

CHRISTIANITY IN EASTERN EUROPE AND ANCIENT RUS' FROM PENTECOST TO ST. VOLODYMYR 988



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During our current preparations for the celebration of the millennium of the “Christening of Ukraine,” we should remember several important historical facts and interpret them correctly from the historical, cultural, religious and political perspectives.

First, we must realize that the event of 988 was only figuratively a “Christening of Ukraine”; in actual fact, it was an official introduction of Christianity as the state religion in Kievan Ruś. Therefore, we have to re-evaluate the first millennium of our history, stretching from sub-apostolic times down to the events surrounding the year 988 in Kievan Ruś.¹

Second, the year 988 should be viewed as the official outcome of a lengthy process of Christianization which had begun with Pentecost and St. Andrew the Apostle, “the First-Called.”² This process, starting from modest beginnings, grew steadily in importance and impact until the official introduction of Christianity as a state religion was the inevitable outcome; the process had been both socio-cultural and historico-religious. In fact, there are very few historical revolutionary events, for most historical events are an outcome of more or less accentuated evolutionary developments. Unfortunately, minds untrained in correct historical thinking are easily inclined to fix their attention on one major event and ignore many earlier important events and developments which were the logical preparation for the culminating event.³

The event of 988, the “Christening of the Kievan Ruś” had many events and developments preceeding it which I would like to mention now for the sake of historical perspective.

Around the year 33 AD, not only the events of Christ’s public preaching, passion, death and resurrection took place, but also the event of Pentecost. This constituted the last major event in a long series of events leading to the establishment of the Church of Christ. The event of Pentecost is described in the *Acts of the Apostles* in ch. 2:1-47. Note vv. 1-11:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like a rush of mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire,

distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." ⁴

Of the utmost importance for us is the reference to "Pontus" (Greek: Pontos) which in the strict sense meant the land along the southern coast of the Black Sea (Pontos Euxeinos). ⁵ In the broad sense, it meant the whole area surrounding the Black Sea, therefore also the contemporary Southern Ukraine, which, at the time of Christ, was known for many Hellenized but multinational colonies. In this area there existed a hellenized Empire of Pontus; ⁶ in 63 BC it had become dependent upon the Roman Empire, and became the area of banishment for many political enemies and Christians in the subsequent three and a half centuries. It is important to note that out of Pontus subsequently developed the Empire of Bosphorus. The most ancient coins known in the world with the sign of the cross belong to the reign of the Emperor of Bosphorus Thotherses (278-308) ⁷. The conclusion that suggests itself is that the first Christians in the lands of the future Ruś-Ukraine must have been the Jews and proselytes from the northern Pontus region who were the ear-and-eye witnesses to the events of Pentecost and who were converted by the sermon of St. Peter as well as the witness of the other apostles. We can then assume that the Pontic Judeo-Christians in subsequent years provided a base from which the apostles conducted missionary journeys. ⁸

It is significant that St. Paul in his epistle to the Colossians (3:11) writes: "Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all." This mention of the Scythians proves that there was concern for their evangelization in the subapostolic Church. Further, it proves that the concern with the barbarians and Scythians in the subapostolic Church was widening the horizon of Christian expansion and unity, beyond the Judaic and Hellenic communities of the Roman Empire. This new unity was more comprehensive and profound. Scythians apparently were the most distant people known to St. Paul and they are used as a type of the universality of Christian evangelization. It also implies that at least some Scythians were already Christians. ⁹

We can safely assume that St. Andrew the Apostle relied on the Judeo-Christian and Scythian connections in his missionary journeys on the northern shore of the Black Sea. *The Primary Chronicle* (in the Laurentian text) gives the following account of St. Andrew's missionary activities: