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Christianity in Russia

Часто страдают, часто преследуются, и все же настойчиво в надежде.

Often suffering, often persecuted, and yet persevering in hope.

That’s the best way I know to describe our Christian brothers and sisters in Russia. And today the Global Christianity Class that’s what we’ll be discussing – the sober and yet encouraging history of Christianity in Russia. My name’s Andy Johnson and we’ll be meeting downstairs in room \_\_\_.

Pre-Christian Russia

No one knows for sure when Christianity first came to the Slavic “Rus” people that make up the language block that we now know of as Russia and the Russian speaking world. Orthodox Christians in Ukraine claim that the Apostle Andrew brought Christianity to Ukraine in the 50s or 60s AD. That’s doubtful. But what we do know is that there is little evidence of settled Christian churches in the Russian speaking world for the first 800 - 900 years after Christ’s death and resurrection. During this time the people known as the Eastern Slavs lived in modern day western Russia, Ukraine and Belaruss. They were a remarkably primitive people, mostly without a written language, who practiced semi-nomadic slash and burn agriculture. Their settled and recorded history doesn’t start until 850 AD when the region around modern-day Kiev, Ukraine was permanently settled. And in 859 AD the Primary Chronicle that documents the history of the Kingdom of Kiev begins. Most view this as the start of the Russian people as a settled and defined society. But the Euro-Asian span of Russia would remain a wilderness of small city states and warring tribes for some time to come.

**Origins and spread of Christianity (900 – 1800)**

In the late 900’s AD the city of Keiv had become the center of a small but growing Russian kingdom. Some time around the end of that century Greek-speaking missionaries from Constantinople made their way to Kiev. They brought with them the Galagolitic script that had been created by byzantine Monks from Thessaloniki, named Methodious and Cyril. Cyril had created the alphabet using the 24 letters of their Greek alphabet and 19 new letters to represent sounds unique to the Slavic language. Hence we still call the much-revised Russian version of this unique alphabet Cyrillic after the missionary, Cyril.

When these missionaries, with their Cyrillic script, came to Kiev they found a pagan people who worshipped various nature gods – chief among them being Perun, the sun god. Vilence, immorality and ignorance were the norm.

But the found one supposed convert in the person of Queen Olga, the Nordick wife of King Svyatoslav of Kiev. She was, however, by all accounts a ruthless and terrible person. Whatever claim she made as a Christian, it bore little fruit of regeneration in her life. After the death of her husband, and as Regent for her young son, Vladamir, she deceived, murdered and carried out genocide to secure the throne for him.

As a result it’s not surprising that her professed Christianity bore little if any fruit among her people, or for Vladamir her favorite son. He was a thorough pagan. He offered sacrifices to the Russian gods and mocked his mother’s faith. His favorite hobbies were war and immorality. He had five wives and dozens of concubines. He seemed an unlikely person to be the man who brought Christianity to Russia.

But soon after Vladamir became king of Kiev, he decided that his people needed a new, modern religion to replace the disorganized paganism that reigned over his kingdom. So, as the story goes, he had his staff investigate the four religious groups on his borders. Islam he rejected because he didn’t want to have to stop drinking. Judiasm was out because they had lost their land and he liked military victories. Western Christianity seemed dull. But he loved the reports of the flashy and opulent services at the Haggia Sophia church in Constantinople. So in 988 he trooped off to the great church of the Byzantine Empire in Constantinople to be baptized. There he fell in love with and, after his profession of Christian faith, was married to the Byzantine Emperor’s daughter, Anna. It was all a shrewd political move, if nothing more. The Byzantine Empire was the richest and most powerful neighbor to his weak and poor kingdom. Now he had a common religion and a Byzantine wife. But, as sometimes happens, God uses even apparently bad motives to do us amazing good.

Upon his return Vladimir ordered the entire population of Kiev to assemble at the river outside the city to be baptized or be considered an enemy of the State. This kind of force allegiance to a new religion is sadly common, and sadly distorts the center of Christianity – heart-felt personal repentance and faith. In one sense, all the sorry and worldly history of the Russian Orthodox church can be traced back to this fundamental error.

And yet, Vladimir himself, was deeply impacted by the new religion he had taken on and foisted on his subjects. As he continued to learn about Christianity something happened to him during the year following his return to Kiev. As one historian observed -

“As for Vladimir himself, his lifestyle was clearly affected. When he married Anna, he put away his five former wives [and all his concubines]. Not only did he build churches, he also destroyed idols, abolished the death penalty, protected the poor, established schools, and managed to live in peace with neighboring nations [for the rest of his life]. On his deathbed he gave all his [remaining personal] possessions to the poor.” (Christian History, Issue #28 in 1990) A remarkable change for a man who just before his professed conversion was a brutal, violent, warlike and grossly immoral pagan.

Was Vladamir genuinely converted to Christ, we can’t really know. Historians disagree. But all agree that in the year following his profession of Christian faith Vladamir of Kiev underwent one of the most remarkable moral reformations in any sitting king in history.

But whatever his sincerity or intentions, that first act of his newly claimed faith – the forced conversion of the whole population of Kiev set the stage for a bitter future. From the very first day, Christianity in Russia was seen as both a civic duty and the way to gain the favor of the King and others in power. Not surprisingly, the church became for many unbelievers, just a way to get power and influence, not salvation. And so for a thousand years, that union of church and throne, along with the ranks of unbelievers brought in through infant baptism, has resulted in a state church in Russia that looks pretty much like the world and seldom looks to the scriptures for direction or correction.

**Reform attempts – (Strigolniki, 15th Cen. – Nonpossessors movement, 16th Cen.)**

That’s not to say that some efforts at biblical reform of the Russian Orthodox Church haven’t taken place from time to time. But the perverse union of the church leadership with the power of the state, has resulted in all serious reform efforts being put down, often with shocking levels of violence.

Nikon and the Old Believers, 18th Cen. – When a church is built on human traditions, rather than the Word of God, than any efforts to change traditions becomes an attack on the very foundations of religion, because without the gospel, sadly traditions are all they have to put their faith in. So when the autocratic Russian Patriarch Nikon sought to “update” the practice of the Russian Orthodox church, a full blown rebellion resulted. Those who broke away become known as the “Staroobryadtsy” or “Old Rite Believers.” I mention them in part because many of them left Russia under intense persecution, and many settled in the Pacific Northwest of the USA. Today in places like Oregon, you’ll find green and white onion-domed churches with a few bearded, Russian speaking men holding on to old ways and old traditions. Kind of like the Russian version of the Amish.

The sad summary is that, whether the Strygolniki in the 1400s, or the Non-possessors in the 1500s, or the Old Believers in the 1700s, or evangelical Christians today – vigorous persecution of dissenters and reformers has been the way of life for the Russian Orthodox church. Except for the efforts of a few noted Monarchs, like Catherine the Great, who tried to force religious tolerance or the 70-year reprieve under Soviet Communism, the pattern for the Russian Orthodox Church has been shocking levels of opposition to any who disagree, dissent or critique its dogma and dominance of religious life in Russia.

**Evangelicalism and Reformation (1800 – 1905)**

As a result of this, there was nothing like a Protestant Reformation in the Russian Orthodox Church. Any reformers who sprang up tended to be quickly put in a grave. Consequently the story of evangelical Christianity doesn’t really start in large measure until the mid-1800s. But as God would have it, when he finally decided to invade Russia with the Biblical gospel, it was in a masterful way, on three distinct fronts. In God’s masterful providence, all of these efforts seemed humanly unrelated, but all began around the same time.

Three fronts for the biblical gospel (Ukraine, St. Petersburg, the Caucasus)

Ukraine -

First was the direct fontal assault through the nation of Ukraine. Russia under Catherine II wanted to attract Germans to move to their newly won Black Sea territories in modern-day Ukraine. So she enticed German tradesmen with generous offers of land and employment. And thousands of Germans – mainly Lutherans and Mennonites, responded. By 1815 there were 58 German villages in Ukraine. And while not all the Germans were Christians, many were. And all of them impressed the Russians with their moral lives and work ethics. The many believers among them began a movement of work-place bible study known as the “Stunde” in German, meaning “hour”. So the Russians began to refer to them as Stundists. Their movment began to involve local Russian in Ukraine. So much so that for a long time after all evangelical Christians in Russia were called “Stuntists.”

The fruit of their piety and evangelism was such that in 1858 the first local converts were baptized in Ukraine. By 1867 there was a church of 35 local Russian converts in the city of Odessa. And, as par for the course, by the 1870s the Russian Orthodox church began to convince officials to imprison the Stundists for “proselytism among the Orthodox.” But by 1881, the ranks of baptistic “Stundists” had grown to over 1000, none-the-less.

St. Petersburg – (Pashkov expelled in 1884)

At about the same time, by the middle of the 1800s, the gospel was breaking into Russia from the North, through the city of St. Petersburg. Strangely enough it started with a British Office, Lord Radstock, who was converted by the Holy Spirit while fighting the Russians during the Crimean War. God moved his heart with pity for the very people with whom his nation was at war. So that at the war’s end, he worked through the English Evangelical Alliance to begin a mission to St. Petersburg. Lord Radstock was sent as a missionary to St. Petersburg in 1874, and saw a remarkable movement of conversions.

Perhaps most notable among Lord Radstocks ministry, was the conversion of a man named Vasily Pashkov in 1874. Vasily happened to be the 6th most wealthy man in all of Russia – owning six major factories. After his conversion he began a “Society for the propagation of spiritual and moral reading” in 1876. This was the first evangelical publishing house in Russia. Over the next 8 years they translated and published 200 books – including “Pilgrim’s Progress”, the sermons of Charles Spurgeon, and numerous hymnals.

Unfortunately, in his zeal for rapid evangelism, Pashkov encouraged the churches they founded to avoid taking stands on complex doctrinal issues like the order of salvation, church government and baptism. These churches, that held to a form of gospel-only Christianity became known simply as “Evangelicals” or “Pashkovites” and they would in years to come become a challenge to those who wanted more doctrinally robust Russian churches.

Despite his wealth and influence, the Russian Orthodox church made persecuting Vasily Pashkov and his followers one of their main goals. So, in 1884, Paskov was finally expelled from Russia by Tsar Alexander III, he died some years later in Europe.

The Caucasus –

Again, at about the same time, another more baptistic group, like the Stundists, became the spearpoint of God’s gospel advance in the Caucaus region near the Eastern Black Sea. An Iranian missionary named Kasha Yagub (known as Yakov Delyakov, in Russian) finished his studies at the Moody Bible School campus in Tehran, Iran. (Iran was a much different nation in the late 1800s than it has become since the Islamic Revolution in 1978, but we digress). Yakov began to travel among the Molokon people of the Caucauses, preaching the gospel from train station to station. And on August 20, 1867 a local Russian man named Nikita Voronin heard him preach and was converted. He was baptized by a German Baptist pastor in what is now Tiblisi, Georgia and joined that local church. Russian Baptists note that date, August 20, 1867 as the beginning of the Russian Baptist Church.

**Alexander III and Konstantin Pobedonostsev –**

The decades that followed saw a steady spread of the gospel and gospel preaching churches into Russia from the North, the West and the South. The groups began to meet one another and together referred to themselves as “Brethern” – though some were more strict Baptists, others rather undefined Evangelicals.

But as God would have it, the pattern of Russia continued, and a decade or so of peace and growth gave way to suffering and persecution. This time at the hands of a Russian Orthodox official, Konstantin Pobedonostsev. He convinced Tsar Alexander to begin a wholesale progrom against the Evangelicals. Baptists and Stundists were outlawed in 1882. Any church-owned property was confiscated and leaders expelled from Russia (like Visily Pashkov). A second round of decrees in 1894 enabled the government to take the children of Evangelicals, and permitted employment discrimination, disruption of church services, fines, beatings and arrest. Many thousands of Christians were sent to prisons and others left for Siberia and Central Asia to get away from the government in Moscow. As a result the biblical gospel spreading farther throughout the growing Russian empire and protestant churches were planted all the way to Pacific ocean.

**Cycles of Freedom and Persecution (1905 – 1985)**

However, in 1905 this wave of persecution abruptly receded when the new emperor Nikolay II put forward the edict “On Religious Tolerance.” Overnight Protestantism became legal. And in 1906 he decreed that groups, like the Russian Baptists, would be formally recognized alongside the Russian Orthodox church to perform civil functions, like marriages, on behalf of the government.

WWI and Baptist, German spies.

Bad times for Orthodox Church, benign neglect for evangelicals (1918 – 1928)

One of the little known ironies of the Russian Revolution of 1917 is that it brought on something of a golden decade for the gospel-preaching, protestant churches of Russia. Explanations for this are somewhat speculative. But what is clear is that the Communist Government saw the Russian Orthodox church, with it’s long history of entanglement with the Tsars, as their great enemy. While protestants seemed to have been viewed as potential allies, or at least as a smaller, less urgent threat. The result was that the decade from 1918 to 1928 saw some of the greatest freedoms and fastest growth ever known among Russian Evangelicals and Baptists. For example, around 1905 the Russian Baptist Union had 162 churches with 11,207 members, 400 preachers, and 10 church buildings. By 1927 there were 4000 Russian Baptist Churches, with an estimate of 400,000 members and over a million weekly attenders. Other Evangelical groups had similar freedoms and growth, with the total number of members in gospel preaching Russian churches reached more than 1 million.

 Stalin’s plan to wipe out religion (1932 – 1940)

But, as is the theme in the story of Russia, the good times didn’t last. Stalin began to shift the Soviet Government from dialogue with Protestant Christians toward repression and in 1932 he began his plan to wipe out religion in the Soviet Union.

Nearly 700,000 Christians were “repressed” – the Soviet term for public punishment that ranged from job loss to imprisonment. By 1939 the only Protestant church that was allowed to legally operate was Moscow Central Baptist Church, down from 7000 legal protestant churches that existed in 1928. These were dark days for Russian Christians.

But in another strange turn of Providence, help came for them from another strange place – this time the German army of Adolf Hitler. When Hitler attached Germany in 1941, Stalin realized that defending Russia would require the help of every Russian, including the millions of devout Russian Christians. So he promptly brought his extermination plans to an end and dramatically softened persecution. Both Russian Orthodox and Protestant churches were allowed to resume their organized activities and many were restored to their former properties.

Even after the war ended, Stalin never returned to his former wholesale plan to eliminate all the Christians. But he did force all the Protestants (meaning the mostly-Arminian Evangelicals and the mostly-Calvanistic Baptists, along with a few Pentecostals) all together into one Union of Evangelical-Christian Baptist. In 1948, about 2000 of these mixed congregations were legally registered in the USSR, many others chose not to register and risk arrest to keep their doctrine more defined and biblical.

Nikita Khrushchev and shift from “militant atheism” to “scientific atheism.”

After the death of Stalin in 1953, things changed for the Russian Christians, but not much better. Nikita Khrushchev, the new Soviet leader, announced a shift from “militant atheism” to “Scientific atheism.” In essence, it was an admission that the old Stalin policies of active persecution had failed and a new approach to try to destroy the Christians was needed. Many religious prisoners were freed from the Soviet Gulag and the most heavy-handed repressions like shutting down churches was abandoned, but other, more subtle and “scientific” methods of persecution came online – infiltration of churches by the KGB, informants, blackmailing, even the psychiatric hospitalization of Christian leaders for religious mental disorders became common.

Kruschev famously declared that the last Christians would be shown as oddities on TV within a decade, but his dream never came true. And in 1964 he was deposed from power, and the Russian Christians were still there.

**The Baptist Union splits (1963)**

But though they endured, these were hard years for Russian Protestants. During the 60s the Soviets banned all children and high school students from attending “unscientific” church services. Some in the Baptist Union went along with each of the new, incremental restrictions from Moscow, hoping each one might be the last. But another group of leaders felt things had gone on too long. So in 1963 a split occurred in the Baptist Union. Those churches no longer willing to see their meager freedoms eroded formed the “unrecognized” Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists. Many local churches split. And many unregistered churches joined with the new Council. By 1965 around 100K Christians had identified with this new, illegal group. They were severely persecuted by the government throughout the hard days of the 1970s and early 1980s. But somehow they managed to endure in the face of grinding, unyielding harassment and persecution. From the outside it might seem that the Russian Christians were being worn down, but in reality it was the Soviet State that was nearing exhaustion.

**Perestroika and Revolution (1985 – 1997)**

Few men seemed to grasp this better than Mikhail Gorbachev, who became the leader of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985. Soon after he announced his new policy of “Perestroika” – meaning Reform, in Russian. His aim was to modernize the Soviet economy. But he quickly concluded that the whole social life of the Soviet Union had become moribund, and he seemed to hope that more popular support would protect his economic reforms from hardline communists in the party. So in 1988 he announced the radical policy of “Glasnost” or Openness which brought a flood of new freedoms to the longsuffering Soviet people – freedom of conscience, freedom of the press and freedom of religion.

The Soviet Union gives up after 70 years of failed persecution.

Especially striking was the pace at which the Soviet policy of hostility to Christianity was abandoned. In the couple of years that followed it seemed like the very government that had for 70 years sought to wipe out the Christians, could say enough good things about Christianity. So in 1988 the Communist Government of the Soviet Union held celebrations in Kiev and Moscow to mark the 1000 years of Christianity in Russia, since the baptism of Vladimir back in 988 AD. In essence, after 70 years of failed persecution the USSR was waving the white flag of surrender to the persevering Russian Christians who had in part simply outlasted the Soviet will to persecute them.

**Another decade of freedom for Baptists (1987-1997)**

That surrender became formal in October 1990 when the Soviet legislature (the Supreme Soviet) voted 341 to 1 (with one abstention) to end all restrictions on and persecution of Christians in the Soviet Union. The act was quickly signed by Soviet leader Gorbachev. Suddenly Christians were free to practice and share their faith as they wished, including the right to evangelize in all public places and interestingly, in state hospitals. Religious education in private schools was specifically allowed and churches were given full legal status to own property, hire workers, etc. Discrimination against anyone on the basis of religion became a crime in the USSR, and to the surprise of many in the West the law were promptly enforced at least in Russia.

The decade that followed was something of a golden decade for the Protestant church in Russia. Churches were filled. Bible from the West were plentiful. And spiritual interest was high. Many new churches were planted. Whatever came after, we can praise God for this season when many men and women heard the gospel and responded in repentance and faith. Many of the younger church leaders who did not grow up in Christian families came to faith during this decade.

**An Old Persecutor Returns (1997 – Present)**

But not everyone was happy with this new season of freedom and tolerance. By the mid-90’s the Russian Orthodox church decided that there was too much freedom, for the Protestants. And they began to work with the remaining hardline Communists to lobby the new President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin to reconsider his support for religious freedom. Back in 1993 Yeltsin had helped to passed an expansion of the 1990 law from the Soviet Union. The new, Russian 1993 law was even more generous in its support of Christianity generally, including Protestant groups. That was too much for the Russian Orthodox Church to tolerate.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the 1997 Law –

So after much work, this alliance of Communists and the Russian Orthodox managed to get a new Religious Law issued. It’s main purpose was to cut out many of the liberties and rights that had been secured in 1990 and 1993. Not surprisingly, it declared the special status of the Russian Orthodox church and removed legal recognition for any organization that had existed in Russia for less that 15 years (prior to 1982). This meant that all Christian groups other than Baptists, Methodists and some other Evangelicals could no longer exist legally in the Russian Federation.

Counteraction of Extremist Activities Laws 2000 –

Then, three years later, an even more restrictive law on Countering Extremist Activity Law was passed under the leadership of the new Russian President, Vladamir Putin. One of the main purposes of this law, again sought by the Russian Orthodox church, was to allow the Russian government to more easily persecute Protestant churches under the vague standard of fighting “extreme” ideologies.

Fusion of Orthodox church and State –

Increasingly we see the landscape in Russia looking more and more like the pre-revolution fusion of church and State that existed under the Tsars. Putin in particular, seems to see the Russian Orthodox church as the only legitimately Russian religious group, all other are suspect. Who is using whom, the Russian Orthodox or Putin, depends on the day and one’s perspective. That this alliance has returned Russia to days of

God is still at work, in often quiet ways –

**Concluding Observations –**

1. Christianization is not the way real Christianity spreads.

Whatever intentions Vladimir of Kiev might have had back in 988AD, the forced Christianization of Russia was not conversion. And the thousand years of bad fruit among apparent unbelievers calling themselves “Christians” yet intent on stamping out real, biblical Christianity seem to bear that out. There is no shortcut to the Kingdom of God. Patient labor for real, heart conversion must be done…merely producing the rapid impression of visible fruit (whether by the sword or by other means) may set up a nation for terrible misunderstandings of that it means to be a Christian. And that misunderstanding may keep going on bearing rotten fruit for far longer, and with worse effect, than we might ever imagine.

1. God almost always preserves a people for himself.

But the history of Russia also shows that wherever God’s word is preached and believed, there usually will be true conversions. And that a church once established on the true gospel, will most often persevere as a lasting witness, even through the most intense government, religious and social hostility. The atheistic, Christian persecuting Soviet Union has been consigned to the ash-heap of history. While gospel preaching, Russian churches are gathered today preaching the very same gospel they preached before Lenin and Stalin were even born.

1. Russian Christianity triumphed in part merely by persevering.

While there are times when Christians should openly confront the false ideas of those who oppose them, it is often the case that Christ’s church triumphs over her enemies in the end, merely by outlasting them. Our Russian brothers and sisters are a great example of this. They never staged mass revolts against the Soviet System. But they continued to identify with Christ, to gather for worship, to teach their children and to share the gospel with others in large measure headless of the various waves of persecution sent out by the Soviet government.

1. Opportunities don’t usually last, we have to be ready to take them.

One of the sad lessons of the Baptist churches in particular is the poor use that many seem to have made of the openness and opportunities in the early 1990s. Some did wonderful work, but it seems that most had become so mired in survival and some infighting that other groups did much more of the outreach in the days right after the fall of the Soviet Union.

1. Encouraging new generation of godly, Biblical leaders in Russia.

But even if the opportunities in Russia may be more hard won today, there are still lots of reasons for optimism about gospel prospects in Russia. One of the foremost is the new generation of Russian church leaders that are coming on the scene. Good theology, careful and faithful evangelism, serious church planting and reform of existing Russian Baptist congregations seems increasingly the order of the day. Protestants in Russia