



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 26 – The Iconoclastic Controversy and Growth in the East

When Moses, the leader of the children of Israel, was on Mount Sinai for forty days with the Lord God of Israel, the people under Aaron held a festival for God, picturing Him as a golden calf. This was directly contrary to what God Himself had just said to them: **“You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them”** (Exodus 20:4-5). The Christians of the Eastern Empire struggled with how this word of God should be understood and applied in their own times. Another word for “image” is “icon”. Those who taught that all images or icons or pictures of God should be destroyed were called iconoclasts, which means “image-destroyers”.

After the days of the apostles, the early Christians decorated their places of worship (for example, the catacombs) with paintings based on familiar Bible stories. They did not worship these images, and it seems that no one objected to them. But as time went on, and as many uneducated pagans became Christians, some of them began to pay undue attention to the images and some leaders thought they were in danger of committing idolatry by their devotion to these images. Images can easily become superstitious objects of worship.

An Eastern emperor, Constantine V (741-775 AD), took it upon himself to settle all controversy on this matter by summoning a council to forbid the use of images in the churches and by condemning those who supported their use. The rise and spread of Islam no doubt influenced his decision, for the Muslims strictly forbade any physical representation of Allah. The Muslims considered Christians as worshipers of many gods because of their teaching concerning the Triune God and their use of images to represent the Lord and His prophets and apostles and other holy persons.

The Eastern Church became involved in a long-lasting controversy between the iconoclasts (image-destroyers) and iconodules (image-worshippers). This controversy also involved the true teaching that God became a visible human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and therefore there could be no objection to portraying Jesus as a human person. John of Damascus, the leading theologian of that age, defended the use of pictures and images to portray Jesus and other Biblical figures as a way of instructing the many uneducated Christians who were unable to read the words of the Bible. But John of Damascus was condemned by the council of Emperor Constantine V.

The council of Nicea in 787 AD distinguished between worship, which must be directed only to God Himself, and veneration, which may be given to images. Nevertheless, the iconoclasts regained power again, and the issue was not finally resolved until 842 AD when the use of

images was restored. To this day the Eastern churches are known for their many icons and images, and no doubt some have been misused as objects of worship. But it is not right nor wise to forbid the use of all audio-visual aids in the church in an effort to suppress or prevent superstitious idolatry. What is needed is careful instruction concerning the nature of God and His will.

The Eastern churches were certainly hurt by all their doctrinal controversies and divisions and especially also by the iconoclastic controversy. But the worst blow was made by the armies of Muhammad and his successors who used force and influence to conquer lands of the Byzantine Empire. They forced the Christians in those lands to become second-class citizens with fewer rights than those who converted to Islam. It is sad that still today many of the lands once occupied by Eastern Christians are populated mostly by Muslims, for example: Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Arabia, and Mesopotamia.

Nevertheless, the Eastern Christians were given the privilege of extending the Christian Gospel to the pagans who lived north of them – the Slavs and other peoples who lived in what is today Russia, Poland, and the Balkan nations. In 862 AD King Rotislav of Moravia, a Slavic kingdom, wrote a letter to the authorities in Constantinople, asking them to send someone to teach them the Christian truth, for they had heard various things from Christians who had moved into their kingdom. Two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, responded to the call. They devised the Cyrillic alphabet for writing the Slavonic language. They translated the Bible into the Slavonic language, and they even conducted worship in the Slavonic language.

The pope of Rome learned what they were doing and influenced Cyril and Methodius to put their mission congregations under his jurisdiction. But the Eastern churches also retained some influence among the peoples living in those areas. Some of the Slavic churches became attached to the church of the pope, while others became Eastern Orthodox.

Missionaries from both West and East entered Bulgaria. After King Boris of Bulgaria was baptized, he asked both Western and Eastern leaders to send him an archbishop to spread Christianity in his kingdom. The Eastern patriarch responded by sending him such a leader. In 917 AD the Bulgarian church leader was given the title of patriarch and became the leader of an independent Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

When Christianity came to the land of Russia around 950 AD and Queen Olga was baptized, her grandson Vladimir and his son Yaroslav asked for missionaries from the Eastern Orthodox Church rather than from the pope of Rome. Christianity made good headway among the Russians, and even though Mongols ruled over Russia for over two centuries (1240 AD and following), the Christian Church survived and thrived. Moscow gradually became the center of Eastern orthodoxy, replacing Constantinople, which became weaker and weaker through the years. The bishop of Moscow was known as a patriarch, and the secular rulers became known as czars.

The iconoclastic controversies increased the tensions between the church of Rome and the Eastern Orthodox church. The word “orthodox” means correct teaching, and the Eastern Christians took this name for themselves. This does not mean that their teaching was altogether correct. They did not fall into some of the errors of the Roman church, but they gradually developed into a more mystical religion, emphasizing liturgical ceremony and tradition above all else. Throughout their history the Orthodox Church has been dominated by secular rulers, first by the Byzantine emperors, and then later by the rulers of the various countries where their churches were located, such as by the czars of Russia and the Communist rulers.

Both Eastern and Western churches subscribed to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 325 and 381 AD. Both churches agreed with the Council of Chalcedon of 451 AD. The increasing tension and competition between the two churches was greatly increased by a dispute that arose over the wording of the Nicene Creed. For some reason that is not fully known, the Western churches in Spain added the Latin word *filioque* (which means “and the Son”) to the Nicene Creed, so that the Creed now says (in English) that the Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but also from the Son. This new wording spread from Spain to France and eventually the entire Western church. Patriarch Photius of Constantinople objected to this addition around 867 AD and declared the Western church to be heretical. He did not believe that the accepted wording of the Nicene Creed should be changed.

Both wordings can be understood in a correct sense. But it was no doubt a foolish move for the Western churches to change the wording of an accepted creed without consulting with the Eastern churches. We use the wording that includes the *filioque*, but we do not say that the Eastern Nicene Creed is heretical – only that perhaps it is not as clearly stated. In any case, this wording change increased tensions between the West and the East.

The final split between the Roman Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church came in 1054 AD. By this time the Eastern church had more complaints against the Roman Church than just the addition of *filioque*. An Eastern bishop accused the Roman church of heresy because the Roman Church insisted that its clergy could not be married, whereas the Eastern clergy allowed their clergy to be married. The Roman Church was accused of using unleavened bread in the Lord's Supper, whereas the Eastern Church used leavened bread. The Roman Church also objected to the authority the Byzantine emperors had over the church. No attempt was made to discuss these differences based on the Word of God in order to resolve them. Instead, Pope Leo IX of Rome gave his ambassador a letter of excommunication, which his ambassador took to St. Sophia Church, laid it on the altar, and then walked out.

Questions:

1. Why did the iconoclasts want to destroy all images in the churches?
2. What does Islam teach with respect to images and icons?
3. What was the final outcome of the iconoclastic controversy?

4. What took place in many of the countries that were once dominated by the Eastern Orthodox?
5. Where were the Eastern Orthodox churches able to spread their teachings?
6. How did the word *filioque* add to the tensions between East and West?
7. Name some of the differences between East and West that were not resolved.

