

**Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Winter 1999 No. 75**

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**THE NICENE CREED Speech by the Bishop of Liverpool**

General Synod Sunday 18th July 1999

Mr Chairman,

At the outset I want to say how much I value the fellowship of the House of Bishops, and the freedom therein to disagree. From this you will guess the stand I am about to take!

Words have meanings. And to change words, however small, is to change their meaning. In proposing this motion the Bishops appeal to the original text of the Nicene Creed. But this begs the question as to what is the original text and how the church has handled it down the centuries. As Bishop Michael\* has said this is a theological as well as a translation issue.

It is not the text of the Council of Nicea in 325. This Creed makes no reference at all to either the Holy Spirit or the Virgin Mary when explaining the Incarnation.

It is not the Creed arising out of the Council of Constantinople in 360. This Creed actually explicitly differentiates the role of the Holy Spirit from that of the Virgin Mary with 'Was born from the Holy Spirit and from the Virgin Mary as regards the flesh'.

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 provides us with the revised Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. In this text it says of Jesus 'Became incarnate from the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary'. But this text does not of course include the famous 'filioque' clause about the Holy Spirit proceeding from both the Father and the Son. Those who insist on a pure ELLC translation of the original text ought to follow the logic of their own argument and insist on the removal of the filioque which was not part of the original.

My point is this - the Western Church (I believe rightly) over a number of centuries began to do its own work of revision on the Council of Nicea. Part of that work was to include the double procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son. Another part of that work was to ensure the Biblical differentiation of the roles of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary (which as I said were in the Constantinopolitan text in 360).

To differentiate between the roles of the Spirit and Mary is to follow not only the Book of Common Prayer and ASB but, most importantly, Scripture itself where in both the birth narratives and the Pauline Epistles different words and different verbs describe the different operations of Mary and the Spirit in the birth of Jesus.

In paragraph 5 of the Bishops' paper it argues that 'the Greek phrases used in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed are those used in two New Testament passages Matthew 1:18 and Galatians 4:4'. I am not convinced. A closer examination of these Biblical texts show(s) that although the same preposition - 'EK' ('from' or 'of') is used in both places, that preposition is prefaced by two completely different verbs. 'Having from the Spirit' in Matthew 'becoming from Mary' in Galatians. These two different words actually distinguish the roles of Mary and the Spirit. A distinction which the ELLC text proposes to undo in the face of Scripture.

Creeds were formulated in particular cultural contexts in order to address potential misunderstandings about the nature of Jesus Christ. I believe Professor Thistleton was right to quote Hans Kung's concern in his book *Credo*. 'The Holy Spirit is not a begetting partner but ... an active power'. In a society where the level of Christian understanding is minimal it is important to be as clear as possible as to how Jesus was both human and divine. That's why clarity at this point is a priority.

To maintain in our creeds the distinction between the unique roles of Mary and the Spirit:  
has the authority of Scripture  
is culturally appropriate  
is faithful to the Western Churches' shaping of the Nicene Creed  
is consonant with the doctrine in the Book of Common Prayer which is our doctrinal standard  
does not disturb recent liturgical memory of usage in the ASB

This Take Note debate will provide the House of Bishops with further food for reflection. I shall vote against as I did in the House and on the Liturgical Commission. I encourage members to vote whichever way. Not because I do not accept the guardianship of the faith which belongs to the House of my brothers. But because in discerning the truth of the Scriptures I honestly and humbly believe that the Spirit speaks to and through the whole Body of Christ, not just Bishops, Priests and Deacons but all the people of God. This is the theological foundation on which this Synod is rightly constituted.

\*Michael Nazir-Ali, Bishop of Rochester, who introduced the debate.