

## THE FILIOQUE CLAUSE (1990)

### 1. Introduction

The Methodist Church is being asked to consider whether it would be willing to omit the *Filioque* clause from what is popularly known as the Nicene Creed, if and when there is sufficient ecumenical agreement to this among the Western churches; in order to restore the Creed to the form accepted by the Church in East and West in A.D. 381. Reports from the World Council of Churches (*Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ*, 1978) and the British Council of Churches (*The Forgotten Trinity*, 1989) have recommended this, and the BCC is now asking individual churches to decide where they stand on the matter.

The *Filioque* clause adds the words 'and the Son' to the Creed: 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken by the prophets'. It thus affirms belief in the 'double procession' of the Spirit from God the Father and God the Son, as an integral part of the doctrine of the Trinity.

While Western churches have used the clause for centuries, the Eastern Orthodox churches have never adopted it. The Orthodox church today gives high authority to the early ecumenical creeds, and finds the insertion of the *Filioque* into an ancient creed which is common to both East and West a major stumbling block in ecumenical dialogue. Hence the Orthodox, now supported by the WCC and BCC, urge Western churches to reconsider its place in the Western version of the Creed.

### 2. Historical and Theological Background

The Creed of the Council of Nicea (325) was primarily intended to refute the views of the Arians, who denied Christ's full divinity, making him subordinate to the Father. On the Spirit, it simply asserted 'And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit'. The Council of Constantinople (381) added the words 'who proceeds from the Father', to secure the deity of the Spirit. This version of 381 – formally the 'Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed' but commonly called the Nicene Creed – was confirmed by the Council of Chalcedon (451). No other creed had such full affirmation by the early church in East and West. (The Athanasian Creed, which contains the *Filioque*, originated in the West under Augustinian influence in the 5th century; the Apostles' Creed, though early, is also Western, and in its present form dates from the 8th century.)

How was the Creed's teaching on the Spirit understood in the West? The Creed of 381 followed the thought of the Eastern Cappadocian fathers, who were concerned to defend the deity of the Spirit against vigorous opposition. They argued that the Holy Spirit was to be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son. They tackled the question of the Spirit's origin: the Father is unbegotten; the Son is begotten; the Spirit – who is not in a relation of sonship to the Father – *proceeds* as 'the breath from his mouth'. The precise relation of Son and Spirit was not addressed, though they wrote of the Spirit proceeding 'through the Son' and 'being manifested in the Son'. The Creed itself was silent on this point: probably because such statements could be interpreted by opponents as subordinating the Spirit to the Son.

The individuality of the Persons was to be a strong theme in later Eastern Trinitarian thought, but the unity of the Godhead was defended by the *common* origin of Son and Spirit in the Father. Yet it was firmly held that the Son and Spirit each originated in a *distinct* way within God's hidden essence; this led to an emphasis in the East on the Spirit's complementary role beside the Son, though not to a separation of their activity.

Arianism continued to be a serious threat to orthodoxy in the West. Western theology, evolving against this threat, moved in a different direction. Defence of Christ's deity was paramount. The idea that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* was a bulwark against Arianism. Augustine played a critical role in spreading the doctrine of the *Filioque*. He wrote of the Spirit as the bond of love uniting Father and Son, and concluded that the Spirit proceeded *from both Father and Son*. This did not mean that there were two sources of the Spirit: rather, the Father so begot the Son that the Spirit proceeded from Father and Son simultaneously. By this, he safeguarded (a) the Trinity's unity and (b) the primacy of the Father, for the Spirit proceeds *principally* from the Father. It should perhaps also be noted that while Augustine held to the *Filioque*, he continued to speak of the Spirit proceeding from the Father, *through* the Son.

For the West, the doctrine of the *Filioque* served several valuable purposes: it defended the divinity of Christ; it helped to distinguish Christ and the Spirit within the Trinity by putting a relation of origin between them; and it bound up the unity of the Godhead (a strong Western concern) by relating the Spirit to Father and Son, rather than to the Father alone. Its supporters, past and present, would argue that it has distinctive merits lacking from Eastern thought. But from the perspective of the East, then and now, the *Filioque* results from, and gives rise to, flawed doctrines of the Trinity and the Spirit. Father and Son are not sufficiently distinguished from each other (this reflects what the East sees as the West's over-emphasis on the unity of the Godhead). They share a kind of deity in which the Spirit does not participate: the Spirit is made subordinate, overshadowed by Christ; as a result the Spirit's work tends to be 'domesticated', limited to the sphere of the Church.

The *Filioque* clause was first added to the Nicene Creed in the West by popular custom, against the wishes of the Papacy, but eventually was accepted as part of the Creed. The Council of Toledo (589), which saw the conversion of Spain from Arianism to orthodoxy, affirmed it. From Spain its use spread to the Frankish Empire. Early in the 9th century, the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne pressed for the *Filioque* to be included officially in the Creed. Pope Leo III resisted this, though he accepted the *Filioque*'s teaching, because he did not think an ecumenical creed could be unilaterally altered by the West. Later that century, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Photius, argued that the *Filioque* was false. The West agreed at this point not to add it to the Creed. But Benedict VIII (1012-1024) sanctioned its use at an Imperial coronation. Schism between East and West formally occurred in 1054, with the *Filioque* as one of its causes. Nevertheless, the sense of a united Christendom remained for a time, and theologians debated the *Filioque* without polemics. The advent of scholasticism in the West brought rigorous defences of the *Filioque* from Anselm and Aquinas, and the rift became wide. The issue was not re-opened at the Reformation, and has only become vital again in recent years, with the renewal of closer contact between East and West.

### 3. Scriptural support for 'proceeds from the Father' and the *Filioque*

The theology of the Spirit in the Creed of 381 was based on Old Testament texts about the Spirit (*ruach*) of God, and New Testament texts such as 2 Cor. 3:17 ('the Lord is the Spirit'); and John 15:26 ('the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father').

Scriptural evidence for the Spirit's procession from the Son is less straightforward. John 16:14 is used: '[the Spirit of Truth] will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you'. It is argued that the Spirit could not perform this role except by procession from Father *and* Son. John 15:26 ('I will send [the Counsellor] to you from the Father . . .') has been used to support the procession of the Spirit from the Son in God's mission to the world, and, by inference, in the Trinity's inner relations. Texts which closely connect Christ and the Spirit are also brought forward to support the *Filioque*: for example, 'Spirit of Jesus Christ' (Phil. 1:19); 'you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him' (Rom. 8:9).

### 4. Ecumenical Discussions

As the matter concerns the version of the Nicene Creed common to all Western churches, it seems important for Western churches to decide about change ecumenically. WCC and BCC reports, noted above, have recommended that the *Filioque* clause be omitted from the Nicene Creed, to restore the Creed to the form agreed by East and West in 381. The Lambeth Conference of 1978 made a similar recommendation to the churches of the Anglican Communion. The Church of Scotland in 1979 expressed a willingness to move in this direction, in step with other churches.

The BCC report urges that this stumbling block in relations with the Orthodox be set aside, 'not for merely diplomatic reasons, but in order to give all the churches of divided Christendom the freedom to penetrate to the underlying questions which are at stake' (*The Forgotten Trinity* I, p.34). It sets the issue in the context of lively new interest in the relevance of Trinitarian theology for the life of the Church; interest sparked off by dialogue with the Orthodox, by the charismatic movement, and by fresh approaches in academic theology that reach beyond entrenched formulas of the past.

### 5. Conclusions and recommendations

It is important to bear in mind that the doctrine of the *Filioque* is not being judged here, but rather the place of the *Filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed. Some would argue that its merits, doctrinally, mean that it should stay there; some may even suggest that to omit the clause would be a betrayal of the doctrine of Christ's divinity. But even if its doctrinal value is firmly endorsed, a question still remains: was the West right to insert it, unilaterally, into the ecumenical creed which received widest affirmation in the early church? The depth of feeling about this among the Orthodox must be taken seriously. The clause clarifies (in a Western direction) a point on which the Creed is silent: the relation of Son and Spirit. However, the positions on each side of this issue are much more subtle, and closer to each other, than those caught up in fierce controversy in the past would admit.

Given the obstacle that the clause presents for ecumenical dialogue, the restoration of the Creed to the form of 381 would open the way for East and West to explore the doctrines of the Trinity and Holy Spirit together, from the riches of their traditions. The Faith and Order Committee therefore recommends that the Conference express its willingness to restore the Nicene Creed to the form agreed by East and West in A.D.381, if and when, in the judgement of the Conference, there is sufficient ecumenical agreement to such a policy in the Western Church.

#### **RESOLUTION**

The Conference expresses its willingness to restore the Nicene Creed to the form agreed by East and West in A.D.381, if and when, in the judgement of the Conference, there is sufficient ecumenical agreement to such a policy in the Western Church.

*(Agenda 1990, pp.115-118)*