



LUTHERAN  
*looks at...*

EASTERN ORTHODOXY

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# INTRODUCTION

Rudyard Kipling started his poem “The Ballad of East and West” with the line “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.”

All the other books covered in the series *A Lutheran Looks At* are about “Western” churches—the Roman Catholic church and the churches that broke with the Catholics at the time of the Reformation.

This book is about an “Eastern” church. When you read this book, you are entering a different and perhaps unfamiliar part of the world, the world to the east of Europe—Ukraine, Russia, the land that today is called Turkey, the Balkans, and Greece. You will be entering the dominant church of those countries and a church whose worship services will make you think you have been transported 1,500 years into the past.

In some senses “the twain” have met. There are three to four million Orthodox church members in the United States. You may live in a neighborhood with an Orthodox church or have neighbors who attend one. With the fall of Communism, doors have opened that allow missionaries to work in the heartland of Orthodoxy. Western missionaries must learn about this church as they work with people who are, or who used to be, members of the Orthodox church.

We will approach Orthodoxy from three standpoints.

1. *History*. Included is enough history to give you a general idea of where the Orthodox church came from and how to understand the array of ethnic Orthodox churches that exist in the United States.
2. *Teachings*. By the time you finish this book, you will understand how the Orthodox approach Scripture and know the basics of what they believe.

3. *Impressions*. Understanding the Orthodox church is as much about impressions as it is about concrete teachings. The Orthodox stress that the only way to know about God is to experience him.

If you are skeptical about whether this book is for you, find an Orthodox church near where you live and attend the service this Sunday. Then come back and finish this book.





# 1 HOW THE ORTHODOX *Church Began*

*A visit* to St. John the Baptist Armenian  
Orthodox Church, Greenfield, WI

The service started at 10:00 A.M., and it was about a quarter after. I wasn't worried. During the first 15 minutes of an Orthodox service, the church is generally quite empty. But in this case, the parking lot was nearly full. Evidently, this congregation expects people to be on time. There were about 30 people in the pews plus the 20 officiants and choir members. A few more would arrive, but there were only about 40 people there when it was time for Communion.

This is an Armenian Orthodox church, one of the most ancient of all Orthodox churches. Armenia adopted Christianity as the state religion in A.D. 301, during the days when Roman emperors were still persecuting Christians. The Armenians were not exempt. The Armenian church is non-Chalcedonian. (It accepts only the first three ecumenical creeds and not necessarily the later creeds of the first seven church councils.) Yet it does not identify with other non-Chalcedonian churches like the Nestorians or Monophysites, who broke away from the main church in the fifth century.

Armenia is a small country located north of Iraq, south of Eastern Russian, between the Black and Caspian seas. Much of its history has been spent under foreign rule, and for that reason it has experienced a good deal of persecution. After the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, Armenia became part of the USSR and suffered persecution under that atheistic regime.

Armenian Orthodoxy in North America was established by those fleeing hardship in their homeland.

St. John the Baptist Church is part of the Eastern American Diocese, with 62 churches in 21 states. It is overseen by the *Catholicos* (the Patriarch), headquartered in Holy Etchmiadzin, located on the southeast border of Armenia.

The Sunday I visited happened to be the 70th Anniversary of St. John the Baptist. A special guest liturgist was His Eminence Archbishop Yeghise Gizirian, the retired primate of the Diocese of Great Britain. He was a smallish man; I would guess somewhere in his 70s. But he had an operatic voice that could have filled a large cathedral.

The Armenian church has its own special customs. While its liturgy bears the broad outline of the other Orthodox liturgies I have seen, it seemed quite different. The priest wore a mitred hat and vestments much like a Catholic bishop would wear. The choir was led by a modern organ, and the choir members wore stoles. The women in the choir wore white lace coverings on their heads. The choir didn't sing hymns or choir selections like we do in Lutheran churches; rather, it sang the congregation's responses and liturgical pieces for the congregation. The choir was much more accomplished than some of the others I have heard.

The service book listed when to stand and when to sit, which is often difficult for a visitor to understand since sitting seems a rather arbitrary (or even voluntary) activity. Yet the instructions were almost impossible for me to use since the entire service was in Armenian, and I soon gave up trying to figure out what page we were on.

Two teenage officiants had censers, which kept them busy the whole service. Two of the others each had a nimbus, or a sunburstlike object on a pole with bells attached that rang when they rolled the poles back and forth quickly in their hands. Together with the bells on the censers, they filled the room with a tambourinelike sound throughout the liturgy. There was no iconostasis (the wall between the congregation



and the altar). Rather, they had a large curtain, at least 12 feet high, that moved back and forth on a track (which I learned is typical at Armenian Orthodox churches). When they wanted to seal off the altar area, one of the officiants pulled a chain that moved the curtain along a track on the ceiling. The curtain was bright red with a large cross in the center. With the curtain drawn, it was impossible to see what the priest and deacon were doing.

At one point there was a procession around the church. People moved close to the aisle. It's about this time in an Orthodox service that I start to feel nervous—audience participation, so to speak. A procession moved from the altar area and started to walk down the side aisle, then up the center aisle, and back. As the priest moved along, he held out a cross mounted to a stick that he reached out to the people to kiss. I was on the right side, near the back. I was trapped. When the priest passed, I tried not to make eye contact. But he reached the cross out to me anyway. I shook my head no. I'm sure he thought I was an unbeliever. I learned later that if that happens, you simply cross yourself when the priest passes by and everything is okay.

Later in the service the congregation observed the kiss of peace. In this church, two ushers walked down the center aisle. Starting at the front pew, they each gave the kiss of peace to the first person in the pew on each side of the aisle, and that person passed the kiss on to the next person, and so on down the pew. The person passing the kiss would greet the next person by bowing, and the two would move their heads together on the right and then on the left. I followed suit when it came my turn. The person extending the kiss of peace to me said, "Christ has been revealed." I was glad that I was at the end of the pew and didn't have to pass it on.

Which was the first Christian church?

Unlike most churches in the series *A Lutheran Looks At*, the origins of the Orthodox church cannot be traced back to

another church that was before it. The Orthodox church was the first. Almost all the visitors to Jerusalem on Pentecost Sunday who heard the gospel from Peter's lips and took it back to their home countries were from places that later became the homes of the Eastern Orthodox church. It was in Eastern Orthodox countries that Paul did much of his mission work.

The Roman Catholic church (the Western church) claims to be the first Christian church. But this is largely due to its claim that the pope in Rome was the first head of the entire Christian church. But at the church's beginning, and in the eyes of the Eastern Orthodox today, the bishop of Rome was merely one of the *patriarchs*, or church leaders, in a major city where Christianity started.

It could be argued that from a doctrinal standpoint, the Western church moved away from the main body of Christianity. The Eastern Orthodox may have a better argument for being the original church.

But for the first thousand years of the church's existence, and probably for another two or three centuries after that, most Christians believed that there was only one church. To them, the terms *East* and *West* merely referred to two geographic areas of the same church, not to two different churches.

We'll return to the topic of why the Eastern church and the Western church divided in chapter 2. The rest of this chapter will give you a brief picture of how the single, universal church developed—a history that to some extent is shared by the East and West. This brief presentation will only give you a bird's-eye view of the early history of Christianity. But it will give you the facts you need to understand the historic development of the Orthodox church.

### The early years

Formal mission work began when Peter, Philip, and the others spread the Word into Judea and Samaria. The gospel spread south through the work of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was

brought to faith through the evangelist Philip. God chose Paul to spread the gospel to the Gentiles in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), Greece, and the western regions of the Roman Empire. Legend has it that Mark started churches in Egypt and that Thomas brought the gospel to India.

At first, in the minds of the secular leaders, Christianity was merely a sect of the Jews. And since the Jewish religion was legal in the empire, the government left Christianity alone.

The basic unit of the church was a gathering of believers who chose a leader, called the bishop. Other congregational leaders included presbyters (elders) and deacons (people who served in various capacities). Often the bishop of the church in a large city was looked on as the supervisor of the bishops in the surrounding towns. Bishops sometimes met to discuss matters of doctrine and church practice.

In time it became obvious to the government that Christianity was a separate religion, comprised of people who refused to honor the Roman Emperor as divine and refused to worship the pagan gods of Rome. Christianity became illegal early in the second century A.D., and for the next two hundred years it was outlawed. Persecution began. In general, persecutions were sporadic and confined to local areas. They ranged from mild to severe and from short to long, depending on who was in power in Rome and how intently territorial rulers wanted to eradicate the new religion.

Yet the church continued to function during those difficult years. Christians met in homes, often in secret. Some church leaders who played a special role in testifying before the unbelieving world were later considered *fathers* of the church. Christians generally came from the lower classes of society. Christians in the early centuries of the religion's existence probably did not exceed 10 percent of the population, and the percentage may have been somewhat lower.

During these years another church institution developed called monasticism. Those seeking a higher level of spirituality separated themselves from society and devoted their time to

fasting, silence, prayer, and meditation. Some would go out into the desert alone, but others would gather together with other monks. One of the most famous early monks was Anthony, who spent many years alone in the Egyptian desert. When he returned to civilization, he was idolized by the common Christians for going far beyond them in practicing the faith.

In those days it was a challenge to remain faithful to the Lord. Witnessing was done as much by martyrdom—when unbelievers watched Christians die in confidence and joy—as by formal evangelism. Christians did not hide their faith, and because it took courage to be counted among Jesus' followers, they had ample opportunities to give a witness to the hope they had.

- *The conversion of Emperor Constantine*

These humble circumstances changed overnight. In A.D. 312, the Roman emperor, Constantine, became a Christian. Things changed dramatically for the church.

First, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Even though some emperors would oppose the church and attempt to reinstate the Roman system of gods, the church was no longer a place for the poor and humble. It came to house people of wealth and influence. It was no longer dangerous to be a Christian. Rather, there were advantages to being a Christian. The church grew in numbers. But what it gained in numbers it lost in commitment and depth of spirituality. The persecution of previous centuries had kept the church relatively free of people who were members in name only. But now the church became filled with such members.

Second, an unhealthy union developed between the church and the emperor. For centuries people would assume that this arrangement was the way God intended for the church to exist in the world. In some countries, like Russia, this system was in place until Communism took over in the early twentieth

century. In the Roman Empire, the emperor was viewed as the secular head of the church and the patriarchs were considered the spiritual leaders. The church's role was to promote morality in society, and the state's role was to protect the church. Doctrinal heresies, which potentially could foster alternate churches, were suppressed by the government. In the government's view, a second church threatened the unity and therefore the security of the state. This arrangement brought secular politics into the church, and often the church was not able to administer its own affairs or deal with doctrinal problems without interference from the state. Critics of this system called it *Caesaropapism*—the Caesar had become the church's pope, or father.

With the conversion of Constantine and with the wealth of the state behind it, the church was able to expand. Churches and monasteries were built with state money; and anyone who opposed the church was subject to fine, imprisonment, or death. At this point, the church was a unit. From Spain in the west to Persia in the east, there existed one universal Christian church. Although a few smaller sects had left the church in the first three hundred years, the church in general was united.

- *The main centers of Christianity*

The Christian church came to have five leading cities. What happened in these centers of Christianity, especially the first three, is important to the history of the Orthodox church. We will be referring to those cities throughout this book, so it would be good to understand a little about them. The head of each of these leading cities was called a patriarch, or father, of the church. *Pope* is a synonym for *patriarch*.

*Rome.* From the beginning, Rome was considered to be the most important city in the Christian world. Peter had worked there and was considered the first bishop of Rome. Subsequent bishops laid claim to his position of leadership. The leaders in the eastern part of the Roman Empire acknowledged the

bishop of Rome's supremacy; however, to them he was always the first among equals. Rome, on the other hand, did not share this opinion. It claimed that its authority in doctrine and practice carried greater weight than that of the other churches. As time went on, the pope's insistence on this became stronger, and this became one of the reasons why the East and the West finally split.

*Alexandria.* Christianity spread to Alexandria (in Egypt) very early in its history. Soon there was a large Christian population there. As a seat of Hellenistic philosophy and learning, it was also the place where early Christians attempted to repudiate this philosophy. Many of the leading theologians of the early church came from Alexandria, including Athanasius.

*Antioch.* Antioch (near the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea) was an important city in Christendom. (Saint Nicholas Orthodox Church of Cedarburg, Wisconsin, is associated with the Antiochian Orthodox church.)

*Jerusalem.* Jerusalem, of course, was where Christianity began. The patriarchate of Jerusalem was an honorary position, and the patriarch held little power.

*Constantinople.* Constantinople, the city Constantine built at the point where Europe and Asia meet, became an important city only after Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire there. *Constantinople* means "Constantine's city." From this location he could more easily govern the whole empire. The city did not play any role in early Christian history, but because the bishop of Constantinople worked directly with the emperor, he rapidly grew in power. Constantine's goal was to make this city the political and spiritual head of the empire. The chief official of the church there became one of the five patriarchs. Ultimately, the patriarch of Constantinople became the most important of all the Eastern patriarchs.

*Moscow.* After the Eastern Orthodox separated from the Roman Catholic church and the Turks captured Constantinople, Moscow became the leading Eastern Orthodox city.

- *The struggle to understand God—the Trinity and Jesus' divine and human natures*

The main topic of discussion during the years between Constantine's conversion and the end of the fifth century was the teaching about the Trinity and Jesus' divine and human natures.

The first major doctrinal error was caused by a man named Arius, a lay leader in the church at Alexandria. Arius taught that Jesus was a divine being, but not equal with the Father. He was a being somewhere between God and human beings. Arius' teaching won over a large number of converts throughout the Roman Empire.

When Constantine became a believer, he decided to call a general church council to discuss the topic of the Trinity in hopes of reunifying the empire doctrinally. The council was held in A.D. 325 at the city of Nicaea, which lay somewhat south of Constantinople. The council arrived at the consensus based on Scripture that Jesus was God, equal with the Father, and that the Holy Spirit was also God, equal to the Father and the Son. The result of this is the teaching of the *Trinity*, a word not found in Scripture but expressing what Scripture teaches about God.

Not all accepted the results of the council, and the debate continued for several decades. It was necessary to call another general council to discuss the Trinity. This council was held in A.D. 381 in the capital city itself, Constantinople. At this council the church received a clear and scriptural confession of faith, the Nicene Creed. This council finalized the wording of the Nicene Creed, which clearly teaches the divinity of the Son and the Spirit. Although Arian churches continued to exist for some time, for the most part the churches of the empire accepted the results of the first two councils. There were no major divisions in the Christian world over the doctrine of the Trinity.

At this point the Christian church was still a unit. In the best of times, the emperor and the patriarch of Constantinople

worked together to promote the good of the church. In the next century, the East and West would begin drifting apart. Controversies over the “person” of Jesus would cause the church in the far eastern part of the empire to split off from the main body.