

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

The Historical Development of Christianity: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism

In the July 2011 edition of *Christianity Today* there is an interview with Bishop Kallistos Ware, formerly known as Timothy Ware, who had converted to Orthodox Christianity as a young man and who wrote a rather definitive book entitled *The Orthodox Church*. Since his conversion to Orthodoxy, Ware has become a monk, took the name Kallistos, became a lecturer at Oxford University and was made Metropolitan Bishop of Diokleia for Greek Orthodoxy in Great Britain. Ware is representative of a number of evangelicals who have converted to Orthodoxy. Among more prominent Christians who also have converted is Franky Schaeffer, the son of Francis and Edith Schaeffer.

Because of these rather well-known conversions, I am devoting this entire edition of *Issues in Perspective* to an analysis of Eastern Orthodoxy and its differences with Roman Catholicism.

The Origins of Roman Catholicism. The Christian church began on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled the nearly 120 believers gathered in Jerusalem. From there it spread to Judea, Samaria and then to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). Organizationally, the church developed from a plurality of church leadership in the 1st century (e.g., Philippians 1:1), to a bishop having authority over several churches in the 2nd century, to a hierarchical structure into 3rd and 4th centuries. By the 5th century, the church regarded the Bishop of Rome as the first among equals and the city of Rome as its geographical center. Through church councils (e.g., Nicea [325] and Chalcedon [451] and others), the church reached agreement that the Bible taught God is Trinity, Jesus is God, His death is a substitutionary one and that He is coming again. Protestant church historians generally maintain that institutionalized Roman Catholicism began with Gregory's appointment as bishop of Rome in A.D. 590. Though he refused the title pope, administratively, he organized the papal system of government that characterized the entire medieval period. Thus, all the major bishoprics of the West looked to him for guidance and leadership. He likewise standardized the liturgy and theology of the burgeoning Roman Church. Doctrines like the veneration of Mary, purgatory, an early form of transubstantiation, and praying to departed saints found their infant pronouncements in his writings. Gregory also promoted missionary activity among the Germanic tribes, who had conquered the Western Roman Empire. Gregory laid the foundation for the great edifice known as Roman Catholicism.

Two other factors contributed to the growing power and prestige of the Roman bishop. First, an early king of the Franks, Pepin the Short (741-768), granted the pope extensive land in central Italy--the Donation of Pepin--making the Catholic Church a temporal and political power in Europe. Second, the Donation of Constantine allegedly gave power and authority to the Roman

bishop when Constantine relocated his capital to the East. It was later discovered to be a forgery. Both, however, solidified the power of the pope. Missionary activity throughout Europe by Boniface (672-754), Columba (521-597), Patrick (ca. 389-461) and many others brought the areas under Germanic tribal domination into the Roman Catholic fold. The Church became a civilizing force as these tribes converted to faith and settled down. During the medieval period of church history (600-1500), a group of theologians called the Scholastics theologized and systematized the body of critical Roman Catholic doctrine. The apex of Scholastic Theology was reached with Thomas Aquinas. His life of scholarship forever shaped the direction of institutionalized Catholicism. In His *Summa Theologica*, he gave critical support to the distinctive doctrines of the Christian faith, including the attributes of God, the resurrection and *ex nihilo* creation. He also defended the veneration of Mary, the seven holy sacraments through which God conveys grace, purgatory, and the role of human merit in salvation, all distinctive Roman Catholic doctrines. He likewise gave a philosophical defense that the communion elements at the prayer of consecration become, sacrificially, the actual body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation). Roman Catholicism not only had a distinct hierarchical structure with clear geographical support, it now had a defining theology.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

The Split between Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy

The division of the church between East and West is rooted deep in church history. First of all, early on leaders noticed the difference and discrepancies that language brought. The Eastern Church spoke and wrote Greek, while the West began to speak and write in Latin. This was perhaps the first sign that there was division within the church. Several additional developments enhanced the linguistic and geographical separation. First, when Pepin made his donation of land in central Italy to the papacy in 756, he caused the pope to fix his attention more to the West and basically ignore the East. The pope was now the largest landholder in Italy, with an annual income of over one million dollars, and a recognized secular as well as religious leader. Second, Pepin's son, Charlemagne, came to Rome and on Christmas Day, 800, was formally crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III. This act symbolized the division of East and West.

A doctrinal development further intensified the obvious East-West division. The issue centered on the question of who sent the Holy Spirit--the Father or the Father and Son? The great 5th century theologian Augustine (354-430) argued strongly that the Spirit was sent ("proceeded from") both the Father and the Son. In 589, at 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 (in Latin, *filioque*, "and from the Son"). This controversy is hence called the *filioque* controversy. The Eastern theologians strongly protested this addition. Another theological controversy separating East and West was the dating of Easter. During the first several centuries of the church, Eastern Christians celebrated Easter on Passover. The West always celebrated Easter on a Sunday. At the 325 Council of Nicea, the Eastern practice was condemned, thereby marking another divergence. By the 4th century, Easter was being celebrated on different Sundays all over Christendom. During the 6th century, a monk named Dionysius Exiguus, worked out a formula for dating Easter and created the B.C.-A.D. system for numbering years. The West accepted his system; the East did not. For Western Christians,

Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after 21 March (vernal equinox). In the East, Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday following the full moon after vernal equinox, but also the Sunday following Passover. For that reason the East normally celebrates Easter about a week later. The final break came in 1054 in what is known as the Great Schism. On 16 June of that year, Pope Leo IX excommunicated Orthodox Patriarch Michael Cerularius for “trying to humiliate and crush the holy catholic and apostolic church.” The Patriarch then excommunicated Pope Leo. This mutual excommunication marks the formal break between Eastern and Western Christianity. That break has never been healed. The hostility and split were intensified when, during the 1204 Crusade, the crusaders sacked and pillaged Constantinople on Good Friday. So horrific and inexcusable was this event that the break between Eastern and Western Christianity was final and complete. Islam also had a devastating effect on the Eastern Church. Major centers of the Eastern Church, Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria, fell into Muslim hands and after the 8th century theological development in these areas ceased. Therefore, leadership of the Eastern Church gravitated to Constantinople’s patriarch. When that city fell to the Muslim Ottoman Turks in 1453, leadership passed to the Russian Orthodox patriarch, who declared that Moscow would be the “Third Rome,” after historic Rome and Constantinople. Today, in effect, there are thirteen self-governing and independent churches in Eastern Orthodoxy, each with its own head, a patriarch, archbishop or metropolitan.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy: Theology and Ethics

Roman Catholicism. Theologically, the Roman Catholic church has consistently held to the historical and biblical view of God as Trinity--Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Equally, the Church has defended the deity of Jesus Christ and His virgin birth. However, there are several areas where Catholics and Protestants have differed:

1. Scripture. The official position of the Roman Catholic church is that “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture” are equal sources of authority for the Christian. The Church is entrusted with the transmission and interpretation of these two Traditions and it declares what that Revelation from God says and means. Tradition for the Roman Catholic refers to the external dogmatic authority that resides in the teaching “magisterium of the church” as expressed in the primacy and infallibility of the papacy. “Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.” [Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Press, 1994), p.26]

2. Mary. The Church teaches that Mary is the “mother of God,” was immaculately conceived, that is born without original sin, and was bodily taken to heaven (the Assumption of Mary), thereby not dying. Therefore, the Church teaches that “the Holy Mother of God, the new Eve, Mother of the Church, continues in heaven to exercise her maternal role on behalf of the members of Christ.” [Ratzinger, pp. 251-252, 254]

3. Sacraments. The Church teaches that there are seven, grace conveying sacraments--baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist (or Communion), penance, Extreme Unction (last rites), Holy Orders and Marriage. Although the Church baptizes adults when they convert to Catholicism, it practices infant baptism, whereby the child is cleansed of original sin. The Church also teaches baptismal regeneration, i.e., that it is necessary for salvation. For the Church, the Eucharist, or communion, centers on transubstantiation, whereby, when the priest prays the prayer of consecration, the bread and the wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus. Each time the Mass is said, Jesus is sacrificially present in the elements.

4. Salvation. For the Roman Catholic church, salvation is more of a process than an event; a line, not a point. That process begins with infant baptism and is nourished along through life by the sacraments. The Church teaches that after baptism the believer will continue to sin. It teaches, however, that there are two categories of sin: (1) "Mortal sin," which can cause a person to lose sanctifying grace and thereby separates the person from God. Forgiveness for mortal sin can come only through confession to a priest or an act of repentance. (2) "Venial sins" are less serious and do not take away grace. They are removed by simple acts of repentance. The Church teaches that faith is merely the beginning of salvation, for the believer must work throughout life to complete the process begun by faith. The faithful Catholic must follow the sacraments regularly. If the sacraments are not followed regularly or if mortal or venial sins are committed and there is no confession, when the believer dies he or she will spend time in purgatory. There they can receive temporal punishment for sin that then purifies them for heaven. [Ratzinger, pp. 288-292]

Eastern Orthodoxy. Daniel Clendenin describes a typical Orthodox worship service: "The near absence of chairs or pews, dim lighting, head coverings for most women, icons and frescoes covering almost every inch of space on the walls and ceiling, a massive and ornate iconostasis separating the priest and the worshipers, the smoky smell of incense and hundreds of candles burning in memory of the dead, the priest resplendent in his ornate vestments and enormous beard, and worshipers repeatedly prostrating themselves, kissing the icons, and making the sign of the cross." ["Why I'm Not Orthodox," *Christianity Today* (6 January 1997), p. 35] What is the theology of Orthodoxy that produces a worship service often so foreign to Western Protestants?

1. The Church. Eastern Orthodoxy teaches that it is the one true church on earth, tracing its origins back to the apostolic church in unbroken succession. The implication of this position is that both Catholics and Protestants have departed from the true church and true faith.

2. The Sacraments. As with the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy affirms the seven sacraments through which God transmits both saving and sanctifying grace. Baptism, however, is the primary sacrament for "everything in the church flows out of the waters of baptism: the remission of sin and life eternal." Orthodoxy practices infant baptism, immersing the child three times, by which the infant is "born again" and wholly cleansed from all sin. Immediately following baptism is the rite of "chrismation," where the priest anoints the child with a special ointment, making the sign of the cross on various parts of the body, symbolizing the gift and seal of the Holy Spirit. Like Catholicism, Orthodoxy teaches the sacrificial presence of Jesus in the

communion elements, but Orthodoxy rejects transubstantiation, simply affirming the mystery of the sacrament. Orthodoxy also administers communion to infants.

3. Icons. Probably the most unusual aspect of Orthodoxy for the Protestant is the centrality of icons during worship. At baptism the believer often receives an icon of the saint whose name he or she takes; at marriage the fathers of the couple bless them with icons; and at death the icon precedes the burial procession. Icons are flat images of Christ, Mary or a saint. They usually take the form of wooden pictures painted in oils and are often ornately decorated with brilliant colors. The icons are central to Orthodoxy because they are of equal benefit and mutually revelatory with the written Word. Icons are not idols or vile images. They are types, figures and shadows of the truths of Christianity. What the Bible proclaims in words, the icon proclaims in “color.” For the Eastern Orthodox Christian, icons demonstrate the humanity of Jesus, which is the key to His incarnation. The icons of Jesus demonstrate that He is God and man together in one person localized in space-time history. Icons thus teach a profound truth of Christianity.

4. Scripture. For the Protestant, Scripture is the final authority. For the Roman Catholic, it is both Scripture and tradition. However, for the Eastern Orthodox, theological authority is internal, coming from the Spirit, Who speaks to believers through tradition. For Orthodoxy, the papacy is not the guardian of truth, the “whole people of God is the protector of apostolic tradition.” As Clendenin argues, “tradition is the life of the Spirit in the church, who alone is the ultimate criterion of truth.” [Ibid. pp. 107-108] For that reason, the Bible is the unique expression of that tradition and is elevated, incensed, kissed and given a place of honor in various processions. However, tradition also includes the historic Church councils and the early Fathers and their writings. Orthodox believers never approach Scripture without the “grid” provided by the Councils and the Fathers. They are all complementary in the Spirit’s witness to truth.

5. Other Differences with Roman Catholicism. Where the Catholic church affirms purgatory, Orthodoxy repudiates this belief. Where the Catholic church demands celibacy of its entire clergy, Orthodoxy permits clergy below the office of bishop to marry. Where the Catholic church affirms the Bishop of Rome (the pope) as head of the Church, Orthodoxy repudiates that teaching. Orthodoxy mandates its clergy wear beards, while that is not an issue in Catholicism. Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy strongly agree on the foundational doctrine of the Trinitarian godhead. But when it comes to almost all other manifestations of faith and practice, they differ, often considerably. Both of these Christian traditions also differ rather radically from historic Protestantism.

See *Christianity Today* (July 2011), pp. 3841 and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 99-112.