

## A Brief History of Evangelism and Mission (2)

By Victor Beshir

### **Ninth Century:**

The ninth century witnessed the good evangelistic efforts by the [brothers Cyril and Methodius among the Slavic nations](#). One excellent reason behind their success is their ability to realize the importance of using the local language, the language that is spoken and loved by its people. People are dramatically influenced when they see the recognition of their language, which internally means acceptance of the people as equally intelligent and important.

[Recognizing the lesson of the importance of local languages and cultures in missionary work is a vital tool in evangelism](#). Imposing different languages or cultures on people have usually ended up in flat failure. However, understanding that the essence of Christian faith is not in the language, nor it is in the cultural inheritance of any nation, makes Christianity readily accepted. We have a great lesson from [the evangelism of the Coptic Orthodox in Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>](#). For when Copts evangelized Ethiopia in the Fourth century, [they did not impose on Ethiopians any Coptic ecclesiastical melodies or music. Neither, they imposed on them certain liturgies or the Coptic language or Coptic culture ingredients](#). The result was significant. The Ethiopian church grew to have its own liturgies (about 15), their own music which expresses the feelings of the Ethiopian person, their own musical instruments, and their own heritage. [This is an important lesson for evangelism and mission to comprehend](#).

### **Eleventh Century:**

**The eleventh century** witnessed [the convert of Russia into Christianity](#). The story of its conversion is one of a kind that I love to tell. Prince Vladimir sent his emissaries to discover the true religion. They visited the Muslim Buglers, the Roman Catholic, and others. Then they attended a liturgy in the church of Haghia Sophia in Constantinople. The men reported back to Vladimir: ["We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or](#)

beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwelt there among men, and that the service surpasses the worship of all other places, for we cannot forget that beauty.<sup>2</sup>” This story reminds me of similar words mentioned by the liturgist Kenneth Stevenson<sup>3</sup>. He traveled with his father to Jerusalem and visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher during Lent of 1982. After attending many services offered by different denominations, he wrote, “The Copts earned their place in the antiquity of their liturgy and spirituality.”

The lesson of conversion of Russia is the realization of the power of the sacraments of the church. No doubt that the liturgy is a great evangelistic tool. However, I have some restrictions based on my own experience; before inviting people to a liturgy, teach them about the meaning of the Divine Liturgy, what does it involve, and how to pray in it. Then invite them to attend a part of the Divine Liturgy in English.

Currently, our Divine Liturgies is too long for Americans and Canadians who got used to only one hour sitting in pews. Having mission churches would definitely help. In addition, I am looking forward to a time when our churches offer more liturgies with a shorter time, in addition to the long ones. Keeping the long one for the Arabic-speaking congregations, while having shorter ones for non-Arabic-speaking congregations would serve all with their different needs. This could be accomplished when a church has more than one priest. In addition, it'd reduce the time spent in taking the Holy Communion—sometimes it takes forty-five minutes—and it'd eliminate the time spent in reading in two languages and preaching in two languages.

**The Eighteen and Nineteen centuries** witnessed great efforts in evangelism. An awakening in the evangelistic efforts almost started in all churches, except those who were ruled under Islamic governments. When reading about evangelism during this period, one feels the kindled fire of passionate evangelism in the hearts of tens of thousands who left the luxury of the European life and American life to go to the end of the earth with the torch of the Christian

faith. In the process, many died in sea or in the jungles of Africa or at the hands of other religions' leaders. But, death news never stopped the waves of evangelizers, who left everything and every person they loved behind, with one objective in mind, to transfer the salvation of the cross and the light of the risen Lord to everyone in the world.

Although, the majority of these missions came from the Catholic Church or from Protestants, we have seen a few done by Orthodox Churches. One great example started after the spiritual renaissance of the Russian Orthodox Church towards the end of the 18th Century. Translating the book of Philokalia, a collection of spiritual writings by Origin, lead to the renewal of monasticism in Mount Athos, which lead to an evangelistic movement. Ten monks from the Russian Orthodox Church evangelized in [Alaska](#).

Tens of thousands were baptized in Alaska by the close of the 19th century. However, evangelism of Alaska in history books is always associated with a poor monk named Herman, who neither baptized anyone nor translated any books. He turned down the honor of becoming a priest to stay as a humble monk. His great "passive evangelism" was in living a holy life and allowing the light of God to shine through him and thus attracting many to the see the essence of the Christian life. This example shows us [the importance of having Coptic monastic life in the West as a tool of passive evangelism. We need monks to show the essence of Christianity through self-denial and living an ascetic life similar to the ones lived by the Desert Fathers in Egypt.](#)

Another great effort was done by the monk Marcarius Gloukharev, who worked as a missionary worker in Siberia for fourteen years. However, his greatest marks on evangelism were in his working hard in formulating an Orthodox theology of missions. He was also the person who dreamed of instilling a missionary consciousness among all Russians and of establishing a missionary center for training missionaries. I myself consider [his dream essential, especially for the Coptic Orthodox Church that needs to instill a missionary consciousness among all Copts,](#)

especially in the West. An understanding of evangelism as an objective set by the Lord himself for the church is very essential for any success in evangelism in Orthodox Church. Humbly, I like to share with you that I have the dream of instilling a missionary consciousness among Copts. I would like you also to have this dream too and work toward make it a reality, with the grace of God.

Another great influence of Gloukharev is his work on changing the painful reality of the Russian masses at his time. He discovered that they were only superficially Christians, and therefore inadequate for the great evangelistic apostolic task that God had in store for them. Therefore, he started working first in starting a deep spiritual renewal within the Russian People.

Bishop Youssef, the Coptic bishop of Southern United States recognized this phenomenon within Copts in America. He talked and wrote about 'the churchless people.' Indeed, the beginning of any cure is to discover the sickness and to acknowledge it, Now, it is time for a spiritual revival that aimed at touching the deepest part of the Coptic souls. May the Lord help our church in dealing with the 'churchless' people's problem.

## Notes,

- 1- Father Altschul, Paisius, *Wade in the River, the Story of the African Christian Faith*, Kansas City, Missouri: Cross Bearers Publishing, 2001, pp. 100, 101
- 2- Veronis, Luke Alexander, *Missionaries, Monks And Martyrs: Making Disciples of All Nations*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light and Life Publishing, 1994, P. 62
- 3- Stevenson, Kenneth, *The Liturgical meaning of Holy Week, Jerusalem Revisited*, The Pastoral Press, 1988, p. 100,

## Question:

What did you learn from this lesson?

