

Lecture 23- The Church of the Seven Councils: Eastern Orthodoxy

Jesu, Lord of glory, as we breast the tide, Whisper Thou the story of the other side; Where the saints are casting crowns before Thy feet, Safe for everlasting, in Thyself complete.

John of Damascus

...God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.

I Timothy 6: 16

Assigned Reading

The Story of Christianity—Chapter 27 (pp. 251-252, 262-265)

Key Terms

Primacy conflict, *Filioque* controversy, Iconoclastic controversy

Objectives

- List some of the factors that divided the Eastern and Western churches
- Illustrate these factors with specific examples from history

Class Prayer

“Set our hearts on fire with love to Thee, O Christ our God, that in its flame we may love Thee, with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, and with all our strength, and our neighbors as ourselves, so that, keeping Thy commandments, we may glorify Thee the giver of all good gifts. Amen.”

From the Orthodox Liturgy

The Church of the Seven Councils: Eastern Orthodoxy

I. “The Church of the Seven Councils”

- A. Nicea I (325)
- B. Constantinople I (381) _____
- C. Ephesus (431)
- D. Chalcedon (451)
- E. Constantinople II (553)
- F. Constantinople III (680-81) _____
- G. Nicea II (787) _____

John of Damascus: “We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set, but we keep the traditions just as we received them.” (On the Divine Images 2, 12)

II. Eastern Theology

- A. The theologians
 1. John Climacus (579-649)—*Ladder of Divine Ascent*
 2. Maximus the Confessor (580-662)
 3. John of Damascus (675-754)—*The Orthodox Faith*
- B. The theology
 1. Apophaticism—the mystery of God (see “An Exercise in Wonder”)

2. Tradition—the witness of the Spirit
3. Theosis—the deification of humanity
4. Icons—the image of Christ (Pantocrator)

III. The Primacy Conflict

- A. Church councils (Constantinople [381] and Chalcedon [451]) acknowledged that Constantinople possessed “equal rank in ecclesiastical matters” with Rome (conciliar)
- B. But the Roman popes claimed supremacy (Leo the Great [440-61]: “the care of the universal church should converge toward Peter’s one chair”) (monarchial)

IV. The Filioque Controversy

- A. Nicene Creed and Eastern Church: “the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father”—safeguards unity of God
- B. Western Church: “...and the son” (*filioque*)—safeguards equality of Father and Son
- C. East versus West: Doctrine of the Trinity
 “If there is a special circle of the inferno described by Dante reserved for historians of theology, the principal homework assigned to that subdivision of hell for at least the first several eons of eternity may well be the thorough study of all the treatises—in Latin, Greek, Church Slavonic, and the various modern languages—devoted to the inquiry: Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father only, as Eastern Christendom contends, or from both the Father and the Son, as the Latin Church teaches?” (Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology*, p. 90)

V. The Iconoclastic Controversy (East only)

- A. Violent reaction in the East against the veneration of icons
- B. Second Council of Nicea (787) declared that icons are of “equal benefit” with the written Gospels and guarantee that “the incarnation of the Word is genuine and not illusory”; “when we honor and venerate an icon, we receive sanctification”

John of Damascus: “It is obvious that when you contemplate God becoming man, then you may depict Him clothed in human form...I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter, I worship the creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter, who worked out my salvation through matter.” (*Divine Images*)

1. Absolute worship or adoration (*latreia*) is due to God alone, while relative worship, veneration, or respect (*douleia*) can be paid to any number of people and objects
2. Authority? No Scriptural support and not a single unambiguous text from the first three hundred years of Christian literature
- C. Final victory over the iconoclasts (March 11, 843) celebrated yearly in Eastern Orthodox churches as “the triumph of orthodoxy”

VI. Permanent [?] Division

- A. Photian schism (863-67)
- B. The mutual anathemas of 1054
- C. The attack on Constantinople in 1204 by Catholic crusaders

For Further Study

John of Damascus (675-754). *The Orthodox Faith*.

Orthodoxy’s first, most important, and, by some accounts, only systematic theology.

Read “An Exercise in Wonder” to get an impression of how the Orthodox have viewed the Christian faith. What themes are repeated in these short readings? How do you respond to these Orthodox writers? Discuss your answers and reactions with your mentor.