
Eastern Orthodox Christians

Origins

Initially, the Christian churches in the East of the Roman Empire were at one with those in the West. The various councils, from the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 through to the Second Council of Nicea in 787, are all recognised by the Eastern Orthodox tradition. However, there were always underlying differences, not least reflecting linguistic and cultural difference between the Western and Eastern Roman Empire. There were also doctrinal differences, centred around the Eastern churches' rejection of the supreme authority of the papacy.

The differences came to a head in 1054. Pope Leo IX sent representatives, or legates, to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, in order to get him to acknowledge Rome as the mother church. Upon his refusal to do this he was excommunicated, and he in turn excommunicated the legates. This event has come to be known as the Great Schism. The division was also further defined by the burning and looting of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204. There were attempts to reunite the two churches at the Council of Lyons in 1274 and the Council of Florence in 1439, but these attempts were ultimately rejected by the Orthodox Church. At the Synod of Constantinople, held in 1484, the so-called Union of Florence was formally rejected, finalising the division with Rome.

Today

Eastern Orthodoxy has around 200 million followers. Earlier this year, Metropolitan Kirill became the new leader of the Russian Orthodox Church. His enthronement was attended by the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev. Kirill had previously had several meetings with Benedict XVI, and some feel this may be the precursor to warmer relations between the Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholicism.

What the mainstream says

- God, in His essence, is totally transcendent and unknowable.
- True knowledge of God always includes three elements: religious awe, personal encounter and participation in the acts of God.
- Christ is the pre-existent Son of God.
- The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity.
- The Virgin Mary is Theotokos ('the one who gave birth to God').
- The goal of man is 'deification', the exaltation of man to the dignity prepared for him at creation.
- A person becomes part of the 'Body of Christ' when the priest anoints him saying, "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit".
- The mystery of Christ's Presence is manifest in a descent of the Spirit upon the worshipping congregation and upon the eucharistic bread and wine.

(Source: <http://www.orthodoxinfo.com>)

Suggested initial Scriptural approach

Paul's depiction of the body of believers to be presented as a "chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2) is a useful start because this kind of symbolic language will be appreciated by Orthodox Christians. Some of the beliefs and teachings which constitute the bride being chaste can then be shown, contrasting the "simplicity that is in Christ" (v. 3) with Orthodox beliefs. That Christ is currently the only true priest, and no one can currently be a priest on earth, is one such teaching (Heb. 8:4).