

A Study in Pursuit of Reconciliation within the Body and Bride of Christ



*And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of
many generations; you shall be called
the repairer of the breach, the restorer of
the streets to dwell in – Isaiah 58:12*

I. EXCOMMUNICATIONS

In 1054AD, following a series of hostile interactions, the papal legate, Cardinal Humbert, officially entered the sacred church of Constantinople, the Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), and placed a papal bull on the altar, excommunicating the Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius. Cerularius responded by anathematizing Humbert and these events have traditionally symbolized the major split between what would be known as the Catholic Church in the west, and the Orthodox Church in the east via what is referred to as the Great Schism.

It is now recognized that the divide was much more complicated than a single event of antagonism, and most locate the formal divide of these two churches in the 13th century at the misfortunes of the 4th Crusade. What once symbolized the unity of the Christian faith in the early Greco-Roman world, these two churches have since had histories that have unfolded in isolation from one another for nearly 8 centuries.

II. GROWING APART

The divide between eastern and western Christianity may have culminated in the significant events of the 11th through 13th centuries, but the distant relationship of these two centuries began slowly unfolding as the Roman Empire collapsed in the 5th century. These two churches emerged with diverse experiences, growing cultural isolation, and unfolding tensions surrounding the unique understanding that each had in terms of how the church was to hold and operate its authority in the world.

- A. **Political Experiences** – The 5th century saw the Roman Empire collapse in the West at the hands of invading barbarian groups. These groups, such as the Goths, Vandals, and Franks, began competing with and fighting with one another for supremacy in the political vacuum that followed. What would arise at the center of this new reality in Europe giving cohesiveness and unity would be the church, primarily expressed through the bishop of Rome, the Pope. Most Barbarian groups were converted to Christianity in the following centuries and the Holy Roman Empire would arise in the 8th and 9th centuries, with the emperor and the pope as its heads. In this, the Western Church would assume temporal power that would never be known in the east.

The Eastern Church would see the Roman Empire continue for another thousand years after the collapse in the West in what is known as the Byzantium Empire. Closely associated with the emperor reigning in Constantinople, the church would exercise spiritual authority that the emperor would enforce in regard to the temporal realm of politics. While not experiencing the Barbarian invasions, the East would be confronted with Islam in the 7th century which would soon see it geographically cut off in the east and south, forcing the church both north and west. The success of seeing Barbarian invaders converted would not be realized among these in the East with its Islamic counterparts.

- B. **Culture and Language** – The growing separation of political experience was compounded by the increasing isolation of unique cultures developing apart from one another. In the West, Latin was the dominant language and by the 5th century very few could speak or read in Greek. The East spoke Greek and by the 7th century, Latin was no longer a language of focus or engagement. Underneath each language were also cultural emphases that, while complementary of one another, were manifesting independent of one another.

The juridical influences of Roman order were more formative among the Latin speaking West, thus emphasizing law and order. In the East, the philosophical musings of the Greeks influenced a more speculative perspective that embraced diversity and mystery. This influenced theological reflection, liturgical practices, church structure and hierarchy, and would eventually manifest in outright conflict by the 9th century.

- C. **View of the Church** – Undergirding this all were divergent views as to how authority was held in the church. The political experiences of the West and the centralized authority of the Pope revealed a greater emphasis on hierarchy that would be much more autocratic. The East was much more conciliatory and emphasized a hierarchy that was more collegial. These views would come into direct conflict regarding the extend of the Pope’s authority, and the nature of authority as it was held in the councils and creeds.

III. SEALING THE DIVIDE

By the 9th century it was becoming increasingly clear that two distinct churches were emerging from one another. While the events of the 11th century were catastrophic, the formal divide would not occur until 1204AD, and would thus be solidified over the next decades.

- A. **Photius and the Filioque** – As authority in the East and West began experiencing tension, it would manifest in the latter part of the 8th century and into the 9th with the addition of the *filioque* clause to the Nicene Creed in the West. This addition, which means ‘from the son,’ began being used in the West centuries before in an attempt to address a recurring heresy known as Arianism. Eventually it would become adopted by the imperial church. In 794AD, Frankish King and soon to be consecrated Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne, accused the East of heresy for not including the clause in their version of the creed.

While this would be the first sign of tension, it would not be until the latter part of the 9th century where these competing views of the church would unfold in open conflict. Following a dispute in the East regarding the Patriarch of Constantinople, the new patriarch, Photius, would openly condemn the West for its inclusion of this clause and for both tampering with the creed and Trinitarian theology.

- B. **Growing Discord** – In the 11th century preceding the events of the Great Schism, a growing discord, especially among the Papacy and the Patriarch of Constantinople arose. Differing practices were being highlighted, such as clerical celibacy and whether to use leavened or unleavened bread in the Eucharist, and outright hostility began to manifest as it became more difficult for Greeks worshipping in the West, and Latins worshipping in the East. This would eventually unfold in the excommunications of 1054AD.

- C. **4th Crusade** – Despite the threats of eternal damnation towards one another’s leaders, the two churches remained in relationship for nearly a decade and a half longer. It would not be until the 4th Crusade, when an opportunist leader in the East, with opportunist crusaders in the West, would lead to the Western siege and subsequent sack of Constantinople. This would be followed by a Western dominance of the city that would not be overthrown until 1261. The impact and effects of this violent exchange would leave a lasting impact in the East that would lead to the formal divide of these two churches.

IV. FAILED ATTEMPTS AT RECONCILIATION

While the divide of Eastern and Western Christianity came to a head in the 13th century, it must be understood that this does not imply that attempts at reconciliation were not engaged. As Islamic Turks continued to threaten the East, the fear of possible overthrow and takeover allowed for several failed attempts. The failures of these attempts would be followed by the fall of Constantinople in 1453 that would push the Eastern Church and the West into further isolation from one another.

- A. **Lyon 1274AD** – The Second Council of Lyon took place shortly after the Latin Empire of Constantinople was once more in the hands of the East. The council, which met in 6 sessions, focused on crusading conquests of the Holy Land and the union of the Eastern and Western churches. The creed was sung three times with the *filioque* and while supported by the Emperor Michael VIII and Patriarch John Bekkos, it was never fully received in the East, forcing Bekkos to abdicate and was then repudiated in 1282 by Michael’s son, Andronicus II.
- B. **Ferrara/Florence 1438AD** – As the West was working through its own schisms and the role of the papacy and the authority of councils, the Council of Basel which had been moved to Ferrara and eventually to Florence by the pope, sought one last time to address eastern and western union. With the threat of Islamic invasion at the hand of the Turks, the East conceded to the West on the issues of papal supremacy, the *filioque*, and purgatory. Of the 700 Eastern delegates only one contested the decisions, but it would be rejected. While accepted by the representative bishops and the emperor, it was never received beyond those present and was thoroughly rejected by the Eastern Church, as well as the civil authorities. In 1453, led by Sultan Mehmed II, the Ottoman Turks invaded Constantinople bringing an end to the Byzantine Empire.

V. WHAT WAS LOST AND MODERN DIALOGUE

The division of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches saw a necessary and important interdependence destroyed. The cultural and theological emphases of each church complemented one another in a way that brought greater wholeness to the Gospel and to the witness of Christ in the earth. The isolated experiences give way to cultural arrogances that have only furthered division and proven a stumbling block to deeper reconciliation and union.

In 1965 the excommunications of 1054AD were lifted by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I in the Catholic-Orthodox Joint Declaration. These were withdrawn once more by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. Since then significant strides have been taken and one of the foremost works towards restoring relationship can be found in the forming of the Ravenna Document in 2007.