

Church History 101

Lesson 16

A Church Divided

Key Concepts: As the church grew it was not immune to struggles over power and control. In the West the church in Rome claimed primacy while the East claimed that the church at Constantinople was Rome's equal. Ultimately these differences, along with others would split the church in two.

The Story: As the church grew it struggled with issues of power and control. These issues included who elected/appointed church leaders, who made theological decisions (the nature of Christ and the Trinity for example), who resolved conflicts between churches and which churches if any were more important than others. As we will see, each of these issues will play a part in the lead-up to the great division of the church between West and East.

As a brief introduction, we should understand that over a period of several hundred years, power within the church moved from the people who elected elders, priests and bishops into the hands of bishops who oversaw larger and larger numbers of congregations. This process of centralized control continued as five churches (along with their bishops) gained exceptional power and influence because of their wealth and location. These were Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Constantinople and Rome. The result was that the power of local bishops moved into the hands of these "super" bishops. In some ways then it was inevitable that at least one or more of these "super" bishops would make the claim to ultimate authority.

The first effort toward this end occurred in the 2nd Century when Victor, who was bishop of Rome, attempted on his own to settle an ecclesial matter dealing with the calculation of when Easter was celebrated. When some church leaders disagreed with him he tried to excommunicate them. He did so, he claimed, because as Bishop of Rome he was the successor of Peter and thus had the authority. Ultimately however the issue was settled by a larger gathering (council) of bishops. Over the course of the next several hundred years the Bishops of Rome (or Popes) claimed that they were the only "apostolic see" (meaning only they had the authority of the Apostles), that their decisions were more important than those of Councils, that they should settle all major judicial cases and ultimately in the mid-800s that the power of the Papacy extended over every other church.

In the East, the church at Constantinople began to regard itself as only slightly below Rome in terms of power. This was made possible when Emperor Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to his new city on the Bosphorus. Thus with a transfer of political power came a transfer of religious power. And just as Rome claimed authority over all churches, Constantinople claimed authority over all churches except Rome. True parity between the two churches became a reality when at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, a still united church claimed that there was equality between the bishops of Rome and Constantinople.

Ultimately the claims by each side made it virtually impossible for the church to hold together. In the West Pope Leo IX (1002-1054) not only claimed authority over all of the Eastern Church but changed the Nicene Creed which had been adopted in 325, which was a violation of a later Council. The result was a mutual excommunication. This meant that neither side would recognize the Councils or the authority of the other. Though these actions were not considered important in the moment they ended up splitting the church in two; a division which still exists today.

Questions:

1. Where do you believe that church power ought to lie?
2. What difference does it make that the church was split in two?
3. Does this history help you understand why we have "Roman" and "Orthodox" churches?