

Where was the true Christian church of God before the Protestant Reformation?

Anyone who has done the work of Christian evangelism knows that eventually you will interact with someone of the Catholic faith. One could go on for hours about the points of divergence had with Catholicism, but I want touch on a one very relevant question that Catholics have asked me over the years: where was the church before the Protestant Reformation in the 15th century? I'm astonished at how nearly every non-Catholic Christian I've talked to is so apathetic to this question.

It is a very fair and reasonable question.

About ten years ago I gave a Catholic neighbour of mine a "To Catholics who love Jesus" booklet which identifies the many problems of Catholicism, and he returned fire with some queries of his own. I became troubled by his question of where the church of God was before the Protestant Reformation. I was also exceedingly dissatisfied with the answer put forth by non-Catholic Christians, which generally speaking was, "we don't know", "maybe it was the Waldensians", or "but that was the dark ages". Such answers are from a confined western European view of history, and even worse they deny that the Spirit of God did anything for one thousand years. I decided to look deeply into this question from my Catholic friend. Also in an honest heart I sought the answer from God, and I believe that God gave me the answer.

The first clue of where the church of God was before the Protestant reformation is: where did the word of God in the English language (King James Bible) come from? Where did the manuscripts used in the translation come from? They came from Constantinople and the Byzantine empire centred in modern day Turkey. By the 14th century, the Byzantine Empire was in great decline and the manuscripts came to western Europe via port cities such as Venice. How did the manuscripts become so prevalent in the Byzantine empire? One of the reasons was because the city of Antioch in Syria was part of the Byzantine empire for a time. Antioch was where they were first called Christians and where all or most of the apostles of Jesus frequented. But these facts are only a small part of the story.

We know that the church of God was prevalent in the Roman Empire. History records persecutions of multitudes of Christians in the Roman empire before Rome fell in the 5th century AD, and before emperor Constantine in the 4th century AD. The question is, what happened to the church of God after this time? Those of the Catholic faith will argue that it was their church that was the true church thereafter. If this were true, not only does this mean that Protestants are outside the church of God, but this also means that the church was confined for one thousand years to the tiny area of western Europe. In light of the command of Jesus to "go into all the world and preach the gospel" this should be extremely troubling for Catholics and Protestants alike.

However, I found that the key to knowing where the true church was from the 5th century AD to the 14th century AD was through first examining church history in the 5th century AD. There was a very significant episode in church history that took place in the 5th century AD. Not only are nearly all Protestant Christians unaware of it, but also they are unable to perceive how significant this was. It took place at a time when apostasy was prevalent and hence the Western Roman empire was in decline. Put simply, this episode was a final chance for Christianity in the Roman empire to repent from the "Alexandrian" school and go back to the "Antiochian" school of Christianity originally started by the apostles of Jesus.

Before we examine this episode of church history, it is most pertinent to know a warning from the apostle John (written in around 90AD). In his writing he gave a warning as to who will be the Spirit of truth and who will be the spirit of antichrist:

“Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that *spirit* of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.” – 1 John 4:2,3

The views of the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools about Jesus can be summarized as follows:

- *Alexandria*: Logos assumes a general human nature.
- *Antioch*: Logos assumes a specific human being

The views of the two schools came to a great climax in the 5th century AD through a debate between two men who were “patriarchs” out of four church patriarchs (of Alexandrian doctrine) at the time. They were Nestorius of Constantinople and Cyril of Alexandria. Before Nestorius was the patriarch of Constantinople he lived in Antioch and had most of his Christian learning from Antioch. The debates originated from a common expression used in the Alexandrian churches throughout the Roman empire: “Mary the mother of God”. This led to a lengthy and complex debate about the “person” and “nature” of Jesus Christ which came to a climax with the Councils of Ephesus in 431AD and of Chalcedon in 451 AD. The councils sided with the Alexandrian view of Jesus Christ. However, in light of John’s writing, this was not the Spirit of truth.

John 4:2,3 identified that the Spirit of the true church of God would confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. The Antiochian school believed Jesus assumed a specific human being, that is, confessed that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. Nestorius of a certainty also confessed that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. He correctly rejected the expression “Mary the mother of God” not only on blasphemous grounds, but also that it was a subtle and pernicious denial of the humanity of Jesus. Nestorius believed to use this expression was to make void the humanity of Christ and solely focus on His deity. Mary was the mother of Christ’s “flesh”, not the mother of God, and to say mother of God was to deny that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. Nestorius argued that Mary the mother of “Christ” was the only correct expression of the relationship of Jesus to Mary. In addition, Nestorius argued that Mary the mother of God was completely unnecessary to use to express Christ’s deity. To the unlearned and ignorant, it made Mary a goddess and part of the Trinity which would hinder many from coming to the faith (which is exactly what contributed to the origin of Islam). One could simply express Christ’s deity by stating “Jesus Christ is the Lord” or “Jesus Christ is the Son of God”, etc. Thus it is clear that Nestorius was of the Spirit of truth.

The following is an excerpt from Nestorius’ second letter to Cyril:

“Holy scripture, wherever it recalls the Lord's economy, speaks of the birth and suffering not of the godhead but of the humanity of Christ, so that the holy virgin is more accurately termed mother of Christ than mother of God. Hear these words that the gospels proclaim: "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham." It is clear that God the Word was not the son of David. Listen to another witness if you will: "Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ. " Consider a further piece of evidence: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, she was found to be with child of the holy Spirit." But who would ever consider that the godhead of the only begotten was a creature of the Spirit? Why do we need to mention: "the mother of Jesus was

there"? And again what of: "with Mary the mother of Jesus"; or "that which is conceived in her is of the holy Spirit"; and "Take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt"; and "concerning his Son, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh"? Again, scripture says when speaking of his passion: "God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh"; and again "Christ died for our sins" and "Christ having suffered in the flesh"; and "This is", not "my godhead", but "my body, broken for you". Ten thousand other expressions witness to the human race that they should not think that it was the godhead of the Son that was recently killed but the flesh which was joined to the nature of the godhead. (Hence also Christ calls himself the lord and son of David: " 'What do you think of the Christ ? Whose son is he ?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' Jesus answered and said to them, 'How is it then that David inspired by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand"?". He said this as being indeed son of David according to the flesh, but his Lord according to his godhead.) The body therefore is the temple of the deity of the Son, a temple which is united to it in a high and divine conjunction, so that the divine nature accepts what belongs to the body as its own. Such a confession is noble and worthy of the gospel traditions. But to use the expression "accept as its own" as a way of diminishing the properties of the conjoined flesh, birth, suffering and entombment, is a mark of those whose minds are led astray, my brother, by Greek thinking or are sick with the lunacy of Apollinarius and Arius or the other heresies or rather something more serious than these. For it is necessary for such as are attracted by the name "propriety" to make God the Word share, because of this same propriety, in being fed on milk, in gradual growth, in terror at the time of his passion and in need of angelical assistance. I make no mention of circumcision and sacrifice and sweat and hunger, which all belong to the flesh and are adorable as having taken place for our sake. But it would be false to apply such ideas to the deity and would involve us in just accusation because of our calumny. These are the traditions of the holy fathers. These are the precepts of the holy scriptures. In this way does someone write in a godly way about the divine mercy and power, "Practise these duties, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress." This is what Paul says to all."

Can anyone doubt that in light of John's writings (John 4:2,3), Nestorius was of the Spirit of truth? Catholic history (and most other western European history) records Nestorius as a heretic, which is completely incorrect. Nestorius did not believe that Jesus was two "persons", he believed Jesus was one person with two natures: human and divine and stressed the importance of emphasising the humanity of Jesus. To not do so was to deny the genuine sufferings of Jesus that He undertook for the salvation of mankind and to deny that Jesus came in the flesh.

History records Nestorius as having a banished and quiet existence after his courageous stand for the truth, but what happened thereafter is an amazing account of church history which is hardly ever told. Those whom the Alexandrian churches referred to as "Nestorians" did an amazing gospel work from the 5th century AD to the 14th century AD, where one can only conclude that the hand of God and His Spirit was upon them. And why? Because they were the true Christians whom the apostle John wrote about, who had the Spirit of God, confessing that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh.

Facts and details which show where the true church of God was from the
5th century AD to the Reformation

- Nestorius was taught at the school of Antioch before he went to Constantinople. Antioch was where they were first called Christians and where the apostles were. They had a literal interpretation of scripture, and possessed and preserved the true Bible manuscripts that were eventually translated into the English King James Version.
- Cyril, the most vehement opponent of Nestorius was from the school of Alexandria. Alexandria is not well spoken of in scripture, it was where the corrupted Bible manuscripts originated and they often had an allegorical interpretation of scripture (in other words they often did not believe the scriptures were an account of actual persons and events).
- The Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon in 431AD and 451AD respectively, sided with Cyril and the Alexandrian school. However, there were Christians in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire who agreed with Nestorius. The Vandals then marched through Rome in 455AD and the Western Roman empire was thoroughly sacked by 476AD. It was not so with the Eastern part of the Roman empire but it remained (Byzantine empire). It can be argued that the dates of these events are not coincidental, but occurred because the Western Roman Empire did not repent from the Alexandrian school to the Spirit of truth put forth by Nestorius. The Eastern Roman Empire remained because the Spirit of truth was in the East through the many believers who agreed with Nestorius.
- The rage against Nestorius and the anathemas pronounced against him, was similar to what Martin Luther endured from Catholicism in the Protestant Reformation. One historical account from Nestorius reads:

“When the followers of Cyril saw the vehemence of the emperor... they roused up a disturbance and discord among the people with an outcry, as though the emperor were opposed to God; they rose up against the nobles and the chiefs who acquiesced not in what had been done by them and they were running hither and thither. And... they took with them those who had been separated and removed from the monasteries by reason of their lives and their strange manners and had for this reason been expelled, and all who were of heretical sects and were possessed with fanaticism and with hatred against me. And one passion was in them all, Jews and pagans and all the sects, and they were busying themselves that they should accept without examination the things which were done without examination against me; and at the same time all of them, even those that had participated with me at table and in prayer and in thought, were agreed... against me and vowing vows one with another against me.... In nothing were they divided.”

- Both Nestorius and Martin Luther were in the Catholic church at the time of their call for reform. The truth put forth by Nestorius was a reformation from Alexandrian doctrines to Antiochian truth, the Protestant reformation was exactly the same, a reformation from Alexandrian doctrines to Antiochian truth.
- Also, like Martin Luther and the Protestant reformation, the truth put forth by Nestorius did not fade away, but flourished, and caused great Gospel preaching missionary zeal amongst Nestorian Christians and churches.

- The 5th century to the 14th century was the appointed time of God for His word to go to the ends of the earth by **land** which only the Nestorians fulfilled. During this time, the Antiochian churches considerably outnumbered the Alexandrian churches of western Europe and were far more widespread in the earth. The 15th century onwards was the appointed time of God for the gospel to go to the ends of the earth by **sea**.
- The Nestorians had free passage from God to go into the world and preach the gospel from the 5th to the 13th centuries. Alexandrian Western Europe during this time was completely enclosed and could hardly go anywhere to evangelise, other than areas which were predominantly evangelised already.
- Western Europe only became “opened” when the reformation to Antiochian truth began to arise, initially with the Waldensians in the 13th century AD and then on mass with Martin Luther in 15th century AD. It is no coincidence that the Americas and other areas of the world were discovered by Western Europeans when the reformation started to occur.
- Nestorian Christianity spread throughout the Middle East in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries AD. They had a significant presence in modern day Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iran. There has been no other time in history that these areas have had such a significant Christian presence, other than with the Nestorians.
- The Nestorians were very much a missionary minded church, they went everywhere preaching the gospel, firstly, throughout the Middle East, and then to almost all of the Asian continent, particularly all of Central Asia, western China and northern India from 7th century to the 13th century AD. Again, there has been no other time in history that these areas have had a significant Christian presence other than with the Nestorians. These nations and areas refer to the 7th to the 13th centuries as their “golden age”, exactly the time Nestorian Christians were active in their lands.
- The Silk Road which covered most of the Asian continent can only be accounted for in light of Nestorian Christianity. Not only was it a vast merchant trading network but it was the result of Nestorian Christians who went all over Asia on missionary journeys preaching the gospel.
- The language of the Nestorians was the Syriac language (similar to Aramaic), which was one of the languages (with Greek) that the Antiochian scriptures were preserved in.
- Mohammed and the origin of Islam can be traced back to the Mary mother of God controversy in the 5th century. Mohammed was influenced by Nestorian Christians who were prevalent in the Arabian peninsula in his life time and before. The Nestorians were completely against images (particularly of Jesus) and brought monotheism to the Arabian Peninsula, which apparently influenced Mohammed greatly. Mohammed was also familiar with Alexandrian doctrines such as the expression “Mary mother of God”, which repulsed him. The origin of the Arabic written language is from the Syriac brought to Arabia from the

Nestorian Christian missionaries. All these factors, together with Mohammed's apparent rejection of the foreign missionaries and nationalistic Arab pride, can be argued to have led to the origin of the Koran and Islam. It is evident that Mohammed took the correct doctrines of the Nestorians and coupled it together with opposition to erroneous Alexandrian doctrines. As a result, the writings of Mohammed were completely in error with his rejection of the deity of Jesus (because of the Alexandrians). The apostle John prophesied and warned of this:

"Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist (the Devil), that denieth the Father and the Son."

– 1 John 2:22

There is no religion other than Islam and the Koran that so vehemently denies the Father and the Son. This is the spirit of antichrist according to John.

- The Islamic religion spread by the sword (which Jesus forbade as a way of spreading the word of God) in the 7th century to all the areas previously evangelized by the Nestorians. As the persecutions in Jerusalem of the early church caused the believers in Jesus to be scattered abroad, so too the Islamic conquests caused many Nestorians in the Middle East to be scattered afar off to other nations from the 7th to the 13th centuries. These nations are known today as Northern India, Central and Western China, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Siberia, Mongolia, and even Korea and Japan. This was very well the permissive will of God to preach Jesus Christ towards the ends of the earth. All the above nations and areas had their golden age in civilization at exactly the times when the Nestorian Christians were dwelling among them.
- When Islam conquered the Middle East they put the Nestorians under tribute. Nevertheless, they tolerated the existence of the Nestorians as they were considered people of "the book" (rather than images) and had much medical, scientific and financial wisdom. No doubt this was the help of God to keep a witness of Him in these areas. The Nestorians were highly regarded by their Islamic overlords in terms of worldly knowledge, which derived from the ancient empires, particularly the Greeks. The Nestorians imparted their knowledge to them, which led to what Islam refers to as their "golden age" in knowledge.
- The Nestorians travelled to all parts of the Silk Road and to the remote areas off the road. Though many of the Nestorians were merchants and doctors on the Silk Road, there were also many missionaries. One historical account of them reads:

"The missionaries often travelled on foot carrying the scripture with them, ready to learn a foreign language to translate them. They travelled over deep rivers and high mountains and thousands of kilometres. On their way they met many heathen peoples and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. The heathen who worshipped idols were told about the Saviour, who died on the cross as a sacrifice for their sins and would save them. They sowed the good seed in the Lord's field, worked zealously and won many souls among the heathen nations. The work of the mission became a blessing to the nations, and the missionaries influenced greatly those among whom they worked; they brought many from sin and idol

worship to God; they went to the palaces of the kings and to the cottages of the poor, spreading the words of Christ and many souls were won.”

- The Nestorians had a significant presence in China during the Tang dynasty (7th to the 10th century AD), which is considered by the Chinese to be the golden age of their civilization. In a museum in the city of Xi'an today, which was the capital of the Tang dynasty, there is a monument from the Tang dynasty days. On the monument are inscriptions written in both Chinese and Syriac language and they write of Nestorian Christianity coming to China.
- The nations of Central Asia were also great civilizations with great cities, prospering from movements along the Silk Road. The Nestorians had a significant presence in Central Asia and many were Nestorian Christians in this area. Marco Polo when he travelled through the region on the way to China in the 13th century was amazed to find remnants of many Nestorian Christian churches. The various Central Asia peoples also acquired alphabetic writing from the Nestorians, which is the Turkic writing system derived from the Syriac and the Arabic.
- It can be argued that the nations of China, India and of Central Asia had the chance to do great things, if they received Jesus Christ as their Lord. But they lightly esteemed the offer of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, embraced other religions, and hence Christianity expanded no further. In the centuries thereafter, great decline came upon China, India and the areas of Central Asia. The kingdom of God was taken from them and given to other nations bringing forth the fruits thereof, as Jesus said. This also was the case for the Middle Eastern nations as well.
- The Mongols were also evangelised and greatly influenced by the Nestorians, and many tribes were wholly Nestorian. Nevertheless, the Mongols were raised up and executed judgment, in a similar manner to when the Huns, Goths and Vandals executed judgment on the western Roman empire. It appears that as Antiochian Christianity diminished in western Europe, so too it diminished in the lands where the Nestorians had reached. History records the judgment of the Mongols to be horrific. The Mongolian empire was the largest land empire in history, and covered exactly the areas where the Nestorian Christians had reached.
- It is no coincidence that the appointed time of the gospel of Jesus Christ by land came to end by the largest land empire in history. The great empire of the Mongols did not happen for a random reason. It happened because of the judgment of God on those who were exposed to His truth and either did not receive Jesus or had a lukewarm conversion. The Mongol empire brought an end to the appointed time of God for the gospel of Jesus Christ to spread through land evangelism. This was the end of the prophesied Sardis church age, spoken of by Jesus Christ in Revelation:

“Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.” – Revelation 3:2

This prophesy perfectly corresponds the timing of the demise of the Nestorian church. The judgment by the Mongols was so comprehensive that true Nestorian Christianity died. As a

result, great decline came upon the east. The subsequent decline of the Mongol empire saw the Islamic religion (the religion of the antichrist) fill the void in the east. The great truths and deeds of the Nestorian church were erased from history by Islam, thus also fulfilling the Sardis church age prophecy.

- The Byzantine empire prospered as a civilization for a number of centuries and its capital, Constantinople, was a great city until its fall in the 15th century AD. The language of Byzantium was Greek. Whilst there were Alexandrian churches in Byzantium who were affiliated with those of western Europe, it is evident that there were Antiochian churches who had a presence in Byzantium as there were found to be many Antiochian New Testament manuscripts, preserved in Greek by the churches.
- The churches in Byzantium did a great missionary work to the Slavic peoples of eastern Europe. This was the time when the word of God and civilization came to countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and the Baltic nations. They were given knowledge of the Greek alphabet from the Byzantines and with time developed their own alphabet and writing to suit their spoken languages. North Africa including Egypt and Ethiopia also came under Byzantine influence. Hence today, we have what is called the “Orthodox” church in these countries. The title Orthodox came to be so named in response to the claims of preeminence by the churches in western Europe. They of Byzantium were adamant that they represented the original church and hence the name, Orthodox. However, it appears that Antiochian theology in Byzantium diminished to the point where, by the 11th century, Islam conquered Byzantine territory. To their credit the Byzantines made many copies of the Antiochian scripture in Greek (for example, in monasteries) over the history of the empire. However, it appears that Antiochian theology in Byzantium continued to decline, with final judgment on the Byzantine empire occurring with the fall of Constantinople in the 15th century to the Ottoman Turks.
- At the beginning of the 13th century whilst the east was greatly declining, a group of people in the city of Lyon in France were touched by the gospel writings about Jesus Christ and His promise of treasure in heaven. Wanting to live an authentic Christian life and zealously follow the teachings of Jesus, they began preaching the gospel of salvation and sharing their joy to others. As they lived in western Europe, this way of Christian living was not allowable for many centuries and they were labelled Waldensian heretics. Some of the Waldensians also declared that Mary was the mother of Christ (not the mother of God), thus agreeing with Antiochian theology. Due to persecution, the Waldensians were driven away, settling in the Alps along the modern day French-Italian border and across northern Italy, southern Switzerland, and western Austria.
- At this same time in history, the Byzantine empire had declined greatly and was being overrun by Islamic Turks. This caused Christians in Byzantium to flee northwards along the Adriatic Sea towards northern Italy, taking many preserved Antiochian Bible manuscripts (Textus Receptus) with them, as well as much other written Greek knowledge. Cities such as Venice became a great city because it was a gateway where the knowledge of the east flowed through to the unlearned west. Thus, the rise of the Waldensians, coupled with access to Antiochian manuscripts from the east, saw the origins of reformation in western

Europe to the original truth of God. It is evident that Spirit of God moved from the east to the west at this time.

- The Protestant Reformation to Antiochian truth saw the great missionary works done by sea to the ends of the earth in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The Americas and Australia were discovered and evangelised along with all sub-Saharan Africa, all of East Asia, India and the islands of the Pacific. **The Protestant missionaries evangelised in exactly the areas of the world where their Antiochian predecessors, the Nestorian missionaries, did not reach.** When we consider the gospel missionary efforts of the Nestorians together with the gospel missionary efforts of the Protestants, all areas of the world can be accounted to have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Thus it is clear that the Spirit of God has gradually moved outwardly from Jerusalem to all areas of the world over the past two thousand years. This can only be accounted for in light of Nestorian Christianity being the true church of God from the 5th century to the Protestant reformation.