Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#9. Summary of The Church in the Eighth Century

When the church went through a period of division during the early Middle Ages, there were two prominent groups that rose to the surface. In the west, the branch was known as the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox Church arose in Constantinople. The western church worshipped and wrote primarily in Latin, while the Eastern Church used Greek. With the passing of time, the differing languages of worship accentuated the growing schism between the two groups.

Politically, the Roman Empire disintegrated, and the two churches largely lost contact with each other. One of the monumental differences was concerning the use of icons in worship. Icons are depictions of Saints, Mary, Jesus, God the Father, God the Spirit, and other significant figures in Christian teaching. The Eastern branch of Christianity were highly in favor of Iconography, viewing the relics as visual aids for a largely illiterate congregation. It should be noted that the object of worship was not the icon, but rather the person it represented. The unavoidable drift however, was a belief that the icons were channels of revelation and blessing. Eastern Christians would reverence the objects with a bow or kiss, or perhaps burn candles and incense before them in order to show reverence. With time, these actions became an appeal for the intercession of the person represented by the icon, which would result in blessing for the seeker.

These practices caused a great division in the eighth century. Christians became known either as "servants of icons" (iconodules) or "breakers of icons" (iconoclasts). The crisis came to a head at the Second Council of Nicea in 787. The sides agreed to use icons as objects designed to give honor to the one depicted (*veneration*) and for purposes of teaching, but the relics were not to be worshipped.

Reformers would later claim the making of and use of such images was forbidden by the second commandment. On the other hand, present day Protestants, who are critical of iconography, must remember that when we use symbols or art work, it is for the same two reasons - for instruction and memorial honor. The Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1646-47 (Question 92) permitted limited use of art and ritual as physical reminders of "sensible signs…by which Christ and the benefits of the New Covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers."

In spite of this inward gaze of the church dominating the history of the eighth century, at least two noteworthy Roman Catholic missionaries were reminding the Church of her responsibility to win the lost: Boniface and Alopan, both Roman Catholic missionaries.

Known as "The Apostle of the Germans," Boniface stood against hostile pagan cultures and saw significant conversions for Christ. He was martyred in 754.

Alopan (also known as Olopan), was used of God in China during the late 600s and 700s but his work was not discovered for nearly 1,000 years. The Sigan-Fu stone was discovered in 1625, and the inscriptions it contained told the story of Alopan and his missionary endeavor. Alopan came from Syria to China, and led a work for God marked by severe, relentless persecution by the Chinese emperors.

For centuries, it was though there was virtually no successful mission to China. The discovery of the Sigan-Fu stone teaches us that great things done for God may be lost to the eyes of this world, but are never lost in Heaven.

In our next chapter, a power struggle over theological wording would unleash a harshness within the church that changed the course of history.