



THE MESSAGE BOARD
A Newsletter from
A. Roy Medley, General Secretary



Personal Reflections

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Middle East Study Tour

Part 2

After a nine-hour flight we arrived in Istanbul at 2:30 AM ET, 9:30 AM local time. The study group, like the good troopers they are, went through a long and tedious process with visas and immigration for Turkey. As our flight for Beirut does not leave until 9:45 PM, Pilgrim Tours arranged for us to have a day of sightseeing in Istanbul.

The history of the city goes back millennia; as Constantinople, it was the center of the Roman Empire and Orthodox Christianity. The seat of the Patriarch of Eastern Orthodoxy still resides in the city, but our travel guide said there are now only about 150 churches in Istanbul serving mainly the Greek and Armenian communities.

As we passed by the Hagia Sophia, once the largest cathedral in Christendom, I noticed the prominent minarets that were added when Byzantium fell. Our guide quickly pointed out that the downfall of the city began not with an onslaught by Muslims, but by the Catholic Christian crusaders who attacked the seat of Orthodoxy for its wealth.

As Istanbul, the city served for centuries as the seat of the Caliphate whose rule united Muslims. The Caliphate was ended by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. With some pride, our guide spoke of the sweeping changes that Atatürk brought, including a secular parliament where women were able to vote and serve as members of parliament.

Modern Turkey is the home of many of the churches of Asia Minor that are mentioned in the New Testament. It always gives me pause when I see how that early cradle of the church, where the ecumenical councils shaped the theological life of the church, now has a very small Christian presence. At the same time, I marvel at the staying power of the various Orthodox churches who have continuously witnessed to Christ since the founding of the church through persecutions by Rome and the eroding power of minority status in a Muslim culture.

While we often think of the status of the church, historically, as a persecuted minority under Islam, I recently read an essay on religious liberty addressed to King James I by an early Baptist, which brought to mind a fact I had learned that there was actually a great deal of tolerance for Christians under Muslim rule in this era. In 1614, Leonard Busher penned this challenge to the king: "I read that a bishop of Rome would have constrained a Turkish emperor to the Christian faith, unto whom the emperor answered, 'I believe that Christ was an excellent prophet, but he did never, so far as I understand, command that men should, with the power of weapons, be constrained to believe his law; and verily I also do force no man to believe Mohamet's law.' Also I read that Jews, Christians and Turks are tolerated in Constantinople and yet are peaceable, though so contrary the one to the other. If this be so, how much more ought Christians not to force one another to religion?"

Grant us this day, O God, confidence in your reign and the day when through Christ our Lord your kingdom shall be perfected on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

American Baptists Serving as the Hands and Feet of Christ

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