

East vs. West

Jason Haché

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

- Matthew 16:18

Who would have ever known that one statement could be the result of such confusion and animosity? For years, people have debated whether or not Jesus was referring to Peter when He spoke these words, or the statement of faith that Peter uttered. Interestingly enough though, this argument had nothing to do with the controversy infiltrating the church in the fourth century. This was not a problem of translation; this was a problem of power and supremacy.

Leading up to the time of Leo’s reign it appears as though each church, and each bishop, did not exercise jurisdiction outside of their area. Yet, even though the Church of Rome attained no jurisdiction over the others, they definitely did attain greater honor. It was this honor that began their ascent towards papal primacy. So, what was it that challenged this ongoing movement towards total power? Politics.

In the year 330 Constantine moved his headquarters to the East. The city of Constantine was established, and with this the political importance of Old Rome quickly began to disintegrate. It was not long until a council put forth the notion that the “bishop of Constantinople take precedence immediately after the bishop of Rome, because his city (Constantinople) is the New Rome”.¹ This suggestion bears with it much more than an increase in power for the Eastern Church. If this were to pass, it would begin a rift between Old and New Rome – each would go its own way and yet only one could come out on top. Immediately the bishop of Old Rome raised his voice in opposition of such an order. His objection? How dare they presume that the Church of God and its supremacy be dictated by politics, or the status of some city or empire! The worthiness of the Church (and therefore the bishop) in Rome is not deemed in such a manner. Which begs the question: how is Rome chosen to be above others?

¹ Shelley (pp. 136)

The answer is simple, and it brings us back to the word of the Lord that began this paper. The bishop of Rome felt that it was by Jesus' own words that his office should be given priority over all others. After all, didn't Jesus promise to build His church on Peter? Going with the presupposition that this is what Jesus meant when He uttered these words, what does it have to do with the bishop of Rome? Well, they actually believed that the bishops of Rome were Peter's successors in authority. In other words, the foundation has been passed onto their shoulders. Through this line of thinking, Leo became the first bishop to be entitled as the Supreme Head of all Christendom – but how long would this title last?

It is interesting that Leo would so strongly hold to his supposed rights of supremacy through Peter. After all, wasn't it Peter who denied our Lord not once, but three times in the face of danger? Wasn't it Peter who Paul openly rebuked in front of all as being a hypocrite? (And in his hypocrisy leading many astray.) Was it not also Peter who the Lord Himself addressed as Satan in one of Scriptures harshest rebukes, a time when Peter openly expressed a mind that was set on earthly things and not on God's Kingdom? Now, of course we all have our moments of weakness and times of failure, but what an odd character to use in support of your right to leadership. Of course, God does not look at men through our eyes, He sees much more than what is expressed – he sees their hearts.

Although, regardless of the adamant expression for their supremacy based in Scripture, the rivalry between the East and the West (the bishop of Constantinople and of Rome) would soon come to an end – at least in the eyes of the world. In the year 451, the council decided to grant equal authority to the bishop of Constantinople that was previously held solely by Leo. This was a groundbreaking announcement, no longer would Leo be considered as the Supreme Head of Christianity. With this one decision, the council was negating the bishop of Rome's interpretation of Jesus' words to Peter in the book of Matthew and placing Leo in a form of co-leadership with the bishop of Constantinople. With this final blow, the Church of Christ was finally and fully split in two - two 'kingdoms' with two 'heads'. This marked the beginning of an ongoing divergence between the Roman Church of the Western Empire, and the Greek Church of the Eastern Empire.