***NEWSBRIEF***

**THREE REFORMATION CITIES:**

**WITTENBERG, GENEVA AND CONSTANTINOPLE**

***The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation***

To be sure, Luther’s Wittenberg and Calvin’s Geneva were locations associated with the Protestant Reformation. But Constantinople? Surely this must be a mistake. Instead should it not be Zurich, the home of the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli? Well, yes, Zurich and Zwingli should not be overlooked. But to think of Constantinople, the ancient seat of Byzantine Christianity--the spiritual home of Eastern Orthodoxy--as playing a role in the Reformation era would seem to be a stretch. Orthodoxy, we generally assume, simply sat above the fray--still reeling from the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453--untouched and unaware of the conflicts between Rome, on the one hand, and Wittenberg and Geneva on the other.

Yet from the 16th and 17th century come largely unknown stories of engagement between Protestants in the West and the Church of the East. The first of these contacts took place, not long after Luther’s death, when the Orthodox Patriarch sent Demetrios Mysos, one of his theological advisors, to Wittenberg to meet leaders of the Lutheran movement. Mysos became the personal guest of Luther’s trusted colleague, Philip Melanchthon, who saw to it that a Greek translation of the Augsburg Confession be prepared for Mysos to take with him back to Constantinople to present to the Patriarch. Mysos, however, never made it back to Constantinople, but was sent by the Patriarch to Romania where he died while assisting Orthodox Christians there.

After Melancthon’s own death in 1560 a group of Lutheran theologians from the University of Tuebingen sought to initiate discussions with Eastern Christians by proposing a dialogue, based on the Augsburg Confession, with the new Patriarch Jeremiah II. They soon found out that the Eastern Church had little, if any, disagreement over those matters wherein the Augsburg Confession presented Lutheran teaching in harmony with the Scriptures and the faith of the Early Church. And moreover, the Patriarch noted with approval those areas in which the Reformers took issue with developments in Medieval Catholicism--such as the scope of papal authority--which had led to the 1054 AD split between East and West. Most of the give-and-take, then, between Jeremiah II and the Lutherans was focused on selected issues: the relation between Scripture and Tradition, the question of freewill, the precise understanding of justification by grace through faith, and the question of why the Western Church in Pre-Reformation times had made an arbitrary addition to the Nicene Creed without consulting the East. (This was to add the clause “and from the Son” to the affirmation that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.”) In 1582 the collected letters and papers from the exchange between the Patriarch and the Lutherans were published in both Greek and Latin. And it is significant that those portions of the correspondence attributed to Jeremiah II came to be regarded as among the “Symbolical Books” of the Orthodox Church. As such, they do not have the elevated status of the decisions made by the Seven Great Ecumenical Councils, but they are nevertheless deemed important representations of the Orthodox faith.

After 1582, political and religious developments in both Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire made it difficult for Lutherans and Orthodox to remain in regular contact. But 38 years later, the election of Cyril Lucaris as the Patriarch of Constantinople opened a new chapter in relations between Western Protestants and Eastern Christianity. Lucaris, although born in Greece, was educated in Italy, and spent some time in Poland where he came into contact with Protestants from whom he was introduced to many of the Reformation teachings of John Calvin. He continued his interest in Calvin even after his return to Constantinople and his eventual election as Patriarch. In 1629, Lucaris published--significantly in Geneva--a Eighteen Point Confession of Faith in which he outlined those points wherein Orthodox teaching was at odds with Roman Catholicism and, in so doing, he utilized the language and categories of John Calvin.

His Calvinist leanings, however, came under criticism within the Orthodox world. In particular, Lucaris’ sympathies with Calvin’s teaching on Predestination were a source of discomfort to Orthodox theologians--a discomfort that would be shared by Lutherans and Catholics as well. One Orthodox bishop who took issue with Lucaris was Dositheus, the Patriarch of Jerusalem who prepared a point-by-point critique of Cyril’s Confession. Later, in 1672, a council of representatives from across the Eastern Church met in Jerusalem to endorse Dositheus’ response to Cyril’s “Calvinism.” No doubt the Lucaris affair, together with East-West political tensions, given Ottoman rule of many Orthodox lands, were factors in the erosion of contact and trust between Protestants and Eastern Christians in the years that followed.

Credit for a renewal of contact between Western Protestants and Eastern Orthodoxy, in the opinion of this writer, goes to the religious “elephant in the room” during the years following the Reformation: the Church of Rome. With the convening of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, we’re all aware of the ecumenical conversations which began, not only between Protestants and Catholics, but between the Church of Rome and the Orthodox Churches of the East. Dramatization of the fact that Rome and Constantinople were prepared to put behind them the distrust represented by the Great Schism of 1054 was the visit made to Jerusalem in 1964 by Pope Paul VI and Athenagoras, the Ecumenical Patriarch, followed by their joint action to lift the mutual excommunication imposed by the two churches 900 years earlier.

Well-known to Lutherans are the official conversations which we have had with Roman Catholics in the years following the Second Vatican Council. And certainly the showpiece from those discussions was the adoption by both churches of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999. But a “spin-off” of those conversations has been the renewal of contact between Lutherans and the various self-governing Orthodox churches. For the past several decades dialogues have been underway between Lutherans and Eastern Orthodox Churches in Europe, as well as in North America. It was the privilege of this writer to have served as one of eight ELCA members of the Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue Commission which met during the 1990s to discuss the Nicene Creed. Our conversations concluded with the adoption of a joint statement in 2003 on “Faith in the Holy Trinity.” In that statement we were able to find common ground in our respective understandings of that addition to the Nicene Creed which had been a point of disagreement in the past. Our common statement, then, is available for all to see by going to the Ecumenical Affairs page on the ELCA website. And as a consequence of our statement, if you look up the text of the Nicene Creed on page 104 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* you will now see an asterisk calling attention to a footnote which reads: “\*‘Or who proceeds from the Father.’ The phrase ‘and the Son’ is a later addition to the creed.”

Here in Montana, given the relative strength of the ELCA and the major presence offered by the two Catholic dioceses, it is only natural that, as we anticipate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, our focus will be on the degrees of convergence Lutherans and Roman Catholics have experienced after years of mutual suspicion and misunderstanding. But this writer would hope that, as we celebrate such progress, we would not forget our Orthodox friends and the faith were share in common with them. For, although relatively few in number--both in terms of parishes and membership--the Orthodox have played, and continue to play, a significant role in the religious fabric of the Northern Rockies.

(*NEWSBRIEFS,* this one written by Pr. Thomas R. Lee of Missoula, are produced by the Quincentenary Task Force of the Montana Synod--ELCA to observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.)