

## Eastern Orthodoxy - Byzantine Theology

### **The Three Major Branches of Christianity**

Roman Catholicism (1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. – Present)

Eastern Orthodoxy (1054 A.D. – Present)

Protestantism (1517 A.D. – Present)

Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are called “Western” Christianity and the main language of focus is Latin. Eastern Orthodoxy is called “Eastern” Christianity and the main language of focus is Greek (hence it is sometimes called “Greek Orthodoxy”).

### **Why you are probably not very familiar with Eastern Orthodoxy:**

- You’re Protestant, so you come from a Western tradition.
- Major centers of Eastern Orthodoxy were repressed by outsiders (Constantinople fell to the Muslims - Moscow and Kiev to the Communists).
- They were always under the eye of the emperor.
- They never had one, single figure as influential as Augustine. (Gregory Palamas is probably the closest they have after the Cappadocian Fathers)

### **What these three branches have in common:**

- They all affirm the Trinity.
- They all affirm *at least* the first 6 major church councils.
- They all affirm the incarnation and the orthodox view of Christ.
- They all affirm Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection.
- And more!

**Church councils that the Eastern Orthodox affirm** (They do not affirm any other councils past these)

Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) – Christ is fully God.

Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.) – Christ is fully human.

Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) – Christ is only one person.

Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) – Christ has two distinct natures.

Second Council of Constantinople (553 A.D.) – Continued to defend that Christ has two, distinct natures (against the Monophysites).

Third Council of Constantinople (680-681 A.D.) – Christ has two wills (against the Monothelites)

Second Council of Nicaea (787 A.D.) – The church can use images in worship.

### **Differences and causes for separation in East and West**

1. Location - In 330 A.D. Constantine moved his capital to Constantinople. This created two major cities over the church – Rome in the west and Constantinople in the east. Other major sees of Eastern Orthodoxy are Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria.



2. Outlook – The West was a bit more practical and the East was a bit more philosophical/mystical.

3. Marriage – Priests in the West could not marry. But priests in the East (below the rank of Bishop) could.

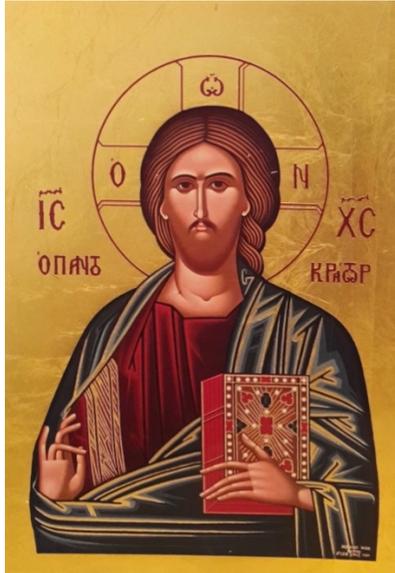
4. Beards(!) – Those in the West were allowed to shave their face or have beards, but priests in the East had to have beards.



5. Language – The West primarily used Latin and the East primarily used Greek.

6. Holidays – There was a big debate over when to celebrate Easter that was different due to the different calendar/holy day arrangements of the Eastern and Western church.

7. Statues and Icons – The Western church allowed statues and icons to be used in worship, but the Eastern church primarily promotes icons.



8. Authority – Sometimes a leader of one church would try to impose something on a church in another territory, and it would not go well. Also, the Eastern Orthodox only accept the first 7 ecumenical councils and none after that (as in Catholicism).

9. Communion – The West used unleavened bread and the East used leavened bread.

10 Trinitarian Focus – Both believe in the Trinity, but the West has a tendency to start their focus the one-ness of God, and the East has a tendency to start their focus on the three-ness of God.

11. The *Filioque* Controversy (see below).

### **The Filioque Controversy**

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed originally said (regarding the Holy Spirit)...

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets;*

By the 9<sup>th</sup> century (867 A.D.) the Western church was charged with heresy by an Eastern Patriarch because they had been adding the phrase “and from the Son” (the Latin phrase here is *filioque*) in the creed. Augustine defended this view in his book *De Trinitate (on the Trinity)*.

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets;*

The last straw that split the church was actually the West using unleavened bread in communion.

In 1054 the Pope (Leo IX) excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople (Michael Cerularius), and he excommunicated him right back. The mutual excommunications lasted until 1965 when they were eventually revoked.

### **Who is right?**

Being a Protestant, I think that the *filioque* clause is true, but the Western church didn't follow the proper procedure when they inserted it. It helps distinguish the Son from the Spirit. If the Son and the Spirit both come from the Father then what makes them different? One answer is that it is how they have their person (the Son is eternally begotten and the Spirit eternally proceeds), but the Western tradition is even clearer that there is another difference. The Son comes from the Father and the Spirit from the Father *and the Son*.

Though scripture is talking about how God interacts *with creation* (and not back in eternity), there are some hints in scripture that may point toward the Western position:

John 20:22 - And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:9–10 - You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

John 15:26 - “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.

John 14:26 - But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

### **Important elements in Byzantine (Eastern Orthodox) Theology**

1. Icons – Holy images (usually of Christ, saints, Mary, apostles, etc.).

-Second Council of Nicaea (787 A.D.) affirmed the veneration of icons.

-If you say you can't have an image of Christ because the Bible forbids graven images they will respond with:

-That is just about images of false "gods."

- They do not "worship" (*latrea*) icons; they "venerate" (*dulia*) icons. You are worshipping the person behind the icon (Christ), not the icon itself.

-It is a way for those who are illiterate (which is most people in church history) to still learn the about the Bible even though they can't read.

"When we...see the image...His saving passion is brought back to remembrance, and we fall down and worship not he material but that which is imaged." -John of Damascus

*-God was fine picturing Christ physically in the incarnation.* When people bowed down to Jesus they bowed down to something they could see.

-They believe that you are picturing the deified flesh of Christ.

-They don't picture Christ ever in an image that would suggest just a suffering man (like a crucifix in Catholicism) but always as the glorified God-man.

-Images of saints are pictures of them as they are now glorified. That is why they often look like they have the same (or similar) face and why they often have halos.



-You usually don't have icons of the Father or the Spirit (other than symbols of the Spirit like a dove).



2. View of salvation – In Roman Catholicism and Protestantism there is a big focus on sin, grace, needing to be forgiven and justification (forensic and legal ideas). The focus in Eastern Orthodoxy is more on one’s ascent to God’s presence. Also, Roman Catholics and Protestants emphasize grace alone for salvation (against Pelagius) whereas seeking salvation and participating in the sacraments can sometimes drift into Pelagianism in Eastern Orthodoxy.

3. Beatific Vision – The happiness we gain by beholding the glory of God. This is the goal of life for the Eastern Orthodox. It’s like eternally looking at the transfigured Christ. Icons are meant to be a foretaste of beatific vision.

4. Mystery – There is a high level of mystery in Greek Orthodoxy. They have a focus on God’s transcendent “otherness.” “They are proud of how little you can know about God.” One of their main theologians says “God is beyond being and non-being.”

5. Apophatic Theology – This way of doing theology emphasizes talking about God in negatives (what he is not) instead of positives (what he is – called “kataphatic theology”).

6. The veneration of Mary – Since Mary is the vehicle through whom God became man she is seen as an important figure in Eastern Orthodoxy (as in Catholicism).

7. Essence and energies – You cannot ever see God’s essence (what God really is). You can only see his “energies” (uncreated glory of God) that shine through in the flesh of Christ. They also shine through the saints (so you can view an image of a saint) since they have seen Christ.



(Gregory Palamas - 1296-1359)

8. Complicated liturgy – Worship services are highly elaborate with icons, candles, singing, rituals, and more. The service is meant to direct your attention to a mystical ascent to God. It is also meant to emphasize God’s mystery (parts of the church are left dark, the services are often not in the vernacular, etc.).

9. Hesychasm – The practice of remaining silent (in a prayer position) for Christian meditation to further experience God.

10. Church authority – The Orthodox Church is composed of 14 or so different Orthodox denominations (Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, etc.). They give priority to the four churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. The Patriarch of Constantinople has the title “Ecumenical.” Though he does not function like a pope (with authority over the other churches), he is the figurehead for the Eastern Orthodox.

11. Theosis – We are caught up in the divine, Trinitarian life of God. It’s not that you are or become a “god.” It’s that you are so closely caught up in God’s life (energies) that you have supreme joy and eternal life.

“[Theosis or deification] does not mean we become divine by nature. If we participated in God’s essence, the distinction between God and man would be abolished. What this does mean is that we participate in God’s energy, described by a number of terms in scripture such as glory, love, virtue, and power...but we never become like God by nature...When we are joined to Christ, our humanity is

interpenetrated with the energies of God through Christ's glorified flesh...thus, we being human, are being deified." –Orthodox Study Bible

"[In Eastern Orthodoxy, theosis is] you working in tandem with the Holy Spirit to become more like God, to participate more and more in the energies of God." – Carl Trueman

However, I think this is an unhelpful way to talk about salvation. The Bible teaches that we have fellowship with God, that we are given eternal life, and that we are united to Christ etc., but it doesn't say anything like "we become completely united to God's energies, etc." This view makes the humanity and work of Christ unnecessary and it confuses the infinite divide between God and humanity. We will remain humans, and only humans, forever. (Isaiah 43:10; Isaiah 44:8; Isaiah 44:6, etc.). The focus in the New Testament is that we are sanctified and then glorified, but all "glorified" just means we are resurrected, perfected, and given eternal life.

"Rather than speak in terms of theosis/deification, I think that [in the Bible] *participation* and *transformation* are the more appropriate categories to describe how believers inter into the messianic story of salvation...Believers are transformed to share in the divine life that God has and conformed to the pattern of Christ in order to imitate the righteousness that God is [but] anything beyond that is going to raise more problems than it solves." –Michael Bird