

OR^{IC}†^{XC}_{NI}^{KA} HODOXY

IN A NUTSHELL: Where did the divisions among Christians begin?

For the first 1000 years of Church history, the Church of East and West was one Church. The major division came about in what came to be known as the “Great Schism of 1054” which took place in the greater context of a period of growing estrangement from the 9th century onward, and a solidification in the crusades, generally seen as irreversible by the time of the 4th crusade in 1204AD.

I wish to warn the reader that, regarding the events of the schism, there is propaganda on “both sides” that “you started in 1054, but we go back to the beginning.” Many Orthodox polemicists state that the Roman Catholic Church began in 1054 and that the Orthodox Church goes back to the beginning, and many Roman Catholic polemicists claim that the Orthodox Church started in 1054 and that the RCC goes back to the beginning. But the truth is that the local churches from “both sides” comprised one Church of the first millennium. The Church of the first millennium consisted of 5 major centers, called patriarchates, up until 1054: Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople (Constantinople still to this day includes several ancient diocesan churches that we find in the Bible, including Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, and several others). In 1054, there were mutual excommunications of two bishops. Although there were no official excommunications of the different local churches against each other, de facto they thereafter formed two Churches. Thereafter, the Patriarchate of Rome, on the one hand, and all territories subject to it, formed the Roman Catholic Church; and on the other hand the Patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople, and Alexandria, with the ancient churches of Mt. Sinai, Cyprus, (and even England and Sicily up until the crusades), and of course the Balkan and Slavic countries, stayed together as the Orthodox Church.

The two primary reasons for schism were the understanding of God and the doctrine of Christ as the Head of the Church. For a few decades before the year 1054, tensions were rising. The patriarchate of Rome in the person of the Pope was growing impatient with the other patriarchates and local churches not falling into conformity with its ordinances. The other patriarchates of the Church were disturbed by

recent innovations and claims brought about by the patriarchate of Rome that the Orthodox saw as being against Scripture and the Church's united understanding of it throughout the first millennium. This included a change in the doctrine of the Trinity in which God the Father was "demoted" from his position as eternal "Arche," "Fountainhead" and "Source" of the Trinity, which issue was brought to a head in the change by Rome of the creed to add the famous "filioque" clause to the creed. Also, for the Church of the first millennium, there is only one Head of the Church, and that is Christ. Orthodoxy would not fold on this issue. In the words of one Orthodox Council, "Christ needs no vicar where He Himself is always present" as the ruler of the one Church in heaven and earth throughout the ages. The Bishops are all local Shepherds of the local Churches, with some being "elder brothers" and some being "younger brothers" when they meet in council, but their office is one of local diocesan Shepherd. "Among us there is no bishop of Bishops...Christ alone is the Bishop of Bishops...the universal Shepherd."

Rome justified these changes by a new and unheard of claim: the claim of jurisdictional supremacy of Rome over all others. From the Orthodox side, the question was raised as to how Rome could claim jurisdiction over, for example, "the mother of all the churches," the church of Jerusalem? It was Jerusalem that signed first at the council of Nicea. Rome was founded by Peter and Paul, but so was Antioch, and Jerusalem was founded by the Lord Himself and is the only see that has foundation in all the Apostles, and if any church was to claim universal jurisdiction, it would be Jerusalem, but it never did, because they were all equals with a brotherly primacies among them.

Other less important issues were also at hand. For example, mandatory celibacy of the priesthood was a move against the decisions of the 1st, 6th, and 7th ecumenical councils which all upheld that a married man could become a priest and live in a married state without having to give up his wife. As the centuries passed, further developments in the Roman Catholic Church would cause reunion to be more difficult. Such developments included the new doctrine of the "temporal fires" of purgatory, indulgences, the removal of the chalice at communion from the laity, etc. Also, the RCC tended to call "dogma" many things that, from the Orthodox side, did not fall into the realm of dogma. Dogma expresses things that are necessary to salvation. Some of these issues have found healing in our day, but still dialogue is needed.


One of the most major obstacles, however, is that Rome now holds to the belief that doctrine can change with the decision and "further revelation" to the magisterium or "teaching office" of the Pope. This is

one of the most interesting parts of the whole matter: *Orthodoxy and Rome both agree that split because of doctrinal changes within the patriarchate of Rome and a lack of change in the rest of the patriarchates of the Church.* Both sides agree on this! The difference is, that the Orthodox holds that the Apostolic teaching cannot be changed, and Rome holds the opinion that the Pope of Rome not only can change doctrine, but that all other must conform and be subject to doctrinal changes instituted by his “teaching office.” Orthodoxy, while it wished to maintain unity with Rome, could not accept this. The model of the one Church of the first millennium was continuity of Apostolic doctrine from the beginning. Universal problems were not solved by one person, but by conciliarity and continuity of doctrine that could not change in essence from that which had been delivered from the beginning and manifest in every generation in the Church. It could be further clarified, but not innovated. The model of the Church from the beginning was that found in Acts 15: “It seemed good the Holy Spirit and to us...” This was and still is the only model of decision making from the point of view of the Orthodox Church. The Roman Catholic Church does justify such “doctrinal development” based on the “new dogma” that the Church’s “teaching office” has the right to modify teaching based on further revelation given via the Pope. In other words, the truth as God decided to reveal it in the “age of the Fathers” was different from that of the scholastics which was different from the era of the renaissance which is different from the era of the “new dogmas” (i.e. post-vatican I). The Orthodox, however, see it quite differently.

Christ promised the Apostles that the Spirit would lead them and through them the Church (“you” in the plural) into all truth, and that the churches were founded upon the teaching decrees (dogmata) of the Apostles, as it says in the book of Acts: “As they went through the cities, they delivered (paredidoun—tradition) them the decrees (dogmata, dogmas, expressions of doctrine) to keep, that were ordained (kekrimena) by the Apostles and Elders (Presbyteron) at Jerusalem. And so were the Churches established in the Faith, and increased in number daily” (Acts 16.4-5). No Bishop, Pope or Patriarch can alter this “deposit” of the Faith that was given “once and for all to the saints” (Jude 3). There can be clarifications of it, but there can be no innovation of it, nor departure from it. As St. Paul tells us, this paradosis (handing on) of truth was given by the Apostles both in word and epistle (Scripture), that which verbally was passed on in “word” being preserved in the liturgy of the Church and later written down by the appointed disciples of the Apostles and by their appointed disciples and confirmed by great miracles and by its consistency with Scripture.

Orthodoxy is far more hesitant to “dogmatize” than are our Roman Catholic brethren, due to St. Paul’s warning in Romans not to argue about “doubtful matters” that are non-essential. It is for this reason that things such as the assumption of Mary are non-dogmatic issues. They do not relate to the essence of the salvation of mankind. However, dogmatic or non-dogmatic, there has always been the sense that the entire Church is the keeper of the Faith. Bishops are our primary teachers, and Presbyters secondarily, but the entire Church, the whole people of God, clergy and laity, are the guardians and confirmation of the Faith, and it is preserved not only in outward proclamations but internally in her Liturgy. This is because of the principle of a common “phronema” (mindset)—i.e. Scripture’s teaching that “we have the mind of Christ.” Together sinners become something that separately they are not—the Body of Christ. The decisions of a council of Bishops with regard to doctrinal matters are held as confirming the truth if they are received by the whole Church and withstand the test of being in accord with the Apostolic deposit of the Faith delivered in word and writing and upheld from the beginning. It is here that we find the Orthodox Church preserving in herself, in the words of Scripture, the fullness of “the Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” throughout the past 2000 years.

And so, for several hundred years after the Great Schism we find two distinct bodies until, in the 1500’s, the Roman Catholic Church would have many split away from it in the Protestant Reformation, which is the cause of having some 30,000 Christian “denominations” today. The Orthodox Church, which did not experience any such reformation, nonetheless laments this as a further complication of Christian unity, and prays that all of this may be overcome by a return of all to the God-given principles that united the Church of the first millennium and restoration of full Communion in that common Faith delivered once for all to the saints. Orthodoxy hopes especially that she can once more share with her Roman Catholic brethren that fullness of the Faith without addition or subtraction which they once shared in common.

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