

Church History (17): The Rise and Progress of Eastern Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodoxy goes by many names: the Eastern Church (in contrast to the Western Church); the Orthodox Church (because of its stress on the seven ecumenical Councils); the Byzantine Church (because Byzantium was the previous name for Constantinople); the Greek Orthodox (because of its use of the Greek language).

Eastern Orthodoxy is a title often given to the Eastern Greek-speaking Chalcedonian Church of the Byzantine Empire, and its daughter Churches in Russia, the Balkans and elsewhere. Strictly speaking, we should only refer to it in this way after the great East – West schism of 1054; it was only at that point that Eastern and Western Chalcedonians separated into two mutually hostile bodies.¹

I. The Rise and Progress of Eastern Orthodoxy

1. *Its separation from the West.* "It was the mutual excommunication of the Pope and Patriarch in 1054, that is generally taken to mark the beginning of the great schism between the Orthodox east and the Latin west. But the schism, as historians now generally recognize, is not really an event whose beginning can be exactly dated. It was something that came about gradually, as the result of a long and complicated process, starting well before the eleventh century and not completed until sometime after" (Ware).² "The Eastern and Western wings of the one universal Church had been drifting apart ever since the fall of the Roman Empire in the West in 410. East and West spoke different languages. They lived in different cultural and political worlds. Over the centuries, a great many differences, disagreements and misunderstandings had grown up between Eastern and Western Christendom" (Needham).³

(1) Doctrinal divisions. From the fifth and sixth centuries, distinct differences began to emerge from the Western and Eastern churches. Timothy Ware, an Eastern Orthodox historian and priest said: "In the last resort, the division between the East and West was over matters of doctrine – two matters in particular: the Papal claim and the Filioque."⁴ (a) The authority of the Pope. From the fifth century, rivalry increased between the patriarchs of Rome and Constantinople. In 451, at the Council of Chalcedon, the bishop of Constantinople was made equal to the bishop of Rome. The bishop of Rome (Leo I), rejected this decree, and continued to view himself as having authority over all churches (east and west). This is one reason for the East's stress on the Councils, which gives equal authority to both East and West.

(b) The procession of the Spirit. Augustine (354-430) argued strongly that the Spirit eternally proceeded from both the Father and the Son. "Neither can we say that the Holy Spirit does not also proceed from the Son, for the same Spirit is not without reason said to be the Spirit both of the Father and of the Son" (Augustine).⁵ In 589, at a western council that met in Toledo, Spain, western theologians added to the Nicene Creed of 381 the language that the Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. The phrase "and from the Son" (*filioque* in Latin), eventually became a source of controversy for several Eastern theologians. "At first, both sides attempted a compromise (from the Father *through* the Son), but this was eventually rejected by both sides" (Olyott).⁶ "The Greek Fathers are willing on occasion to affirm that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son – such language is found

¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:453

² Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 5

³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:131

⁴ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 5

⁵ Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book 4: 20 (see also, Book 5:11, 13-14; 15:26-27)

⁶ Stuart Olyott, *What the Bible Teaches about the Holy Spirit*, 76

particularly in St Gregory of Nyssa – or that He proceeds from the Father and *rests upon* the Son; but the Christian east has almost always refused to say that the Spirit proceeds *from* the Son" (Ware).⁷

(c) The Seven Councils. "The Eastern Orthodox Church bases its teachings on Scripture and the Seven Ecumenical Councils: Nicene I (325); Constantinople I (381); Ephesus (431); Chalcedon (451); Constantinople (553); Constantinople III (680); Nicene II (787). Western churches recognize these as the first seven ecumenical councils, but not the only seven. The Eastern Orthodox say there have been no ecumenical councils since 787, and no teaching past the Second Nicene is accepted. "The first seven councils met in the East, 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 (Calhoun).⁸ "The doctrinal definitions of an Ecumenical Council are infallible. Thus, in the eyes of the Orthodox Church, the statements of faith put out by the seven councils possess, along with the Bible, an abiding and irrevocable authority" (Ware).⁹

(2) Political divisions. These took place in four stages: (a) Constantine. In 324, Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople. Upon his death, the Empire was divided between his two sons, one of whom ruled the western half of the empire from Rome while the other ruled the eastern region from Constantinople. "Then came the barbarian invasion at the start of the 5th century: apart from Italy, much of which remained within the Empire for some time longer, the west carved up among barbarian chiefs" (Ware).¹⁰ Meanwhile, the eastern half of the Empire continued under the title of the Byzantine Empire and was headquartered in Constantinople. The patriarch of that city had authority over the patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, and served under the emperor, who ruled those lands with military might. In the east the emperor had tremendous influence in church affairs. (b) Charlemagne. Charlemagne (Charles the Great) was the king of France (768) and Italy (774). In 800, he became Emperor of the Roman Empire, uniting most of Western Europe against the East. "The Byzantine split with Roman Catholicism came about when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne, King of the Franks, as Holy Roman Emperor in 800. From the Byzantine viewpoint, this was a slap to the Eastern Emperor and the Byzantine Empire itself – an empire that had withstood barbarian invasions and upheld the faith for centuries" (Ware).¹¹

(c) Constantine IX. "Political and military events sparked off the final breach between East and West. The Byzantine Emperor, Constantine IX (1042-55), had made an alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry III (1039-56), and Pope Leo IX (1049-54) against the Normans, who were threatening both Byzantine and papal land in southern Italy. As a result of this alliance, Constantine IX demanded that the patriarch of Constantinople (Michael Cerularius, 1043-58), acknowledge the superior authority of Rome over Constantinople. The patriarch refused, and in 1052 he closed down the Latin-speaking churches of Constantinople" (Needham).¹² "In 1054, Pope Leo IX of Rome excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople (Michael Cerularius). The patriarch in turn excommunicated the pope. That was the schism, or division, of the Church, the division of the one Church into two – the Greek Eastern and the Latin Western Church" (Kuiper).¹³

⁷ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 205-206

⁸ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 23:3

⁹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 196

¹⁰ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 5

¹¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 15

¹² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:135

¹³ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 144

(d) Crusades. The crusades, beginning in the late 11th century, were Papal sanctioned military campaigns, intended to retake the Holy Land from the Muslims. In the early 13th century, crusaders took Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Church. "The final blow was the attack on Constantinople in 1204 by 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" (Calhoun).¹⁴ "It was the Crusades, and the outrages committed by the Western Crusaders against Eastern Christians, which made the great schism into a burning grass-roots reality" (Needham).¹⁵

(3) Geographical divisions. Islam had a devastating effect on the Eastern Church. There were four influential cities in the east: Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. The first three fell into Muslim hands and after the eighth century theological development in these areas ceased. Therefore, leadership of the Eastern Church gravitated to Constantinople's patriarch. When that city fell to the Turks in 1453, leadership passed to the Russian Orthodox patriarch, who declared that Moscow would be the *Third Rome*, after historic Rome and Constantinople. "After the Arab conquests, the Orthodox Church was blocked to the south and east by Islam, and thus its expansion was in a northerly and northwesterly direction. Those areas of Eastern Europe were populated mostly by Slavs, who had invaded them after the Germanic peoples. They occupied most of what is today Poland, the Baltic countries, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Greece" (Gonzalez).¹⁶ "Russia claimed independence from the patriarch of Constantinople in 1589, the first nation to do this. Other ethnic and regional splintering quickly followed, and today there are eleven independent Orthodox churches. The Russian Orthodox church dominates contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy, representing seven-eighths of the total number of Orthodox Christians" (Ware).¹⁷

The great East-West schism of 1054 broke the one Catholic Church apart into two rival Churches, the West centered on Rome and the papacy, the East centered on Constantinople. North and west of Constantinople, however, there stretched huge lands larger than Western Europe, inhabited by the Slavic peoples; and here, the Eastern Byzantine type of Christianity flourished outside the political boundaries of the Byzantine Empire. This was especially the case in Russia, where the Eastern faith took the vast and majestic form of the Russian Orthodox Church. Today, this is the largest Orthodox Church in the world.¹⁸

2. *Its doctrinal distinctives.* "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 five points: mystery, tradition, liturgy, icons, and deification" (Calhoun).¹⁹ (1) Mystery. "Eastern Orthodoxy involves an emphasis on the mystery of God, focusing on the shadow and the darkness rather than the light. 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" (Calhoun).²⁰ Within Eastern Orthodoxy, the term "mystery" is usually applied to seven sacraments. "The

¹⁴ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 23:3

¹⁵ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:137

¹⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:263

¹⁷ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 15

¹⁸ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:233

¹⁹ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 23:2-3

²⁰ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 23:4

chief place in Christian worship belongs to the sacraments or, as they are called in Greek, the mysteries. The Orthodox Church speaks customarily of seven sacraments, basically the same seven as in Roman Catholic theology: baptism, anointing (chrismation), eucharist, penance (confession), holy orders, holy unction (anointing of the sick), and marriage" (Ware).²¹

(a) Baptism. "Baptism signifies a mystical burial and resurrection with Christ (Romans vi, 4–5 and Colossians ii, 12); and the outward sign of this is the plunging of the candidate into the font, followed by the emergence from the water. Sacramental symbolism therefore requires immersion or 'burial' in the waters of Baptism, and then 'resurrection' out of them once more. Baptism by infusion (when the water is merely poured over part of the body) is permitted in special cases; but Baptism by sprinkling or smearing is quite simply not real Baptism at all" (Ware).²² Similar to the Roman Catholic Church, for the Orthodox, those baptized (including infants) are forgiven all sin and united to Christ. "Through Baptism we receive a full forgiveness of all sin, whether original or actual; we 'put on Christ', becoming members of His Body the Church" (Ware).²³

(b) Anointing (chrismation). "Immediately after Baptism, an Orthodox child is 'chrismated' or 'confirmed'. The priest takes a special ointment, the Chrism (in Greek, *myron*), and with this he anoints various parts of the child's body, marking them with the sign of the Cross: first the forehead, then the eyes, nostrils, mouth, and ears, the breast, the hands, and the feet. As he marks each he says, 'The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.' The child, who has been incorporated into Christ at Baptism, now receives in Chrismation the gift of the Spirit, thereby becoming a *laikos* (layperson), a full member of the people (*laos*) of God" (Ware).²⁴

As soon as possible after Chrismation an Orthodox child is brought to communion. A child's earliest memories of the Church will center on the act of receiving the Holy Gifts of Christ's Body and Blood. Communion is not something to which infants come at the age of six or seven (as in the Roman Catholic Church) or in teenage years (as usually in Anglicanism), but something from which they have never been excluded.²⁵

(c) Eucharist. "The Orthodox Church believes that after consecration the bread and wine become in very truth the Body and Blood of Christ: they are not mere symbols, but the reality" (Ware).²⁶ Thus, the Orthodox largely understands the Eucharist in a similar way as does the Roman Catholic Church. "The word transubstantiation is not to be taken to define the manner in which the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord; for this none can understand but God; but only thus much is signified, that the bread truly, really, and substantially becomes the very true Body of the Lord, and the wine the very Blood of the Lord" (Philaret).²⁷

The Orthodox Church believes the Eucharist to be a sacrifice; and here again the basic Orthodox teaching is set forth clearly in the text of the Liturgy itself. *Your own from Your own we offer You, in all and for all.* At the Eucharist the sacrifice offered is Christ Himself. Our offering of bread and wine is taken up into Christ's self-offering, and so is transformed into His Body and Blood. The offering is *Your own* in a second way: not only is Christ the sacrifice that is offered, but He is also, in the true and deep sense, the

²¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 267

²² Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 271

²³ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 271

²⁴ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 271-272

²⁵ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 272

²⁶ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 275-276

²⁷ St. Philaret (1782-1867), *The Longer Catechism of the Orthodox, Eastern Church*, Q.340

one who performs the act of offering. He is both victim and priest, both offering and offerer. As the celebrant says to Christ in the prayer before the Great Entrance, *You are the one who offers and the one who is offered.*²⁸

(d) Penance (confession). "Penitence is a Sacrament, in which he who confesses his sins is, on the outward declaration of pardon by the priest, inwardly loosed from his sins by Jesus Christ himself" (Philaret).²⁹ "Orthodox children receive communion from infancy. Once they are old enough to know the difference between right and wrong and to understand what sin is – probably aged about six or seven – they may be taken to receive another sacrament: Repentance, Penitence, or Confession (in Greek, *metanoia* or *exomologisis*). Through this sacrament sins committed after Baptism are forgiven and the sinner is reconciled to the Church: hence it is often called a *Second Baptism*" (Ware).³⁰

(2) Tradition. "Among the various elements of Tradition, a unique pre-eminence belongs to the Bible, to the Creed, to the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils: these things the Orthodox accept as something absolute and unchanging, something which cannot be cancelled or revised" (Ware).³¹ For the Orthodox, Scripture, the Creed (381), and the remaining Ecumenical Councils, combine to form an infallible tradition. "Where Rome stresses Papal infallibility, Orthodox stress the infallibility of the Church as a whole" (Ware).³²

(3) Liturgy. This has to do with the form of worship: the prayers, various readings, singing (chanting), and physical gestures (kneeling, sign of cross, etc.). The various elements used within their liturgy are largely taken from Basil and John Chrysostom. "Orthodoxy has made few explicit definitions about the Eucharist and the other Sacraments, about the next world, the Mother of God, the saints, and the faithful departed: our belief on these points is contained mainly in the prayers and hymns used at services. Nor is it merely the words of the services which are a part of Tradition; the various gestures and actions – immersion in the waters of Baptism, the different anointings with oil, the sign of the Cross, and so on – all have a special meaning, and all express in symbolical or dramatic form the truths of the faith" (Ware).³³

(4) Icons. Icons (from the Greek meaning *image*), were originally painted pictures of Christ, Mary, and the saints. To this was eventually added wood carvings and statues. These are usually illumined by candles and adorned with incense. "The Tradition of the Church is expressed not only through words, not only through the actions and gestures used in worship, but also through art – through the line and color of the Holy Icons. An icon is not simply a religious picture designed to arouse appropriate emotions in the beholder; it is one of the ways whereby God is revealed to us. Through icons the Orthodox Christian receives a vision of the spiritual world" (Ware).³⁴

After a long period of dispute, the controversy over icons 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

²⁸ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 278-279

²⁹ St. Philaret (1782-1867), *The Longer Catechism of the Orthodox, Eastern Church*, Q.351

³⁰ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 281

³¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 191

³² Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 232

³³ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 198-199

³⁴ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 199-200

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.³⁵

(5) Deification. "The final goal at which every Christian must aim is to become god, to attain deification (*theosis*). For Orthodoxy our salvation and redemption mean our deification" (Ware).³⁶ This doesn't mean we become divine, but that we become one with God so as to share in His nature. The Orthodox distinguish between sharing in God's essence and energy. "The idea of deification must be always understood in the light of the distinction between God's essence and His energies. Union with God means union with the divine energies, not with the divine essence" (Ware).³⁷ By "essence" is meant the transcendence of God, and by "energies" is meant the imminence (nearness) of God. "Orthodoxy therefore distinguishes between God's essence and His energies, thus safeguarding both divine transcendence and divine immanence: God's essence remains unapproachable, but His energies come down to us. God's energies, which are God Himself, permeate all His creation, and we experience them in the form of deifying grace and divine light. Truly our God is a God who hides Himself, yet He is also a God who acts – the God of History, intervening directly in concrete situations" (Ware).³⁸

The gulf between creature and Creator is not impassable, for because we are in God's image, we can know God and have communion with Him. And if we make proper use of this faculty for communion with God, then we will become 'like' God, we will acquire the divine likeness; in the words of John Damascene, we will be 'assimilated to God through virtue.' To acquire the likeness is to be deified, it is to become a 'second god,' a 'god by grace.' 'I said, you are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High' (Psalm lxxxi, 6; cf. John x, 34–5).³⁹

For the Orthodox, deification begins at baptism, increases through this life and is perfected at the resurrection. It's increased throughout this life through the cultivation of secret prayer, and partaking regularly of the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper. "If a man asks 'How can I become god?' the answer is very simple: go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God in spirit and in truth, read the Gospels, follow the commandments" (Ware).⁴⁰ For modern Orthodox, Christ's atonement is regulated to baptism, which washes away original and past sins, which must be perfected through good works. Thus, justification is a process, begun at baptism, continued through faith and works, that ends in our glorification and deification. "God's gifts are always free gifts, and we humans can never have any claims upon our Maker. But while we cannot 'merit' salvation, we must certainly work for it, since 'faith without works is dead (James ii, 17)" (Ware).⁴¹ "Unlike the eastern religions which teach that humans are swallowed up in the deity, Orthodox mystical theology has always insisted that we humans, however closely linked to God, retain our full personal integrity. The human person, when deified, remains distinct (though not separate) from God. The mystery of the Trinity is a mystery of unity in diversity, and those who express the Trinity in themselves do not sacrifice their personal characteristics" (Ware).⁴²

³⁵ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 23:3

³⁶ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 225

³⁷ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 199-200

³⁸ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 203

³⁹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 213

⁴⁰ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 236

⁴¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 216

⁴² Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 226