

3. THE CHURCH TODAY – PART 3



ROMAN CATHOLIC & ORTHODOX BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

- Please note that one can devote entire courses to the study of Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. These notes are meant to be a summary of generally accepted theology and practices of these Church branches.
- We must always be graceful when critiquing the views of those we don't agree with: Be honest in our representation of their beliefs and engage with their best arguments and examples, not the most extreme view we can find. If we would like them to do the same to us, it is only fair.
- Our study of the doctrine Eastern Orthodoxy will focus specifically on the *Greek Orthodox Church*, as it is the most influential for the parts of Church History that we will be studying.

1. SCRIPTURE

- All three major branches of Christianity accept the 39 books of the Old Testament & the 27 books of the New Testament as Scripture.
- Roman Catholics & Eastern Orthodox accept the *Apocryphal* books as part of the Bible (which were included the Greek Septuagint), while Protestants don't (following the Reformers).
- The Bible of the Roman Catholic Church was the Latin *Vulgate*, translated from Hebrew (OT) and Greek (NT) by Jerome in the early 5th Century. Jerome went to Bethlehem and learned Hebrew from the Jews. He therefore did not want to include the Apocrypha in his translation because he understood that the Jews never viewed those books as being inspired. He was overruled by Church authorities and included them.
- The Greek Orthodox use the Greek *Septuagint* as their translation.

There are differences in the role that the Bible plays and the authority that is given to its teaching:

- Protestants believe in *Sola Scriptura*, making the Bible the final authority on any theological issue. There is much of value to be found in the writings of the Church Fathers and the historic doctrines of the Church insofar as they agree with Scripture, but it alone is *theopneustos* – “God breathed” (2 Tim 3:16).
- Both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics reject *Sola Scriptura*. They both give equal authority to Tradition and the Teachings of the Church.
- Tradition means ‘handing over’, ‘transmission of’
 - Word suggests the action of conveying a deposit of knowledge.
 - It was the Church who gave us Scripture. (*But what about the Old Testament?*)
 - We might have inspired Scripture, but who will provide and infallible interpretation for us?
 - Orthodoxy: The consensus (agreement) of the Church on what the correct interpretation is.
 - Catholicism: The consensus of the Church is important, but the Pope is uniquely gifted to infallibly interpret Scripture. A claim Protestants & Orthodox deny.
- Consensus of the Church includes:
 - The Creeds
 - The decisions of the Church Councils
 - Eastern Orthodox only accept the *Ecumenical Councils* (Both East & West being present). The last one being the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 AD. No longer possible after the Great Schism of 1054.
 - Roman Catholic Church accepts the authority of all subsequent Western Councils, the last one as recently as the Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965.
 - The teaching of those and apostolic succession
 - Apostolic succession is the belief that Christ appointed the apostles and the apostles then appointed other leaders called presbyters or elders or bishops.

- Their practices, beliefs and interpretations were passed down from the Apostles through the Church Fathers up to the present.
- For the Roman Catholic Church, apostolic succession runs through the Apostle Peter all the way to the current Pope.
- For the Orthodox, it runs through all the Apostles, but particularly Andrew (Peter's brother) who they believed founded the Church in Byzantium (which became Constantinople).
- Icons
- Protestants are often guilty of what they are accused of by Roman Catholics & Orthodox: That *Sola Scriptura* means I have the freedom to take my Bible and interpret it any way I want, any way "the Spirit leads me". No! Protestants more than anyone should seek to study the Bible, make use of resources, and sit under solid Biblical teaching and preaching, to discern truth from their own feelings or 'spiritual experiences'.

2. WHAT SALVATION MEANS

- There are differences in how the Churches view the process & goal of Salvation.
- The Western Tradition (which includes Protestants) is very legal, therefore has very strong legal concepts: Judgement, justification, sin, wrath, forgiveness, etc.
- Augustine of Hippo did a lot of work on the idea of original sin (based on the New Testament teaching): Human beings are born sinful (as a result of Adam's *original sin*) and commit sins against God from as soon as we are able. God in his righteousness must judge sin, and therefore humanity is doomed to destruction and eternal separation from Him. However, Jesus in his Grace offers Himself as a sinless, perfect substitute, taking our sin and suffering the wrath of God in our place. His death and resurrection opened the way to relationship with God through faith.
- While both Roman Catholics and Protestants agree that salvation is only possible because God first showed His Grace toward us by sending His Son to die in our place, and that we must respond in faith to receive salvation, there are *major* disagreements about the particulars. Protestants state that salvation is BY grace alone, THROUGH faith *alone*.
- From the (Roman Catholic) Council of Trent (1545-1563): *If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.* Anathema means to be cursed, cut off from God and certainly hell bound.
- The word 'salvation' in the Bible is clearly divided into three parts:
 - Justification – The moment where we are pronounced forgiven, freed of all our sin and debt.
 - Sanctification – Our Christian life of living in obedience, overcoming sin, relationship with God.
 - Glorification – When we are made new, given our resurrection bodies and made perfect.
- Roman Catholics make no distinction between Justification and Sanctification, therefore, once you have been justified and you sin again, you are in trouble! You need to do good works to earn your forgiveness again.
- In Roman Catholicism there are two types of sin: *venial & mortal*:
 - A mortal sin is defined as a **grave action** that is committed in **full knowledge** of its gravity and with the **full consent** of the sinner's will and is a turning away from God.
 - A venial sin generally fulfils only two of the three criteria and is not seen as a turning away from God.
- If a Christian dies without having repented of committing a venial sin, they will still go to heaven. If he/she dies without having repented of a mortal sin, that person is guaranteed to go to hell.
- The Roman Catholic doctrine of *purgatory* says that all believers who die must first go through a period of cleansing fire before being pure enough to enter heaven. It could last for anything from a couple of years to millions of years depending on your life. Ironically enough, it came into existence first as an encouragement: Don't worry Christian that you feel so imperfect and unworthy, God is going to cleanse you before you go into his presence!

- Only the Pope has the authority to reduce time in purgatory, either through proclamation, or the issue of indulgences.
- It is a terrible doctrine that makes light of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross in paying for our sin and making us clean! It is not found anywhere in Scripture, rather they appeal to an obscure verse in 2 Maccabees.
- The Orthodox Church did not share the same Latin legal foundation and was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy.
- Eastern Orthodoxy rejects the doctrine of being born in sin (original sin). They don't have a big focus on sin and forgiveness at all, and that's why a number of them despise Augustine as a heretic even though he is considered a saint in the Orthodox Church as well.
- For them salvation is all about the *resurrection* and God making everything new.
- The process of *theosis* (becoming like God) is emphasized over justification, sanctification and glorification. It almost seems that we come so close to God that in the end we are changed, NOT into gods, but we almost lose our humanity. This goes far beyond the Biblical language: the bride of Christ (the Church) will be united to Him, not individuals, and we will always remain fully human.
- It is a very mystical religion, and difficult to understand for us from the Western tradition.

3. MARY & THE SAINTS

- In the early Church there was a lot of discussion on who Jesus was. In fact, that's what most of the early Church Councils spent most of their time debating: How do we find proper balance between His divinity and humanity?
- During these debates, someone asked the brilliant question: Is Mary *theotokos*? Is she the 'God-bearer', literally 'the mother of God?'. The reason why it is so brilliant is that the answer must be YES...BUT! In its original form it had nothing to do with Mary herself, but everything to do with the baby in her womb: was it both God and man, or only man?
- Our friend Nestorius said that Mary was the mother of Jesus (the man), but not of Christ (God).
- The correct view is that from the very beginning Jesus was 100% God and 100% man. Two natures in ONE person. His deity he has always had but his humanity came from Mary.
- But this term 'mother of God' stuck (unfortunately). Mary very soon took a place of real prominence in the thoughts of many.
 - Pagan cultic influences on the Church.
 - The influence of the non-canonical book the *Gospel of James* (or the *Protoevangelium of James*)
 - People naturally seek ways to bypass having to deal with Jesus directly (idol factories).
- The four Marian Dogmas (a dogma is a doctrine that *must* be believed):
 - Mary as Mother of God (mostly in the good sense).
 - Perpetual virginity - The idea that Mary's womb was so sanctified that no other children were worthy of it. She also never had relations with Joseph her husband. 4th Century onward. Allegorical interpretation of Ezekiel 44:2:

Then the Lord said to me: This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it. Because the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it, therefore it shall be shut
 - Immaculate conception – Mary was born without the stain of original sin, God kept her. Only dogmatized in 1854. Creates a lot of problems.
 - Her bodily assumption into heaven. Mary did not die but was taken up to be with the Lord. Only dogmatized in 1950!
- Mary is Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:12), the link between God and men. She is also the burning bush in Exodus 3, touched by God but not consumed.

- Both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches will insist that they venerate (or honour) Mary, but they don't worship her. Read this Catholic prayer, the *Memorare*, regularly offered to Mary, and then make up your own mind:

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help or sought thy intercession, was left unaided. Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins my Mother; to thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful; O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me, Amen.

If you watched the *Passion of the Christ* and you were theologically astute, you would have seen that the thief on the cross that asks Jesus to remember him when He is in His kingdom is wearing a brown pouch (scapular) around his neck.



According to Catholic tradition, Mary appeared to a monk in the 14th century and told him that anyone who dies wearing this scapular would be guaranteed a place in heaven and will be released from Purgatory by Mary on the first Saturday after their death. It makes a mockery of Jesus' words to him.

- The word *saint* simply means 'holy'.
- In both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the Saints are those Believers who by
 - moral example
 - courage and bravery
 - great spiritual lives
 can achieve a place of honour among God's people. They are venerated in icons (Orthodox & Catholic) and statues (Catholic) and special feast days named after them.
- They now serve as intercessors for Christians in the efforts to help them to become more like Christ. Both Orthodox and Roman Catholics are encouraged to pray to the saints to ask them for intercession.
- Their lives are viewed as an example for Christians to follow.
- In Roman Catholicism, the good deeds of the saints go into the Treasury of Merit, a type of spiritual bank believers can draw grace from.
- Process of becoming a saint (being canonized):
 - Wait five years after the person's death.
 - Verify that they had lived a virtuous, Godly life or had suffered death for the sake of Jesus.
 - Two "verifiable" miracles should have occurred as a result of the intercession of the person in question (This step is not required in Eastern Orthodoxy).
- In the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope took over the sole responsibility for declaring Saints in the 12th century. Most of the Popes throughout history canonized only a few saints (a few didn't canonize anyone), i.e. it was a strict and controlled process. In modern times, Pope John Paul II canonized 482 people, and the current Pope Francis has canonized 898 saints. It almost becomes a meaningless category.
- The problem: We are *all* saints! 1 Corinthians 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, Romans 1:7.

4. CHURCH GOVERNANCE

- The Roman Catholic Church is governed by the Pope. The office of the Pope was given to Peter in Matthew 16:18 and passed on to his successors. The Pope is Christ's representative on earth and therefore the rightful head over the global Church.
- All other branches of Christianity are thus in rebellion and cut off from the True Church.
- In the Eastern Orthodox Church, there are four major centres: Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey), Antioch, Alexandria & Jerusalem. The Bishop of Constantinople (*Ecumenical Patriarch*) is the figurehead, spokesperson and representative of the church to the outside world, but he does not have ultimate authority.
- For them there is no apostolic succession in terms of an office, only in the preservation of the true teaching of the Apostles.
- Many Eastern Orthodox churches are thus independent, holding to the same doctrine but with their own language and some unique customs.

BONUS: The office of the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Anglican church functions on this same principle: he is the figurehead but cannot demand loyalty and obedience as the Pope does.

- Protestant Churches also deny the office of the Pope and believe in some form of Church independence.
- There are differences in terms of how churches should be governed: In the Baptist tradition there is a strong belief that churches should be autonomous, run by the local Pastors/Elders only. Some believe that local Pastors should be accountable to an overseer (Bishop), while others such as Dutch Reformed Churches believe Synods make governing decisions which local Pastors then put into action.

5. SACRAMENTS

- Roman Catholicism has defined seven (7) sacraments, which most Eastern Orthodox would accept:
 - Baptism
 - Confirmation (Making a public declaration of faith)
 - Eucharist (Communion...but not really)
 - Marriage
 - Holy orders (becoming a priest, monk, nun)
 - Penance (Doing good deeds to prove that you are repentant)
 - Extreme unction (Anointing of those on their deathbed)
- Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and some Protestant Churches all baptize babies.
- For Roman Catholics, baptism washes away the stain of original sin and regenerates.
- Catholics sprinkle their babies.
- For Eastern Orthodox, baptism makes the baby born-again, a Christian.
- Because they speak Greek, they know that baptise means to immerse, and so they dunk the baby under the water three times!
- The central part of a Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox church service is the *Eucharist* (Thanksgiving), what we would call communion but with some distinctions. In fact, walking into a Catholic or Orthodox church you will see the altar have prominent place.
- Both believe that the bread and wine are the *literal* body and blood of Jesus:
 - For the Roman Catholics he is offered for sins anew in a bloodless sacrifice.
 - The process of transubstantiation: Items become the body and blood without ceasing to look like bread and wine.
 - For the Eastern Orthodox consuming the bread and wine is transformational, making us more like God by partaking of His *divine energies*.
 - For them the process is a mystery, they don't seek to explain it.

- Therefore, the priest serves the congregants, the items are not distributed, because spilling a drop of wine would be spilling the blood of Christ, and a wasted crumb of bread is a part of the body of Christ.
- If a person is excommunicated from the Church and lose access to the body and blood of Jesus, they are in real danger of hell. This gave the Church a great deal of power, as we will see in later lectures.

6. KNOWING GOD

- In Eastern Orthodoxy, theology is all about mystery and about the unknowability of God.
- They stress the fact that we can only describe God by what he is not: Immortal (NOT mortal) for example.
- This is called *Apophatic* theology (describing God only in negative terms [what He is NOT]).
- Human terms are too corrupted to meaningfully apply to God: We cannot say that God is *love* because our definition of love is totally inadequate.
- While there is something to be learned there regarding God's holiness and our limited capacity to understand Him, it misses that the Bible gives us very clear statements about what God is like.
- Roman Catholics and Protestants hold to *Cataphatic* theology: We believe that we can describe God in positive terms (what He IS) while remembering that our human language is very limited and we should always properly define our terms.

7. CLERICAL MARRIAGE

- Roman Catholic clergy are forbidden from being married.
- According to them, the Apostle Paul held the unmarried, celibate life as the highest possible standard for Christians (1 Corinthians 7:8).
- Unfortunately, this system has caused much abuse. Many Bishops and Cardinals, even some who became Popes, had multiple children with 'concubines' who they didn't marry and therefore didn't break the official rule.
- Eastern Orthodox priests may be married when they are ordained, but you cannot marry after ordination as a single person or a widower. Orthodox Bishops are not allowed to be married.
- Marriage is a wonderful gift God has given humanity. It is the ultimate picture of Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:32).

8. CONCLUSION

- While we can learn from Eastern Orthodoxy & Roman Catholicism, these Churches reject the doctrine that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. This means that they are preaching a different Gospel than the one the Apostles preached.
- We also totally reject the continual re-offering of the sacrifice of Jesus in the Eucharist. Jesus died once for all, a perfect and holy sacrifice.
- We can therefore not stand in unity with Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy in the faith. It should greatly sadden us that this is the case, and we should continue to pray for them and share the Gospel with them.
- This doesn't mean that there are not true believers in those churches – there may be many saved Roman Catholics for example, but then it is *in spite of Roman Catholicism*, not because of it.