

Eastern Orthodoxy

This lesson is entitled “The Church of the Seven Councils, Eastern Orthodoxy.” For the first 1,000 years of Christianity, the time period we have covered so far, when I have referred to the “Eastern church” I have meant the Eastern part of the one Catholic Church. There was not a separate Eastern church until 1054. In this lesson I will describe the events that led up to the separation of Eastern Orthodoxy from the Roman Catholic Church and some of the repercussions that resulted from that separation. In the second 1,000 years of Christianity the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church have been separate churches.

The prayer that I will use to begin this lesson is taken from the Orthodox liturgy. It is a rather famous prayer to Orthodox people, and it is a wonderful prayer that we can pray as well. As we begin to think about the history of Orthodoxy, let us pray in the traditional words of the Orthodox liturgy.

“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.”

As we think of the pulling apart of the two parts of the Christian church, there was much cultural influence at work there. The Western church became increasingly Latin speaking. The Eastern church remained Greek speaking. Thus even in the use of two different languages there were certain differences that came to bear upon the two parts of the Christian church. Someone has said that the Eastern church and the Latin church could not understand each other because they spoke two different languages, and it was always difficult to know exactly what each side was talking about.

The Eastern church has always taken great pride in the fact that it is the church of the seven councils. The Western church also believed and held to the teachings of the seven ecumenical councils. Those councils are very important in the history of the church. I have described some of those in some detail, but let me review them for a moment. The first council was Nicea in 325. The second was Constantinople in 381. One word that could be used to summarize those first two councils is “Trinity.” They both dealt with the doctrine of the Trinity. The next four councils—Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople II, and Constantinople III—all dealt with the doctrine of Christ. The seventh ecumenical council was Nicea II, which met in 787, and it dealt with the controversy over icons. If you learn those seven councils, divide them into their three categories, and add a few dates, then you will know much about church history. Those councils were important for both Eastern and Western church history.

All of those councils met in the East, as you can observe from the cities, which are all in modern Turkey. The Eastern church views those councils as particularly the possession and treasure of the Eastern church. The Eastern Orthodox Church grudgingly shares them with the West, but it views itself as the church of the seven councils. The Eastern church has been very concerned not to change anything that the church fathers wrote in the documents of those seven ecumenical councils. John of Damascus, the greatest of the Eastern Orthodox theologians, wrote, “We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set, but we keep the traditions just as we have received them.” One thing will become plain as you study Eastern Orthodoxy—it does not change. Its theology does not change. At least, that is what the Eastern Orthodox Church claims. It has certainly been able to verify that claim more often than the Western Catholic Church in making that same claim.

Most of the lessons thus far have focused on the West, and so we have become more familiar with Western names such as Augustine, Ambrose, and from the Middle Ages people like Boethius and Isidore of Seville. This lesson will focus on some of the important names of the East. The East and the West shared the early church fathers. Until about the time of Augustine, both churches claimed the same tradition. Augustine was a transition, however, because Augustine belongs to the West. The Eastern church does not like Augustine much because they think he is the beginning of the problem. Before Augustine there is a shared tradition. Increasingly the West developed its own theological history and tradition with Ambrose, Jerome, and preeminently Augustine, and also Gregory the Great, down to Thomas Aquinas, and into the Reformation. The East had its own particular favorites, who were people that the West honored as well. They were people like Athanasius, the Great Cappadocians, and John Chrysostom. Those were Eastern theologians. If you read much of the history of Eastern theology, you will find Athanasius quoted repeatedly along with the Great Cappadocians and John Chrysostom. Like people in the West quote Augustine, people in the East quote those theologians.

There are some other names that we should know. John Climacus lived in the sixth and seventh centuries. He was an abbot of a monastery in Sinai. He wrote a book called *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. It was one of the most widely read manuals of monastic and mystical spirituality during the time. He set the book up as 30 steps up a ladder, representing the 30 years of the life of Christ. It included prayer, meditation, and various other things to do and think and pray as the soul slowly, and with difficulty, ascends the ladder. The ladder became a strong image in both the Eastern church and in Western mysticism.

There was also Maximus the Confessor, who lived mainly in the seventh century. He is considered by many to be the father of Eastern Orthodoxy. He was an opponent of Monothelitism, which I have not talked about before. Monothelitism is an offshoot of Monophysitism. Maximus held to Chalcedonianism against any attempts to merge the two natures of Christ. He lived a very ascetical lifestyle, as many Eastern theologians practiced. He was also very liturgical in his writings. As you read the Eastern theologians, liturgy tends to merge with theology, more so than it does in the West. In the West we tend to think of theology as one thing and liturgy as another. In the East it is difficult to separate those two. Theology and worship blend. As a principle, that is a very good one to have. The Eastern mind tends to think that the West is too concerned to separate worship from theology and therefore is tempted to become too rational in its understanding of theology. The East rejects that sort of rationality, particularly as it was developed in the medieval scholastic theology of the Western Catholic Church.

The most important of all the Eastern theologians may have been John of Damascus. He was from a distinguished family. By the time John came along, living in Syria, that part of the Eastern church was under the control of the Muslims. So John grew up in a distinguished Christian family, but in a Muslim-controlled country. He served in the government of that country. He was remarkably bold enough to write a treatise against Islam, which he called the "Ishmaelite heresy." He did not lose his life because of it. John of Damascus retired from public office and entered the great monastery of Mar Saba, and there he began to write on theology. His most important book is *The Orthodox Faith*. Someone has called it Orthodoxy's "first, most important, and by some accounts, only systematic theology." Thus John of Damascus is important to remember for the Eastern church as a parallel to Thomas Aquinas, who was the great theologian of the medieval Western church. John of Damascus also wrote hymns such as "The Day of Resurrection" and "Come, ye Faithful."

Much of the theology of the Eastern church was shared with the West. Yet there were certain distinctive emphases in Eastern Orthodox thinking, which are still present in that church. Those emphases can be summarized under four points. In the West there were emphases on sin, grace, justification, salvation,

and the sacraments. The list of emphases in the East, however, is *apophaticism*, tradition, *theosis*, and icons. Simply in making those two lists it is evident that theology was moving in different directions or at least assuming different emphases. To the Western mind, that list from the Eastern church sounded strange, as though the Eastern church had lost the main direction of theological understanding. Those emphases deserve to be considered in more detail, which can hopefully lead to a better understanding of why the Eastern church maintained those emphases.

Apophaticism is simply the use of negative theology, such as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite created. It involves an emphasis on the mystery of God, focusing on the shadow and the darkness rather than the light. There is light, but there is also darkness. There is revelation, but there is also mystery. The Eastern church emphasizes, celebrates, loves, and adores the mystery. In the Western church, we are always trying to solve the problems and understand the mystery. The Eastern church does not really try to solve the problems. It does not try to understand much. It simply adores and worships, rather than trying to explain.

The second emphasis in the Eastern church is on tradition. These are relative emphases. The Western church preserves mystery, too—to some extent. Yet the Eastern church revels in it. Both the Eastern church and the Western church have a role for tradition. The Western church has so much emphasis on tradition that the Reformers thought it had gone too far. Luther, Calvin, and some of the other Reformers rejected some of the Roman Catholic tradition and its emphasis on tradition along with Scripture. In the Eastern church, however, there has never been a check on the high estimate and value placed upon tradition. In the Eastern church, tradition is the witness of the Spirit. The Spirit spoke the Word and spoke in the ecumenical creeds, and the Spirit speaks now in the tradition. In the living voice of the church, in the community of the faithful, the Spirit still speaks. For the Eastern church, at each true council, the miracle of Pentecost is renewed—when the Spirit descends and truth is renewed. Despite the confusions in those councils, and the presence of people who were not worthy people, still the miracle of Pentecost repeated and the Holy Spirit spoke and the words of the council became the words of the Spirit. With a view such as that, the ecumenical councils rose almost to the level of Scripture. In some expressions of Eastern Orthodox thought, the councils are the same as Scripture, which is why they do not abide any tampering with the words of the councils, for it would be the same as tampering with Scripture. The Eastern Orthodox mind does not think that God promised to speak only in the Scripture. Therefore they do not have the idea of Scripture alone, but rather the idea of Scripture plus the continuing revelation of God through the church. They do not believe in revelation through the pope, since they do not have a pope. The revelation is through the community, the whole church, which grows into the truth as God speaks continually in the church.

A third emphasis in Eastern Orthodoxy is *theosis*. That Greek word means “deification” and refers to the deification of humanity. That word sums up salvation in the Eastern church. In the West we talk about sin and justification as a way of understanding salvation. In the East the emphasis is on *theosis*, or deification. The idea is that we are changed so that we become like God. The Eastern theologians will say it even more strongly. Athanasius said, “God became man, that man might become God.” That is *theosis*, or deification. That strikes the Western mind as a problematic way to understand theology and the transforming effect of grace. The Eastern mind, though, sees that as the real purpose of Christ coming into the world, to so transform us that we become like Him. In some ways we can see that. We talk about union with Christ and becoming more like Christ or more like God. In the Eastern expression of *theosis*, it is stated so strongly that most Western thinkers pull back from that because it sounds like a heresy of some sort. A closer examination of the Eastern idea of *theosis* will reveal that the Eastern theology does not go over the line, although it uses language that Western Christians would want to avoid. In the West there are people who pick up on that idea—these are the mystics, but they were

constantly being accused of pantheism. To the Western mind, that kind of language and expression goes too far because it tends to blur the distinction between God and His creation.

Finally, the fourth great point of emphasis in Eastern theology is the use of icons. They are the images of Christ and of the saints. When a Protestant goes into an Eastern Orthodox Church, the first things he notices are the icons. They are all over the place. The central icon is usually an image or a painting of Christ. The Western church was more likely to picture Christ suffering on the cross, so the crucifix became important in Western piety. The Eastern church often depicts Christ as the king and the judge. He is not usually pictured as the suffering Christ but as the almighty Christ. Icons were important in the Eastern church, but their use caused a controversy. There was a century of controversy over whether it was appropriate or not. It was known as the “iconoclastic controversy.” The iconoclasts were people who wanted to destroy the images. The church struggled for a long time over that, and I will later describe that controversy in more detail.

First I want to describe the conflict between the East and the West, the “primacy conflict.” The iconoclastic controversy took place in the East, but the primacy conflict was between the two parts of the undivided church. Some of the ecumenical councils, particularly Constantinople and Chalcedon, had not only dealt with issues of Trinity and Christology, but also some other points as well. One point was the relative significance of the two major churches or cities that existed, Rome and Constantinople. Those ecumenical councils acknowledged Constantinople as “the new Rome, with equal privileges and equal rank in ecclesiastical matters with Rome.” So the unchangeable church councils had said that Rome had great authority and so did Constantinople. The problem was that the Roman popes never quite accepted those statements. The Roman popes believed that Rome had the ascendance and that Rome was the number one place and the number one church. Constantinople could be number two, but it could not be the same as Rome. You can see how that would lead to stress and strain between the two parts of the church as a result of that. The Orthodox Church was willing to acknowledge the “primacy of Peter,” which was the term that was used. Peter was the leader of the apostolic band and the first bishop or pope in Rome. In a personal sense, they could acknowledge his supremacy, as a first among equals, as a place of honor. They could not acknowledge, however, the supremacy of Peter, and likewise of Rome, in power or authority in an institutional sense. In other words, the Eastern church would acknowledge Rome as first in an honorary sense, but not in a real sense.

The Roman Catholic Church became increasingly monarchical through the Middle Ages. Authority was vested in the pope. That did not happen unchallenged. There was a conciliatory movement in the West that tried to work against that monarchism and make the Western church more like the Eastern church. Yet that movement failed. So the Western church became more monarchical with authority vested in the pope. That was not finalized until Vatican I in the nineteenth century.

The Eastern church became conciliar, which meant it was a church of councils. It was not a church with authority vested in one leader. The patriarch of Constantinople has an honorary position among the patriarchs of the various Eastern churches. Yet those churches remain independent. They are *autocephalous*, meaning they have their own head. There is a church of Russia, a church of Ukraine, and various churches in Europe, such as the Greek Orthodox Church, and each one has its own head. There is no one like the pope in the Eastern church, even today.

Beside the primacy conflict, another problem was the *filioque* controversy. It became a major issue with debates and books and all kinds of arguments in all kinds of language over that one word. It would take someone far smarter than I am to figure out what it was all about. I will give you the best summary I can of the issue. The word *filioque* is a Latin word that means “and the Son.” The Nicene Creed had said,

“The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.” Eventually, however, the Western church added “*filioque*” to its Latin version of the Nicene Creed. So their version would say, “The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.” That is called “double procession.” From about the time of Augustine on, the Western church used the Creed that way. Officially, the word was added to the Creed by Pope Benedict VIII in 1014, but long before 1014 and Benedict VII the *filioque* was part of the Nicene Creed in the West.

The East objected to that addition. It is easy to understand why the East would object to it. They believed that nothing could be added to the creeds, just as nothing could be added to the Bible. The Eastern church was greatly offended because the Creed was authoritative and fixed, and it was not right, nor even possible, to the Eastern mind to change the Creed. The west viewed the Creed as a human document, not a divine document. It was a providentially arranged document, according to the West, in that they believed God was involved in its formation. The creeds were not viewed as infallible, however, and it was not impossible to change them and state truth more fully as more truth was revealed. Thus, on one ground, the East objected simply because the West changed the creed.

There was also a doctrinal issue involved. In the Eastern view of the Trinity, the Father begets the Son and the Father breathes the Spirit. The Father is the one source of divinity. He is the one principle of the Godhead within the Trinity. Thus they would argue there must be a particular emphasis on the role of the Father, which would safeguard the unity of the Trinity. The favorite text in the East on this issue is John 15:26, which says, “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you, from the Father.” Thus the Holy Spirit comes from the Father. The East does add “through the Son,” because the Son sends Him, but He is from the Father, not from the Son. The emphasis is on the unity based out of the role of the Father as the source of divinity or the principle of the Godhead.

The West, after Augustine, viewed the doctrine of the Trinity in a different way. In their view the Father begets the Son, and the Father and the Son are the two who breathe the Spirit. That emphasis safeguards the equality of the Father and the Son. The text that was often used in the West was John 20:22, which says, “Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” In that text Jesus seems to be the source of the Spirit.

Much debate has occurred over that issue. It is an important issue, and it was the key issue that separated the Eastern church from the Western church. Jaroslav Pelikan said in his book, *The Melody of Theology*, “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?” Pelikan, who is probably the greatest historian of doctrine in the modern church, was a Lutheran until he recently converted to Eastern Orthodoxy.

I want to return now to describe the iconoclastic controversy. It was a 100-year struggle in the East, and it did have repercussions in the West. Charlemagne in the West, the Holy Roman Emperor, carried on a tirade against the icons. It was mainly an attack on the Eastern church because Charlemagne had designs to increase his power in the East, and the Eastern church was an obstacle to that. Eventually, in the sixteenth century, there was another emphasis on this issue in the Protestant Reformation when Luther, and particularly Calvin and later the Puritans, objected to the use of images in worship. Luther was not as concerned about it, but Calvin and the others were.

In the East, however, there was a violent reaction against the veneration of icons. Icons had been used for some time. It then seemed that suddenly there was a reaction to the practice. Icons had been used throughout the Eastern church, and their use was prevalent in worship. The use was extreme in many ways. For example, they sometimes added flecks of paint from the icons into the Eucharistic wine, as though it would increase the efficacy of the Eucharist because there were little bits of gold paint added to the wine. Suddenly, however, there was a reaction to that practice. There are different explanations that have been given for why some people in the East spoke up to say that the practice was not right. One explanation is that the emperors in the East, who were in Constantinople and were the successors of the emperors of Rome, believed that too much power resided in the monasteries. The monasteries were the places that the icons were drawn up, painted, venerated, and promoted. So in order to put down the power of the monasteries that threatened the authority of the emperors in the East, there were a number of emperors who tore down the icons. The emperors sent their soldiers out to destroy the icons, which often created riots because the monks and the people would try to defend the icons and they would be killed in the process. A second reason that may have influenced the reaction against the icons was the rise of the Muslim period. Much of the area of the Mediterranean, where the Eastern Orthodox churches were, was controlled by the Muslims. The Muslims are very committed against any kind of image in worship. As a protection against Muslim criticism that the Eastern Christians were idolaters, there may have been a reaction against the use of icons. Third, it may be that some people simply decided the use of icons was theologically wrong.

After a long period of dispute, the controversy was finally settled at the Second Council of Nicea, the last of the seven ecumenical councils, in 787. At that council the icons were defended. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, that was a great moment. It is still called the Feast of Orthodoxy. Once per year the Eastern Orthodox churches will celebrate the Second Council of Nicea when the icons were defended and supported. The argument for the icons was that they were of equal benefit with the written word. The church has revelation from the written word and it has revelation from the pictures. They are mutually revelatory. There is the Gospel by word and the Gospel by color. In order to understand icons, you need to see their color. Thus icons are a way of receiving truth by a picture, and that picture can reveal something to you about the Gospel. Another stress at the Second Council of Nicea was that if the incarnation is genuine, if Christ is really a man, then He can be depicted as any other man can be depicted. Thus the use of icons became a defense of the real humanity of Christ. Those who attacked the icons were accused of not believing that Christ was really human, which would have been a case of doceticism. The council at Nicea also said that the use of icons promotes sanctification. They helped people grow in their love for Christ and the church. Not only did the Second Council of Nicea defend the icons, but so also did John of Damascus in many of his writings.

The actual practice of people using the icons was also clarified. The Eastern church, the council at Nicea, and John of Damascus all made a distinction between the absolute worship that is to be given to God alone and the relative worship, or veneration, or respect, that can be given to any number of things, such as the Bible. In the Eastern church it is often a practice for people to kiss the Bible as sign of respect. Such veneration then is also given to Mary, to the saints, and of course also to Christ. To a Western Christian, such practice may look like idolatry. It does not look like that at all, however, to an Eastern Christian. At least it does not look like idolatry to an Eastern theologian. What an Eastern Christian is really thinking I do not know. Eastern theologians make a distinction between veneration of icons and the worship of Christ. One of the Cappadocians said, "The honor given to the image passes over to the prototype and then it becomes worship." So honor is given to the image, but not worship. A different word is even used there, both in Greek and Latin, for what is occurring with the image. Yet somehow that act is transformed into worship, not of the image, but into the worship of Christ. The outward form of veneration can look the same as absolute worship, but the inward intention is very

different. It may look like worship, but it is not. It is veneration. My question is whether that is really true in actual practice. What does the Eastern Orthodox Christian really do when that person kisses the icon, or even the Bible? Does that person make that rather fine theological distinction in his or her own mind?

In my view, the attempt to establish patristic authority for icons has not succeeded. One certainly cannot establish biblical authority for the veneration of icons. There are not many biblical texts quoted on the Eastern side of the debate. Even the church fathers of the first 300 years did not lend much credence to this practice. There is not a single unambiguous text that mandated icon veneration in the first three centuries of Christian literature. There is an almost unbroken succession of early writers who equated the use of external images with paganism. In light of a lack of evidence in Scripture and the early fathers, the Eastern church at the Second Council of Nicea moved toward an acceptance of the use of icons as a proper way to worship.

While we do not know what will happen in the future, there has been a “permanent” division, from 1054 until the present time, of the Eastern and the Western churches. There was a temporary division in the ninth century called the Photian schism. The mutual anathemas of 1054, however, marked the official break within the church. The pope excommunicated the patriarch and Eastern Christians. The patriarch responded in kind by excommunicating the pope and Western Christians. They each pronounced anathemas condemning the other side. Those anathemas were actually revoked by both churches in 1965. It took a long time for the anathemas to be removed, and the schism still exists.

The final blow was the attack on Constantinople in 1204 by Catholic crusaders. Rather than going on to the holy land to fight the Muslims, the Catholics from the West settled down and fought the Eastern Christians in Constantinople and stole many of the Eastern Orthodox treasures and moved them to places like Venice. That certainly did not help the relationship between the two parts of the church. There is still that division today.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God shall stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).