



## 41: How was it that the Church split between Catholic and Orthodox Christians?

This is far too big a subject to tackle in a small space. However, I will try. From earliest times, there was a division in the Church between those who thought, spoke and wrote in Greek, and those who used Latin. Greek is a highly abstract language capable of expressing shades of meaning which can only be expressed clumsily in Latin.

The tortuous and agonising theological disputes which led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity were conducted in Greek; the Latins barely participated. There were frequent disputes between East and West, such as those over the veneration of images and the correct date to celebrate Easter.

The Church was organised into five Patriarchates: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Nicomedia (later moved to Constantinople, all Greek-speaking; and Rome, the only Latin Patriarchate. Once the Christianity became the 'official' religion of the Roman Empire, the Emperor had a voice in the running of the Church. As sole Patriarch of the West, and Bishop of the seat of the Empire, Rome, the Pope assumed a pre-eminence of honour, at least, and the right to arbitrate in case of dispute between the other Patriarchs.

The removal of the seat of Empire to Constantinople, and the collapse of the Empire in the West, left the Church as almost the last organised force in the Latin-speaking lands. The authority of the Pope in the Western Church was increased rather than diminished. In the East, though, it was the Emperor, who had the title 'the equal of the Apostles', rather than the Patriarch who was the visible symbol of the power of God on Earth.

In 751, Ravenna, the last outpost of the Empire in north Italy was captured by the Lombard barbarians. The newly Christian King of the Franks, Pepin and his son Charles (Charlemagne) answered an appeal for help from the Pope, Stephen, and conquered the territories the Lombards had seized. They bestowed these lands, not on the Eastern Roman Emperor, but on the Pope. The Emperor was even more outraged when, in 800 AD the then Pope, Leo, bestowed the title of Holy Roman Emperor on Charlemagne.

Charles took his position as Emperor very seriously. St Augustine of Hippo, writing in Latin, had declared 500 years earlier that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the love between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity. This, though, was not the official wording of the Nicene Creed, which stated that the Holy Spirit proceeded from God the Father (i.e. it was not a lesser power). Unofficially, some parts of the Western Church, such as that in Spain, had been adding the words 'and the Son' (*filioque*).

Charlemagne set himself to tidy up the Church in his dominions. Among other matters, he insisted, over the protests of the Pope, who knew the trouble that

would be caused, that '*filioque*' should be included in the wording of the Nicene Creed.

The Eastern Church could not accept that any alteration in the wording of the Creed, which had been arrived at with such difficulty, could be made without the authority of a General Council of the whole Church. It could not be changed on the say-so of one Patriarch, even of Rome, and an upstart barbarian so-called Emperor. They did not want to reopen the question of nature of the Trinity.

The dispute rumbled on without resolution for two more centuries until a fresh dispute arose in 1054 over ecclesiastical jurisdiction over lands in southern Italy claimed by the Eastern Empire but occupied by the Normans.

A deputation led by the Latin Cardinal Humbert went to Constantinople to try to sort this out. Humbert, an arrogant, quarrelsome man, was horrified to discover the number of things the Greeks did differently, from the taking of baths and the use of forks at table (effeminate) to the admission of the unconfirmed to communion and the fact that 'and the Son' was omitted from the Creed. He excommunicated the Eastern Patriarch on the spot (which he had no authority to do) and left Constantinople, pausing only to shake its dust from his feet.

No-one at the time expected the breach between East and West to be permanent, but it has remained. There was a chance of reunion in 1431, when Constantinople was in danger of falling to the Turks. The Eastern Emperor, desperate for help from the West, accompanied a delegation to a Council of the Church at Florence in an attempt to settle the contentious issues.

Eventually a settlement was patched up, but some of the Eastern delegates walked out and returned home, insisting that if Constantinople remained faithful to the Orthodox faith, God would send help from Heaven to the beleaguered city. In any case, better to die a true Christian and be among the saved, than yield to heresy and be damned.

When the main delegation returned home, they were repudiated by the Patriarch. The Emperor himself, having signed the Act of Union, was declared a heretic. No sufficient help came from the West, and Constantinople, the last remnant of the Roman Empire, fell to the Turks in 1453.

Since then, attempts at reconciliation have proved fruitless. The Eastern Churches reject all changes in doctrine and liturgy in the West, in the absence of a renunciation by the Pope of his claims to primacy, and the calling of a General Council of the Church. There matters rest for the moment, despite friendly approaches from recent Popes.