22F95O) One Orthodox young man had gotten this idea from his unguided reading in the New Testament. "When I got to some parts, like the Sermon on the Mount, and would read it, I would get scared. Dead scared. Because I knew how I was supposed to be, and I just understood that this is what God expects of me, and that there was no way I could come close to God." (19M95O) Orthodox understandings gave some young people pause when they heard the idea that forgiveness was not a result of personal merit. "I had some doubts about the idea of good works versus faith, because in the Orthodox faith they are really strong about good works (as being part of salvation)." (22F95O)

d. Mild Interest – One group of young people mentioned that they had been positive toward the message, but without any deep responsiveness. "I wasn't thinking about the gospel very deeply. I would accept what they were teaching, but I wouldn't make any personal decision about it. I wouldn't receive it into my heart, but just into my mind, though my attitude towards it was generally positive." (21M96A) "I thought, 'This is pretty interesting.' But I didn't think about Jesus Christ coming and being our Savior. I was just thinking that there were interesting stories." (22F95O) Some positive attitude had something to do with curiosity. "When he told about Jesus, I was interested. My attitude was positive, because I didn't know about salvation. But I didn't pay much attention." (22F98M) One young man was moved by a gospel drama without making the connection to the gospel itself. "I remember a drama performed by Russian actors, in which they dramatized the Prodigal Son. And that made me cry when the son came back and the father accepted him. But still I didn't get the connection – it was 2,000 years ago, and how does it work now." (27M92A)

e. Strong Interest – A few noted that they hadn't believed at first, but that a deep interest had been stirred that would later bear fruit. "I wasn't believing the message at first. But I would get these things in my mind, and later on when I went home, before going to bed, the message stuck in my mind and I had to think about it. I don't know why it didn't leave my mind, but I was thinking about it and meditating on it. I was comparing it to the fear that I had about death. And after a few meetings I felt that this might be the way for me to conquer my fear about death." (22M94A) The strong interest of one Orthodox young man related to his comparison to the difficulties he felt with Orthodox teaching. "When I first heard the message I liked it. It was good – God was going to forgive me of everything. I had thought that it was so difficult and complicated." (23M98O)

f. Deep Reception – For the few that received the message very deeply at the first hearing of it, there had been prior preparation of their hearts. One seeker finally had her questions answered: "At the discipleship group the missionary explained the whole idea. He told us the basic gospel. I was listening to him and thinking, 'Finally, I got it!' Now I had the idea about which I had been wondering, regarding who Jesus Christ was." (32F92A) Another who had been seeking for a long time was instantly transformed. "At the meeting they talked about the basics – that Jesus loved me, and had died for me, and that He was my friend and God was my Father – so many simple things that I couldn't believe that this could be. I received it all with an open mouth. I was thinking, 'Yes, yes!' I had looked for so long, and became a fanatic when I found it." (29F92O) A young man who had previously never really listened carefully to the message came one day to a deep conviction of his sin – and this opened the door of his heart to the message. "It was only after I had experienced my sinfulness – the horror of my sinfulness, and the horror of my unworthiness, that the gospel got through. Then I know that it did. I finally heard it, so to speak. It really got through." (29M92A) Perhaps the words of the gospel had been spoken in his presence, but for him it had been as if he had never heard them before this point.

3. Initial Attitudes to Method of Presentation – Some responses to the gospel were actually to some features of how it was presented, and not because of the message itself. The young people did not have as much to say about this, largely because they seemed to accept that whatever method being used was simply "the way it is done." However, there were a few comments that are instructive. A few of the responses had to do with language. Some complained about the translation when Americans were teaching. "The translator of the lesson was not good, and it (the message) wasn't something that was very clear to me."

(26F92A) In other words, it was hard enough to understand the message without having to deal with poor translation on top of this. One girl who translated messages noted that part of the difficulty was with language that was not familiar to her. "I didn't really like it, because it was all very new to me with the things they talked about. And my English wasn't as great as far as American phrases and statements went." (23F92A) Another response that one young man had was to his feeling drawn into a "bait and switch" situation at a concert. "After they played they talked about the gospel. I was thinking, 'Ah, come on! Now I know why this concert was free. Come on, give us some more music.'" (27M91A) The same young man had a similar attitude to some literature that he read. "I read from the New Testament that they gave me. Then I came to the part that was called the 'Methodical Instructions for Spiritual Workers.' I kind of thought, 'Yes, this is it – this is how they fool people,' or something like that. 'This is how they persuade people about all this nonsense about God.' I had that kind of thinking." (27M91A) Finally, one girl had a feeling that methods used were manipulative in the Christian concert she attended. "After the music, people were asking who wanted to repent and confess their sins, and then they turned off all the lights, and I thought that this was done to influence people psychologically. I had a strange attitude to this. I was more interested in facts, and not the emotions." (18F97A)

4. Initial Attitudes to Believers – Russian young people had a variety of attitudes toward the first evangelical believers with whom they came into contact. These ranged from very negative to very positive, as will be seen in this section.

a. Discomfort in Their Presence – It was not uncommon for young Russians to feel uncomfortable around believers due to their "strangeness" in one form or another. This was most evident when the believers were from the West. "They were so different with their broad smiles and their different behavior. They were kind of strange." (28M92A) A few who spoke English felt discomfort due a lack of facility in the language. "One of the young American men came and started talking to me. And I felt just awful, because I couldn't understand half of what he was saying, even though he was really nice and polite, and tried to speak really slowly so that I could understand." (19M95O) However, this discomfort also was felt in the presence of Russian believers. "This Russian guy took me to his home group. At first in this group I felt uncomfortable, because I was among people that I didn't know, and I didn't know how to act around them." (23M98O)

b. Distrust of the Believers – As is the case with discomfort, distrust also was at times connected with Western believers. Orthodox and nationalist thinking had some influence here. "I wasn't really sure what the Americans were doing in Russia. I didn't really trust what they said, because they were Americans. If they are Americans, they are of the American culture, and their Christianity is only 200 years old, and our Christianity is 1,000 years old. So that's not a good contrast in favor of the Americans, and so I really didn't trust them." (28M92A) One aspect of this distrust was the fear that other people would try to control the young person's life. "I tried not to allow anybody to tell me what to do, and I tried to keep a wall between myself and them. But I would feel some pressure, even from those good Americans in that good church, regarding what to do and what not to do, and I felt that this was my own business, between me and God. What was scaring me was that somebody was trying to get into my personal life, but with his own will and not with God's will. I was afraid that people would do these things instead of God." (22M94O) One young man suspected that believers he had seen in a singing group were not what they seemed to be. "They seemed so pious, so holy in front of the people, that you could just draw icons from

them. And I really wanted to see what kind of people they were when nobody would see them." (29M92A) Some had seen their friends repent, but didn't take it seriously. "She repented at a church, and started going to church. But I didn't trust it, because she had done other things and then threw them away, so I thought that this was just another phase for her." (27F95A)

c. Disrespect for Believers – Some expressed that they lacked respect for the believers for one reason or another. One young man had an early encounter with a so-called convert that affected his respect for believers. "My friend said that he became a Christian. He said, 'I saw this TV program, and they said that you need to repent, and so I did. And tonight is my birthday. Let's go drink vodka for the last time and then we will both stop drinking, and start reading the Bible. That's what we need.' Then a few days went by, and he said, 'Ah, it was just a joke. I don't really believe in Jesus. Let's forget about the Bible.' So that was my experience – to see a 'believer' and how he would stray away from God." Some others were discouraged by behaviors of the supposed Russian believers that they would encounter in the Western churches. "I didn't like how people around me would still lie and do things like this – that was strange for me. I experienced that in our church among Russians who would be jealous of each other, and would tell lies at times. People were not living as they should." (19F92J) Some of this was more evident in the early 1990's, when so many Russian youth would come to church just for the English opportunities. "The relationships in the church didn't satisfy me. People were all trying to have American friends, because it was so new for Russian people. And everybody was trying to speak English. I could speak English, but very poorly at that time. I could understand a lot, but was afraid to speak – I had this barrier. I felt that I wasn't as good as others, and they would brag because they know the language, and would try to make an American friend – and I didn't like that. It wasn't fair; everyone should be just as accepted as anyone else. So I felt a bit left out, and wasn't happy in the church." (26F92A)

d. Impressed With the Believers' Lives – More commonly, young Russians made positive comments about the believers that they encountered. They were impressed with them in many ways. Some admired their commitment. "I saw their devotion in coming to us. When I recognized how they lived, and what they did, I was impressed. Because I wanted to be good, and I wanted to be perfect, so their example was a very convincing thing." (28M92A) Many of the comments related to the breaking of stereotypes, especially when young Americans would come visit them. "We were told that American students were coming to our school to give a presentation. I thought it would be another group with chewing gum and torn jeans, who are coming to do a rock concert or something. But then my first impression was how they were dressed. Their neat and modest appearance. I was thinking about how very different they were from other Americans I had seen." (23F92A) "At the camp right away I saw that there was nothing strange about the people – they were normal, and even good people. So I lost my negative attitude right away. I understood that they were different, and they had something. I knew that they were real, but it was hard to believe that they lived that way all the time." (15M99O) One common stereotype that young people had in the early 1990's was that believers weren't very intelligent. Meeting intelligent people who were believers was an eye-opener for many. "I started to think, 'Hey, if so many clever men believe in Christ, it might not be a fairy tale. Let's figure out what is going on here.'" (28F91M) This could even be seen by some on TV. "The first time I started hearing about the gospel was with a TV program. I watched some programs by Charles Stanley

where he was talking about God. There was something in him – he was alive, and it seemed like he knew what he was talking about." (19F96A)

More of the comments had to do with particular characteristics that were noticed in the believers. "At the concert I was looking around and seeing how the people were good and kind, and who had a lot of patience and good characteristics. And I thought that maybe this God that they were talking about can save me, or deliver me from sin." (17F96O) Peace and joy were often the characteristics that produced spiritual thirst. "At the camp I saw these Americans, and I saw that there was something different about them. There seemed to be such a peace in them, and (I was impressed with) the way they fellowshiped among themselves. The joy in their eyes was very convincing to me. And I was wondering, 'What is in them? Why can't I live that kind of life?' I thought that I knew about Jesus as well, but I knew that I didn't live the life that they lived." (19F96A) One young man felt this as he visited the location of one Christian ministry. "The atmosphere of the place – I could not explain it at the time what it was – but it was so shocking, because it was so peaceful, restful, and calm." (19M95O) Young people used to damaged people around them were shocked to see that there was a different quality of life available.

e. Moved by the Believers' Love – As one would hope, this was one of the central impressions of believers that young Russians expressed. Not just to "see" love, but to *be loved* by believers, was what influenced the attitudes of the young people. "What I heard at the home meeting was not so important as what I felt. I had thought before I went that they were going to try to teach me something, perhaps try to tell me how to live or something. But they didn't do that. They talked to me about whatever I wanted to talk about. I felt love and acceptance – that was the most important thing." (22M94O) "They would come up to each one of us and try to make personal contact, and they would actually look you in the eye when they talked to you, like they were genuinely interested in what you had to say. I saw their warmth and openness that made this experience (of their visit) very different." (23F92A) "All of them were smiling, all of them were kind and friendly – nothing like my friends at school." (19M95O) For some young people, this was the critical feature to open up their hearts and not be so guarded against Westerners. "I really enjoyed a lot of love and acceptance from the pastors and the missionaries and lay people, and this really relieved a lot of my fears and opened me up more." (28M92A) For many young people with broken homes, this was especially important. "I liked the American missionary very much, because I don't have a very good relationship with my father, so it was new for me to experience a love from a man. And that helped me a lot." (19M97O) Young people in Russia often express a tiredness of the harshness of life. The first experience of loving fellowship can have a deep effect on them. "At the camp I started thinking about my life. I didn't want to leave at the end of the camp and go home, because I felt like a real person there among those believers." (17M99O)

5. Initial Attitudes Toward Worship and Music – The gospel is more than propositions about the atonement – it also includes the promise of a new life in communion with God. One of the main ways that Russian youth were exposed to this communion was through the worship that they were able to observe. Again, a variety of attitudes were recalled by the young people I interviewed.

a. Simple Enjoyment of Music – Several of the young people mentioned that they enjoyed the music that they heard at various Christian activities. Often the enjoyment of the music was not connected with anything spiritual. "I liked the worship and singing. I thought

it was pretty interesting." (22F95O) The music was enjoyed, but it did not move the heart toward God. "The worship of the group attracted me, because I wanted to participate in singing – not necessarily because it was spiritual singing, but I just liked to sing. It was a nice sound, so I participated fairly quickly." (22M94A)

b. Spiritual Effects of Music – Others noted that the music moved them in different ways, and had a deep effect on their spiritual hunger. "I was given a tape of hymns. I would listen to that tape every morning because I enjoyed it so much. I wanted to listen to it even more, and even to memorize some of it. And I would always have it with me, and I had with me this feeling of peace that I had never had before." (19M95O) Hearing beautiful music, even without understanding the words, attracted one young woman to want to know more about what was behind it. "They sang a Christian hymn in English. I didn't understand it, but the spirit of it, and the melody – I'd never heard anything more beautiful. And that melody just stuck in my mind. And I wished that I could understand the language, because at that time I was thinking, 'What is this all about?'"

c. Earnest Participation of People (Especially Youth) – More commonly mentioned than the music itself was the effect of seeing other people worshipping God with sincerity – a sight rarely seen, if ever, by young Russians. "I liked the fact that people were gathering together, and were not ashamed of that, and were praising and worshipping. I really liked that." (19F92J) "I liked the worship at the church. People were involved, and I liked the music and the styles. It was easy to sing all together. People in the Orthodox church don't take part in worship, because it is in an old language that they don't know, and you should be specially trained to sing that music, and the melodies are hard to remember. So the worship at the evangelical church was much easier to participate in. It was just normal words and normal songs that all the people were singing together. So I loved it." (32F92A) The fact that even young people were involved was a pleasant surprise for some. "I liked the worship from the time I started visiting the church, and I participated right away. It was good to see young people doing this, and it was very attractive." (29F93O) The spirit of the young people was moving for some observers. "When they sang, I noticed something in the group. They smiled, and I saw peace on their faces. And it just made me cry. I looked at them and said, 'That's it, that's exactly what I am looking for. I want to have the same peace that they have.'" (21F92A)

d. Discomfort With Having to Join In – Along with those who appreciated the worship were attendees who felt that they were forced to participate in some way in which they were not prepared. One girl who had been invited to a conference had this kind of experience. "It turned out to be overwhelming to me. I saw a couple hundred people clapping their hands and singing those songs as soon as we gathered in the room. It seemed like everyone knew what to do except me. I was thinking, 'Where am I?' Because I was thinking that it would be like a seminar, where nobody would be forced to express any kind of beliefs. So I started feeling uncomfortable. People were singing, 'I love Jesus.' And I assumed that it was a rule, and I had to do the same thing. But I couldn't sing, 'I love you, Jesus' because it wouldn't be sincere. So I felt really uncomfortable, and decided to leave." (26F92A) Another young man at a church service also felt this pressure. "I didn't like how they would sing for 20 minutes, and you had to stand the whole time. I didn't understand why I had to stand. Then they divided up into groups for prayer, in groups of about ten people, and they had to pray for each other. That was something I really didn't like." (22M94O) In other words, these were seekers who were not handled very sensitively. They want to be able to observe from a

safe distance, and are in some way compelled to do something against their will. The same young man later spoke about what attracted him to a church: "I liked the fact that it was just normal people. I didn't feel scared or pressured or anything. Nobody pushed me to say or do anything. I could just come and sit and watch, and if I wanted to I could take part in it. But if I didn't want to, nobody was going to make me." (22M94O)

e. Worship or Music Not Appealing – There were also those young Russians who, for one reason or another, did not respond to the worship or music. It may have been simply because of the style. "There was some music in the meeting, but I didn't like it. The singing was general singing together with a guitar. I remember that I didn't like it, but not to the extent of being repelled by it. The style just didn't appeal to me." (27M91A) Some young people were just remote from the worship. "They were singing Christian songs at the camp, but that didn't mean anything to me." (15M99O) "When I went to the church service, I was confused by the songs." (19F99O) Some who joined in, and may have thus been considered believers, were just going along with the program. "Before my conversion, in the times of worship, I was just joining in because it seemed like a good thing to do. The worship seemed strange to me, but at the same time I wasn't denying that there is a God, and I thought, 'Sure, I can worship that God.' But I didn't know what He was to me, and didn't even know 100% that He was real. The worship itself didn't have a strong negative or positive effect on me." (23F92A)

f. Made Nervous by Charismatic Worship – A few young Russians had negative attitudes the first time they observed styles of worship that were new and different to them. This is understandable, given the lack of such styles in Russian tradition. "At the church I saw these older people dancing and such, and I was confused and didn't like it. And one other thing that was important was how they would lift their hands (and nobody understood why they had to lift their hands). I felt that it was like a cult where they 'zombie' people." (19F99O) In some cases this was interpreted as a way to imitate strange Americans. "I got scared at the charismatic church, because of how they sang and danced and did weird things. And the speaker said, 'HaleLUyah' like Americans said it. He spoke with this kind of an accent even though he was Russian. He was trying to sound like his American teachers. That was really scary. I was sure that it was a satanic cult or something. I was afraid, so I got up and left." (22M94O) Of course, many young Russians have entered into this style of worship over the past decade. However, first impressions being powerful, those who are not already Western oriented have often rejected such approaches as not being "Russian" and have not remained to hear the gospel.

F. Potential Barriers Against Conversion to Evangelical Christianity

Young Russian people who had come to an understanding of the gospel still had to deal with potential barriers between themselves and evangelical Christian faith. Although some of the young people felt no barriers, and responded immediately, others went through some struggles. This section will discuss the various attitudes young Russians had to the most commonly mentioned barriers to conversion. These attitudes may or may not be representative of the whole youth population, since in fact all of these young people eventually became evangelical believers. But the existence of these barriers is an important factor to consider when thinking about the youth context within which the gospel is preached.

1. Fear of Opposition – Evangelical Christians are very much the minority in Russia, and have received much opposition from different sources. The fear of receiving such opposition is a potential barrier many young people face.

a. Parental Opposition – The young Russians who later became converts did not report a very strong feeling of fear regarding potential parental opposition to their decision. For some, it was because they were old enough to be independent of their parents. "I was about 21 years old. At that time I think that I wanted to have my own opinions. I had begun to associate myself more with my friends than with my parents." (29M92A) Even younger people had quite a bit of independence. "I didn't think that my parents would be concerned about whether I accepted Christ. They were more like, 'You can do whatever.'" (22F95O) Several didn't give the issue much thought. "I didn't think about what my parents would think." (20F94A) "I didn't have any fear of what my parents would think." (32F92A, 15M99O) Others faced it with firm resolve. "I wasn't afraid of what my parents might think. Though my parents were against this, I stood my ground." (21F98O) "My mother was against this, but I stood my ground and didn't let it hold me back." (22F98M)

There were those who had concern about what their parents would think, but in each case they said that their personal convictions carried more weight. "I had some fear of what my parents might think. I was afraid at first, but it was not an overpowering fear. It probably made me hesitate in my decision, but didn't make me completely push the idea away." (23F92A) "I was concerned about what my parents would think, and at first I was afraid that they would think that I was some strange new child, doing something that I shouldn't be doing. But my fear didn't keep me from responding to the gospel." (22M94A)

b. Peer Opposition – The fear of opposition from friends was a stronger barrier among young people than fear of parental opposition. But again, young people fell into two basic groups – those who had no concerns about peers and those who did. Among those who felt no peer pressure, several reasons for this appeared. Some had few friends in the first place. "I had few real friends, and so fear of peers didn't cause me any delay in response to the gospel." (15M99O) "I didn't think about what my friends would think. Because I'm the type of person that has few friends. So their opinions didn't interest me." (20F94A) Others had friends, but didn't care about their opinions. "I didn't have any fear about what my friends would think." (32F92A) "To me it didn't matter what my friends would think." (22F98M) A few were considering the gospel in the company of their friends, and so felt no barrier from them. "At first there were about five or more people from my school who would go with me to the meetings. So I was pretty secure about going to them." (21F92A)

There were others who felt pressure when they considered how their friends would respond to them if they became believers. Fear of misunderstanding was common. "I definitely thought that I would not be understood by my friends. I knew that if I were to make a decision for Christ, it would change my relationships with my friends – if not completely, at least substantially. There were those who wouldn't want to accept it if I told them about it. Probably the issue of dealing with friends caused more hesitation than anything else." (23F92A) "I was afraid of my friends thinking that I was some idiot, or doing something bad, so there was some peer pressure on me." (22M94A) Some didn't like the prospect of withdrawing from peer activities and what that would mean. "I was held back a bit by what my friends might think. I was in a rock band and we always drank together and went to parties. And I knew that if I was going to change that I couldn't be with them." (19M97O) Fear of ridicule was a factor as well. "I was afraid of what my friends would think

about what I was doing. I thought that they would say (mockingly), 'Oh, you are a believer now, and now you will have to go to church all the time.'" (15M96A) "The first barrier was that I was afraid of what my friends would say. I thought they would say, 'What's the deal? Are you crazy? There is no God. Believers are all strange – there is something weird about them.' My friends believe that God exists, but that He is very far away. Practically all my friends have an Orthodox grandmother or Orthodox parents. But they don't think it is worth doing anything about it." (17M99O) "I was afraid to read the Bible in front of my sister. I didn't want her to make fun of me." (21F94A)

2. Russian Orthodox Concerns – Given that many people consider Orthodoxy to be the national religion of Russia, and active opposition against non-Orthodox "intruders" into Russia is widely broadcast, it is to be expected that there would be barriers in front of youth who would consider converting to a "Protestant" faith. Several different attitudes emerged from my interviews in this regard.

a. Lack of Identification With Orthodoxy – For one group of young people, Orthodoxy had no deep meaning for them. Such young people were most likely to come out of atheist homes. "In our home we didn't have any tradition that you had to go to an Orthodox church. Since we had a non-Christian home, we didn't really have any standards regarding what Christianity has to be." (23F92A) "In my mind there was no clear distinction between Orthodoxy or Protestantism. I felt that God was universal, so there was no difference for me if it was Protestant, Orthodox or Catholic." (22M94A) "I didn't really know that there was such thing as 'Orthodox' at that time." (21F92A) These attitudes were much more common in the early 1990's, when there was much more ignorance among young people regarding the connection of Orthodoxy and Russian culture.

b. Lack of Concern for Orthodoxy – Other young Russians knew about Orthodoxy but were not concerned about coming to faith outside of its walls. "I don't think I thought of Orthodoxy as a problem as I contemplated accepting Christ." (22F95O) "I wasn't concerned about what Orthodox people would say." (21F98O) "I wasn't afraid of what anybody would think when I became a believer. I didn't care what Orthodox people would say." (29F92O) One reason for this was a faith in God that rose above questions of denomination. "I didn't think about the idea that these Westerners might be 'sectarians.' I think that I had become certain about God, that He would protect me, and I wasn't afraid of anything." (20F94A) Others knew about the warnings about sects, but didn't listen. "I thought that Orthodox people would probably say that I had become part of a sect. But this didn't bother me." (13F99O)

c. Clear Preference of Evangelical Faith Over Orthodoxy – There was also a group of young people that had some experience in Orthodoxy, and preferred what they learned and experienced with evangelicals. Orthodoxy was also no barrier for them. "I was already disappointed in Orthodoxy, so I wasn't worried about what they would think." (32F92A) "I was told that the people in the home group were not Orthodox. But that didn't bother me. I saw that these people had a closer relation to Christianity than those people who called themselves Orthodox." (23M98O) A few were more specific about what it was that they found in contrast to what they had experienced in Orthodox churches. "I rejoiced in the fact that it was much easier to come to God than I had thought, and much more enjoyable (than in Orthodoxy). I could approach God without having an actual building that I had to walk into and say, 'This is a church – that's where I meet God.' I could be at a bus stop and talking to Him." (23F92A) "I was connecting my feeling of peace (in listening to worship

music) to God, but I could not explain the difference between this and why I had such a hopeless feeling when I could come into an Orthodox temple. I was starting to get an idea that there was something wrong with Orthodoxy." (19M95O)

d. Hesitations about Protestantism – Finally, there were those young people that clearly struggled with the Protestant faith that they were considering, in light of pressures of Orthodoxy. "At first I was fighting over the fact that I felt that Orthodoxy was better than Protestantism, and I was always trying to find the bad things about the Protestant churches, and comparing it to the good things in the Orthodox church." (22M94A) "I recognized that if I were to join and get baptized in this Protestant church, the doors to Orthodoxy were going to be closed to me." (28M92A) There were those that had been visiting an evangelical youth group for some time before knowing it was not Orthodox, and getting a mild shock. "When I first heard that this group I was visiting was a group of Protestants, I was shocked. I had come for a while and didn't realize they were Protestants. I thought, 'Wow, Protestants are so bad!' Before this I had just been thinking, 'They are cool people, why shouldn't I go?' I also wondered "'Protestant' – what are they protesting?' I wondered if it was a sect or cult, and I was a bit scared. I didn't know what it was." (19M97O) It was also possible to lean away from anything not Orthodox more for nationalistic reasons than for spiritual ones. "I had some fears that this group was not Orthodox, but the issue was more regarding the fact that Protestants would not have as many opportunities in Russia. If you are going to go far in Russia, you need to be Orthodox. So the issue to deal with was how society would look on my decision, and not on how Orthodoxy itself would respond. I had a feeling of patriotism that held me back for a while." (15M99O) In each of these cases, Orthodox concerns held these young people back for a time, but ultimately was not a strong enough force to keep them away. Of course, given the scope of my interviews (being only with evangelical converts), it is hard to say how many turned away and stayed away for the same reasons given above.

3. Unbelief in the Message – One other barrier that several young people faced was simple unbelief in the gospel message. Unbelief was not as common a barrier as simple apathy, but did present itself in several cases. Unbelief was not an issue for several who heard and received the message very quickly. "I didn't have any barriers to believing what was being told to me." (19F96A) "I didn't have any problem with believing what I was hearing. Since my mom was kind of a believer, she was always telling me something about God. So I was always thinking that there was a God – I just didn't know how to reach Him." (22F95O) But other young people struggled with unbelief, and especially those who had been influenced by modernist teachings. "At that time it was still hard for me to resist the teaching of evolution, and to believe that God created the world." (21F92A) "It was really hard for me to believe about miracles and the resurrection because I was so much into science." (32F92A) Often this came down to a difficulty accepting the Bible. "At first I had some difficulty believing in the message, because I thought that the Bible is some book that is billions of years old, and it is more of just a history book." (23F92A)

Unbelief also related specifically to the gospel message itself. This could take several forms. It may have related to the central fact of the gospel. "I understood the gospel, but it was difficult for me to believe that Jesus died for me on the cross." (18F97A) One young man who thought he was a good person didn't accept that he needed more. "The singing group said that what they needed (for people joining them) was a pure heart. I didn't say it out loud, but what I was thinking was, 'Come on, that's not a problem.'" (29M92A) Another

young man didn't like the fact that he couldn't integrate Christian truths with those of other religions. "I was really shocked at the ultimate claims of Christ. Hindus started out by saying that they are not the only way. They were saying that Yoga and Hinduism is not really a religion, but a spiritual approach that anybody can take. And Christianity was different. As an unbeliever, this 'broadness of mind' is extremely alluring. That is what really seems wise, when you don't really draw the line and say, 'I am the only way.' That sounds pretty narrow to the unbelieving mind, and thus unappealing." (28M92A)

4. Unwillingness to Repent – It is more common among Russians than Americans to closely identify conversion with repentance. The unwillingness to change one's life thus served as a barrier for several young people. The struggle was commonly connected with the lifestyles of peer groups. "I was at the point that I understood that I was wrong, and I didn't really know how to live. I knew that my friends were not true, because they deceive you and things like that. I knew that I had to stop drinking and all the things that young people do wrong. But I didn't yet understand this very deeply. And the fact that my life would have to change was scary." (22M94O) "I was in a rock band and we always drank together and went to parties. And I knew that if I was going to change that I couldn't be with them." (19M97O) To come to faith in Christ is simply not the fashionable thing to do, and it was hard for young people to pull away from the crowd. "I had thoughts like, 'You are young, and this is the most interesting time in life.' It wasn't that I was looking for anything in the worldly life, but rather that everybody was doing all these things because they were fashionable and cool. So I kind of felt that this is what I should do also." (19F99O)

It was also common for fear of repentance to surround *assumed* restrictions that would be imposed on one's life. Confusion over what was and was not central to the gospel caused these young people to be repelled. "I understood that if I came to God my life would change, and some of the rules that I understood kept me away – such as no friends at school, and always praying, and no smoking or drinking. And that's why I left the group. I think that I didn't understand the truth about these things. I didn't want the kind of restrictions that I imagined." (23F96A) "I used to struggle with the thought that the Christian life was not going to be fun, and I used to love having fun all the time." (21F94A) Negative attitudes in most religious circles against occupations in the world also had some effect. "I had difficulty with readiness to believe the gospel, because I had some doubts about leaving my other goals of becoming a businessman. And I understood that I would have to leave these other goals. Some of that was left over from what I learned in Orthodoxy – that I would have to leave it all." (19M95O) Others were put off because they assumed that to become a believer was to become like people they didn't respect. "To call yourself a 'believer' was at that time not appealing to me because I would be identifying with these strange babushki in Orthodox churches." (25F93A)

There were a few other barriers that related to an unwillingness to change one's life. A few didn't trust others that would be involved in this life change. "As I was considering the gospel, it was hard to learn to trust completely. I wasn't used to trusting people completely." (32F92A) "What was scaring me was that somebody was trying to get into my personal life, but with his own will and not God's will. I was afraid that people would do these things instead of God." (22M94O) For one young man the issue was related to changing his perspectives more than changing his actual behavior. "Sometimes I felt in my heart that I didn't really like what I was learning. That is one reason I waited so long to accept Christ.

For example, some of the teachings about sex that I would have to change views about. It wasn't an issue of changing my life, but my attitudes." (15M99O)

5. Counting the Cost – This barrier has much in common with the one above. Part of the unwillingness to repent is a counting of the cost of such repentance. But some young people seemed to be more reflective in the matter of looking at what was going to happen to them, and wondering whether or not they had truly counted the cost. "I never felt pressured by people, but rather the opposite. I would often think about the passage about whoever wants to build a tower should count the cost. I would wonder if I had counted the cost." (19F99O) "At the camp I understood the gospel, but didn't repent because I thought that I wasn't ready. I was wondering if it was worth it or not to do this." (17M99O) This theme of not feeling ready was repeated by several young Russians I interviewed. The implications of the gospel had become more clear to them than for others that easily accepted and later easily discarded the truth. "Several times they asked me if I wanted to receive Jesus Christ as my Savior. But I considered this a pretty serious decision to make, so I was kind of afraid. Inside I was thinking that I was not ready for it. I wasn't yet serious enough about it, and would say, 'Alright, alright, just give me time.'" (22F95O) Some counted the cost based on the lives that they saw around them, and didn't consider themselves capable. "I would think, 'I can't really be like them – they are so committed.'" (27M92A) Close involvement with other believers by some made the cost even more real, since one's life would be suddenly in the spotlight. "I think that I procrastinated because of fear. I remember vividly that I knew that these Americans were going to watch me after I would make this decision for Christ. And I knew that I would have to change my life. And I wanted to put it off, because I didn't want to make this evident to everybody else." (23F92A)

6. Other Barriers to Conversion – Many other internal barriers to conversion were mentioned. Some are difficult to categorize, and others fit into several categories. Also, a young person may not even be able to articulate the combination of barriers he or she felt while considering the gospel. The following are a few illustrations of the kinds of walls that can be found between young Russians and the call of the gospel.

a. Pride – The feeling that one was already good enough was a barrier to some. "I thought that I wasn't really a sinner, since I didn't kill, I didn't steal money from a bank, and I *almost* never lied to my parents. I didn't know why I needed to be any better. I thought that I could be bad at times because there were people around me that were worse than I was, and they lived with that and didn't have any problems." (22F95O) Some carried a notion of self-righteousness because of their efforts at self-reform in association with a church. "I was thinking that I was a fairly good guy. It was good that God forgave some of my bad things I'd done, but at times I would go to church and think, 'I guess that there is nothing else that I have left to repent of. I think I'm clean. I think I'm a pretty good guy now.' So I had this self-righteousness." (27M92A) Such thinking became a further barrier of pride for some later, when they truly came to appreciate the seriousness of their lostness but were already deeply involved in Christian activities. "One of the first nights of the Bible school this man was preaching this 'Jonathan Edwards' type sermon. He said that God had not saved us to live in sin. And I saw that this is what I was doing. I had been active in church, but the missionaries didn't know about my immoral relationship with my girlfriend. At the invitation I felt that I must go forward, but I thought I couldn't, because I'd been three months in the school. There would be 120 people pointing at me and saying, 'This guy came to our school as such a sinner? How can we hang out with this guy?'" (27M92A)

b. Self-Serving Approach to God – Some felt that they were coming to God, but didn't realize that they wanted to come on their own terms, and not God's terms. "I visited the church for about 9 or 10 months, and then I went away from them. I didn't find what I wanted from God. I wanted to feel God in my heart and my life, but in fact my heart was closed to God." (23F96A) "I was praying, 'God, you should win me over – give me some sort of experience or something.' So for the most part I was trying to get to God on my own terms. That was the problem." (28M92A) One girl was rejecting God because of her broken expectations for how He should operate. "My main barrier that held me back was that I felt that everything in life should go the way that I want it to go. It was not good if something went wrong. And at that time something went wrong, and so I didn't trust Jesus as a result. A situation with my mother made me bitter. At that time my mother was very ill, and I didn't understand why Jesus had let this happen. The disease was really serious, and I did not know why she had to have it. I prayed about it, and afterward she recovered, but from that time something had broken in my soul, and I couldn't trust in Jesus. So I wasn't really interested in what he was saying." (21F98O)

c. Procrastination – Some could give no reason why they did not respond to the gospel, other than they were just putting it off. It was not a high enough value for them to do anything about it at the time. "For the year that I didn't accept Christ, I was not delaying because of any problems, I was just otherwise occupied." (22F98M) "They were teaching us, and I was beginning to understand about how man is sinful. I knew all these things, but I wouldn't do anything about it. I would accept what they were teaching, but I wouldn't make any personal decision about it." (21M96A) One girl identifies this as a common Russian problem. "I think that this is one thing that you would find with most Russians. Even if you present the gospel to them, and you think they really understand (and they may indeed understand it) they don't want to make a decision right away. Procrastination is probably the biggest thing with us. And so when my friend was explaining the gospel I was tempted to say, 'Well, I'll think about it tomorrow.'" (23F92A)

d. Absence of Conviction – This feature of the sinful nature is present in all of the categories discussed above, but with some young people it was in evidence as a simple dullness to the things of God that took time to overcome. "I just wasn't used to thinking seriously about such things." (21M96A) "During the meetings they would sometimes give invitations, but I didn't quite understand what it meant. And there wasn't yet that conviction inside of me." (21F92A) "I heard preaching about the salvation message from Scripture, but the first times I didn't really get it. I didn't receive it all at once. I had to hear it over and over again." (21F94A)

III. CONCLUSIONS

A. Selected Emphases - Many different conclusions can be drawn from this paper. Each reader could emphasize themes in different ways, depending on what he or she was looking for. My summary conclusions are based on what I am looking for – the openness of Russian youth to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the proper ways to reach these young people. My selective emphases, then, fall under four main headings in this paper, all dealing with key issues in the process of communicating the gospel.

1. Life vs. Methodology – There is a tendency for evangelistic efforts to rely on man-made formulas of gospel presentation with unbiblical rituals of conversion. The hope seems

to be that the listener can somehow be almost "herded" into the faith. There is a kind of person who will respond to such approaches, but in many cases this same kind will just as easily stray away. Spiritual life is a complex mystery of faith and understanding, because the author is God Himself. Rather than developing methods, we should be developing deeper spiritual lives that possess the wisdom required to apply the biblical truths needed by each individual. Spiritual discernment is far more valuable than methodological expertise. The Russian young people I interviewed were very often on their own spiritual wavelength, and the inner transformation was semi-independent of the methods being used on them.

2. Love vs. Words – Almost as critical as the words of the gospel is the love of believers for God and for one another, displayed without pretense before the eyes of the seeker. Young people reported that the life that they witnessed was a key to whether or not they would listen seriously to the message. There is widespread skepticism among Russian young people, and only something that is real has the power to break through that barrier. Churches and organizations that forget this will begin looking a bit more like a business that trades in souls (the accusation against evangelicals by Orthodox leaders) than like a living body of believers in Christ.

3. Time and Patience – There is really no excuse for artificial pressures that lead to meaningless "decisions" for Christ. There is no "side-door" into the Kingdom of God. Young people come to us with a wide variety of motives and desires, and often their understanding of the gospel is extremely shallow and self-serving. But exposure to the Word of God in the context of a loving fellowship does its work over time, and young people come to a faith that is real. Almost all of those who reported rapid response to a message also reported that their heart had been searching and was "ripe" for the final step. So it is possible to see a young person repent and believe on a first visit. But this is not at all the norm, according to my research. Allow time for the gospel to sink in, and don't expect faith to grow in a vacuum.

4. Probing and Feedback – It seems to me that one of the most neglected aspects of communicating the gospel is dialogue. Christian workers did not often enough engage young people directly in serious spiritual conversation that would probe for revealing feedback. One result of this was that understanding of the gospel was taken for granted, and unbelieving young people were allowed to believe that they were believers. Perhaps this was simply because they had "prayed the prayer," but at times even this was missing, and they had just attached themselves to the group for other reasons than that they were born again. Wisdom calls for probing with love as part of both the evangelistic and discipling processes. Wishful thinking doesn't produce true conversions.