

# **Crisis, Change, and Conversion: Forty years of conversion among Croatian Baptists**

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## **Abstract**

*Evangelicals represent a tiny minority in Croatia. During the period of war and change that accompanied the emergence of the Republic of Croatia during the 1990s, evangelical groups experienced relatively significant growth. This movement has not been formally studied. Understanding this movement has significant benefits to those seeking to further the Kingdom of God in Croatia, but also beyond, as the issues of ethnic identity, nationalism, and civil strife are not unique to Croatia. The focus of research is from 1970 to 2010, the two decades prior to the emergence of the Republic of Croatia and the two decades that followed, and is limited to Croatian Baptists. In this article the major trends in conversion among Croatian Baptists during this period are discussed, and five suggested approaches for future evangelism are presented.*

## **Introduction: What is normal?**

In the late summer of 2006, a seaside baptismal service was held in the city of Split, Croatia. On that bright summer morning, a fifty-year-old woman named Željka and her twenty-five year old daughter were to be baptized in the Adriatic Sea. Standing in the midst of a group of about fifty people, each shared her testimony before walking down into the water to receive baptism. As Željka stood before the assembly, she made the following statement: “Today marks the end of a twenty year battle with God.” During the mid-1980s, a tourist visiting Split had

given Željka a New Testament. Željka began to read it, but discovered that the teachings she read in the New Testament were different from what she had learned growing up as a Roman Catholic. As a child, she felt drawn to the spiritual aspects of life, but felt an aversion to the Catholic forms of worship. After several months, Željka stopped reading the New Testament, though she kept it, hidden away in a drawer. Twenty years later, her husband Vinko heard the gospel at an outdoor evangelical concert in Split and began attending the Split Baptist church. As she began to notice the change in her husband, she began to attend the church herself, and after five years accepted Christ and was baptized.

Forty-year-old Tomislav is also a Baptist living in Split. However, he was born and raised in Zagreb. In 1995, a neighbor invited him to attend a summer camp being held in the town of Selce on the northern Croatian coast. Tomislav's friend told him that Baptists were hosting the camp, so there would be some religious meetings, but that they would not be forced to attend. As the neighbor was also not a Baptist, he and Tomislav spent the week enjoying the waters of the Adriatic and did not attend a single worship service. However, at the end of the week Tomislav began to feel guilty about not attending and decided that he would go to the last service of the week. When his friend refused to go with him, Tomislav went alone. That evening Tomislav attended the service and heard a sermon that brought conviction to his heart. As the final songs of the service were sung, and the preacher asked if any one would like to receive Christ as their personal Savior, Tomislav prayed to receive Christ. By the end of the year Tomislav had been baptized and was attending the Baptist church in Zagreb.

Željka's conversion experience lasted twenty years, while Tomislav's lasted less than an hour. Which of these conversion experiences is normal? And if neither experience is normal, what does normal conversion look like among Croatians? The answers to these questions were the basis for a research project conducted in Croatia between 2013 and 2015, of which this article is an abridged account. The goal of the project was to see how God had moved among Croatians over the past forty years, so that gospel workers could seek to align their efforts with the movement of God in the lives of those who have yet to convert.

This article will first examine the methodology of research, as well as some of the delimitating factors of the project. Second, general trends in conversion experience will be examined in two significant groups, those of a Baptist background and those who were not raised in a Baptist family. Third, trends in conversion experiences will be examined in the light of the civil conflict and change during the four decades between 1970 and 2010. Finally, six barriers to conversion will be discussed, and five responses to this conversion resistance will be recommended.

## Methodology and Known Limitations

### *Methodology*

This article is an abridged presentation of a doctoral dissertation completed at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY in December 2015. The field research for this dissertation followed the grounded theory methodology. Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss define grounded theory research as a methodology of “building theory from data” (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 1). Grounded theory research does not approach its subject matter with a preexisting theory as to the cause of the process, but rather research is conducted and the theory is “generated or ‘grounded’ in the data from the participants who have experienced the process” (Creswell 2007, 63). In this project, the participants were Croatian Baptists and the process was conversion. Wayne Grudem provides a basic theological definition of conversion: “Conversion is our willing response to the gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation” (Grudem 1994, 709). This definition consists of three primary elements: the gospel call, a willing response, and trust (or repentance and faith)” (Grudem 1994, 710). Conversion therefore begins with the divine initiative of God and results in both repentance and belief in the life of the convert (Mark 1:14-15).

The primary focus of this dissertation was field research, seeking to discover the conversion experiences in Croatia between 1970 and 2010. Research was conducted using a survey instrument, which consisted of a single sheet of paper, printed on both sides, with multiple-choice questions relating to demographic information and conversion experience. There was also a section where the respondent was able to briefly share his or her story in narrative form.<sup>1</sup> Surveying was conducted in churches at the time of the Sunday worship service. In cooperation with the local pastor, following the close of the service, the purpose of the research project was explained prior to distribution of the surveys. At each location, it was clearly expressed that the survey was both voluntary and anonymous.

Once the surveys were completed and entered into the database, analysis of the results began, seeking theories grounded in the data obtained through the survey. This analysis consisted of three phases: first, sorting and summarizing; second, sorting and ranking; and third, sorting and comparing (Rubin and Rubin 2005, 224-26). In the first phase, a general picture of Croatian Baptists emerged. This consisted of the demographic makeup as well as the characteristics of their

1 842 surveys were collected which for the population size surveyed was adequate to provide a confidence level of 99% and a +/- 3% margin of error. “Sample Size Calculator,” Creative Research Systems, <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>.

conversion experiences. The second and third phases provided a deeper understanding of the conversion experiences of Croatian Baptists. In this phase, trends were sought that pointed towards elements that appear to be key among a majority of respondents.

### ***Known Limitations***

Before closing this section, it is important to state the limitations that are inherent in this study. First, research was delimited by the decision to survey only Baptists from among all the evangelicals in Croatia (Bebbington 1989, 2-3). Baptists represent only 22% of the total number of evangelical Christians in Croatia.<sup>2</sup> By choosing to limit the scope of the research to only Baptists, this automatically excluded more than 75% of evangelicals who have experienced conversion during this period. In spite of this reality, the decision has been made to focus exclusively on Baptists for two reasons. First, this allowed a more manageable project, working within one union and with a clearly defined research group. Further, focusing on one union provided a focus believed to be more useful both to national Baptists as well as to the expatriate mission agencies working with Croatian Baptists, by detailing how Baptists have succeeded and by providing insight into areas in need of improvement.

Finally, while this project was undertaken from an evangelical perspective, the author acknowledges the fact that one does not have to be an evangelical to have experienced conversion. The author does not believe that being a member of a Baptist or evangelical church is a prerequisite for salvation.<sup>3</sup> However, to locate all individuals who experienced genuine conversion in Croatia would be similar to the task appointed to the field hands in the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24-30).

- 2 The figures were provided to me in an unpublished document related to the 2011 national census. A note attached to the document states, "In the Census of 2011, there is the question of belonging to a particular religious community/church, but a small part of the population declared in the sense of belonging to a religious community that is the name by which the members of a religious community call themselves. Therefore, data on the number of members of certain religious groups. . . should be taken as the minimum figure, i.e. minimum number of members of an individual group to a particular category shown in the table" (Author's translation).
- 3 That said, I firmly believe that the Baptist and evangelical views on Christian faith and practice are closer to Scriptural teachings than any other. Furthermore, it is much more difficult for an individual to hear, understand, and respond to the gospel outside the Baptist and evangelical churches than within.

## “Ana” and Insiders and Outsiders

Based upon survey results, the experiences of Željka and Tomislav are both seen to be extreme. The “average” Croatian Baptist looks something like the following composite personality, which I will refer to as “Ana.” Ana is nearly fifty years of age and lives in north-central Croatia. She grew up in a family in which both parents were Baptist. Ana converted in the 1990s, at the age of twenty-five, after having heard the gospel multiple times, through multiple means, over the course of seven years. She does not remember a specific date when she converted. She was baptized within a year of her conversion, in her local church, the only church that she has ever attended. Ana considers personal Bible reading, the preaching in her local church, and the influence of her family to be the primary means through which she was converted.

“Ana” is of course a gross oversimplification of Croatian Baptists, and glosses over a major feature of their makeup. According to the survey, 49% of Croatian Baptists were raised in Baptist families, 35% were raised Roman Catholic, 7% were raised Orthodox, and 5% were raised Atheist. Therefore, half of Croatian Baptists grew up in a context similar to “Ana,” while the other half grew up in contexts more similar to those of Željka and Tomislav. To fully understand how Croatian Baptists have experienced conversion, both of these groups must be examined.

The conversion typology of R. T. France is useful in understanding these two groups (France 1993, 291-310). France distinguishes between “insider conversion” and “outsider conversion.” In both cases, for France the phenomenon of conversion is understood in the term “turning.” In the Old Testament, the term used is *shubh*, while in the New Testament the term *epistrepho* (France 1993, 304-305). Insider conversion is primarily seen in the Old Testament in terms of “the people of God being summoned to be true to the covenant relationship already established” (France 1993, 294). However, with the arrival of Jesus Christ, and the spread of the gospel beyond the Jewish religious community, insider conversion was not an option for many of those turning to Christ. Pagan Greeks were not people of the covenant; they could not return to a previously established relationship with God, as they had no knowledge of the Jewish God. Therefore, a new conversion experience is seen, that of outsider conversion.

In France’s conversion typology, the focus of the conversion phenomenon remains the movement of God. The differences between insider and outsider conversion are not in the phenomenon of conversion, but rather in the context in which an individual lived prior to the conversion experience. “Outsider/insider” is a distinction in terms of a person’s previous situation, not in terms of the end-product; all stand equally in need of ‘convertedness,’ and through it all become

one ‘in Christ Jesus’” (France 1993, 308). This outsider/insider distinction, therefore, is based on the context in which an individual lived prior to conversion.

In the following two sections the conversion experiences of insiders and outsiders will be explored in terms of a conversion timeline, means of conversion, and witness recurrence. The conversion timeline consists of the period of time between first hearing the gospel, conversion, and baptism. The means of conversion consist of the form of the message relating the gospel about Jesus Christ (Packer 1989, 21). In the words of Paul, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). The means of conversion are the specific form in which the mystery of Christ is revealed to one who is as yet spiritually dead. There are a wide variety of particular forms in which the gospel is transmitted, including relational, verbal, written, as well as through deeds. Finally, witness recurrence represents the number of times an individual heard the gospel prior to conversion, as well as the number of evangelical believers, who served as living witnesses, known prior to conversion.

## **Insider Conversion**

### ***Conversion timeline***

Nearly three out of four individuals in this category converted before the age of 20. Ten percent of those who experienced insider conversion converted in their twenties, with the remaining 15% converting after the age of 29. This is the obvious result of having grown up in an environment sympathetic to the gospel and where the gospel was regularly proclaimed. Therefore, those experiencing insider conversion convert relatively early in life.

The conversion timeline for insider conversion generally begins with conception; the children of Croatian Baptists are often in church from the womb onwards. Further, insider converts are “on the radar” of believers even before birth, and their early lives are saturated in prayer and exposure to the gospel message in both the home and church. However, I chose to begin the timeline at age five, as that age is recognized by psychologists as the point by which a child has become fully self-aware (Rochat 2003, 717–31). Therefore, with this initial point set, the average conversion timeline for insider converts in Croatia is ten and a half years. This consists of approximately nine years between first hearing the gospel and conversion, and approximately a year and a half between conversion and baptism.

### ***Means of conversion***

Insider converts cite the Bible as the most important influence in their conversion. The second most important influence on insider conversion is family,

and the third most important is the preaching in the local church. The order of the second and third means for insider converts are at odds with the experience of “Ana,” yet it is the family which makes an insider convert an insider. The family environment serves as a critical means through which the gospel message is expressed, in both word and deed.

Three other means were significant for insider converts: formal evangelistic events, summer camp, and small group Bible study. All three of these must be seen in the light of the alternation conversion experience, “a relatively limited form of change which actually develops out of one’s own past” (Gaventa 1986, 12). Young people growing up in an environment saturated with the gospel, when experiencing conversion, do not undergo a radical reformulation of their worldview. Rather, in personalizing the gospel message, they are confirming the worldview that they have inherited from their parents and their parents’ faith community. In most cases, the unconverted children of Baptists will have already developed lifestyles in line with the faith community, and externally will not seem radically different than members of the faith community who have converted. Young persons experiencing insider conversion do, however, need a venue in which they may formally announce the internal change once it occurs. Croatian Baptist churches do not have a weekly “altar call,” in which a young person may “walk the aisle” and “pray to receive Christ” before the faith community. Therefore, evangelistic events and summer camps serve as venues where it is appropriate to express conversion. Finally, small group Bible studies, or *vjeronauk* (faith teaching) for children, provide a deeper knowledge of a faith already taken for granted due to one’s family spiritual heritage, providing an age-specific exposition of the gospel message.

### ***Witness recurrence***

Insider converts grow up in an environment saturated with the gospel, and therefore hear the gospel many times prior to conversion. Eighty-seven percent of insider converts heard the gospel message more than ten times prior to conversion. Similarly, 82% of insider converts knew more than ten believers before conversion.

## **Outsider Conversion**

### ***Conversion timeline***

Those experiencing outsider conversion convert later in life than insider converts. This is an obvious consequence of not being exposed to the gospel at an early age, as well as the result of not growing up in an environment sympathetic to the gospel worldview. The gospel confronts and contradicts their previous

worldview, and therefore their conversion experience is not alteration, but rather conversion or transformation, in the Gaventa typology (Gaventa 1986, 12). Whereas the vast majority of those experiencing insider conversion convert before the age of 20, only 20% of outsider converts do so. The greatest number of those experiencing outsider conversion convert during their twenties (31%), and nearly as many convert during their thirties as do before the age of twenty (29%). Further, nearly one in four convert after the age of forty. The outsider conversion experience is much broader and more varied than the experience of the insider convert.

The average conversion timeline for outsider converts is seven years, with six years between first hearing the gospel and conversion, and another year following conversion before baptism. Yet this timeline is significantly shorter for atheists, a total of four years, and significantly longer for Orthodox, twelve years in total. I believe that this striking difference between atheists and Orthodox reveals that social pressure is a greater stumbling block to the gospel rather than the actual claims that the gospel makes. An atheist experiences conversion in the terms of Gaventa's conversion, while an Orthodox experiences conversion as transformation; the worldview change is much more radical for the atheist. The one who faces a greater worldview change experiences conversion in a shorter period of time than the one with a less radical worldview change. Therefore, the impact of social pressure is not merely in terms of keeping one from participating, by denying access, but also has an impact in that an individual must "de-program" the false religion before truly comprehending the gospel message. It would seem then that there is a greater advantage, in terms of gospel receptivity, to a worldview with a greater divergence from the gospel worldview, than in a worldview that is closer to the gospel worldview. This will be discussed at greater length below in the following section dealing with conversion resistance.

### ***Means of conversion***

Outsider converts cite the Bible as the primary influence on their conversion. This response was the same both for insider converts and outsider converts, and must be seen as reflecting not only their conversion experience, but also the theology of the movement into which they converted, as Croatian Baptists hold a very high view of Scripture. The second highest influence on conversion was preaching in the local church. The third influence was that of friends.

For outsider converts, friends take on the role that the family serves for insider converts. The outsider has no other living witness available than any friends they know who may be believers. With no believing friends, the outsider's access to the gospel is limited to the Bible, written materials they may encounter, and radio or television broadcasts. As Croatian Baptist churches are generally small, in larger population areas, an individual may not know of a Baptist church's existence, and in smaller population areas may not have the courage or inclination to



attend. Certainly the Holy Spirit can utilize these means; they are fully sufficient to lead an individual to conversion under the power of the Holy Spirit. However, a living witness, in the form of a family member for an insider or friend for an outsider, can not only point to other means, but can actually be a means through which the gospel is proclaimed, an interactive means which can not only proclaim the gospel, but also serve, comfort, encourage, and pray for salvation.

Other significant means for outsider converts include family, books, small group Bible studies, and evangelistic events. That family should be significant for outsiders is somewhat surprising. Thirty-two percent of respondents from a Roman Catholic religious background cited family, while this number was 20% for non-Roman Catholics. Clearly, while these individuals did not grow up in an environment saturated with the gospel, the Holy Spirit was able to use something in that environment, whether a respect for Scripture or an ethical lifestyle, to lead them towards the gospel. A more likely potential explanation, however, is that of outsider converts reaching their family with the gospel. The importance of books and small group Bible studies reveals a need for obtaining a greater knowledge of the conversion experience, a knowledge that had been lacking in their early years. Finally, evangelistic events provide both a concentrated presentation of the gospel by trained or gifted gospel workers, with a clear call to respond, as well as a venue to respond which is not available elsewhere.

### ***Witness recurrence***

The outsider conversion experience is generally marked with a repetition of gospel message and messengers, though to a lesser extent than for insider conversion. Sixty percent of outsider converts report hearing the gospel more than ten times while 24% percent report hearing the gospel three or fewer times. Forty percent of outsider converts report knowing more than ten believers prior to conversion, while 33% report knowing three or fewer believers. Once again, a much broader and more varied experience is represented in outsider conversion than in insider conversion. I believe that this is primarily due to the variety of contexts in which individuals lived prior to conversion.

## **Conflict and Change**

Having examined conversion among Croatian Baptists in terms of religious background, conversion experiences will now be examined in terms of the social and political changes that occurred during the period between 1970 and 2010. First, what impact did the conflict of the 1990's have on conversion? And second, what impact did the political and social changes of the past four decades have on the conversion experience?

## **Conflict and Conversion Experience**

Sixteen of the thirty-two churches surveyed are located in conflict zones, areas where the Homeland War was fought between 1991 and 1995. Nine of these churches are located on the lines of conflict. The remaining seven churches are located behind the lines of conflict. The results from these sixteen churches represent 42% of the total survey. These churches are nearly identical to the total survey in terms of gender while their members are slightly older. When examining the religious background of respondents, these churches report a significantly higher number of those with an Orthodox background. For the total survey, 6.7% of respondents stated that they came from an Orthodox background. For respondents in the conflict zone, 11.8% stated that they came from an Orthodox background. This is in line with the percentage of Serbians living in Croatia prior to the war, 12.1% (*Statistički ljetopis Republike Hrvatske* 2011, 55).

There are no significant differences between the responses of individuals in conflict zone churches and the general survey in terms of conversion experience. In terms of means of conversion the patterns of significant means remain the same. The Bible remains the primary means of conversion, followed by sermons, family, friends, and evangelistic events. Perhaps the primary result of this examination is that respondents do not view the humanitarian response to the conflict as playing a significant role in their conversion experience. However, in concert with the humanitarian response, Bibles were distributed, the gospel was preached, and outsiders came into contact with Croatian and international gospel workers. In other words, in responding to the questions of means of conversion, respondents may have cited a Bible, but not the humanitarian worker who gave it, as having significance.

## **Change and Conversion Experience**

The four decades between 1970 and 2010 brought significant political and social change to the Croatian people. Throughout these varying periods of social and political upheaval, Croatians have encountered Christ and converted. In this section, the conversions of Croatian Baptists will be examined by each decade. First, the general statistics by decade will be discussed. Second, conversion experiences will be compared among the four decades. And finally, the means of conversion will be examined in each of the four decades.

### ***Number of conversions by decade***

Based upon survey data, the number of conversions among Croatian Baptists has increased with each decade, though unevenly so. The breakout of conversions by decades is as follows: 120 respondents stated that they converted prior to 1970, 83 respondents stated that they converted during the 1970s, 88 respondents stated

that they converted in the 1980s, 212 respondents stated that they converted during the 1990s, 161 respondents stated that they converted during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and 102 respondents stated that they converted in 2010 or later. Thus, 62% of Croatian Baptists converted following the establishment of the Republic of Croatia in 1991.

These figures work out to approximately 8 conversions per year in the 1970s and 1980s, 21 conversions per year during the 1990s, and 16 conversions per year during the first decade of the 2000s. While there are only four years of data for the second decade of the 2000s, the average for these four years is 25.5 conversion per year. Therefore, after a spike in the 1990s, there was a slight decline in the first decade of the 2000s. However, the rate for the 2010s would indicate that the current decade will eclipse both the 1990s and 2000s.

### ***Religious background***

The religious background of Croatian Baptists has shifted over the decades. Prior to 1980 there is a strong predominance of individuals from a Protestant religious background. Approximately 70% of Croatian Baptists come from a Protestant religious background. Just fewer than 20% of Croatian Baptists come from a Roman Catholic religious background, and just under 10% from an Orthodox religious background.

Beginning in the 1980s there is a sharp change in the religious backgrounds of Croatian Baptists. There is a sharp increase, from 18% to 38%, among individuals from a Roman Catholic background, and a drop from 71% to 58% among individuals from a Protestant background. This trend continues in the 1990s with an apparent sharp decrease, from 58% to 34%, among individuals from a Protestant religious background. However, while there is a decrease in percentage; in fact, in terms of actual conversions, there is an increase of nearly 30% from the 1980s to the 1990s. The drop in percentage is due to the fact that the total number of conversions doubles in the decade of the 1990s and there are a greater number of individuals with Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and atheist religious backgrounds.

In the 1990s, for the first time, there are more converts from a Roman Catholic religious background than from a Protestant religious background. During this decade there are also significant increases in conversions from among Orthodox and atheist religious backgrounds, with 10% of conversions coming from each of these two groups. During the first decade of the 2000s, the numbers revert, with more converts from a Protestant background than Roman Catholic background. However, based upon the data from the first four years of the current decade, it appears that once again more converts will come from a Roman Catholic background.

### ***Age at time of conversion***

The average age at the time of conversion has generally increased with each decade. Prior to 1970, more than half of respondents stated that they had con-

verted before the age of 16. Since the 1990s, roughly the same numbers have converted after the age of 25. This can be seen as a result of an increase in insider conversion.

### ***Conversion timeline***

In general there has been a gradual shortening of the conversion timeline. This is due primarily to a shortening of the number of years between first hearing the gospel and conversion. The time between conversion and baptism has generally remained steady. Prior to 1990, nearly two thirds of Croatian Baptists took more than three years from first hearing the gospel to their conversion. This changed dramatically with the 1990s. During the 1990s nearly two thirds of Croatian Baptists converted within three years of first hearing the gospel. During the 1990s, nearly one third converted the same year that they first heard the gospel. Following the 1990s, the average has been evenly divided above and below the three-year mark. In general, the second half of the conversion timeline has remained steady throughout the four decades. Nearly half of Croatian Baptists are baptized the same year as conversion, and the majority of the remaining individuals are baptized in the first few years following.

### ***Witness recurrence***

Through the past four decades there has been a trend towards conversions with fewer witness recurrences. This is true both for the number of times hearing the gospel as well as the number of believers known prior to conversion. Throughout all four decades the majority of Croatian Baptists report more than ten gospel encounters prior to conversion. However, there is also an increasing trend of those who responded to the gospel after only three or less encounters. The same trend is true for the number of believers known prior to conversion. Once again, the majority of Croatian Baptists report having known ten or more believers prior to conversion. However, with the exception of the first decade of the 2000s, there is a steady increase in those who report having known three or fewer believers.

### ***Summary***

Two primary trends are evident in examining the conversion experience of Croatian Baptists by decade. The first is the number of conversions. The second is the nature of conversions. In general, while there has not been a massive wave of conversions, as one would expect to see in a time of spiritual awakening, there has been a consistent increase in the number of conversions. Further, these conversions are not occurring merely as a result of spiritual reproduction following physical reproduction. Rather, through the past twenty-five years there is an increase in the number of individuals converting from a non-Protestant religious background. The greatest growth is found in the 1990s, with a slight reduction

in the first decade of the 2000s. However, examining the growth during the first four years of the current decade present a picture by which current growth could easily outstrip that of the 1990s.

Second, just as there has been an increase of growth in conversion, the amount of time and exposure to the gospel has decreased. Over the periods covered there has been a decrease in the length of time from first hearing the gospel to the point of conversion. Further, there has been a decrease in the number of believers known prior to conversion. However, what these trends may indicate, rather than a change in the way that Croatians convert, is that individuals of different religious backgrounds experience conversion differently, based upon their contexts at the time of conversion.

### ***Change and Means of Conversion***

**Prior to 1970.** Prior to 1970, the most significant means of conversion was family, with 68% of respondents citing this means. This high response for this means reflects the fact that 73% of Croatian Baptists from this period were raised in a Protestant religious background. The second and third responses were relatively close, with 53% for Bible and 50% for sermon. Twenty-five percent cited an evangelistic event as being significant in their conversion, while 22% cited friends.

**1970s.** Beginning in the 1970s, the Bible becomes the primary means of conversion for all remaining periods of the survey. Seventy-seven percent of respondents from this time period cite the Bible as being critical or very important to their conversion. Sixty-five percent of respondents cite sermon and 60% cite family. Thirty-six percent cite an evangelistic event and 27% cite a small group Bible study. This fifth means is closely followed by summer camp, with 25% of respondents citing this category.

**1980s.** The primary means for this time period is the Bible, with 75% of respondents citing this category. Following the Bible, there are an equal number of responses for sermon and family, each with 64%. Next are evangelistic event (42%), small group Bible study (39%), and finally friends (38%). The 1980s are significant in that in this decade tracts are relatively significant in their importance, with 18% of respondents from this time period marking this means.

**1990s.** Once again the primary means for this time period is the Bible, with 70% of respondents citing this category. The other significant means from this period are sermon (56%), friends (42%), family (38%), and evangelistic event (28%). There are two significant notes for this time period, as it coincides with the previous section's discussion of conflict and conversion. First, during this period of significant humanitarian aid in the wake of the Homeland War, this means of conversion is cited by less respondents than in any other time period.

Second, during this period, for the first time, the category of friends becomes more significant to conversion than family.

**2000s.** During this period the most cited means of conversion is once again the Bible, with 71%. The category of Bible is followed by the categories of sermon (58%), family (52%), and friends (43%). The categories small group Bible study, books, and summer camp are all cited by 27% of respondents.

**Post 2010.** While the sixth period covers only approximately four years (2010 through the period of the survey, late 2013 to late 2014), these data reflect the most contemporary view of conversion among Croatian Baptists. The responses during these four years are similar to the responses during the 1990s. The most cited means is the Bible (79%), followed by sermon (75%), friends (48%), family (44%), and small group Bible study (43%). Evangelistic events and summer camp are both significant with each having 28% of respondents citing these means.

**Summary.** Upon reviewing these data, several trends become evident. The first is the overwhelming importance of Scripture in conversion. Since 1970, 70% or more of respondents cite the reading of the Bible as being critical or very important to their conversion. From my perspective of seeing the Bible as the inspired Word of God, this high percentage is not surprising. In fact, the opposite is surprising, that there is not an even higher level of respondents citing the Bible. What may account for this is the tendency of Croatian Baptists to respond more to oral means than written. When comparing non-Bible written means to oral means, in almost every period except for the 1990s, the categories of sermon and small group Bible study score higher than written means.

The second trend is the relative decline in the importance of family in conversion and the rise in the importance of friendship in conversion. Prior to the 1970s, family was the most important means of conversion, more important even than the Bible. However, following 1970 the importance of family in conversion has steadily dropped. The lowest period is during the 1990s, and following a rise in the first decade of the 2000s, the number has receded again among the most recent converts. The data for these two periods, the 1990s and 2010s, support the data for religious background, in which in both of these periods there are more individuals from a Roman Catholic background than from a Protestant background.

The third trend is the ongoing importance of formal evangelism over evangelism through service. Throughout all the periods covered, humanitarian aid never rose to double-digit significance. Further, the period of the Homeland War in the 1990s scored the lowest percentage, within the margin of error for having no impact. Education fared slightly better in some periods, but was generally at or below 10% throughout. Formal evangelism, however, has tended to be more significant. In general throughout these periods, evangelism events have scored around 3%, and summer camps have generally scored between 25% and 30%.

## **Barriers: Conversion Resistance**

Standing in stark contrast to the conversion experiences presented in this study are the more than 4.2 million non-conversion experiences of those living in Croatia today. What are the barriers to conversion past and present that have kept a Christianized people from experiencing spiritual conversion? Why are the Croatian people apparently so resistant to the gospel? In this section I will identify four factors from Croatia's past which have led to this conversion resistance, and two factors that face the Croatian people today. In the following section I will suggest five responses to address this resistance.

### **Four Past Factors**

I believe that there are four primary historical factors which have created a conversion resistance among the Croatian people: limited access to the biblical gospel, a culture saturated with a false gospel, a society with an intense allegiance to tradition, and a potent nationalism that has reinforced the ascendancy of this false gospel. Except for a brief period in the sixteenth century, in one small section of northwestern Croatia, access by Croatians to the biblical gospel has generally been limited until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The majority of Croatia never experienced the results of the Protestant Reformation, and the states that ruled over the Croatian people either directly limited or discouraged outside evangelical influences. The birth of the Croatian Baptist movement was the result of indirect missional efforts, such as emigration and re-immigration (Hopper 1977 and Knezović 2001). The limits on gospel access were removed with the establishment of the Republic of Croatia in 1991, and since that time the Baptist church in Croatia has more than doubled. However, access to the most effective means of conversion (family and friendship networks) remains limited.

The Croatian culture is saturated with the false gospel of the Roman Catholic Church. From birth to death, every major life event is impacted by the sacramental system. This system is self-identified with the first century church, and therefore claims historical ascendancy. Through this system of the Roman Catholic Church a gospel of faith and works, of grace and merit, of God and mankind, both the individual as well as a pantheon of saints, is presented as working together to achieve forgiveness and salvation. This system utilizes the same Scripture, the same theological terms, and claims the same God and savior as do evangelicals, yet with radically different interpretations of each. The biblical gospel is heard and understood in the framework of their existing worldview, and is not recognized as the radical message that it is. Therefore, the presence of the false gospel weakens the impact of the biblical gospel among the Croatian people.

The third factor in conversion resistance is the strong sense of tradition among the Croatian people. Among a people group that is saturated with a false gospel, for an individual to embrace an alternative gospel, or even to explore its teachings, is tantamount to betraying one's own family. Further, from the perspective of the family, for an individual to turn to another gospel will be perceived as not only personally changing religions, but also turning one's back on one's current and past family. Outsider conversion among Croatians will be perceived both individually and in society as becoming "other." Therefore, tradition serves to discourage both seeking and accepting the gospel.

The fourth factor leading to conversion resistance among Croatians is nationalism, the passionate self-identification with one's people group in political terms. Where tradition is the informal, natural conformity to one's family and immediate societal peers, nationalism is the formal focus on conformity to the larger entity of the people group. In a culture that is defined primarily by its identification with Roman Catholicism, to abandon the Roman Catholic Church is to abandon one's homeland. Nationalism has been particularly potent during the past century among Croatians as they moved towards nationhood, reaching its highpoint in the late 1990s and early 2000s following the war for independence. Right at the time that increasing access to the gospel arrived, the rise of nationalism served to reinforce the gospel inoculation among the Croatian people.

## **Two Current Factors**

The four historical factors listed above continue to be an issue in contemporary Croatia. While nationalism and the influence of the false gospel may be seen to be weakening in the wake of new political realities, they are still important. Further, access remains an issue as there are many areas of Croatia that continue to have no living witness. However, two new factors are present that have not been historically present among the Croatian people group: secularism and pluralism. While both of these factors tend to limit the effects of nationalism and its allegiance to the false gospel, both factors simultaneously serve to reinforce conversion resistance among the Croatian people.

Secularism is the separation of sacred from the secular, and ultimately is the removal of the spiritual from daily life. Secularism occurs in the political sphere, but also within the worldviews of the Croatian people. In the political sphere secularism undermines the power of the established institutions of religion. From a Croatian Baptist perspective, this is not necessarily bad, as Croatian Baptists exist at such a disadvantage with the traditional churches in Croatia. However, secularism in the worldview of the Croatian people serves to reinforce conversion resistance by banishing spiritual talk from common discourse. In a secular



environment, there is no place for public evangelism, personal or formal; spiritual talk is unfamiliar, unexpected, and unwelcome.

Pluralism can be defined as a state of fact or as an ideal. In the former, pluralism is defined as “a situation in which people of different social classes, religions, races, etc., are together in a society but continue to maintain their separate traditions and interests” (Merriam Webster 2015). In this case, Croatia has always experienced pluralism, as it has always existed as a part of a larger community, whether as a part of the Venetian Empire, the Hapsburg Empire, or Yugoslavia. Pluralism may also be defined as an ideal, to be cultivated and pursued within a society, “the belief that people of different social classes, religions, races, etc., should live together in a society” (Merriam Webster 2015). The watchword of pluralism is “coexist,” - to not only accept the differences of those around oneself, but also to appreciate and honor these differences. From a purely secular point of view this is a noble ideal, and quite necessary for a society that is not homogeneous to succeed and prosper.

However, the ideal of pluralism is at odds with the exclusivity of the gospel. Pluralism increases conversion resistance in two ways. First, the exclusivity of the gospel message is not welcome in a pluralistic society which demands that individual worldviews find a place for all other worldviews. Differences in worldviews are seen as differences of perspective rather than differences in reality. In this environment, evangelism, promoting the exclusivity of truth in Jesus Christ alone, is both uncultured and insensitive. Second, as the members of a pluralistic society internalize the pluralistic ideal, the uniqueness of the gospel message is subordinated to the position of one option of many, which may be cannibalized for the preferred components (i.e. love and grace), while the less desirable components may be ignored or rejected (i.e. holiness and sin). In a pluralistic society, individuals may say yes to the gospel, but also say yes to views contrary to the gospel as well, which ultimately results in a rejection of the gospel.

## **Recommended Response: Reaching the Resistant**

Having examined the six factors of conversion resistance among Croatians, and not ignoring the theological fact that God alone is the Lord of conversion, to which efforts should gospel workers apply their limited resources of time and personnel? The short answer is nothing startling or new: “preach the gospel” (2 Tim 4:2). While it may appear to many gospel workers in Croatia today that they are preaching out of season, it is only by preaching the gospel of Christ that men and women are converted. Five general approaches will be suggested below for how to reach Croatians: prayer, an appreciation of the distinctiveness of both insider

and outsider conversion, an understanding of collaborative evangelism, a focus on church planting, and an embracing of theological and denominational distinctiveness. These five approaches address various aspects of conversion resistance as well as drawing upon the conversion experiences of Croatian Baptists.

## **Prayer**

Recognizing that no man comes to the Father but through the Son, and that no man comes to the Son except that the Father draw him, the first step in seeing increased conversions among Croats must begin with prayer (John 6:44, 6:65). A ministry of prayer recognizes that while God is the Lord of conversion, the church has been chosen as an instrument of both bearing the gospel and also interceding for those who need the gospel. While founded primarily on this theological factor of conversion resistance, Scripture speaks of prayer as addressing the other six factors. Prayer is sought to bridge limited access (Matt 9:38). Further, prayer may be directed towards the softening of hearts hardened by false religion, tradition, and nationalism, and the opening of ears and eyes shut by secularism and pluralism (2 Chr 6:19-40, Neh 1:5-11, Col 4:3-4, 2 Thess 3:1). Prayer should be focused nationally as well as specifically to cities and individuals.

## **Addressing Insiders and Outsiders**

Following prayer there needs to be an awareness of the diversity of contexts within Croatia. The gospel answers every question, yet it is important to know the questions that are being asked by an individual prior to seeking to provide the appropriate answer. There are three primary types of people needing conversion in Croatia: insiders, spiritual outsiders, and material outsiders. Insiders are the children growing up in Baptist families in Croatia. Access, false religion, and tradition are not factors of conversion resistance for insiders, though in the national education system they will encounter nationalism, secularism, and pluralism. In order to be drawn toward conversion they need a firm biblical foundation and may sit under significant biblical teaching before they experience conversion. Insiders may experience conversion subconsciously and will need a venue in which to announce their conversion in order to move their conversion from being merely a personal experience to being a public decision.

Spiritual outsiders are individuals who accept a spiritual reality, but hold to the false gospel. These individuals may be aware of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church or merely be traditional Catholics with a limited knowledge of the Church's actual teachings. The primary factors of conversion resistance among

spiritual outsiders are false gospel, tradition, and nationalism. Allowing the Bible to speak for itself should be a key strategy in reaching spiritual outsiders, as the Bible is both an accepted authority yet also a critic of their traditional worldview. Further, providing an alternative community is key for spiritual outsiders to be drawn to conversion, as their traditional community may not accept them if they convert. This alternative community may be an established evangelical church, but in the many areas where established evangelical churches do not exist, new churches must be planted to provide this alternative community.

Material outsiders are individuals who hold to a materialist worldview. They reject the spiritual worldview of both the gospel and the false gospel. The primary factors of conversion resistance for material outsiders are tradition, nationalism, secularism, and pluralism. While many material outsiders reject the spiritual underpinnings of Croatian tradition and nationalism, as Croatians they will accept the forms that accompany them. Personal relationships with believers are key for material outsiders, and these relationships can then lead to additional encounters with the gospel through sermons and formal evangelistic events.

Access is a key problem for both spiritual and material outsiders. Insiders are born into a network by which they are engaged with the gospel. However, due to the high proportion of Croatians who do not have a natural social network that includes believers, Croatian churches must be intentional about reaching out beyond these natural networks. Regular evangelistic events inside and outside of church buildings must be a part of every local church's annual calendar. Further, while broad seed sowing methods such as street evangelism and radio or television reported very low response rates, efforts must be made utilizing these methods to engage new networks with the gospel. Without these efforts, the majority of Croatians will live their entire life without encountering a living witness.

## **Collaborative Evangelism**

In the Croatian context, evangelism needs to be pursued with a collaborative mindset. As stated earlier, the conversion experience of Tomislav is not the norm, and gospel workers among Croatians should not expect those who hear their message to be converted by a single gospel message in a single encounter. While this always remains a possibility, and gospel workers can live in hope of such a result, the vast majority of conversions will occur as the result of multiple messages conveyed through multiple encounters through multiple means over the course of multiple years. Croatians tend to convert as a result of collaborative evangelism, the net result of this repeated and varied exposure to the gospel.

Collaborative evangelism embraces all forms of evangelism and does not hold one method above or below another. Collaborative evangelism is truly “all things

to all people, so that by all means” some might be saved in a way that one style of evangelism cannot be (1 Cor 9:22). With a collaborative view of evangelism, both confrontational evangelism and relational evangelism are equally valid; neither is to be disparaged. Due to the various giftings of evangelists and the various contexts of the unconverted, all styles, forms, and methods of evangelism should be utilized throughout the country, and as many as possible in the local church. At the least, a local church should have regular formal outreach events while simultaneously encouraging and training members in personal evangelism.

## **Church Planting**

In the Croatian context, evangelism alone will not be enough to overcome conversion resistance; communities must be formed that those who convert may join. Due to the conversion resistance factors of tradition and nationalism, converts need a new community that can support them, as some converts will find themselves excluded from their pre-conversion communities as a result of their conversion. Further, it is only through the community of faith, that is the church, that true collaborative evangelism can occur. Through the multiple giftings of the local church, the gospel can be both heard and seen, reinforced by the repetitive living witness of its members. In a context where there is only one Baptist church for every 105,000 Croatians, access to the living gospel remains a challenge that only church planting can overcome.

Finally, there is a distinct trend in the survey data that calls for a focus on church planting in Croatia. While established churches are proving effective in reaching those raised within these faith communities, examining the results of seven church plants in comparison with the results of established Baptist churches shows that these communities are more effective in reaching those from a non-Protestant religious background. In these seven churches, the percentage of those with Protestant religious backgrounds is significantly lower, while the percentages of those with Roman Catholic and atheist religious backgrounds are significantly higher. Churches planted since 1991 have a better rate of reaching those outside the church than the churches already in existence before this date. The reasons for this difference are beyond the scope of the data obtained in this research project. However, I would speculate that the reasons for this difference are as follows. First, to effectively plant a church, evangelism must be very intentional. Second, to plant a church in an area where there was previously no evangelical church increases access to the gospel. And finally, church plants are by their nature open to outsiders, whereas some more established churches may be less aware of or even less welcoming of outsiders. Church plants depend on outsiders to be established and, as a result, may be more accommodating than established churches.

## **Maintaining Theological and Denominational Distinctiveness**

In the Croatian context evangelism and church planting need to occur in a spirit that embraces the theological and denominational uniqueness of both the evangelist and church planter. In the current secular and pluralistic climate, a balance needs to be established between bridge building and drawing clear distinctions with other worldviews. Certainly there are times when leaders within the evangelical community will need to engage with leaders from other faith communities on issues of religious toleration, and so pursue interfaith dialogue. Certainly there are times when leaders within the evangelical community will need to speak with one voice on the issue of religious freedom, and at that time pursue ecumenicalism. However, when engaging in evangelism and church planting, a clear distinctive must be drawn.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is exclusive to all other religions and worldviews and it calls all men and women to an exclusive relationship with one God through one mediator based upon the sole principle of grace. In a context where each of these singular entities is defined in radically different terms, an overly strong focus on bridge building will only serve to muddle the gospel message. In the short term a hearing will be gained, but in the long term the content of the message will be weakened. Ultimately, it is in the distinctiveness of the gospel message that the Spirit will move to bring about conversion, and the desire to gain a hearing should not be used as an excuse to water down this unique gospel message.

## **Further Research**

In light of the findings of this research project, there are several directions of further research that could serve to strengthen our understanding of conversion among Croatians. First, a similar study among non-Baptist evangelicals in Croatia could provide a broader understanding of how Croatians experience conversion. In particular, research among the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, which is approximately the same size as the Croatian Baptist Union, would provide a Croatian population segment with a similar understanding of spiritual conversion. This research would provide a larger pool of data on conversion among evangelical Croatians, while also providing the opportunity to search for factors distinctive to the Baptist worldview.

Second, Baptists in neighboring countries provide further opportunities for research. The Baptists of Serbia could be studied and the results compared to this study in order to provide insights from a similar culture but a differing primary traditional worldview. The Baptists of Bosnia, while few in number, could also

provide insight from an area of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim backgrounds. Finally, the Baptists of Hungary, who live among a people with the same religious tradition as Croatians, but a markedly different culture, could provide insight as well. Each of these three eastern European countries has shared with Croatia the transition from communism to democracy, and Bosnia experienced a war much more destructive than that experienced in Croatia. Research in these areas could provide a contrast by which better insights into the data collected through this project could be understood.

## Conclusion

In the southern Dalmatian region of Croatia, the topography is primarily karst. This has resulted in a landscape that is predominantly rocky and produces a meager crop. In this context the goods produced tend to be small in quantity, but of considerable quality. Dalmatian wines have been valued since the time of the Roman Empire, and the *pršut* from the town of Drniš was served to the kings and queens of Europe in the nineteenth century. The same might be said of the Church in Croatia, which has grown out of a spiritually rocky soil, with little quantity of production to speak of.

Yet, in God's economy those of little state are afforded special status (Matt 19:30, 20:8). Perhaps in Eternity, when the multitude gathers around the throne to praise the Lamb, those of the nation, tribe, and tongue that were of the Croatian people group will have a special status due to their lack of numbers (Rev 7:9-10). However, this would be a dubious distinction to pursue. It is my hope and prayer that as a result of this research the church in Croatia will engage the lost, and that the ranks of the multitude on the last day will be enlarged due to the presence of many, many Croatians, who have as of today yet to convert.

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Eric Maroney

## **Kriza, promjena i obraćenje: Četrdeset godina obraćenja među hrvatskim baptistima**

Sažetak

Evanđeoski kršćani predstavljaju neznatnu manjinu u Hrvatskoj. Tijekom razdoblja rata, koje je obilježeno nastankom Republike Hrvatske tijekom 90-ih godina 20. stoljeća, i društvenih promjena, koje su potom uslijedile, došlo je do znatnog porasta evanđeoskih vjernika. Ovaj pokret nikad nije bio formalno istraživano u Hrvatskoj, a njegovo razumijevanje ima velik značaj za one koji žele širiti Kraljevstvo Božje u Hrvatskoj, stoga što se pitanja etničkog identiteta, nacionalizma i građanskih sukoba ne propituju samo u Hrvatskoj. Istraživanje se provodilo za razdoblje od 1970. do 2010. godine, što znači dva desetljeća prije uspostave Republike Hrvatske i dva desetljeća nakon toga, a provedeno je isključivo među hrvatskim baptistima. U ovome članku razmatraju se osnovni trendovi obraćenja među hrvatskim baptistima u navedenom razdoblju, potom se predlaže pet mogućih pristupa uspješnoj budućoj evangelizaciji.