The History of the Baptist Evangelical Church in Ukraine
(excerpts from the research project "The History of Baptist Evangelical Movement in Ukraine" by Odessa theological seminary, 1996)

This presentation will be specifically focused on the Protestantism of Ukraine, even though the state religion of Ukraine is Eastern Orthodoxy. It is important to mention, however, that in the year of 988, the city of Kiev (capital of Ukraine) was the heart of Christianity through which Prince Volodymyr introduced the Eastern Orthodox religion to all of Europe. Traditionally, Ukraine was and still is a country with a rich religious history. However, the Orthodox church failed to provide the spiritual rejuvenation and moral standards that the people were looking for during that time period.

The very first mentioning of protestant ideas coincide with the wide reformational movements that swept over Europe in the 16th century. At that time the wealthy intelligentsia of Ukraine sent their sons to study in German universities who were able to attend lectures of Luther and Melanchthon and other prominent protestant theologians. Being influenced by their sons' ideas, the wealthy people started liquidating Orthodox churches and opened protestant schools and academies and turned their serfs into Protestant Christians.

The first comprehensible Ukrainian Bible was translated in 1581 under the name of Ostroska Bibliya (after Prince Constantine Ostroskiy who became a Protestant Christian and encouraged the spreading of Protestant thought throughout Ukraine.) In the year of 1556 the New Testament was translated into comprehensible Ukrainian language. The 16th century events in the spreading of Protestant ideas mark the beginning of the first step of the evangelical movement in Ukraine which laid firm foundation for the development of the second step in the history of the evangelical movement in Ukraine (middle 18th century).

A significant role in spreading the Protestant ideas in the 19th century, in particular, the pietist movement in Ukraine was played by the foreign missionaries who came to southern Ukraine (Odessa) from Wuerttemberg (center of pietism in southern Germany). These men primarily preached about personal relationship with God and about having a spiritual unity with Him. It is known that the leaders of this movement established the Russian Bible Society which did a lot of work of translation the Bible into Russian and spreading it among people. There was one man in particular John Melvil who was from the British Bible Society who worked with those people who left Orthodoxy and needed discipleship.

Many documents were found in the state archives of southern Ukraine (Odessa, Simferopol, Kherson and Zaporizha) that documented the activity of the first foreign missionaries. Among them were Johannes Bonekemper and his son Carl as well as Johannes Pritskau, Johannes Willer, Frank Linovski and others. Their work started in
German colonies (Rohrbach, Glodonosi and Johannestal) and later in Ukrainian settlements of Karlivka, Lubomirka and others.

The principal efforts of Bonekemper for his ministry were devoted to the organization of prayer meetings. In 1829 he introduced the "Erbauungsstunde" (hour of private devotion, "Stunde" is a short version). One of those prayer meetings hosted a group of about 70-80 people and it came out officially that there should be created a church or congregation. Johannes Bonekemper's son Carl discipled Ukrainian men among them were Onyshchenko and Ratushni who later organized their own prayer meetings. Here then was the beginning of the "Schtunda" or stundism, that Ukrainian "sect" which rejected priestly dominion and exaggerated external rites of worship. It was really not his father, the Rev. Johannes Bonekemper, who brought pietism to the Russian or Ukrainian people, but Carl Bonekemper, the son. The Greek Orthodox church was and is entitled to watch and care for its unity and guard its believers from any sect which breaks in to make proselytes. It was only natural for the Greek Catholic church to oppose this sectarian movement. However, it should rather have learned something from these believers instead of persecuting them.

Thanks to the extended missionary work in the first part of the 19th century, first congregations emerged in other districts of Ukraine. Documents that were found in the state archives of Cherkassy region said that the year of 1869 marked the beginning of stundism in Kiev region who origin was the German colony in Rohrbach in Kherson district.

The documents that belong to the 19th century give information about the specific time of the activity of the first protestant congregations. According to the report done by an Orthodox priest the very first congregation started in 1855. There are other documents that documented the activity of so called "Baptist society" who were baptizing people through immersion.

Protestantism became popular very fast. There are a number of factors to consider in studying the fast popularity of Protestantism: the idea of salvation offered by the Protestant church was quite unorthodox: one could be saved through their own faith and righteous life rather than through rituals and intersession of priesthood and episcopalia of the Orthodox church. The second factor is that Protestant believers were more educated because they had their own schools that were affordable and well staffed. Theirs were the only schools that offered effective and affordable education.

In the area of economy the Protestant church also had its advantages over the Orthodox: there were representatives of all the strata of the society, but most of the Protestant believers were hard working farmers and diligent workers who stood out because of their integrity and good workmanship. Even the priests of the Orthodox church found it exemplary and honorable. Protestant believers were trying to resemble the first apostolic church in all they did: they shared their blessings and helped out each other. Good working habits made them more prosperous than others. To "outsiders" that was a very attractive feature that drew more people to Christ. The Orthodox
Christians wanted to "do business" with Protestant because of the prosperity of the latter.

Another factor in the quickly growing popularity of the Protestant religion is that Protestant believers had maintained close relations with German missionaries and theologians who preached the Gospel all over Ukraine and won many people. Also, the relations were strengthened by working with European missionary and publishing centers. The last factor but not the least is the active missionary and evangelical work of Protestant believers. They went as far as Siberia to spread the Gospel disguised as immigrants. Along with all the reasons mentioned above, one of them was rooted deeper: the people in Ukraine were experiencing spiritual and moral crises and had spiritual needs that the Orthodox church could not satisfy. The inner life of Orthodox parishioners was in a desperate state. Orthodox rituals and traditions were carried out very formally without effecting the moral and spiritual sides of life. At the same time, Baptists showed compassion, sensitivity and integrity. It was documented that nobody could blame a Baptist for stealing because of their honesty. The 70s of the 19th century were the years of Baptism blossoming throughout Ukraine and Russia.

At the beginning of the 20th century Baptist churches started offering children's Sunday schools and youth services. The Gospel was brought to the children's parents and to the community. This was another unique opportunity that the Orthodox church was lacking. One document states: "Orthodox church was empty while Baptist gatherings were always overflowing with new comers." Baptist church was also called an "affordable" church because it didn't require one to go through a row of ritual cleansing ceremonies, or other religious customs which also required parishioners to pay high priest fees.

The persecution of Protestant churches started as early as 1890s. It was rooted in the fact that the Protestant belief was opposing the totalitarian and bureaucratic life style (poverty, inequality) and the regime that the tsarist government and Orthodox church offered. Protestants offered a so-called "democratic faith" that was free willed. The persecution started with a mere reference to Baptist churches as "a foreign, alien and German-origin" faith that was imposed on Russia. The tsarist government, without learning about the faith of Protestants, asked themselves a question "Why have a protestant faith when we have our own?" The Ministry of Domestic Affairs imposed search and constant surveillance of all the Protestant Christians. All the missionary work was prohibited and no evangelism was allowed in all the tsarist Russia. Spiritual literature was confiscated and home searches were frequent. Later more severe measures were taken: Baptists were banished to Siberia and deprived of all the rights. The underground church gatherings were spied on and persecuted throughout the last 100 years. It started in the late 1890s and the collapse of the Communist regime brought freedom in 1990. I think we all have a lot of catching up to do. But the amazing thing was that God enabled all persecuted generations to persevere and now it is time for blossoming!

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