

The Schism between East and West, 1054

The recent visit of Pope John Paul II to Greece has produced mixed reactions. Some Greeks reacted with bitter criticism for past hurts, and others with studied avoidance. Criticism of Western violence during the crusades, and silence from the Vatican about Turkish violence to Greek Cypriots have brought an unexpected apology from the Pope. Some commentators are expressing the hope that more might develop from that apology. When the final schism between the Churches of the East and the West came in AD 1054, there had been strained relations for centuries. Already in 482 a schism had occurred, which lasted for 36 years. In the ninth century the patriarch Photius had resented Pope Nicholas I's interference in affairs in the Eastern Church. The Pope wanted to control church affairs in Thessalonica and Greek-speaking South Italy, and there was the ongoing theological difference about the derivation of the Holy Spirit. For a long time Latin was the official language in the court of Constantinople, but later on cultural differences had an impact, and the language barrier was greater than it had been in the past.

In 1054 the Normans defeated and captured Pope Leo IX. The Normans were threatening to bring to an end the last remnants of Byzantine control in South Italy. The patriarch at Constantinople, Michael Caerularius, who, as the "Ecumenical Patriarch", wanted to be equal in dignity to the Pope, closed the Latin churches and monasteries in Constantinople. His friend, Archbishop Leo of Ochrida, wrote a letter to the bishop of Trani in Greek-speaking south Italy, warning against errors of the Latins. None of these should have been church divisive issues. They included the use of unleavened bread in the Lord's Supper, fasting on Saturdays during Lent, the eating of things strangled and of blood, and the singing of Alleluia only at Easter. Other non-doctrinal differences were the celibacy of all clergy, and the way monks shaved their heads. Cardinal Humbert was at Trani when the letter arrived, and sent the letter to the pope. The tone of the Pope's letter to Caerularius about this was unfortunate. Cardinal Humbert and two other papal legates took replies by Pope Leo IX to Caerularius to Constantinople, where the controversy continued. The Greek Emperor Constantine X supported Cardinal Humbert for political reasons.

When the papal legates could make no impression on Patriarch Caerularius, on 16 July 1054 they entered St Sophia, the chief Greek church in Constantinople, and, while the principal altar was in readiness for a service, laid on it a sentence of excommunication. They immediately went out, shaking off the dust of their feet against the Eastern Church, and exclaiming, "May the Lord look upon it, and require it." On 20 July the Patriarch Caerularius responded in equally emphatic language.

The real doctrinal issue lurking in the background was the objection by the East that the West had added to the Nicene Creed the words, "and from the Son" without consulting the Eastern Church. The West confesses that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father. The Athanasian Creed, which the Eastern Church has never accepted, also includes the procession of the Spirit from the Son as well as from the Father.

Still today, the Orthodox Churches regard the Father very emphatically as the origin, or source, of the Son and the Holy Spirit within the Trinity. Their criticism of Western theology, with its procession of the Spirit from the Son as well as the Father, is that the West worships two founts of deity, and forsakes theology for philosophy.

There is very little in Scripture that can settle this dispute. Undoubtedly Cappadocian theologians like Gregory of Nazianzus, took the statement, "who proceeds from the Father", in John 15:26, to express the distinct "mode of being" of the Holy Spirit, parallel to the Son's being begotten. They understood "procession" to refer to the relationship of the Spirit to the Father within the Trinity.

Early Western theologians, Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers, and Victorinus also accepted, in their own ways, procession of the Spirit from the Son as well as from the Father, even before Augustine's great book, "On the Trinity." Certainly, another Eastern theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, wrote at times in ways that suggested that the Spirit came from the Father through the Son. His comparison of the separate origins of Eve and of Seth from Adam, for example, suggests that he could accept that the Spirit came from the Father through the Son. Seth had come from Adam through Eve.

The compilers of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed intended to say, by inserting the clause "who proceeds from the Father", that procession was the particular "mode of being" of the Holy Spirit, which eternally distinguished Him from the Father and from the Son. Being "begotten" distinguished the Son from the Father and from the Holy Spirit.

The basic scriptural question is whether in John 15:26 Jesus means that the Holy Spirit is eternally derived from the Father, or whether the Holy Spirit comes into this world from the Father. Careful examination should

show that it does not strictly deal with the intra-Trinitarian relationship of the Spirit to the Father and the Son, but to the Spirit's coming into the world. The Spirit proceeds into the world from the Father, and the Son sends Him into the world ("to you"). In John 15:26 the clause for "who proceeds from the Father" is parallel to the earlier clause "whom I (namely, Jesus) shall send to you from the Father."

There is a difference between saying that the Father has eternally begotten the Son and saying that the Father has sent the Son into the world. In this verse the Greek word for "from" does not immediately mean "derived from" in the way in which the word that the Nicene Creed used for "from" is intended, although "from" in the sense of "out of" is used in 1 Corinthians 2:12: "the Spirit who is from God."

There are consequences. If John 15:26 speaks about the sending of the Holy Spirit into the world, we frankly have no word anywhere in the Scriptures that describes the eternal relationship of the Spirit to the Father or to the Son. All we then have are the passages like "the Spirit of His Son." Then there is no word in Scripture for the Holy Spirit that is parallel to the way in which the word "begotten" denotes the relationship of the Son to the Father. In this respect, though the Son reveals the Father, and the Spirit shows us the Son, the origin of the Spirit Himself remains partly unrevealed. Perhaps the reticence of the church generally about the third Person of the Trinity, the "half-known" God, reflects God's scriptural revelation itself.

It is not true, as was suggested in the media, that there has been no dialogue between East and West since 1054. The Council of Florence in 1439, for example, showed that the dispute between East and West should not really have arisen in the way it did. Lutherans accept everything in their confessions about the Trinity and the person of the Spirit. However, a person who accepts John 15:26 in its original meaning can say "and from the Son" in an edifying manner when he recites the Creed, meaning that both the Father and the Son sent the Spirit into the world, just as the Father sent His Son into the world.