

Suggested Guidelines for Contextualizing the Gospel for Modern Russian Youth

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present a suggested list of guidelines for presenting the gospel message in the context of modern Russian youth culture. The information behind this study has come from three primary sources. First, from insights I have gained from living and ministering in Russia since 1993. Second, from my reading of ethnographies about the Russian culture, both historic and contemporary. And third, from interviews with young Russian people, both Christian and non-Christian.

Not every issue of Russian youth culture will be included in this paper, and not every principle of the gospel will be discussed. Rather, this is a selective list based on my own opinion of which issues are most relevant to a Christian worker from the United States (or from a culture similar to the American culture) who is specifically trying to reach Russian youth. Thus this paper does not contain a complete guide to doing evangelism, and at best could be used as a supplement to those who are designing approaches to reaching Russian youth with the gospel.

I will begin by laying a few basic theoretical foundations for the practice known as contextualization. This will be most appropriate for those who are not familiar with the concept. Then I will give an overview of the fundamental issues that affect how this contextualization is to be carried on in a Russian context. The third section will be the most detailed, in which I will discuss some of the more important truths of the gospel that require more special contextualization in Russia. The final section will discuss a few issues to consider in selecting proper venues for presenting the gospel to Russian youth.

I. THE NEED FOR CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE GOSPEL

A. A Definition of Contextualization

To "contextualize" in evangelism is to communicate the truths of the gospel message in such a way that the hearers will understand what is being said and will see the relevance of the message to their lives. This sounds like common sense, but is much easier defined than practiced. Proper contextualization must be concerned with proper terminology, order of presentation, knowledge of audience worldview and preconceptions of the gospel, and must also anticipate causes of opposition. If the message has not been properly contextualized, the hearers may not properly understand what has been told them, and as a result will not have the correct image in their mind of what is required of them. It should be stressed at the outset and constantly repeated: this is not a simple task.

B. Factors of Contextualization

1. Understanding Central Cultural Issues – People in every culture develop a set of values, beliefs and attitudes as they are raised within their own culture. Some of these are held deeply, and in many cases a person may have never even questioned them. Others may be negotiable or debated within the culture. But all of them will affect how a person receives a new message. One must ask, "What core values are my listeners assuming as they hear the message of the gospel? What do they already believe that will affect their attitude toward the message?" To jump right into a "standard gospel presentation" is to ignore the fact that people will tend to fit the ideas into their preconceived grid – and the result will often be a misunderstanding. The truths of the gospel, when new to hearers, arrive to transform them *from* something and *to* something. In cross-cultural evangelism, that *from* which the listeners are being transformed is not exactly the same as that from that which the evangelist may have been delivered. In addition, the new life *to* which the people are being transformed will have a different appearance than the new life in the evangelist's culture. Proper contextualization starts by taking seriously the central characteristics of a people's inner culture, never assuming that the gospel is being written on a blank slate. Americans must beware of assuming, for example, that Russian culture has given its youth an appreciation of the same attractions of the gospel that work on the hearts of Americans. Different cultural values lead to different slants on the attractiveness of the gospel.

2. Building Truth Systematically – The central truths of the gospel, such as might be written out in a short tract, can be deceptively simple. The fact is that they are built on a broad set of assumptions that are carefully developed in biblical history. The events of the Bible create the proper foundation upon which the gospel is laid. The Bible creates and develops the proper world view and life values that make the work of Jesus Christ understandable. These truths must be carefully taught, and listeners tested for proper understanding. Often the cultural traits discussed above will cause listeners difficulty in both comprehending and accepting the gospel, and the evangelist must be prepared to build step by step. Each culture will differ in the set of steps that must be constructed to reach the platform of clear understanding that leads to readiness for response.

3. Tearing Down Error Carefully – When biblical teaching is not the basis for a culture's beliefs and values, errors will abound. In order for the pure gospel to take root, false reasoning must be pulled down at the same time that biblical teaching is being constructed in the mind (II Cor. 10:5). The evangelist must be aware of the errors peculiar to the culture in which he is ministering, and be prepared to battle them sensitively, yet directly. Improper worldview assumptions will lead to chronic problems in new churches.

4. Allowing Proper Cultural Variation – Much of what makes the world so interesting is the wide array of values and practices that exist in various cultures. A great many of these are not unbiblical, and need not be removed as the gospel is brought in. Many of them, in fact, may more closely reflect biblical teaching than the values and practices of the evangelist's home culture. All of these must be allowed, and even celebrated, so that those receiving the gospel do not take offense needlessly.

5. Disallowing Improper Cultural Contamination – One common danger in the process of contextualization is to allow some kind of syncretism – the improper mixture of falsehood with biblical truth. This can be troublesome in a subtle way in cultures that have had some form of Christianity in their history. Even when one has assumed he has torn down error, as mentioned above, subtle remainders of unbiblical aspects of the receptor culture can mix in with and render impure the understanding of the gospel.

6. Removing Personal Cultural Preconceptions – A common problem of those doing cross-cultural ministry is to assume that their own cultural expression of Christianity is in fact part of the gospel. The result is an attempt to convert people not only to Jesus Christ, but to another culture as well. This is a common complaint against American missionaries, who tend to be very ethnocentric. The evangelist must thus not only contextualize the message, but must decontextualize it as well – that is, he must remove from his teaching those factors that reflect his own cultural biases regarding values and practices. This is one of the most difficult aspects of contextualization, but is absolutely vital to developing a healthy movement of the gospel in another country.

II. BASIC ISSUES IN RUSSIAN CONTEXTUALIZATION

A. Orthodox Foundation

1. Russian Religious Identity – Russian Orthodoxy has been the national religion of Russia for just over 1,000 years. One deeply ingrained feature of Russian religious character is the assumption that "Russians are Orthodox Christians." Contextualizing in Russia is complicated by the fact that most of the people who believe that there is a God already consider themselves to be Christians. In their minds, to be Russian is to be Christian, and to be born in Russia is to be baptized as an infant by an Orthodox priest.

2. Orthodox Anti-Contextualism - The Orthodox Church believes that its forms, sacraments and traditions have continued uninterrupted from the apostles themselves.¹ The Church does not alter these forms in order to fit into a new context. These traditions are considered to be as authoritative as the Bible itself,² and thus cannot be arbitrarily changed. When the average Russian youth thinks about the operation of "church," the images of the unchanging Orthodoxy all around him exert a strong influence. Russian culture has changed drastically since the Revolution; the Orthodox Church has not changed at all.

3. Orthodox Privileges – Although Orthodoxy suffered major setbacks during the period of communism in Russia, it never lost its privileged position as a Russian national symbol. Since the fall of communism, the Orthodox Church has made gradual steps to try to regain advantages over all other religions in Russia. Orthodox leaders were heavily involved in the passing of a law restricting the registration of new religious groups in Russia. At major political rallies, Orthodox leaders are often conspicuous. Orthodox priests are allowed to teach religious courses in public schools, while other groups are not allowed access.

B. Culture In Disarray

1. Confusion and Change – The fall of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union left many Russians in various states of disillusionment, discouragement and despair. At the same time, others expressed a new hopefulness and enjoyment of freedom. Life had been quite standardized in the Soviet system, and suddenly all the rules had changed. The older people were the most harmed by this, and many have been plunged into poverty. On the other end of the spectrum, the youth of Russia have emerged as a new kind of subculture that needs to be studied carefully. They are growing up in an entirely different Russia than that of their parents' youth. This disarray has profound implications for the communication of the gospel among youth and, as will be mentioned below, the youth subculture is far from being monolithic. There is no single overpowering context for all Russian youth.

2. Cultural Invasions – Perhaps the most visible manifestation of change in Russia is the presence of heavy influences from other cultures – and most particularly from the American culture. This is most clearly seen among youth, who commonly listen to Western music, follow Western fashions, and gravitate to clothing and accessories that bear English lettering. The influences go beyond the material ones. Alternate beliefs, values and attitudes from abroad are being assimilated by many Russian young people. The Russian culture was long prevented from open access to outside influences. The youth seem to be making up for lost time in their avid consumption of Western culture.

3. Polarization of Youth – Not all Russian youth respond in the same way to changes in the Russian culture. In fact, two opposite positions among youth seem to be developing. These positions are partially traceable to an old debate that has been carried on in Russia between those called "Slavophiles" and those called "Westernizers." The Slavophiles believed that Russia held the key to the regeneration of Europe through ideals found uniquely in traditional Slavic culture and Orthodox Christianity. Westernizers were in favor of leaving behind these ideals in a move toward more rational ways that they believed were found in Western thought.³ The entrance of communism into Russia complicated the issue even more, but did not eliminate the underlying controversy among Russians. Now it is heating up again between youth that are more traditional and patriotic, on the one hand, and those that are more contemporary and less proud of Russia, on the other hand. To contextualize the gospel for a Russian youth, one must first learn more about where the young person is located along this cultural continuum.

C. Barriers in Place

1. Orthodox Exclusivity - Perhaps the most important factor of Orthodox influence is its claim to be the one true church of Jesus Christ on earth.⁴ All others who claim to be followers of Christ are considered to be heretics. Those who seek to "cooperate" with Orthodoxy in evangelizing Russian youth are seeking in vain. This issue of the nature of the church must be dealt with directly by evangelical believers, because Orthodox leaders are very forthright in making their exclusive claims publicly (though, perhaps, not so frankly when speaking to Westerners).

2. Folk Religion - Although Russian folk ideas about God and the spiritual life come primarily from Orthodoxy, the practices of common people display a mix of Orthodoxy, paganism and folk

superstitions. To understand the influence of Orthodoxy on young people, it is not enough to read the official church doctrines. The Orthodoxy that is observed by Russian youth is that which is practiced by the people around them, and this is often very unattractive to them. On the other hand, the relative lack of personal demands found in folk religion can become a strong barrier against the gospel call to a radical life change. Folk ideas can also cause confusion for a young person who is hearing the gospel message. For this reason, underlying assumptions of youth must be unearthed if the gospel is to have its proper impact in their hearts.

3. Secularism - Secularism has been the central feature of the Russian cultural scene since the Revolution. All Soviet public institutions and all forms of art assumed a life without God. In order to learn more about God, one had not only to go out of his way, but had to face many obstacles as well. Even with the revival of Orthodoxy, mass culture even today operates very much in a secular mode – including the culture of Russian youth. With such a small percentage of the youth involved in any way in religion, the dominant youth peer influence is secularism. In spite of some reports to the contrary, there has been no mass movement of youth into churches. Thus the peer context for the average Russian youth is not a spiritual context. For a young person to be "like everybody else" – a strong drive among young people the world over – they should remain unreligious (or have religion only to an absolute minimum level).

4. Fear of Cults - Along with every other Western influence invading Russia have come religious cults of all kinds. Many of them are destructive cults that have separated children from their families, and which result in highly regimented lifestyles. Parents are naturally frightened about these, all the more since Orthodox priests are often warning about them through various media. However, there is very little discernment among parents when it comes to non-Orthodox faiths. The tendency is to believe that they are all cults. An evangelical leader will often get a call from a mother whose child has started attending the church. She will anxiously ask something like, "What is going to happen to my daughter?!" Parents with stronger control over their children will often forbid them to attend a non-Orthodox church. The warnings of Orthodox priests and the fears of parents have contributed to a great wariness of non-Orthodox religions among Russian youth. If a religious belief involves joining a particular group and entering into their practices, there will automatically be suspicion among young people. Those who are more flexible, however, feel that they can discern the difference between a strange cult and a legitimate religion, and are not so afraid or overly cautious. Even with them, however, the building of trust is no easy matter.

5. Negative Experiences of Evangelism – Following the flood of Western evangelicalism into Russia, many young Russian people were trained with superficial methods of evangelism. These methods tended to ignore Russian culture and promoted barging ahead with a "cold turkey" approach that did not take into account the need to build trust. Many Russian youth have been "accosted" by such people, and tend to have a negative attitude to someone who approaches them with a "presentation" of some sort. Insightful Russian believers have noticed that a young person will often be thinking, "this person is just trying to stuff me with what has been stuffed into him by somebody else."

6. Inoculation Against the Real Gospel – Superficial evangelistic methods have also resulted in many young people who have been led to believe that the praying of a prayer has taken care of

the issue, and that they don't need any more teaching or exhortation by you. They did what they were told to do by other visiting evangelists – why should they do it all over again? Such young people become very difficult to reach with the gospel of a transformed life (something that they didn't want in the first place, because it was too threatening). Many of these will actually become involved in churches, and perpetuate the shallow methods that were used on them. They have not been truly converted, and become like the "blind leading the blind" in their evangelism. The result is often simply more inoculation.

7. Fear of "Pioneering" – Westerners must never forget that the call to follow Christ in every aspect of one's life is still a very new concept to the Russian ear. To believe in God, wear a cross, be baptized, or pray a prayer is relatively harmless and will not raise any eyebrows. But to love, worship and serve Jesus Christ openly is to stand out very sharply among modern Russian youth culture. An American convert immediately has a multitude of fellow believers to get involved with, as well as a great variety of kinds of churches to join. The Russian seeker must look forward to being a relative pioneer, among the first of his peers to follow such a path. It is not a "tested and reliable" path that gives him comfort, but something new and different that makes him nervous.

8. Peer Pressure - Young people in the West are heavily influenced by their peers, and Russian youth feel this same pressure to conform to the styles and attitudes of those around them. Peer pressure has become perhaps the most dominant direct influence on Russian youth. A very common statement would be, "I don't want to be different. I want to be like everybody else." Since the dominant life perspective of a Russian teenager's peers is secularism, as mentioned above, the practical result is that young people live their lives with very little thought of God. They don't deal with spiritual issues in their everyday lives, and find few around them that do. As a result, they will say, "Everybody else lives that way (without God), so I should too." One of the ideas held by Russian youth is that religion is something that gets in the way of fun, and for that reason is to be avoided.

The factors above combine to create an atmosphere in which deep religion of any kind tends to be rejected among Russian youth. It is generally acceptable among peers for a teenager to wear a cross, carry an icon, or occasionally visit a church service – as long as it does not affect his or her everyday life. Young Russians do not freely discuss deep life issues – this is a matter only for a very few close friends. It is no small matter to break through the surface of superficial religious issues to get to the heart of true faith, and even then a young person is going to be thinking, "What would my friends think if I responded to this message?" The usual answer is, "They will think I have become strange." Getting deep into religion automatically makes a person an outsider from the dominant peer group. One young Christian man said, "When God starts doing something real, people become suspicious and oppose it."

This peer pressure seems to have the most power in younger teens, and Russian youth workers have found that, in general, young people from age 17 and older are easier to work with than those 16 and under. Peer and parental pressure give way to more individualistic and adult attitudes as the Russian youth gets older. Even so, workers have found that it is always best to try to work with opinion leaders among youth, who are less afraid of being "pioneers" (as mentioned above). Young people who have a "follower's" mentality tend to be more afraid of new ideas,

and are looking around to see who else among their peers is heading in these new directions. Opinion leaders will be less influenced by this fear, and can be the source of effective networking to reach larger groups of young people with the gospel.

In the initial days after the fall of the Soviet Union, an atmosphere of tolerance reigned. Everything was new and open, and there was very little active opposition to steps of faith. In many ways, people did not really know what to expect from open faith in God, and were ready to welcome anything that would help them escape the troubles of the past. As life began to enter the post-Soviet reality, with new worldly attractions flooding in from outside, young people became more aware of the meaning of making a choice to submit to God. The dominant peer culture ran faster toward materialism and hedonism than to spiritual values, and now those dominant values find the religious life to be a threat rather than a help. Subtle opposition to true religion began, and has grown into active persecution in some places. Young people are finding that accepting the gospel is going to mean rejection by their peers.

9. Western-Inspired Optimism – Among the young Russians that are most attracted to the things of the West, and who see increased opportunities for themselves in a Russia that is moving toward Western freedoms (in their estimation), their optimism about their life and prospects can work at cross-purposes with the gospel. They are not yet disillusioned about this life, and are too young to think very seriously about their mortality. They are thus often not open to a call for a radical change of life that will pull them away from the very things that at this time hold for them such promise. The promises are empty, but they don't yet know this. Although they are open to Western ideas, most of this openness leads to receptivity to pop culture and its worldly attractions. There is not yet a strong voice reaching them, which they respect, that can warn them against the vanity of worldly pursuits and thus set them on a search for more enduring principles of life.

D. The Westerner's Problem of Identification

1. Wealth – Russians commonly believe that their American visitors are wealthy. This has become one of the biggest problems for Americans in Russia. In fact, in comparison to the vast majority of Russians, an American is indeed very wealthy. The Russian perception creates various kinds of barriers to reception of the gospel. Russians often wonder how these wealthy visitors can understand anything about the difficulties of their lives, and how their message can be relevant. They might say, "Well, it is easy to have faith in America, where you have everything you want." This factor is less powerful among youth, who are not yet so conscious of the connections of wealth and faith, but it is an important factor to deal with nonetheless.

2. Superficiality – Russians commonly mention that Americans are very friendly – but only to a point. At first they greatly enjoy how everybody smiles at them, but then their experience begins to make them wonder what is behind the smiles. Are they sincere? Young Russians who have visited America will often say, "Everyone is nice and open, and they say, 'come visit us.' But when you drop in on them (unannounced – the Russian way) they say, 'It is nice that you came by, but what do you want? Why did you come by?'" They miss what Russians call *dushevnost* – which could be translated as "the quality of having an open soul." Russians prefer being more straightforward, and being friendly only with those who are really friends. And, once people are

friends, there are no artificial boundaries between them. Russians expect that friendships should be deeper, and that friends should depend on each other much more than they see in American relationships. Americans who come to Russia often tend to isolate themselves from Russians except in religious settings. Then, since their knowledge of the people is not deep, their religious messages tend to be simplistic. For an American to truly connect with and impact a young Russian for the gospel, he or she will need to invest much time, listening and observing more than speaking.

3. Structure - Americans suffer in Russians' estimation by comparison to Germans (a culture disliked by Russians for many obvious historical reasons). American culture, like German, is seen as being too structured, with everything "cut and dried." When Russians visit such a country it feels to them unnatural and makes them long for the simpler life of home. They tend to feel nervous when they go to a place with lots of order, because they always seem to be breaking the rules. Western influence has caused Moscow to become much more orderly than the average Russian city or village. Because of this, even Moscow feels different than the rest of Russia – it is unique. Young people are more flexible in adapting to a highly structured environment, but will tend to react to it unfavorably at first. Americans must be willing to put aside their urge to force Russians to fit within their systems and structures, and reach them within their own cultural approach to managing life.

E. The Russian's Problem of Motivation

1. Curiosity - In the early days after the fall of communism, Americans in Russia were a great novelty. Many Russians had never seen a foreigner in person before that time, and would have been frightened to speak to him even if they had the opportunity. Early visits of American Evangelicals drew large crowds, curious to hear what the Americans had to say. This curiosity was the main driving force of Russian young people, and a great many of them attended evangelistic meetings in the early 1990's. Information about the West and its culture had been largely withheld from them in the past, and now they wanted to find out all that they could. A common response afterward was, "Well, the Americans came, and we had lots of fun. They gave out Bibles and talked about God – but we don't really know what they wanted. They stayed a few days and then they left. Funny Americans."

2. Financial - Along with curiosity were found many other motives that were not related to the gospel message brought by the Americans. The opportunity to receive financial help was a major factor, and many Americans with soft hearts gave away many dollars in attempts to provide help. As this became common knowledge, many young people were present whenever an American group arrived.

3. English Language – English-speaking Russians were also eager to get practice with their language skills by speaking with Americans. Good English ability was a prime factor in finding work, especially in the early 1990's. Most of the young people had very little practice with their English, and attached themselves to Americans in order to improve their practical language skills.

4. Escape From Russia - Many Evangelicals and organizations were inviting Russians for a trip to America, and this also became a dramatic attraction. The power of the desire of Russians to travel abroad has been commonly underestimated, and ulterior motives related to this desire were often not well discerned by Americans.

5. Easy Deliverance From Problems – For many young people who did respond to the gospel message, it was often to a one-sided, misunderstood call. They wanted God to bring help to their lives, but did not hear the call to a change of life. They wanted instant results with no personal effort, and thus many became disillusioned. They did not want to hear about restrictions on their amoral lifestyle. The gospel of easy belief may have brought many to churches, but it brought relatively few to Jesus Christ.

III. GOSPEL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS TO CONTEXTUALIZE

A. Who is God?

1. Distant vs. Immanent – Some have compared the Orthodox attitude toward God to that of Islam. God is seen as distant from man, and thus we are unable to approach Him on any sort of familiar grounds. This provides a good foundation for teaching about the transcendence of God, but leaves a great gap in the understanding of God's immanence. Young Russians must be taught that the transcendence of God does not mean that He is distant from them. They should not see Him as outside of His creation, but intimately involved with it – and especially with the people He has created to be involved with Him.

2. Caring vs. Aloof – The immanence of God would not be much comfort without understanding the caring nature of God, as the Father of those who believe in Him and in the Lord Jesus Christ. Russian youth must understand the God who is not only ready to respond, but also lovingly willing to provide care for those whose hearts will receive Him as children. Many have the attitude that God should not be "bothered" with the small problems that we have – they are not so important to Him. This falsehood must be dispelled.

3. Mysterious vs. Knowable – Russian Orthodoxy has long appreciated the great mysteries surrounding the nature and work of God. Mystery and awe go together in the way that Russians have traditionally thought about God, and consequently simplified explanations of God are often distasteful among Russians. Young people are not as influenced by this mystical spirit, but may feel suspicious about a teaching about God that makes Him "too knowable." A proper balance must be maintained that exalts the mystery of the infinite God, while also giving credit to the clarity of God's Word in explaining what humans can and should know about Him. A spirit of awe and mystery can go together well with the joy of receiving God's clear revelation.

4. Gracious vs. Judging – Young people have nagging feelings about their sin, even if they try to ignore or suppress the guilt feelings. They commonly believe, though will not always openly admit, that they are being punished for their sins in this life. God is thus primarily seen as the Judge who does not approve of their lives. The common reaction is to avoid thinking about Him. That He would be gracious and ready to pardon, and even enter into a close, loving relationship with a sinner is not understood by most young people. They must be taught about the evil of sin

and sin's consequences, but they must be shown clearly the heart of God as shown in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. It must be seen as a picture of grace and not of further condemnation.

5. Relevant vs. Outdated – As mentioned above, the Orthodox Church fiercely avoids any attempts to change its outward forms. The seeker is expected to contextualize himself to God – God will certainly not change His ways to come to them. The result is a general attitude toward God as being outdated and irrelevant to the current life of young people. He can perhaps meet the needs of old women with no future, but can certainly not speak very deeply to vibrant young people with their lives ahead of them. This point, in a nutshell, illustrates both the importance and the challenge of contextualizing the biblical teaching about God to Russian youth. They must understand the God who communicates Himself in ways that a person can understand, and who deals directly with every issue of modern life in a way that is perfectly wise. God is eternally relevant.

B. What is Conversion?

1. Process vs. Event – Confusion over the nature of conversion seems to abound in Russia. But the problem is not simply with Russians who respond to the gospel, but also with Westerners who are communicating it and evaluating responses. One difficulty is in how these two groups understand the way that conversion occurs. Some are emphasizing the process, and others the dramatic event of conversion. I see two fundamental reasons for this confusion.

The first reason for confusion relates to Orthodox teaching on the subject. The central meaning of salvation in Orthodox teaching is the growing participation in the nature of God by the means of Orthodox rituals and mysteries. It is this process that is the central aspect of salvation according to Orthodox teaching, in contrast to the focus on legal justification in Western teaching. “Orthodox theologians contend that in the West the doctrines of sin and salvation have been unduly dominated by legal, juridical, and forensic categories.”⁵ The restoring of a mystical union with God, a process not completed in this life, is the focus of Orthodox soteriology, and one does not hear of God declaring sinners righteous on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. “In the history of Orthodox theology...it is startling to observe the near total absence of any mention of the idea of justification by faith.”⁶ Unlike evangelical soteriology, in Orthodox teaching there is no clear distinction between justification and sanctification. The “legal” aspect of justification tends to be the focus of the thinking of Evangelicals, and this contrast in ways of thinking can cause confusion among Russian listeners to the gospel. In addition, a much stronger theology and demonstration of divine indwelling and transformation is often needed among Evangelical missionaries in order to communicate the gospel in all its glory to the Russian mind.

The second reason for the confusion lies in the nature of coming to understanding of biblical truth. Westerners often don't recognize the wealth of context that the American culture and media provide for people about Christianity. Even if much of it is not accurate, it still provides many windows into the meaning of the gospel to people in the American culture. The Russian culture and media are almost completely devoid of such context, and so most Russians haven't had time to meditate on the claims of Christ or the ramifications of the gospel by the time they

are asked to make a decision to convert. In this sense we are not talking about a "process" of regeneration, but about a process of being brought to a readiness for true repentance and belief.

2. The danger of conversion rituals – Westerners doing evangelism are almost invariably attached to visible actions that are identified with conversion. By far the most common is the use of a "sinner's prayer" in both public and private settings. It may be quite a feat to bring a Westerner to the point of such a prayer, and thus the likelihood may be much greater that one is truly praying in faith (but even this is a debatable point). In Russia, the tendency to see prayer almost as an incantation, with the expectation of satisfying a mysterious divine demand, makes such conversion rituals very suspect – even dangerous. They have resulted in countless false conversions in Russia in the 1990's. Multiple thousands, including many young Russians, have been reported as converts as a result of such a prayer, and yet the churches have very rarely grown as a result of campaigns that use these approaches. In most cases, in my opinion, the use of such a prayer has actually been abortive of the important process of coming to an understanding of the call of Christ, as mentioned above. This fact is displayed in the common practice of young people "falling away" as soon as they understand that the Lord is making any kinds of demands on their lives. They are not used to such an idea, and become afraid. Their impulse is to run away from such a challenge. Thus the all-too-common pattern: a quick, flighty response to an incomplete explanation of the gospel; a shallow response with an equally shallow rejection; a young person scared or offended, and now much harder to reach with the truth.

3. The meaning of "Belief" – To many in Russia, to be a "believer" is simply to be one who assents to the existence of God. Even this was no small claim in the time of the Soviet Union, and so those who believed in the existence of God kept this fact secret. Since so many Russian youth believe that God exists, and have been baptized (as discussed below), they need to be carefully informed about the nature of true belief. Otherwise they will not understand why a person who is already a "believer" needs to do anything else. Belief as a living trust and a new life needs to be deeply stressed with Russian youth. It will actually often be a sign of progress when a young person is *unwilling* to make such a step toward conversion as described above. It will mean that the claim of Jesus Christ on his life is starting to sink in and threaten his sinful autonomy.

4. The purpose of baptism – According to Russian Orthodox teaching, water baptism is the means by which a person enters into the Christian life. It is the door into salvation, which continues in the process mentioned above. It is thus far more than a symbolic act, because by it one is said to be made a member of the mystical body of Christ. For many Russian youth, baptism is not just the first act of the Christian life; it is practically the only act that they will experience in a church (unless they are also married in a church). A great many Russian youth have been baptized as infants, and this may be their only claim to being a Christian. And yet, it may serve as a barrier against the gospel. A believer's baptism outside of Orthodoxy will be considered a strange thing, and will need to be carefully explained.

5. New life and Nominality – Russian youth who consider themselves to be Orthodox may have extremely little to do with the Church. "Conversion" to Orthodoxy, if it is even considered in these terms, bears little effect on their lives. The idea of a new life that is a daily walk with God is not their normal idea of Christianity. Many want the minimum, which could often be seen as a

small measure of insurance before God while they actually continue to live their lives as they please. This extreme nominality can easily carry over to those who get involved with Evangelicals. Young people are not likely to have a concept of a conversion that would make them newly living members of a living body. They may get involved in just a minor way, picking and choosing what they want to do, and moving on to other things when they lose interest in the activities. Much of this could be avoided if, from the beginning, Westerners carefully taught the new life that comes with true conversion.

C. What is the Christian Life?

1. Relationship with God - For the Orthodox Church, baptism, communion, and other church activities are far more than symbolic acts. They are sacraments in the fullest sense. They are seen to transmit grace to the believer, resulting in true communion with Jesus Christ, and thus occupy a prominent place in the thinking of Orthodox people. For many people, performing the sacraments is the sole reality to their relationship with God. They will superficially perform the sacraments, memorize prayers, wear a cross, carry an icon and cross themselves, but don't think as much about the deeper meaning of a moment by moment relationship with a loving Father God. Furthermore, on the folk level, many of the practices mentioned above have descended to the level of superstition, completely removed from any notion of a relationship to God. One of the most critical contextualization issues is thus to instill in young people the notion of a real and living relationship with Jesus Christ that cannot be contained in any outward acts.

2. Prayer as communion – Consistent with the sacramental mindset that young people may have gained from Orthodoxy would be the notion of ritualistic prayer that can be performed apart from a living relationship with God. Many have a notion of prayer as a memorized incantation that will force God's (or even "fate's") hand. Prayer as ongoing, loving communion with the Father is not commonly understood. One of the best ways to contextualize this is for young people to actually see it taking place. And one of the best venues for this is in small groups of believers.

3. Living by the Word of God – Even among those who are heavily involved in Orthodox ritual, the knowledge of the Bible is likely to be minimal. Given the Orthodox belief that the Church is the infallible interpreter of the Bible, as will be mentioned below, it is more important to learn from the priests than to search the Bible for oneself. Life is generally lived according to tradition and ritual, and not directly according to the teachings of the Bible. To accept the Bible as the authority for daily life is a very big step for a Russian youth. The Scriptures were shrouded in mystery within Orthodoxy, and ridiculed by communists. The result is that they are largely ignored today. Although the Bible has some measure of value in the eyes of Russians, it is for all practical purposes unused. The Russian youth must learn that the Bible is deeply relevant to his or her life, and see that spiritual light and life fulfillment will be found in its message.

4. Ambassador for Christ – The nominality mentioned above has also combined with a Russian notion that one should keep his spiritual beliefs to himself. The fact that a youth is likely to be ridiculed for taking religion too seriously adds to the pressure to remain silent about one's faith. This, of course, runs counter to the command of Christ to make disciples and proclaim His message to the world. Although the means of proclamation must be contextualized as well, as

will be discussed below, the fact of proclamation as the duty of an ambassador for Christ must be clearly taught and expected.

5. Eternal Perspective – Seventy years of communism led most people to focus their entire attention on this earthly life (since it was, in fact, the only life that existed). Orthodoxy, on the other hand, tended to withdraw from participation in the world (as did Baptists). The result is that there is little understanding of the need to live life in the light of eternity, yet with a focus on bringing glory to God in the context of normal human life. Young people today tend to be fixated not just on earthly life, but on the immediate pleasures of that life. It is a very strange thing for them to think about living life today in such a way to influence eternal reward. Earthly life and eternal life are often separated in the mind by a great gulf, and it is up to the one who is contextualizing to explain the close connection of the two.

6. Living by Faith – In times of great uncertainty, it is most important for believers to learn to trust God as a caring provider. Under communism this idea was ridiculed, and it is hard for a young person to understand how a life of faith operates. One will even hear a young person say, "Well, it is okay to trust God, but you need to depend on yourself." This secular approach holds sway, even among those who consider themselves to be believers in God. Young people need to learn to find security in the Lord, and not in having money, jobs, and material goods. Most importantly for the Westerner, this message may not be well received coming from him. Most Russians think that Americans don't need to trust in God – they already have everything. "How can they come here and tell us how to live by faith? They don't know anything about our difficult lives!" On the other hand, Russians who have learned this secret can become effective in demonstrating and verbalizing this to others.

7. Suffering – Related to the above is a biblical perspective on suffering. One of the key features of the Russian consciousness has been a fixation on suffering. One will very often hear or read of the "long-suffering Russian people." Their long history bears this out, and 20th century history has planted this idea even deeper than in the past. Again, Westerners are not usually the best people to teach the message of how God uses suffering, and that it should not be rejected. Many Russians already believe that Americans, for example, are spiritually inferior to Russians due to their comfortable and unchallenging lifestyle. This will not be such a strong factor with youth, who have not experienced the suffering of their parents and grandparents, but the subtle messages cannot help but filter down to them. The point is that proper communicators must help Russian youth to beware of focusing all their attention on trying to materially better their lives, as well as avoiding suffering by remaining quiet about their faith.

8. Holiness and Morality – Life under communism was considered to be impossible without lying, cheating, and breaking rules. After all, the rules were unfair. But even today, for example, businessmen believe that if a small business pays all of the legally required taxes, it will not be able to survive. Public morality in this and many other areas greatly deteriorated under communism, especially in its last few decades. Young people became very immoral and relativistic. Today, to see another young Russian living a life of sexual purity and integrity is a strange thing. Many Americans are surprised at what they consider to be the loose idea of integrity among their Russian counterparts. The holiness of God and the joy of a pure lifestyle, even in the face of ridicule and difficulties, must become part of a young person's concept of the

Christian life. Otherwise youth are likely to have minimal moral foundations, and will not respond to the Lordship of Christ.

9. Stewardship – Giving to the Church has often been seen as a way to receive back a favor from God. Many young people will buy a candle to light in an Orthodox church, or even pay an older woman to pray for them. Young corrupt businessmen will pay priests to pray for them – even with no intention of changing their lifestyle. Thus the connection of money and spirituality has become corrupted in the minds of many. This becomes a touchy area to contextualize, because young Russians must be taught to be stewards of their resources as members of the body of Christ. Many have seen Westerners give great amounts to Russian churches and ministries, and do not yet feel that it is their responsibility. Or they may feel that they need not give, because they have so little themselves. This is another teaching that is best passed on by a Russian in similar circumstances as those of the listeners, who can both teach and demonstrate proper stewardship.

D. What is the Church?

1. The Church as People – One of the first misconceptions to correct in the mind of a young person is that the Church of Jesus Christ is not a building of particular architecture; it is not a temple made by man. Rather it is the people of God assembling together to worship and build each other up. Young Russians are often very surprised when told that the Church is people, so connected in their minds is the local Orthodox temple. The Baptists in Russia are today very intent on having impressive buildings, and much of this comes from the fact that Russians will not take seriously a gathering of people in a home or rented hall. How can it be called a church without the building? With the poor economic condition of most Russians coming to churches, Evangelicals have great difficulty finding the funds to construct buildings. The result is often a lack of feeling of ownership and stewardship by the congregation. That Russians would learn to look at *themselves* as "the Church" should be a critical goal of contextualization.

2. The Church under Lordship – A further difficulty is to instill the notion that the Church is a worldwide family of believers with no human head. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church; He is the head of the body. As such, there is no human mediator between God and man apart from Jesus. The Orthodox Church considers itself to be the only true church of God on earth, and will vehemently reject the notion of the equality of all local bodies before God. The Church itself is seen as the mediator between God and man, and nobody should expect access to God apart from the ministrations of this organization. There will be no compromise on this issue, and Evangelicals will find this to be a critical point of contention. Young Russians will be forced to consciously reject the authority of what is considered to be the national Russian Church in order to join a group of Evangelicals.

3. The Church under the Word – Evangelicals understand that the Word of God is the standard by which the Church is to be judged. In Orthodoxy, on the other hand, the church itself is considered to be infallible, and the result is that the ecumenical councils and other Orthodox traditions have authority equal to that of the Bible.⁷ The Church has no external or dogmatic authority over itself, but is itself the authority, a fact guaranteed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church. "...the only ultimate theological criterion to which Orthodoxy appeals is the

living presence of God himself, who safeguards the church and promises through his Spirit to lead us and guide us into all truth.”⁸ Evangelicals often think that they will be able to appeal to the Word of God to prove their assertions about the Church and about believers, but Russian youth are being told that people outside the "true Church" have no such right to use the Bible. As with all issues related to Orthodoxy, the extent to which the Russian Orthodox Church influences a Russian youth will be the extent to which this teaching will be both critical and controversial.

4. The Church as Family – In Russian Orthodox churches people do not really function as members who are intimately involved in each other's lives. The people worshipping next to each other may do this for years without knowing each other, and would not consider themselves as part of a caring family that is interdependent. Russian youth who have a conception of the Church in their minds have the idea of a *place* to go to perform church-type rituals. One can go anonymously, and slip in and out at any time. It is both important and difficult to introduce the idea that the Church is the family of God, and that the lives of the children of God should intertwine as they provide mutual care for each other.

5. The Church as Body – The prior point related to the love and care within the Church; this point relates to the function of its various ministries. Russian Orthodoxy with its strict hierarchy and notion of priesthood, is not a model of the mutual ministry of gifted people toward one another that is found in the Bible. The priests "do the ministry" for the people. It is a very novel concept for Russians that all the members of the body are equal ministers that work together to build up the body of Christ. This is even the case in Russian Baptists churches, where a few Brothers tend to dominate the operation of a church. Strong authority and passive membership is a concept that must be carefully torn down so that Russian youth do not fall into the patterns of their ancestors and elders.

6. The Church as Light to the World – If Russian evangelical churches are to have an impact on Russian society, become recognized, gain credibility, and reach more young people for Christ, they need to inculcate in their members the idea of the Church as the light of the world which must not be hidden. Young people are used to thinking of the Church as irrelevant to society at large, and the cloistering, otherworldly approach to religion as practiced in Russia lends credence to this attitude. Russian Baptists also tend to be both legalistic and hyper-separatists, not promoting integration into society in activities that are not considered "Christian." The result is very minimal impact on the culture. Young people must gain a new perspective of the Church as a force in the world, infiltrating to provide both salt and light, and not attempting to simply escape from the world.

7. The Church and Worship

a. Music – Russian Orthodox church music is very traditional, and often seems gloomy and depressing to Russian youth. If anything "Christian" is portrayed in Russian media, it will be Orthodox music that is providing the atmosphere. Young people need to find out, to their surprise, that the worship of God need not be imprisoned in musical styles that are unappealing to them. Young people are becoming very westernized in their musical tastes, and will be much more open to new styles of worship music that would not necessarily appeal to their parents (and would probably appall their grandmothers). This is a form of contextualization that calls for the formation of new mental associations, and so will bring about various responses. It might be best

to utilize more universal youth styles that do not expect too great a cultural leap in the minds of youth.

b. Ritual – Young people are likely to think of worship in terms of precise liturgy, rituals and forms, candles and vestments – all inseparable from Orthodox worship. The simplicity of evangelical worship will often be a shock (though often a pleasant surprise) to young people. Consistent with their attitudes toward all things Orthodox, they may not really care that the Orthodox Church operates in this way or that. However, their fear of cults will be more likely to surface when approaches to worship are in sharp contrast to Orthodox forms. It will be important for Evangelicals to not only demonstrate a new way to worship, but explain it carefully as well. Young Russians do not necessarily have in their minds an idea of what their ideal worship would look like, but inner values, if offended, may prevent them from truly entering into the approach brought to them by Evangelicals. Much is yet to be learned about this subject as it relates to Russian youth.

8. The Church and Symbols – There are a few evangelical churches in Russia that are already beginning to attempt to utilize selected Orthodox symbols (such as icons, priestly vestments and incense) in their worship services, with the apparent goal of making Russians more at ease. An icon may not seem harmful in and of itself, but the question must be asked: Are there beliefs that are inseparably linked to the use of icons that will produce unbiblical practices? It may not be so easy to alter the idea of icons in the minds of Russians, and it may not be advisable. Evangelicals may even attract more Orthodox opposition by using symbols that are considered the spiritual property of Orthodoxy. Also, the cross is a universal Christian symbol that may cause few problems. However, the wearing of a cross can often carry deeper meanings for youth that relate more to underlying superstitions than to Christian truths. Priestly vestments worn by a man who is not a true "priest" could cause unnecessary confusion. The use of symbols will be one of the most dangerous areas of contextualization attempted in Russia, and Evangelicals should proceed with great caution.

9. The Church and the State – As mentioned above, Russian Orthodoxy has been the religion of Russia for over 1,000 years. In addition, the Church has long been intertwined with the State, and thus Russian nationalism drives many people to identify with Orthodoxy as part of their pride in being Russian. Americans, who are so used to a plurality of denominations, along with religious freedom, have not had to struggle with this issue for many years, and are often unable to draw on rich historical, exegetical and biblical theology to teach about this issue with authority. As a result, many Americans are disqualified as spokesmen for Christianity in the eyes of many Russians. Russian young people may be quite ready to hear that the Church need not be attached to the State, but careful teaching will be required to show that this is true, and why it is true. Also, many American denominations are entering Russia and starting churches that are named according to that American organization. To associate with a denomination may be a helpful thing, but to accept the name and authority of it in a country like Russia is to invite long-term irrelevance in the minds of the majority of the potential Russian audience. The Russian churches should be Russian – not pale copies of something American.

IV. CONTEXTUAL VENUES FOR PRESENTING THE GOSPEL

In this section I will just briefly discuss a few issues that have arisen in Russia regarding evangelistic venues. The subject requires much more treatment, but a few summary statements may be of some introductory help.

A. Mass Evangelism

1. Advantages – Large meetings in rented halls have become associated with visiting Western evangelists in Russia in the 1990's. The primary advantage is that a neutral setting can be arranged where many people can be invited to hear the gospel. Advertising can be used to attract people, and gifted speakers utilized.

2. Disadvantages – The main disadvantage relates to the misuse of this method by many evangelical groups. Many Russians have responded to a public gospel invitation by performing the required step (raising hands, coming forward, praying a prayer, filling out a response card, etc.) but only a minute fraction of these have ended up in churches. Russians are often seen to respond due to the actions of the group around them, but with no deep understanding. A speaker cannot respond to the particular questions and problems of each listener in a mass group, and the large numbers who respond in various ways make follow-up problematic.

3. Primary Usage – This method is best used when the main goal is general exposure to the gospel. I believe that those listeners who are serious will demonstrate this by coming to further meetings in various kinds of neutral venues, or by giving a trained believer the opportunity to come visit them. They will be much less likely to take the big step of visiting a church. I would discourage any kind of public invitation at the time of the meeting. At the same time, I would make allowance, by means of one-on-one meetings, for those few that may be actually ready to repent and believe at that time.

B. Church Evangelism

1. Advantages – An evangelical worship service provides a setting where the visitor can observe a large group of believers together and see what they do. The site will be more likely to remain the same for future visits, unlike those rented for public meetings. The message of the gospel is combined with singing, prayer, and other forms of worship. In addition, bringing the young person to become a living part of a church is the goal of evangelism, and so this step must necessarily happen sometime.

2. Disadvantages – The church can be an intimidating place for a young person to visit, and may be too strange to him or her for an initial exposure to the gospel. The pulpit messages are less likely to be directed to the visitor, and may be hard to understand.

3. Primary Usage – This method is best used when the main goal is exposure to worship. Visitors not only hear the gospel, but also see it being corporately demonstrated. The life of the body need not be described, because it is in fact experienced. A trained member has more

freedom to follow up by conversing with a person who has visited the church. The resulting personal relationship is a more fruitful method of evangelism, especially in Russia.

C. Small Group Evangelism

1. Advantages – A small group, usually meeting in a home, provides a more natural setting for a young Russian who is finding out about Christians. In the small group he can see how believers interact with each other, care for each other and pray together. He can see that they are normal people like him, but with a living faith that exists outside of the four walls of the church building. A visitor to a small group is much more conspicuous than in a church service, aiding in follow-up.

2. Disadvantages – The small group may be the most susceptible to being considered a cult, and this fact will frighten many away from them. It may also be less likely that a person will be there with adequate training to properly communicate with a visitor in line with his particular needs. Visitors to small groups may feel too conspicuous in a small group, and thus be too intimidated.

3. Primary Usage – This method is best used when the main goal is exposure to fellowship. The life of a church is best seen in the lives of its members, and godly fellowship is the most important expression of that life.

D. One-on-One Evangelism

1. Advantages – This method has the advantage of being the most flexible of all methods. It can occur anytime, at any place. The person doing this kind of work is able to focus all of his attention on one person, allowing for more particular probing into the person's special needs and questions. This is the only method that can be used with the many people who will not accept any invitation to a group. A loving, wise believer can take the time and build up trust, being careful not to rush the young person into something for which he is not ready.

2. Disadvantages – In Russia, one person evangelizing another is a very strange thing, and young people will be likely to feel that this is not a normal person talking to them. The fear of cults will also be a factor, in that this is the common approach of cults in Russia. The young person may be very reluctant to open up and discuss such a topic, and so the method is often limited to close acquaintances or else gifted personal evangelists.

3. Primary Usage - This method is best used when the main goal is exposure to personal counsel. The young Russian can see how this one person cares enough about him to take time and deal with his personal life problems. When church members are trained to do this kind of evangelistic ministry sensitively, it can become the most important way to give people first exposure to the gospel.

CONCLUSION

There seems to be a common assumption among American Evangelicals that they are able to write the gospel message on a "blank slate" when ministering to Russian youth. They assume

that atheism left a vacuum that allows for rapid acceptance of the gospel. This is simply not true, and fruitful ministry demands that this illusion be broken. The combined influences of Orthodoxy, secularism, hedonism, superstition, fear of cults, and other factors have quickly made the soil resistant to simple seed planting among Russian youth. The ground must be broken and watered by wise Christian workers.

Americans desiring to reach Russian youth need to become educated regarding the cultural and religious context that shapes how their audience thinks and feels. Russian youth are definitely reachable with the gospel, and encouraging, fruitful ministry is proceeding today along with the fruitless efforts that have discouraged so many American workers. May God grant us the desire to proceed in our labors with wisdom and discernment, so that a new generation will hear and see an effective, contextualized communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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Endnotes

¹ John Karmaris, *Concerning the Sacraments* in Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995, p. 30.

² Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994, p. 109.

³ James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, New York: Vintage Books, 1966, p. 320-21.

⁴ George Florovsky, *The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church*, in Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995, p. 112.

⁵ Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994, p. 109.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 110.

⁷ George Florovsky, *The Authority of the Ancient Councils and the Tradition of the Fathers*, in Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995, p. 30.

⁸ Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994, p. 107.