

CHAPTER 11 : THE EASTERN CHURCHES

The Roman emperor Constantine the Great rebuilt Byzantium (today's Istanbul) in AD 330. He renamed it Constantinople and made it the capital of the Roman Empire. The Roman empire was divided by Theodosius I (also called "the great") for his two sons in AD 395. Arcadius became ruler in the East, with his capital in Constantinople, and Flavius Honorius became ruler in the west, with his capital in Milan. The Byzantine Empire or Eastern Roman Empire was the eastern section of the Roman Empire which remained in existence after the fall of the western section. Its capital remained Constantinople. The life of the Byzantine empire is commonly considered to span AD 395 to 1453.

The Byzantines considered themselves to be Romans and the legitimate continuation of the Roman Empire. Practically speaking, however, the general prevailing national identity of the Eastern Roman State was Greek. Greek was not only the official language, but also the language of the church, of the literature and of all commercial transactions. Even though the Byzantine Empire was a multinational state, including Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Egyptians, Syrians, Illyrians, and Slavs, it was considered to be a "Greek state" due to its Orthodox Christian character and its common Greek culture radiated by large centers of Hellenism such as Constantinople, Antioch, Ephesus, Thessalonika and Alexandria.

The Eastern Empire was largely spared the difficulties of the west in the 3rd and 4th centuries, in part because urban culture was better established there and the initial invasions were attracted to the wealth of Rome. In the 6th century the empire under Justinian I even regained some of the lost Roman provinces, conquering much of Italy, north Africa, and Spain. Under his reign, the Hagia Sophia was constructed in Constantinople in the 530s.

Justinian left his successors an empty treasury, however, and they were unable to deal with the sudden appearance of new invaders on all fronts. The Lombards took Italy, the Slavs overwhelmed much of the Balkans, and the Persians gained domination of most of the eastern provinces. These were recovered by the emperor Heraclius, who annihilated the Sassanid kingdom, but the sudden appearance of the Arabs was too much for the empire, and the southern provinces were all overrun in the 7th century.

What the empire lost in territory, though, it made up in uniformity. The southern provinces differed significantly from the northern in culture and practiced monophysite (rather than Orthodox) Christianity, and so felt alienated; the north put up much more of a struggle. Monophysitism (from the Greek *monos* meaning 'one' and *physis* meaning 'nature') is the christological position that Christ has only one nature, as opposed to the correct Chalcedonian position which holds that Christ has two natures, one divine and one human.

By the time of Heraclius the empire had been divided into a system of military provinces called *themes* to face permanent assault, with urban life declining outside the capital

while Constantinople grew to become the largest city in the world. Attempts to conquer Constantinople failed in the face of the Byzantines' superior navy and their monopoly of the still mysterious incendiary weapon Greek fire. After that the empire began to recover.

The Byzantine emperor exerted various degrees of influence on the churches in his realm. He appropriately called Ecumenical Councils of the churches to resolve doctrinal disputes. Various emperors also rightly suppressed the use of images in worship, in what is called iconoclasm.

One of the famous Ecumenical Councils was the Council of Chalcedon (451). It set forth the Chalcedonian Creed, which describes the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. The Church in Egypt (Patriarchate of Alexandria) split into two groups following this Council, owing to a dispute about the relation between the divine and human natures of Christ. Eventually this led to each group having its own Pope. Those that remained in communion with the other patriarchs were called "Melkites" (the king's men, because Constantinople was the city of the emperors), and are today known as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, while those who disagreed with the findings of the Council of Chalcedon are today known as the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria. There was a similar split in Syria. Those who disagreed with the Council of Chalcedon are sometimes called "Oriental Orthodox" to distinguish them from the Eastern Orthodox, who accepted the Council of Chalcedon. The Oriental Orthodox are also sometimes referred to as "monophysites" or "non-Chalcedonians", although today the Coptic Orthodox Church denies that it is monophysite.

The use of images of Jesus Christ in worship was an error the church long struggled with. Canon 36 of the Synod of Elvira (c.305) rightly prohibited images in churches, "lest that which is worshiped and venerated be depicted on the walls." But with the erroneous approval of the use of images by the Trullan Synod (692) of the Third Council of Constantinople, the debate was joined again. It was most pronounced in Asia Minor, especially around Constantinople, in the 8th and 9th cent. More godly Byzantine emperors like Leo III, Constantine V, Leo IV, and Leo V – called iconoclastic emperors – suppressed the use of images. But Eastern Iconoclasm was opposed in the West by the wicked Romish Popes, such as Gregory II, Gregory III, and Adrian I.

The wicked Byzantine Empress Irene restored the images. Iconoclasm was rejected at the Second Council of Nicaea (787). But iconoclasm was not entirely suppressed in the Byzantine empire and the Eastern churches until another woman (Theodora) ruled the Byzantine empire. Like Irene 50 years before her, Theodora mobilized the iconodules and proclaimed the restoration of icons in 843. Since that time the first Sunday of Lent is celebrated in the churches of the Orthodox tradition as the feast of the "Triumph of Orthodoxy". Thus, the churches of the Orthodox Eastern Church are generally decorated with flat pictures, bas-reliefs, and mosaics, although they reject the figurines present in the Roman Catholic Church.

Also in the seventh century the areas covered by the churches of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem were conquered by Muslim Arabs, and the native Christians were treated as second-class citizens. Westerners tend to think of Christianity as dominant in society for a long period of history, but this has definitely not been the case for Christians in three of the five ancient churches, who have been in Muslim-dominated societies for 13 centuries.

In the ninth and tenth centuries, Orthodoxy made great inroads into Eastern Europe and Russia. This work was made possible by the work of Cyril and Methodius, who translated the Bible and many of the prayer books into Slavic. They found themselves competing with missionaries from the Roman diocese in places like Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. After being driven out of Czechoslovakia, they were later welcomed in Bulgaria, in part because they prayed in the people's native language rather than in Latin, as the Roman priests did. On a visit to Rome both were attacked for spreading the Word of God in the Slavic language and not Greek or Latin. But Cyril & Methodius consistently defended spreading the Faith in the native language of the people.

The Russian Orthodox Church dates to the year 988, when Prince Vladimir I officially adopted Eastern Orthodoxy as the state religion of the fledgling Russian state. Vladimir I, Prince of Kiev, for much of his life remained pagan, although many of his subjects had embraced Christianity. Throughout this period he took several wives and erected pagan statues and shrines. He also made considerable efforts to extend his territories, fighting in Galicia in 981, against the Yatvingians on the Baltic coast in 983, against the Bulgars in 985 and against the Byzantine Empire successfully in the Crimea in 987. In 988 he negotiated for the hand of the Byzantine emperor Basil II's sister, Anna. At Basil's insistence, Vladimir was baptized, married Anna and gave up his other wives. Thereafter he destroyed pagan monuments and established many churches.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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This second volume in a two-part series on church history is primarily an edited version of the following works on church history and Biblical interpretation:

James A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism* (Cassell & Company, Limited: London, Paris & New York. 1878). (see electronic version at <http://www.whatsaiththescriture.com/Fellowship/James.A.Wylie.html>)

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Let My People Go* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.