



Saints Cyril and Methodius and Their Gift of Enlightenment

In order to more easily understand the achievements of Saints Cyril and Methodius in the last half of the ninth century, it might be helpful to very briefly be reminded of the first 1,000 years of Christianity.

And it might be easiest to understand these first 1,000 years of Christianity and the Christian Church by thinking in terms of **three periods**, each approximately one-third of the first 1,000 years:

- 1) 33-312 A.D. (Early Christianity);
- 2) 325-787 A.D. (Age of Ecumenical Councils and the acceptance of Christianity and attempted resolutions of conflicts and/or heresies);
- 3) 800-1054 A.D. (One Church — Two Voices: Beginnings of the “Great Schism of the One Christian Church”).

Early Christianity: The early Christian Church was a church in hiding. Its members were often ridiculed, persecuted, and even killed. Being a Christian was not popular and could be very dangerous. It was often “open season” on Christians, who for the most part were forced to practice their religion in secret, at times hiding their faith, at times proclaiming and defending it at the cost of their lives. These early Christians relied on a living, primarily oral tradition. The knowledge of what to do was often handed down from their teachers and elders, many of whom, by the way, were women, who could and did have positions of authority. There was a lack of uniformity in Christian practice, and differences could be found in almost

every community. These communities were usually very small, sometimes only a household or two. From the very beginning, there were differences of opinion, of practice, of belief.

At this earliest of stages it is unclear how much was written down and recorded. Certainly, relatively little has come down to us. There are many gospels, some say as many as **30**, and other Christian texts that would soon be judged unauthorized and incorrect. Some of these unaccepted writings, known by the term *apocrypha*, were very similar to what we now find in the New Testament, others were quite different.

That, very briefly, is the story of the Christian Church in the first three centuries of its existence. It is for these reasons that during this early period the Christian Church is often known as the “Church of the Catacombs” = an underground Church; this Church and all Christians were subject to the whims and cruelties of the powerful, who were rarely Christian themselves and who rarely looked upon Christianity and Christians favorably.

This all changed in the year 312. The Roman Emperor, while at war in what now is now France, saw a sign in the sky. It appeared to be a cross in light. Underneath were the words, “by this sign shall you conquer.” And conquer he did. The emperor, Constantine by name, accepted Christianity and with his conversion, Christianity and the Christian Church entered into a new relationship with the Roman state and the world.

The next year, 313, Constantine and his fellow emperor, Lucinius, enacted the “Edict of Milan.” With this proclamation, *Christianity became officially tolerated*. Christianity and Christians now had the same rights as all other religions. It was now illegal to persecute Christians in the Roman Empire simply for being Christians.

Within the next 50 years the Christian Church was to go from an officially **tolerated** Church, to the **only official Church** of the Empire. It was to go from a persecuted Church, to a tolerated Church, to a privileged institution.

The Emperor Constantine, or Constantine the Great as he is often called, was also responsible for two other decisions that had a profound affect on Christianity. In the year 324 he moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to a city on the Bosphorus called Byzantium, in what is now Turkey. He renamed this city Constantinople in his own honor. Constantinople was to have a profound influence on the Christian Church from its establishment until its fall to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

The other great decision that affected the entire Christian Church was the convening of the “First Ecumenical Council of the One and Undivided Christian Church” in the city of Nicæa, in the year 325, under Emperor Constantine's direction and with him as Chair. Every single bishop and leader was invited. It was truly a convening of the entire Christian Church.

Age of Ecumenical Councils. Let's look at the historical situation logically. There was a certain amount of chaos, or rather, uncertainty, in the early Christian Church before this. The Church and its believers had been busy simply surviving and trying to endure and persevere.

Many of the believers had also been anticipating that the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ were eminent. But, now that Christianity was accepted, even promoted, it was time for the Christian Church to resolve a number of issues and to become firmly established. It was time for the Church to define itself, and to prepare itself and its followers for life not only on this Earth, but also, in terms of the Church's beliefs, for eternal life and the Second Coming. It was time to organize and, especially, have unity in faith (*ortho doxos*) and practice (*ortho praxis*).

In order to do this effectively, the Christian Church needed to organize. It also needed to speak with *one common voice*, at least on the major issues. Finally, it had to have a commonly accepted Creed, or foundation of faith, an official set of writings, common practice in services, etc. None of this was necessary or even possible in the first three centuries. Now, not only was it possible, it was absolutely necessary.

Among the primary issues that faced the establishment of the Christian Church were problems of interpretation, of belief, and the challenges of different simultaneously existing interpretations, many of which were ultimately labeled by the official Church as "heresy." Many of these issues revolved around two extremely complicated and difficult-to-understand theological concepts: **1) the nature of Christ as both "God and Man;" and 2) the concept of "Trinity" – "one God in three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."** Some of these heretical beliefs and interpretations were extremely popular. Moreover, these heretical beliefs were often championed by famous, intelligent, highly articulate, popular, and even "saintly" religious figures and thinkers. There were many such differences in interpretation regarding these two theological concepts, and some form the basis for the eventual differences between the One Christian Church and other very early Christian Churches, such as, for example, the Armenian, Coptic, Jacobite, and Maronite Churches. We share much in common with them, but not enough.

Now I would draw your attention to the "Sign of the Cross," as we Orthodox make it. Whenever we make the sign of the cross, we affirm our belief and acceptance of both of the extremely complicated theological concepts: the Trinity and the Dual Nature of Christ.

The mechanism by which all these questions and issues were to be considered, debated and resolved, was the convening of the Ecumenical, or General, Councils of the Christian Church. Seven such Councils met. It was felt that with the collective wisdom of the Church authorities, and under Divine guidance, the Christian Church found resolution of divisive issues and a unity of faith and practice.

As already mentioned, Emperor Constantine the Great chaired the first such council, in Nicæa, in the year 325, with 318 fathers of the Church in attendance. The others took place in:

Constantinople in 381
 Ephesus in 431

Chalcedon in 451
 Constantinople in 553
 Constantinople, again, in 680
 and, finally, Nicæa again, in 787

These Councils set the groundwork, resolved issues, and laid the basis for the tenets of faith of this new religion, Christianity. These Councils determined which books, which Gospels were acceptable, and which works could not be fully accepted or had to be rejected. These Councils took up challenges to Christianity, and, collectively, made determinations that were to be in effect for all Christians. Acceptance of the decisions of the Councils meant that one fully accepted Christianity and was a true Christian. The Ecumenical Councils also determined the levels of authority of the five patriarchates of the Christian Church. The five patriarchates were Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria.

Rome is the oldest Patriarchate, and had a special position of honor, a **primacy of honor** in the Christian Church. When any of the patriarchs gathered together, the Pope, that is, the Patriarch of Rome, would speak first, chair the proceedings, etc. But, beyond the Pope being considered as “**first among equals**,” in the Christian Church, *every* bishop is an equal participant in apostolic succession, all have the same sacramental powers, all are divinely appointed.

With the seventh ecumenical council in Nicaea in 787, the council that affirmed and restored the veneration of icons, the period of ecumenical councils comes to an end.

One Church — Two Voices. Thirteen years later an event occurred that would shake the unity of the “One Holy and Ecumenical Church” as well as change the balance of power in the world. On Christmas day, in the year 800, Charlemagne was crowned “Holy Roman Emperor.” By the way, **KARL — KRAL, KRALJ /KOROL’** — the Slavs took the name “Karl” from Karl Velikii (i.e., Charlemagne) and it became their word for “king.”

Charlemagne’s coronation was a direct challenge to the authority of the Byzantine Emperor, who, by the way, considered himself to be the Holy Roman Emperor. At this time, Byzantines did not think of themselves as Greeks or Byzantines, but as Romans. But, the Byzantine Empire had troubles of its own. The newly emerging Muslim religion was putting pressure on the southern portions of the Byzantine Empire, while the arrival of Slavic and other pagan tribes was putting increasing pressure on the western and northern borders. Byzantium could no longer protect all its territory. Rome looked to find other sources of protection, and did so by encouraging the appointment or consecration of a Holy Roman Emperor. As of this event, Rome no longer looked exclusively to Constantinople and the Byzantine emperors for its needs. It increasingly acted in an independent manner.

Thank you for your patience and forgive this lengthy background introduction, but, hopefully some of you will have found it of interest. Also, when I now finally turn to Saints Cyril and Methodius, it is my hope that some of the events, their accomplishments, and the lasting impact they have had will be easier to understand.

In the year 862, Rostislav, Prince of Moravia (Czech Republic, now), sent a request to Michael III, Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople. In the *Life of St. Cyril*, Rostislav is quoted as saying: “Although our people have rejected paganism and now observe Christian law, we do not have a teacher who would **explain the true Christian faith in our own language.**” The emperor considered the request, and asked for a monk named Constantine to be sent to him.

Constantine was from Thessalonica (Solun), and was the youngest of seven children. His father was Greek and a person of some importance. It is generally believed, however, that his mother was Slavic. Northern Greece, where Thessalonica is located, had many Slav inhabitants, generally the ancestors of the Bulgarians and Macedonians. Even if his mother was not a Slav, there were many people who were living in that region that were Slavs and there is no doubt that Constantine, later known as Cyril, knew the Slavic language. He was highly educated, knew several languages, and had by this time been sent as a diplomat to many countries and peoples. He was the equivalent of a full professor in the best monastery in Constantinople by the age of 30, and had become a monk as well.

By the next year, 863, Constantine was ready to go to Moravia. He was accompanied by his older brother Methodius, who was also a monk and an experienced administrator. Either one of them could do what Prince Rostislav had asked: *preach* to the people in a language they understood. However, with them they brought several manuscripts, probably eight in all, the **first** books written in a **new alphabet** and a **new written language**. Constantine, who due to his education and rank by this time was better known as Constantine the Philosopher, had **created a new alphabet for the Slavs**, and translated the Greek into a new literary language for the Slavs, **a language that was understandable to all Slavs, even though the basis for it was the South Slavic version spoken around Thessalonica**. This new alphabet and language, which in English we call Old Church Slavonic, were the paths by which the Slavs were not only to be brought to Christianity, but to understanding and enlightenment.

In the 10th century, an unknown, but probably Bulgarian author, under the pseudonym, **УЪРЪНОРИЗЪЦЪ ХРАБЪРЪ** (Chernorizets Hrabr = “The Bold Monk”), in his only known work of just 5 pages, **Ѡ ПИСЪМЕНЪНЪЕХЪ** (“On Letters”), wrote the following about the origins of Slavic literacy:

In times past, the Slavs did not have books, but, being pagan, read and calculated by means of cuts and notches, and later, having accepted Christianity, they had Latin and Greek to render Slavic, but this was inadequate, for how can one write БОГЪ [“Bog,” the Slavic word for “God”], or ЖИВОТЪ [“life”], or СЪЛО [“very”], or ЦРЪКОВЪ [“church”], or ДЪБЪ [“oak tree”] or ѠЗЫКЪ [“language, tongue, tribe people”]...

And that is the way it was for many years, but God, who would not leave mankind without the ability to comprehend and be illumined, sent a holy man, Constantine the Philosopher by name, also known as Cyril, and he fashioned 38 letters...with which to write Slavic.

The “Bold Monk” goes on to write of the history of the Greek, Latin, and Slavic letters and alphabets, and concludes that the Slavic letters are better, not just for writing Slavic, but even as an alphabet. His logic is simple, but impeccable. As he explains in his treatise: the origins of Greek and Latin letters are unknown, they are associated with a number of people, and the letters developed over a long period of time. However, what is clearly known is that the creators of the Greek and Latin letters were certainly pagan. The Slavic letters, therefore, having been created by one individual and for the purpose of Christianizing and enlightening the Slavs, are superior, particularly since that individual, Cyril, was a canonized saint.

This attitude, expressed less than one hundred years after the Slavs received literacy, is quite remarkable. Yet, interestingly enough, it is based on historical evidence. The Slavs know the facts regarding their literacy perfectly. They know who – St. Cyril, when – in 863, why – to translate and write holy books in Slavic, where – Constantinople and Moravia, and what – the first Slavic alphabet – was created. They even know which books were first to be translated, those 8 manuscripts necessary to conduct church services.

Arriving in Moravia and preaching and serving in Slavic, Saints Cyril and Methodius quickly found themselves in conflict with the local Frankish-Bavarian clergy sent by and loyal to Rome. This clergy had been preaching and serving in Latin. In fact, the brothers were accused of being heretics, since they did not serve the liturgy and other services in one of the three accepted “holy” languages: Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. These were the three acceptable languages since, according to the New Testament, the words – “This is Jesus Christ, King of the Jews” – were written in these three languages on a sign, put on the cross of Christ. Thus, it was felt that these were the only languages thought to be worthy of worship in the Christian Church. While there may never have been an *official* “Trilingual Heresy,” there is every reason to assume that accusations were made against Saints Cyril and Methodius.

Cyril and Methodius went to Rome to answer the charges of heresy. While on their way, in Venice the brothers debated the issue of whether only the three languages were worthy of use in worship. They concluded their arguments with a citation of Paul in Philippians 2:11 – *And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* They continued to Rome to see Pope Nicholas I and to answer the same charges of “heresy.” Pope Nicholas died while they were traveling, and it was Pope Adrian II that heard their testimony and defense. Remarkably, St. Cyril again won the debate. **Rome recognized Slavic as the fourth language to be worthy of ecclesiastical use.** As further proof of this, while in Rome and in the presence of the Pope, Cyril and Methodius served the liturgy in Slavic in two different churches, using the manuscripts and translations they had made and brought from Moravia.

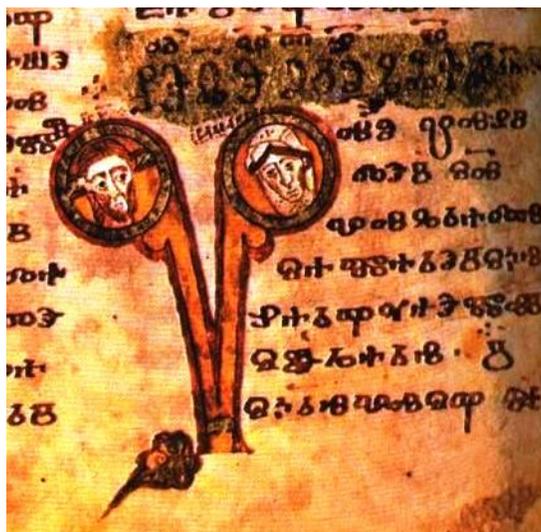
A few days later in 867, still in Rome, Constantine the Philosopher died. Shortly before his death, he became a monk of the “Great Schema” and took as his new name, Cyril. This is why we call him St. Cyril. His brother Methodius wished to take his body for burial, but the Pope insisted he be buried with all honor in Rome. Since St. Cyril had discovered the relics of St. Clement, a Pope of Rome, on an earlier diplomatic mission and had returned them

to Rome, it was finally decided to bury him in the Church of St. Clement in Rome. This church was destroyed in the 11th century. Only a few years ago the sarcophagus where St. Cyril had been buried was discovered. His relics were no longer there.

Methodius returned triumphantly to Moravia as Archbishop. For the next 18 years, essentially until Methodius' death in 885, Slavic and Latin in churches co-existed in Moravia. After the death of St. Methodius, Stephen, the Pope at that time, revoked permission for Slavic and the new Slavic alphabet to be used.

And now, let me finally turn to this new alphabet and language, only the fourth to be recognized worthy of the One Christian Church.

The alphabet that St. Cyril created is not that Cyrillic that still bears his name, but a most remarkable alphabet, also probably called Cyrillic initially.



In order to be accepted, it appears to have been purposely designed to be clearly different from both Greek and Latin. The alphabet is unique, although letters and concepts from other alphabets were occasionally borrowed by St. Cyril for the Slavic alphabet. St. Cyril, as I mentioned before, knew many alphabets and languages. He designed the Slavic alphabet to have a letter for every vowel and consonant in Slavic. No other alphabet at that time could be used to write the Slavic language correctly.

This particular alphabet is **now** known as Glagolitic, and probably takes its name from a group of Croatian Dominican monks, who, with the permission of the Pope in the 13th century and with the understanding that they would *never* teach it to anyone who was not a member of their small brotherhood, continued to use Glagolitic in their services and as a form of secret writing for centuries. These Croatian monks were known as “glagoliashi,” from the

Slavic verb “glagolati,” which means, “to speak,” and it is from these monks that the term, *глаголица*, “glagolitic,” came to be used.

Some say that the information in a saint’s life is unreliable, and that we shouldn’t assume that St. Cyril created this alphabet. Yet, I would answer them that, just because the information is found in a saint’s life does not mean that the information is not true. In fact, I think it can be proven that one person, St. Cyril, created this alphabet.

Firstly, Glagolitic achieved one of its original requirements in being maximally different from Greek or Latin. It clearly looks different.



Secondly, if the characters are closely examined, several organizing principles for the characters can be seen, the many consistent details of which I will not describe here. Here I would note in particular the strict proportional symmetry of the letters and a most peculiar and highly illogical trait of writing all parts of the letters in a series of short curved dashes. Although the illusion of loops and straight lines is visually present, close examination reveals that all of the strokes used, even in what seem to be straight lines, are really a series of small dashes. This is also true of the circular elements, which are also composed of short arcs. Thus, even a simple looking character, such as the Glagolitic “a” , for which it would seem only 4 strokes of the quill would be necessary, actually were formed with many more short curved (arc-like) strokes. This is why I refer to Glagolitic as illogical: it was painstakingly slow to copy out a character, word or entire text in Glagolitic. While it is true that Glagolitic was maximally different from Greek and Latin, it was not an easy alphabet to use in copying out numerous texts or making many copies, since the tremendous amount of work involved to form each and every letter was not practical.

Since the same organizing principles are found throughout the alphabet, it is a certainty that one person, one mind, conceived of the alphabet, otherwise the letters would not be designed in the same way each and every time.

And finally, while I doubt that most scholars would ever agree, I believe the proof that St. Cyril is that one person and the clear creator of this alphabet can be found by truly understanding and examining the first letter of this alphabet, that same “a” .

Many scholars do agree that the letter that St. Cyril created to be the first letter of the new Slavic alphabet looks very much as though it was based on the Hebrew letter, “aleph.”

Aleph has several meanings in Hebrew, one of which is “knowledge.” But, it is also clear that St. Cyril’s “A” looks like a cross.

This is my interpretation and what I believe is definite proof that St. Cyril created this alphabet. The cross was a symbol of death, of torture. Only in Christianity did that same symbol of death become a symbol for the promise of resurrection. Only through Divine understanding could “knowledge” be elevated to “understanding,” to “wisdom,” to “Sophia.” Thus, the first letter of a new alphabet, a new alphabet created to help bring the Slavs to Christianity, a new alphabet to not only educate them and give them knowledge, but to through that knowledge enlighten them and bring them to an understanding of Christianity and its meaning, is symbolic of everything that St. Cyril believed. Through the cross we are given the promise of eternal life; through knowledge we are brought to understanding, to Divine Wisdom, to “Sophia.” Furthermore, we know from the *Life of St. Cyril* that even as a small child he had dedicated himself to “Sophia,” to Divine Wisdom.

And, now let me also tell you that each of the letters of the Glagolitic alphabet stood for a word and that students would learn the alphabet by memorizing the words for which the letters stood. (Something similar to “A is for apple, B is for boy, C is for cat.”) The word for the first Slavic letter “a” is *az* – “I,” the first person singular. Even more interesting, and certainly not a coincidence, when a person repeated the first three letters of the alphabet, “*az*” - “*buky*” - “*vede*,” he said a complete sentence: “I know letters,” that is, “I am literate!” I have no doubt that St. Cyril, that scholar and genius, created the Slavic alphabet.

Now, let me quickly get to the end of the story.

Without the blessing of the Pope, the monks and clergy using Glagolitic and Slavic were harassed, driven out, and even arrested. Methodius had by then died and some of the older disciples left Moravia. Other disciples were imprisoned and some were even sold into slavery. Fortunately for all of them, Boris, the Bulgarian emperor, decided exactly at this same time to accept Christianity. He not only welcomed the followers of Cyril and Methodius, but also found and freed as many missionaries who were already educated in Slavic writing as he could. He provided money for monasteries, churches and schools, and encouraged the monks to teach the alphabet, to copy and distribute manuscripts, and to translate new works into Slavic.

And it was also probably at this time that Cyrillic as we know it, that alphabet clearly modeled upon Greek, began also to be used by the Slavs. Remember, early Glagolitic is not a logical alphabet for transmission. It is slow and cumbersome. This other Cyrillic, named again for St. Cyril, was much easier to teach and to use. It was far more efficient and practical than Glagolitic.



Now that Slavic writing and the use of Slavic in the Church had powerful backing, and was in an area that was more outside Rome's sphere of influence, it was no longer important for the Slavic alphabet to be clearly new and different from Latin or Greek.

For a time, Glagolitic continued to also be used. Even though the alphabet was not encouraged, minor traces of it were found almost everywhere there were Slavs. Of the hundreds of thousands of pages copied in the Glagolitic alphabet created by St. Cyril, fewer than 3,000 pages exist today. There are, however, many more in the Glagolitic script found among Croatian Catholics, and it survives in this later form even today.

The original Glagolitic alphabet created by St. Cyril continued to be used by some until approximately the year 1200. It is distinct due to its "rounded" appearance (the curved arcs forming the letters). The later Glagolitic as used by the *glagolishi* monks is "square-looking," in part because the lines are actual lines and not formed by a series of connected arcs. This later *glagolitic*, also known as "Western," "square," or "Croatian glagolitic" probably began to be used around 1300.

Because the early Cyrillo-Methodian Glagolitic script was fairly quickly replaced by the Cyrillic script as we know it, many have forgotten its importance to bringing the Slavs to Christianity. Also, some of the peoples who received this alphabet and language did not use it, as far as we know, for very long. But neither this alphabet, nor its role, nor the literary language set down by SS. Cyril and Methodius should be forgotten. In one way or another, all Slavs benefited from these gifts.

The feast day of SS. Cyril and Methodius is celebrated on April 14th in the Roman Catholic Church, and on May 11th O.S. (May 24th, New Style) in the Eastern Orthodox Church. They are rightly called "Apostles to the Slavs" and "Enlighteners of the Slavs."

Thank you for your attention and patience.