## A Biography of Cyril 826-885 A.D.

### A Byzantine monk who worked in the Near East



Cyril and his brother Methodius

Cyril was born in Thessalonica into a wealthy family. His father was a Greek military leader. He was educated by private tutors studying grammar, poetry and rhetoric as well as theology. At the time Thessalonica was the second most important city in the Eastern Roman Empire after Constantinople. It was a rich place of learning.

Spiritually, Cyril was influenced by a scholarly bishop called Leo who was the bishop of that city. As a young man Cyril showed such great academic promise and that the age of 15 he received an Imperial invitation to study in Constantinople. There he studied grammar, poetry, mathematics and philosophy.

Resisting opportunities that came with his family connections, he was ordained as a deacon in the church. He quickly found that he was much more interested in scholarship than administration!

Around 851 A.D. the Arab Muslim Caliph al-Mutawakkil advanced his armies into Byzantine territory and the Emperor sent a delegation to negotiate a treaty with the Arabs. In addition to all the political issues, the Arabs questioned the Byzantine envoy about the meaning of the Trinity. They asked him, **"How is it that you Christians say you worship a single God, but then triple Him by claiming that there is Father, a Son and a Spirit. If you have an explanation for this, write to us of these things and convince us"**.

For this "theological" portion of the mission Cyril was chosen to go by the Byzantine Emperor. Apparently his reply was, **"I will gladly go forth for our Christian creed. For is there anything sweeter to me than to live and die for the Holy Trinity?"** (!) So Cyril's task was to clarify the misunderstanding concerning the Christian Godhead in hyper-monotheistic Muslim context – to proclaim the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus was to proclaim a Trinitarian God.

At the beginning of the dialogue the tone was polemic (confrontational). The Arab Muslim side accused the Christians of great inconsistency in their way of living! This was probably true!

Cyril chose a very unlikely text to reply – Isaiah 53:8, ***"By oppression and judgement he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken."***

Cyril argued that this was speaking about the Lord Jesus – God's Suffering Servant and he argued for the greatness of God and the mystery of His ways. **"Our God is like the depths of the sea."** Cyril wanted to turn the conversation from just law-keeping and focus what he said on the majesty of God and the absolute necessity of worshipping Him as He really is. Then, in turn, he criticised Muslim practice and thought for being overly simplistic.

Continuing the exchange, Cyril described the redeeming and transforming work of the Lord Jesus in true believers: **"He uplifts them from beneath what is burdensome** (our sin) **and instructs men by faith and godly virtue."** For Cyril, the saving and transforming work of the Lord Jesus was built on Jesus Christ also being the Creator. He refers to Ps. 8 – a psalm in praise of God as Creator – especially verses 1 and 9.

Later in the discussion Cyril rebukes his Arab hosts who were boasting about the wealth and abundance of their empire. He does this by appealing to the greatness of the Creator, **"Praise should be given unto God who created it all and gave it to people to enjoy."**

As the discussion moved towards the meaning of the Trinity, the Arab questioners asked the following question in a rather mocking way, **"Since there is a single God, why do you praise Him as three different deities? Why do you call Him Father, Son and Holy Spirit?"**

Cyril responded strongly, **"We have been well taught by the prophets and the fathers and the teachers of the**

**church to praise the Holy Trinity – the Father, the Word and the Spirit – three persons within a single being. The Word became flesh in the Virgin Mary and was born for the sake of our salvation as your prophet Muhammad himself witnesses writing, 'We sent our spirit into a maiden and willed that she delivered a child.' (Sura 19:17). Here you see I am explaining the Trinity by the Quran!"**

Cyril's arguments were very clearly dogmatic and contextual. He appealed to the prophets of the Old Testament who he regarded as worshippers and servants of a Triune God. He also referred to the historic theological teaching of the church – "***Three persons within a single being***" – he used the familiar language of the Nicene Creed. So Cyril was inviting Muslims to come and see the New Testament in Christian terms, but he also demonstrated an understanding of the Quran in using Sura 19 as a bridge to Christian ideas.

In summary, for Cyril the majesty of the Trinitarian God was a far greater satisfaction than the Islamic ideas of God which he saw as very over-simplistic.

After a few years of living back at Mount Olympus, Cyril and his brother were sent by the Byzantine Emperor to a Turkic nomadic people group living in the Caucasus region of Russia – the Khazars. Since 750 A.D. the Muslim Abbasid Caliphate had been based in relatively close-by Baghdad. Now increasing influence was being put on Khazars to become Muslims. The Khazar Khan asked the Byzantine Emperor to send someone who could help the Khazar people to decide whether they should be Christians or Muslims.

The Byzantine Emperor decided to send Cyril and his brother Methodius to work among the Khazars. The very first thing they did was to commit themselves to learning both Khazar and Russian so they could be effective in their ministry. Secondly, after language learning, they committed themselves to communicating Biblical concepts. Cyril's messages were usually fairly philosophical, but one Khazar philosopher criticised him for referring to the Bible far too often in their discussions.




In general, both brothers were engaged in open dialogue with their Muslim contacts. Apparently their witness was fruitful since 200 Khazars became followers of the Lord Jesus. The Khazar leader wrote to the Byzantine Emperor, "***You sent us a holy man who has shown us the Christian faith and deeds. Having established that this is the true faith, we have ordered that those who so wish should be baptised in hope that we too shall follow suit*"!**

**Cyril's apologetic methods**

1. Cyril emphasised that the God of the Bible is both Creator and Triune in nature. He quoted from Psalm 33:6, ***"By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made …"***. And clarifying the essence of a Trinitarian Creator he added, "**The one and only God who by His Word created every living thing and made the heavens and the life-giving spirit through whom their whole host holds together.**"

Apparently the Khan replied, "**We speak of all things in the same way, but think differently on one point only. You praise a Trinity and we a single God, keeping to the Scriptures**". Cyril replied referring to the Old Testament and argued that, "**Scripture preaches both the Word and the Spirit**". He then gave a human analogy to this ruler. He posed the question, "**If anyone shows you respect but does not honour your word and your spirit while another honours all the all three – yourself, your word and your spirit, which of the two will show you the greater respect?**" Cyril then summarised the argument by circling back to Scripture and quoting Isaiah 48:12, ***"Hear me Jacob and Israel whom I called: I am He; I am the first; I am everlasting and now the Lord and His Spirit sent me forth."***

2. Cyril aimed to further explain the Christian Godhead by defending the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus. He was responding to the question of how God could be born of a woman. Cyril began with an



Early Byzantine Church of the Holy Trinity

analogy: if the host of a household cannot show hospitality to a king in his own home, then the host could have a servant to show the king hospitality.

Then, appealing to Scripture, he gave examples: if God could appear in a burning bush, a cloud, smoke or in a storm (Ex. 3:2; 19:16-18; 34:5; Job 38:1; 40:6) then God could certainly inhabit a human being, including a humble woman. Cyril then invited his audience to consider the purpose of the incarnation as the Creator's way of healing very sick souls through the atonement of the death of the Lord Jesus on the Cross. Finally, Cyril appealed freely from the Old Testament to argue that the Lord Jesus is truly the promised Messiah and the means by which the Creator God brings healing to mankind.

When dialogues began with Muslims, they usually asked Cyril's opinion about the Prophet Muhammad who revered Jesus as a great prophet, born of a virgin and as one who healed the sick and raised the dead (Sura 19:29; 3:40; 3:43). Clearly they recognised that Cyril had some knowledge of the Quran and wanted to probe his understanding of the Lord Jesus in the Quran. But for whatever reason, Cyril did not bite and he chose not to make any arguments based on the Quran.

On one occasion he answered a query about Muhammad's role by citing Daniel 9:24, ***"Seventy sevens are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy."*** This seems to indicate that vision and prophecy would be sealed up with the Messiah's coming. So Cyril questioned how Muhammad's revelation in Islam could be regarded as valid. Specifically, he wondered whether there could be any sort of prophet after the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus.

**A Summary**

This is a brief summary of a mission to Arab Muslims in Samarra and to Muslims in Khazara. What characterised Cyril's approach?

- It was frank and quite polemic! But Cyril could afford to be bold and confrontational because he felt free to express himself since he was promised protection by his Muslim hosts because they respected the Byzantine Emperor who had sent Cyril on this mission.
- Cyril always worked on the basic assumption that the whole Bible was true and he used it liberally to support his ideas and arguments. He used language borrowed directly from the Nicene Creed. He clearly and unapologetically presented the Lord Jesus as divine – the Creator and the Redeemer, the one crucified, buried and risen from the dead, ascended into heaven and therefore worthy of all praise.
- By appealing to historic Christian teaching, Cyril also demonstrated his ability to be contextual. Among Muslims he made a Christian argument for the Trinity by appealing to the Quran. Among other approaches he used analogical reasoning and philosophical arguments. He constantly referred to God as the Creator, but for every contextual argument he made, Cyril routinely returned to Scripture and the creed to summarise his thoughts.
- As a missionary theologian to Muslims, Cyril sought to emphasise the great mystery and majesty of God and the vital necessity of being a worshipper over the mere duty of keeping religious law. To the Muslims he highlighted the purpose behind the incarnation – healing from the consequences of our sin offered by our Creator God through the Messiah the Lord Jesus by means of His death, resurrection and ascension to the place of supreme power. Cyril's mission was a Trinitarian mission and his gospel unpacks the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in redemption.

**What can we learn from Cyril as we engage with Muslims today?**

1. We must learn and depend on our presupposition that the Bible is authoritative and the Holy Spirit will help us to articulate its truths to our Muslim friends. We must be faithful to Scripture. We have no right to hedge or to try to make it more palatable.

2. Islam bears a much closer resemblance to Judaism than to Christianity, so Cyril was wise to make much in his dialogues of the Old Testament ideas of creation, law and the prophets.

3. Cyril showed himself to be a student of the Quran at least at some level. He didn't see the Quran as an authoritative revelation of God, but as a bridge to communicate ideas about God. Cyril proved to be a good student of Arabic and of culture so he could effectively connect with his audience.

4. Cyril quickly established common ground with his Muslim audiences by proclaiming a Creator God. In a sense his arguments were pre-doctrinal by initiating Gospel conversations through focusing on the Maker of Heaven and Earth as a meaningful approach to Muslims.

In our post-Christian world today we no longer have a situation where emperors send out 'workers' like us! But God is sending out 'non-government workers' from many different nations.

**What should we not copy from Cyril's life?**

We should not seek to recover Cyril's practice of polemic approaches! Byzantine theologians like Cyril, John of Damascus (676-749 A.D.) and others had a level of political protection in the context of Christendom. So Cyril could employ a polemic approach, but for the most part he connected well with Muslims on a personal level.

So our engagement with Muslims today ought to be highly relational and free from any expectation of or dependency on any political power. Through an appropriate boldness and winsomeness as we share the Gospel with our Muslim friends, our role today should be seen as a clear witness from below – from a place of vulnerability, service and relationship.

In our post-Christian world, the globalised 21$^{st}$ century may provide the very best environment for Christian-Muslim relations to develop in a positive way. Perhaps today we will be able to see a sustained, genuine and authentic Christian witness to the Muslim World based on the truths of God's Word.