

FAITH, REPENTANCE AND CONFESSION:

The Experience of Conversion to Jesus Christ
as Reported by Young Russian Evangelical Converts
in the Greater Moscow Area

by

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I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

A. 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 conversion experiences. 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 were believing, thinking, feeling and acting in the time immediately prior to and following their decision to follow Christ. 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.

D. Research Boundaries - I confined my study to ethnic Russian young people, male and female, who became Christians between the ages of 14-25, and 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 1990 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 new believers in order 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 I 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 or experience. The value of the research is in displaying something of the variety 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 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.

5. 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 indicator 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.

6. This paper is the third of four papers on four related topics regarding Russian youth. The first two papers are concerned with: (1) The background of religious beliefs, attitudes and practices of the young Russian converts and (2) Selected factors in coming to an understanding and appreciation of the gospel by that group. When completed, the final paper will consist of evaluations of Western evangelism in Russia, with suggestions of these young Russians for the improvement of the evangelistic approach of Westerners.

II. RESULTS OF RESEARCH

A. Coming to Faith in Christ

The experiences of coming to an assured faith in Jesus Christ, as reported by the Russian young people I interviewed, were not always so clean-cut as one might expect. As will be seen in this section, there was often a very fuzzy line between unbelief and belief, and between doubting and assurance. The testimonies below raise many theological issues, the solving of which is largely beyond the scope of this paper. Raising the theological questions is fair at this point, and I will do this to some extent. However, my main purpose is to report the words of Russian young people as they speak of their own experiences.

1. Identified Time of Conversion – Testimonies regarding events and times of conversion contained several traditionally expected features. However, many fell outside of commonly expected (though not necessarily biblical) categories.

a. The "Sinner's Prayer" - As one would expect, the praying of a formulaic "sinner's prayer" was a common means used to bring a young person to Christ. This is the almost universal methodology of Western evangelicals in Russia (and elsewhere), and young Russians who have little biblical understanding are in no position to question whether or not this ritual itself is the true door to salvation. They latch on to it, with varying understanding. The young Russians reported a variety of ways in which this prayer was suggested to them, as will be seen below. They were led in prayer at large services or concerts, at small group meetings, by a close friend, by the Jesus Film or even by a TV preacher. Others prayed alone by themselves, and one even simply read the prayer from the Four Spiritual Laws.

i. Prayer as the Point of Conversion – In those cases where saving faith is present, as a gift from God, this prayer becomes for young people an identifiable point of conversion. "I visited a pastor's family. One man asked me if I wanted to receive Jesus into my heart, and I said that I did. So we prayed, and that was my true step. When I prayed, I understood not only with my mind, but also in my heart. Now I was ready." (23F96A) This young woman had been in and out of the church for some time, and had struggled to reach a point of surrender. Another young man had a similar experience, until one day when he went for a walk with his American Christian friend. "I asked my friend some questions. And he said, finally, 'Do you want to pray right now and accept Jesus into your heart?' And I said that I did. So we prayed right there. I pretty much had already understood at that point what I needed to do, but I just hadn't done it. I was acquainted with the Bible, and what God had done. I had believed what I had been taught, but I just didn't know what to do. Maybe I already believed at that time, but I identify that prayer as the time when I got saved." (21M96A) He had been acting pretty much like a believer, but was provided a kind of "visible door" through this prayer.

ii. Prayers of Deep Conviction - There were several young people who reported a deep sense of certainty and readiness when they were given an opportunity to pray this prayer. The prayer for them was a clear and profound step of faith. In most cases, they had been dealing in their hearts with a hunger to know the truth. "I went to a meeting in which there was a special presentation about the birth of Christ. They went on an on about His purpose. And I pretty much just swallowed all of it, it was so interesting. And when they had a prayer for people who wanted to accept Christ, I knew that this is what I wanted to do. I was so happy that I was crying, because I had finally found what I was seeking for." (21F93O) Others had put it off for some time before finally praying. "At the Saturday meetings they gave salvation messages almost every single week. I went to one meeting

without thinking ahead that I would accept Christ on that day. I hadn't planned it. But when we were praying, I felt that I needed to do this right now. It's hard to describe this." (22F95O) "I had heard preaching about the salvation message from Scripture over and over. And then I finally got to the point where I felt that I needed to stand up and pray when they asked if there was anyone willing to pray that prayer. I felt that this was really the time for me. I had heard this call in the other meetings, but felt I wasn't ready. At this meeting I was ready, and I repented and asked for forgiveness. I identify this as the point when I was saved. It was a very sincere repentance, and I remember every bit of it." (21F94A) Another young woman had gone to Christian meetings for some time, then had a trauma of a death in her family which made her search more intense before a Christmas meeting she attended. "The preacher there explained very thoroughly Christ's birth, how He came to earth, His life, death, and resurrection. And it was so clear to me. And there was something in me saying, 'You need to make a choice.' And then he gave an invitation, and that's the time when I accepted the Lord. I was just crying because of the realization that I was a sinner, and with joy at the same time that I had found what I was looking for." (21F92A)

iii. Prayers of Little Faith – There were other young people that were led to pray this prayer, but were approaching it from more of a "try and see" perspective. "At the camp some person told us the gospel and the 'four spiritual laws.' For two days I was thinking about this, and then I prayed. I had decided to try it out – I didn't know what would happen after that. I knew that in this prayer I was inviting Jesus Christ into my heart, and that my life would somehow change. And with this idea, I prayed. I understood what I was doing, but I just wanted to try it to see what would happen. I had believed and received everything that they were teaching us about the gospel. And once I tried this prayer, I really did believe, and I decided to continue on the path." (15M96A) One young atheist found his hesitant step of faith to lead to a profound experience. "After the Christian concert I read the Four Spiritual Laws again. I was feeling the excitement from the concert, and also loneliness as now I was facing again my difficult life pretty much all alone. My loneliness suggested a need for love and friendship, and that from God. I guess I decided to dare to think that there is possibly something out there. The booklet said to pray a prayer. And I said, 'Okay, I will.' At that little glimpse of belief I prayed the prayer. And after I prayed that prayer I had an overwhelming feeling of God's presence. It was some kind of light and warmth and love and acceptance just showering over me. It was like a one-minute jump from a total darkness and loneliness and desperation to a shower of love and acceptance. And I thought, 'Yes, this makes sense! This is God – this is Jesus Christ!' I had no doubts about that. I identify that time I first prayed as the time I became a believer." (27M91A) Not much faith was required in his case. Even a prayer heard on a TV program was used for one young person who also had little faith. "I came home and turned on the TV, and a foreign preacher was talking about God. And then I decided to make a serious decision. I had simply become interested – 'Is there a God or not?' So I had decided to test if there was a God or not. Then, when I prayed in front of the TV with the preacher, I said to God, 'If you exist, something will change; if you don't exist, then I will not change, and my life will be the same as before.' I decided to believe as much as I could, to imagine that God exists. So I gathered up my strength and prayed in front of the TV. I don't remember what I prayed, but I followed the preacher's prayer. but for me it was important not just the words that I prayed, but my attitude and my faith that I felt toward God – my yearning. And after I prayed, I opened my eyes and I felt myself purified. That which had bothered me had gone away, and I felt myself to be free. I believe that I was saved at that

time. That's when my life started changing. That was my decision to believe in God, though I didn't have much understanding." (20F94A) Another young woman was pretty much just doing what she was told to do when she prayed this prayer. "One time the pastor said, 'Whoever hasn't accepted Jesus into their heart, come to the stage.' So I decided to go forward, just because I hadn't accepted Him before. One of the leaders led me in a prayer that he asked me to repeat. After that he said, 'Now you are a born-again believer.' At that time I didn't really think too much about what I had done, but I thought, 'Now I am a believer.' And I started coming to church each Sunday." (21F96O)

iv. Confusion About the Prayer – For several young Russians, identification of the sinner's prayer with conversion led to some confusion. As understanding grew, the desire to seal the transaction could lead to further prayers. "At the time I made this decision to believe in God, I didn't understand the gospel. They would explain the gospel to us, but I don't remember understanding it. But I prayed the prayer. And then, later on in the church, I prayed the prayer again – just in case." (26F92A) One young woman was instructed in such a way that the prayer itself became the mandatory step, even after she was a believer. "I had been on this ministry team, believed the Bible, and thought that I was a believer. One day I was asked, 'Did you accept Christ?' And I asked him, 'What is this?' He said, 'Did you accept Christ as your Lord and Savior?' He said, 'You just tell him that you want to be with Him all of your life. And it won't be hard for you, because you are already a believer. You just need to do it, just formally.' So I did this. But if I had been told to do this earlier, I would have. That was just the first time somebody had directed the message personally to me. Before this, I already knew that I had to believe in Jesus and to follow Him. And then I was being told that I was already a believer, but that I had just never prayed this prayer to God to be with Him all my life. It was in my mind, but hadn't been expressed verbally. And nobody told me that I had to be 'saved' or whatever, because I already believed in Christ and was following Him. I decided that this last step was just a formal thing, like, 'You just need now to say it out loud – that's all you need.' But now, looking back, I believe that I was already converted before this." (28F91M) The understanding of this prayer as a salvation ritual led some to believe that they couldn't be saved without this formal action. "When I decided that today would be the day I would repent, they would forget to call for repentance at church. This happened maybe three or four times, where I would come to church on Sunday just to repent, and they wouldn't give an invitation. Every time I would sit there trembling, thinking, 'Okay, now they are going to give an invitation.' But they would forget. But finally it happened." (27F95A) For one girl, the action also required the laying on of hands in a group. "Before this meeting I had made a decision when this should happen. My brother had told me that this was important, and I shouldn't be in a hurry. But I thought, 'If they don't lay hands on me, then I won't be born again.' And then I thought, 'What if I die tomorrow, and I don't get born again?'" (19F99O) One young man took the matter into his own hands, also looking at his conversion as requiring this point. "I had started telling people that I wanted to receive Christ, and started asking about how to do it. People told me that I just needed to pray. I thought that there would have to be something more I would need to do. I was told that I should talk with the leader about this, but he slept late that day. I wanted to talk to him before church on the day of the Lord's Supper. Since he didn't come, I decided to pray by myself at church so that I could participate in communion. I understood that the content of the prayer wasn't important, but that it was important to make a decision." (15M99O)

b. A Point of Serious Decision – Some young people pointed to another decision point, not involving the sinner's prayer, as the point of their conversion. "I had this girlfriend that I had an immoral relationship with. I started to think that I didn't want to continue doing all this, and then I remembered that I had a way out. I had a possibility of changing my life. I knew I had been going to these Christian meetings, and was hearing a lot of good stuff there. I felt guilty because I was going to these meetings, but I was so bad. I was living two lives. In one I was a good guy, and in the other I was bad. I decided that I didn't want any more of this bad stuff in my life. And at this time I decided to go to these meetings and really get involved and learn about God. I'm not sure about a point of being saved, but I think it was the day that I made the commitment to go to the meetings seriously. I decided at that time to really follow Jesus. I didn't pray a prayer, but I made a decision. I made a commitment to leave all the bad stuff in my life, and maybe to get closer to these people and to God." (19M97O) It was common for young people to be involved for some time with a Christian group, and even to be considered a believer, before actually coming to faith in Christ. "My life truly changed when our group went on an evangelistic trip. We did evangelism and showed pantomimes, and this very greatly strengthened my faith. And it was at that time that I may say that I really became a believer. We had to stand in front of many people and say how God had come into our hearts. Before this trip I believed, but it was not a very strong faith. It was only then that it was evident that God truly worked in the hearts of people and helped them." (15F99O) Some had supposedly become Christians through praying a prayer, then later saw that they were not really trusting God at all. "I went through some major problems in my life, and I was asking, 'Why doesn't God help me.' Then my friend told me, 'Now you see that to follow Christ is a serious thing. It is not a game.' I understood that this was a critical time in my life. I could do nothing but rely on God, because I had no options. I saw that my life didn't fit what I expected, and what is written in the Bible. Through this traumatic situation I decided to rely on God, and let Him do whatever He was going to do. And I think that it was at this time that I was born again." (23M98O) Several of these young people reported that they had gone through something similar: The repeating of a sinner's prayer, a time of not really walking with God at all, or living in hypocrisy, and then a serious decision. And most of them point to the serious decision, not the first prayer, as the time of their true conversion.

c. Believing the Message – Another group of Russian young people were not able to identify a particular decision, but rather simply believed the gospel when they heard it. They were not aware of any further particular step to take (other than baptism), and so simply continued on in their new life after believing the truth. The amount of truth was not always great. One young woman counts her beginning from the time she ceased being an atheist. "When I decided that God existed, I automatically accepted everything about Him. I didn't have any problem of doubting the truth of the Bible. I hadn't read it yet, but I accepted it. So whatever I was going to hear from the Bible, I wouldn't doubt it. So the question for me was either to doubt everything, and return to my normal life, or to stay with everything. I wouldn't accept it partially. I didn't understand the gospel yet. But I had accepted God and everything connected with Him. Only later, in church, did I realize the gospel bit by bit and take it in." (26F92A) For another young person, it was receiving and believing a key truth that was the beginning of his new life. "I had gone home from sitting with believers as they prayed, and I had felt so unclean beside them. I really felt that God would never accept such a dirty, filthy person as me. That was a terrible feeling. I felt doomed for Hell, that is for sure. I went to church the next Sunday, and then I finally heard that Jesus died even for me – for this dirty,

filthy person. It was very dramatic for me. I wept, I felt completely undeserving (and I still do). So the moment when I really felt that Christ died for me was when I believe I was born again. Maybe somebody had told me that I should pray a prayer or something, but I didn't feel that I would experience that undeserved love of God through praying certain example prayers. I remember that the only thing that mattered was that Jesus died even for me, so that I would not perish, and have eternal life. *Even for me!* That is what mattered." (29M92A) Another young man who had been in Bible classes for some time described a moment when he finally understood and believed a key issue of the gospel. "The teacher explained the gospel using the analogy of the chair. It was an analogy of believing in God versus trusting Him. And that's when I made the decision, 'I'm going to trust God. I'm going to entrust my life to Him.' I identify this as the point that I was truly saved. I had started to finally understand that I was a lost sinner." (19M95O) One young woman from an Orthodox background describes her conversion as an awakening as she read a book. "I read 'Kamo Gradesh,' which talks about the apostles and Christians in Rome. At that time I began to understand that Jesus was the living God – this was a kind of revelation to me. I had an opening of my eyes about the nature of Jesus. It is hard to explain exactly when I heard the gospel, but I believe I was saved when I read that book. At that point I gained a totally new view on life, and everything started from there. The book didn't explain all the gospel, but it explained it at the level that I needed at the time." (29F93O)

d. No Identifiable Point of Conversion – There was also a sizable group of young Russians that could point to no particular moment or event that signified for them their conversion to Christ. One common statement I heard was, "I can't identify a moment when I see that I became saved. It was a process." (15F99A) The process may have surrounded an event, so that the timing could be identified in general. "After the concert I started to go to the church, and started to communicate with people, but didn't ask Jesus to come into my heart. Then I was invited to come to a Moscow conference, and got to know many people, but still hadn't accepted Jesus into my heart yet. I was invited to St. Petersburg, and went there for 4-5 days. I visited the church there. I got to know the pastor there, and others who went to that church. After that trip I understood that something had happened within me. I didn't know what, but I knew for sure that something had happened. I no longer cared about my old life. I just wanted to get to know God more. I don't remember anything specific in this visit that caused this change. I see a process and not a point of salvation. And in fact, even until this time I have never asked God to come into my heart. But I know for sure that He is in my heart." (18F99O) But often it was just a process with no particular identifiable moment. "I don't remember a day when I can say I was saved. It was more of a process. I was thinking and asking questions, and getting answers from the Bible itself and from other materials about Jesus' death and resurrection, and I gradually came to the point of believing and accepting everything. That took a couple of months." (32F92A) "For me there was no exact moment when I can say I was born again – I don't know when it happened. In fact, I think it is a mystery, and nobody really knows for sure when they are born again." (22M94O) As I mentioned in a prior section, several had already considered themselves saved before somebody later gave them a prayer to pray. For them also, there was no identifiable point of conversion. One young man looks back over a strange mixture of belief and confusion that makes it impossible to identify a conversion point. "I will now state that you are a Christian when you believe that Christ is the only way. But my own experience is a problem, because I was devoted to Christ for a time, but also was trying to keep the door open to other religions.

I was being accepted as a believer, and believed that I was a believer. So I really clearly believed, but I had some intellectual problems. I clearly do not identify a point in time of conversion. It was clearly a process. The best I can do is probably to identify the year I became a Christian. I was clearly believing one week, and clearly disbelieving another week through this period. So I'm not really sure when I was saved." (28M92A) Most of the young people who have this kind of experience came to Christ in the early 1990's, when there was not so much of a Western evangelical presence in Russia that had spread the idea of a point of decision linked to a sinner's prayer. But it is still not uncommon to hear one's conversion described as a process, and not as a point in time.

2. False Starts in the Faith – A good portion of the young Russians that I interviewed reported that they had made some kind of "decision" or gone through a salvation ritual prior to the time they identify as their actual conversion. They described some of the components of those false starts, along with some of the results in their lives. It is important to note that labeling these events as coming short of conversion is the conviction of the young Russians themselves – I am not imposing my own interpretation on the events. Having said that, I will also say that I do agree with them that they were not truly converted at the time of their original "decision."

a. Ingredients of False Starts

i. Being "Led" in Prayer – The constant in almost all reported false starts was the factor of being led through a prayer as a supposed gateway into salvation. This took several forms, but was usually in a large meeting. Some acknowledged that they doubted the effectiveness of this from the beginning. "I went to a large evangelistic meeting with my friends. I heard a clear presentation of the gospel. The speaker asked those to stand up who wanted to pray. When he was praying, I was clearly praying these things. But when I said, 'Amen,' I looked at my friends, who had not stood up, and I said, 'That's too easy – I don't believe it.'" (28M92A) Another young man followed the prayer in a booklet. "I would read in this booklet, 'If you pray this prayer, *right now*, the Holy Spirit is going to *come into your heart*, and *then...*' and so on. I didn't really understand this, and I thought that it was wrong. But for some reason I decided to believe it. So I tried it, and started thinking that I was a believer, since I had prayed this prayer. But it doesn't happen like this, that if you just pray this prayer that the Holy Spirit is going to come into your heart." (22M94O) One case involved not even being led in a prayer, but being prayed for by another person. "I heard a man on the street give a testimony through an interpreter. I came and listened. I don't remember what his testimony was, but I think that it had some effect on me, as far as he was asking who wanted to accept Jesus into their lives. I lifted up my hand, so he prayed for me. I don't remember the way that he prayed for me. The only thing that I remember is that he told me to find a church." (29M92A) This same young man added that he was still considering himself to be righteous, and had no comprehension of his lostness. People were often accepted into fellowship without much question. "In our church a 'believer' was a person who had prayed the sinner's prayer. Whether it was mechanically or sincerely didn't matter. One time I prayed, by myself, 'God, I need you.' Someone at a home group meeting asked me, 'Have you prayed the sinner's prayer?' And I thought, 'Well, maybe that prayer was the sinner's prayer.' And so I answered, 'Yes.' So they said to me, 'You are a brother now?' And again I said, 'Yes.' And I thought, 'Hey, that was okay.'" (23M98O) Sinner's prayers have been reported in such abundance that one would think a huge revival was happening in Russia. But the reality is quite different. People pray this prayer, are given assurance, and

often don't even take another step. "We had a general meeting with an evangelistic message. I prayed the prayer, and was waiting to see if there was some big change that would come over me. But nothing much happened, so I wasn't sure about it. I talked with an American English teacher about it, and also with the Russian teacher. I saw that they were happy for me. They told me that I was saved. The next day we left to go home. After the camp I forgot all about what I had done." (13F99O)

ii. Lacking in Understanding – This ingredient is certainly present in the cases above, but was explicitly stated by several young people as the prime issue. "I watched this TV preacher. I remember that he had a personal prayer to ask God to forgive sins. I remember that I prayed that prayer. But I don't know if I really knew what I was praying about. After this I tried to read the New Testament. I would always fall asleep when I read it, and I didn't understand anything at all." (19F96A) Many young Russians were not averse to praying along, even without comprehension. "We were on a retreat with a Christian man. One night late, we were getting ready to go to bed. He asked me and several other kids if we wanted to pray. And we said, 'Yeah, why not?' We didn't understand what it was. We prayed, and that was it. He led us in a sinners' prayer, but nothing happened." (19M97O) Some who were being instructed in English lacked understanding for obvious reasons. "One friend would speak English to me, and there was not always an interpreter available. But I tried to understand what she was saying. And one time she was telling me some things, and I was saying, 'Alright, alright.' And then she said something, and I understood the word 'pray' at that time. And I prayed with her, but I didn't understand a word that she said. So maybe, as I look back, that was the sinner's prayer, and that she was trying to tell me about how I needed Christ." (21F92A) One young man described the problem that many impressionable young people had, including himself: "I didn't understand the difference between giving my life to religious people or giving it to God." (23M98O)

iii. Lacking in Conviction – Beyond a lack of understanding, a lack of true conviction was a common ingredient of false starts. The reasons for praying a prayer were often unrelated to real faith in Jesus Christ. Sometimes a simple lack of sincerity was the reason. "Missionaries would come to our school to tell us about God. They would give us some gifts, tell us about the gospel, and prayed with us, but nothing happened. Then other missionaries came and also told us the gospel and also asked us to pray. And then I thought, 'Why am I all the time praying and deceiving people?' Because I was not praying sincerely. I wanted to, but it never worked out that I prayed sincerely." (20F94A) "At the concert my friend repented. I also raised my hand, but I didn't really repent." (18F97A) Sometimes mixed motives hindered young people. "I think that the message that I heard was good, but my heart was wrong. Part of me was saying, 'I want to go meet those guys and hang out with them and be their friend.' So I wasn't thinking 100% about salvation, but about making friends with those American guys." (27M92A) The motive may have been admirable in itself, but lacking in real faith in Christ. "The speaker asked those to stand up who wanted to pray. And because of the way I was, I stood up, because I wanted to show everybody that I am pro-God, and that I renounce these other things." (28M92A) One young girl explains in more detail the mixture of thoughts going on in her mind when she prayed this prayer. "They told us at the conference much about God, and on the next-to-last day they explained more in detail about the gospel. And for some reason I felt that I wanted to pray. I was thinking that God could fill this emptiness inside. I knew that Jesus had come to earth and died to pay the penalty for my sins and the sins of the world. I think it was closer to just *trying* this prayer

than being really ready. I didn't know exactly what I was doing. And I thought that maybe this will mean that I will go to Heaven, but on the other hand I was ashamed that I had sinned so much and that God had to come to the world to save me. At that time I didn't know about repenting, but just that they said that God would come into my heart and that my faith would be strengthened. It was important not simply to believe, but to invite Him into our hearts. I already considered myself to be a believer, but I heard that I had to do this as well, so that's what I did. When I look back, I don't believe that it was then that I became a believer. I don't know how I would explain it, except that maybe it was simply a first step to faith." (15F99O) There is much food for thought in this quotation. Evangelists should present the gospel in a way that does not offer so many young people (like this girl) a simple step that doesn't really answer the true need of their hearts.

b. Results of False Starts

i. Unchanged Lives – A nominal Christian is a Christian in name only. Outward things may change in his or her behavior, but there is no spiritual transformation. And this was one of the experiences of young Russians after these false starts. "After I prayed that prayer I started reading in the Bible and in other books, and I thought that I was saved. But now I understand that I was not, because I still lived just as I did before with my friends and my girlfriends. I would pray again, and try to live like the Protestant believers did, but I couldn't." (22M94O) Some young people got involved in a church and started trying to act like believers, but knew that something was wrong. "I never knew what it really meant to be born again. I just understood it was like 'four steps' that I had to take, and everything is okay. Then I was trying to make myself think that my life was pleasing to me, and that it was all good. It wasn't. I had big ups and downs, like an Orthodox religious practice. I just had the usual, post-communist life of a religious person who had the same problems as everybody else. Perhaps I was not ready to be born again at that time. But what I was taught would not have helped me anyway." (23M98O) Another young woman made a similar reference to an Orthodox approach, in which a believer is not grounded in fellowship. "After the meeting when they prayed for me I left, and I had the idea that I was now a believer. But again I had no idea what to do, where to go and how to be a believer. Just like before (after her Orthodox baptism). In principle it was just like in Orthodoxy – go to church, pray, be filled up, leave, and live just like I did before. I needed a person to lead me." (29F92O) Some who had prayed were among believers, but without much effect. "After he led me in prayer, the next summer he invited me to go to the USA. We traveled on the West Coast. I'm not sure of the purpose of the trip, but I think he wanted me to be in a Christian atmosphere. He may have told people that I had prayed to receive Christ, but my actions were not Christian. But I don't remember them trying to lead me in prayer again." (19M97O) Others were involved with believers, but knew that they were not truly changed. "During the two years after the conference where I prayed, I visited a Bible club. Maybe I learned more about God and tried to live according to the laws of the Bible. And maybe during those two years it would have been easier to draw me away from the faith. Because in my head I already understood everything, but not fully in my heart. The one thing that kept me coming to the group was that I had friends here and could come and hear about God, and that it was interesting to me." (15F99O)

ii. Hypocrisy – Some young Russians were specific about how their unchanged life was combined with some form of hypocrisy. "I went through several months when I was living two lives, one at youth group and the other with my old friends." (17M96O) "I was

pretending that my life was okay, even though it was a mess. I was told to witness, and to do this I had to think that my life was okay. I would tell people how good my life was, but I wouldn't feel like it. And I had to make myself think like that all the time. And I thought that this was what it meant to 'confess faith.' But now I really understand that it was lying." (23M98O) Some even became leaders in some way or another, but confess that their heart and motives were not right. "I was in church, but was not living a life worthy of the gospel. I had an immoral relationship with a girlfriend. I got involved in Bible study and was even leading it, but I didn't really understand anything. I would tell people about God, but I wasn't really committed to church deeply." (27M92A) "I tried to grow spiritually. I even took responsibility for leading a home group. But nothing worked out. Now I believe that I had some impure motives. I wanted to be 'somebody.' I wanted to be 'holy' like those preachers. Nobody had told me that I would need to deny myself. That was not pleasant to hear. In their view, Christianity was just an easy thing, especially in the beginning. Just a simple step, and God gives you the Holy Spirit, and that's it. This was the main problem." (23M98O)

iii. Abandoning Fellowship – A common eventual step for many that had made these false starts was simply to leave the church. "I was baptized, but was not born again. I was just one of the good statistics about how many people were 'born again' and 'baptized.' But the bad statistic was the huge percentage of people that had passed through the church and left – even after being baptized." (23M98O) Some left simply because nobody really took the time to connect with them. "I had prayed the prayer at camp, but just forgot all about what I had done. I believe that I would have stayed with God if people would have stayed with me after that first camp. I went to a couple of youth meetings after that camp, but then I got busy with classes and couldn't go to it anymore. And I didn't really know people, and they didn't really know me, so nobody called me." (13F99O) One potential bad result is that those who leave are now harder to reach. "My brother would often go to church and confess, go through the four steps or whatever. But now he has just decided to live his sinful life. Now it is hard to witness to him." (19F99O)

3. Forms and Causes of Doubting – Many young Russians reported the experience of various forms of doubt subsequent to the time they identify as their conversion. These accounts offer insight into the various ways that the faith of young Russian believers is tested, and suggests ministries that are required in the early stages of their spiritual lives.

a. Absence of Doubts – There are a few who simply never experienced doubts. "I never had any doubts after my conversion about whether I was saved." (15M99O) "At the time I was saved I had no doubts in my heart. They all said to me that I was their brother now. After this I always thought about that day I was saved, and so never doubted my salvation." (21M96A) One young woman describes how refusing to doubt was part of her initial decision to accept the gospel as truth. "When I decided that God existed, I automatically accepted everything else about Him. I didn't have any problem with doubting the truth of the Bible. I hadn't read it yet, but I accepted it. So whatever I was going to hear from the Bible, I wouldn't doubt it. The question for me was either to doubt everything, and return to my normal life, or to stay with everything. I wouldn't accept it partially. It wouldn't be being honest with myself." (26F92A)

b. Doubting the Truth of the Gospel – One form of doubting that was experienced was doubting that the gospel was true. For some this was based on a troubling question. "Experiences that I'd had in other religions were really a problem for me for a full year as a Christian. I really believed in Christ, but I tried to find some way to keep an open door for

the other religions. My biggest problem was why those good people wouldn't find their way to God. Christ is the way, but I was battling over the matter of whether He was the *only* way." (28M92A) Orthodoxy presented another problem for some. "After I prayed, I thought about the fact that these people weren't Orthodox. I understood that anyone who was not a Russian Orthodox believer was in a sect. But I read about it, and understood that they all teach the same things, and that this was not a sect. Before this I had started wondering if I had received the right faith or not." (17M99O) "I had some doubts, because my grandmother has a strong will and strong temper, and she told me I would burn in Hell and be beheaded, because I had changed my religion. So sometimes I had doubts." (21F98O) Others had doubts that took the form of a temptation to reject everything as a flight of fancy. "I had times of temptation when Satan would tempt me to reject everything that I had accepted, and to think, 'God doesn't exist – this is just your fantasy.'" (26F92A) "I started getting these thoughts like, 'This is crazy – what am I doing here? What if this is just some sort of hobby or infatuation or something, and that I will just lose interest in it?'" (32F92A)

One interesting form of doubt was based on a misconception about the truth that came face to face with reality. It deserves an extended quote. "Later, for about a half a year I had some doubts about whether I really wanted to follow Christ After accepting Christ, it seemed that I was in my own world. It was like a little fairy tale going on around me, and everything was wonderful. I had no problems, and I knew that I wanted to follow God, and do what He had commanded. I was reading the Bible. It was like the first love, where everything is great in the beginning. But when it got down into the routine of real life, I started to wonder, 'Can I really apply it to my life? I woke up and realized that the world was totally different from what I thought it should be. The problem started when I met a nice person in the world who didn't know anything about God, but who was just a good person. And he could do so many things that I couldn't do, and felt such a freedom about his life. And I didn't feel this freedom. Satan really used that person, because after that I was messed up for a while. He seemed like a very nice person, and could do so many things, and had total control of his life. And here I was, being so limited, having to wait and having to trust God and such, when there was so much to be had outside the Christian world. So I had to rethink everything. This man had said that Christians tend to look at life as if all the sinners are the ones who don't know God, and they all end up living badly, using drugs or alcohol, etc. And that was how I was assuming it in my mind – that unbelievers always end up in a big mess. And I had the examples of my relatives being very angry and bad people. And here I was seeing a really nice person who didn't believe in God but was so nice and pure, as far as I could see. He didn't drink, didn't smoke, he had a nice job and knew what he was doing. So I guess I saw that there is such thing as a normal life, and that you can be good without God. And there is so much freedom, and you can control your life. And it is up to you whether you are a good person or a bad person. And this caused me a crisis. I still believed in God, and everything was clear, but I was doubting whether I wanted to follow Him and stay on the same path, or go on with my own life and kind of just forget it. For a half year I was in my own world trying to decide about this." (21F93O)

c. Doubting of Worthiness for Salvation – Another form of doubt that young Russians experienced was to accept the truth of the gospel, but to wonder if they were truly saved. This doubt always came as a result of seeing ongoing sin in their lives. "I had some doubts about my salvation when I misbehaved, and I wondered if I would be forgiven." (22F98M) "Later, after I had big problems with my boyfriend, I started to doubt that I was

saved." (21F96O) "Sometimes later I wanted to lie to my mom or somebody else, and I would think that if you are saved you are not supposed to do that. but if you *want* to do that so badly, then you are probably not really saved. So I worried about this." (22F95O) For some this was a serious problem because of putting themselves under a load of high expectations. "I started to see things in myself that needed to change, and that I had sin, and then I started to doubt. But I was still on fire – I was a kind of aggressive believer. So I would always ruin myself by giving myself such strict rules." (29F92O) Some doubts came from comparing oneself to mature believers. "There were times when I would suddenly think, 'Why do you think that you are a believer?' Because I would see these people at the church, and I saw that they were godly people, and I would ask myself why I would think that I am a believer." (22M94O) Often a young person was not always assured or always doubting, but rather floating between the two positions. "When everything was going well, and I was changing, I would say, 'Now I know that this is the Holy Spirit.' But when there were problems, I would say, 'I'm not doing the right things, and maybe I don't have the Holy Spirit,' or 'God has left me, and everything is wrong.'" (19F99O)

d. Other Forms of Doubt – A few other kinds of doubting cropped up among the young Russians. Warnings from Scripture caused some doubts. "I had some doubts later, when I would see verses about not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord' is saved, and I wondered about myself." (15F99A) "I was reading the Bible, and there were some verses that would talk about the fact that you will die, and about what you have and haven't done, and I began to wonder if I had salvation." (20F94A) One young woman doubted because she had approached the truth with a testing heart. "I thought that if I hadn't really believed everything immediately (because I had had to check things out), then maybe I hadn't really come to God." (32F92A) Others wondered if they had really done the *step* that they assumed was required for salvation. "I would ask myself, 'Are you sure that you prayed the prayer?' Then I thought 'I'm not sure – maybe I should pray it again.' Then I would pray it again 'for sure.' I would get all the words right, and then say, 'Well, now I'm a believer.' And this kind of thinking gave me no rest for a while. I would often question myself" (22M94O) "I think that I thought that if I would pray the prayer that I would be saved. I remember this, because that is the reason that I prayed it several times – to be completely sure that I had made this decision. I prayed it a few times at the conference, then a few times at the church. The issue for me was the prayer. When I prayed the salvation prayer many times, I would feel assurance right afterwards. But then I would start doubting again, so I would pray again." (26F92A)

e. Ways of Coping with Doubts – Beyond the means of coming to assurance, which are discussed in the next section, Russian young people had many interesting ways of dealing with their doubts. Some means were fairly simple: "I prayed, and Jesus gave me the power to overcome these doubts." (21F98O) "I didn't pay a lot of attention to these doubts, but just saw that the Bible said that I was saved." (15F99O) "I just quit thinking about this problem." (15F99A) Others went through a bit more of a process. "When I had these doubts, I first of all reminded myself, 'If you wanted to find God – here is the place.' And I would recall all that I knew about God. The Lord helped me to realize that 'Here is God, and here is His word. If you believe Him and trust Him, He will be with you.'" (32F92A) One additional difficulty was the ascription of guilt to those who would doubt. "They taught us that we shouldn't doubt our salvation, because it was by faith." (21F96O) "One of the things which is really terrible, a doctrine widely preached in churches, and is really wrong, is that to doubt is

a sin. If you doubt your salvation, this is also a sin. When I would ask myself, 'How do you know that you are saved?' my religious conscience would then say, 'Ha! You doubt that you are saved! This is a sin. Don't doubt.' And so I would run away from these doubts. But it is written, 'Test yourself to see if you are in the faith.' You have to test your faith. And my doubts helped me to seek." (22M94O)

4. Coming to Assurance of Salvation – A lack of assurance of salvation need not have come simply from doubts about the gospel or one's remaining sin. Many started out their lives as believers without knowing that such confidence was a part of the Christian faith. A combination of good teaching and personal experience usually brought about this assurance.

a. Sure From the Beginning – Just as there were believers who experienced no doubts, there were those who had an assurance from the beginning. "Once I came to an assurance of salvation, I was always sure. Once I understood this truth, I accepted it. I'm the kind of person that when I accept something, I hold on to it and don't doubt." (19M97O) "I have been sure of my salvation from the beginning." (18F99O)

b. Assurance Through Persuasion – Whether or not a young person understood or felt an inner assurance, it was common for other believers to persuade them that they were indeed saved. "One of the home group leaders led me in a prayer that he asked me to repeat. After that he said, 'Now you are a born-again believer.' At that time I didn't really think too much about what I had done, but I thought, 'Now I am a believer.'" (21F96O) The assurance may have come through the literature that was read at the time of converting. "I had prayed that prayer, but I didn't even call myself 'Christian' then. I knew that I did believe in God, and God had revealed Himself to me in this particular way, and I wanted that. And the booklet had said that you cannot lose your salvation, so I said, 'Okay, I am a new creature now. Okay – what does it mean?'" (27M91A) It was a common phenomenon for young people to be told that they were Christians on the basis of praying the sinner's prayer. "He said, 'Do you want to pray?' And I said okay. So we prayed a short prayer, and I repeated the prayer. and then he shook my hand and said, 'Now you are a Christian.'" (27M92A) Later several who had been given this type of assurance came to the realization that they were not really saved. They lacked in understanding, experience, and conviction. "There were books I read which tried to give me an assurance, saying, 'Don't worry, you prayed the prayer, and it is written in the Bible, 'Whoever asks will receive.' But what these books told me was never enough." (22M94O) One young man who says he was not saved at the time was given this kind of assurance in the following manner: "Just before my friend left for America he decided to make sure that I was saved, and he asked me, 'Do you know where you are going to go after you die?' And I said, 'Of course I don't. How in the world do I find out where I go?' And he said, 'You believe in Jesus Christ, don't you?' And I said, 'Yes, I do.' And he said, 'Well, the Bible says that everyone who believes is going to go to Heaven.' And that was it. And he asked me, 'So where are you going to go when you die?' So I figured that the logical answer was, 'To Heaven,' if what he says is true, but it didn't really fit into my mind. But I answered him, 'Well, I am going to go to Heaven.' But I didn't really understand." (19M95O) When this kind of "assurance" is given, the results can be (and have been) damaging. In the case of all these young people, later teaching and experience brought them to true assurance. But who knows how many unbelievers have gone away with "assurance" but no spiritual life?

c. Assurance Through Teaching and Guidance – What several young people needed was clear Bible teaching on the basis of salvation, and when they received this they believed it. "Real assurance came after I got clearer teaching about salvation. Because if I

had been taught this clearly at my first church, I would have believed it right away. But I don't remember any clear teaching there. But later at the other church the pastor taught about this and I really understood it." (26F92A) Perhaps this kind of ignorance and confusion is more common than many pastors realize. "I really gained the knowledge about the gospel when I attended a school that trained Sunday School teachers. They explained the plan of salvation. I still didn't know that I was going to Heaven. It was later, through the practice of growing, that I came to understand that I would go to Heaven. I didn't have assurance, but mainly because I didn't understand. But I knew I was saved." (27F95A) "On one Sunday message the pastor pointed out scriptures about assurance of salvation, and I thought, 'Okay, I'm saved.' Up to that time I hadn't really thought about assurance." (32F92A) Most received this teaching from individuals, but some cited that they got it through reading literature as well. One young woman sought out this guidance when she received a challenge to her faith. "I had talked with this Orthodox guy for a long time, and he was trying to tell me that I wasn't saved, and that there is in fact no assurance of salvation. I believed that I was saved, but didn't know how to prove it from Scripture. Then I met with my pastor and he gave me a whole number of verses about assurance of salvation, and I wrote them down in the back of my Bible – to be prepared for my next meeting with someone from the Orthodox church. Maybe it was at that time that I really knew why I believed in assurance of salvation. I don't remember if people had been telling me that I should be assured that I was saved. Maybe they were, and I had no doubts until my faith was tested." (26F92A)

Several particular doctrines and explanations were mentioned as being important in gaining assurance of salvation. "I believe that the Lord helped me to realize that it was really *His* work, it was what *He* did, and not what *I* did." (29M92A) "I was sure that I was saved, and was understanding this based on the Bible, and based on my interpretation of the doctrine of being born again." (27M91A) Often these teachings were received as a result of a particular question or problem. "I had experiences when I would do something very wrong. It would be explained to me that this was not good, but that Christ would not turn away from me. So I just needed people to give me assurance regarding this particular issue." (19F92J) "I worried about having doubts. But I talked with my friends about it, and they explained the situation to me – that every Christian can have doubts about salvation. So counsel from my friends helped me to come to more assurance." (22F95O) A truth of Scripture could work together with an internal experience, anticipating the next section below. "Later, when I would have doubts I would pray, and I would also remember that the Holy Spirit is the seal that shows me that I am saved." (19F96A)

d. Assurance Through Spiritual Experience – Along with doctrines understood intellectually were inner experiences that validated that God was working supernaturally in the heart of the young believer. Many had such assurance before receiving the biblical basis for it. "I had pretty much gotten assurance that I was a believer and saved before I figured out the intellectual basis. Before I came to Christ I had been working hard at bringing myself to perfection. And I had become exasperated, because I couldn't get anywhere. But when I became a Christian this process became automatic. I was not struggling in the same way, but was really changing. I saw that my attitude was changing, where I was hating before and now I was loving, or that I had more temper then and more patience now. It was a daily process of liberation." (28M92A) "My assurance, as a reasoned belief, came later. Before this I just had this undeserved love, that Christ died for me. And later, it was realized as salvation." (29M92A) There were various forms of supernatural changes that gave assurance. "I got

internal assurance of salvation by my desire to go to church and to read the Bible, which was more unexplainable to me than any desire to behave honestly or good toward other people. This told me that something strange was going on inside me, which did not come from me, and that it must be something supernatural." (25F93A) "I remember when I really got peace in my inner self. This was the main expression for me. I could share this with people, and also felt that I knew where I was going with my life. I was absolutely at peace. I knew that God was with me, and I was going in the right direction." (22M94O) I think that I understood right away that I was always going to be with God. I felt this assurance from the start. Every day I felt that God was really in my heart and really near me. I felt His hand on me, and that He was showing me the way I had to go." (23F96A)

Assurance through experience also took different forms. Some who later had doubts started out with fervent assurance. "At the first I was sure that I was saved, because I was on fire." (29F92O) Others had to go through a great deal of testing, and come to the realization of the serious reality of their relationship with God. "I went through a period of testing, when I came to understand what it would be like without God, and then I realized that I didn't want anything else, and that a relationship with God was the most important thing in life. Only He can give me that which is most important, and I can't live without Him. And then my doubts subsided." (19F99O) "I had started to doubt, and have serious problems. Then I had serious talks with a more mature believer. After that I started to think about my life, and my relationship with God, and I understood that I truly wanted to follow Christ, understand Him, and grow. Now I understand that a believer is not just someone who has prayed a prayer. True believers understand how important it is, how serious it is, and they seek God." (21F96O) Others really came to assurance through ministering to others. "I came to assurance by working with lots of people. I found out how powerful God is, and I felt Him. And that was enough. I guess He just revealed Himself in the lives of others, and I saw the example of how He can change people." (21F93O) "I came to an assurance of salvation in the course of a hospital ministry. Up until that time I had more of a trust in a distant God. But then I finally forsook all my other goals when I went into the hospital and saw all those people with all those needs, and that had to be the work of the Holy Spirit. I had never felt the Holy Spirit working that actively in my heart. It was so brand new for me." (19M95O) Finally, for one young man assurance can't be explained. "Regarding assurance, and how I knew that I knew God, this is a hard question. Now I just know this, and that is all. I don't know how to explain it. It just came to me, and now I understand that I know God. I finally came to understand what was the difference between Christianity and religion, and I praise God for that." (23M98O)

5. Experiences of God as Confirmation of New Life – This section is related to the one just above, in which inner experiences of God were reportedly instrumental in establishing young people in their assurance of salvation. The difference in the testimonies below is that spiritual experiences are reported as confirming the presence of new life or strengthening faith in the new converts (whether or not they at that time connected this with certainty of salvation). These kinds of experiences were reported in three primary contexts, as follows.

a. At the Point of Conversion – Several young Russians described profound experiences at the time of conversion. Some of these have been described above in other sections, but here are a few more. "A year after the missionary came I came to Jesus. I was so overjoyed and filled with emotion when I knew that Jesus was alive and that he had saved me and loves me." (21F98O) "When I walked out of the church after repenting, I felt that I was

seeing the whole world with a different set of eyes. My attitude toward everything had changed." (17F98O) "When I prayed to repent, I had some kind of strange feeling when I closed my eyes. It was not physical, but something unusual inside. And after that I started looking differently at people. Before that I didn't care much about people, but after I prayed I felt a different kind of love and joy that there were such people around me." (15F99O) One young man wrote to his Christian friends about the day of his repentance. "I think you remember the most important event that happened on Easter. That was a great day! We had so much love on that day. This day is the most important day of my life – I've become a Christian! I'm not now hesitant, I'm not disappointed with life, and I want to do my best to improve my life and to walk with God and to keep my faith growing. I'll tell you more later, because there is so much to tell, and everything is so exciting, so wonderful!!" (21M96A)

b. At a Point of Testing and Trials – Young believers soon experienced times of testing, and experiences from that period of time also served to confirm them in their faith in various ways. Several of the trials related to problems with parents and other relatives. "I will never forget once how God worked in one situation and I felt Him helping me resolve a problem. One time one of my aunts, who was strongly Orthodox, was pushing at me. She was telling me that what I was doing was all wrong, and she was kind of trying to brainwash me. And I was just sitting there smiling – I knew that I was right, and I knew that God was with me. But then she stood up, and she is much bigger than me, and she is pretty violent. And I could see Satan in her – I just knew that it wasn't her talking, because she totally changed her appearance – it was Satan right there trying to scare me. Normally I would get scared, but at that time God gave me such a powerful strength – I don't know what it was. But she stood up right in front of me, yelling at me, and she has very dark eyes and dark hair. And I just looked at her, smiling. And I was thinking, 'I should probably get scared, but I'm not going to, because God is more powerful than Satan.' And I knew that if I did get scared, she would hit me. If I didn't let God give me his strength, she would hit me. But that was one of the tests where I really felt His power in me. God did this, but I had to trust – I had to let Him do it. That was a very real experience." (21F93O) Others reported seeing God answer their prayers when parents opposed them for going to a meeting or following Christ. (19F92J, 21F92A) One young man who was still unsure of his new faith was in a desperate situation with his parents, and turned to God in his hesitating way. "I felt kind of desperate, and then I remembered, 'Oh yeah, I remember being desperate before, and what I did really helped.' So I started to pray, and it was really a prayer of doubt. It was like, 'God, I guess that you are somewhere there, and I remember that experience from before.' And again I experienced a similar kind of feeling of the presence of God, and I experienced comfort, and some kind of hope and love. Those experiences kept me going for that period of time." (27M91A)

Other times of testing were reported. One included overcoming deep inner problems. "At first I had long-term depressions, and then I felt like there was nothing that could help me. But then God took away my depressions and my fears. This was in the beginning of my Christian life." (17F96O) Another was tested in her faith regarding her unbelieving husband. "When I started attending the church, I started praying for my husband, that he would repent. And I thought that this was impossible. I knew that he didn't want to, and he would say that it wasn't for him. But when we moved and visited another church, he repented almost immediately. And that was a miracle for me, because when I prayed I didn't believe that it would actually happen. I was just being obedient, and people were telling me that it would help." (27F95A) One young woman on a business trip was having great

struggles related to her work, and turned to God for help. "I was in this period of stress, really needing the Bible and really needing help, and asking God for help. It was there that I first really spent enough time with God to really feel that He delivered, He saved, and He gave peace. That was really the first experience that I can remember that really proved to me something." (25F93A)

c. In Times of Serving God – Ministry involvement was one common context of experiences that confirmed new life. The most common ministry in which this occurred was that of telling others about Christ. "I think that witnessing helped me to see God working in my heart. We would go to the park and start witnessing after we had been trained. And I saw how this was not really me doing this. That is, I didn't really plan ahead to say things, and the Lord would give me the words to say, and I was amazed. I was thinking, 'I am really *saying* these things? I know the Bible?'" (32F92A) Ministry trips for young people were often instrumental in providing growth through this kind of experience. "It was on our mission trip that I felt the power of the Holy Spirit, and how God was working through me to reach other people. And then I understood truly that I was really a sinner, but that I was really saved. It was a period of rapid spiritual growth for me. I didn't have anything blocking me, because I was there with just the believers for that time." (17M99O) One girl recalled a time that her group was to put on a pantomime, but they didn't feel like it. Yet their leader called them to pray and do it anyway. "And after that prayer we put our makeup on and went to the stage. And we were all worried that nobody would watch us, and that they would make fun of us. But after we showed the pantomime, everyone in our group was pleased and happy that we had actually done this. Because afterward many people were drawn toward us and came up to us to talk with us about God. And after this I truly understood how the devil puts different thoughts into our minds that we shouldn't do things that we should do, when God truly wants us to do this work for Him." (15F99O) Such ministries also provided the foundation for a new experience of fellowship with God for young people who had ministered. "After we would return from our ministry, I would have this amazing time of fellowship with God. We would come back really late, and I would sit down on my bed, open my Bible, and just talk to Him and listen to Him answer through the Word. It was the most amazing experience." (19M95O)

B. Repentance and Life Change

As already indicated in various ways above, the Russian young people described their conversion as involving more than an acceptance of the truth of the gospel. Their lives were changed as well. In fact, influenced by much tradition, Russians are far more likely than Americans to use the word "repent" when they describe their conversion. It is not at all a foreign idea that to become a Christian is to leave an old way of life and enter a new one. This section of the paper will deal with some of the aspects of repentance and life change as described by the young Russian converts that I interviewed.

1. Expectations of Life Change – How much one expected his or her life to change depended on a few factors. One was a simple comprehension that change was part of the idea of the Christian life. "Regarding life change, I really didn't know how it was going to happen, but I did ask Jesus to change my life, and to make me the kind of person He wanted me to be. But I didn't know what changes He would bring into my life." (19F96A) A doctrinal understanding was at times the ground of this expectation. "After I heard what God was like, and who I was in Christ, I understood that I am a completely different person. So I

understood that God not only wanted to save me, but also to change me – so that I would become better, more like He is." (20F94A) Others were not so aware of the changes to take place in their lives, since they weren't told as much about this. "The group didn't impose much on me by way of behavior changes." (27M91A) "I didn't hear much about leaving my old ways, but I knew that I had to change some things." (21F92A) Several young people didn't expect much change because they didn't consider that they had that much in their lives that needed changing. "At the conference when I prayed, I realized that I had to repent and confess my sins. But I didn't have a clear understanding of repentance. I wasn't really doing anything wrong or bad, actually, so it wasn't really clear to me that I had to overcome some areas in my life or stop doing some things. I didn't do them, so I didn't have to stop doing them." (22M94A) "I understood about repentance, but I was thinking that this would not be hard for me, since I wasn't too bad. It would be okay, since I'm already trying to be good." (22F95O) "I didn't drink, smoke or fight with my parents, so there was not much to change." (19F96A) "I knew that I would have to adjust my life. I didn't think that it would be that substantial of a change, since I was never into drugs or anything drastic like that." (23F92A) Apparently, many young people looked at repentance and life change largely in reference to external behaviors as opposed to internal corruption.

2. Attitudes Toward the Prospect of Life Change – The young people all reported that the expected changes in their lives were welcome changes. "When I believed in God, I knew that my life was going to change. I wanted this change." (18F97A) "I was prepared for my life to change, and wanted this. So repentance was not a problem." (29F92O) "I really wanted my life to change, so the demands of the Christian life were very attractive to me." (19F92J) They had already known that they wanted to change, and some had even begun to make changes prior to their comprehension of the gospel. "I changed the way I dressed before I became a Christian, because I wanted to be like the believers I saw, and I thought that if I would dress differently I would be pretty good." (21F92A) The desire for change came as young people saw the emptiness of their own lives and the hope in the lives of believers. "By the time I was ready to come to Christ 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. I was disillusioned with all these things, plus I had experienced some bad things." (19F99O) "I wanted God to bring into my life the joy that I saw in people around me at camp." (19F96A)

3. Change as a Process – As one should expect, the changes that accompanied salvation took place over time and not all at once. There is nothing surprising in this. One common pattern was some large changes immediately, with other changes following over time. "It was really a challenge for me to stop lying. I made myself stop doing this, all at once. And I began feeling like my mouth was dirty when I was saying something that wasn't true. That was the first thing that changed, right away. Then it was little by little I would change. I had lived without God all my life. But now God was adding to my life, so the whole picture changed." (26F92A) Often all changes were gradual. "There were everyday changes, but there weren't major changes in my life right away. Rather, they were gradual changes." (22M94A) Some saw the changes as a continuation of what had already begun. "I had been changing all along before this time, so there was no radical change in my life right away after I prayed." (21M96A) One common situation was a crisis of making a break from the world, which took some time for several young people. "For a time I had several sides to my personality. I acted differently in different circumstances. I acted one way among the

believers, another way in my dorm, a third way with my parents and a fourth way at work. Finally I became convicted about this. I read a book where the same situation was described, and I gave this to God. He made one person out of those four sides, by taking the wrong ones away from me." (26M94O) "For a time I lived as if between the world and God, and felt a battle going on inside of me. This began right after I had been at the camp, for about a year and a half. This changed when they started to talk me about getting baptized, and they told me I would have to forget about my past life." (15M96A)

4. Attitudes Toward the Changes as Experienced – The section above noted the young Russians' attitudes toward the prospect of change. Here we look at just a few of them as they actually go through changes. Several who were looking forward to changes found them to be more of a challenge than they had anticipated. "I had thought that repentance would not be hard for me, but I found that it was harder than I had thought." (22F95O) "I thought that there was not much to change, but then it seemed that I wasn't letting Christ change my life inside of my family. That was the hardest thing for me – to change my old habits and behaviors in the family." (19F96A) But a few of the most telling quotes reflect the fact that most of the changes were happening inside, where others couldn't necessarily see them. "My mind was changing. I was trying to form new life values, new views, and things like that. Every day, every minute I was constantly thinking about Christianity and about God. And I would tell myself to change." (26F92A) "The changes in my life maybe were not noticed by those that were around me, and they just assumed that I had been a nice person. But for me personally, I saw that my bad motives disappeared. I wasn't telling others what was happening inside me, but I myself knew what was happening. God purified me, and would reveal things to me that needed to be changed, and I would pray, and God would change me. I started to think differently about myself, and then my behavior changed. I started to have new desires and new ideas." (20F94A)

5. Hesitating and Wandering – Life change had some major interruptions for some young people, during periods of not walking with the Lord for one reason or another. This may have been a common story for those in the early days of their new life, as they faced new temptations, such as in this account: "After I prayed, about a month or two later I went through a period where I doubted, and felt that I wanted my old life back. My doubts were whether I wanted to live like a believer or not. However, I was sure that I was saved. But for a short time, maybe 2-3 weeks, I went back to things as they had been before, stopped going to the group, and threw it all away. But this didn't bring me any joy. And I decided that it was better to live with Jesus." (17M99O) Two young women had more serious times of wandering, and they deserve some extended quotations for the insights they contain. "I had some unbelieving friends that I liked, and we lived together in a dormitory at that time. So I had an alternative for fellowship. Then I started missing church meetings, because these other friends were all interested in going somewhere else on Sunday and I wanted to be with them. By the time I had missed several weeks in a row, I decided that they would think that I am bad in that church, so I never came back. I left the church totally, but I didn't change my views about God. Nothing changed except that I stopped going to church. And so I remained a Christian, I would say to everyone that I was a Christian, but at the same time I wouldn't have any Christian fellowship, I didn't read the Bible, I didn't pray – I only thought. I spent almost a whole year just thinking about it. I thought about it every day. Of course I had those times of temptation when Satan would tempt me to reject everything that I had accepted, and to think that God doesn't exist, it is just your fantasy. But I stayed with it, because I had once

made this change, and I didn't want to change all over again. I lived without the church for a long time. And I didn't know what to do, because I remembered the commandment about not leaving your congregation – I knew that I should go to church. But I didn't know to what church to go. I didn't want to start everything all over again to go to church. We had one Protestant church near our house, but I didn't know what kind of church group it would be. I was kind of afraid to take the steps myself. And I said, 'Well, God, if you want me to go to church, then you will have to take my hand and bring me into one.' And then I stopped thinking about it. And then one time God really took my hand and brought me into the church. He showed me that He knew how to bring me into the church." (26F92A) "I had a time after my conversion when I basically left the Lord for about maybe two months or so. I was also working at that time, and I wanted to be a journalist, and I worked for a teenage newspaper, and I was offered a chance to do a program on TV. And I realized that if I would continue to go to these Christian meetings, I knew that I would have to leave this work, because it was a really wicked environment. And also it was a choice for me, either stay with my friends at school (plus the newspaper and TV jobs), or else go to those meetings – or even stay with God. And at that time I decided, 'Well, it is all in vain, there is no God.' I started doubting whether it was really all true about God. But I think that I forced myself to lie to myself inside that there was no God, so I could justify why I did not leave my friends and that job. So I made a wrong choice. And I quit reading the Bible and praying. And I started going back to the life I used to have with my friends. And when I made that decision that I didn't believe in God any more, I went back to my old friends. But something happened, in that my old friends rejected me, just for no reason. They just weren't interested in me, and didn't want to spend any time with me. They just left me, and I was so miserable. It was a hard time. I was pretty scared one night, a horrible feeling came over me where I felt that I would die, and I was so afraid to die. And I called this friend and told him that I didn't know what was wrong. And he told me to take my Bible. And I was thinking, 'Well, I haven't read it for a while.' And he took me to II Peter 3:9 where it says that God is not in a hurry to kill, but that He desires that everyone to come to repentance. And I realized that God still loved me, and I prayed and I repented, and I wanted to go back, and asked God for forgiveness for what happened, and I realized that He still loved me, though I had rejected Him. When all my friends had rejected me, and I was so lonely, God still loved me. And the same week there was this friend who was wondering why I had not been at the meetings. She called me and said she wanted to come visit me at my home. So she and two other students came to visit me. She brought me some gifts, and I enjoyed the fellowship, and she asked me if I was going to come to meetings again, and I said that I wanted to come. I wanted to go back. So I started going back to the meetings, and helping as much as I could. I believe that I was really saved before this, but then that I stumbled and then came back. Because I knew 100% for sure that if I had died during that time I would still have gone to Heaven. During this time I felt really guilty. I knew that there was a God, but I didn't want to admit it to myself. I carried a heavy guilt for those months. When I came back, I became stronger in faith than I had been before I stumbled." (21F92A)

C. Confession of Faith and Reactions

One of the signs of new life is willingness to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In addition, the instruction to do so is often given very early after one comes to Christ. "We were told to witness to our friends. At a conference one of the teachers said, 'If your friends

or relatives still do not know that you are a believer, you'd better tell them.'" (27M91A) This confession of faith in Christ also includes water baptism, at least in the understanding of most Western groups. Finally, confession elicits various kinds of reactions from friends, family, and others.

1. Timing of Confession of Faith - Some young Russian converts confessed their faith more quickly than others, as testimonies in this section reveal.

a. Spontaneous Sharing – Many young Russians were inspired to share their new faith in Christ from the beginning. "I told many people about my new faith, and dragged my husband and brother to church. At work I stopped working and stood in the center and told people about salvation. And people listened to me. When they saw changes in me, such as that I didn't party with them like before, they listened to me with attention." (29F93O) "I tried to share my faith immediately, especially with my family. I was very inspired." (22F98M) "I started witnessing in the army through my words and with my lifestyle. For several months I was kind of preaching to my whole group in the army." (28M92A) Some told of their lack of results from this youthful enthusiasm with their new faith. "I tried to tell people about Jesus, especially when I was a young believer. I started telling everybody. Some people were not really opposed, but were indifferent. But some would listen. But nobody came to repentance at that time, though I wanted to share and had high enthusiasm." (21F96O) "I had a desire to tell people about my faith immediately, but then I had some bad results from doing this, and then I started to doubt whether or not I should do this. Maybe I wasn't ready to do this." (15M99O) "We were told to witness, not necessarily with the Four Spiritual Laws – you could use other things. But this booklet had worked in my life, so I wasn't opposed to using it. But there was very little effect from this." (27M91A)

b. Hesitation in Sharing – Young people gave several reasons for not sharing their faith right away. Some were still in a stage of simply watching and learning, perhaps still in a process of final commitment. "I didn't start telling people about my new faith, because at that time it was more passive than active. I didn't get involved with believers right away. I was just going to church and listening and watching. Nobody was working with me. I would just come in and go out." (17F96O) The desire may have been present, but not the readiness. "I wanted to tell people about my faith, but didn't do it immediately. But after several months I started to share my faith." (21F98O) Others were simply shy and secretive in the beginning. "I was shy to tell about my new faith. It took a year to tell my mom about my new faith. I was afraid to tell her." (19F96A) "I didn't tell my friends at that time at the university. I was thinking that they would never know anyway, so it would be my personal secret. For many months I didn't tell any of my Russian friends about my new faith." (22F95O) "I didn't really feel comfortable letting my friends know that something had changed. It took a while for me to grow in that and become bold enough to tell my old friends. It was really hard for me to go back to the people that had known me before." (21F94A) Some early hesitation was due to a lack of comprehension of what had happened. "I didn't tell anybody about my faith 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) Finally, hesitation may have come because of a desire to experience more life change. "In the early days, when I would go home after a meeting, I never wanted to tell my friends about who I was, and with whom I was meeting. I always wanted to get away from my old friends and go back to these Americans, so I could learn more about the Christian life, and learn more about how to become a different person." (22M94A)

2. Issues of Water Baptism – Water baptism is more than a form of confessing faith in Christ, but it is important enough in that connection that I will deal with it here. This issue of Orthodoxy and its effect on the Russian culture comes into play when the question of baptism arises for new Russian converts. The timing of baptism and the understanding of what it means faces particular challenges for evangelicals leading young Russians to Jesus Christ.

a. Orthodox Baptism – A large percentage of Russian young people reported that they had been baptized in the Orthodox Church, usually as children, whether or not they had any other religious behavior after that. Others were baptized as adults, before coming to Christ. "I was baptized after a series of meetings at an Orthodox church. That is a very difficult situation for me, because I was baptized, but only repented three months later." (21F94A) Also, several young Russians reported that they received Orthodox baptism after becoming believers through evangelical efforts. "They were teaching about baptism in our church, saying, 'If you are a Christian, you have to be baptized. It is a commandment, and it is your testimony.' So I decided to be baptized. But I didn't know how they performed it at the evangelical church, so I decided to do it in the Orthodox Church. I was out at our dacha, and we just went to the Orthodox church there, and I got baptized one Sunday. Just like that." (26F92A) One young man mentioned how subtle cultural pressures influenced him toward baptism. "Before I became a believer, sometimes I heard the question, 'Have you ever been baptized?' Orthodox people and some Russians who aren't even believers would bring their children to the Orthodox church to be baptized. I would talk to my friends, and they would ask me if I had been baptized, and I would have to answer, 'No.' And I felt myself to be a different sort of person. So finally when I got water baptized, it had this meaning for me also, besides the significance of walking with the Lord. It meant that I had something that I didn't have back then." (29M92A)

b. Difficulties Surrounding Baptism – The issue of having been baptized Orthodox is a common problem for young people to deal with when they become evangelical believers. Young people dealt with this in several ways. Some churches have not required a believer's baptism. "I was baptized when I was a small child. I haven't thought about baptism yet. But I asked if I should get baptized again, and they said it was an important question, but I had to decide this for myself. So I should think about it carefully." (17M99O) "I was baptized in the Orthodox church at 3 years old. Nobody has talked with me about the idea of a second baptism." (13F99O) Others have accepted Orthodox baptism as believer's baptism. "Later I asked, 'Was it good for me to be baptized in the Orthodox Church?' And at my church they agreed that it was good, and didn't ask me to be baptized again. They said that I was baptized by faith, so that is okay." (26F92A) Some young people continue to have some confusion about whether or not their Orthodox baptism, either as an infant or as an adult believer, was enough. "I had some confusion about whether I should be re-baptized. I had been baptized in the Orthodox church as a baby. And I wasn't baptized after that." (22M94A) "I'm still dealing with the issue of water baptism. I didn't get baptized a second time, because when I got baptized for the first time, I think that it met all the requirements for baptism. It was by faith in Christ, even though I didn't understand much. All it takes to be saved is to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and confessing. So it was a baptism by faith. So I usually think it is a good baptism, but sometimes I think that some people might think that it was wrong, so what should I do? But I think the Lord just gives me the idea that it is okay. It was my first expression of faith." (32F92A) Some young people who have gone on to Russian Baptist

churches have had particular difficulties, since the environment is more strict. "Now, talking with my pastor at our Baptist church, we are dealing with this. But I knew what I was doing when I got baptized, and didn't think that this was just a tradition or just that everyone else was doing it. But they will make a decision at my church regarding whether or not to accept my baptism. I haven't participated in communion yet because of this." (21F94A)

Others have direct opposition regarding evangelical baptism because of pressure from Orthodox parents. "I wanted to get baptized, thinking that I wanted to do it and had to do it, but my mom was always against it, because she is still pretty strong in Orthodoxy. She didn't want me to get baptized, because she said getting baptized twice is not right."

(21F93O) "I didn't get baptized again as a believer. There were some arguments with my mom about it. She is okay that I am with evangelicals, and about my faith, but she thinks that baptism is all the same in Orthodoxy and Protestantism – they are all Christian religions. So she thinks that one time is enough. God needs to work on her heart, and then she may allow me to do this. But I don't want to hurt her." (22F95O) One formerly Orthodox girl is still in confusion over the issue. "I didn't believe that Orthodox baptism was enough. But actually I didn't really know. But I do think that believer's baptism is important – though I haven't been baptized yet." (19F99O)

c. Ways of Understanding Baptism – A few words should be said about some of the various ways that baptism is understood in Russia, and how this has affected some Russian young people in evangelical churches. Three main competing ideas have caused some confusion among Russians. The first idea is that of Russian Orthodoxy. Young people are used to hearing about infant baptism, and most had already been baptized before having any beliefs of their own. In addition, many were baptized as teens as part of the fashion of the day rather than out of genuine conviction. Baptism as an expression of new life and faith is far less understood among the general public, although it must be said that very few young people had much understanding of Orthodox baptism as well. The second idea is that practiced by most Russian Baptists, and which has affected only those young people who had some exposure to Baptists after their conversion. Water baptism as practiced by Russian baptism comes closer to the idea of "confirmation" than it does to common Western ideas of baptism as the first step of obedience. Baptism is preceded by a time of learning, in which the pastor would be able to obtain proof that the person who had repented was living an obedient life. The time of delay varies, but delays of a year or more are not uncommon. "I went to the Baptist church and talked to them about baptism. They told me, 'You have to first be in our church for a year, and we will see how good you are as a Christian, and then we will baptize you.'" (28F91M) The third idea is that which is practiced by most Western groups that have worked in Russia - baptism as an entry into the visible church, as an outward symbol of the inner transformation. "We were taught that immersion is like death with Christ, and coming out of the water is like being raised with Christ. That is, a symbol of cleansing from sin." (20F94A) Much more could be said about the issue of baptism, but my main purpose here is to indicate that varying ideas about the nature of water baptism may be presented to young Russians, and evangelical believers need to be capable of clearly explaining how they understand baptism and defend this from Scripture.

d. Timing of Water Baptism – One area in which some of the confusion mentioned above has been manifested is the issue of *when* to get baptized. Those who had never been baptized in an Orthodox church often had little problem with the idea, and were baptized very soon after their conversion. Others said that they only delayed getting baptized because

it took time for them to get the idea that it was important. Since my research was done among young Russians who came to Christ through Western outreaches, I rarely came across young people who would have been influenced by the Russian Baptist practices and who thus would have experienced a delay in baptism for that reason. Most of the difficulty came for those who had already been baptized in the Orthodox church. This issue has already been discussed to some extent above. A quantitative study would be required to determine the range of periods between conversion and baptism among Russian youth, and that was not part of my research.

3. Expectations for Reactions – One part of the reality of confessing faith in Christ is the reaction of others to that confession. Before discussing the nature of those reactions that were experienced, a few words can be said about the expectations of young people as they looked to share their faith with others. The main issue that young people discussed was the presence or absence of warnings that opposition or misunderstanding would result. One young man who wasn't warned about this had a bad experience: "I didn't expect such negative reactions, and that is why it turned out so bad for me. It harmed my desire to witness." (15M99O) It was better for those who had been warned ahead of time. "I had been told that people wouldn't understand or would oppose, so it wasn't surprising when it happened." (22F98M) "I expected that people would respond negatively, so such reactions didn't surprise me." (13F99O) Warnings were not always believed, and the actual misunderstanding had to be experienced by young people. "I was told, 'Your friends are not going to understand you.' I didn't really believe this. They didn't just tell me how it was going to be, but they had arguments for it which were clear to me. So I started thinking a lot about it, and I tested what they said. And I found that some of my friends indeed didn't understand." (22M94O) Along with warnings, good perspective on dealing with this was helpful. "We were told that when you tell people about God, even if they laugh at you and don't accept it, all the same they will hear the gospel, and you are planting a seed." (15F99O)

4. Reactions Experienced – Young people had much more to say about the actual reactions they encountered as they shared their faith in Jesus Christ in the general public, with friends, and with family. Since many of the reactions from all three groups came from an Orthodox perspective, we will start by looking at the nature of those responses.

a. Orthodox Reactions

i. Orthodox Exclusivity – Many of the young people reported opposition from Russian Orthodox people. "I met with several people who were trying to tell me that I was a sinner for not going to an Orthodox church." (26F92A) For such people, to leave Orthodoxy is to leave the true faith. "Orthodox opposition from my aunt was quite serious. She was my godmother from my baptism, and took her responsibility seriously. She was pretty much saying that we were 'rejecting the true religion.'" (25F93A) "Orthodox people are always opposing us when we go outside and share the gospel. People tell us that we are false, and that Orthodoxy is the true faith." (19F92J) Anything that is not Orthodox is considered to be a sect or cult. "When we invited others to church, people would say that they were Orthodox. Everyone was afraid that we were from a sect." (27F95A) "When we were on the train to Krasnodar, we were talking with one grandmother, and she said directly, 'Anything that is not Orthodox is a sect.'" (17M99O) "There were people warning me, and still telling me, not to leave Orthodoxy. When I tell my grandmother, she calls my other grandmother and says that I am going to a weird cult. When I leave to go to a meeting, she says, 'Oh, you are going to your cult again?'" Some opposition is quite blunt. "During our Bible distributions we would

always meet Orthodox people and priests, and they would tell us that we were condemned to Hell." (21F94A) Evangelism is thus often met with such hindrances. "I started feeling Orthodox opposition in our hospital ministry, because some people were resentful. They would say, 'You are not Orthodox, and I'm not going to listen to you.'" (19M95O) In addition, reverse evangelism is common. "One time I talked with an Orthodox guy for eight hours, and he tried to push and push and push, and I felt really bad." (26F92A)

ii. Nationalist Orthodox Opposition – Another form of opposition overlaps with that mentioned above, but seems to come as much or more from a Russian nationalism as it does for a concern for the true faith. These two concerns are not always easy to separate. "My friends and acquaintances would tell me their opinions, that Orthodoxy is *our* faith, and that somebody else's faith is something wrong." (21F96O) "One of my four aunts would always yell at me and argue with me about my religion. They would say that here I am with these Americans, and they are all from Satan, and the true religion is Orthodoxy, and so on." (21F93O) Anti-American sentiment often mixes with Russian nationalism, and this nationalism commonly understands Orthodoxy as the only valid Russian religion. "When we would do Orthodox evangelism we would run into Orthodox opposition. They would say, 'Why are you Russians with those Americans? You are supposed to be Orthodox.' And my relatives would challenge me regarding the 1,000 year history of Orthodoxy in Russia." (27M92A) "I would get Orthodox opposition when we would witness on the streets. They would ask us, 'What denomination are you?' or 'What church are you from?' Then they would call us 'traitors' or whatever – all these patriotic things." (32F92A) "When I started sharing the gospel on the streets I started hearing, 'That's an *American* church,' or 'We are Orthodox.'" (21M96A) Opposition to Protestants often comes from a strong political slant. "Once in my university a teacher said, 'Protestants are the enemies of all people.'" (19F96A) "I had opposition from an unbeliever who thought that the reason I would be a Protestant was for political reasons – that it was necessary for the American government, and so I should just be an Orthodox believer and that's all. The Protestant belief was just an American experiment on Russian people – it is all just a plot." (15F99A) Opposition need not be a reasoned opposition from personal conviction. "I had opposition from people who were not true Orthodox believers, who would simply tell me that this faith is not right." (15M99O) Appeals to loyalty can mix concepts of family and religion. "Both my grandmother and my grandmother's friends opposed me. They also have their children and grandchildren, and they said that I didn't respect my own family and the religion I was born in." (21F98O)

iii. Orthodox Tolerance – Not every Orthodox response was one of direct opposition. Some level of tolerance also appeared, for various reasons. "In my group at the university I have a friend who is strongly Orthodox, and serves at his church. But we get along. I speak about Christ, and he speaks about Christ. And I know that he is Orthodox and he knows that I am different from Orthodox, but we never have problems. We just speak about God, and he never opposes me." (22M94A) Some tolerance is from the more progressive wing of the Orthodox Church, those inspired by the late Alexander Mien. "When my sister made a decision to study here, she talked to this Orthodox priest that we really respected a lot. She told him that it was an American Christian college, and he didn't say that it was wrong – which was really quite surprising, because most would talk you out of it and tell you not to do this. But this priest was not against the Western influence. Later I found out that it was from the more liberal wing of Orthodoxy." (21F94A) "I had some Orthodox friends, but they were from Alexander Mien's church, which was quite a different kind of

Orthodoxy." (28F91M) Some parents approved, apparently seeing no condemning difference, even if they would not accept it for themselves. "I would talk with my mom, and she would say, 'It's okay if you are like them, because they explain to you the Bible, and now you are reading the Bible, so that's okay. But I am too old to change my faith.'" (22F95O) Some tolerance fell short of approval, but recognized that even false religion is better than falling into gross sin. "My grandmother thinks that I go to a cult. But she doesn't really persecute me. She is Orthodox, but she likes the fact that we read the Bible, and she understands that it is better than being a drug addict, drinking, and doing all that young people do." (19F99O) One final source of unusual tolerance is that which is extended to non-Christian faiths. "I had no opposition from Orthodoxy. First, I was Tatar, and they didn't care about me. Russian Orthodoxy thinks that if you are Moslem or Buddhist, that's okay. You are already with God. They don't try to convert you. But if you are Protestant, then for sure you have to be converted." (28F91M)

b. Other Family Responses – Several other kinds of positive and negative responses from families, primarily parents, were reported by the Russian young people.

i. Immediate Approval – Some parents gave approval to their children's decisions to follow Christ, for various reasons. Some were open to spiritual things themselves. "My mother never opposed anything, and in fact loved it. She really liked morals, and that they were teaching about God here." (19M95O) Others even came to Christ after their children. "My mother allowed me to go to the church, and to help in the church, and after about six months she came to Jesus as well." (23F96A) "I told my parents basically right after my conversion. Now my mom and sister are also saved. When I talked with them, it was a revelation to them that the Bible is actually the living Word of God, and that you can apply it to your life. My mom had never denied that there was a God, it was just like she needed an explanation." (23F92A) Others gave approval not for spiritual reasons, but for the secondary benefits that they saw for their children. "During this time I had some conversations with my mom and my grandmother. At first they were excited, because they thought that I would learn English this way." (21F92A) "When I came to work here, an 'American college' sounded really prestigious, and they really wanted me to be with the Americans." (21F94A) Changes for the better in the lives of their children caused quick approval for some. "My mother liked it from the beginning, because she liked the changes in my life. She was happy that I gave up drinking and everything else." (19M97O) "My parents were okay with me going to the group, because they had seen the effect on my sister, and everything was okay for me as well. Mom saw how she had changed, and she wasn't opposed." (15F99A)

ii. Earned Approval – Other young Russians needed to overcome initial doubts and opposition by proving themselves before their parents. The fact that some children continued to live normal lives overcame some parents' fears of religion or cults. "My parents could hardly imagine that their son had become a believer, and didn't know what to expect. But I acted normal, so soon after this their worries passed, and then they couldn't care less about it, as long as I studied and did well with my school work. That's what they cared about." (27M91A) "At first my parents were wondering what church I was going to. But they said it was okay to go. Then they saw that nothing wrong was happening to me – I was still going to school and all that. So they said, 'Okay, it's your choice.'" (19F96A) For others, the spiritual changes they saw impressed them and won them over. "I had been seeking for something like this for my whole life, and I had finally gotten it, and I just couldn't handle it

because it was so good. After the meetings I would tell my mom about it and just start crying. She had been opposing my attendance at the meetings before this. But she could see that God was working in me, and that my tears were taking out all the guilt and the fear and the bad stuff in me. And then I didn't have any resistance from her, because she saw how I was changing for the better." (21F93O) "My mother was glad that I was going to the meetings, because before that my friends weren't very good. But also she was afraid that this was a sect. My dad didn't have a very good attitude toward it. At first he would just say that I was being lured into a sect. But now he has changed his attitude. And now my mother knows that I'm a believer, and is even proud that I read the Bible every day, and she tells others about this." (15F99O) One girl earned approval to the point that her mother left a cult to come to faith. "I told my mother that I had become a believer. She was happy, but the fact that she was a Jehovah's Witness made her realize we had some differences in some things. There were some things we didn't agree about. We started to read the Bible together, and we would talk together and I would pray for her. And now she has changed her beliefs, and received Christ. Now she comes to my church." (13F99O)

iii. General Tolerance – Many parents that did not give direct approval were yet tolerant of their children's new faith and practices. "My father said, 'You do what you want. I don't believe in what you believe, but you can do what you want.'" (26F92A) "Afterwards I told my parents that I had prayed and become a believer, and that I had received Christ into my heart, and they said, 'Okay, fine.' They didn't forbid me." (15M96A) A "live and let live" attitude characterized some families. "When I told my family about my new faith, I was definitely not ridiculed or persecuted. They understood it, and seeing the change in my character and in my life, they supported it, whether or not they had decided for themselves about it. It was more like, 'If you are happy that way, that's fine.' They never cut me off in any way." (23F92A) Having gotten to know the evangelical leaders before a camp helped one young man's parents to be tolerant. "I told my mom that I had become a Christian, and she said, 'How? You are already baptized.' But everything is okay with her. Before we went to the camp, we had a parents' meeting at the school, and the leader talked with them about our organization, so that parents would know about who they were. So they already knew what was happening." (17M99O) One tolerant father even learned enough to take advantage of his son's new faith. "My parents didn't mind if I wanted to be a Christian. My dad had done away with the communist party because it had been exposed. And they probably felt kind of good toward American influence, and didn't mind that the churches had come. But my dad would sometimes use my behavior against me: 'Oh, you think you are a believer, and here you are not helping your father. You are supposed to honor your father and mother.' And he made me feel like I was faking my faith." (27M92A)

iv. Opposition to Religion – Parents who were not Orthodox could still be opposed to their children's new faith, but more because they were against religion in general. "My parents thought that I was crazy, and that it was nothing serious. They didn't believe in God." (18F99O) "My grandparents said, 'We are scientists, and we know for sure that there is no God.' I told them that God is true, and all the facts point to Him. This argument still continues." (18F97A) "My mom and grandmother started calling me a religious fanatic, and a nun, and all those things they could think of." (21F92A) Some families imagined that strange things were about to happen to their child. "I told my sister when I became a believer. She thought that this meant that I was going to a monastery. She was really upset for me. And my parents questioned me about whether being a Christian would mean that being

beautiful would be completely wrong. This came from the images of those old ladies with their heads covered with shawls." (25F93A) Some opposition was very strong. "My grandfather is a military general, and was very much against my faith. He drinks a lot, and once he got drunk and kicked me out of the house. And I live with someone else to this day." (21M96A)

v. Fear of Cults – Parents have fears about cults that will control their children and cause them harm, whether or not they think about the spiritual issues involved very deeply. "At that time there was that cult in Japan that had put poisonous gas in the subway. And my parents were afraid that I might be with them." (19F96A) "One time I told my mom that I was going to a meeting. And she said, 'You know, this has gone on for too long now. This is too much. You are not going. It is like a sect there, and you aren't going there.'" (21F92A) "My mom was really scared when I told her about my faith. She thought that it was a sect. And I think that she is still afraid a little bit." (32F92A) The connection of cults with Americans caused some parents to be afraid. "In the beginning, opposition from my mother had nothing to do with faith. It was the idea of meeting with Americans. Back then a lot of cults were coming into Russia. So when I gave my address to some American organization, whether it was Christian or whatever, it was wrong." (21F93O) Others knew about particular cults that they would warn against. "Some family members gave me warnings. They said, 'Make sure that they are not Mormons.' They had spent time in other countries, and had encountered Mormons there." (19M95O)

vi. Other Warnings and Opposition – Young people faced some problems for various other reasons besides those mentioned above. Some girls were opposed by mothers who were simply trying to control them. "My mother tried to forbid me from going to church – not because she had any other religious convictions, but she said I was wasting my time. But actually, she just wanted to have me near, to control me. And she couldn't control me when I was in church." (26F92A) "My mother reacted to my conversion very badly. We had real bad quarrels, and she would shout at me, 'You love your Christ more than me!' She felt that I was free, and that I was happy without her, and she couldn't handle this." (28F91M) Other parents just had a suspicion, not knowing what to expect. "I wrote a letter to my parents to tell them about my faith. I tried to be pretty mild. When I went home, I remember that my mom was opening the door, and she was kind of looking at me like, 'What am I going to see there?' They didn't know what to think, really, because they didn't have a lot of contacts with believers." (27M91A) "My parents would get suspicious about all this. They wondered where I would go and why." (29M92A) Some parents worried when young people who had seemed to them on a track to success were now leaving it all. "I got opposition because of the question of 'What do I do with my life?' Because I got out of the university for the sake of my spiritual search. And that was a real offense to my parents. They had exhausted their resources in order to get me into that university. So I got opposition for the kind of choices that I made." (28M92A)

c. Peer Responses – Young Russians had the most to say about responses that they received from their peers as they shared their faith. Several had said that the opinions of their peers was one of the biggest challenges to their new faith, so this is an important issue for them, and they seem to be more sensitive to this opposition than to that which comes from Orthodoxy or even from parents.

i. Ridicule – It was common for young Russians to be ridiculed when their peers found out that they had become believers. Some of this may have been fairly passive, as in

the way friends looked at them when they shared their faith. "I had some close friends at the university. And I was trying to ask one of them if she believes in God, and she was telling me, 'Yes, I do.' And I was kind of trying to explain the whole message to her, but she was looking at me like I was crazy. Russian people have gotten used to the Orthodox religion, and something new seems strange to them." (22F95O) "I was so excited about my faith that I told everybody I knew. And they would look at me like I was crazy." (21F93O) Some of the persecution of this sort was mild. "I started to receive some kinds of mild persecution from friends. There were friends who thought that I was an idiot, but they weren't aggressive." (22M94O) Others were more direct in ridicule. "Not all my friends would sharply reject me, but one of them did. He called me a fanatic, or that I was losing my mind." (29M92A) "When you try to explain everything to them they don't listen to you. And when you say to them that even a little praying and reading the Bible could help, they usually, say, 'Are you crazy?' And then they laugh." (21M96A)

ii. Contention – Combined with ridicule was often an active contention against the new faith of the young Russians. A common tact was to assert that faith was something that was unnecessary. "My friends said to me that I was crazy. They knew me very well before I became a Christian, and they asked me, 'Why do you need this?' They realized that I was not a person who could be humble and gentle, and they couldn't put me and my faith together, because of my lifestyle." (18F97A) "My friends laughed about me, and always said, 'Why are you doing this, why are you going to church? You don't need this! Come back to us.'" (23F96A) Some would question how the young believer could accept this new lifestyle. "My friends questioned me. In the beginning I had unbelieving friends who were closer to me than anybody in the church. They would be asking me about God and what He required of me, and what He would make me do, and how I could ever agree to that." (25F93A) Contention could be very aggressive, as old friends tried to pull the young people away from their faith. "All of my old friends were opposing me in my faith. This one girl who was my friend, with whom I went to the Christian 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.' And then I had a school friend who was a close friend since we were nine years old. I invited her to one of the conferences. She came, and one girl from my institute came, and one night they were both just attacking me, telling me I should reject what I believed, and that I was a fool and crazy. 'You cannot really believe that stuff, can you?' The three of us were living in this room, and I was in the middle, just arguing and not giving up. So there was some big social pressure for me." (26F92A) Old friends tried to draw young believers back into their lifestyle of sin with various tactics. "Some of my friends thought I had become crazy. One friend said, 'You know what? God is in everything. God is in this rock. God is in that tree. And life is about being a good guy and a good friend and having a good family and good kids, and drinking vodka sometimes, having fun, and working hard. That's what life is all about. You need to drop that church you are going to.' He would say about the Bible, 'I tried that, and read the Bible. Come on, it is just fairy tales!' And some girlfriends would try to tempt me to live immorally. That was hard." (27M92A)

iii. Resentment and Anger – Some who witnessed for Christ received a more aggressive anger from those who heard the message. "Some people that I didn't even know very well responded aggressively. They would say, 'Shut up! What are you talking about?'"

What is this foolish stuff?" (15M99O) Some anger was brought on by immature approaches of the believers as they shared their faith. "The people I hung out with, but weren't really deep friends, didn't like the change in me. But my method of persuasion was kind of like, 'How are you so dumb not to understand this?' Now I'm not too surprised that they were opposed to this." (27M91A) "There were some who said, 'Stop bothering us with your God, and with your church!' They would say, 'You are the same as us.' Because I would try to witness to everybody. But I would contradict myself with my life, and everybody could see this." (23M98O)

iv. Concern for Sects – Some of the opposition and warnings echoed the parental concerns discussed above, that the young people were being drawn into sects. "My friends told me that this was just an American sect." (17M99O) After initial rebukes against the new believer failed, it was common to believe that they had been deceived and entangled in a false religion. "My friends would say, 'Why do you need this? Why do you believe? There's no way that you can prove that God exists.' And then, when I started changing, they thought that I was in some kind of sect." (15F99A) "Some of my friends said to me, 'What's with you? What has happened to you?' Some others said to me that that it was all nonsense, that I had been deceived and pulled into a sect." (13F99O) "At first my friends thought that I had joined a cult." (19F99O) Again, the issue of being "strange" was central to this opposition. "Some peers opposed me, but they were not my close friends. They told me that I was going to some bad place, and that those people are crazy, and that I was strange as well." (22F95O)

v. Trivializing – Another common response was to not take the new believer seriously for one reason or another. "I told my classmates, who weren't believers, about my conversion the next day. Their response was like, 'So what?'" (21M96A) "My Russian friends would sometimes joke about it, but it wasn't serious. Their parents were more against it than they were." (19F92J) Young Russians commonly accept a very minimal amount of religion, and don't take seriously the desire to go beyond this. "When I told some school friends about this, before school, they said that it was okay to just go to church, but you don't have to believe all that stuff." (15M99O) Another common form of trivializing was just to consider that the new believer was going through another phase. "My friends couldn't understand me, and thought that this was just my new hobby. But nobody gave me direct opposition." (18F99O) "I think that my close friends just thought that this was something I was doing, along with philosophy and other things." (25F93A) "My friends' attitudes were like, 'Well, maybe this is just her new fling.'" (23F92A)

vi. General Respect and Tolerance – Several young believers had friends who were more ready to accept them without opposition. "I'm thankful to God that I didn't have any opposition from peers. And even now, at the university, all my group knows that I am a believer, and I've had a chance to share the gospel with some of them. And they just accept this, and respect it with no opposition." (19F96A) "I told my friends that I had believed in Christ, and they said that this was my personal matter. My friends didn't oppose me." (15M96A) Those who came to Christ in the early 1990's lived in a time of more tolerance, and general respect was the cultural value. "At the time when most of the missionaries started coming in to Russia, in the early 1990's, and religion was starting to become more prominent, the attitude was like, 'Well, it is your personal decision, and if you want to change your life that way, you can.'" (23F92A) "My close friends and I had always respected each other's thoughts and beliefs, and we are still good friends, though we believe in different things. I wouldn't say that people that tell believers that they are crazy are good friends. It's more like

pals. My friendships were built on respect." (28F91M) Some earned respect from their peers by their lifestyle and attitude. "At first my friends thought that I had joined a cult. But then they were humbled, because they saw that I didn't care what they thought. And so, to keep our relationship, they just closed their eyes to the issue. They tried not to mention it. They would just say, 'Be careful.'" (19F99O) The gospel also had some effect on those who had contact with the new believers. "My friends were very surprised about me, and they started to think about the gospel more." (18F97A) Some had even quite felicitous circumstances with the friends around them. "All of my friends believed in Christ at the same time I did, so I had no peer opposition. I got positive responses in general from the people I knew. I didn't have any opposition." (21F98O)

vii. Lack of Influential Peers – The only young people who did not experience the reactions noted above were those who were lacking in close unbelieving friends for one reason or another. "I didn't have close friends whose opinions I would have sought, except one close friend who was with me at church, so I had no peer opposition." (32F92A) "I didn't really have any close relationships with my friends beforehand, and would be betrayed often beforehand as well. So opposition from friends was not a factor." (19M95O) Some young people had moved away from old friends, and so were starting out their Christian life without strong peer influence. "I didn't have opposition from friends, since I had left my old friends when I went to the university. Before that summer I had spent all my time with my old friends, but now I was placing all my attention on the youth group." (19M97O) "I didn't have any friends opposing, because God took me away from my old company and placed me in a new environment when we moved to a new city." (21M96A) The friends of one young woman had left her in the midst of a severe problem. "All of my friends had all of a sudden disappeared when I was in the midst of a difficult situation with my physical problems. So I didn't have any peer opposition." (21F94A) A common phenomenon was that young believers ended up with no unbelieving friends after their lives changed. "Now there were certain things that I couldn't do, and stopped doing. And this was hard to explain to my old friends. I guess I tried to still be friends, but our interests went in different directions. So I lost all my old friends." (21F93O) "My old friends said that I had gotten into a sect. Their attitude toward me changed. It wasn't very good to begin with, but when I became a believer it got worse. And I practically didn't communicate with them at all. Nobody wanted to socialize with me. This bothered me a little, and I didn't want to go to school." (20F94A)

5. Coping With Opposition – Given that young people faced many kinds of opposition, as noted above, how did they cope with it? All of those whom I interviewed stayed with their faith, so this section deals only with *successful* means of coping.

a. Orthodox Opposition – Some of the strongest direct opposition was from Orthodox sources. Young Russian converts had several ways of responding to that opposition.

i. Unconcerned with Denomination and National Identity – There was one group of young people that did not feel sensitive to the challenge at all. Many were not really aware of the fact that there were different branches of the Christian faith. "I didn't think about denominations, because I didn't even know about them." (26F92A) Others didn't feel that it was an important issue. "I had a normal attitude toward Orthodoxy. I thought that they are also a church, and we are all believers, and it doesn't matter which church you go to. The point is to be a believer." (21F96O) "I had been told at our meetings that all believers are brothers and sisters, and that denominations are not important, so I was not predisposed to be

opposed to Orthodoxy or to be too much for it. I guess I was just thinking that they were normal, and I didn't have much personal contacts with them." (27M91A) These young people did not have the idea that to be Russian was to be Orthodox. "I wasn't bothered by the idea that I am Russian and 'should be Orthodox.'" (23F96A) "It didn't bother me at all that I wasn't Orthodox." (27M92A) "Words like 'Russian – the only good church' would mean nothing to me. Rather, I would listen to what they were teaching about Christ, and then I would compare, and would either accept it or reject it." (26F92A) These young people saw the issue more in the simplicity of the Christian faith. "I tried to explain to Orthodox people who were opposing that we are just 'Christians.'" (21M96A) "I didn't have any feelings that the teaching I was getting was 'not Russian.' I thought it was simply classical biblical teaching. So I thought that it was right. I thought it was simply Christianity in its purest form." (23M98O) Finally, those who were Jewish had other reasons to have no connection with Orthodoxy. "I heard the opinion that I am Russian, and I should be Orthodox. But I am half Jewish and half Russian. And very often I heard that the Orthodox Church wouldn't treat the Jews well. I had a kind of fear that they wouldn't treat me well there. It wouldn't mean that I would reject them as a church, but I would just prefer not to go there. So concerning the opinion that if you are born in Russia you should be Orthodox – it didn't mean much to me." (29M92A)

ii. Unpersuaded by Orthodoxy – Other young Russians were more deeply aware of the controversy between Orthodox and evangelical believers, but didn't feel any strong persuasion to alter their path in the direction of Orthodoxy. There were several who either originally sympathized with the Orthodox position or would feel convinced by them in a dispute, but who later changed their minds. "Some Orthodox people say the only true religion is Orthodoxy, and that being Protestant is not good. At first, when I was not firm in my faith, I was on their side. I felt that it was not good for a person to change denominations. But after a while I realized that what they were saying was not that serious." (22M94A) "I felt this pressure from Orthodox people, and I started investigating the issue. And at first when someone tried to convince me of something, I would tend to believe them. But then, conflicts would arise in my mind, because this would disagree with what I had believed before. Then I would be honest with myself, and I couldn't accept their position. So there were only two ways for me – either accept what they were saying and reject what I had already believed, or doubt what they were saying and stay where I was. And I stayed." (26F92A) Some young people were frustrated that they could not defend their faith against Orthodox opposition. "My aunt was arguing against our faith. I felt a fear like the fear I would have of an adult and a relative. I felt uncomfortable and upset that I couldn't defend the truth. I was aware of what the differences were with Orthodoxy, and I felt that I wasn't able to defend myself. But I was ready to stand in my position." (25F93A) Others listened without much interest. "My long-time friend had a strong Orthodox grandmother, and so she was trying to persuade me not to believe as I did. But I don't think that I was ever strongly Orthodox, so I just let her say what she wanted to say." (22F95O)

One of the primary reasons given for not being persuaded by Orthodox people was the conviction that such people didn't really understand spiritual truth very well. "I just felt bad for them, because they don't understand. They were surprised to hear that Jesus died for all people, and some were surprised that Jesus was a Jew, and not Russian. I was surprised to hear that they thought that Jesus had been Russian, and this happened many times." (32F92A) Some opposition was thus without substance. "I didn't have any deep Orthodox friends, but just people who would consider themselves Orthodox, and they

couldn't even press their point. They would just say, 'Well, I think that it (your faith) is something wrong.' But it was nothing serious. They didn't really understand or know anything themselves, and they had meaningless opinions." (21F96O) One young woman was more direct about the lack of understanding she found among Orthodox people in opposition. "I heard on the radio and TV that I should be Orthodox and not Protestant. But I think that people don't know what the Protestant faith is all about. They don't even know what the Bible says about loving one another, and that salvation is through Jesus Christ. Orthodox people believe more in the traditions of the church. And they don't rely on what the Bible says. And I think that this is the problem – they just don't know enough." (19F96A) This kind of opposition grieved some of the young people who experienced it. "One time our group was on a train, and we were talking with one grandmother, and she said directly, 'Anything that is not Orthodox is a sect.' This both disappointed me and offended me. I knew that such people were around, but the first time it happened to me personally I had this reaction. I was offended that people didn't understand." (17M99O)

iii. Disillusioned with Orthodoxy – Many of the young people had either grown up with Orthodoxy, or had tried it out as they were seeking the truth. They did not accept Orthodox opposition because they had in fact already made a decision to turn away from Orthodoxy. "I wasn't bothered by Orthodox opposition to evangelical Christians, because I already knew that they were not right. You just go and spend time standing in this service and lighting candles, and nothing personal happens. I knew that I had something special that was changing my life. I had already rejected Orthodoxy, so I didn't care if there was opposition." (19M97O) "My disillusionment with Orthodoxy had already occurred way before the time I started hearing the gospel. I already understood that it was not true, and I wasn't afraid to leave it." (19F99O) "By the time I heard Orthodox opposition, I already didn't care about Orthodoxy at all." (19M95O) Disillusionment had various causes. Primary was the issue of the gospel. "I had quickly enough realized that they didn't teach you the salvation message there. And since this was the most important thing to me, there was no point in being there." (21F94A) Others pointed to the Orthodox forms, teachings, and practices with which they disagreed. "I went away from Orthodoxy when I saw real problems with their teaching. I saw their accent on Mary, and I was not pleased with this. It sounded like idolatry. And I also didn't like their emphasis on saints and relics." (28M92A) "When I was challenged I would respond that they light candles and take money for baptisms. And that's not right." (27M92A) One woman had personal experience with this. "Before I went to an evangelical church I visited an Orthodox church. And there were several times when I wanted to go into the church and get some information about how I could learn more. I went to the church to ask them to baptize my son. And they said, 'Okay, bring a towel and money.' And I asked, 'Is anything going to change in my life after I do this? Will I have any responsibility?' And they said, 'Just bring the towel and the money.' And I decided I wouldn't go there." (27F95A)

iv. Convinced by Evangelical Faith – Perhaps more important than a rejection of Orthodoxy was a conviction that the new believers had received the truth, and were not about to turn away from it. "By the time I got Orthodox opposition, I was already confident in what I believed." (26F92A) "I had to face much opposition from my aunts, but God really showed me Himself. I felt firm in what I believed, in spite of their arguments." (21F93O) "I never felt any internal problems with leaving the Orthodox church. Once I found what I had been searching for, I didn't have any issues about what church to go to or not to go to." (29F93O)

Some had felt at home in evangelical church in general ways from the beginning. "I believed that God was leading me to this place. I had believed in God, but I didn't know Him before this." (17F96O) "When I heard the sermons in the church before I repented, I knew that they were more close to me." (27F95A) Others saw the lives of others, and the changes in their own lives, and were convinced. "I knew that the people around me at the evangelical church were real Christians. I respected them a lot. And I felt the work of the Holy Spirit in me and I was growing. The leader would say that I was growing spiritually, and I felt for myself that I was growing spiritually." (26F92A) Key to the convictions of some were the doctrines that were taught, and their clarity in the Bible. "I knew that salvation was by grace, and that the church was not the building but the people. They would tell me things, and I would read the Bible, and I would see the truth of this in my life. I would understand what I was being taught, and it was logical, and it was based on Scripture. So I felt confident in what I believed, and I knew why I believed it." (26F92A) "I knew that the Orthodox Church said it was the only true one, but I saw the difference between what the Word of God taught and what they said." (23F96A)

b. Family Opposition – Young people had much less to say about dealing with opposition within their family, other than what was mentioned in the section above regarding the nature of that family opposition. The main struggle was gaining permission to go to meetings, and in the case of all these young people that battle was won. "I had some difficulty in protecting my right to go to church, but I continued to do so. From time to time my mom would try to hurt my feelings, but then within a year I was free to do what I wanted to." (26F92A) "I told my mother that I had become a believer. I had to tell them about the conference that I was going to. I prayed that they would let me go, because before that they never let me go anywhere, especially when I was going to go somewhere for several days. And God answered my prayers, and my parents calmly let me go without even asking me where I was going and why. They just quickly let me go. It was to me an answer to prayer. My parents never strongly opposed what I was doing. They were opposed, but I always prayed before I would talk with them. And God gave me the words to say that would convince them. I knew that I would not be able to say it in my own words. I didn't have any authority in my family, since I was the youngest one of the family. So God spoke through me, and I understand it that way because they would immediately let me go where I wanted to go." (20F94A)

c. Peer Opposition – Young Russians tended to downplay the issue of overcoming the peer opposition that was mentioned above. The only chord that was mentioned as being struck by the comments of opposing friends was that of one young woman: "I don't know how much of their opposition was in my own head, because I did think that those old ladies in the Orthodox church were crazy. I certainly did not want to appear like them or identify with them." (25F93A) Most young people mainly ignored the opposition. Some recognized that those who opposed were not true friends. "Some peers opposed me, but they were not close friends, so I didn't really care." (22F95O) "Maybe some people laughed at me a bit, but it didn't matter to me. I understood that those in the Christian group were my true friends. Maybe those others were just acquaintances." (15F99O) Christian friends were important for those experiencing opposition. "I made friends with one girl at my school who had believed in God at the same conference. This helped the situation." (20F94A) Others overcame opposition by the strength of their convictions. "I started to receive some kinds of mild persecution from friends, but I understood one thing: everybody else is wrong. They are

unbelievers, and I'm not going to listen to anything they say. I didn't care about their opposition." (22M94O) "With my friends, I just realized that they could ridicule me if they wanted to, but they couldn't take away what I already had. Something was in my heart between me and the Lord." (23F92A) Some turned opposition into an opportunity for a witness in one way or another. "My friends were humbled when they saw that I didn't care what they thought. And I had arguments for my faith, and could explain why I believed, so they had nothing to say against it." (19F99O) Opposition also produced some benefits that were appreciated. "I definitely became more willing to stand alone, and I learned what that meant. And after the Lord takes you through those experiences, he also gives you the joy of fellowship with other believers, and you can relate to each other in this." (23F92A)

D. Major Influences to Conversion Identified

In an earlier paper I presented many quotes from young Russians regarding how their hearts were prepared to receive the gospel, and also how their understanding and attitudes changed in the process of evangelism. In those sections are many statements regarding factors that influenced them in their path toward conversion. This section will not repeat all those statements, but will merely recap what some young people identified as the *major* influences toward their conversion. Most identified a combination of factors that worked together in the process. Others found it hard to identify any major factor other than simply responding to the gospel message. Some of these said that the factors listed below were not relevant to their process of responding to the gospel. Finally, and most importantly, the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be completely discerned by those who are being drawn to the Father. In spite of this, some benefit can be derived from hearing how a few young Russians described the key influences that led them to respond to Christ, and that is the purpose of this section.

1. Fulfillment of a Search – Some young people were already on a conscious quest for something, and found in Jesus and the gospel message the answer to their search. The object of the searches differed based on the felt needs of each individual, but these can generally be categorized into intellectual, emotional and volitional seeking and finding (although there is certainly a bit of each involved in the heart of each seeker).

a. Rational Searches – Some who had intellectual questions found the answers to these questions in the Christian faith and were influenced by the ability of the Bible to provide satisfaction to their intellectual needs. "I was asking ultimate questions, trying to make sense out of life. This was the prime mover for me in my seeking. And I was very attracted by the logic of Western Protestantism – its accuracy, clarity, and understandability. I was really impressed by the perfection of the Christian philosophy and world view. It all fit together perfectly. It had everything in its right place, and nothing could stand in comparison with it. There were rational answers to everything." (28M92A) "The biggest attraction of the gospel to me was probably that it gave sense to life, especially in how it answered so many questions. For example, I had the question about why everything in nature is so beautiful, and when humans come then it becomes ugly. And that Bible answered that. Also, if man is good, and if humanism is right, then why are men doing such bad things? If children are little angels, why do they grow up like monsters? And the truth about the sinful nature explained a lot to me. So for me, at the beginning the most important thing was how the Bible explained everything." (28F91M)

b. Emotional Searches – Other Russian young people sought answers to inner voids that they felt, which had to do more with the affective domain. They found the answers in Jesus, and the new life He gave them. "Before I became a Christian I had no desire to do anything. My whole life seemed gray to me. It was so dull. So I was driven by my desire to escape this. When I trusted Christ, life acquired taste and color. It became worth living. I felt that I could grow forever in God. I had sensed a need to grow, but had not known which way to grow. But I found this when I trusted Christ." (26M94O) "What was most important was that I was seeking God. And I realized that this was not just a religion, but it was what I was looking for – a relationship with God. Before this, I had been too much into knowledge and science." (32F92A)

c. Volitional Searches – The third general category of seeking and finding had to do with seeking direction for the exercise of the will, and finding the hope for this in the will of God. "What I found was hope. Before my Christian life I relied only upon my own efforts. Now I can rely fully on God and His will." (18F99O) The seeking for one young man began with a desire to escape the emptiness of his behaviors. "I came to Jesus partly because I wanted to change my life. I had really bad friends. We smoked, and fought with others, and I would come home all beat up. I was tired of this. At first I liked it, but then I wanted to get away from their influence on me. And then I heard at the camp that my life could change." (15M96A) The Christian life offered a direction that was unique for each individual, and one young woman was attracted by this truth. "What I found was probably close to what I hoped would be the solution to my problems. I had understood that my life was always going to be exactly like that of my parents and grandparents. But then I discovered that God's will is for your own personal life, and one need not live a copy of other people's lives. God is going to give a special purpose in life, and this is what is going to make a difference and make your life count – and this is one of the things that I had struggled with before." (23F92A)

2. Observing Believers – Many young Russians were most heavily influenced by what they saw in the lives of believers as they observed them in various situations. Something that they observed triggered an inner spiritual thirst or gave them a conviction that what they were seeing was real and true.

a. Different from the Norm – This is the most general category of what young Russians observed and by which they were impressed. Christians were different in ways that was attractive to them. "At the camp I saw all these Christian people around me, and I saw that my life was different from theirs. I wanted my life to be like theirs." (13F99O) "At the camp I saw that there was a difference between believers and unbelievers. And then I thought that maybe in fact there is something that gives them this joy and love and fellowship. And then I believed that God exists, because when they prayed out loud they put all their cares on God. So looking at the believers helped me to believe in God." (17M99O) "I was watching the believers, and I wanted to have what they had." (23F96A) "Observing how the Christians lived was a very important influence on me. Almost from the first time I met them I saw that they were different from other young people." (22F95O) This difference showed a spiritual reality, working among normal people, that was convincing. "Before my conversion I had an idea that at some time God was going to change my life somehow. But you can't do this alone, with no hope and no example. It was important that the believers that I saw were normal people, and that their faith works for real. Since I saw that these people were living for God, and that it worked in their lives, I asked myself why I shouldn't do this as well." (22M94O) The first experience of this spiritual reality was not necessarily pleasant, as one

young man discovered when he joined a group for prayer for the first time. "When they started praying, I wanted to join them, but I felt that I just couldn't. And suddenly I felt myself to be so dirty, so filthy, so unclean. It was a very intense feeling." But this unpleasant feeling opened his heart to receive the message of forgiveness.

b. Integrity and Consistency – A more specific manifestation of the reality of spiritual lives in believers was found in their unfeigned lives. That is, they practiced the truths of which they spoke, and this consistency was an important influence for many young Russians. "My whole life was impacted by the way these people lived. We didn't see any contradictions between their words and their actions. And we would spend much time together with them in different kinds of circumstances. So we saw them in their real lives." (26M94O) Simple aspects of the Christian life were influential to those observing them. "I spent a lot of time with this one Christian. I would watch him, how he would read the Bible and pray, and he would just be a friend to me – not teaching me all the time or trying to push me or anything." (21M96A) "I saw how they loved God. They would read the Bible, and they prayed. And that was strange for me, but I liked it. We had never done this in my family." (19F92J) To see lives lived according to the Bible was strange and new for many. "These people lived according to the Bible, and this was influential to me. We watched their family and their children, and it was amazing to us because we weren't used to this way of life in our own families. Our families didn't live according to the Bible." (21F98O) Seeing people apply the Bible to their lives made it seem relevant for the first time. "At first I had some difficulty believing in the message, because I thought that the Bible was just a book of history. But when I watched people closely, I thought that maybe it wasn't simply that. They would get their prayers answered. I could see something in their eyes, and then I thought that they must really believe in this person in their hearts. These people were applying the Bible to situations in their lives. And that's what made it real – it can really work, and can be applied to your life." (23F92A) "The message impacted me a lot, but there were also people. I saw so much freedom in their eyes, and so much love and so much light." (21F93O) That is, the light of life and the light of truth worked together to deeply impact this seeker.

c. Peace and Joy – When young people spoke of aspects of Christian lives that most attracted them to the gospel, peace and joy were often mentioned. "When they sang, they smiled, and I saw peace on their faces. And it just made me cry. And 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. I knew that they had something that I was seeking. And because of that, I believed what they were telling me.'" (21F92A) "I was watching the lives of the believers and their attitudes to life and to me. They had joy in their life, and they had hope, whereas I was without hope." (21M96A) "I wanted the difference that I saw in the believers. I saw how Jesus gave joy and peace to people." (19F96A) One girl found peace in believers in an unusual way. "In this Christian family a relative had died. We went to the funeral, and I noticed that people were not weeping like in Russia. And that was very strange for me. And I asked why this was so. I said, 'You guys need to cry – why are you kind of happy?' And they explained to me that this relative was in Heaven. And now I began to really think about this." (19F92J)

d. Commitment and Devotion – Finally, some young Russians were impacted by observing the sacrifices that Christians had made in their devotion to serve God. This was usually due to the fact that foreign believers had come to Russia to minister the gospel. "It was strange that they said that God had led them to come to Russia and live. For an

American to go to live in Russia was very strange to me." (19F92J) "At first I didn't trust the Americans. But then I got to know better the kind of people these Americans were, and what they did. For example, I saw their devotion in coming to us. When I recognized how these guys lived and what they did, I was impressed. Their example was a very convincing thing." (28M92A) "The greatest evidence for me was a young missionary's life. He had a college education and gave up a good career to come to Russia as a missionary instead of making money. This really spoke to me. I thought, 'His faith means so much to him, to give up all these things.' This influenced me." (32F92A)

3. Relationships with Believers – Beyond the detached observation of the lives of believers, actual relationships with them were commonly deciding influences on young Russians as they contemplated the call of the gospel. These relationships provided that which was needed for these young people to experience the reality of the gospel.

a. Genuine Friendship – The simple factor of true friendship was an important factor in the evangelistic ministry. "The leaders spent a lot of time with us, not only to study the Bible, but also to make friends with all of us." (26M94O) "Looking back, I think that the best thing done in my case in the evangelistic process was that it was done through friends and people that I respected. It was 'kitchen evangelism.' Drinking tea and talking and talking. For me this was the best way to come to Christ. I was a doubting person, and would only believe the words of a person I respected." (28F91M) Friendships can only be proven through time, and young Russians watched closely to see if the interest in them was genuine. "I felt that these people were really my friends, and weren't just people who need you for something." (22F95O) "Her willingness to talk with me was very important. I could see this in her eyes, that I wasn't just taking up her time. This is very important for Russians. We don't want to take up somebody else's time in this way. We are more reserved than Americans, and so we are very cautious and we notice little signs of irritation or impatience, or 'I've got to go' type signs. But she was so willing to talk even late into the night with me." (23F92A) These young people could sense the difference between genuine love and a 'gospel agenda,' and this made the difference for them. "When they would come talk to me, the ones who impacted me were the ones who were really interested in me as a person, and who loved me no matter what, and their purpose was not to 'preach the gospel,' but to be my friend. So God really used people in this way." (21F93O)

b. Support and Guidance – One aspect of genuine friendship that impacted young people was consistent support and personal guidance on the part of the believers. "The most important thing that people did was to support and encourage me and help me step by step." (19F99O) "They would give me advice from the point of view of the Bible, and they would tell me that they were praying for me." (21M96A) The most important aspect of this guidance was that it was personalized. "She was willing to answer my questions, exactly the ones that I was asking. It wasn't like, 'Okay, boom, boom, boom, let me check this off. Okay, you realize this, you realize that,' and so on. She related to my individual situation and the questions that I had." (23F92A) "I think it was harder for me to understand the teachings in the meetings. I often had lots of questions, and I am glad that I had people who could answer them personally." (22F95O) Encouragement on a consistent basis made the difference for one young man. "I went back to the meeting the next week, and the week after that, and he was there all the time to encourage me. And he would come greet me, and he would be smiling at me, and I loved it. And the more I kept going there, it came to the point that for the whole week I was just waiting for the day of the next meeting to come. There was something

in this young man that was pulling me towards him, and I couldn't explain what it was." (19M95O)

c. Kindness and Gentle Treatment – A little bit of kindness went a long way with several young Russians who had not always experienced this in their lives. "They were always kind to me and smiling at me. And they never said any rude words to me, and they didn't want me to do bad things – and this agreed with what I knew was important. Their kindness was important." (22F95O) Young women were impressed by how young Christian men treated them. "A young man I met treated me and everyone like a gentleman. And none of my boyfriends were like that. So I would believe what they would share with me about the gospel. I wanted to be like them." (21F92A) Acts of kindness touched hearts among the young people. "Once I had to go to the hospital for three weeks, and they were the ones who came to visit me, and they brought me food and Christian books to read. I understood through this that they were different from others." (21M96A)

4. Response to Persuasion – The gospel itself is a call to a new faith and life, and preaching the gospel always involves at least some level of persuasion. However, some people are not very responsive to the gospel until a believer applies some personal persuasion to act. And yet, for Russian young people, this kind of persuasion was rarely a key factor in their conversion. Several young people expressed the opposite sentiment, that they had been hindered by feelings of being pressured, and wanted to respond at their own pace. "If I didn't understand something, I wasn't going to act on it just because somebody told me to do this. I didn't want to become a believer just because *they* wanted me to. And I felt a pressure to respond to the gospel before I was ready." (22M94O) "People had been trying to persuade me to accept Christ, and I often felt pressured. I don't like it when people tell me that I have to do something. It's okay if they ask me, but not tell me that I have to do something." (19F92J) Others didn't feel wrongly pressured, but simply didn't respond to persuasion. "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 feeling that I was not ready for it. I wasn't yet serious about it, and would say, 'Alright, alright, just give me time.' And they never tried to push me. They accepted it when I told them that I wasn't ready to make this decision. So I didn't respond to persuasion as an important influence." (22F95O) Several others mentioned that they had never had anybody apply any personal persuasion to them at all, and responded freely to the gospel. "Nobody was personally trying to persuade me. I just heard the gospel in the teaching during Sunday School. I heard persuasion, but not personally to me." (32F92A) "Nobody tried to persuade me personally to accept Christ – all the teaching was in the group." (19F96A)

There were a few who did point to persuasion as an important factor in their response to the gospel. For one girl, it helped her overcome procrastination. "My roommate explained to me the whole picture of salvation. Before this I had heard bits and pieces of the gospel, but hadn't heard the whole picture. She asked me if I wanted to make a decision. And I said, 'Well I do, but I really want to think through it some more, and I don't want to make a decision now.' I think I was procrastinating because of fear. I knew that I would have to change my life. And so I was tempted to say, 'Well, I'll think about it tomorrow.' But then she made it so vivid in my mind that I should decide right then, since I didn't know what would happen to me even the next minute. And we talked about it some more, and I accepted the Lord well into the night." (23F92A) Careful discernment is required to detect if a person needs to be persuaded, or if further persuasion will cause resentment. One young man had

heard the gospel for a long time, but feels that he should have been persuaded more personally. "I think I needed someone who would sit down and talk to me face to face, and explain things to me personally and challenge me. Nobody was directly, personally trying to persuade me to accept Christ. I wasn't asked any deep questions about my life or about my spiritual life." (21M96A)

5. Key Truths – The gospel itself is the key truth that must be understood and accepted in the conversion process. And for some young people, it was simply the presentation of the gospel as a whole that was their key to their conversion. "I had been given various pieces of the gospel before this one meeting, but it had never been put together as it was at that time." (21F92A) In the early 1990's the simple truths of the gospel brought about some dramatic results. "What they were saying at the meeting was very surprising to me. They were only talking about the basics of the gospel that today many unbelievers have heard on TV. But at that time there was nothing like this. All these simple things they told me - I couldn't believe it could actually be true. I received it all with an open mouth. I was thinking, 'Yes!, Yes!'" (29F92O) For others it was the same overall gospel truth that dawned on them, but more gradually. "I had heard others say that they heard something, and the light turned on. But for me it was step by step as I sought for wisdom. I got to know a little, and practiced it, and got to know a little more." (22M94O) The gospel as a whole, however, contains many individual propositions of truth. For some young people, one key proposition was the central influence on them as they were processing the overall gospel message.

a. Truths Regarding the Existence and Nature of God – In a country where atheism was long the accepted state dogma, simple truths about the existence of God were profoundly effective in moving some young Russians toward God. "My friend and I started to talk with this one young Russian man. He didn't say anything particular. But we sat down and he said to us, 'First of all, girls, God really exists.' I remember that this really blew my mind. This thought remained in my head and I started thinking about it. And then I *wanted* God to exist. I realized that I liked this idea." (26F92A) "A man in this meeting was talking about creation, and showing these slides about how beautiful the world is, and how it couldn't exist through evolution. There must be a God who created all this beauty. And I thought, 'This is what I have always been thinking inside.' I wouldn't say it in words, but I felt it. And so I believed him immediately and completely. I thought, 'This guy is right. This guy is telling the truth.'" (28F91M) Regarding the nature of God, one of the main key truths that affected young Russians was that God is loving and good. "To me it was important that God is good – He is not an old man somewhere who is just going to punish me. This was consistent with what I had believed as a child. The feeling was close to that feeling. So it felt like something I had been looking for." (22M94O) "The message about God's love really impressed me, because I had heard before that God was anything but a loving God, and that helped me." (32F92A)

b. Truths Regarding the Nature and Needs of Man – The lost estate of man is part of the gospel message, but for some young people the personalization of this truth was a key factor in their conversion process. One young woman was shaken by the notion that man is separated from God. "One day I came to my brother's house after I had problems with my boyfriend. I started to tell my brother's friend (a believer) about it. He said a phrase to me, after which I started thinking. He said, 'Without God, it is always like that.' And I started thinking, 'How come? I am without God? Nobody knows who is without God here.' And he asked me if I knew God. And I thought, 'What a foolish thing! You ask me if I know God?' I

said to him, 'I'm a believer.' And then he asked, 'What is the expression of your faith?' And that was an important question for me. It turned out that all my faith had only to do with quoting some verses, and nothing else. And now I began to be troubled that I didn't belong to God, and had nothing to do with God, because now I understood this." (19F99O) The law of God had the effect of waking some up to their sinfulness. "It was important for me to hear the truths about the Ten Commandments, and through this I saw that I was actually a sinner. Before this I thought that I was not really a sinner. The explanation about the meaning of the Ten Commandments was really important." (22F95O) The notion of being a lost sinner could also have a positive effect, bringing willing acceptance. "I heard about sin at the concert, and I thought, 'Oh, yes, that's right. I am a sinner.' I agreed that this was true. They described what sin really was so that I could understand it. There were a lot of dramas about sin and sinners that they showed. This was an important truth for me to hear." (17F96O) One young man who had tried to overcome sin in other ways found that the message of his sinfulness met his newly discovered need perfectly. "I was trying to practice integrated yoga. In this you had to practice morality in order to get through to enlightenment. So I tried to be my best, to be good. But I found 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. This was a crushing blow. I could not answer my spiritual needs, and become better, by way of integrated yoga. I was fully in the dirt. It was a humbling experience. And at this moment the gospel became very clear to me, because I realized that what was holding me back was sin. That clicked. I was trying to overcome sin, but I was fully in sin, and not able to overcome it. And then I read in the gospels that this was the very purpose for Christ to come. Religions were telling me ten steps to get myself out of sin, and Christ was saying that you can't do this in the first place. He came into the world to take our sins away, and did this, and you have to believe. So that was the point at which I really started to be moving toward believing in the gospel. That was when I got my answer." (28M92A)

c. Various Aspects of the Gospel Message – The central truth that Jesus had died to pay the penalty for sins was a profound revelation for several young Russians. "He told me that Jesus had died for my sins. I didn't really even know that He had died for my sins. I knew a lot about Orthodoxy, but I didn't really know a lot about Christianity. I didn't know why He had died, or who He was. I never knew that there was a possibility to become a child of God, and I had joy to learn this." (19F99O) "At the meeting I came to understand more clearly that Jesus Christ came to earth to die for me. I knew I was bad, and wondered how could He die for someone bad like I was. But they said that He knew everything about me (and yet had died for me). This was a new conviction for me." (21F92A) The message of Jesus' death was powerful to one young man who had recently been made aware of how sinful he was by observing the lives of believers at a prayer meeting. "I went home, and I really felt that God would never accept such a dirty, such a filthy, such a stinking person. That was a terrible feeling. I felt doomed for Hell, that was for sure. But I decided to go to the next Sunday service anyway. And then I finally heard that Jesus died *even for me*. He died for this filthy, dirty, stinking person. I remember that it was very dramatic for me. I wept, I felt completely undeserving. And that's the way it happened." (29M92A) The way to salvation by faith, apart from good works, was another key truth for a few. "I was amazed by the words that it was not from you, but it is a gift from God, not of works, and that nobody can boast (from Ephesians 2:89-9). I remembered this, and it stuck in my head. Not from you, but a gift from God. Maybe this was the first time that I comprehended at least a part of

the gospel." (26F92A) One young Russian who was attempting a syncretistic approach to religion was shaken by the exclusivity of Jesus. "I was trying hard to harmonize all religions. That was my biggest goal. But then I got in touch with Christianity as part of my studies. At first I was pretty confident that I could integrate it into my beliefs. And then I was really shocked at the ultimate claims of Christ. Now I realized I had to make a choice between my ideas and Christ. I recognized that they were saying completely different things, and they cannot be harmonized." (28M92A)

d. Various Aspects of the Christian Life – Some young Russians were more impacted by the nature of the life to which they were being called, looking beyond the message of forgiveness to the message of new life. Certainly the gospel message was the key truth, but the truth of what the new life was going to be like was a key to their acceptance of the gospel. Some who had feared that Christianity called them to live a strange life were moved by a clearer understanding of what God was calling for. "The truths that were good for me were those that gave me freedom, and acceptance of the way that I am – without, of course, undermining the truth of the gospel, and the need for moral change. I was afraid of what Orthodoxy would require of me. As a teenager, I didn't want to be a stranger among my classmates by wearing long, dark skirts and no makeup. To learn that this was not required, and that I could be myself, gave me a feeling of sweet freedom and acceptance. And I could visualize how I could take the changes that were indeed required of me, without taking on the social stress that I was afraid of." (25F93A) The notion of a good God whose changes were desirable was another important truth. "Now I had the idea that God would only change me for the better – so I wasn't scared about any changes that were needed in my life." (32F92A) One girl who had wanted to be good found in the Christian life a reason for being good without worrying about what others would think. "The thing that attracted me to the faith was that if God exists, then you can do right things without the fear of being ashamed or not being accepted. There are true standards. People in the world who do good things are not accepted by the world – they are laughed at. But now I had a reason to be good." (26F92A) A life of direct fellowship with God was an important attraction to one young woman. "To me it was such a relief to recognize that I don't have to go through an Orthodox priest or somebody else – because my life is so different from that priest's life, or that other person's life – but I can go directly to the Lord and He can answer me. That was a feeling of relief." (23F92A)

E. Time Frame in the Conversion Process

This research is qualitative research, in which information was gathered through interviews and no statistical information was sought. However, I did gather some information informally through my interviews regarding the time frame of the conversion processes of those I interviewed, and a few words can be said about my findings. These results are not to be considered scientific – that is, they are not based on careful sampling or well-designed surveys. In addition, identifying the points of time involved in the conversion process was often a difficult task for those I interviewed. In spite of this, and taking into account a margin of error, the results are helpful to consider.

I asked each person to identify the point in time at which they first began hearing a clear presentation of the gospel, and the point in time which they identify as that of their conversion to calculate the time between first hearing and conversation (hereafter called "conversion period."). To avoid the distortion of extreme numbers, I dropped the three top

and three bottom totals, which tended to distort the average. For the remaining group as a whole (39 individuals), the average conversion period was just over 12 months. Only six of the total 43 young people reported that they were converted the first time they heard the gospel.

I also did a few calculations to see if there were differences in the average conversion period among people based on age (converted as a young teenager or an older teenager) or background (Orthodox versus Atheist, for example). These averages differed from each other slightly, but were always less than one month more or less than the overall average, an insignificant difference given the sample size and the method of gathering the data. The only significant variance that I detected was between those converted in 1994 and prior as compared to those converted in 1995 or later. The average conversion period for the former group was around 10 months, and for the latter group was around 16 months. So, at least among my small sample, young people took longer to respond to the gospel in the second half of the 1990's than they did in the first half of the decade. This is consistent with many factors I discovered in my interviews, including the increased Orthodox opposition and the growing invasion of alternate options (largely from Western pop culture) that have become an increasing barrier to young people since the early 1990's. At the very least, we can say that people doing evangelism should not be surprised if it takes a year or so for most young people to come to Christ after their first exposure to the gospel. Some responded much more quickly; others took much longer. But an expectation of commonly quick responses is unrealistic.

III. CONCLUSIONS

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 conversion process.

1. Point of Faith Fixation – It seems to me that a naïve assumption exists that the job of evangelism is to focus attention on a certain and recognizable point of decision. Although it is not uncommon for people to experience such a dramatic point, it is not the universal experience of those who come to faith in Christ. A fixation on such a point leads people to call for a point in time decision as opposed to a living and real faith. Such rituals as the "sinner's prayer" are not found in Scripture. Nowhere are we told to "ask Jesus into our heart." The focus should be on truly believing the gospel message, and saving faith can be bypassed if a visible step is offered that requires only the mouthing of a prayer.

2. Unnatural Assurance – Those leading people to Christ can do great harm by offering artificial assurance of salvation. "Of course you are saved. You prayed the prayer, didn't you?" The fact is that we cannot *give* assurance of salvation. We can only give solid biblical teaching that will help people understand the basis and expected results of salvation. True assurance comes as young people understand the gospel, believe it, and begin to see God working in their lives. Faith-testing experiences and ministry involvement are used by God to prove to the new believer that their faith is real. Don't short-circuit this critical process by assuring anybody of something that may not be true.

3. Love Opens Hearts – Young Russians repeatedly stressed how important it was to observe and experience the love of believers. Those preaching the gospel among these young people are being closely watched. Your life should demonstrate what you say the Bible promises. Love is patient and kind, and so patience and kindness should be your approach with those with whom you are sharing the gospel. Each young person is unique, with his or her own desires and motives. A personal relationship is required in order to know how to apply the Scripture to their particular situation, even among those that quickly respond to a gospel presentation in a group. Detached preaching is limited. True love works deeply, and is proved to be genuine only over time. Any unbeliever can pretend to be loving and caring in a short burst of time in one evening. Let your love be proven as real – and thus from God.

4. Preparation for Opposition – This point may be concerned more with what one might consider the "discipling" process as opposed to the process of evangelism. However, many who are considering the gospel are in for severe opposition in the Russian culture – among peers, family, and Orthodox believers. Opposition must be taken very seriously, and must be dealt with from the beginning. We know that it will occur, and those considering the gospel must know that we are aware of this and have biblical explanation for it. Properly understood, opposition is friend to true faith. We must know how to enlist it as a friend, and not be defeated by it as an enemy.