

Holy Disobedience: Resistance to Secular and Ecclesiastical Authority in Orthodox Christian History

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Introduction

As one begins a study of Christian history, and in particular the patristic period, what becomes immediately apparent is how often figures regarded as “heroes” of the Christian narrative found themselves at odds with both secular and ecclesiastical authority. These heroes and saints were the ones who, to protect the orthodox faith, disobeyed the biblical injunction to “submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men” (1 Peter 2:13). They were the ones who ignored Ignatius of Antioch’s plea to be obedient to the bishop, respecting him “as you respect the authority of God the Father.”¹ Of course, this dynamic is not exclusive to the patristic period. For example, during the thirteenth and fifteenth century debates over union with the Roman Catholic Church, once again we find the saints actively struggling against both ecclesiastical and secular authority in order to preserve the Orthodox faith.

Now as an historical phenomenon this is, to say the least, intriguing. However, for Orthodox Christians this reality presents a rather troubling precedent-- can an individual simply ignore secular and ecclesiastical authority whenever s/he thinks it right? What would then prevent Christians from challenging Church or State at every turn, claiming that they are simply following the examples of Saints Athanasius, Ambrose, Maximus the Confessor, and Mark of Ephesus? Already there are many within the Orthodox Church who challenge elements of the hierarchy using the “holy disobedience” of the fathers to justify their position.² In the ongoing “culture war” in American society

¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians* (Eng. trans: Cyril Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* [New York: Touchstone, 1996], 95-97).

² A recent example of this can be found in the 2006 *Kelliotes Letter to the Sacred Twenty Athonite Monasteries*, in which leading monks decried “the anti-Orthodox and blasphemous actions, declarations, and decisions of the Oecumenical Patriarch, and of the other Primates and Bishops who vociferously and visibly advocate--bare-headed--the acceptance and teaching of the chief heresy of Ecumenism. . . For this reason we believe

Christians on both sides of the left-right divide have declared their intention to disobey unjust government laws when they believed them at odds with Christian moral principles.³ Paul had written that “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1) and Ignatius of Antioch had once claimed “that we should regard the bishop as the Lord Himself,” and yet for centuries disobedience, rather than obedience, has been the way of the Orthodox.⁴

This paper is an attempt to examine the historical phenomenon of “holy disobedience” in the Orthodox tradition, perhaps as a way of discovering what wisdom history offers Christians today as they face the challenge of dealing with authority, both secular and ecclesiastical. In doing so, it is important to make a few clarifications. The first concerns the difference between legitimate and illegitimate authority. Throughout the centuries Christians have disobeyed individuals because they believed them to be, for one reason or another, illegitimate authorities--e.g., popes whose claims to universal jurisdiction were never recognized, bishops who were uncanonically elected, emperors who illegally seized the throne. There are too many such cases and they only complicate the matter. Instead, what will be discussed here is disobedience to those recognized, even by the disobedient themselves, as *the* legitimate secular or ecclesiastical authority that would, under normal conditions, require obedience.

Second, the paper will restrict itself to Orthodox Christian history. Certainly “holy disobedience” is not something particular to Orthodoxy. For example, Protestant Christians for centuries have seen the Reformation as an act of “holy disobedience” necessary to protect the

that . . . the only thing that will gladden the Orthodox and shame the *kakodox* is to cease commemoration of the patriarch and of all the bishops agreeing with him.”

<http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/kelliotes.aspx>.

³ On one side there was the 2006 statement of the Roman Catholic Cardinal of Los Angeles, Roger Mahoney, who instructed his priests to disobey any law that required Catholic agencies to report illegal immigrants. On the other was the 2009 Manhattan Statement signed by representatives of the Evangelical, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox Churches. While recognizing “the duty to comply with laws whether we happen to like them or not,” the signatories stated that “we will not comply with any edict that purports to compel our institutions to participate in abortions, embryo-destructive research, assisted suicide and euthanasia, or any other anti-life act; nor will we bend to any rule purporting to force us to bless immoral sexual partnerships, treat them as marriages or the equivalent, or refrain from proclaiming the truth, as we know it, about morality and immorality and marriage and the family.”

⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians* (Eng. trans: Cyril Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers*, 89).

gospel from the corruptions of the Roman Church of the sixteenth century. Martin Luther's famous "Here I stand, I can do no other" in many ways echoes the cry of the saints of old as they stood against Church or State to protect the faith. However, it would take us too far afield if we were to judge the truth of Luther's claims (and thus the validity of the Reformation itself), which is why we will only discuss events in the Christian East. Besides, as the history makes clear, there are more than enough disobedient Orthodox Christians to go around.

The Scriptures

Any discussion of holy disobedience must begin with the Scriptures and the precedent set by the apostles themselves as the early Church began to preach Jesus as the crucified and risen one.⁵ According to Acts 4, "the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees" brought Peter and John before the "rulers of the people and elders" who commanded them to cease their ministry and desist from speaking in Jesus' name. Their answer was, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). When the apostles continued to preach and heal in Jesus' name they were again arrested and reminded that they had been given "strict orders not to teach in this name." Peter, speaking for the group, simply replied "We must obey God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29) establishing a principle for dealing with authorities, both secular and religious, that would be invoked throughout the centuries.

⁵ I am going to sidestep the question of Jesus' own relationship to the secular (i.e., Roman) authorities and the challenge he seems to present to the religious leaders of his day. The fact that Christ's death was brought about by these two groups working in collusion would indicate that the relationship was, to say the least, problematic. The gospels speak of Jesus teaching "as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Mark 1:22, Matthew 7:29), which seemingly contrasts the God-given authority wielded by Christ with the pretended power of the Jewish teachers. Concerning the Romans, for centuries Christians have tried to understand the teaching that one should "give to Caesar what is Caesar's but give to God what is God's" (Mark 12:17, Matthew 22:21, Luke 20:25). While often taken as a call for obedience to the state, Jesus' execution on the charge of claiming kingship (witnessed by the *titulus* placed on the cross) points to the perception, but not necessarily the reality, that Jesus was a political problem. For a discussion of the issue see Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 679-93, 962-68.

Paul, of course, the very man who enjoined Christians to obedience in Romans 13:1-7,⁶ seems to have had a very prickly relationship with those in authority in the Church, particularly with the “so-called pillars” James, John, and Peter.⁷ Without doubting their legitimacy as “apostles and elders,” Paul never gives them unquestioned obedience, and famously rebukes Peter in Antioch when he believes him to have violated the principles established at the Council of Jerusalem.⁸ Paul grounds his own apostolic authority in the call he received from Christ on the road to Damascus, believing this pedigree equal to (or beyond) anything claimed by the others.⁹ Therefore even if one claiming to be among the “super apostles” . . . “comes . . . and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached” (2 Corinthians 11:4-5) Paul is clear he must be rejected.¹⁰

⁶ “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (Romans 13:1-7).

⁷ According to many scholars Paul’s deliberate use of the phrase *hoi dokountes einai ti* (“those who seem to be”) is intended to be derogatory, “perhaps confirming some marginal reservations he had about the way in which some members of their church extolled them.” James Louis Martyn, *The Anchor Bible: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Volume 33A: Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 204-05.

⁸ “When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong” (Galatians 2:11).

⁹ According to F.F. Bruce, in Paul’s mind “it was the personal call of the risen Christ that made him an apostle” F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 145.

¹⁰ Whether this is a reference to James and the Twelve or simply to opponents in Corinth who claimed apostolic authority remains open to debate. See Frank Matera, *II Corinthians*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 244-54.

Disobedience to the State

Despite Paul's clear call for obedience, the Church's relation to the state during the apostolic period remained a complicated affair. Beginning in 64 AD, during the reign of the Emperor Nero, Christians in Rome found themselves persecuted for their beliefs and blamed for the great fire that had consumed the city.¹¹ For the next 250 years sporadic and localized persecution of Christians occurred throughout the empire, culminating in the great imperial persecutions of Decius (249-251) and Diocletian (303-305). Having long been accused of disloyalty to the state (a charge which apologists like Justin had tried their best to answer)¹² Christians were now asked to prove their allegiance by offering sacrifices for the safety of the empire.¹³ Obedience to imperial authority was one thing, and in most cases Christians were quite happy to oblige. However in demanding that believers offer sacrifices to the gods, the state had gone beyond what could legitimately be expected and Christians now found themselves duty bound to resist.¹⁴ According to

¹¹ According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero shifted blame onto the Christians as a way of answering those who were prepared to point the finger of guilt at him. He wrote: "As a consequence, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians [or Chrestians] by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but, even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. In accordance, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not as much of the crime of firing the city as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired." Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44.

¹² According to Justin, Christians are "more than all other people . . . your [i.e., the emperor's] helpers and allies in the cause of peace" who "try to pay to those appointed by you, more readily than all people, the taxes and assessments, as we have been taught by Him [i.e., Jesus]." Justin, *First Apology* 12, 17 (Eng. trans: Justin Martyr, *The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard, ACW 56 [New York: Paulist Press, 1997], 29, 34-35).

¹³ See J. B. Rives, "The Decree of Decius and the Religion of the Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999): 135-54.

¹⁴ Cyprian of Carthage was among the most vocal critics of those (especially priests) who lapsed during the persecution, writing, "He [i.e., the Lord] says *He that sacrifices to the gods, unless it is to the Lord only, will be totally destroyed* (Ex 22:20). Moreover, the Lord speaks again in these words: *They have worshipped those whom their own fingers have made, and the lowly man bows down, and the great man does obeisance. And I shall not relent towards them* (Is 2:8-9). And in the Apocalypse also we read of the wrath of

Hugo Rahner, this refusal “had its roots in the Christian’s response to the invitation to the kingdom where the messiah would reign in peace and justice, making it impossible to fall under the total control of a despotic state.”¹⁵ Simply put, Christians were first and foremost citizens of the Kingdom of God, and it was to this kingdom that their primary allegiance belonged. Because citizenship here was both “temporary and secondary,” all of its demands had to be weighed against the chief obligation of Christian discipleship.¹⁶ Provided that the state did not attempt to overstep its proper bounds-- e.g., by asking Christians to betray their true king-- the Church could give it everything it wanted. For example, the emperor was owed prayers and was deserving of the greatest respect, for according to Tertullian, “as a man he is second only to God, protected by God, and therefore inferior only to God.”¹⁷

the Lord who utters these menacing words, *If a man worships the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his brow and on his hand, he too shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God mixed in the cup of His wrath; and he shall be punished with fire and brimstone in the sight of the holy angels, and in the sight of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torments will ascend for ever and ever. And they shall have no rest, neither day nor night, they who worship the beast and his image* (Rev 14:9-11). Such, therefore, are the torments and punishments with which on the day of judgment the Lord menaces those who obey Satan and sacrifices to idols. How does he imagine he can act as a priest of God seeing he has obeyed and served the priests of Satan? How does he suppose that his hand can now be turned to the sacrifice of God and the solemn prayer of the Lord seeing it has been in bondage to sacrilege and sin?” Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle 65* (Eng. trans: Cyprian of Carthage, *The Letters of St. Cyprian*, vol. 3, trans. G. W. Clarke, ACW 46 [New York: Paulist Press, 1986], 113).

¹⁵ Hugo Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 4.

¹⁶ Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity*, 4.

¹⁷ “For we offer prayer for the safety of our princes to the eternal, the true, the living God, whose favour, beyond all others, they must themselves desire. . . . Without ceasing, for all our emperors we offer prayer. We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection to the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest, whatever, as man or Cæsar, an emperor would wish. . . . I do more than you for his welfare, not merely because I ask it of Him who can give it . . . but because, in keeping the majesty of Cæsar within due limits, and putting it under the Most High, and making it less than divine, I commend him the more to the favour of Deity, to whom I make him alone inferior. . . . Never will I call the emperor God . . . [for] it is his interest as man to give God His higher place. Let him think it enough to bear the name of emperor. That, too, is a great name of God’s giving. To call him God, is to rob him of his title. If he is not a man, emperor he cannot be. Even when, amid the honours of a triumph, he sits on that lofty chariot, he is reminded that he is only human. A voice at his back keeps whispering in his ear, ‘Look behind thee; remember thou art but a man.’ And it only adds to his exultation, that he shines with a glory so surpassing as to require an admonitory reference to his condition. It adds to his greatness that he needs such a reminiscence, lest he should think himself divine.” Tertullian, *Apologeticus pro Christianis* 30, 32 (Eng. trans: ANF 3:42-43).

However, according to Hippolytus, when the emperor claims a level of authority that belongs to God alone, the Christian must imitate the example of Daniel and follow the decrees of God rather than those of the king, even if, like Daniel, it may literally put him in the lion's den.¹⁸

But things changed following the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, when the Empire itself ceased persecuting the Church and began instead to patronize it. Constantine the Great, who presumed the traditional right of the emperor to regulate religious matters, not only granted Christians freedom to worship within the empire, but quickly made them the preferred sect. As *pontifex maximus* Constantine was seen by Christians not only as the divinely appointed patron and protector of the Church, but as its visible head whose commands echoed the will of God himself.¹⁹ For the most part the Church embraced this new state of affairs and the *symphonia* established between the empire and the Church.²⁰ However, following the Council of Nicea in 325, certain figures began to reassess this relationship as Constantine and his heirs

¹⁸ "The fidelity of Daniel is worthy of admiration . . . One who has faith in God ought not dissemble or fear the powerful, especially those who use power for evil. If they are compelled to do something opposed to their belief, their better choice is death rather than submission. . . . the apostles, forbidden by the rulers and scribes from preaching the word, did not cease to 'obey God rather than man' . . . So Daniel too, forbidden to pray, did not bow down before the royal decree, lest he show less respect for God's law than for that of mere men. . . If anyone is hindered in the worship of God or in prayer because he is threatened with death, he ought to prefer death to submission to the will of another . . . Therefore imitate Daniel without fear of the satraps and without bowing to the decrees of men, so that when thrown into the lions' den you may be protected by an angel, may tame the beasts and force them to fear you as a servant of God. No wound will you suffer, but when taken unharmed from the den you will be recognized as a sharer in the resurrection and will become master of your enemies and give thanks to the ever-living God." Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel* (Eng. trans: Hugo Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity*, 30-31).

¹⁹ Constantine himself had claimed: "I myself, then, was the instrument whose services God chose, and esteemed suited for the accomplishment of his will. Accordingly, beginning at the remote Britannic ocean, and the regions where, according to the law of nature, the sun sinks beneath the horizon, through the aid of divine power I banished and utterly removed every form of evil which prevailed, in the hope that the human race, enlightened through my instrumentality, might be recalled to a due observance of the holy laws of God, and at the same time our most blessed faith might prosper under the guidance of his almighty hand." Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.28 (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.1.507).

²⁰ Dominic Janes, describing the attitude of Christians who were now on the receiving end of imperial favor and largesse, writes that their view was simple: "If this be the Lord's will then God be praised!" Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 52.

began diluting Nicene orthodoxy in the name of religious harmony. This was certainly the view of Athanasius of Alexandria, whose staunch defense of the council led him to reject all compromise with those he deemed Arian. For Constantine religious peace was a good in itself, which is why the emperor made it clear to Athanasius and the Nicene hardliners what they had to do-- re-admit Arius and his followers to communion.²¹ When Athanasius refused, Constantine issued instructions that were incapable of misinterpretation:

Meantime should any one, though I deem it most improbable, venture on this occasion to violate my command, and refuse his attendance, a messenger shall be dispatched forthwith to banish that person in virtue of an imperial edict, and to teach him that it does not become him to resist an emperor's decrees when issued in defense of truth.²²

And yet despite all of the honorifics he heaped upon Constantine and his children (e.g., "most religious," "most blessed") Athanasius would not obey them, believing not only in the truth of the Nicene position, but also in the right of the bishops who spoke the truth to minister free of imperial interference. He wrote to the clergy, instructing them that if "you are quite unexpectedly replaced by order of the civil authorities as you presided blamelessly in your churches in union with your people . . . justice demands that you show your disapproval, for if you remain silent in a short time this evil will spread to all the churches."²³

Of course Athanasius was not alone in condemning imperial religious policy, or in urging others to resist it. Pope Julius in the West also bemoaned the fact that "the decisions of the Church are no longer according to the gospels but tend only to banishment and death."²⁴ He wrote to the Bishops of the East asking them to "denounce in writing those persons who attempt [such things], so that the Churches may no

²¹ In 328 Constantine wrote to Athanasius demanding that he re-admit Arius and others to communion. He stated: "Having therefore knowledge of my will, grant free admission to all who wish to enter into the Church. For if I learn that you have hindered or excluded anyone who claims to be admitted into communion with the Church, I will immediately send one who shall depose you by my command and shall remove you from your place" Athanasius, *Apologia Contra Arianos*, 59 (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.4.132).

²² Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 4.42 (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.1.551).

²³ Athanasius, *Epistula Encyclica* 6 (Eng. trans: Hugo Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity*, 50)

²⁴ Athanasius, *Apologia Contra Arianos* 35 (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.4.118).

longer be afflicted thus, nor any bishop or presbyter be treated with insult, nor anyone be compelled to act contrary to his judgment . . . lest we become a laughing stock among the heathen and, above all, excite the wrath of God.”²⁵ When, in 353, Pope Liberius was asked to support the condemnation of Athanasius at the Synod of Arles, he refused, claiming that “I would prefer death for God’s sake rather than appear a traitor and give my consent to a judgment contrary to the Gospel.”²⁶

Once again the choice appeared to be obedience to the emperor or obedience to the gospel, just as it been for the apologists. And, once again, the Church was forced to define for the emperor the limits of his authority and the Christian’s ultimate allegiance. Athanasius’s supporters “used great boldness of speech against him [i.e., Constantius], teaching him that the kingdom was not his, but God’s . . . and they threatened him with the day of judgment and warned him against infringing Ecclesiastical order and mingling Roman sovereignty with the Constitution of the Church.”²⁷ Constantius, meanwhile, took the traditional Roman view that the emperor had both the power and duty to regulate religious matters, maintaining that the imperial will effectively ruled the Church.”²⁸ Yet not everyone was convinced by his arguments. Bishop Lucifer of Cagliari wrote to the emperor to remind him that ultimately, “despite all your cruelty you lie helpless under the feet of God’s servants, and all your imperial pomp is for us nothing. For us, you are, with all your authority, only a passing breeze.”²⁹

This same line of thinking is evident in writings of Ambrose of Milan, whose challenge to the Emperor Theodosius following the massacre at Thessalonica has become the stuff of ecclesial legend.³⁰ Yet

²⁵ Athanasius, *Apologia Contra Arianos* 35 (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.4.118).

²⁶ CSEL 65 167, 14-16 (Eng. trans: Hugo Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity*, 52).

²⁷ Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum* 34 (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.4.281).

²⁸ “The Emperor summoned [the bishops] before him, and commanded them to subscribe against Athanasius, and to hold communion with the heretics; and when they were astonished at this novel procedure, and said that there was no Ecclesiastical canon to this effect, he immediately said, ‘Whatever I will, be that esteemed a canon; the Bishops of Syria let me thus speak. Either then obey, or go into banishment.’” Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum* 33 (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.4.281).

²⁹ Lucifer of Cagliari, *Moriendum esse pro Filio Dei* 4 (Eng. trans: Hugo Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity*, 54).

³⁰ “When Ambrose heard of this deplorable catastrophe [i.e., the massacre at Thessalonica], he went out to meet the Emperor, who . . . desired as usual to enter the holy church, but Ambrose prohibited his entrance, saying . . . ‘You must not be dazzled by the splendor of the purple you wear, and be led to forget the weakness of the body which it clothes. Your subjects, O Emperor, are of the same nature as yourself, and not only so, but are likewise your fellow servants; for there is one Lord and Ruler of all, and

this was neither the first nor the last time Ambrose found himself at odds with the emperor. In 388 a mob rioted and destroyed a synagogue in Callinicum at the instigation of the local bishop, leading Theodosius to order its rebuilding at the Christians' expense.³¹ Ambrose was clear that as a subject he owed Theodosius obedience, yet he was bound to speak out, "in obedience to God . . . and the desire to preserve your well-being . . . for who will dare tell the truth if the bishop does not?"³² He reminded Theodosius of the dilemma now facing the bishop-- that he could comply with the law and become an apostate, or resist and become a martyr.³³ The preferred choice for Ambrose was clear, "for God is more feared than men, for he is rightly preferred even to emperors. If someone considers it proper to show deference to a friend, or parents, or a relative, I think it should rightly be shown to God and that he should be preferred to all."³⁴ As he put it plainly elsewhere:

He is the maker of all creatures, whether princes or people' . . . The Emperor, who had been brought up in the knowledge of Holy Writ, and who knew well the distinction between the ecclesiastical and the temporal power, submitted to the rebuke, and with many tears and groans returned to his palace. The Emperor shut himself up in his palace and shed floods of tears. After vain attempts to appease Ambrose, Theodosius himself at last went to Ambrose privately and besought mercy, saying 'I beseech you, in consideration of the mercy of our common Lord, to unloose me from these bonds, and not to shut the door which is opened by the Lord to all that truly repent.' . . . [Having been forgiven] the Emperor, who was full of faith, now took courage to enter holy church . . . but [Ambrose] forbade him to come inside the altar rail, ordering his deacon to say 'The priests alone, O Emperor, are permitted to enter within the barriers by the altar. Retire then, and remain with the rest of the laity. A purple robe makes Emperors, but not priests. . . ' Theodosius meekly obeyed, praising Ambrose for his spirit, and saying 'Ambrose alone deserves the title of bishop.'" Theodore, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5:17-18.

³¹ Ambrose expressed his astonishment that the "spoils of the Church" should be provided "for the disbelief of the Jews" and that the "patrimony given to Christians by Christ [would] be transferred to the treasuries of unbelievers." This "triumph" over the Church, he writes, will be ranked by the Jews alongside their victories over Pharaoh and the people of Canaan, and celebrated in perpetuity as a victory over Christ himself. Besides, Ambrose believed that all this "commotion" over the burning of a building to be excessive, especially since "it was an abode of unbelief, a house of impiety, a shelter of madness under the damnation of God Himself." Ambrose of Milan, *Epistula 40* (Eng. trans: Ambrose, *Saint Ambrose Letters 1-91*, trans. FC 26 [Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954], 10-14).

³² Ambrose of Milan, *Epistula 40* (Eng. trans: Ambrose, *Saint Ambrose Letters 1-91*, trans. FC 26 [Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954], 8).

³³ Ambrose of Milan, *Epistula 40* (Eng. trans: Ambrose, *Saint Ambrose Letters 1-91*, trans. FC 26 [Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954], 9).

³⁴ Ambrose of Milan, *Epistula 40* (Eng. trans: Ambrose, *Saint Ambrose Letters 1-91*, trans. FC 26 [Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954], 17-18).

We pay to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. Tribute is due to Caesar, we do not deny it. The Church belongs to God, therefore it ought not to be assigned to Caesar. For the temple of God cannot be Caesar's by right. That this is said with respectful feeling for the Emperor, no one can deny. For what is more full of respect than that the Emperor should be called the son of the Church. As it is said, it is said without sin, since it is said with the divine favour. For the Emperor is within the Church, not above it. For a good emperor seeks the aid of the Church and does not refuse it.³⁵

During the monothelite crisis of the sixth and seventh centuries, with Christianity still divided over reception of Chalcedon, the imperial desire for religious peace once again brought the saints into conflict with the emperors.³⁶ Pope Martin I of Rome and Maximus the Confessor joined forces to battle both the *Ekthesis* of Heraclius (638) and the *Typos* of Constans II (648) which to them represented a form of “creeping monophysitism” that diluted the truth of the Council.³⁷ Pope Martin was later arrested and taken to Constantinople, where after being defrocked and humiliated he was sent into exile, dying shortly thereafter in 655. Maximus the Confessor was also brought East and put on trial, where he

³⁵ Ambrose, *Sermo contra Auxentium* 36 (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.10. 436).

³⁶ Monothelitism (i.e., the belief that Christ had only one operative will) although not explicitly formulated until 634, had its roots in the lengthy, and somewhat complicated, debates surrounding the Council of Chalcedon and the orthodoxy of the Tome of Pope Leo to Flavian. It had stated: “So, following the saintly fathers, we all with one voice teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ . . . acknowledged in two natures, which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ.” Norman Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 86.

³⁷ Both documents were read out and condemned at the Lateran Council convened by Pope Martin in 649. For Maximus the debate was simple: “If he [i.e., Christ] has two natures, then he surely must have two natural wills, the wills and essential operations being equal in number to the natures.” *Diputatio cum Pyrrho* (Eng. trans: Joseph Farrell, *The Disputation with Pyrrhus of our Father among the Saints Maximus the Confessor* [South Canaan: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1990], 4). For more on Maximus’s role at the Synod see Rudolf Riedinger, “Die Lateransynode von 649 und Maximus der Bekenner,” in Felix Heinzer and Christoph Schönborn, eds., *Maximus Confessor: Actes du Symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur, Fribourg, 2–5 Septembre 1980* (Fribourg-en-Suisse: Editions Universitaires, 1982), 111–21.

maintained not only his orthodoxy, but the proper place of the emperor vis-à-vis the Church. He said:

No emperor was able to persuade the fathers who speak of God to be reconciled with the heretics of their times by means of equivocal expressions . . . [You ask] “Is the Christian emperor also a priest?” [I say] no, he isn’t, because he neither stands beside the altar . . . nor does he baptize, nor perform the rite of anointing, nor does he ordain and make bishops . . . nor does he wear the symbols of priesthood, the pallium and the gospel book . . . During the anaphora at the holy table . . . the emperors are remembered with the laity . . . after all the clergy.³⁸

Centuries later the Church was again confronted with imperial intervention in Church matters, as the Emperors Leo IV and Constantine V began their campaign against the icons. This time it was John of Damascus who came to the Church’s defense, claiming that there had been a “piratical attack” on the Church, with bishops being exiled or killed and replaced with imperial lackeys.³⁹ Once again, as with Constantius, Theodosius, and Constans II, the emperors had forgotten their place and failed to remember that:

It is not for emperors to legislate for the Church . . . for emperors did not speak the word to us, but apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers . . . Political good order is the concern of emperors, the ecclesiastical constitution that of pastors and teachers . . . We submit to you, O Emperor, in the matters of this life, taxes, revenues, commercial dues, in which our concerns are entrusted to you. For the ecclesiastical constitution we have pastors who speak to us the word and represent ecclesiastical ordinance.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Relatio Motionis*, 4 (Eng. trans: Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil, eds., *Maximus the Confessor and His Companions: Documents from Exile* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 55-59).

³⁹ John of Damascus, *Treatises on the Divine Images*, Treatise 2.12 (Eng. trans: John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth [Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003], 69).

⁴⁰ John of Damascus, *Treatises on the Divine Images*, Treatise 2.12 (Eng. trans: John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth [Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003], 68-69).

Disobedience to Ecclesiastical Authority

As problematic as the Church-State relationship has been for Christians, the question of (dis)obedience to ecclesiastical authority is more complicated, and thus far more vexing. Certainly there are more than a few examples, especially in the writings of the desert fathers and early monastics, of the need for obedience to one's spiritual superiors. The *Rule of Benedict* clearly states that "obedience given to superiors is given to God,"⁴¹ and according to John Cassian:

The monks rank obedience not only above manual labor, but over reading, silence, the peace of the cell, even before all virtues; they consider all things to take second place to this, and are happy to undergo any inconvenience if only they can show they have in no way infringed this one good thing.⁴²

Given this stress on monastic obedience, one might then find it puzzling that historically monks have been at odds with ecclesiastical authorities in so many different times and places. For example, Maximus the Confessor refused during his trial to commune with the hierarchy in Constantinople, believing them to be heretics condemned by the Romans and the Lateran Synod. His accusers then asked him: "But what if the Romans should come to terms with the Byzantines, what will you do?" He answered: "The Holy Spirit, through the apostle, condemns even angels who innovate in some way contrary to what is preached."⁴³ Simply put, Maximus knew that in the matter of Christ's wills he was right and the hierarchy was wrong, and he would rather die "than have on

⁴¹ Benedict of Nursia, *Regula Benedicti* 5 (Eng. trans: Benedict, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. Terrence Kardong [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994], 104).

⁴² To emphasize the importance of obedience Cassian related the story of a man who entered the monastery, bringing with him his eight year old son. The abbot wished to test the commitment and obedience of this novice, and so he had the son subjected to mistreatment and beatings while his father watched on in silence. The abbot then ordered the father to take his son and throw him into the Nile, which he did "as if the command had been given him by the Lord." John Cassian, *The Monastic Institutes* 4.27 (Eng. trans: John Cassian, *The Monastic Institutes*, trans. Jerome Bertram [London: St. Anselm Press, 199], 55-56).

⁴³ *Relatio Motionis*, 7 (Eng. trans: Bronwen and Allen, *Life of Maximus the Confessor*, 63).

my conscience the worry that in some way or other I have suffered a lapse with regard to belief in God.”⁴⁴

In the eighth century, during the iconoclastic controversy, imperial pressure on the iconodules was supplemented by the decrees of the iconoclast hierarchy, who gathered in (an alleged) ecumenical council at Hierea in 754, and formally ruled against the icons.⁴⁵ Despite the absence of all five patriarchs, 338 bishops, led by Theodosius of Ephesus, participated in the synod, anathematizing all who attempted “to represent the divine image of the Word after the Incarnation . . . [or] the forms of the Saints in lifeless pictures with material colors.”⁴⁶ Having now been endorsed by an ecumenical council, the teachings of the iconoclast bishops became the teaching of the Church, to which religious obedience must be given. And while the emperor could (and did) employ the secular arm against the iconodules, the iconoclasts could now also demand submission to the decisions of an ecumenical council. For this reason monastic communities were told “to subscribe to the definition of our orthodox synod” for it was not right that “idolaters and worshippers of shadows” should prefer their own view to that of the Church.⁴⁷ Simply put, the Church has spoken and its children must obey.

Of course the absence of all five patriarchs made impugning the conciliar legitimacy of Hierea easy for the iconodules, but very often opposition to the iconoclast councils-- both at Hierea in 754 and a similar council in 815-- took a different tactic. Theodore the Studite, for example, called on the monks to engage in “God-pleasing resistance” to the decisions of these synods (as well as the Moechian synod of 809) because despite the veneration of legitimacy, these gatherings lacked an

⁴⁴ *Relatio Motionis*, 7 (Eng. trans: Bronwen and Allen, *Life of Maximus the Confessor*, 63).

⁴⁵ Interestingly, unlike John of Damascus who saw the whole controversy as a piratical takeover of the Church by the emperor, the Synod of Hierea likened him to the apostles, for just as “Christ armed his Apostles against the ancient idolatry with the power of the Holy Spirit, and sent them out into all the world, so has he awakened against the new idolatry his servants our faithful Emperors, and endowed them with the same wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Impelled by the Holy Spirit they could no longer be witnesses of the Church being laid waste by the deception of demons, and summoned the sanctified assembly of the God-beloved bishops . . . that they, under divine guidance, might express their view on the subject” *Horos of the Synod of Hierea* (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.14.543).

⁴⁶ *Horos of the Synod of Hierea* (Eng. trans: NPNF 2.14.545-546).

⁴⁷ Stephanus Diaconus, *Life of St. Stephen the Younger* (Eng. trans: John Philip Thomas, *Private Religious Foundations in the Byzantine Empire*, *Dumbarton Oak Studies* 24 [Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 1987], 119).

essential component required of all true Church councils-- adherence to the canons and to the truth.⁴⁸ He wrote:

[The Church of God] has not permitted anything to be done or said against the established decrees and laws, although many shepherds have in many ways railed against them when they have called great and very numerous councils, and given themselves to put on a show of concern for the canons, while in truth acting against them . . . a council does not consist simply in the gathering of bishops and priests, no matter how many there are . . . A council occurs when, in the Lord's name, the canons are thoroughly searched out and maintained . . . [for] no authority whatever has been given to bishops for any transgression of a canon. They are simply to follow what has been decreed, and to adhere to those who have gone before.⁴⁹

Thus for Theodore disobedience to the hierarchy was sometimes necessary if one was to be obedient to the canon of truth received from the Fathers, “for we have an injunction from the Apostle himself: If anyone preaches a doctrine, or urges you to do something, against what you have received, against what is prescribed by the canons of the catholic and local synods held at various times, he is not to be received, or to be reckoned among the number of the faithful.”⁵⁰ Addressing the charge that he was introducing schism, Theodore was adamant that in so much as he had remained a child of the Church and its canons (unlike the false teachers who now claimed authority) it was not he who was the

⁴⁸ The Moechian (“adulterer”) controversy arose when Theodore and others objected to the marriage of Constantine VI to the lady-in-waiting (and Theodore’s cousin) Theodote, claiming that lacking proof of adultery he should never have left his first wife, Maria of Amnia (who had been forced to become a nun). The marriage was eventually performed, not by the Patriarch, but a priest of *Hagia Sophia* named Joseph. Theodore demanded that Joseph be excommunicated along with all who communed with him, which presumably would have included both the emperor and the patriarch. Although tensions ended during the reign of Irene, in 806 a synod was convened that re-admitted Joseph to the priesthood, which once again brought the issue forward. Theodore then found himself anathematized as a schismatic in 809 because of his refusal to acknowledge the authority of the conciliar rehabilitation.

⁴⁹ Theodore the Studite, *Epistle I.24 to Magister Theoctistus* (PG 99: 985) (Eng. trans: Patrick Henry, *Theodore of Studios: Byzantine Churchman* [Michigan: UMI, 1968], 120).

⁵⁰ Theodore the Studite, *Epistle I.24 to Magister Theoctistus* (PG 99: 985) (Eng. trans: Patrick Henry, *Theodore of Studios: Byzantine Churchman* [Michigan: UMI, 1968], 118-119).

schismatic.⁵¹ As with Maximus before him, Theodore knew in this matter he was right and the hierarchy was wrong.

Following the disastrous Battle of Manzikert in 1071 the Byzantine Empire increasingly found itself threatened by Seljuk advances in the East, losing most of its territory in Asia Minor by the end of the century. Despite the hope entertained by some (e.g., Pope Urban II) that a joint crusade would unite the two halves of Christendom, relations between Latins and Greeks deteriorated throughout the twelfth century as increased contact brought little but enmity between the two sides.⁵² By the Fourth Crusade the mutual hatred boiled over, leading to the vicious sack of Constantinople by the Latins in April of 1204 and the establishment of the Latin Empire under Baldwin of Flanders.⁵³ And yet, within months of Michael VIII Palaeologus's re-capture of Constantinople in 1261, Michael and many of his heirs were willing to negotiate Church union with Rome in exchange for aid against the Turks. As Manuel Palaeologus later told his son John:

Our last resource against the Turks is their fear of our union with the Latins . . . As often as you are threatened by the miscreants, present this danger before their eyes. Propose a council; consult on the means; but ever delay and avoid the convocation of the assembly . . . The Latins are proud; the Greeks are obstinate;

⁵¹ Theodore the Studite, *Epistle I. 28 to Monk Basil* (PG 997, 1001).

⁵² According to Aristeides Papadakis, "Before 1095, in both East and West, Christians still believed in a single undivided Christendom, whereas afterward very few did so." Aristeides Papadakis, *The Christian East and the Rise of the Papacy: The Church AD 1071-1453*, vol. 4, *The Church in History Series* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 105. See also Jonathon Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Angeliki Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, eds., *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001).

⁵³ Violating their crusader oaths, drunken soldiers raped "pious matron, girls of marriageable age . . . and maidens, who, having chosen a life of chastity, were consecrated to God." Others, "breathing murder . . . pillaged the holy places, trampled upon divine things, ran riot and cast down holy images of Christ and his holy mother." To the occupants of Constantinople the Latins had become "forerunners of the Anti-Christ, the agents and harbingers of his anticipated ungodliness." Nicetas Choniates, *The Sack of Constantinople*, trans. D. C. Munro, *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History, Series 1, 3.1* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1912), 15-16. For more on the Fourth Crusade see Geoffrey de Villehardouin, "Chronicles of the Fourth Crusade and the Conquest of Constantinople," in *Chronicles of the Crusades*, ed. and trans. Margaret Shaw (New York: Penguin, 1972), 29-162; Alfred Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade, Medieval Mediterranean 29* (London: Brill, 2000).

neither party will recede or retract; and the attempts at perfect union will confirm the schism and alienate the churches.⁵⁴

Now more often than not these negotiations came to nothing, but on two separate occasions Church union was, in fact, briefly achieved — at the Council of Lyons in 1274 and the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1439. These were thought to be “ecumenical councils” and are still regarded as such by the Roman Catholic Church.⁵⁵ And yet we know today that both Lyons and Florence ultimately failed in their attempts at union and are not considered ecumenical councils by the Orthodox Church. The reason for this, it has been often suggested, is “holy disobedience.”

In fact, Roman Catholic historian Joseph Gill, in his monumental history of the Council of Florence, maintained that the sole stumbling block to Florentine union was the stubbornness and disobedience of one man-- Mark of Ephesus-- and that had Mark been silenced, or punished by the emperor for refusing to accept the decisions of this ecumenical council, the history of Christendom might well have been different.⁵⁶ Gill, most would argue today, appears to overstate the council’s chances for success, and fails to recognize that Florence, like Lyons, had deeper systemic problems that explain its failure.⁵⁷ Yet, there is something to be said for the fact that with both the Council of Lyons and the Council of Florence disobedience to secular and ecclesial authority goes a long way in explaining the failure of these two (so-called) ecumenical gatherings.

From the Orthodox perspective, the Council of Lyons can hardly be called either an ecumenical council (since four of the five patriarchs were absent) or a reunion council (since there was never any discussion

⁵⁴ Quoted in Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 6 (New York: Bigelow, Brown & Co., 1845), 422.

⁵⁵ In 1974 Pope Paul VI caused a stir when he referred to Lyons as “sixth general council of the West” rather than ecumenical, although Catholic listings of the ecumenical councils since the time of Robert Bellarmine’s *De Controversiis* have included both Lyons and Florence.

⁵⁶ See Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

⁵⁷ Orthodox theologian and historian John Meyendorff asked whether or not a genuine “ecumenical encounter” was even possible at Ferrara-Florence. Lacking a shared *sensus ecclesiae*, he argued that it was not surprising that the Council spent days quibbling over the authenticity of texts and repeating the same old arguments that had marked the *filioque* debate since the time of Photius. John Meyendorff, “Was There an Encounter between East and West at Florence?” in *Rome, Constantinople, and Moscow: Historical and Theological Studies* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 87–111.

of the theological issues dividing East and West).⁵⁸ Indeed, Lyons is better understood as Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus's personal submission to Rome, the resulting "union" being little more than his attempt to bring the Eastern Church along with him. Michael was keenly aware that union with the Latins had little support among the Byzantines and promised the Orthodox that any deal would leave the Church "untouched by innovation," the only exception being the inclusion of the pope's name in the dyptichs. Still the anti-unionists refused to go along, openly proclaiming that the Latins were heretics who must be avoided like mad dogs. Patriarch Joseph refused to participate in the upcoming council, and most of the clergy followed suit, signing an anti-unionist oath that pledged to "keep inviolate the teachings of the Savior" regardless of what might be decided at Lyons.⁵⁹ In the end, Michael could only convince one-third of the clergy to pledge themselves to the union, as they obediently attested that "in th[is] matter . . . we have come to the same conclusion as our God-crowned and mighty holy and Lord Emperor."⁶⁰ As for the disobedient majority, for the moment they could take solace in the fact that while they were at odds with God's anointed, they were still in union with the Patriarch. However this changed immediately following the council, when Joseph resigned and John XI Beccus was elected patriarch.

John Beccus had originally been a vocal opponent of Michael's unionist agenda, and had earlier referred to the "Italians" as heretics.⁶¹

⁵⁸ In fact, the statement on the procession of the Holy Spirit (i.e., the *filioque*), the chief dogmatic issue separating East and West, was formulated at the second session of the council, weeks before the Byzantine delegation arrived in Lyons on June 24th. For more on the proceedings of the Council see V. Laurent and J. Darrouzès, eds., *Dossier Grec de l'Union de Lyon 1273-1277* (Paris, 1976); Joseph Gill, "The Church Union of Lyons Portrayed in Greek Documents," *Orientalia christiana periodica* 40 (1974); Burkhard Roberg, *Die Union zwischen der griechischen und der lateinischen Kirche auf dem II Konzil von Lyon*, Bonner historische Forschungen 24 (Bonn, 1964); H. Wolter and H. Holstein, *Lyon I et Lyon II* (Paris, 1966); Antonio Franchi, ed., *Il Concilio II di Lione (1274) secondo la ordinatio concilii generalis Lugdunensis*, Studi e Testi Francescani 33 (Rome: Edizioni Franciscane, 1965).

⁵⁹ Text in V. Laurent and J. Darrouzès, eds., *Dossier Grec de l'Union de Lyon 1273-1277*, 134ff.

⁶⁰ Joseph Gill, "The Church Union of Lyons Portrayed in Greek Documents," 33.

⁶¹ Despite being listed among the so-called "Latin-minded" theologians of the late Byzantine period, Beccus was "passionately attached to the Byzantine way of life" and completely unconvinced by the arguments of Western scholasticism. J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, Oxford History of the Christian Church (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 236. For more see Joseph Gill, "John Beccus, Patriarch of Constantinople," *Byzantina* 7 (1975): 251-66.; R. Souarn, "Tentatives d'union avec Rome: un patriarche grec catholique au XIIIe siècle," *Echos d'Orient* 3 (1899/1900):

For this he was imprisoned, where he underwent a conversion of sorts while reading the works of Nicephorus Blemmydes and Nicetas of Maroneia.⁶² For eight years as patriarch John XI tried to win the clergy over by the force of his arguments, and yet despite all his efforts, both administrative and theological, he was never able to overcome their hostility to the Latin Church. When the union was formally proclaimed in Constantinople it was celebrated rather quietly in the imperial chapel at Blachernae rather than Hagia Sophia, where the anti-unionists refused to commune with the patriarch. In February of 1277 Beccus presided over a synod that hurled excommunications and anathemas against those who would not submit, defrocking any cleric who refused communion from a unionist priest.⁶³ Among those excommunicated by Beccus were both Nicephorus I, Despot of Epirus, and John I Ducas of Thessaly, who later gathered their own synod at Neopatras (comprised mostly of anti-unionists who had fled Constantinople) to excommunicate Michael VIII and his followers. For his part the emperor kept busy imprisoning leading anti-unionists, even showing them off to the pope's representatives as proof of his sincerity. But, as J.M. Hussey noted, "while Michael could compel, it was not within his power to convince."⁶⁴

What is interesting about the opposition to Michael and his patriarch is the diversity and size of the group that constituted it. This was disobedience on a mass scale, comprising members of the emperor's own family (e.g. his sister Eulogia), generals, senators, church officials, lay people, and (it was noted at the time) a great number of women.⁶⁵ Both anti-Latin and unwilling to compromise in matters of the faith, the anti-unionists saw in the policies of Michael and Beccus everything they despised-- compromise with and capitulation to Rome and its various

229-237, 351-370; V. Grumel, "Un ouvrage récent sur Jean Beccus, patriarche de Constantinople," *Echos d'Orient* 24 (1925): 229-37; J. Gouillard, "Michel VIII et Jean Beccus devant l'Union," in 1274: Année charnière. Mutations et continuités (Paris: CNRS, 1977), 179-90; Alexandra Riebe, *Rom in Gemeinschaft mit Konstantinopel: Patriarch Johannes XI. Bekkos als Verteidiger der Kirchenunion von Lyon (1274)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005).

⁶² Although his motives have been questioned by some, the evidence suggests that Beccus's conversion was the result of a sincere search for truth. Papadakis agrees, arguing "it is useless to deny (as is often done) either the sincerity or the reality of this moment in Beccus's religious evolution" Aristeides Papadakis, *Crisis in Byzantium: The Filioque Controversy in the Patriarchate of Gregory II of Cyprus 1283-1289* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Press, 1996), 23.

⁶³ See Joseph Gill, "The Church Union of Lyons Portrayed in Greek Documents," 22-29.

⁶⁴ J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, 226.

⁶⁵ Joseph Gill, "The Church Union of Lyons Portrayed in Greek Documents," 25.

errors.⁶⁶ For example, despite the emperor's earlier promises, the pope was now demanding that the Byzantines alter the Nicene Creed in order to profess the *filioque*.⁶⁷ Believing this to be a heresy long ago condemned by the Church, despite all the threats from both Church and State, the anti-unionists held firm.

In the end, of course, despite the efforts of Michael and Beccus, the Union of Lyons never succeeded. By the time Michael died in 1282 Pope Martin IV had excommunicated him as a "supporter of heretics," and his own son Andronicus II denied him the usual imperial funerary rites for his betrayal of the Orthodox faith.⁶⁸ In quick succession Andronicus II repudiated the unionist policies of his father, forced Beccus to resign, and restored Joseph to the patriarchate. The disobedient masses had won.

The Council of Ferrara-Florence was, in many ways, far different than the Council of Lyons. Unlike Lyons it could genuinely claim to be ecumenical, in so much as the five patriarchs (or their representatives) were present and there was full and free discussion of all the contested issues.⁶⁹ For months the two sides went back and forth on

⁶⁶ It was during this period that "lists" of Latin errors began to proliferate. See Tia Kolbaba, *The Byzantine Lists: Errors of the Latins* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Tia Kolbaba, "Byzantine Perceptions of Latin Religious 'Errors': Themes and Changes from 850 to 1350," in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. Angeliki Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001), 117-43.

⁶⁷ In 1278 Pope Nicholas III sent legates to Constantinople, demanding the adoption of the *filioque* throughout the East, since "unity of faith does not permit diversity in its confessors or in confession . . . especially in the chanting of the creed" J. Gay, *Les Registres de Nicolas III* (Paris: Bibliothèque des Ecoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 1904), 128 (Eng. trans: Deno John Geanakoplos, *Emperor Michael Palaeologus and the West, 1258-1282: A Study in Late Byzantine-Latin Relations* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959], 313).

⁶⁸ Martin's motives were largely political. Three months before the emperor's excommunication the pope had accepted Charles of Anjou's plan for the restoration of a Latin Empire in Constantinople.

⁶⁹ One can contrast here the opinion of Roman Catholic scholar Joseph Gill with the traditional Orthodox view of the council as found in the *Memoirs* of Sylvester Syropoulos. According to the account of Syropoulos, the Greeks were starved into submission and only signed the union decree under a combination of imperial, financial, and psychological pressure. Although recent scholarship has been more favorable to the historicity of the *Memoirs*, there is certainly reason to question the overall objectivity of the account since Syropoulos had himself been a signatory to the union and may have written them as an apology for his own actions. See V. Laurent, ed., *Les "Mémoires" du Grand Ecclésiastique de l'Église de Constantinople Sylvestre Syropoulos sur le Concile de Florence (1438-1439)*, CF 9 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1971). Gill's work emphasized that the anti-unionists enjoyed full freedom of speech throughout the council (witnessed by the fact that Mark of Ephesus remained the Greeks'

purgatory and the *filioque*- each side only becoming more frustrated by the seeming impasse that had been reached. However, increasingly members of the Byzantine delegation, men like Isidore of Kiev, Bessarion of Nicea, and George Scholarius, were swayed by the Latins' arguments. They came to believe that the Latin teaching on the procession of the Holy Spirit was genuinely orthodox, and clearly supported by the fathers, both East and West.⁷⁰

Emperor John VIII Palaeologus, under tremendous pressure from both the pope and the unionists within his own ranks, pressed the issue. Increasingly the leading anti-unionists, men such as Mark Eugenicus of Ephesus and Anthony of Heraclea, were labeled as "traitors and Judases" who were preventing both the unity of Christ's Church and the salvation of the Great City.⁷¹ Mark, however, remained unmoved, believing that the Latins' texts were corrupted and their arguments contrary to the teaching of the fathers.⁷²

When a vote on the orthodoxy of the *filioque* was taken on May 30th the Latin teaching was rejected by a 17-10 majority-- the anti-unionists were still in control. However, it was at this point that holy

spokesman until the very end) and that the privations endured by the Greeks (which were genuine) were not part of a plot to extort them, but rather caused by the pope's inability to meet the ever-increasing costs of indefinitely maintaining a large Byzantine delegation. See Joseph Gill, "The Council of Florence: A Success that Failed," in *Personalities of the Council of Florence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 1-14; Joseph Gill, "The Freedom of the Greeks in the Council of Florence," in *Church Union: Rome and Byzantium 1204-1453* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979).

⁷⁰ According to Bessarion, "It was not the syllogisms . . . or the force of arguments that lead me to believe this (i.e., the Latin position), but the plain words of the doctors. For when I saw and heard them, straightway I put aside all contention and controversy and yielded to the authority of those whose words they were. . . . For I judged that the holy fathers, speaking as they did in the Holy Spirit, could not have departed from the truth and I was grieved that I had not heard their words before." Emmanuel Candal, ed., *CF 7.2 : Bessarion Nicaenus, S.R.E. Cardinalis, De Spiritus Sancti processione ad Alexium Lascarin Philanthropinum* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1961), 40-41.

⁷¹ The unionists argued that if the only defense left to the anti-unionists was to say that the Latins' quotations were false (which George Scholarius called "the height of stupidity"), or to reply with lies (which was unbecoming), the union must be consummated.

⁷² It should be noted that modern scholarship has found many (but certainly not all) of the Latins' texts to have been, in some way, corrupted. According to John Erickson, while "Mark's theory of wholesale fabrication is rather farfetched . . . spurious texts did play a certain role in the 'success' of the council, particularly in the way in which the crucial problem of the procession of the Holy Spirit was addressed" John Erickson, "*Filioque* and the Fathers at the Council of Florence," *The Challenge of Our Past* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), 160.

obedience was invoked. Patriarch Joseph II, now close to death but convinced of the Latins' orthodoxy, invited members of the delegation for private meetings, reminding them both of their collective theological ignorance and of their debt to him personally:

Why do you not listen to me? Was it not from my cell that you came out? Was it not I who raised you to the rank of bishop? Why then do you betray me? Why did you not second my opinion? Think you, then, that you can judge better than others about dogmas? I know as well as anybody else what the Fathers taught.⁷³

How successful was appeal to obedience by the Patriarch? Three days later, when a second vote was taken on the orthodoxy of the *filioque*, the entire delegation (except Mark of Ephesus, Anthony of Heraclea, Dositheus of Monemvasia, and Sophronius of Anchialus) embraced the Latin teaching. As for Patriarch Joseph, when he died days later the Latins were convinced enough of his commitment to union to permit him burial (with honors) in the Church of Santa Maria Novella where he remains to this day.⁷⁴

When the union was finally proclaimed on July 6th amid great pomp and pageantry, the one notable absence from the proceedings was Mark of Ephesus, who had refused to sign. In an interview with Pope Eugene shortly afterward he explained his justification for denying obedience to, what was now considered by all parties to be, an ecumenical gathering:

The councils sentenced those who would not obey the Church and kept opinions contrary to her doctrine. I express not my own opinions, I introduce nothing new into the Church, neither do I defend any errors. But I steadfastly preserve the doctrine which

⁷³ Syropoulos, *Memoirs*, 9.17; Laurent 450–52. (Eng. trans: Ostroumoff, *History of the Council of Florence*, [Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1971], 136).

⁷⁴ Patriarch Joseph had told the Byzantines shortly before his death: "I will never change or vary the doctrine handed down from our fathers but will abide in it till my last breath. But since the Latins, not of themselves but from the Holy Scriptures, explain the procession of the Holy Spirit as being from the Son, I agree with them and I give my judgment that this 'through' gives to the Son to be cause of the Holy Spirit. I both unite with them and am in communion with them." Syropoulos, *Memoirs*, 9.19; Laurent 452–54 (Eng. trans: Gill, *The Council of Florence*, 260). The patriarch had also (allegedly) left a will detailing his commitment to the union, but its authenticity remains a matter for debate.

the Church, having received from Christ the Savior, has ever kept and keeps.⁷⁵

The pope, after having failed to convince Mark to obey, demanded that he be punished, likening him to those (like Arius) who had refused to acknowledge the Council of Nicea.⁷⁶ The emperor claimed that he had already guaranteed Mark safe passage back to Constantinople, but assured the pope that appropriate steps would be taken to silence Mark unless he subscribed to the union at some point after his return East.⁷⁷

Within days the Byzantine delegation began their journey back home, where Mark's brother had already been stoking the fires of anti-unionism. By the time the Byzantines finally arrived back in Constantinople in February of 1440, the signatories had come to reject the union, wishing they too had been disobedient to pope, emperor, patriarch, and council. They cried out:

We have betrayed our faith. We have exchanged piety for impiety. We have renounced the pure sacrifice and become azymites. Let our hands, which signed such an unjust decree, be cut off! Let our tongues, which consented to the Latin faith, be plucked out!⁷⁸

When the emperor tried to compel the clergy to commune with the unionist Patriarch Metrophanes, the leading anti-unionists left the city to lead the resistance from afar. Mark of Ephesus spent his remaining years writing against the council, urging Orthodox Christians to run from

⁷⁵ Syropoulos, *Memoirs*, 10.23; Laurent 508–10 (Eng. trans: Ostroumoff, *History of the Council of Florence*, 159–60).

⁷⁶ Pope Eugene would later refer to “that wretched Ephesian, spewing out his poisonous thought everywhere. If only the emperor had consented to his being punished as he deserved, in the same way that Constantine permitted the punishment of Arius-- that poison of the Church-- both time and money would not have been wasted.” George Hoffman, ed., CF 1.3: *Epistolae Pontificiae ad Concilium Florentinum spectantes cum indicibus ad partes 1–3* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1946), 17–18 (Eng. trans: Nicholas Constas, “Mark Eugenicus,” in Carmelo Conticello and Vassa Conticello eds., *La théologie Byzantine et sa tradition*, vol. 2 [Turnhout: Brepols, 2002], 420).

⁷⁷ Andrew of Rhodes records that Mark of Ephesus had promised to accept the decrees of Florence once a new patriarch was elected in Constantinople. See Gill, *The Council of Florence*, 297.

⁷⁸ Doukas, *Historia Turco-Byzantina of Doukas*, crit. ed. Vasile Grecu (Bucharest, 1958), 315. See George Demacopoulos, “The Popular Reception of the Council of Florence in Constantinople (1439-1453),” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 43 (1999): 37-53.

the unionists “as one runs from snakes . . . as from those who have sold and bought Christ.”⁷⁹ Isidore of Kiev tried to introduce the union in Moscow, entering the city behind a Latin cross with the anti-unionist monk Symeon in chains before him. Within days of including the pope’s name in the dyptichs, Isidore was in prison on charges of heresy. By the time the union was publically proclaimed in Constantinople in December of 1452, it had already been rejected by the patriarchs of Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. George Gennadius Scholarius, who had urged the Greeks to union at Florence, now became the leading anti-unionist and first patriarch of Constantinople following the fall of the city to the Turks.⁸⁰ The union was at an end, and as with Lyons, the Orthodox “heroes” of the council were those who would not subscribe to it — disobeying both Emperor and Patriarch in the name of the orthodox faith.

Conclusion

Having examined the phenomenon of resistance to secular and ecclesiastical authority in the Orthodox tradition, one would think that we should be able to construct clear and concise guidelines for when “holy disobedience” is appropriate. Unfortunately, we cannot. In the end it is a matter of conscience whether one obeys or disobeys his/her secular and religious superiors, hoping in either case that ultimately one is doing the will of God. That being said, I do believe there are at least two important principles that emerge from our study which can be used as Orthodox Christians wrestle with issues of obedience/disobedience in the Church today.

First, that there exists a primary allegiance of the Christian to the Kingdom of God that relativizes his/her allegiance to the powers of this world. This loyalty to God over all others forces Christians to recognize that occasionally secular authorities make claims upon the

⁷⁹ Cited in Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Christianity: the History and Canonical Structure of the Orthodox Church*, trans. Basil Bush (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 135.

⁸⁰ The former unionist now wrote: “Wretched Romans, how you have gone astray! You have rejected the hope of God trusted in the strength of the Franks; you have lost your piety along with your city which is about to be destroyed. Lord have mercy on me. I testify before you that I am innocent of such transgression. Know, wretched citizens, what you are doing. Along with your impending captivity you have forsaken the faith handed down from your fathers and assented to impiety. Woe unto you when you are judged!” Doukas, *Historia Turco-Byzantina of Doukas*, crit. ed. Vasile Grecu (Bucharest, 1958), 317 (Eng. trans: Geanakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society and Civilization*, 388).

conscience that are far beyond their competence. This is particularly the case when secular authority claims for itself the right to rule over properly religious matters, to usurp or “pirate” the power of the Church, or to compel Christians to act in a manner contrary to the gospel of Christ.

Second, that despite the importance of ecclesiastical obedience as a religious good, Orthodox history also teaches us that resistance to religious authorities, be they patriarchs, bishops, or councils, may be necessary to protect the faith. This is especially the case when ecclesiastical authorities have been co-opted by the state or when they clearly teach contrary to the ancient faith of the Church. Obedience to the truth of the gospel is the first requirement of the Christian. When, either by their teachings or their actions, Church authorities betray that truth for personal gain or political expediency, “holy disobedience” is entirely appropriate.

These principles, important as they are, are not always easy to apply. In the Church today it is sometimes hard to separate prophetic practitioners of “holy disobedience” from quarrelsome troublemakers who are simply bloody-minded for the sake of it. For centuries individuals have invoked the examples of Saints Athanasius, Ambrose, Maximus, and Mark of Ephesus to justify their resistance to authority, and not all have been right. And yet, history also teaches that those who are today condemned for their disobedience may, in fact, be the ones remembered as “heroes” in the years to come. The principles gleaned from the history may assist us as we try to discern the truth, and as we continue wrestling with issues of power and authority, obedience and disobedience, in the Orthodox Church and the world at large.