

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#10. Summary of The Church in the Ninth Century

Things got a bit complicated in the ninth century. Because of certain wording in the Nicene Creed (from the fourth century), a great confusion in regard to the relationship of The Holy Spirit to the Father and Son would eventually lead to a division, or “schism” between churches in the west and east.

In one respect, the problem was theological. In another respect, it was a power-play between the Bishop of Rome (Pope Nicholas) and Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople. The struggle over a theological question became the battleground that would attempt to make the Pope the spiritual leader of all Christians across the globe. Nicholas insisted the Bishop of Rome possessed supreme authority over all Christendom. This claim was disputed by Photius, as well as the other leaders of the Eastern Church.

Nicholas lived from 800-867, and served as Pope for nine years from 858 until his death. He was a capable organizer, and strengthened the political power of the church while struggling against Muslim and Norse incursions. He also faced severely strained relationships with the Eastern Orthodox branch of the Church. He is chiefly remembered as being the definer of the modern Papacy, exercising expanded political and ecclesiastical authority.

Photius, the leader of the church in Constantinople, was born in about 810, and died in 893. He is the namesake for the Photian Schism (863-868), which was essentially a division caused by differences in opinion in regard to Papal authority over the churches in the east.

Both Nicholas and Photius were promoters of missionary activity. Photius' leadership was largely responsible for the conversion of many Slavs. Under Photius' direction, Methodius and Cyril (two brothers from the area of Thessalonica) set out for missionary work in present-day Russia. They designed the Cyrillic alphabet in order to translate Scripture into Slavic dialects. The area around the Black Sea was largely evangelized. Churches today in that region can trace their history back to the work of Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century.

It is interesting to note that a pattern seemed to re-emerge. Not only was there a battle over certain doctrines, the extent of ecclesiastical control, and the appropriateness of political power — there was a constant tension over the defining of the church's primary purpose in the world. Was she destined to become a political power or a spiritual one?

When asked by Pilate if He were truly a king, Jesus replied, “My Kingdom is not of this world.” Yet the church needed to define what it meant to be “salt and light.”

The case can be made that though the church of the ninth century was growing politically and culturally, its theological health was questionable at best.

The power gains of the church tended toward corruption, and that led to a weakening of true faith in many areas. As the Norsemen and Muslims swarmed against Europe, attention was given more to defense and political solutions. Many church historians have concluded that solid, Biblical teaching was in serious decline during this era.

As a result, many have called the next century “The Dark Ages.”

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