

The Gospel of America's Russian Apostle
By Seth Grant, 1st place winner, 2018

Alaska is not much thought of in Texas except, perhaps, when we remember with a bit of greenness that they took from us the title of “Largest State in the Union.” Despite this offense, Alaska has a unique history that deserves our attention, particularly in relation to its interaction with the European world and Christianity. South, Central, and much of North America met Catholicism through the Spanish and Portuguese, as did Canada through the French Jesuits, while the east coast of North America had Protestants and a smattering of Anglicans. The Alaskan tribes, however, first met Christ through the priests of a different denomination of Christianity: those of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In the collection of HBU's Dunham Bible Museum is a book that points visitors back to this initial missionary effort. This is an 1848 *Gospel of Matthew* published in Russian as well as Aleut, the language of the Alaskan (Unangan) people, using a modified version of the Russian Cyrillic alphabet for both languages. This *Matthew* was translated by one Father John Veniaminov—an Orthodox priest, a missionary to the Alaskans, and, later, the Metropolitan of Moscow. Eventually, Veniaminov would be canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church as “St. Innocent, Enlightener of the Aleuts and Apostle to America” (Hopko). Of course, when he moved to the Aleutian Islands in 1824, he knew none of this yet.

The Aleutian Islands first encountered Russian explorers in 1741. The leaders of the Russian expedition, Vitus Bering and Aleksey Chirikov, reported that the islands were rich with sea otters and fur seals, animals highly valued in the fur trade. At that time, the Aleut population was around 25,000 (“Aleut”). By 1745, the Russian-American Company had established an operation of hunters, trappers, and fishermen in the islands. Unalaska, one such island, became home to the oldest permanent settlement in the region when the Russians established a village

there in the 1770s (“Aleutian Islands”). Over the next fifty years, several Orthodox missionaries (most notably St. Herman) would come to Alaska, often clashing with the Russian-American company over the latter’s treatment of the natives. Still, Christianity did not gain much ground with the Unangan people (as they called themselves) until the arrival of Father Veniaminov in the 1820s (Black 239).

John Veniaminov was not born a Father, of course. Rather, he was born in 1797 in Russia’s Irkutsk province to a father who died when he was six. Four years after his father’s death, Veniaminov was sent to study at Irkutsk Seminary, where he remained over a decade. In 1817 he married Catherine Sharina, and in 1818 he graduated. He taught in an Irkutsk parish school until 1821, at which point he was ordained a priest for the Church of the Annunciation, where he served a further two years (“Past Primates”). Early in 1823, however, the Holy Synod of Russia sent orders to Irkutsk to commission a priest to Unalaska. His bishop asked Veniaminov. Veniaminov, feeling in his heart that this was from the Lord, gathered his family—his mother, his wife, and their two young children—and went. The journey took fourteen months. By the time they arrived on Unalaska Island, July 1824 had drawn to an end (“Past Primates”).

Almost as soon as their boat reached the dark shore, Father Veniaminov set about preparing the island for Christ. He built a house for his family, a chapel, even a meteorological station (Graves). All the construction was done with the help of the native Aleuts, whom Veniaminov trained in the arts of carpentry, blacksmithing, and masonry (“Past Primates”). The chapel, begun in 1825, grew into what is now Unalaska’s Church of the Holy Ascension, one of the oldest Russian Orthodox churches in America. Parts of the chapel remains from Veniaminov’s original, and services are still conducted in Slavonic and Aleut—a practice that also arose from the efforts of Veniaminov (“Holy Ascension”).

Father Veniaminov prioritized language learning from the beginning, and he learned quickly. By 1826, only two years after his arrival, he knew enough of the Unagan dialect to begin developing an Aleut alphabet with the help of a local chieftain, Ivan Pan'kov (Ivanov 6). The result was a version of Cyrillic script adapted to the phonic peculiarities of Aleut. It is interesting to note that this effort keeps up with the Orthodox linguistic tradition, as Cyrillic itself was developed by Byzantine missionaries (Saints Cyril and Methodius) in the ninth century A.D. to reach the Slavic people with the Gospel ("The History of the Russian Alphabet"). Like Cyril and Methodius, Veniaminov aimed to make the Aleuts more receptive to Christianity by translating Scripture, hymns, and the Orthodox catechism into their own language. This effort was aided by Veniaminov's careful study of Aleutian culture and his consequent ability to translate Russian phrases and liturgical terms into an Aleut equivalent that made sense to the Alaskans (Ivanov 10). To this end, he established schools to teach them to read and write in their native tongue (Graves).

The translation effort began in full in 1828 with the gospel of Matthew (*Oxford Handbook* 534). As Veniaminov and Pan'kov worked, they continued to refine the alphabet and orthography to account for the complexities of Aleutian speech. During this time, Veniaminov integrated his Aleut translations of hymns and the Orthodox catechism into the liturgy at the Church of the Holy Ascension (Ivanov 10).

Veniaminov completed the first translation of Matthew's gospel in 1833. Fifteen years later, his accomplishment finally made it across the Bering Sea and was published in St. Petersburg as a Russian-Aleut diglot (*Oxford Handbook* 534). One of these original 1848 publications was brought to Houston by Dr. Norma Lowder, an educator, musician, and philanthropist who did mission work in Unalaska and the Aleutian Islands (Michalos 8). Dr. Lowder later donated the

Gospel of Matthew to Houston Baptist University, and it is now on display in the Dunham Bible Museum.

In 1840, Father John Veniaminov was transferred to Sitka, where he picked up another language and became the Bishop of Kamchatka, the Kurils, and his beloved Aleutian Islands. After ten years of service as bishop, he was called back to Russia to become first an archbishop and later the Metropolitan of Moscow, head of the Russian Orthodox Church. He served in that role from 1868 until his death in 1879 (Black 240). He published many works over the course of his life; *An Indication of the Pathway into the Kingdom of Heaven*, his catechism and accompanying treatise on the Aleut people and language, is a landmark work of both Orthodoxy and anthropology (see Ivanov 8-12). Now, as an artifact in modern Texas, the Bible Museum's Aleut *Gospel of Matthew* serves as a powerful reminder of an inspiring man whose work and life were driven by a deep love for his God and his flock.

Works Cited

- "Aleutian Islands." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 18 Dec. 2015, www.britannica.com/place/Aleutian-Islands. Accessed 22 Feb. 2018.
- "Aleut." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 18 Dec. 2015, www.britannica.com/topic/Aleut. Accessed 20 Feb. 2018.
- Black, Lydia T. *Russians in Alaska: 1732-1867*. University of Alaska Press, 2004.
- Graves, Dan. "Veniaminov: Paul Bunyan of the Alaskan Church." *Christianity.com*, www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1801-1900/veniaminov-paul-bunyan-of-the-alaskan-church-11630551.html. Accessed 20 Feb. 2018.
- "The History of the Russian Alphabet." *Learn Russian*, learnrussian.rt.com/alphabet/the-history-of-the-cyrillic-alphabet. Accessed 20 Feb. 2018.
- "Holy Ascension of Our Lord Cathedral." *Orthodox Church in America*, oca.org/parishes/oca-ak-unahak. Accessed 22 Feb. 2018.
- Hopko, Thomas. "Russia: Missionary Activity." *The Orthodox Faith, Volume III: Church History*. The Orthodox Church in America, oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/church-history/nineteenth-century/russia-missionary-activity. Accessed 20 Feb. 2018.
- Ivanov, Viacheslav Vsevolodovich. *Russian Orthodox Church Of Alaska And The Aleutian Islands And Its Relation To Native American Traditions: An Attempt At A Multicultural Society, 1794-1912*. University of Michigan Library, 1997.
- Michalos, Constantina. "A Lifetime Educating and Serving Others: Dr. Norma Lowder." *HBU*

News, June 2007. www.hbu.edu/publications/hbunews/NewsV-45_N1_07-07-original.pdf. Accessed 23 Feb. 2018.

The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America. Edited by Paul Gutjhar, Oxford University, 2017.
“Past Primates: His Grace, Bishop Innocent (Veniaminov) of Alaska.” *Orthodox Church in America*, oca.org/holy-synod/past-primates/innocent-of-alaska. Accessed 21 Feb. 2018.