

A Pentecostal Pastor in Hagia Sophia

Daniel Tomberlin

Recently I was traveling in Bulgaria, preaching the services for Orthodox Easter in local Pentecostal churches. I had a few extra days before returning to the United States, so I seized the opportunity to realize my long-held dream to visit Hagia Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom, which was built in the early sixth century.

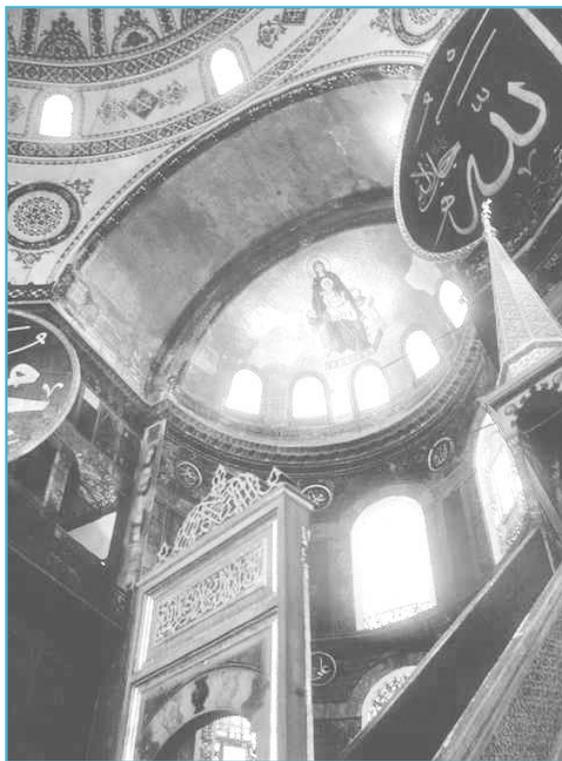
I arrived in Istanbul early in the morning and headed straight to the gates of the Hagia Sophia. As I walked the perimeter of the ancient church I could not help but be overwhelmed by a strong sense of history. Just a block from Hagia Sophia stood the ancient Saint Irene Church where the First Council of Constantinople was held in 381. Many of the ancient theologians of the church had walked the very streets on which I was now walking. In my mind I could easily imagine thousands of ancient Christians assembled on these very grounds preparing themselves to worship according to the liturgy written by their sainted bishop, John Chrysostom.

As I stepped into the narthex of Hagia Sophia, it was as if I had made a journey back in time to the sixth century. All I had ever read about this place began to burst forth in my imagination. I decided that this would not be a tourist attraction for me but that I would make this a spiritual pilgrimage. So for the next few hours I opened my mind and heart in hopes of experiencing something of the timeless worship represented by this ancient church. The architecture and decor of the narthex was beautiful and inspiring—the high arched ceiling, the marble floors, and those enormous doors. Through these

doors one entered into the basilica itself. Through these doors emperors, bishops, deacons, and believers from throughout the world entered to encounter the divine. As I stood before these doors, in my imagination I could hear the voice of an ancient bishop cry out the words of the liturgy: “Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in” (Ps 24:7).

To enter the basilica through the doors I had to step up and across a large marble threshold about eight inches high, one foot wide, and eight feet long. This had the effect of making me conscious of stepping up and into a high and holy place. Again I was reminded of words from Scripture: “Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen” (Eccl 5:1). Entering the basilica for the first time was nothing less than awesome. It has been said that the Emperor Justinian designed the basilica to represent a vision he received

of the heavenly cosmos. There is indeed a certain “otherness” about this place. I found my eyes being drawn heavenward. I could not help but look up. The vast expanse of the domed roof seems to serve as a crown over all creation. At the center of the dome are several windows through which the light of the sun pours. Its effect is more than simple illumination of the building. The light has the effect of a theophany—what the Eastern theologians have called the *divine energies*. I stood there for several minutes in reflection. Many words of Scripture flooded my mind: “Let there be light”; “I am the light of the world”; “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all”; “If we walk in the light, as He Himself is the light, we have fellowship with one another.” The



words of the creed that had been so mysterious to me, “God from God, light from light,” now made sense, even as I admit the inability to verbally express the mystery.

Several hundred tourists were visiting Hagia Sophia on this day. Most seemed to scurry around, but I was in no hurry. I walked to one of the huge pillars that support the massive structure and stood there quietly and listened. The collective muffled voices of tourists could be heard throughout the building. I began to imagine this place filled with thousands of worshipers, the liturgical hymns being sung by multiple choirs with the responses by the congregation. It was as if the entire domed creation was singing out, “Let the heavens be glad, let the earth rejoice, the Lord reigns!”

Throughout the building are various iconic mosaics. These mosaics portray Christ, the Virgin Mary, and John the Baptist, as well as various prophets, apostles, bishops, and emperors. The background of the mosaics is golden, and many of them are positioned opposite windows. The incoming sunlight illuminates the mosaics, which then reflect the light. As the sunlight shines on them, the golden, textured mosaics seem to have a fluid quality, as if alive. My friend Nikolay Kolev and I stood quietly before one of the mosaics. Suddenly Nikolay said, “So this is what they mean by icon. Not bad!”

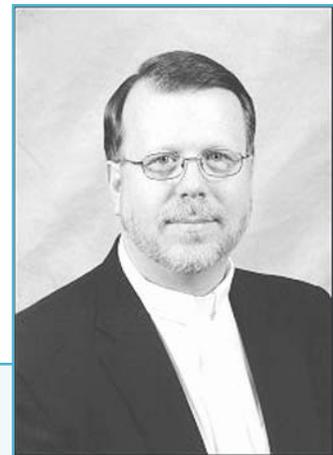
Nikolay walked off to view other sections of the building. I walked upstairs to view the basilica from the empress’s balcony. After a few minutes I stepped back, sat down on the floor, and closed my eyes in prayer and meditation. I began to imagine myself present at an ancient worship service. As the choirs sang, the bishop and deacons led the procession. The aroma of incense began to fill the building, and the smoke of the incense began to rise, dancing in the rays of sunlight pouring through the windows of the dome. The iconic mosaics were glistening with life. The ancient prophets and apostles, deacons and bishops, were assembled together with us, in the presence of the Holy Trinity. Then I remembered the legend of the conversion of Russia. Prince Vladimir sent delegates to investigate the great religions. When his delegates returned from their visit to Hagia Sophia, they exclaimed, “We did not know whether we were on earth or in heaven!”

As a Pentecostal, I might be expected to find Orthodox spirituality alien to me. It is true that icons, vestments, incense, and liturgy have little or no place in Pentecostal spirituality. However, much of Orthodox spirituality relates very well with Pentecostalism. Worship is an expression of theology—theology in action. With our Orthodox brothers and sisters, Pentecostals believe worship to be an encounter with the divine. Orthodox motifs of fire and light correspond well with the Pentecostal understanding of the “shekinah glory of God” and the “baptism of the Spirit and fire.”

Although my visit to Hagia Sophia was somewhat joyful, there was also great sadness. In the fifteenth century, Constantinople was conquered by Muslim armies. The church that had been the center of Eastern Christianity for a thousand years was converted into an Islamic mosque. Throughout the building I could see signs of Muslim domination. The most obvious were some huge round signs portraying Islamic mottoes which were hanging prominently in the basilica. Today, Hagia Sophia is neither a church nor a mosque but a museum—an empty shell of its former glory.

I remembered the words of Jesus, “Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” So I asked, “How could this happen?” Then I remembered the words of Jesus to the seven churches in Asia: “Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent” (Rev 2:5). No, the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church, but Christ can—and will—remove a lampstand!

In the end, for me Hagia Sophia stands as a monument to what must not be. The church cannot be a *tool* of the empire. Rather, it must be the *conscience* of the empire. The church cannot become a relic of past glory. The church must be alive with the worship of the saints in fellowship with the Holy Trinity. The church must resound with the praises and songs of God’s people. The church must always be a place to encounter the divine.



Bishop Daniel Tomberlin is an ordained bishop in the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) and is currently the pastor of the Bainbridge Church of God in Bainbridge, Georgia. He is also a missionary evangelist who ministers in Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe and serves on several boards of his denomination. His book, *The Sacraments in Pentecostal Worship*, will be published in 2006.