

***MAKE IT PROFOUND AND PERSONAL:***

Evaluations of Western Evangelistic Methods

Within the Modern Youth Context

by Young Russian Evangelical Converts

in the Greater Moscow Area

by

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## CONTENTS

<b>GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT</b>	1
Introduction 1/ Background 1/ Research Approach 1/ Research Boundaries 1/ Limitations of Findings 1/ Other Introductory Notes 2	
<b>RESULTS OF RESEARCH – CRITIQUES AND SUGGESTIONS</b>	3
<b>Suggestions Regarding the Content of the Message</b>	3
Teach the Whole Truth 3/ Teach Deeply 4/ Adapt Your Teaching 5/ Free Your Message of Foreign Elements 6	
<b>Suggestions Regarding the Delivery of the Message</b>	8
Minimize Monologues 8/ Do Away With Scripts 8/ Communicate Truths Progressively and in Good Measure 9/ Eliminate Manipulative Techniques 10	
<b>Suggestions Regarding the Character of the Messenger</b>	11
Be Loving 12/ Be Godly in Character and Attitude 13/ Be Genuine 14/ Be Wise 14/ Be Discerning 14	
<b>Suggestions Regarding Building Relationships</b>	15
Relate to the Individual 16/ Promote Mutual Respect 16/ Expect Mistrust 17/ Win a Hearing 18/ Aim for Heart Fellowship 20/ Commit Yourself to People 20	
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	21

## 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 general 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, through a series of individual interviews, to discover the ways that Russian youth themselves describe their conversion process and experiences. 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, during, and following their conversion. 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 or opinion. 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 Western evangelistic approaches. 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 final one of four papers on four related topics regarding Russian youth. The first three papers are concerned with: (1) The background of religious beliefs, attitudes and practices of the young Russian converts, (2) Selected factors in coming to an understanding and appreciation of the gospel by that group, and (3) The experience of conversion to Jesus Christ as reported by the group. This paper consists 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 – CRITIQUES AND SUGGESTIONS

The interview questions that elicited the responses found in this paper were relatively simple. First I asked young people to tell me what they think was done right or wrong as the gospel was communicated to them by Westerners (or by Russians trained by Westerners). I then asked them why they think that this or that approach was right or wrong. I followed this up with further questions regarding evangelistic approaches that they know about or have seen elsewhere, seeking their opinions of these as well.

I then categorized their responses, and have placed them in order from the more objective to the more subjective factors in the gospel communication process. The opposite direction could just as easily have been taken. In fact, the principles are interrelated, since all the parts of the communication process work together. For the same reason, a great deal of overlap is in evidence, and some quotes could fit into several categories. The communication of the gospel is a rich and complex process whose components do not exist in isolation from one another. Yet these components can be examined analytically, and that is a goal of this paper.

The answers of the young people commonly took the form of trouble-shooting critiques of Western approaches that they identified as being ineffective in Russia. Each of their criticisms implied the need for opposite approaches, whether good examples of that opposite approach were specifically identified. With this in mind, I have stated my outline points in the form of their implied or stated recommendation for Westerners as they do evangelism in Russia. I have categorized the suggestions into four categories that suggest four related components of communication: the content of the message, the delivery of the message, the character of the messenger, and the nature of the relationship between the messenger and the receiver.

Furthermore, critiques came from two basic directions. The first was a cultural direction, in which the critique was based upon a lack of proper contextualization of the gospel message or its packaging into the Russian youth scene. The second was a biblical/theological direction, in which the basic critique would be valid in any cultural context. I haven't always made this distinction overtly in this paper, and in fact at times the two directions were inextricably bound in a particular critique. I invite the reader to consider the matter of which principles are universal and which are bound to the Russian youth context.

### A. Suggestions Regarding the Content of the Message

According to the young Russians I interviewed, Westerners who preach in Russia must take care how they define and explain the gospel. The message must include all the important biblical truths, it must not be made shallow or simplified, it should be properly adapted to the audience, and it must not be mixed with unnecessary or unbiblical elements.

**1. Teach the Whole Truth** – Russian young people noted that many Westerners tend to be selective in their presentation of the gospel. They want to make the gospel acceptable, and so emphasize that which is attractive and downplay or even leave out elements that are not attractive. The resulting imbalance can cause the truth to be misunderstood and the gospel instructions to be misleading. One way this can be done is by emphasizing the blessings of salvation and eternal life without being open about the need for repentance from sin. "You really have to convince people that they are sinners, and not to simply promise them all these blessings and mercies and eternal life. Because they need to hate that sin, like God hates it, to sincerely repent of it." (21F94A) "When I was being evangelized, nobody told me that I had to (as Jesus said) deny myself and hate my life. And that is hard and painful, and you have to

think much about this beforehand. It is not pleasant to hear." (23M98O) One young man gave a sobering (though extreme) example of how an imbalanced message had misled one young man: "I'm involved in a prison ministry. And they had one guy who was most spiritually active in there. And in a couple of months I found out that he had killed two people (after his supposed conversion). One time he looked at me and said, 'You know what? I didn't really understand that I would have to change when I came to Christ.' I was shocked. So many people think that nothing has to change, it is just that now God will help you. They think, 'I just added God onto my life, and now I have insurance that I'm going to go to Heaven.' There is no exchange of my life for Christ's life, there is no death to self, no taking up of the cross – there is no realization of the cost. It is just, 'I'm going to pray a prayer.'" (19M95O)

Another related means of imbalance is to present the Christian life largely as a means to get one's "needs" met. The inadequacy of that approach is described by another young man. "No person would ever stay long with the Lord for the sake of satisfaction of a specific need. There is only one need that would keep him with the Lord – the need of being saved and to live with the Savior. This is the only need that will keep one with the Lord. With other things, either the person would get disappointed if the Lord would delay in the satisfaction of certain needs, or else the person will have the needs satisfied, and then forget about the Lord. ('Why would I need Him? I got what I wanted.') That person may even stay a little bit pious, and come to church from time to time, but would think, 'Well, I already have my needs satisfied.' But this is not the gospel. The gospel is very simple - that Christ died for your sins. And that should be ahead of everything. All the other things are secondary. Your physical or emotional needs are 'soulish' needs (I'm not talking about spiritual needs – you can have hope about your spiritual needs if you get saved). But the gospel gets to the core – your sinfulness." (29M92A)

Imbalance is also identified in the way that assurance of salvation is given to many supposed new converts based on simply having heard the gospel and prayed a "sinner's prayer," without regard to adequate understanding or evidence of life change. One young Russian who was trained in this approach now sees the problem with it. "I really believe in the assurance of salvation. But I agree, along with possibly most Russians, that we should not give assurance of salvation the first time we meet. I believe that this is starting to be used merely as a formula. You know, you get through this first page, and then you get through the second page, and so on. And I've personally made several mistakes in this, where I have given people assurance of salvation and then they turn out to be unbelievers, and their lives are a total mess. They were not believers, but they believed that they were believers." (28M92A) Young Russians have also seen that easy assurance is even sometimes combined with warnings not to doubt this assurance. "One of the things which is really terrible, and which is widely preached in Protestant churches, is that to doubt your salvation is a sin. So when I would ask myself, 'How do you know you are saved?', my religious conscience would then say, 'Ha - you doubt that you are saved! It is a sin! Don't doubt.' And I would run away from these doubts. But it is written, 'Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.' (II Cor. 13:5). You *have* to test yourself." (22M94O)

**2. Teach Deeply** – Westerners have a burden to make the gospel understandable and clear. But in the opinion of many young Russians, this effort often results in taking truths that include mysteries and complexities and making it sound like they are simple and obvious. By reducing great truths to simplistic formulas, many appear to have a lack of reverence for the gospel, and communicate that they don't have much appreciation for mystery and depth.

Much of this sense of awe and mystery can be traced to the Orthodox influence in Russian thinking. "Orthodoxy was attractive to me in its emphasis on the mystery of God. When you understand God in these mystery terms, it sounds much more deep and wise and mysterious. And that is a more appealing picture of God to the Russian mind than the Western clear, loving, '4-law' God. With Protestantism, you are asking yourself, 'Am I getting a simplified version of the truth? That is, maybe the Western teaching is clearer to understand, but maybe it is a simplified version. Maybe God is more like this other idea, and is more consistent with this mysterious attitude and insight and whatever. So when I read some American evangelical writings, I thought that they were pretty much shallow, and not really deep enough." (28M92A)

One young man characterized the form and spirit that these simplistic messages often take: "I would read this sort of passage: 'If you pray this prayer, RIGHT NOW, then the Holy Spirit is going to COME INTO YOUR HEART, and THEN....' and so on. I didn't really understand, but I thought that it was wrong. It doesn't happen like this, that just because you pray this sinner's prayer then the Holy Spirit is going to come into your heart. But this is a part of Protestant doctrine." (22M94O) Note that he identifies this as a "Protestant doctrine." Others experienced similar explanations. "At the Western church where I first attended, they would think that this little booklet was enough. They would think that if a person mechanically prays this prayer, then he is saved. It was done wrong." (26F92A) "In the view of the people in our church, Christianity was just like an easy thing, especially in the beginning. Just a simple step, and God gives you the Holy Spirit, and that's it. And now I understand that this is not the way it is." (23M98O)

Elements of depth are missing from this approach, as young Russians maintained. The gospel cannot be taken so lightly. "It sometimes sounded like, 'Just repent, and you'll be with God, and you'll be saved, no matter what you do, and you won't lose it.' But if someone has truly repented of their sins, they don't take that decision lightly, such as ' Well, I repented of my sins, and that's it. Now I'm saved.'" (21F94A) Shallow methods led to shallow responses among Russians. "I think that people shouldn't use the bridge-type diagram and prayer in evangelism. You just draw the diagram and then you say, 'Let's pray a sinner's prayer.' Because Russians will just repeat after you when nothing is happening on the inside. Especially in the past, there were usually a lot of foreigners with you. And it was interesting to talk with them. And whatever they would tell you, you would do. But it usually didn't cause any difference." (19M95O) Simple, step-by-step methods are being identified as "Western" and taken to be unfruitful, though they may be appreciated at first. "When I was just starting out, I liked the Western way of spelling things out one step at a time. It seemed clear to me. But when I started trying to act like that and live like that, I discovered that it doesn't work. That's when I started having problems." (21F96O) Russian young people who are truly spiritual seekers will not have much patience for a faulty spiritual paradigm that "doesn't work" in their lives.

**3. Adapt Your Teaching** – Young Russians have also noted that much of the gospel communication aimed their direction has not been adapted to their personal and social situation. The "generic" gospel message can be received by those who have been dealing with issues of life and death and are thus "ripe" for the truth, but only a small percentage of young Russians have their ears open for this message. Others need to be allowed to come to a comprehension of the gospel in a way that fits their particular context, or else it won't seem relevant to them. It will sound too theoretical to attract their attention. To be more effective,



the message should bring biblical answers to questions being asked by the young person. "Every young person has his own questions, and each of them should see that you understand his problems." (18F97A) The Westerner communicating the gospel may adequately describe ultimate issues in a general way, but the young Russian wants to know exactly what this means in his or her life. "What was good for me was that they would take the Bible and make it practical for my life. They would explain everything, using personal examples from life." (21F93O) A young Russian gives one simple example that is relevant to the young people around him. "I think we need to explain to youth more about what it really means to be a Christian. It is not boring, and you don't have to give up everything that is fun (as they assume)." (19M97O)

Again Russian cultural/religious realities dictate what it means to "adapt" a message. For example, many Westerners have mistaken the widespread "return to God" in Russia as deeper than the young people report it to be, just as they underestimate the level of belief in God that existed under communism. "I think that Russian people always believed in God. Those who call themselves atheists have just found more excuses for their mind to say there is no God. But they still believe – that is what I have found. In the early 90's they began to believe even more, but only *because it had become fashionable*. At that time Orthodoxy had started to come back into fashion. Everyone would 'believe in God,' but it was nothing special. In the 1970's it would have been very serious to openly believe in God, but not today." (22M94O) The influence of Orthodoxy on the Russian mind must not be underestimated. "Russian Orthodoxy had a great influence on Russian classical literature, and this literature had a strong influence on those who were thinkers in Russia." (28F91M) One example is in the idea of faith and reason, which is such an important issue in Western Christianity. In contrast, this has not been a central issue in Russian Christianity. "Western people are extremely logical and rational, but Eastern people are more irrational – and Russia is between the two. So this irrationalism is pretty much attractive to Russians." (28M92A) Without knowing this, Westerners who explain the gospel are taking for granted a common base of discussion which is often absent. Young people may be more Westernized, and less affected by this thinking than their elders, but this is a core feature of the Russian culture and will not change quickly.

**4. Free Your Message of Foreign Elements** – This exhortation echoes the last phrase in the oath taken by those on the witness stand: "To tell the truth, the whole truth, *and nothing but the truth*, so help me God." The gospel should be taught in its purity, unadulterated by debated dogmas and emphases that were born in a foreign context. The terms used should not be overloaded with meaning that was developed in a high-context situation. As much as possible, the Word of God must be allowed to speak directly. One young Russian woman summarizes this idea: "It is very important to give people the Word of God and to underline important verses for them to read. Tell them that the Bible will explain better what you want them to have, and tell them how it has changed your life. If they will start to read it, God's word will start working in their life." (21F92A) In most cases much explanation is needed, as will be described further below, and this is where Westerners must exercise caution. Much teaching overemphasizes points of doctrine that were critical to historical situations. For example, Protestants often want to be so sure that they emphasize that salvation is "not of works" that it feels to the first-time listener like they are saying it involves "no works" whatsoever. And this is interpreted as meaning that it doesn't change one's life. Thus doctrinal fights from other contexts should not be imported intact. Critical points of truth

may become obscured. Also, denominational distinctives should not force neophyte listeners to immediately take sides in issues peripheral to the gospel. "The biblical message about knowing God should be simple. But most of the religious practices we are seeing are complicated. And many teachers say, 'It is complicated and difficult. And people from many generations before us have discovered this. So you shouldn't rebel against this, because we know what to do, and you don't know what to do.' They may not say it exactly like this, but they mean it, and you feel this pressure. And you feel like, 'Who am I to argue? They know better.' And people start to study their system. They learn somebody's religious system instead of biblical doctrine." (22M94O) One adulteration is the enthronement of the "sinner's prayer," something not found in the New Testament. Perhaps born in a time when the desire was to lead people away from cultural Christianity to definite conversion points, it has often degenerated into an empty ritual – and especially when exported to a completely different context such as that of Russia. Young Russian leaders are beginning to understand this more clearly. "Not long ago I stopped using this 'sinner's prayer' altogether. I used to try to tell them before that this prayer itself didn't bring you to salvation, but that it would help you seek God, and so on. But I was still working with this terminology from Protestant formulations. And this can produce a mess." (22M94O) Another example is to bring the issue of what is true and what is false religion or Christianity to the forefront, even before the gospel itself. "Westerners sometimes say directly, 'Other religions aren't right at all, and the only true religion is Christianity and Protestantism.' And young Russians think, 'Oh yeah, right, there is just one religion, and I can find help only in YOUR church. Okay, okay, sure. Only one church is right, and it happens to be your church.'" (17F96O)

Another form of subtle adulteration of the gospel is to use terms that are packed with too much meaning, perhaps not even clearly understood by the one communicating the gospel. Loaded terms become formulaic, the precise meaning can be fuzzy, and the result may be an unbiblical idea. Westerners may think they are aiming for precision, but the result (in the initial communication of the gospel) is often obscurity and thus rejection. "Sometimes Americans just say things that Russian people don't understand. Russians don't understand things like 'get saved,' or 'accept Jesus into your heart.' We don't have phrases like that. We just have God and Jesus and church. We don't understand this idea of God living inside you – it sounds real strange to us, and it causes people to reject the message. I would rather start with words like 'you have to trust God, you have to ask Him to help in your life,' as opposed to talking about having God come live in your heart. And instead of asking God to 'control' your life (which sounds strange to us), ask God to help you to become a better person. These things are more understandable to the Russian." (19M97O) The ideas themselves may or may not be biblical ideas ("saved" is definitely biblical, but "accept Jesus into your heart" is not a biblical admonition), but the word or phrase can also be shorthand for an entire theological point of view that you cannot easily explain. It is better to keep your communication free from terms that are going to cause stumbling for reasons other than rejection of the gospel itself. "There are some factors that can turn people on and turn people off. What really turned me off were words like, "dying to yourself," "giving your life to Christ," and anything connected with life and death. The problem was that I didn't understand what meaning was contained in these words. It wasn't until later that I learned this Christian language. But to a person who does not know Christian language, the words themselves are important. I did not want to 'die.' And I didn't want to 'give my life' to anyone. Those things turned me off." (25F93A) You may be reading the words of this young woman, thinking that the problem

was that she was simply rejecting the gospel. But you must ask yourself what do those phrases *really mean to you* when you are communicating them, and how do they square up with what is the reality of your Christian life. You may be using phrases that you can not explain adequately, which don't translate well into the Russian conceptual framework, and which don't match what really happened at your own conversion and what is currently happening in your own life.

## **B. Suggestions Regarding the Delivery of the Message**

Westerners not only need to be careful about the content of the message they are delivering, but also about the way the message is packaged and the process of delivering that package. Russians have often noted that people from the West depend too much on one-way, scripted presentations of the entire gospel message, in ways that manipulate and rush people toward an eternal decision.

**1. Minimize Monologues** – Russian young people mentioned the importance of engaging Russians in conversation, where feedback and interaction lead to better comprehension of the message. This feature is often absent from Western approaches. "There was no feedback at all when they were communicating the gospel in these small groups. I was given information, and I was given orders what to do: 'You have to pray, and you have to do this and that.' But nobody really asked me any diagnostic questions, like I do when I teach in school. I have to hear back from students what they comprehended. This wasn't done with us. But you cannot preach the gospel without knowing exactly what a person has comprehended." (26F92A) Many young Russians call for greatly limiting mass evangelism for this very reason. "I think that mass evangelism is not effective with Russian youth today. Maybe in those first years when Russia was just opened, it was interesting. But now I think it is just a waste of money. That money could be spent much more effectively." (28F91M) An example of an effective approach, in which dialogue is dominant, is given by the same young woman: "I believe that the best approach (for students) is small evangelical Bible study groups that meet in youth hostels and dormitories. Students can meet and talk, and Christian students share with non-Christian students." (28F91M)

**2. Do Away With Scripts** – Russian young people spoke against the use of the "canned" approaches to communicating the gospel which are commonly used by people from the West. These approaches don't feel natural to them, since they are too rigid and artificial. Westerners may like the fact that it is easy to train people to use them, and that they are "efficient" to use, but these methods have a low level of effectiveness due to the offensive, mechanical interaction involved.

The approach is especially offensive in Russia because it violates cultural values, in which flexibility and simplicity are appreciated over order and discipline. Americans tend to operate with a business-like efficiency, looking for orderly results. This doesn't feel like *life* to Russians. "We have a different culture from the American culture. Our perspective on life is different. Russian people have simpler discipline and do things in simpler ways. It seems that Americans have too much discipline and put too much work on themselves. They have so many programs that they work through, and we like it more simple." (29F92O) "Russian people don't like to plan. We do everything spontaneously. We just decide and then act, and it is hard for us to make plans. So, for example, in a Bible study group, when you tell us, 'Okay, we need to do this in a systematic way,' it is difficult for Russians to do this. We feel that we are being ruled over, and are being forced to do something that we hadn't intended to

do, and didn't want to do. We want to do things more like in life, where things would go and flow in their normal course." (20F94A) One young woman described this Western approach in the context of training for evangelism that she endured: "They were just giving us the information in a mechanical way. And since that time I don't like the Four Spiritual Laws. We were just given this booklet, and my friend was even an unbeliever and she was made to do evangelism on the streets, without really understanding it, but just by having this booklet. And they would think that the booklet was enough." (26F92A)

The feature of a scripted evangelistic approach that offended many was the fact that it was inflexible. One young woman characterized such approaches: "It can be like, , "Okay, boom, boom, boom, let me check this off. Let's see, you realize this, you realize that, ..." (23F92A) It is a lack of wisdom and love that would force people through a scripted and inflexible presentation that treats people like objects of a consumer survey. "Sometimes Americans come who just know the Four Spiritual Laws brochure. And if in the middle of the presentation Russians start asking questions, they will say, 'Just wait a while, and listen to all of this.' Then they don't ever answer the questions. They don't want to divert from their brochure. But this brochure doesn't always answer personal questions of the listener, which will help them to understand. Stopping and answering questions shows love. But sometimes Americans act like, 'Come on, your questions are not important.' They don't say this, but this is what the Russian person feels." (19M97O)

Often assumed by this readiness to use scripted approaches is that one can move quickly from initial gospel exposure to concluding call for action. This assumption is evident in most Western gospel tracts, which include a "sinner's prayer" at the end of even the shortest overviews of the gospel. This approach may be defended as demonstrating faith in the power of God and his Word to effect conversion, but Russians counter that it ignores God-given human processes of coming to understanding and conviction. "I really dislike this idea of just presenting, and praying through, and getting the person's name down as a convert." (28M92A) "In some cases the Lord can redeem the situation, but generally, for long-lasting fruit, a person cannot be brought to faith in 10-15 minutes, and then you leave and go. It needs to be a long process, and it can't be, 'I'm going to teach you right now how to get to Heaven.'" (19M95O) These statements may offend some whose methods assume this instant possibility, but young Russians are offended by the presumption of Americans that they are working properly with this method. "The problem is that it is your desire to get people all the way from a first introduction to the point of a prayer. It think that this has to do with pride. Usually those who are not mature in Christ operate this way. It is actually working against God." (22M94O) These are strong words, but they come from young Russians who have seen the fallout from a multitude of so-called "decisions for Christ" that came at the end of brief, scripted gospel presentations.

**3. Communicate Truth Progressively and in Good Measure** – Westerners seem to feel an irresistible force pulling them toward the "bottom line." They want to "get to the point" in their gospel presentations, and don't have much patience for laying foundations. The common pattern is to utilize minimal biblical introduction and maximize the focus on the bare truths and call of the gospel. Yet the gospel message is built on the critical foundation of much biblical revelation, and exposes deep features of human nature that are not quickly and easily explained. These normally take time to "sink in" even in a culture such as that of the USA which has been so deeply influenced by Protestant teaching. Russia has no such influence, and thus young Russians have ground which needs to be prepared to receive the

gospel foundations. "I was at ground zero regarding knowing what faith is, or understanding any kind of doctrines. Gospel approaches have to start with A and go to Z with Russian people, because of our history." (23F92A) Many young Russians who have been trained to "give" the whole gospel to everybody immediately are now rejecting this approach. "At first I started witnessing to everybody. I wouldn't even call it 'witnessing,' but rather *loading* things on people, stuffing them with ideas. I was sincere, and it was from my whole heart, but sometimes I didn't know the measure. Maybe the people would think about these things after I would talk with them, but I think it is a misconception to witness like this to everybody. I actually looked like a cultist when I would tell everybody, even when it was not needed. (19F99O)

What could such young people mean when they say that the whole gospel was "not needed" by everybody? They do indeed clearly understand that people are lost and in need of the Savior, and that they all need to hear the gospel of His salvation. But they are seeing that truth is effectively communicated only when a person is listening, and is received only when the listener is attentive. They are saying that serious thought is required for a person to truly deal with the gospel, and so the communication of the gospel is a process. "I believe that evangelism is a process and not an event. That is very important in evangelism. For example, my personal experience is that I have had more people come to Christ during 'follow up' than during 'evangelism.' You already think this person is a Christian, and you do the follow up, and you already have his name down as a Christian, but then he finally really gets it about the third or fourth time through the gospel. And you thought he got it before, but actually only now is the time that he truly 'got it.' And he got it because he continued to ponder the gospel. The gospel has to be presented several times and strengthened from various directions." (28M92A) Furthermore, the wise communicator builds more specific truths upon more general truths, moving only as fast as he or she sees the person truly dealing with those general truths. "In order to evangelize someone, I would at first just make friends, and not try to talk about religious or spiritual things, but just gain an understanding and be friends. Talk as little as possible in terms of Christian things. I would try a little bit to nudge the person closer, and talk about the meaning of the gospel step by step. I would want to speak in simple words about how God changes lives, and see how they respond to this little bit." (21F96O) This method of being sensitive and measured in one's revealing of the gospel is counter-intuitive for people trained to be afraid to let people "get away" without hearing the whole message. But the love and wisdom demonstrated in this approach helps establish the believer as the source of further truth when the time is right for the person who is lost. "As long as everything is going well with them, many won't think about the message. But when they have problems, they will know where to go and whom to ask. And then you can tell them more. But you shouldn't tell them very much until they test it themselves. If my only approach is just to talk a lot, this won't produce results." (19F99O)

**4. Eliminate Manipulative Techniques** – Young Russians have noted that Westerners often follow evangelistic approaches that are designed to influence a response, either through shading the truth (as noted above) or through the mild to strong forms of coercion described in this section. The gospel message itself includes a serious call, but the urgency of the gospel is not transmitted through human pressure. "What scared me is that they tried to get into my life and change it with their own teaching. Even though it was more from God than from them, I could still clearly sense a problem and was scared. I was afraid that *people* would do these things instead of *God*. So I felt a pressure to respond to the gospel before I

was ready." (22M94O) This kind of human pressure is devoid of grace. "An attitude of grace, when you are not forced, is vital. I think it is really wrong to force people to do things. You have to wait on a person to make his own decision. Then it will be more permanent. I felt guilt all the time at one church." (26F92A)

Some Westerners intent on building a church or a program have perhaps built artificially by not really dealing with true seekers. "What missionaries and others need to do is to encourage you to seek. It is written that he who *seeks* finds, but it is not written that he who *is led* finds. I see when other people 'lead' people to Christ, and how this doesn't work. Help them seek, but don't press them. That would be easier and faster, and better." (22M94O) The results can be damaging in two ways that one young Russian describes. First, churches end up gathering too many who are weak-willed and responded to the personal force of the evangelist instead of to the Lord and the Scriptures. "I think this is the main problem when people 'bring' other people to God. They make ignorant sheep out of people, and they gather them into crowds and make churches. And in my church, when they kind of felt that I was seeking on my own, they didn't appreciate that. And that made me nervous. And I think this is wrong. The only way for people to find God is to seek. This is a major problem in evangelization here. We cannot 'bring' people to God in this sense. We may encourage and support, but we cannot *carry* them. Now I see that people who are easily led tend to get involved, and open their hearts to people and not to God. This is where formal religion starts." (22M94O) That is, the young people were never deeply spiritually engaged, and joined the church as if joining a club. The second damaging result is that some who otherwise were earnest in their search are turned off and leave. "Now many serious people who are really seeking for God have left churches. I saw many of my friends come to church, and I felt so sorry, because they would leave when somebody tried to get inside their life and change it." (22M94O) A life must be changed by God, and not by manipulative evangelists. And not, it must be added, by the use of "bait and switch" methods to get people into a meeting less than honestly. "The goal is sometimes just to cheat people to come to a meeting, and then give them the gospel. And people don't like to be cheated." (27M91A)

One cultural issue to consider is how Russians may tend to respond to authority more collectively than Westerners. This makes it very possible for a Westerner, once respected, to abuse his position of authority with young people. "Russian mentality is influenced by an Eastern mentality as well as by Orthodoxy. The idea is that there is an authority, which is our culture. And when you become a part of a church, now this is your culture. And this is your authority - you need to obey it. But like in Orthodoxy or Buddhism, there is often a guru or something. And in the church this 'guru' can be your discipler or teacher. And it causes big trouble." (22M94O) That is, some young Russians will be more desirous to simply do what *you* say to do rather than seeking to understand the will of God from the Bible. And if you have given them a prayer to pray, and you tell them that they are now saved, that may be the end of their questioning of this issue – whether or not there was any spiritual reality involved.

### **C. Suggestions Regarding the Character of the Messenger**

When young Russians speak of those factors which either hinder or help the evangelistic efforts in their country, the character of the witness is one of the foremost topics. Evangelicals from the West are commonly so intent on the verbal content of the gospel that they can downplay the importance of godliness in the communication of spiritual truth. Russians, on the other hand, will not tend to receive logical arguments that do not seem to

have strong evidence resident in the character of the witness. The following four aspects of godly character were commonly mentioned by the young Russians as important features of the spiritually mature and effective witness for Christ.

**1. Be Loving** – This obviously central feature of Christian character is rightfully listed first. But lest it be too easily glossed over as too obvious, it should be explained carefully. Warning should be given that love is often lacking in the character of witnesses for Christ. A person who loves is patient, kind, encouraging, and sensitive. Whatever is done by a loving person is done with the highest and best in view for the listener, with genuine care for his or her soul. Love overcomes many other potential deficiencies in Christian witness. Love opens doors to hearts. "For young people, it is really important for them to see that they are loved. Even if you are speaking in a big auditorium with a large audience, somehow you should express love to them. They should want to seek fellowship with you and be trusting. People should feel that you want to spend time with them, and that you are interested in their reactions, somehow, by asking questions or whatever." (26F92A) This statement echoes those stated above regarding methods of communicating. A person who loves wants to get to know people and fellowship with them, and not just to pass on a message to them. "When people 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 just to preach the gospel, but to be my friend. God really used people in this way." (21F93O) While you are talking with a young Russian, they are reading subtle things in your character. "It was important to me to see her willingness to talk with me, because I could see it in her eyes. I wasn't taking up her time. And that is very important for Russians – we don't want to just take up somebody else's time. We are more reserved than Americans, and so we are very cautious and we notice little signs of irritation or impatience, or signs that seem to say 'I've gotta go.' But she was so willing to talk even late into the night with me." (23F92A) Deep heart motives must be right, or the wrong message will be communicated in the process of evangelism. "They need to see that you truly want to help them, and that you don't just need their life for some reason." (23M98O)

Westerners tend to overemphasize the transmission of information in the process of sharing their faith. Certainly that is the goal, because faith comes from hearing the Word of God. However, the truth must be spoken in love. And love is patient enough to listen. "For Russian youth, it is important to accept them the way they are, and just to listen to them. Because I think that young people are seeking for peace. And so you need to be patient with them and to listen to their problems that they have to share." (21F92A) "When you are becoming a friend with a young person, you listen – you need to just listen and be patient. (19F92J) Westerners are seen as often being too impatient for this, because they think that time is being wasted and the gospel needs to be proclaimed. This is a fatal mistake in Russia. The gospel needs to be *heard* when it is preached, and the love of the believer is critical to opening the ears of young Russians to hear the message.

One interesting aspect of love that Westerners do bring to Russia, and with which they can have a special ministry to young people, is that of positive encouragement. "I was always very encouraged by Americans to keep on growing, keep on reading the Bible. They would always encourage me. That's something I've never seen in Russians. My parents would never encourage me to do something. It is very unusual in our culture. For seventy years you just did the best for your country, but it never said thanks to you. So it is a very strange thing for Russians to encourage each other, to say that 'You are doing well.' They would only make

comments when you make mistakes. 'Why are you so bad?' They encourage you by keeping silent. As long as they are quiet, things are okay. But I found out that the American kind of encouragement convicts you to do even better. It makes you more sure about yourself. Russians tend to want to put you down to make themselves feel better – that they are higher than you are. But Russians really blossom when they are encouraged." (19F96A) To encourage properly, one must know a person. And getting to know them takes time. Westerners must embrace the investment of time as the proper means to establish the atmosphere within which the truth may be effectively communicated.

**2. Be Godly in Character and Attitude** – Young Russians who have lived through the 1990's have heard many different kinds of messages regarding religion and faith. One more person making claims about God is not at all impressive to them, and in fact many have had more than their fill of people trying to, as my Russian friend says, "stuff them with something." In this context, a witness who would stand out from the crowd must be a living expression of the message of transformation; a model of the truth. Words of depth should be matched by depth of character and attitude; words of purity and light should issue forth from a life that radiates that pure light. "Westerners need to be good examples for the Russians, so they would wonder why these people are so different." (22F95O) "For young people today, it is important to show the gospel with your life. Show them that there is an alternative, something better than what they have. But show it not just with words, but with your life. (19F99O) Along with the pure message of salvation, witnesses for Christ need to have a purity of heart and godliness in their life and motives. Young Russians are sensitive to this reality. "Only the ones who came here to serve God and who were seeking Him at the same time were effective with me. When I saw their lives, their example, their practical application of the Bible, this was when I would ask people to help me out or have Bible studies with me or explain more. The message itself impacted me a lot, but also people, when I saw so much freedom in their eyes, and so much love and so much light. They shared Christ out of their life and their heart. On the other hand, some come and share Christ out of responsibility, and what is shared out of responsibility, I know I would reject it, and Russians would reject it completely. I want to tell this to everyone who comes into Russia. They won't have any impact if they do this work out of responsibility, without the right spirit." (21F93O)

The understanding of godliness in Russia is heavily influenced by Orthodoxy. There is among Russians an innate appreciation for spiritual depth that even young people may have, whether or not they have any personal desire for this themselves. Unfortunately, in contrast many Americans come across as shallow, and are not respected. "I don't want to judge, but I say this based on the impressions. Some Americans would truly give an impression of a depth of godly life and communicate the gospel deeply, but others would present it superficially. The Orthodox Church presents God solemnly. But many Westerners would bring some superficiality. I don't say that we shouldn't have any joy, even singing and dancing before the Lord. But at the same time it should be *deep*. When it remains superficial, it becomes a stumbling block, and people will sooner or later get disappointed. Those big evangelism campaigns have been considered superficial. Unless one's teaching and attitudes present the depth of godly things and of the godly life, which is both experienced by missionaries and expressed, I would say to forget about mission work in Russia. It will never work with superficiality. And if someone has this superficial attitude, I wouldn't advise him to come to Russia again." (29M92A)



**3. Be Genuine** – Some of the comments above may make it sound like only the spiritually mature can be involved in witness for Christ, and that younger believers would be excluded. However, if a spiritual worker loves, and does not pretend to be what he is not, or to feel what he does not feel, listeners are ready to forgive other areas of immaturity. The point is that one must be authentic and honest about one's spiritual state. When one gives personal testimony, there must be a congruity between his or her life and words. Unaffected honesty and consistency are critical among young Russians who are watching you at all times. "Your attitude is very important. Russians are very sensitive to *how* they hear something. Just what you say on the outside is not going to work – what you feel on the inside they will see and they will sense. So you have to live it. If it is in your heart, they will get it." (21F93O) Young Russian believers who had picked up a form of "feigned" witnessing discovered the ineffectiveness of this among other young Russians. "One of my main misconceptions was that I would witness about things that I had not tested and experienced in my own life. I had only heard them from some older believers. I would share about it, but I wasn't responsible for my words. And now as I look back, I realize that if somebody would tell *me* such things, I would not believe. I would see that this person doesn't really understand the truth he is talking about. A person should get these things in order in his own life before he can really help someone else." (19F99O) "Later I started to discern what is spiritual versus what is fleshly. And I came to understand that earlier I had thought of so many things in the wrong way. I had to stop just *bothering people* with my Christianity (which I thought was 'witnessing'). I came to understand that we need to BE the light, and not just to *say* that we are." (23M98O)

The flip side of the dangers of hypocrisy is the power of one's personal testimony. Young Russians are sensitive to the inability of impersonal meetings to communicate genuine spirituality. "How I felt at a conference was that they were in effect saying, 'Here, I am giving you the information: 1,2,3.4.5.' You couldn't see that people were speaking from the heart. It is important to show that this is not something that you just *know about*. This is something that you *live*. It is truly a part of you that you love God." (26F92A) People need to get close to young Russians and share their lives. "It is important to be open and understanding, and to share your life experience with the person you are talking to. This really helps them to see a real person that has had an experience, and helps explain the Bible, which they don't understand and haven't even really seen much before." (23F92A)

**4. Be Wise** – Young Russians have heard many "sales pitches" regarding religion. People who can read them such a pitch are common enough. But rarer are those Christian workers from the West who are skilled in handling truth and perceiving spiritual reality. Evangelism among Russian youth is actually delicate work, requiring good judgment of what truths are needed in particular situations. And this is the nature of the biblical wisdom required of an effective spiritual mentor: an understanding of how to instruct one in his movements to spiritual reality; skill in applying truth to life. The quotes of young Russians on this topic are already listed in the section above regarding the delivery of the message. The wise worker is not dependant on scripted monologues, but makes judgments of what to communicate at the time of interaction, based on a good working knowledge of biblical truth and a skill in interpersonal communication.

**5. Be Discerning** – This is related to the issue of wisdom, but looks more at the judgment required to detect what is spiritual and what is not in the character of individuals. Mature workers should be spiritually sensitive, alert, and generally able to distinguish between what

is authentic and godly versus what is of the natural man. This requires keen perception, judgment and insight into hearts. And this is more difficult across cultural and language barriers, where communication signals are not so familiar to the Westerner. Even so, the cross-cultural worker should not be naïve and credulous in the face of professions of faith. Among Russian youth this is very important, since there are many other reasons they may want to get close to you. "The difficulty with young Russians is making sure that they don't want to talk with you just so that they can practice their English and find out about the States or whatever. Yes, you have to befriend them, but make sure they are genuinely interested, that this is a very important topic that you are sharing with them, and that they are not simply wanting to please you because you are a friend. Or they may simply be thinking, 'Hey, here's a new idea from Americans, and their stuff is cool, and we're going to do it.' Make sure they understand. A young Russian may even tell you that he made a decision for Christ when he didn't." (23F92A) "Some of the young people were in the church just because of the Americans. Some of them had had American teachers who shared the gospel with them at school, and who had brought them to the youth group. The teachers had left to go to the USA, and those kids who were still friends of the Americans would use the American youth leader's e-mail to write to them. And they would just hang out with foreigners, because they could work on their English skills. The way they talked about the Bible and related to other people would show who were believers and who were not." (21M96A) This lack of genuine spiritual interest was apparent to the young Russians, but the Americans didn't detect it.

Sadly, Americans have a reputation for spiritual credulity among a great many Russians. "Russians will pray this prayer with you, not even meaning it. We had a funny time with this big preacher from America. They said that 300 people came to pray every night. But then all of a sudden they noticed that it was the same people every night. So then they had to explain, 'If you prayed this prayer once, you don't have to pray it a second time.' And then, after that big campaign only about 10 or 20 of those people stayed in church." (28F91M) And this happened in the early 1990's, when far more people responded to public evangelism than they do today. Much credulity, also sadly, seems to be connected with a wishful thinking and a desire to report great effects from evangelistic efforts. "They would evaluate their mission work based on how many people came forward to pray, and stuff like that. But they never counted how many people stayed in the church afterward." (28F91M)

#### **D. Suggestions Regarding Building Relationships**

The most common suggestions from young Russians surrounded the critical importance of building bonds with people. Developing common understanding and affection in a good relationship helps to prove the reality of your words and verify the initial appearance of spiritual life that was observed at the first encounter. It should be noted that not all young Russians considered personal relationships to have been central to their process of responding to the gospel. However, the assimilation into the body of Christ is one critical aspect of becoming a disciple of Christ, and this demands the development of spiritual relationships from the beginning steps of a new convert's Christian life.

In comparison with that of Russians, the American idea of friendship tends to be superficial. "For Russians, the most important thing is friendship. You know, talking in the kitchen one on one, and stuff like that. I had a problem communicating this with many Americans, because even the word 'friendship' we understand differently. For us, a 'friend' is one to whom you go when everything is bad or when everything is good. A friend is closer

than a brother. But Americans would say, 'You should come over Saturday and watch TV with us, and we can make friends.' Friendship in your opinion and our opinion is different. I had a hard time explaining all this to Americans." (28F91M) This section contains the suggestions of young Russians for how to enter into the process of building the kind of relationships that will make evangelism more effective.

**1. Relate to the Individual** – The first and most obvious aspect of building a relationship is to interact with people one-on-one. "We should work with people individually. God is a personal God for each person – not just a God to the general group. God's love is for each person." (18F97A) Those that spoke of impact on their lives commonly spoke in terms of how somebody had taken the time to get to know them and minister to them as an individual. "At the church people would give of their time, and would invite me everywhere. For me I appreciated the feeling that somebody was spending time on me. So to me one-on-one evangelism is the best thing. You can see a person not just once, but many times." (26F92A) "This one American girl was willing to answer my questions, exactly the ones that I was asking. She related to my individual situation and the questions that I had." (23F92A) A few pointed to literature distribution, even Bible distribution, as having limited value in Russia apart from the establishment of individual contact. "I think it would help, even when just distributing tracts or Bibles, if a person would just stop for five minutes, without just tossing a Bible into somebody's hands, and just talk with them. I know how it helped me. I think it is the personal contact that is very important. Of course I know that God works through giving a person His word, and He will open it up if it is His will for that person, but it also helps a lot to be able to talk with someone. That's not very practical for many Americans, since few of them speak Russian." (23F92A) "When groups go out and distribute Bibles, I don't think that this is enough. Of course the Bible is God's Word, and is enough in that sense. But without previous explanation of what it is, it is very difficult to understand it. So giving out Bibles means a lot, but does not help many people deeply. There is a need for a personal approach to people, with explanation from the Bible." (22M94A) And again, as in the quote above, this is hard for most Americans who speak very little, if any, Russian.

**2. Promote Mutual Respect** – Building a close relationship requires that each person show regard and courtesy toward the other. Westerners have not always come to Russia with the humble attitude required for building this mutual respect, and their efforts have been hindered as a result. This disrespect happens in a few ways. First, some people seem to have an exalted perception of their own character or importance in evangelizing Russia. "Some people come here to Russia to witness, and to 'bring those poor Russians to Christ.' And that never worked with me. When people come to Russia to talk about Christ, they shouldn't be feeling like, 'Here I am, helping those poor Russians,' or 'Here I am – I know all these things, and you don't, and it is my responsibility to tell you.'" (21F93O) "In one evangelistic organization it sounded like, 'Look at me, I'm so good, and I'm giving you the message. Listen to me.'" (26F92A) Again, Russian young people are sensitive not just to what is said, but to how it is said. Humble attitudes are absolutely critical, but some Americans seem to come to Russia with a messianic complex. "When Americans say, 'We are going to reach Russia for Christ!' Russians usually think, 'Why should *you* reach *us*?' (17F96O)

Another means of showing disrespect is to utilize the manipulative techniques already discussed above. Western organizations must be extremely cautious not to look down on any Russian as someone to be used for its plans and purposes. An imperious attitude can do damage to the heart, and some preachers are misrepresenting the Lord in this way. "Some

Russians will feel that the human will and aggression coming from these human preachers represents God, and it produces a fear in them." (22M94O) But this kind of fear is not spiritually productive. Human coercion can produce psychological conversions that come short of regeneration. The most successful evangelism among Russian youth is that which makes them feel they are both loved and respected – something which they do not find in the world. "I think that youth see love in our group, and sense that nobody is going to offend them and say, 'You are a fool, you are stupid.' Because this is what is happening in our schools and universities. In those places you have to stay closed and not open yourself up to other people, because you don't want to be abused. If you are not a believer, you don't care about people, and you can say insulting things to people to hurt them. Russian young people don't necessarily like to pick fights to criticize, but if you do have an argument, they will be more likely to say, 'Oh, you are totally wrong, you are just stupid and foolish.' (19M97O) "Today, for young people, to go to church is like, 'Are you crazy? Going to church is for old women.' (28F91M) Christians, by promoting mutual respect, must provide safe harbors from such kinds of relationships and attitudes that are common among young Russians.

**3. Expect Mistrust** – This warning is an important key to the whole issue of evangelistic work among modern Russian youth. Until a young Russian has a basic level of trust in you as a person, very little of what you say will be received very deeply. Because of the current environment in Russia, winning trust is the necessary first step in evangelism. After this, a young person will be more comfortable to expose to you his or her thoughts and feelings, knowing you will receive them with love and wisdom, and more willing to listen, knowing you are a safe and reliable person.

The recent historical context is important here. Many Russians were willing to trust religious people from the west immediately after Perestroika, because they were not aware that there were many competing ideas about how to come to God. But this soon changed. "After the fall of the Iron Curtain, not only Christian missionaries came, but other cults and other religions as well. And people started getting lost in all of that. And confusion and fear arose. Any many people would turn to the Orthodox church for the sake of something firm and full of stability, that existed here for a long time, and is really trustworthy. What all of the people want to know is the truth - something that has stability, something that is firm and unshakable. And the Orthodox church, with its history and tradition, would give this impression. They would say, 'We've been here for a long time, we have received traditions handed down by the apostles,' and so on. 'And here they come, these missionaries. Where do they come from? Where are their roots?'" (29M92A) Furthermore, it became apparent that the Western people had unusual ways of approaching God. "Russian people have gotten used to the Orthodox religion, and something new seems so strange to them." (22F95O) After the initial wave of closet believers were brought to Christ after Perestroika, the rest of the public was not so open to the gospel, and evangelistic events had paltry results. "These evangelistic events are not effective – there were too many Mormons and Moonies and other cults doing the same thing, and so people don't trust the events. Russians are not very trusting. They don't trust TV or newspapers or people who speak in big auditoriums. They are used to this from many years of communism, and think, 'One person has lied, how do we know that this is not another lie?'" (28F91M)

The issue of uncomprehended motives is another factor involved in the mistrust of Russians toward Americans evangelizing in their country. "Many people here don't understand the motives of people coming here. They think, 'Oh, everything is so fine with

you in America, and now you have come over here just to help us – but we don't need your help. We are okay.' They need to understand how you are trying to do the will of God. Your motives should be clear, because Russians are not just considering what Americans are saying. They are asking many personal questions like 'Why are you doing this, what are your motives, what are you thinking?' They are examining you, and they don't trust you." (18F97A) Some have suspicions that the motives are not at all religious. "Some Russians think Americans are coming to reach Russia in order to advance some political causes." (17F96O) "There was this conference called, 'Reaching Russia in Our Reach.' And many people thought that it looked like something besides God's plan was involved. It was as if the American Government was involved somehow." (17F96O)

Another barrier to trust is the lack of identification of Russians with American culture. Though youth are becoming more Westernized, this is mainly an issue of popular culture and not of core cultural values. "Sometimes Russians are afraid that together with faith comes a different culture, a strange culture. You need to be careful not to bring culture to them instead of God." (20F94A) Americans must work more sensitively in order to overcome this cultural barrier. "Many Americans don't understand our lives. They preach based upon their American realities, not thinking about how people here live." (28F91M) "The American and Russian lifestyles are so different. The situations are completely different. A lot of Russian people tend to think that, 'Well, this is good for *you* – you all drive cars, and have all these nice things,' and so on." (23F92A) In other words, they don't trust you to be able to speak with any relevance to their Russian situation. Too many Americans doing evangelism in Russia seem to be completely unaware of these barriers to trust, and don't do much to try to overcome the barriers before launching into the message.

The problem of trust is now even a barrier to young Russians that are closely involved with American-planted churches and evangelistic organizations. Young Russian unbelievers can't imagine that their peers would be involved with Americans for issues of faith – there must be some other motive. "Russians will ask me, 'How much money are they paying you?' They think that the only reason we are involved is because of the dollars." (18F99O) "They say to us, 'Oh, yeah, you have gone to study in Hawaii, and they are paying you, and you are only good because they are supporting you to be good.'" (17F96O) Young Russians on staff with these organizations are thus implicated in the suspicions that are directed toward Americans. "We may say to them that we are being paid for working, so that we can tell them about Christ. Then they say that we are receiving money for wrong motives – to draw other people into an American sect. In general they are just afraid, and don't understand. They think our work is for other reasons – business reasons. They have many suspicions." (18F97A) Some churches are seeing that they need to establish their own Russian identity to overcome the distrust of parents – but it is no easy matter. "Our group at church is trying to get more Russian leaders involved, so it is not the group 'of an American.' It is better to have Russian leaders, because then parents don't say, 'It is just an American group.' And yet we wouldn't survive without the support of Americans, and we wouldn't have materials." (21M96A)

**4. Win a Hearing** – When trust is lacking, as discussed above, hearts are closed. But those hearts can be opened when the believer proves himself in the process of a relationship built on love and integrity. "First win their hearts so that they would look to you as an example. And then you can share the gospel with them." (21F92A) And again, as mentioned above, it is genuine lives that build trust and open hearts to hear the truth. "Your personal

testimony is very important. Sure, you can explain the facts of the gospel - but when you share your personal experience, people are more open to you, and they can trust you, and can trust God after that." (22M94A) Many young Russians recommended a focus on the building of the relationship before sharing too much of the message. "Regarding youth today, I agree that we have to help them understand that they are not living the right way, so that they would seek. But before they understand this, it is very hard work. First I need to be able to become their friend, so that they would trust me. They need to see that I am not just another person off the street, or just a religious person, but that God is truly doing something in my life, and they should see this with their own eyes." (23M98O) "You should not start out by mentioning Christ to young Russians. Just be friendly and wise, and they will be your friend and trust you." (22M94O) "Americans need to become friends with Russian youth. Not to be so pushy, but for the time being just trying to be friends. And probably for some time to not even talk about the Bible for several weeks. And then after that they could start talking about the Bible." (22F95O) The issue of sin is a sensitive one that should not be broached without some groundwork. Granted, the gospel involves confrontation of sin. "But in Russia you shouldn't just start out with such a message. You should get to know them personally in order to say such things." (21F94A) "Most Russians do not like to speak about their past life, and what kinds of sins that they committed. Sometimes Westerners will ask about their past life, and Russians don't want to tell them anything, 'Because it is my life.' So it is not wise to probe, but Westerners sometimes try to investigate these things. Its better not to do this." (22M94A) It is also not wise to single young people out for probing discussions. "I think that Russian youth are used to just being like everybody else, and they feel pressure in this direction from parents, teachers and friends at school. That is, you shouldn't have your own personality or individual characteristics. So we feel more comfortable when we are sitting in a group. And when somebody is talking to us, we feel safer in a group. Then if he asks you something personally, you feel unprotected – especially if you don't know this person well. So an American needs to build trust before he can have more individual discussions. Sometimes this happens very easily and very quickly, but sometimes it takes a long time. It depends on the person." (19F96A)

Part of winning a hearing is to come to young Russians with a method or approach that feels natural to them. The venue or operation should not be strange for Russians, leading them to believe that evangelical Christianity is not Russian. Russians understand that the American people are different from them, and this is not necessarily bad at all. "In some ways it is better for Americans to be different from Russians, because it is interesting and it is an attraction." (19M97O) But still the Russian should feel comfortable. "I believe that to attract people in Russia you need some kinds of public events which are associated with something that people are accustomed to. A concert is a concert. It is not wild or strange or ridiculous. An 'evangelistic event,' on the other hand, is a wild and strange and ridiculous thing to a Russian person. Likewise for a sermon. And even an invitation to a church is kind of unusual. An invitation to a concert is much better. And when people come and see a very good program, which by their personal standards is of very good quality, they can start to sympathize with the whole thing. I think that this is what is often lacking in our evangelism." (27M91A) Young Russians are calling for a continued move to more natural means of outreach. "We need to do more activities for teenagers. At our church we have table tennis, where we can just invite people to come and play, and not just tell them the gospel the first minute when they come. Just let them fellowship and watch, and get interested. So we should

be more active in this way." (32F92A) "It is good to evangelize in schools, clubs, restaurants, and in the places where the young people gather." (17F96O)

**5. Aim for Heart Fellowship** – Once trust is established and hearts are opened, the goal should be to make a deep spiritual connection with young Russians; a true sharing of life (which is the meaning of the word "fellowship" that we are introducing to these young people). Russians have often been disappointed that they did not find this in American-style churches and organizations. "I wanted deeper relationships, and what I experienced was shallow. We would say that we were brothers and sisters, but I needed closer and more loving relationships." (21F96O) The ability to provide this should not be taken for granted. It is the fruit of mature spirituality. "In the church there should be a real, open-hearted friendship. And this has to be done under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and not by my own will." (23M98O) Some American programs resemble a "truth factory" as much as they do a fellowship, and they fail to reach the heart of young Russians. "The first thing that I can mention that was done wrong when I was being evangelized was that they would invite many people, but the follow-up work would be really formal. All those manuals, which were really not the best, and all those systems that people were following without good personal relationships. And I remember those girls who were teaching us – they were not ready to teach, but they were made to teach. So it was like a well-oiled machine which was working, working, working, but without any personal discipleship. So the system was wrong." (26F92A) The simplicity of deep fellowship is the essence of the evangelistic strategy for which these young Russians call. "I really believe in relationship evangelism. We need to be befriending people and imparting truth. What clearly works best in Russia, and especially Moscow today, is relationship evangelism. You must really get in touch with the person. As you befriend a person, over a period of time you are able to demonstrate some reality of Christianity through your personal life, and then you find a good way of explaining Christ and the gospel. Evangelism really works better in the context of a relationship." (28M92A)

**6. Commit Yourself to People** – Deep relationships that are effective in evangelism are those which stand the test of time. Leading people to Christ demands a commitment to people that goes beyond a few transmissions of the gospel message. At the very minimum must be a dedication to following up on anyone who makes moves toward Christ as a result of your ministry. "It is really important, after a person has heard the gospel, not to leave him. You need to continue to talk to him. This is really important." (17F96O) "It is important to follow up with people that have gotten saved through you. You need to check up on them and see how they are doing, so they don't think that they are just another item on a list that got checked off." (23F92A) "I enjoy working with this one American ministry where we go to orphanages sharing the gospel. And I see how kids are interested. But I see that after we leave those places, there is nobody to keep working with those who really received Christ. There aren't enough workers for that. After any evangelism program, it is important to give people a chance to attend a Bible study group. Very often there is no such opportunity." (19F96A) These comments reflect the fact that much evangelism by Westerners in Russia falls short even of the bare minimum level of commitment to people. In their "hit and run" styles they fail to demonstrate the meaning of "making disciples."

A better starting point is to realize from the start that true evangelism demands a whole-hearted commitment. Making disciples "demands a long process of building the relationship. And then, while the relationship is going on, you need to just to pour your whole soul and life into this person." (19M95O) Very few Americans have the time or ability

to do this with young Russians. "I work with teenagers, and the problem of reaching them is close to my heart. And I understand that they need lots of attention. Even in the world there are organizations that work with youth. And the only ones that are successful are the ones who will totally dedicate themselves to the youth. It is very important to the teenagers that they always have somebody that they can depend on. And I think that people from the West are not ready for the time required. There are so many limits on their time, and they have other priorities." (27F95A) The new Russian churches need to build a culture that allows for a great deal of satisfying interaction between believers and unbelievers. "The main thing young people need is fellowship and communication with young people. Youth from 9-18 need fellowship. You need to spend time with them, play games with them, go walking somewhere together, and communicate with them. Show them by our lives who God is, and then speak to them." (20F94A)

One final related exhortation coming from young Russians is that most Russians require a special kind of perseverance as they are in the stage of dealing internally with the call of the gospel. "I think that one thing you would find with most Russians is that, even if you present the gospel to them, and you think they really understand – and they may indeed understand it – they don't want to make a decision right away. Procrastination is probably the biggest thing with us. You should not be too pushy. If a person is going to procrastinate, he is going to procrastinate." (23F92A) "In dealing with Russians, it is difficult to get an answer right away – yes or no, willing or not willing to trust God. So there needs to be continuous relationships, and not just a one-time meeting where the person says, 'No, I'm not willing to become a Christian.' You have to persevere. It's not necessarily because the person doesn't want to become a Christian, but a Russian needs time to think about that himself, and evaluate it, and compare it to what he has heard before." (22M94A) Counting the cost is no small matter, and it is naïve to expect a clear decision on the first hearing of the gospel message. Perseverance in the relationship helps to ensure that a person comes to a clear understanding of the message, and that you have proven yourself a loving and trustworthy guide on their spiritual path. There is simply no substitute for investing time in a person.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

A conclusion to a research paper would normally contain recommendations for actions to take in the light of the findings. This paper, however, is in fact completely made up of recommendations. All that is left to say is that I agree with what the young Russians have had to say, and conclude that we should listen carefully to them and adapt our evangelistic approach accordingly. Much of what they are saying will be accepted as common sense by those who advocate lifestyle evangelism. Other comments are interpretations of Russian culture, and could be either verified or questioned by other Russian analysts. All such further meditation on these issues could be productive in the attempt to improve the evangelism that is being done among Russian young people.

I find it refreshing to listen to young Russian Christians. They don't have a tradition of what evangelism "should be like," and so are ready to boldly criticize approaches that might be considered "tried and true" by Western evangelists. Some might wonder if some of their ways of thinking could at times be influenced by a lack of biblical understanding. However, I felt that the comments that I selected for this paper showed them to be serious and thoughtful students of both Scripture and culture. We should take them seriously. Several of those I



interviewed are already leaders among their peers, and are already exemplary consultants in the task of evangelism in Russia. They have much to teach us, and can even help us to see ourselves in a new light – in ways that can alter how we think about evangelism even in our own country.

I believe that the issue of proper training for evangelism is one of the most important current topics evangelicals in Russia should be discussing – but Western evangelicals and the Russians that they are training. We need to consider what it is that we are passing on to them by way of "training" for evangelism. Are we setting them up for failure by passing on naïve, ill-conceived approaches? Will we ruin their reputation by leading them to do things that needlessly turn off the peers they are trying to reach? And will our methods give them false impressions that carry over into other aspects of discipleship? Our classroom mentality often sends a message of detachment from life that feels unnatural to Russians – and rightly so. We need to lay the foundation of proper theology, but let Russians take the lead in discerning the forms and approaches that are wisest in communicating the truth to young Russians. May the Lord give us humility and conviction to this end.