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Off the Street and into the Kitchen: Contextualizing the Gospel for Russians

Samuel P. Slobodian

Vice President, Baptist International Evangelistic Ministries
Oak Forest, Illinois

A study of Russia and its people is both fascinating and frustrating. Russia is indeed fascinating because of the vastness of her boundaries, the uniqueness of her people, the differences of her ideologies, and the great degree to which she has impacted so many people and nations in making her imprint on history.

The fact that dramatic events impacting much of the world are taking place in Russia these days, and that these events are often covered by our media here in the United States, heightens both our awareness and our fascination.

Yet attempting to understand the Russian people has puzzled and often frustrated many Westerners. Perhaps that is why Yale Richmond begins his highly regarded book, *From Nyet to Da: Understanding the Russians*, by quoting Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich who long ago said, "I have never met anyone who understood Russians."¹ More recently, Winston Churchill stated that "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."² Similarly, it is often the case that students

¹Yale Richmond, *From Nyet to Da: Understanding the Russians* (Yarmouth, Me.: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1992), xi.

²Henry S. Rowan and Charles Wolf, eds., *The Future of the Soviet Empire* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), 1.

of this fascinating country come to accept Paul Winterton's rueful dictum: "There are no experts on Russia—only varying degrees of ignorance."³ However, anthropologist Margaret Mead notes the importance of such study in a report on certain aspects of Soviet attitudes toward authority in which she states, "A primary task . . . is the increasing of understanding of our own culture and that of other countries. On our capacity to develop new forms of understanding may well depend the survival of our civilization."⁴

While scarcely none would argue the importance of the survival of our civilization, the goal and motive of the missiologist is even higher; for the Great Commission is a heavenly mandate, and the salvation of souls is an eternal matter.

The Russians Identified

For a long time the term "Russian" was frequently used to identify the entire Soviet Union which stretched across eleven time zones and encompassed over 100 nationalities and peoples. The nationalities could be divided into three groups: the conquered people, the people who immigrated or were absorbed, and the Slavic people. Our attention will focus on this third group, the Slavic group which is also referred to as Eastern Slavs, or Russians to distinguish them from the Western Slavs (Czechs, Slovaks, Poles) and the Southern Slavs or Yugoslavs (Serbs, Croates, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Bulgarians).

The Eastern Slavs are comprised of three groups. There are over 10 million White or Byelorussians, nearly 52 million Little Russians or Ukrainians, and there are over 148 million Great Russians. These three types have influenced one another,

³John Fischer, *Why They Behave Like Russians* (New York: Harper, 1947), viii.

⁴Margaret Mead, *Soviet Attitudes Toward Authority* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 1.

and there have been inter-marriages. Nevertheless, shades of distinction remain between these three types of Russians exist.⁵ The Russian language is closely related to the two other East Slavic languages, Ukrainian and Byelorussian and all three use the Cyrillic alphabet devised by Saints Cyril and Methodius. So closely related are these three East Slavic languages that native speakers of Russian, Ukrainian, and Byelorussian understand one another.⁶

The Eastern Slavs alone were found well distributed throughout the immense Soviet realm. Even when the surrounding countryside was non-Slavic in ethnic character, they were frequently the most numerous nationality in town and tended to occupy more than their share of positions, responsibility, and power.

While Russians numbered little more than half the population, the political and economic leadership of the Soviet Union was almost entirely Russian, as well as the top echelons of the Communist party armed forces, and KGB. Russian, moreover, was the predominant language and culture.⁷

Today with nationalistic sentiments growing in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia the term "Russian" is more and more distinctly identified with the Great Russians of the Eastern Slavic group.

⁵Georges Jorre, *The Soviet Union: The Land and Its People*, 2nd ed., trans. E.D. Laborde, 2nd Ed., (New York: Wiley, 1963), 72-74.

⁶Michael Ryan and Richard Prentice, *Social Trends in the Soviet Union from 1950*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), 68.

⁷Richmond, *From Nyet to Da*, xxiii.

Russian History

The history of the Russian nation began when East Slavic tribes living along the Dnieper River formed a loose federation around the city of Kiev, which was established in 862. The name of the new nation was Rus, identifying the possible Scandinavian roots of the ruling tribe or clan. The Russians adopted Christianity from Byzantium to the south in 988. Most of the tribes were conquered by the Mongols in the first half of the thirteenth century, and Muscovite Rus replaced Kiev as the center of the surviving Russian nation. The difficult struggle for survival under the Mongolian (Tartar) Empire is still reflected in Russian ballads, songs, and proverbs. Moscow rulers were able to consolidate Russian lands and lead a national liberation which achieved total independence from the Mongols in 1480. The Russians conducted a vast territorial expansion for the next few centuries, establishing colonies even in the New World (in Alaska and California). St. Petersburg became the third capital at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and the reign of Peter the Great (1689-1725) brought cultural advancement and certain progress to the nation. Despite this progress, the lot of common Russians remained as poor as the miserable conditions of prior centuries, for the majority of the Russians were serfs or peasants tied to the land belonging to squires, the czar, or monasteries. The end of the Russian Empire came as a result of the military defeats in the Crimean War during the 1850s, which forced the government to abolish serfdom in 1861, and the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905, which resulted in the introduction of a limited parliamentary system. The 'Provisional Government' replaced the monarch in February 1917, as a result of Russia's military setbacks in World War I. Russia's brief experience with democracy ended quickly with the October Revolution of 1917, engineered by Lenin and his followers. For

most of the past century, the Communist government ruled Russia with totalitarian power and Marxist-Leninist ideology.⁸

To the Western observer it seemed that there was no prospect for significant change. However, not long after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he proposed dramatic changes as he introduced revolutionary concepts such as glasnost (openness, transparency) and perestroika (change, transformation, restructuring). When Gorbachev first spoke of these concepts (along with others he introduced into the Soviet Union like democratization), many in the West seemed skeptical. Within a relatively short period of time, however, Gorbachev was caught in a struggle between democratic forces he had unleashed and an old-guard authoritarian regime. In dramatic events which captured the fascination of the whole world in 1991, Gorbachev was toppled from power and replaced by Boris Yeltzin, the first democratically elected president of Russia. Also the Soviet Union was dissolved and its fifteen "republics" became independent countries loosely organized as "the Commonwealth of Independent States." The results of all this produced a great deal of economic hardship as well as political instability. Today, like his predecessor, Yeltzin is in the precarious leadership position of a country that is struggling between two forces: those committed to democratic reform politically and free market reform economically and those old guard, authoritarian, some times nationalistic forces committed to resisting those reforms. Presently, these forces are locked in a struggle and no one can predict the outcome.

A history of frequent invasion, tremendous wartime casualties, as well as cultural and political isolation have made an impact on Russian culture. Also of great significance in our Western attempt to understand Russians, we should note what is missing from Russian history. "Unlike the Western culture in

⁸Vadim Medish, *The Soviet Union*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice, 1987), 9-44.

which we live, Russian culture experienced no Renaissance . . . no Reformation . . . no Enlightenment."⁹

Remote from the West, Russia experienced none of the major developments which shaped modern Europe—the Renaissance with its revival of classical influence and flowering of the arts, the Reformation with its pluralism of religious and secular thought, the rise of big cities, the development of modern agriculture and commerce, the scientific revolution, economic liberalism and recognition of individual rights, the beginnings of political liberty, and the growth of a strong middle class. In the West the middle class was in the forefront of reform. Russia's failure to develop a strong middle class delayed reform.¹⁰

Furthermore:

Since Russia had no equivalent of the Magna Charta, there has been no outgrowth of judicial reforms . . . no constitutional balance of interests . . . no religious, human, and property rights. There was no Renaissance with its rejection of medieval values and revival of culture. There was no Reformation and its resulting effects on politics, economics, and social structures.¹¹

The Russian Orthodox Church

Russian Orthodoxy has had a profound influence on Russian culture. Even though Russia was under communism for 70 years, in many ways this country never ceased to be Orthodox

⁹Ray and Cindy LeClair, *Handbook for Christian Travelers to the CIS* (Wheaton, Ill.: Slavic Gospel Association, 1993), 3.

¹⁰Richmond, *Understanding the Russians*, 7.

¹¹LeClair, *Handbook for Christian Travelers to the CIS*, 3.

and indeed has been for over 1,000 years. "Orthodox Christian faith permeates every facet of the culture and history of the Eastern Slavs: language, art, architecture, literature, customs, habits, values, and hopes. The term 'Holy Rus' suggests this interpretation."¹²

The long history of the Russian Orthodox Church began when Kievan Rus converted to Orthodox Christianity in 988. The territorial struggles of the centuries which followed isolated the Russian Orthodox Church from the rest of Christianity, and Russian Orthodoxy developed independently as a national church which eventually was centered in Moscow.

Moscow, moreover, saw itself as the Third and Last Rome, successor to Rome and Constantinople, the two capitals of the Roman Empire which in turn had fallen to barbarians and infidels. Russia was regarded by its religious and lay leaders as a holy land with an imperial mission, a new center of Christianity, destined to unite the people of East and West. It was at this time that Russia's rulers began to use the title tsar, derived from Caesar. Russia's historic distrust of the West has its roots in this religious schism and its aftermath.¹³

Some of the cultural themes that are addressed in the following section such as communalism, egalitarianism, and submission find their roots in Russian Orthodoxy.

Even though the present Orthodox leadership is known for a history of cooperation with Communist authorities, a recent survey disclosed that 75% of the Russians surveyed expressed a

¹²Leonis Kishhorsky, "The Mission of the Russian Orthodox Church after Communism," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 1 (Summer 1993): 1.

¹³Richmond, *From Nyet to Da*, 7.

"great deal of confidence" in the Orthodox Church and its leaders.¹⁴ Today the Russian Orthodox Church is:

the least reformed element of former Soviet society, and is still very defensive about its past. Many Orthodox hierarchies desire to return to at least an unofficial state/church status in which preference would go to the Russian Orthodox Church, a possibility that naturally worries Catholics and evangelicals.

The Orthodox are often not supportive of full religious freedom or democracy or pluralism. A priest in Moscow in late 1992 was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that the most dangerous forces that Russian presently faced were democracy and pluralism. Evangelicals and Catholics were compared to wild wolves and sheep-stealers.¹⁵

Russian Cultural and Sociological Themes

Attempting to define the cultural/sociological themes of a people as diverse and complex as the Russians is certainly a function which yields results that are less than precise. There is the danger of unfair stereotypes and there are always exceptions. Despite this and the difficulties mentioned in the introduction, we who would like to present the Gospel to Russia must earnestly endeavor to understand the Russian people. The degree to which we gain an understanding of these people is the degree to which our missionary efforts among them will be enhanced.

Though similarities exist, it is clear that Russians are recognizably different from Americans and other nationalities. We will begin by first identifying some historical similarities that

¹⁴Mark Elliot and Wil Triggs, eds., "God is Alive and Well in Russia," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 2 (Winter 1994): 4.

¹⁵Kent R. Hill, "Bringing the Image of Christ to the CIS" *United Evangelical Action* 52 (March/April, 1993): 3.

we in America would share with the Russian people. Then we will proceed to show some cultural and sociological differences.

Both Russians and Americans see themselves as citizens of multi-ethnic, continental, world powers. Like Americans, Russians are justifiably proud of their country for a number of reasons. Nevertheless, they are disillusioned with some of the recent developments:

Russians can be rightly proud of their industrial and scientific accomplishments—the first man and woman in space . . . the duration record for living in an orbiting space station . . . the largest dams, railroads, and truck plants . . . leading the world in the production of concrete, steel, timber, and in the mining of several minerals . . . the ability to build large cities in the harshest weather conditions.

As glasnost revealed the failures of Marxism-Leninism, the majority of the population experienced deep disillusionment and a great loss of national pride. Many Russians viewed perestroika with cynicism. A growing sense of hopelessness regarding the likelihood of lasting positive change is apparent, even in the midst of democratic reform.¹⁶

Both Russians and Americans tamed a wilderness in their expansionist history:

Americans moved west from the Atlantic coast across the Great Plains and the Rockies to the Pacific shores. Russians expanded in all directions but mostly east beyond the Ural Mountains and across the vast stretches of Siberia to the Pacific shores, and beyond to Alaska in 1741. . . . Indeed, as Russian and American historians have noted, there is a frontier spirit shared by Siberia and the American West.

¹⁶LeClair, *Handbook for Christian Travelers to the CIS*, 10.

The land-owning gentry and the bonded serf of European Russia were not common to Siberia, which was settled by such diverse groups as Cossacks, political and religious dissidents, independent peasants, runaway serfs, and exiled convicts. Today's residents of the Siberian metropolis Novosibirsk liken it to Chicago, which they know, by reputation, as a hustling, bustling city serving a vast hinterland.¹⁷

Furthermore, John Fisher in his book, *Why They Behave Like Russians*, likens the Ukrainians with the Texans of America:

The Ukrainians are the Texans of Russia. They believe they can fight, drink, ride, sing, and make love better than anybody else in the world, and if pressed will admit it. Their country, too, was a borderland—that's what "Ukraine" means—and like Texas it was originally settled by outlaws, horse thieves, and land-hungry farmers, and people who hadn't made a go of it somewhere else. Some of these hard cases banded together, long ago, to raise hell and livestock. They called themselves Cossacks, and they would have felt right at home in any Western movie. Even today the Ukrainians cherish a wistful tradition of horsemanship, although most of them would feel as uncomfortable in a saddle as any Dallas banker. They still like to wear knee-high boots and big, furry hats, made of gray or black Persian lamb, which are the local equivalent of the Stetson.

The Ukrainians concede that their men and horses are bigger, their women a little prettier, than any others in Russia. They pride themselves on their freehanded hospitality, their easy friendliness, and they love to tell tall stories about Bogdan Khmelnitzky and Stepan Rzin which

¹⁷Richmond, *From Nyet to Da*, xx.

sound remarkably like the legends of Sam Houston and Jesse James. They believe they won the war, with little help from the rest of Russia and not worth mentioning from the outside world. Nor is this conviction altogether unreasonable. One soldier out of every five in the Red Army was a Ukrainian, and their land was the great battlefield of the war; no other comparable area suffered anything like its devastation . . . On all other people the Ukrainians look with a sort of kindly pity. They might have thought up for their own use the old Western rule of etiquette: "Never ask a man where he comes from. If he's a Texan, he'll tell you; if he's not, don't embarrass him."¹⁸

Furthermore, Russians are like Americans according to one study where they are described as "expressive and emotionally alive."¹⁹ In this respect the Russians are not unlike the easy-going Americans. "Americans often find that they have much in common with Russians—personal openness, informality, simplicity of manner, and lack of ceremony, in contrast to the greater polish and protocol that embellish life in Western Europe."²⁰ However, as emotional and expressive as Russians are among friends, they are often more reserved and serious in public gatherings or meetings.

While the similarities are evident, it is just as evident that Russians and Americans have significant differences. Some of the differences that will be detailed here are historic traditions which endure despite the revolutions of 1917, the 70 years reign of communism as well as its demise, and current upheavals.

¹⁸Fischer, *Why They Behave Like Russians*, 22-23.

¹⁹Raymond A. Bauer, Alex Inkeles, and Clyde Kluckhohn, *How the Soviet System Works: Cultural, Psychological, and Social Themes* (New York: Vintage-Random, 1956), 159.

²⁰Robert Daniels, *Russia: The Roots of Confrontation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 318.

Accordingly, these traits will continue to influence the Russia which is developing today and beyond:

When nations have existed for a long and glorious time, they cannot break with their past, whatever they do; they are influenced by it at the very moment when they work to destroy it; in the midst of the most glaring transformations, they remain fundamentally in character and destiny such as their history has formed them. Even the most daring and powerful revolutions cannot abolish national traditions of long duration. Therefore, it is most important, not only for the sake of intellectual curiosity but also for the good management of international relations, to know and to understand these traditions.²¹

One formidable difference found in most Russians is the atheistic worldview rigorously imparted to them by more than 70 years of Marxist rule. Even though there is widespread disillusionment with the Marxist-Communist ideology of their past, many Russians so long schooled in scientific atheism continue to have a naturalistic, humanistic worldview. Following are some tenets of Marxism which have helped shape Russian society from a Russian travel handbook:

Man: Many Russians regard human beings as the highest evolved animals in nature . . . and will eventually control it through technology . . . man is basically good . . . Given the proper environment, he has the potential to be honest, hard-working, caring, and just. Goodness in society can be achieved through education and by changing the socio-economic environment.

²¹Richmond, *From Nyet to Da*, xv.

Supernatural: As naturalists, Marxists subscribe to the philosophy of materialism - only matter exists. There is no supernatural, no Supreme Being. Man is a free agent who should remain self-determined and unhindered by the bonds of superstition . . . Interestingly, despite a supposed lack of belief in the supernatural, many atheistic Russians are quite superstitious . . . [Russia] has become a world leader in the study of parapsychology, which includes such occult phenomena as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, divining and paradiagnosis . . . There is great curiosity and serious interest in these phenomena. Yet for many, belief in the supernatural is a vestige of a less developed stage in man's evolution. Atheism, in contrast, is considered scientific and until recently was presented as axiomatic from elementary school through university. With the disillusionment in Marxism, however, atheistic beliefs are currently promoted with less certainty than previously.

Morality: Marxism denies the existence of moral absolutes. Morality is relative and shifting. Standards of right and wrong were determined by the Communist Party and, unfortunately, might (or expedience) was right.²²

Now with the collapse of the Communist system with its moral relativism, social evils are widespread in Russian society. Lying, cheating, deception, and bribery have become normal. For example, theft of personal possessions is considered criminal by most while theft of public property is not. A moral vacuum seems to be acknowledged by many Russians. In November 1990, a study was released by Dr. Mikhail Matskovsky, Director of the Soviet Academy of Sciences' Young Family Research Department, which indicated in a national survey that 81% of the

²²LeClair, *Handbook for Christian Travelers to the CIS*, 5-8.

population was searching for a belief system, especially those ages 15-25.²³ Many are abandoning atheism for belief in God according to a recent study, and large numbers of Russians show an interest in religion though the majority still classify themselves as atheists.²⁴

A second significant cultural theme found among Russians is the strong value they place on collectivism. Much more than Americans, Russians express strong group loyalty and identification. As a result, Russians are more influenced by peer pressure than Americans. Under communism, individualism was perceived as bourgeois and associated with capitalism.

If a scientist goes against the stream and pushes for the financing of unorthodox experiments, he is likely to be considered an egotist rather than an achiever . . . If an architect draws an innovative plan, he may find it politic to avoid claiming authorship lest he be accused of heaping credit upon himself.²⁵

This characteristic may have early roots according to some.

This tendency for Russians to emphasize the group rather than the individual can be traced to their early history as communal farmers and as an Eastern Orthodox people. Orthodoxy, with its strong emphasis on the church as the Body of Christ, views salvation as a collective event; that is, one is saved by becoming part of the church (through baptism) and participating in its sacraments. Individualism is associated with the cardinal sin of pride. This may well be one reason why Protestantism, with its emphasis on

²³Ibid., 9.

²⁴Elliot & Triggs, "God is Alive and Well in Russia, 4.

²⁵David K. Shipler, *Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams* (New York: Times Books, 1983), 72.

individualism, has been viewed with some suspicion among Russian people.²⁶

Decision making or event thinking seems to be done collectively or communally by Russians. Perhaps this is why an initial response by a Russian is so often not the final response. The answer is often changed after it is run through the grid of associates, or family, or brethren. Sometimes it is changed again after further consultation or input from higher ranking or older associates, family, or brethren.

Akin to collectivism is egalitarianism which is a Russian social philosophy that advocates the removal of inequities among the population. Though support for communism has faded in Russia, the egalitarian ethic still remains. This is a marked contrast to Americans who grow up in a success-oriented society. Russians, on the other hand, believe that it is morally wrong to get ahead.

While there is a streak of individualism in many Russians, the entrepreneurial spirit of the businessman and independent farmer runs counter to Russian egalitarianism. Most Russians, it is often said, would rather bring other people down to their level than try to rise higher, a mentality known as *uranviloka* (leveling).²⁷

In his book *The New Russians*, Hedrick Smith addresses the intensity of these feelings in a chapter entitled "The Culture of Envy."

If Russians are justly known for their warmth within a trusted circle, and for their hospitality toward guests, they often show an abrasiveness, a churlish spite, toward people

²⁶LeClair, *Handbook for Christian Travelers to the CIS*, 19.

²⁷Richmond, *From Nyet to Da*, 37.

outside their circle; the natural breeding ground for this attitude is the floating anger engendered by wretched circumstances. The Russians are long-suffering people who can bear the pain of their misery, so long as they see that others are sharing it. The collective jealousy can be fierce against those who rise above the crowd . . . The Soviet press is full of stories about attacks on privately owned cooperative restaurants and other small service shops, the perpetrators are people who resent seeing others do well. In the debates at the Supreme Soviet, the most potent arguments, the ones with the strongest resonance among the general populace, are the passionate accusations that the free market will yield speculators getting rich from profiteering and exploiting the working class. . . .

Felicity Barringer, a former *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow, put that sentiment into language that drives home the point. At a Soviet-American conference, she made the shrewd observation that "in America, it's a sin to be a loser, but if there's one sin in Soviet society, it's being a winner."²⁸

Furthermore, Russians seem to place more value and focus on relationships rather than on tasks or accomplishments. The Russian Research Center of Harvard University has noted that in the Russian system of values, personal achievement is not regarded as highly as it is in the United States. Loyalty, respect, and sincerity rank far higher than achievement in the Russian view:

[Russians] make their judgments of their friends and acquaintances not so much on the basis of the individual's behavior as on an assessment of the person's qualities and

²⁸Hedrick Smith, *The New Russians* (New York: Random House, 1990), 199-203.

attitudes. In other words, they value people in terms of what they are, rather than by what they have done.²⁹

Hedrick Smith describes how a Russian economist explained this attitude.

During my first tour as a correspondent in Moscow, I remember a government economist describing where work stood on the Russian scale of values. "A man can be a good worker, but work is just a thing," he told me. "What really matters is his spirit, his relationship to others. If he is too scrupulous, too cold, people will dislike him. We have a word for that, *sukovaly*—dryish—but *sukhoi*—dry—is even worse. And finally *sukhar*, which means dry like a bread crust—no human touch at all—that is the worst." Such admiration for human warmth is understandable and appealing, but the problem is that Russians tend to slip over the line, turning commendable traits into a justification for avoiding responsibility and initiative, for a slack attitude toward work. If, as psychologists have suggested, America is dominated by workaholic Type-A personalities, the Soviet Union is mired in hard-to-motivate Type B's.³⁰

The Russian mindset is also a difficult challenge for a Westerner to grasp. Hedrick Smith also illustrates this difference by quoting some of his Russian friends.

What is far less understood in the West is that the mindset of ordinary people is an equally forbidding obstacle. My intellectual friends would tell me, "We Russians are long on

²⁹Raymond A. Bauer, Alex Inkeles, and Clyde Kluckhohn, *How the Soviet System Works: Cultural, Psychological, and Social Themes* (New York: Vintage-Random, 1956), 158-159,

³⁰Smith, *The New Russians*, 184.

debating, arguing, philosophizing, or reciting poetry; we are good at feasting, drinking, toasting, and at talking deep into the night; but we have no head for business.

Russian mentality is not based on common sense. "It has nothing to do with common sense," the writer Tatyana Tolstaya told David Royle, one of our producers. "Our thinking is not orderly, logical. We do not have a linear consciousness . . . In Western culture, European culture maybe, emotions are considered to be on a lower level than reason. But in Russia, no . . . It is bad to be rational, to be smart, clever, intelligent, and so on. And to be emotionally warm, lovable, maybe spiritual, in the full meaning of that word—that is good."³¹

Contextualizing the Gospel for Russians

The term contextualization was initially used by those "not bound by an absolutely authoritative biblical text."³² Consequently, "contextualization as initially proposed went too far in the direction of accommodating cultures, religion and existential situations."³³ The term however, has been redefined by many and thus has taken on a variety of meanings. This writer, in agreement with many conservatives, adheres to a concept of contextualization that incorporates a subordination of human culture, science, and religion to biblical revelation.

In their book entitled *Contextualization*, Hesselgrave and Rommen proposed that "contextualization is rooted in dissatisfaction with traditional models of theological education."³⁴

³¹Ibid., 182-183.

³²David J. Hesselgrave, *Today's Choices for Tomorrow's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 154.

³³Ibid., 155.

³⁴David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), 29.

A look at the still developing history of contextualization seems to reveal that this may be so. Likewise, this presentation on contextualizing the Gospel for Russians may appear to be critical of some missionary efforts directed at Russia. In the hope of diffusing any potential for offense in this, let it be said that even the best efforts by man are far from perfect and today's God-blessed genius is often tomorrow's dysfunctional knave once we get the poor chap dissected upon the lofty table of missiological research. To help us in this path of humility, we may consider the practical wisdom of a well known coach who often stated that he and his team always learned much more from a single defeat than from a string of victories.

Ever since the doors of missionary opportunity were flung open by God's unmistakable hand, there has been a proliferation of hundreds of organizations employing thousands of people which have launched multitudes of efforts to evangelize Russia. Coming from one who is a part of this movement, the following presentation comes with the acknowledgment that we can do a better job of reaching Russians. Too many efforts have been launched and maintained with such an intense emphasis on haste that not enough time has been allowed for adequate reflection and the positive adjustments that such would produce. While the urgency of the moment is often eloquently cited as a rationale for acting quickly, there should also be passion for doing our work well rather than carelessly. Therefore, this presentation will propose what can be done to improve our efforts of contextualizing the Gospel for Russians by focusing on several aspects of Russian culture.

First we need to acknowledge and address what some refer to as the East-West 'Reality Gap':

One of the greatest problems we are faced with in ministering in East Central Europe is the "reality gap." By this I mean the perception of reality as it exists in the East. Western missionaries come to the East with a distinctly

Western idea of reality. If one wants to place a phone call in the West, one simply picks up the phone and places the call. If one's plumbing is leaky, one simply calls a repairman. But these simple tasks, taken for granted in the West, are different here in the East. Frequently, all phone lines are busy or one simply cannot get through for one reason or another. Leaky plumbing is an ever-present reality in the East, with which one simply learns to live. As a result, one's work effectiveness drops considerably compared to Western standards.³⁵

I believe a way to bridge this 'reality' gap is to lower expectations which are unfairly placed upon missionary workers, ironically by those who are supposed to 'support them,' their home boards and supporting churches. Though proposals like cutting the size of projects and doubling the projected time allotted for their completion may sound regressive to ears back home, somehow these supporting organizations upon whom so much depends need to be sensitized to field realities so they would be Christian enough to lift the burden as expressed by one individual based in Moscow. "All of us who are working here who answer to offices in Western Europe or North America are working under 21st century deadlines in a 19th century environment."³⁶

Though this first recommendation may not be considered as contextualization in the technical sense, in the practical sense it certainly addresses the context where missionary effort in Russia is taking place. If heeded, this proposal has the potential to greatly improve the prospects for other efforts in

³⁵William S. Covington, "Bridging the East-West 'Reality' Gap," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 1 (Summer 1993): 11.

³⁶Melissa Vaterlaus, *Real Life in Moscow* (Moscow: Triad Christian Mission, 1993), 11.

contextualization. Perhaps, we can call this 'pre-contextualization!'

Secondly, we need to re-consider the methods that are being used to evangelize Russians today. It seems that the primary method employed by many from the West is the same method which worked so well in the West. Namely, the traditional preaching service followed by an altar call. Certainly this has unquestionable Bible basis and such efforts have been met with impressive numbers of Russians responding.

However, in the excitement over these apparently impressive results, it is easy to over-estimate the success of these meetings. While many organizations are consumed in the flurry of organizing and conducting evangelistic campaigns, hardly any are evaluating the long-term results of these efforts on discipling converts. While fellowshiping in the house of a Russian pastor with a large congregation, we asked about the long-term results of a Western-style campaign their church had concluded with a well-known Western evangelist. Though large numbers of people responded and large numbers of conversions were reported, now that some time had passed only two of the 'converts' remained. Hearing a similar story from a different pastor, I asked if it bothered him that the Americans had come, stirred many to come to the altar call, and yet there seemed to be so little lasting results. No, he said, he thought that the Americans did a good service but that he would not count those who came forward as conversions but as people who were 'shook-up.' The Americans had done a good service, he thought, because these people did need to be 'shaken-up' and in one or two cases it did lead to salvation.

It seems that the methodology employed here could be contextualized to be more effective. Some suggestions along this line would be to use national evangelists who speak the language instead of the Americans and tying the meetings to local national churches with leadership committed to follow-up and discipleship. While such campaigns would be smaller, they

would be less costly, hopefully leaving funds available for equipping and training discipleship and follow-up efforts. One of the recommendations that came out of a meeting of former Eastern-bloc church leaders and Western missions was that Western organizations who want to help should spend less time preaching and more time training and equipping national Christians.³⁷

Furthermore, other methods of presenting the gospel should not be overlooked, especially those methods which have a more historic basis among Russian people. For example, the use of books and films should attract a greater proportion of mission attention than is currently allotted them. Russia is one of the most literate societies in the world. Some of the greatest Eastern Slavic heroes were poets and writers. Everywhere people are reading and everywhere there are book tables. Many churches have gained more impressive results through the use of portable Christian lending libraries than any other method employed. Some of the most desirable literature requested is apologetic material such as Josh McDowell's Russian versions of *More Than a Carpenter*, and *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. More Christian films in Russian need to be provided and even produced. Russians are a cinema-conscious people with at least one cinema hall in every town. One of the most effective evangelistic tools employed in Russia today is the film *Jesus* produced by Campus Crusade. However, one will most likely search for other films in vain. Unfortunately, too many ministries from the West arrive in Russia seeking to help with the pre-conceived notion that the help the Russians need is to hear their Western personnel.

While not discarding large public gatherings, serious attempts need to be made to present the gospel in smaller more informal

³⁷Church Leaders in Former East-Bloc Countries Offer Recommendations to Western Missions," *Breakthrough* 2 (January-February 1992): 2.

settings. Those familiar with Russian culture point out that this is the kind of setting in which Russians feel more at ease:

At home, with the intimate circle of family and friends, they feel secure and are relaxed, warm and hospitable, sharing and caring, and they speak their own minds. . . .

The kitchen is the center of social life, and Americans should not pass up an opportunity to get into those kitchens and see Russians at home. There is no better way to get to know Russians than over food and drink, or merely sitting around a kitchen table sipping tea.

The secret of social life in Russia, says Stites, is conviviality around a table, drinking, telling jokes, laughing. When you get to that point, the battle is half won.³⁸

Therefore, a contextualized method of presenting the gospel would incorporate an informal strategy that takes into account the Russian way of decision-making, which seems to be slower and more communal than the American quick and individualistic way. An old Russian proverb implies Russians live two distinct lives: "At home do as you wish, but in public as you are told." Perhaps progress can be made by moving from the public into the private setting, hence off the street and into the kitchen.

Thirdly, the gospel needs to be contextualized to Russians in a manner that will address their mindset. Various authors have explained the different ways in which people think and know. Among them is F.H. Smith:

Smith's approach dispelled the naive notion that there is one "proper" way of thinking and even the more sophisticated idea that there are only two ways of thinking. He not only elaborated three ways of thinking; he clarified the relation

³⁸Richmond, *From Nyet to Da*, 110.

between them and insisted that people of all cultures think in these three ways. Differences among cultures in this regard, Smith said, are due to the priority given to one or another type of thought. Since all peoples think in these three ways, mutual respect is in order and cross-cultural understanding can be achieved.³⁹

Hesselgrave and Rommen suggest ways to contextualize to various mindsets:

Armed with an understanding of the penchant for concrete relational thinking among Africans, Chinese, and various tribal peoples, the contextualizer will give more attention to the importance of history, myths, stories, parables, analogies, aphorisms, pictures, and symbols in communicating within these contexts. Understanding the psychical thought processes of Indians, the contextualizer will adjust to an approach to thinking and knowing that invests a kind of authority in the enlightenment experience that it refuses to invest in any product of postulational thinking, whether it emanates from science or Scriptures. Thus the emphasis on the nature of biblical revelation in the contextualized commentary on Galatians 2. Knowing the classical Muslim mind, the contextualizer will be better prepared for Muslim willingness—and even desire—to engage in debate concerning the relative merits of the claims of Christ and Muhammad or the integrity of the Koran versus that of the Bible.⁴⁰

Now what about the Russian mindset? According to Russians as quoted by Hedrick Smith earlier, their mindset is more emotional than rational. How can one contextualize for a

³⁹Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 205-206.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 206.

mind which seemingly de-emphasizes reason? Obviously this can be done for the gospel itself was foolishness to the Greek culture which relied on reason (1 Cor 1:23); nevertheless, many Greeks understood and received the Gospel.

One of the best examples on successfully dealing with a Russian mindset is told by Yale Richmond in his book, *From Nyet to Da: Understanding the Russians*. According to Richmond, for some unknown reason firmly ingrained in the Russian mindset, a Russian will invariably approach anything with a closed mind, a definite *Nyet*. Based on his 25 years of experience in Russia, no discernable approach, ardent appeal, or display of logic seemed to unlock the door. In the following incident, he tells of his encounter with a Russian from whom he received a definite *Nyet* in his appeal to get a much needed meal. In recounting this experience, Richmond reveals what he believes to be the key to dealing with the Russian mindset.

From past experience in Russia, I knew not to retreat, so I stood my ground, changed the subject, and began to converse with the old lady. We talked about my long trip from the States, the purpose of my visit, the Moscow weather, where I learned to speak Russian, the current shortages in Moscow, her children and mine, and how nice it was for me to be back in Russia again. After a while, I returned to the subject of my hunger and asked if she had any suggestions as to what I might do before the snack bar closed for the night.

"I'll lend you some rubles," she replied, reaching for her satchel under the desk.

My approach had worked. A kind old Russian grandmother had taken pity on a hungry American and lent him a few of her own rubles so he could get some *khleb, sir, i chai* (bread, cheese, and tea) before retiring for the night. Welcome to Moscow!

The lesson of this story—and this book—is simple. Moscow can be a cold and impersonal place, where a

visitor's requests all too often meet with an automatic *nyet*. But Russians respond to a human approach, and they can be warm and helpful once a good interpersonal relationship has been established. When that point is reached, their word is good, *nyet* becomes *da*, and deals can be done. This is the key to understanding the Russians.⁴¹

Therefore, the way to appeal to a Russian mindset is not any conscious pattern of logic, argument, or information, though these elements are a part of the equation. The key seems to be the roundabout way of a good interpersonal relationship. To unlock the mindset, and we hope the hearts of Russian people, Richmond later in his book recommends repeated visits, long informal times, and patience:

There are a number of rituals that must be gone through before the business part of a meeting can start: first, the small talk, a necessary part of all personal encounters; then, the customary tea or other drink, followed perhaps by talk about family and personal problems; and finally, the business of the day. All this takes time and usually does not start before ten o'clock in the morning.

The business part of the talk will also be lengthy because important issues are approached in a roundabout rather than direct manner. Impatient Americans will wonder when the key issues of the meeting will be discussed. And after the meeting has concluded and the visitor believes he has agreement to proceed, nothing may happen for weeks, or months, or ever.⁴²

This may not be all bad for Americans doing ministry in Russia, though it may seem strange that Russians do not

⁴¹Richmond, *From Nyet to Da*, 293.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 122-123.

automatically and quickly respond to our plans. This particular cultural phenomena can be a great blessing, for it forces us to depend upon God to mysteriously move in hearts rather than depending upon a formula or plan devised in America. Moreover, since we often can do nothing, we can pray in the vacuum of time created. This ought to be encouraging for those of us who are concerned about the 'de-theologizing of mission' by relying too much on the social sciences. Ministering in Russia may just be the best place to demonstrate the limitations of the social sciences.

A fourth way of contextualizing the gospel to Russians is to address the Russian Orthodox tradition that has had considerable influence on Russians as previously mentioned. Kent Hill is quite accurate when he states, "Evangelicals are often insensitive toward, or ignorant of, the Orthodox, their history and their theology."⁴³

In this area Don Fairbairn's recent study on the Orthodox Church entitled "Partakers of the Divine Nature" has done a great service. Fairbairn identifies Orthodox concepts that those who present the gospel to Russians should be aware of, including some suggested truths and Scripture passages which would be of great help in contextualizing the gospel to Russians. For example, regarding presenting salvation to Russians, Fairbairn writes:

It should be clear that most elements of the Orthodox concept of salvation actually pertain to sanctification, not justification. This confusion is related to the Eastern understanding of grace as a power or energy of God. Such an understanding is consistent with part of the New Testament usage of the word "grace," but the main way the word is used is to indicate the "freely given" nature of

⁴³Kent R. Hill, "Bringing the Image of Christ to the CIS," *United Evangelical Action* 52 (March/April 1993): 1.

salvation. Romans 5:2, Ephesians 1:5-6 and 2:8-9, Titus 2:11, and other passages related to salvation use the word "grace" to refer to God's giving us His acceptance when we do not deserve it. The Eastern failure to recognize this aspect of grace contributes to an inability to distinguish between justification as God's free acceptance of unworthy sinners and sanctification as the process of making sinners actually righteous.

Accordingly, the main element of the Gospel which workers should emphasize in discussions with people influenced by Orthodoxy is that acceptance before God is both free and immediate for those who trust in Christ. One does not need to undergo a life-long process of deification in order to gain fellowship with God. Instead, a person is guaranteed God's eternal acceptance from the moment genuine faith begins. To people who are filled with guilt and frustration over their inability to be completely deified and thus to gain communion with God, this message will be the greatest, most liberating news they will ever hear.⁴⁴

A fifth way to contextualize the gospel to Russians is to address the moral relativism taught by scientific atheism. As demonstrated earlier, many Russians are looking for a belief system realizing that the relativistic approach to morality has been a dismal failure. Their concern has led to many open doors to teach morality, ethics, and Christian principles and values in many public settings. Perhaps more than teaching morality and ethics, we must demonstrate it. It is universally accepted that we teach more by example than by verbal admonition. One would think this would be especially true if the quality being taught were demonstrative in nature. Love demonstrated seems to impress us more than love exhorted or love explained. Kindness

⁴⁴Don Fairbairn, "Partakers of the Divine Nature," (Unpublished paper), 9-10.

demonstrated seems to impress us more than kindness exhorted or kindness explained. When Christ demonstrated what God was like in human form was that not contextualization?

A sixth way to contextualize the gospel to Russians is to address their pessimistic, lethargic attitude which inhibits progress. According to Kent Hill, this is the greatest spiritual problem in Russia today:

It appears to me that the single greatest spiritual malady of the Russian people, based on literally hundreds of discussions with taxicab drivers, teachers, and others from all walks of life, is the overwhelming sense of pessimism, powerlessness and fatalism. The sentiment prevails that "all that affects my life basically is controlled by people outside of my world—by politicians, by others." This hopelessness creates a paralysis of action and an inability to respond to the world.⁴⁵

A good way to address this issue is to accept the following challenge issued by Hill:

Let me propose a "Spiritual Antidote Project" to address the Russian malady of hopelessness and to inform mission strategies. Christian witness should say, "I know some way that you can order your life that will allow you to live with dignity in accordance with God's will, no matter what happens with the economy and no matter who becomes the political leader of your country." That is good news that should be shared with a nation in despair.⁴⁶

Therefore, whenever a project is undertaken which endeavors to present the gospel to Russians, a proper contextualization would address this challenge. Seldom would

⁴⁵Hill, "Bringing the Image of Christ to the CIS," 4.

⁴⁶Ibid.

anyone argue that the context Russians live in today is gloomy, uncertain, grim and foreboding. Even the church seems to have succumbed to a world of private piety, with long faces and sad music.

Whether the evangelistic project is a single tract, a local campaign, or a long-term educational program, this and other Russian cultural and social themes identified earlier, should be addressed. The following themes are proposed as suggested issues that are relevant to Russian people today.

1. A creator God for the darkness of atheism.
2. A sustainer God for the uncertainty of life.
3. An absolutely righteous God for the hollowness of moral relativism.
4. A revealed God for the joy of discovering Him and His word.
5. A personal God for the craving for individuality.
6. A Jesus who is God and loves the sinner and brings happiness to the soul.
7. A salvation which is instantly available for all.
8. A Bible, the perfect guide which brings joy to the heart.
9. A church which is a flourishing and triumphant community.
10. An eternal citizenship in a country which can never decline.
11. A home in a spacious mansion which will be forever uncrowded.

Conclusion

It should be noted, that this presentation is just a beginning. Much more can be said. The subject of contextualizing the gospel for Russians deserves more thorough and on-going treatment. It should also be emphasized that whatever tools or materials are produced, they would need to be

examined, and likely further contextualized by Russian Christians. In keeping with the previous recommendation of emphasizing the informal setting ('off the street and into the kitchen') it would probably be best to pursue this informally. My own experience has often confirmed the validity of this principle. There are certain to be glaring insufficiencies to what has been proposed. The best chance of improving them is with Russians who will be brought to helpful heights of candor once we move 'into the kitchen'. In this further contextualization, the helpful tools of scholars' surveys, charts, and theories will be supplemented by the *khleb, sir, i chais* (bread, cheese, and tea) of Russian soil. Finally, all forms of contextualization must be subjected to the authority of the Word of God.

We will pray that as in the past, this interpersonal effort will free the Russian soul we want to know and reach for Christ.