

3 Ways America Could Repeat History and Succumb to Islam

The thousand-year Byzantine Empire was one of the most powerful and vast empires the world has ever known, and it was Christian. During its lengthy reign, it produced a mass trove of Christian art, architecture, legal jurisprudence, theology and culture. It built, perhaps, the most magnificent church building ever built, the *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople, which is said to have changed the history of architecture.

Yet, the mighty Byzantine Empire fell to Islam in the 15th century and serves as a reminder to us that we must not trust in our advanced technology, stock market wealth, or military might, but our trust must be in the Lord. As David said in Psalm 20:7, *"Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God."*

Why did the Byzantine Empire fall to Turkish Ottoman invaders in 1453? I will address three reasons in this article—three trends that weakened the church and Empire and made both vulnerable to the Islamic invaders. They are (1) The church's preoccupation with political power; (2) the loss of personal faith to outward ritual and liturgical formalism; and (3) theological rigidity and strife.

Reason #1

The Church's Preoccupation with Political Power

The mighty Byzantine Empire began around A.D. 330 when Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to the small city of Byzantine near the eastern edge of the Empire. There may have been logistical reasons for making this major move, but ego was obviously involved for he renamed the city Constantinople after his own name and made it the capital of the Empire. Today, the city is known as Istanbul.

Constantine, though he had not been baptized, convened the famous Council of Nicaea in 325 in the nearby city of Nicaea. Although the stated reason was to address the Arian heresy that denied the full deity of Christ, many historians believe that Constantine had political reasons for calling this council.

With the Empire beginning to unravel, it is likely that Constantine saw Christianity as the cord by which he could pull the Empire together, for the one common thread running through all the varied people groups of the Empire was Christianity. If he could strengthen that cord, it would strengthen and bind together the Empire.

Constantine thus began favoring the Christians, building them elaborate buildings and underwriting the salaries of their bishops whom he also exalted into positions parallel to the provincial governors of the Empire. Hans Kung, the most widely read Catholic theologian in the world today, says:

Constantine used this first council not least to adapt the church organization to the state organization. The church provinces were to correspond to the imperial provinces, each with a metropolitan and provincial synod. In other words, the empire now had its imperial church!

Christianity thus became politicized and this continued with increasing intensity with Constantine's successors. This led to much political wrangling for church offices and power, often involving banishments and even death. At the Council of Ephesus in 449 physical violence broke out and the presiding bishop, Flavian, died of the wounds received at this council (Eddie Hyatt, *Pursuing Power*, 52).

It was these political pursuits of power that caused Gregory of Nazianzus (325-389), Bishop of Constantinople, to come to disdain church councils. He wrote:

For my part, if I am to write the truth, my inclination is to

avoid all assemblies of bishops, because I have never seen any council come to a good end, nor turn out to be a solution of evils. On the contrary, it usually increases them. You always find there love of contention and love of power which beggar description (Eddie Hyatt, *Pursuing Power*, 52).

In such a politicized setting, it is no wonder that the power of the simple message of Jesus was overlooked. The church and its leaders relied on the political power of the state to advance its cause rather than the power of the message itself, which Paul said, *is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes* (Romans 1:16).

This preoccupation with political power and the divisions it produced weakened the church and the Empire and made both vulnerable to the Muslim invaders. In this election year, let us remember that a politician will not save us. There must be a turning to God Himself. Let us remember the words of Isaiah 33:22, *"For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; he will save us."*

Reason #2

Personal Faith Replaced with Liturgical Formalism

With the politicization of the church there came a corresponding loss of the personal aspect of the Christian faith. Instead of a heart relationship with God through faith in Christ, Christianity became institutionalized and formalized. Gifts of the Spirit that flowed freely in the New Testament church were gradually replaced with outward form and ritual.

Constantine initiated the construction of church buildings to accommodate the religious gatherings of Christians, who had previously gathered primarily in homes. The architecture of these new buildings, with their elevated throne-like seating at the front for the bishop and rows of seating for the congregation, made significant congregational involvement

impractical. In addition, the liturgy and worship style, once plain and personal, were now adorned with the pomp and practice of the Imperial court.

Bishops, inspired in part by both Old Testament and pagan precedents, began wearing distinctive clothing to indicate their superior rank. Kung says:

Bishops were accorded secular titles, insignia and privileges which up to then had been reserved for the emperor or high officials: candles, incense, a throne, shoes, the maniple, the pallium and so on (Hyatt, *Pursuing Power*, 49).

How far the church had removed itself from Jesus! And the institutionalization continued resulting in the church becoming more and more a complex religious system with a multitude of offices, titles and regulations, all foreign to the New Testament.

The formalizing and ritualizing of the church's worship marked the end of dynamic gatherings where spiritual gifts would flow freely in the congregation. A. J. Gordon, Baptist pastor and founder of Gordon College in Boston, was correct when he wrote:

It is not altogether strange that when the Church forgot her citizenship in heaven and began to establish herself in luxury and splendor on earth, she should cease to exhibit the supernatural gifts of heaven (Hyatt, *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity*, 36).

Lacking a church with the strength and vitality of a personal, dynamic faith in Jesus, the Empire found itself weakened and vulnerable when Islam came with its armies. I confess that I am alarmed when I see how Europe and North America have dispensed with a Christian worldview and replaced it with a secularist mindset that denies objective truth and attempts to be accepting of everyone and critical of no one. Such a

politically-correct mindset cannot withstand the millions of Muslims who are committed to an Islamic worldview and dedicated to imposing that worldview on the rest of humanity.

Reason #3

Doctrinal Rigidity & Strife

The church's rise to political affluence and power marked the beginning of many fierce doctrinal battles. Free from the threat of persecution and enjoying the favor of the emperor, church leaders now gave their attention to theological questions that usually became litmus tests of one's orthodoxy.

Many violent struggles ensued, producing sharp divisions in the church. Basil of Caesarea, bishop of Cappadocia (A.D. 370–379), likened it to a great naval battle being fought by men who “cherish a deadly hate against one another.” He wrote:

But what storm at sea was ever so wild and fierce as this tempest of the churches. In it every landmark of the Fathers has been moved; every foundation, every bulwark of opinion has been shaken; everything buoyed up on the unsound is dashed about and shaken down. We attack one another. If our enemy is not the first to strike us, we are wounded by the comrade at our side (Eddie Hyatt, *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity*, 36).

One of the most famous and destructive doctrinal controversies was over the *filioque* clause in the creed of the Roman (Western) Church. After Constantine removed the government apparatus of the empire to Constantinople, the Roman bishop (later known as the pope) filled the power vacuum that was left with claims of supremacy. There thus developed a rivalry between Old Rome and the New Rome of Constantinople, and this rivalry was expressed in conflicting claims of authority and in doctrinal controversies such as the *filioque* controversy.

Filioque means “and from the Son” and the Western Church,

centered in Rome, confessed the Holy Spirit to have proceeded from both the Father and the Son. The Eastern Church, based in Constantinople, insisted that the Holy Spirit proceeded only from the Father.

This seemingly trivial doctrinal difference became a major source of strife and division and eventually led (along with political strife) to a formal division of East and West when, in 1054, Rome and Constantinople formally excommunicated each other.

Both were drastically weakened by this separation but Byzantine would suffer the most from this division. When the Ottoman Turks began rattling their swords toward Constantinople in the fifteenth century, the city, in desperation, signed an agreement with Rome in which it agreed to recognize the authority of the pope in return for Rome's help against the Turks.

But when the Muslim invaders attacked the city, Rome did not send help and after a long siege the great city of Constantinople fell to the Muslim invaders. For three days the city was plundered and many of its inhabitants slaughtered. Priceless art and manuscripts were destroyed. Magnificent churches were turned into mosques and all Christians who were unwilling to convert to Islam were placed under a heavy tax known as the *jizya*. The great Byzantine Empire came to an end after a thousand years of existence. The region—now present day Turkey—is under Islamic control to this day.

How We Must Respond

I do not write this to create fear, but to inculcate a seriousness and soberness about the time in which we live. I write that we might learn from the past and not repeat the same mistakes and suffer a similar fate. I write this to hopefully inspire Christians to rise up and be the church. It is not enough to “find” a church or “go” to church; this is a

time when we must “be” the church.

Finally, the churches of North America, Europe and every nation must pray for a great spiritual awakening that will produce in its members a new heart commitment to the truth that is in Jesus. Only the truth will set us free and only the truth presented in the power of the Holy Spirit will change the hearts of Muslims all over the world for whom Christ died and rose again. {eo}

This article was derived from the books 2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity and Pursuing Power, both by Dr. Eddie Hyatt and available from Amazon and from his website at . Learn more about his ministry and his vision for another Great Awakening at his website, .