

## On Bells and Their Ringing



*Russian bell ringers displaying their talents*

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The striking of the "Dormition" bell signaled the beginning of the solemn peal of church bells from all the temples in Moscow on the great and bright Paschal night.

The Russian Orthodox populace so loved the ringing of church bells that they enriched it with ingenuity and art.

The distinctive trait of Russian bells is their sonority and sweet sound, achieved by various means:

- 1 an exact proportion of bronze and pewter, often with silver added, i.e. correct casting.
- 2 the proper height and width of the bell, i.e. correct instrument proportions.
- 3 the exact thickness of the bell walls.
- 4 the proper hanging of the bell.

5 the correct casting of the clapper, the manner of fixing it to the bell, and many other means.

The clapper is the actual striking component of the bell situated within it. A Russian bell is distinguished from its western European counterpart first of all in that the bell itself is permanently fixed, and the clapper inside of it moves freely, striking the side of the bell and producing its ring.

In Russian the clapper is characteristically called the "tongue" of the bell, making the bell's sound comparable to a living voice. For the Russian faithful bells became tongue, voice and trumpet. And indeed what could the pealing of bells be called other than a speaking mouth? On great feasts they remind us of heavenly blessedness; on saint's days they tell us of the unending rest of the holy dwellers in heaven; during Passion Week they remind us of our reconciliation with God through Christ the Savior; and during Bright Week they announce the victory of life over death and the eternal unending joy of the life to come in the Kingdom of Christ.

Is this not a real mouth speaking, when a bell informs us of every hour, of its passage, along with a reminder of eternity, when "there should be time no longer." (Rev. 10, 6)

Announcing the glory of the name of Christ, ringing out both day and night mostly from above God's temples, the pealing of bells by itself reminds us of the words of Almighty God, spoken through the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah: "I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, who shall never hold their peace day or night, (making) mention of the Lord." (Is. 62, 6) It is not by coincidence that pagans who used to hear the peal of bells often said, "It is the voice of the Christian God speaking!"

The sound of a single church bell is solemn and sublime, while the pealing of several bells more or less in concert is even more majestic sounding. The mighty peal of bells has an effect on our interior sensibilities, awakening our souls from spiritual sleep.

And what sorrowful, oppressive and most often irritating feelings are called up by

the pealing of bells in the heart of the evil and impious apostate.

The ringing of bells summons up a feeling of uneasiness and spiritual anguish in the heart of the unrepentant sinner, while in the heart of the believer seeking peace with the Lord God the ringing of church bells gives rise to a peaceful joyful and bright mood. One may thus determine the status of his soul by the sound of ringing church bells.

We can single out many examples in life, when a person, wearied of life's struggles with sorrow, has fallen into a state of depression and hopelessness and decided to attempt the taking of his own life, then suddenly hears the sound of church bells.

The willing suicide shudders, trembling at his own self, and, involuntarily protecting himself with the Sign of the Cross, remembers his Heavenly Father and awakens new noble sensibilities in his heart - and he who might have perished is reborn to life forever. So there is a wonderful hidden power in the striking of a church bell that penetrates deeply into the human heart.

Having come to love the ringing of church bells, the Russian Orthodox people have united to it all their festive and sorrowful events. For this reason Orthodox church bell ringing not only signals the start of church services, but serves as an expression of joy, sorrow and solemnity. And from this have arisen the various ways of ringing bells with their names and meanings.

### **The Types of Bell Ringing**

Church bell ringing falls into two basic categories: A. calling to worship (blagovest') and B. bell ringing proper (zvon).

#### **A.Call to Worship.**

The call to worship (blagovest') is achieved by the measured striking of one large bell. By this type of ring the faithful are called to gather for services in God's temple. This ring is called blagovest' because it announces the "good news" of the beginning of divine services.

The call to worship is rung in the following manner: first the bell is struck three times slowly (until the ring all but dies away) after which it is struck at a measured pace. If the bell is very large or even incredibly huge, then the clapper is swung to strike first one side of the bell and then the other. But if the bell is comparatively

not so large, the clapper is tied so that it is near one edge of the bell, and a system is worked out so that it may be rung by depressing a board with the foot.

There are two types of call to worship:

1 The normal or frequent striking of the largest bell and

2 the Lenten or slow striking of the second largest bell on the weekdays of Great Lent.

If the temple has several large bells, as happens in some cathedrals and large monasteries, then these large bells are named according to their designation: festal bell, Sunday bell, polyeleion bell, weekday bell and fifth or small bell. Usually in parish churches there are no more than two or three large bells.

### **B.Bell Ringing Proper**

Bell ringing proper is when all or several bells are rung at once. Ringing all the bells is divided into the following categories:

1 Treble peal (trezvon) -- All the bells are rung, then after a short interval all the bells are rung a second time, then again a short interval after which all the bells are rung a third time, i.e. all the bells are rung three times or in three sessions.

2 The treble peal expresses Christian gladness and solemnity. (In our time the treble peal has come to mean not only a ringing of all the bells three times, but also a general or patterned ringing of all the bells.)

3 Double peal (dvuzvon) -- All the bells are rung twice, i.e. in two sessions.

4 Chain ringing (perezvon) -- Each bell is rung in turn (one or several times for each bell), starting with the largest bell to the smallest and repeated many times.

5 Reverse chain ringing (perebor) -- A slow striking of each bell only once, starting with the smallest bell to the largest after which all the bells are rung together once. This is repeated many times.

## **The Application of Bell Ringing and Its Meaning**

### **Bell Ringing at the All-Night Vigil**

1 Before the beginning of Vigil -- call to worship followed by treble peal.

2 At the beginning of the Hexapsalmion -- double peal. This double peal announces the beginning of the second part of the Vigil service, Matins, and expresses the joy of the Nativity of Christ, the incarnate second Person of the Holy Trinity, our Lord Jesus Christ. Matins begins, as we are all aware, with the doxology of the angels to the shepherds in Bethlehem, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men," a direct reference to the Nativity. The Russian people often call this the "second peal" (second after the beginning of Vigil).

3 During the singing of the polyeleion, before the Gospel reading -- treble peal, signifying the joyfulness of the celebration. At Sunday vigil the treble peal signifies the joy and solemnity of the Resurrection of Christ. (In some areas this treble peal occurs during the singing of "Having Beheld the Resurrection of Christ".) Usually this is referred to as the Gospel ring. The Russian people often call this the "third peal".

4 At the beginning of the Magnificat -- a short call to worship, consisting of nine strokes on the largest bell (as is the custom in Kiev and all Ukraine).

5 On great holidays Vigil ends with a treble peal.

6 If the bishop serves Vigil, then there is a treble peal at its conclusion to accompany his procession.

### **Bell Ringing at Divine Liturgy**

Before the 3rd and 6th hours are read the call to worship for Divine Liturgy is rung, and at the end of the 6th hour right before the Liturgy itself begins the treble peal (trezvon) is rung.

If there are two liturgies (earlier and later), then the call to the earlier is slower and

more restrained than before the later liturgy and is usually rung on a lesser bell.

If a bishop is celebrating the Divine Liturgy, the call to worship is rung at a pre-determined time. A treble peal is rung during the approach of the bishop to the temple. When the bishop enters the temple the treble peal ceases and the call to worship is again taken up until the start of the vesting of the bishop. At the end of the 6th hour the treble peal (trezvon) is rung.

During the Liturgy itself there a call to worship is prescribed at the beginning of the Eucharistic Canon, the most important part of the Liturgy, to announce the time of the sanctification and transubstantiation of the Holy Gifts. The Archpriest K. Nikolski in his book "Rubrics of Divine Worship" states that the call to worship begins at the singing of the words "It is meet and right to worship the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" and continues up until the singing of "It is truly meet to bless thee, the Theotokos". The same prescription is given in "The New Tables of the Law" by Archbishop Benjamin (St. Petersburg, 1908, p. 213). In practice, however, this call to worship is shorter and consists of 12 strokes. In the south of Russia the call before "It is meet and rightŠ" takes place before the Eucharistic Canon during the singing of the Symbol of Faith (Creed) and consists of 12 strokes, one for each article. This call before "It is meet and rightŠ" was introduced into the Russian Church during the tenure of Patriarch Joachim (1690) after the custom of the Western Church, where bells are rung at the words "Take, eat."

At the end of Divine Liturgy on all the great holy days a treble peal is prescribed (all the bells are rung). A treble peal is also prescribed after every Liturgy celebrated by a bishop to accompany his procession from the temple. On Christmas Day it is prescribed that all the bells should be rung from the conclusion of Liturgy until Vespers.

On Pascha, the Feast of the Resurrection of Christ, the call to worship begins before Nocturns and continues up until the commencement of the procession, when the joyful and festive treble peal (trezvon) is taken up, lasting to the end of the procession, and even longer. Before the beginning of the Paschal Liturgy there is a call to worship and treble peal (trezvon). And during the reading of the Gospel at Paschal Liturgy a multiple chain ringing is prescribed (7 strokes on each bell, signifying the fullness of God's glory). This solemn chain ringing symbolizes the preaching of the Gospel of Christ in all languages, and at the conclusion of the Gospel a joyful treble peal of victory is rung.

On every day of Bright Week all the bells are rung from the conclusion of Liturgy until Vespers.

From Pascha until Ascension there is a treble peal (trezvon) following Sunday Liturgy.

On Patronal Feasts at the conclusion of Divine Liturgy and before the moleben a short call to worship and treble peal are prescribed. After the moleben there is a treble peal (trezvon).

A treble peal is prescribed for all processions.

Before Royal Hours a call to worship (blagovest') is rung on the largest bell.

Before Lenten hours the call to worship is rung on a lesser bell. At both Royal Hours and Lenten hours the bell is rung in the following manner: before the 3rd hour -- 3 strokes, before the 6th hour -- 6 strokes, before the 9th hour -- 9 strokes, before the Typical Psalms and Compline -- 12 strokes. But if a great feast occurs during Lent, the bells are not rung at the beginning of each hour.

At Great Friday Matins, celebrated on Great Thursday evening and including the reading of the 12 Gospels of the Lord's Passion, in addition to the usual call to worship and treble peal at the beginning of Matins there is a call to worship at each Gospel: before the 1st Gospel -- 1 stroke on the large bell, before the 2nd Gospel -- 2 strokes, before the 3rd Gospel -- 3 strokes, and so on.

At the conclusion of Matins, while the faithful are carrying their "Thursday Fire" home, a treble peal (trezvon) is prescribed.

### **The Application of Chain Ringing and Its Meaning**

At Vespers of Great Friday, before the Epitaphion is carried out, during the singing of "O Thou who clothest Thyself with light as with a garment", a slow chain ringing (one stroke on each bell from the largest to the smallest) is prescribed. And once the Epitaphion has been placed in the center of the temple, a treble peal (trezvon) is immediately rung.

At Matins of Great Saturday, beginning with the singing of the Great Doxology and throughout the procession with the Epitaphion about the temple the same type of chain ringing as at the carrying out of the Epitaphion (one stroke on each bell from the largest to the smallest) is prescribed. When the Epitaphion is brought back

into the temple and brought before the Royal Gates, a treble peal (trezvon) is immediately rung.

A slow chain ringing of one stroke on each bell beginning with the largest bell that has a powerful ring to the smallest whose ring is thin and high-pitched symbolizes the "emptying" of our Lord Jesus Christ for the sake of our salvation, as we sing, for example, during the 4th Irmos of the Resurrectional Canon in Tone 5 "Habakkuk, having understood as a prophet Thy divine emptyingŠfor the salvation of Thy people..."

According to the ageless tradition and practice of the Russian Orthodox Church (in the central part of Russia) this type of chain ringing should be used only twice a year, on Great Friday and on Great Saturday, on the day of Christ's death upon the Cross and on the day of His burial. Experienced bell ringers are very careful to preserve this tradition and never allow the sorrowful ringing of the bells on this commemoration of the death and burial of our Lord and Savior to be confused with the funeral ring of simple sinful mortals.

At Matins on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, on Cross Veneration Sunday and on August 1 (the Feast of the Procession of the Holy Cross), before the Cross is carried from the altar during the singing of the Great Doxology there is a chain ring whereby each bell, from the largest to the smallest, is struck three times (in some places only once). When the Cross has been brought into the center of the temple and placed on the analogion, a treble peal (trezvon) is prescribed.

A similar chain ringing, but faster and more frequent, 7 times on each bell (in some places 3 times) takes place before the Lesser Blessing of Water. When the Cross is lowered into the water, a treble peal (trezvon) is prescribed.

Exactly the same chain ringing takes place before an episcopal consecration. In general a multiple chain ringing of several strokes on each bell is a solemn bell ringing. In some places this type of chain ringing takes place before the beginning of Liturgy on patronal feasts and other solemn festive occasions, as indicated above, for example, during the reading of the Paschal Gospel.

### **The Application of Reverse Chain Ringing and Its Meaning**

Reverse chain ringing, or the funeral or burial ring, expresses sorrow and grief over the loss of the deceased. It is rung in an opposite order, as already mentioned



above, from chain ringing, i.e. one stroke on each bell from the smallest to the largest, after which all the bells are rung once together. This sorrowful funeral chain ringing is always followed by a short treble peal (trezvon), which expresses the joyous Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Since some bell ringing handbooks forbid treble peals at funerals, which is not in keeping with Church practice, we shall explain further.

A slow reverse chain ringing of the bells, from the smallest to the largest, symbolizes the various stages of a person's life on earth, from infancy and youth to maturity and adulthood, and striking the bell once signifies the severing of mortal life by death, when all that has been acquired for a person's use during life is abandoned. As is expressed in the funeral hymn, "All mortal things are vanity; they do not endure after death. Riches do not last, and glory is left behind. For when death comes, all these things are destroyed." (Or as another hymn says, "In but a single moment death overtakes them.") "Wherefore let us cry to Christ the Immortal: Give rest in the abode of those who rejoice to him who has been taken from us."

The second part of the hymn refers directly to the joy of the future life with Christ. This joy is also referred to by the short treble peal (trezvon), which concludes the sorrowful reverse chain ringing.

In the question and answer section of the magazine "Orthodox Russia" Archbishop Averky gave a well founded explanation of panikhidas and funerals, which to all intents and purposes may be also applied to bell ringing. "According to our Orthodox custom panikhidas and funerals should be served in bright vestments. The custom of conducting these services in black vestments has come to us from the West and is completely not in keeping with the spirit of Holy Orthodoxy. Yet in spite of this the custom is fairly widespread, so much so that it would be difficult to change it. For the true Christian death is crossing over to a better life. It is joy and not grief, as is so beautifully expressed in that most touching third kneeling prayer, read at Pentecost Vespers, "For when we leave our body, O Lord, and go to meet Thee, there is no death, but a passing from this most sorrowful existence to sufficiency and delight, to rest and joy."

This treble peal, which reminds us of the Resurrection, has a comforting effect on the believing Christian soul that mourns over the loss of the deceased and imparts to it an inner joy. There is no cause to deprive the Christian of such joy, all the

more since this treble peal has become a fixture in the life of the Russian Orthodox people and is an expression of their faith.

In this wise, when the funeral procession approaches the temple there is a mournful reverse chain ringing, and when the deceased is brought into the temple, a treble peal is rung. After the funeral, as the deceased is being brought from the temple, there is again a reverse chain ringing, followed once more by a treble peal.

At the funeral and burial of priests, hieromonks, archimandrites and bishops the reverse chain is rung somewhat differently. First the large bell is rung 12 times, then follows the reverse chain ringing, then the large bell is once more rung 12 times followed again by reverse chain ringing and so on. As the body is carried into the temple a treble peal is rung. A treble peal is also rung after the reading of the Prayer of Forgiveness. As the body is carried from the temple the aforementioned reverse chain is rung, and a treble peal is rung after the body is lowered into the grave. In some places the reverse chain is rung as usual.

In the "Book of Rites" it is noted that as Patriarch Joachim was being carried from the temple there was rung a call to worship (blagovest') changing from bell to bell at long intervals.

Recently we learned that there exists yet another type of reverse chain ringing -- one stroke on each bell, but beginning with the largest and continuing to the smallest, after which all the bells are rung together. This has been confirmed by the phonograph record "The Bells of Rostov", recorded in Rostov in 1963. In our experience we have never heard such a ring, and there is no indication of it in any bell ringing handbook. Therefore its origins are uncertain.

There exists also a so-called "Beautiful Ring" on all the bells. This "Beautiful Ring" is used in cathedrals and monasteries where there is a great quantity of bells, among which are many large bells. The "Beautiful Ring" is executed by several ringers, five and more in number. "Beautiful" ringing occurs on great feasts, on joyous and festive occasions in the Church, and also to honor the diocesan bishop.

Apart from this we should also make mention of the tocsin or alarm bell. The tocsin or alarm is a constant uninterrupted ringing of the large bell. The alarm bell was used during times of trouble such as fire, flood, civil unrest, enemy attack or other type of public calamity.

"Common Council" bells used to call the citizens of Pskov and Novgorod to the

people's assembly.

Military victories and troop returns from the battlefield were announced by a joyful, festive treble peal (trezvon) on all the bells.

In conclusion let us call to mind that our Russian bell ringers achieved great mastery in their art and were well known throughout the world. Many tourists used to journey from Europe, England and America to Moscow on Pascha to hear the ringing of the bells. On that "Feast of Feasts" in Moscow from all the various temples more than 5,000 bells rang. The Paschal ringing of the bells in Moscow could never be forgotten by those who heard it. It was "the only symphony in the world", as wrote the author I. Shmelyov.

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