

# **Part III The Church in the Wilderness**



## Chapter 8 The Church Outside the Empire

Several challenges confront any church scholar or historian who seeks to trace the wanderings of the Church of God during the two phases of its 1,260-year wilderness period. This is because its history is not about one continuous human organization. During the Pergamum Era (381-800 CE) that the majority people of God resided east of the empire. During the turbulent period of 325-381 CE many exited the Eastern Roman Empire.

### Fleeing the Roman World

They left to maintain their freedom to observe the weekly Sabbath, the Biblical holy days, the Christian Passover on Nisan 14 without persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the Christianized pagans known to the world as Byzantines. Do not lose sight of the fact that the Church also fled in the west into the mountains and that those in the east continued to maintain communication with their distant brethren in the west through trade routes north of the Roman frontier.

In the west God's people sought refuge in the mountains of Spain, southern France, Northern Italy, and across the eastern and southern frontiers of the empire. We know little about them until about 800 CE when we see the appearance of the Thyatiran Era (ca. 800-1631) at the demise of the Pergamum Era (ca. 381-800).

The surviving accounts of the Sabbath-keeping Church of God as it moved across the European continent have been written nearly in their entirety, by their Orthodox enemies who viewed them as heretical. Accounts of the Church of God fleeing into regions of Africa have not survived as the records and evidence not destroyed by the Byzantines were by the Muslims in their conquest of Northern Africa. The extant history deals with God's people in the general region of ancient Armenia, lying between the Black and Caspian Seas. That region appears to be the operational center and focus of the third era of the Church of God.

We read of groups labeled by hostile outsiders with such names as Paulicians, Bogomils and Valdenses—of whom smaller or larger segments, at different times, appear to have been true Christians in the mold of the first-century Jerusalem Church. Eroding their understanding of the apostle's doctrine were apostasy, lethargy and never-ending persecution by the Christianized-paganism of the Orthodox. The consequence was that the teachings of these groups radically changed over a long period of time, until they became more like their Orthodox antagonists.

Regrettably, writers often lumped together various groups of those they understood as heretics, including the Church of God, under the same name,



not truly distinguishing the differences in their teachings. Thus a great challenge in developing the history of the Church in this period is not simply to identify who taught what, but when to recognize when a group ceased to be part of the true Church, and at what point God removed His Church to another place.

Using biblical criteria, one can identify—among groups classified as *heretics* by Catholics and *dissenters* by Protestants—groups of believers who followed the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles' doctrine. Remnants of the God's Church can be found among Paulicians in Armenia in the 600s–800s, Bogomils in the Balkans in the 900s, Cathars (Puritans) and Albigenses of Southern France around 1000–1200 CE, Valdenses in northern Italy in the 1200–1400s, and Lollards in England in the 1300s. Not everyone given these

labels were part of the people of God, but it appears that members of the Church of God are found among these groups. Some retained the teachings of the Christ and the apostles for a period of time, then compromised and lost that precious truth.

Down through the centuries, the Church of God has not embraced the pagan ideas promoted by the Orthodox whether the Eastern Greek Orthodox and its derivatives or the Latin Roman Catholicism under a "Christian" label, nor has it followed doctrines Protestants carried out of their "mother church" such as the trinity heresy.

### Confiscation of all Nonconforming Churches

The Orthodox used the power of the Roman state to strip Judeo-Christian people of God of their churches and to criminalize their observance of the Sabbath, annual Sabbaths, and the Nisan 14 Christian Passover. Following the First Council of Constantinople, the first since Constantine's Council of Nicaea, the edict of 30 July 381 by the tyrannical and despotic Roman Emperor Theodosius I ordered the immediate surrender of all churches to the orthodox bishops who confess that "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of one majesty and power, of the same honor and dominion" (Baus, 1986, p. 74); (Hefele, 1896, p. 369). To find the religious freedom to obey God the people of God then by necessity fled the jurisdiction of the corrupt Christianized paganism of the Roman Empire and the Orthodox bishops.

In 395 following the death of Theodosius I, the Roman Empire divided for the last time, politically separating the eastern and western halves of the empire. In the Latin speaking west, the people of God as refugees took flight into the Alps mountain range, stretching across the western and southern part of the European continent in a broad arc, into non-Orthodox territories becoming known generally as the *Vaudois*. As far as we know those Judeo-Christians in the Greek speaking East, a Church of God remnant later known as Paulicians, fled the tyrannical Orthodox jurisdiction of the Roman Empire to remote areas of eastern Asia Minor near the Euphrates River and in the mountains of Armenia.

The designation Paulicians appears to have originated in Armenia, a more or less independent principality situated on the Roman-Persian border, which became the Byzantine-Arab border after the Muslim conquest.

Frequently Armenia allied itself to the Eastern Roman Empire and at times came under its sovereignty.

In the mid-seventh century some lived in seclusion in a sort of circular dam in the Taurus Mountains. A manual of faith and practice of the group, *The Key of Truth*, survives (Conybeare, 1898). The *Key of Truth*, compiled over several centuries, makes it evident that over time the Paulicians drifted away from the truth once delivered (Jude 1:3).

### CHRONOLOGICAL HIGHLIGHTS

381	First Council of Constantinople. On July 30, 381, Roman Emperor Theodosius I, baptized in 380, issued an edict stating his belief in Christ and the Trinity, that all his subjects were to share the same views, that any people with differing views were "extravagant madmen" and heretical and authorizing the seizure of the properties of all non-orthodox churches
400	About 400, John Chrysostom complained of Byzantine Orthodox Christians turning to the Sabbaths and the feast days taught by the Judeo-Christians.
451	Council of Chalcedon, an Orthodox conclave which repudiated the notion of a single nature in Christ, and declared that he has two natures in one person and <i>hypostasis</i> and insisted on the completeness of his two natures: Godhead and manhood.
600s–800s	Paulicians found in Armenia
869	Peter Siculus as ambassador to the Paulician principality on his eastern frontier in Asia Minor.
654	Constantine of Mananali (ca. 620–681) began to preach, helping to revitalize the Church.
690	Simeon died as a martyr by burning on a pile with many others by order of Justinian II.
900s	Bogomils in the Balkans
1000–1200	Cathars (Puritans) and Albigenses of Southern France around 1000–1200 CE

The description of this era of God's church at Revelation 2:12-17 suggests that heresy and heretics troubled the group. It is important to note that in their 400 year history only some demonstrably manifested the characteristics of the converted people of God. Eventually false ideas and doctrines ("the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality" and "those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans") and disobedience to God led to their demise (Revelation 2:14-16). Revelation 2:14 records that Jesus told them: "Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth." In

the east the era appears to have come to an end by the sword of the Orthodox Byzantines.

According to Armenian scholar Nina Garsoian in *The Paulician Heresy*, "It would, then, appear that the Paulicians are to be taken as the survival of the earlier form of Christianity in Armenia" (Garsoian, 1898, p. 227). The author also states that the Paulicians were "accused of being worse than other sects because of adding Judaism" (p. 213).

Christ's message to this third stage of God's Church (Paulicians) is characterized by the Church at Pergamos (Revelation 2:12–17). The word *Pergamos* means "fortified," and the Church members of this era were noted for dwelling in remote, mountainous areas. In Revelation 2:13, Christ said of the Pergamos Church that they dwell where Satan's throne is. Pergamum was a center of the ancient Babylonian mystery religion.

In 133 BCE, Attalus III, the last "god-king" of Pergamum, died and in his will bequeathed his kingdom and his title, *Pontifex Maximus* ("Supreme Bridge-builder" between man and God), to the Romans. The Roman rulers took the title and held it until Emperor Gratian bestowed it on Pope Damascus in 378 CE. The Catholic popes continue to use that title to this day. Also, historically, the term "Satan's throne" alludes back to Nimrod's ancient kingdom, which in distant antiquity included Armenia and the upper Euphrates (Genesis 10).

About 400, the Orthodox Archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom whined of Byzantine Orthodox Christians turning to the Sabbaths and the feast days taught by the Judeo-Christians. This third era of the Church of God suffered from constant peril at the hands of the Byzantines as well as from Marcionism, a heretical dualist belief system originating in the teachings of Marcion of Sinope at Rome, and other groups with Gnostic and Manichaean ideas.

As early as the fifth century, we find the Paulicians condemned as heretics in Orthodox documents. The first prominent leader among the Paulicians whose name we know is Constantine of Mananali (ca. 620–681). About 654 he began to preach, helping to revitalize the Church. Prior to his ministry, most of the Church membership consisted of descendants of Christians who had fled Greece and Asia Minor about two centuries earlier. They preserved the names of their original congregations and continued to

refer to themselves as the "church of Ephesus" or the "church of Macedonia," even though they were located hundreds of miles from the original sites.

Following the death of Constantine of Mananali, the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Pogonatus about 684 sent a commissioner named Simeon into Armenia to stamp out the Paulician movement. Simeon, however, joined with the Paulicians and became one of its ministers. Calling himself Silvanus after one of the Apostle Paul's disciples, Simeon died a martyr by burning on a pile with many others about 690 by order of the tyrant emperor Justinian II.

In the mid 19th century, the incredibly wicked Byzantine Empress Theodora of Armenian upper-class descent and the spouse of Byzantine emperor Theophilos, became regent of their son, Michael III, 842 to 855. During that period she intentionally



Gold *solidus* of Theodora's regency, with her on the obverse and her son Michael, the nominal emperor, and her daughter Thekla on the reverse.

persecuted and by some estimates murdered in martyrdom at least 100,000 Armenian Paulicians.

Orthodox religious leaders canonized this evil corrupt woman in recompense for her zeal on behalf of the restoration of icons as objects of veneration even though such worship was outright idolatry. Theodora forcibly resettled many Paulicians in European Thrace. The murderous behavior of this despicable Byzantine empress prompted the eastern segment of the Church of God remnant to migrate on into northcentral Europe and eventually settling among other brethren in southern France and the Alpine region.

The first comprehensive Byzantine biased account of the Paulicians, *Historia Manichaeorum qui Pauliciani dicuntur* (*History of the Manichaeans Who are Paulicians*) which is one of the main sources for the history of the Paulicians appeared about 869. Peasant Emperor Basil I (867-886), equipped with no formal education nor military or administrative experience, sent Peter Siculus as legate (an official emissary) from Basil I to the Paulician leader Chrysocheir, to negotiate an exchange of prisoners. He remained nine months in the Paulician city of Tephrike/Tibrice, now Divrigi in Turkey, on

the upper Euphrates in the Paulician principality on the Byzantine eastern frontier in Asia Minor. There he wrote his Paulician history.

A second forcible resettlement of Paulicians from Asia Minor into the Balkans took place under Emperor John I Tzimisces (969-976) who transferred a large Paulician population to Philippolis in Thrace. He sought to secure his northern frontier by the forced transplanting of various Paulicians to Thrace. These he suspected of sympathizing with their Muslim neighbors to the east. During the First Crusade many of the Paulician remnant remaining in Armenia then migrated north and then west through southern Germany to the area of North Italy, becoming part of the Vaudois who were often confused with the *Patrini* and *Albigensi*.

### The Eastern Orthodox Church

*The Key of Truth* reports the disgust and revulsion of the Paulicians toward the Orthodox Christianized pagans of the Byzantine Christianity and their priests. Known as the Eastern Orthodox Church, and often simply as the Eastern Church, these Christianized pagans were part of the great false harlot church described in Revelation 17.



A mosaic depicting *Hagia Sophia* at its peak of glory.

This activist form of Greco-Roman Christianity, understood as Byzantine Christianity, reached its golden age during the high point of the Byzantine Empire and continued to flourish in Ukraine and Russia, after the fall of Constantinople. Numerous autocephalous churches (a hierarchical church whose head bishop does not report to any higher-ranking bishop) were established in Eastern Europe and Slavic regions. This form of false Christianity was highly anti-Semitic and persecuted Jews and the Church of God in the east vigorously.

The Eastern Orthodox Church, now officially known as the Orthodox Catholic Church and commonly referred to as the Orthodox Church, has become the second largest professing Christian church in the world. It claims about 300 million adherents, primarily in Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

It is the religious denomination of the majority of the populations of Belarus, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Ukraine. It wrongly teaches that it is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church as declared in the Nicene Creed.

In the 530s the Orthodox Church of the Holy Wisdom (*Hagia Sophia*) was built in Constantinople under emperor Justinian I. It is now rightly a decaying museum in Islamic Istanbul. The Byzantine Empire reached its greatest territorial extent under Justinian.

The Byzantine Church in Egypt (Patriarchate of Alexandria) split into two groups following the Council of Chalcedon (451), over a dispute about the relation between the divine and human natures of Jesus.

Eventually this led to each group anathematizing the other. Those remaining in communion with the other patriarchs by accepting the Council of Chalcedon teaching of "two natures in Christ without confusion, change, division, or separation" were known as "Melkites" (the king's men, because Constantinople was the city of the eastern emperors), not to be confused with the Melkite Catholics of Antioch. Those who disagreed with the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon are today known as the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. There was a similar split in Syria (Patriarchate of Antioch) resulting in the Syriac Orthodox Church.

Those Byzantines who disagreed with the Council of Chalcedon are sometimes called "Oriental Orthodox" to distinguish them from the Orthodox, who accepted the Council of Chalcedon. Oriental Orthodox are also at times referred to as "non-Chalcedonians", or "anti-Chalcedonians". The Oriental Orthodox Church denies that it is monophysite and prefers the term miaphysite, to denote the joined nature of Jesus (two natures joined into one). Both the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches mistakenly believe themselves to be the continuation of the true Church.



Hagia Sophia as it exists in today's world as a museum in Istanbul.

There are, as well, the "Nestorian" churches, which are Eastern Christian churches that keep the faith of only the first two ecumenical councils, i.e., the First Council of Nicaea and the First Council of Constantinople. "Nestorian" is an outsider's term for a tradition that predated the influence of Nestorius. Thus, "Persian Church" is a more neutral term.

### The Western Latin Church

The Western Roman Empire was the western half of the Roman Empire, the other half being the Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantine Empire. Theodosius I briefly ruled a united Empire until his death in 395. He was the last Emperor to rule both parts of the Roman Empire. His older son Arcadius inherited the eastern half while the younger Honorius acquired the western half. Both were still minors. Honorius was placed under the tutelage of the half-Roman/half-barbarian *magister militum* Flavius Stilicho while Rufinus became the power behind the throne in the east. Stilicho and Rufinus were rivals.

Gothic king Alaric I, who rebelled following the death of Theodosius I, cleverly exploited the disagreements between the eastern and western courts regarding ownership of Illyricum. Stilicho defended Italy against the invading Goths, but failed to control the Vandals, Alans, and Suevi who invaded Gaul. Executed for high treason in 408, Stilicho became a victim of court intrigues in Ravenna where the Western Imperial court resided since 402.

While the East began a slow recovery and consolidation, the West began to collapse entirely. In the west the Bishop of Rome (the emerging papacy) arose as the overseeing bishop for all Greco-Roman Christians in the West or the Western Church or sometimes Latin Church.

### The Adoptionist Heresy

The false doctrine of adoptionism assumes that Jesus of Nazareth was not the Son of God before His baptism. Those who hold this doctrine deny or diminish Jesus Christ's pre-existing eternal presence in the Godhead. Jesus Christ existed as the Logos—the "Word"—from the very beginning (John 1:1). Yet this very same divine being came to the earth "in the flesh"—and Scripture labels as "Antichrist" the idea that Jesus was not fully human (1

John 4:3; 1 Timothy 3:16). Scripture makes it plain that Jesus Christ would come to the earth as "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23).

The adoptionist heresy arises from the teachings of Arius. *The Key of Truth* indicates the presence of Arianism, specifically, adoptionism in the teachings of the Paulicians. This means many in this group or movement over many centuries did not understand the nature of God. The later Sardis era (1600-1930) of the Church of God was Arian in belief through most of its history and its ministers taught the heresy of adoptionism. As the church proceeded through its "wilderness period" many truths were lost and many false teachings became part of their religion.