

The *Filioque* Controversy

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Since 1054 a line of division has cut through Christianity. But the differences between Eastern and Western theology became pronounced first in 325. In 325 a controversy arose concerning the correct date for Easter and the use of images for religious purposes. The debate raged on for centuries. Other various opposing viewpoints also manifested themselves and the gap grew wider. The chief point of contention was and remains the “Filioque.” The “Filioque” speaks to the procession of the Holy Spirit. The Latin Church maintained the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son (filioque)*. The Eastern Church maintained the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father.

The first part of the assignment calls for a historical overview of events leading up to the schism between East and West. The second part is to speak specifically to the theological differences between East and West which caused the East to reject the “Filioque” and the West to embrace it.

Historical Background

The final division between East and West took place in 1054. In 1054 the Patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated the Latin pope. Since 1054 the Eastern and Western communities have gone their separate ways.

Let’s go back to the beginning and see what led the Patriarch to his action. Our starting point is the first council of Nicaea (325), called by Emperor Constantine. Prior to this council a controversy had arisen over the views of Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria. Arius taught that Jesus was not God in the full sense that the Father is God. At Nicaea the 381 assembled bishops soundly rejected Arianism. The bishops put forth their opinion in a confessional statement called the Nicene Creed. This Nicene Creed (N) ended abruptly with the words, “and in the Holy Spirit.” An anathema formed an addendum which read, “But as for those who say, There was when He was not, and, before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic Church anathematizes.”

The church called the second general council at Constantinople (381). The council at Constantinople like the one preceding and the five following were decidedly Eastern. At the second council of Constantinople the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (C) was formulated and adopted.ⁱ The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was the most influential creed of the fourth century. The first official appearance of (C) came with its ratification at the council of Chalcedon (451).

Was (C) an original creedal statement or an expansion and elaboration of the Nicene Creed? Some believe it was an elaboration. Others maintain (C) was an entirely new document.

There are stark differences between (C) and (N). The Nicene Creed ends with the words, “and in the Holy Spirit.” The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed continues, “the Lord and Giver of life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father is worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.” The anathema original to (N) is absent from the original text of (C). “It is probable that the Council of Constantinople did indeed approve the text of (C), not as a revision of (N), but as a parallel statement.”ⁱⁱ It may be the Eucharistic Creed we use in our communion liturgy is misnamed.

At this time (C) stated the Holy Spirit is the One, “Who proceeds from the Father.” On this point the Greek East and Latin West were in full agreement. They agreed on the basis of St. John 15:26: “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send from the Father, the Spirit of Truth, who goes out from the Father, He will testify about me.” NIV.

The first public appearance of the “Filioque” came at the third Council of Toledo (589). Reccared, king of the Visigoths, formally renounced Arianism on behalf of himself and his people. In his exposition of what the true faith should be, Reccard wrote: “In equal degree must the Holy Spirit be confessed by us, and we must preach that He proceeds from the Father and the Son and is of one substance with the Father and the Son; moreover, that the person of the Holy Spirit is the third in the Trinity, but that He nevertheless shares fully in the divine essence of the Father and the Son.”ⁱⁱⁱ The third Council of Toledo proved to be a landmark event in the history of Spanish Catholicism. The East had no representation at Toledo. The West inserted the “Filioque” by its own authority. This was the West’s clear statement against Arianism and Semi-Arianism which was spreading across Europe. The schism between East and West which exists to this day was born.

The “Filioque Creed” spread from Spain into other parts of the world. The “Filioque Creed” was accepted and put into the service orders at various times in different locales. “The Germans were particularly attracted to it. With the revival of the Empire in the West under Charlemagne (800-814), the Western emperors found it useful to press the point that the subjects of the Eastern Empire were heretics because they did not teach a procession of the Holy Spirit out of the Son as well as out of the Father. For this reason they pressed for the adoption of the “Filioque” in the liturgy of the Church of the City of Rome, the patriarchal see of the West. But it was not until 1014 that they finally succeeded.”^{iv}

The precise date for and circumstances surrounding Rome’s acceptance of the “Filioque” into the creed are unknown. The widely accepted theory has it that Pope Benedict VIII (1012-1024), under the persuasions of Emperor Henry II, consented to have the Constantinopolitan Creed sung at the Holy Eucharist.

In 1053 the Patriarch of Constantinople addressed a letter to the Western Church. The charge was gross heresy. The gross heresy included the “Filioque”, the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist, celibacy. Because the Patriarch persisted in his charges the papal legate excommunicated the Eastern Church. At that point the patriarch countered by excommunicating the pope in 1054.

The Creed (C) including the “Filioque” received much help with the onset of Lutheran Reformation. (C) was translated into German. The people were able to have it in their hands and confess it with their hearts and lips. “It is thus one of the few threads by which the tattered fragments of the divided robe of Christianity are held together.”^v

II.

The Theological Differences Between East and West

First, take a look at the Scripture passages which shed some light on the “Filioque”. Matt. 10:20, “For it will not be you speaking, but *the Spirit of your Father* speaking through you.” 1 Cor. 2:11, “No one knows the thoughts of God except *the Spirit of God*.” Gal. 4:6, “God sent the *Spirit of His Son* into your hearts.” Romans 8:9, “And if anyone does not have *the Spirit of Christ*, he does not belong to Christ.” 1 Peter 1:11, “to which *the Spirit of Christ* was pointing them.” Phil. 1:19, “For I know that through your prayers and the help given by *the Spirit of Jesus Christ*, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.”

These passages speak to the special relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the divine essence. This relationship is defined as a procession or spiration. John 15:26, “(Spirit of Truth) who *goes out* (proceeds) from the Father, He will testify about Me.” John 16:7, “Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.” Gal. 4:6, “God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts.” John 20:22, “And with that He breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit.”

The East and West divided over a fundamental difference in approach to Trinitarian theology; the mystery of the Godhead in particular. The question is not a simple, Should the “Filioque” be included in the creed? The question is a more complex, How do we understand the inter-Trinitarian essence and the interpersonal relationship among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? It became clear to me that behind the

“Filioque” controversy there lies a recognizable yet unresolved uncertainty about the relationship among the three persons of the Trinity.

The Eastern and Western churches continue in their different approaches to the Trinity. For this reason the “Filioque” remains a major obstacle in all attempts to bridge the gap. Next to the authority of the Pope, the “Filioque” is the chief reason for division. Now to the specific theological differences.

The West

The procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father *and the Son*, equally and coordinately, is characteristic of Western trinitarianism since the time of St. Augustine (d. 430). Beginning with Tertullian (d. 230?) the typical formula had been from the Father *through* the Son.” This wording emphasized the Spirit’s divine nature against the *Pneumatomachoi*.

But in the fourth century a deeper implication was drawn from this that the Son along with the Father was actually productive of the Holy Spirit. The Scripture they appealed to was John 16:14, “He (Spirit) will bring glory to Me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.” Up to this time the fathers held back from saying “and *from* the Son.” But St. Augustine had no such qualms and the obscure rendering “*through* the Son” was changed to “and *from* the Son.”

Augustine’s approach to the Trinity was characteristic of the West. The Western Church always began with God’s Oneness. The Western Church approached the unity and divinity of the One in light of the shared *ousia*, or *substantia*. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all equally God—One God. Therefore what could be said of one could be said of the other persons. Since the Spirit proceeded from the Father, the Spirit also proceeded from the Son. Augustine regarded any denial of the double procession as violating the unity and simplicity of God. However, Augustine did admit that in another sense, “that in the primordial sense (principaliter), the Spirit proceeded from the Father because it was the Father who endowed the Son with the capacity to produce the Holy Spirit.”^{vi}

For the West, the changing of the obscure formula “through the Son” to “from the Son” tied up all the loose ends in the doctrine of the Trinity. To support the co-equality of the Son with the Father the West since Augustine has taken the procession of the Holy Spirit in the wider sense and has taught the double procession “from the Father and the Son.” “We may therefore take as reliable indications of the role played by the “Filioque” in Western theology: 1) The New Testament witnesses to the Spirit as being the Spirit of the Father and the Son. 2) We can understand the inner economy of the Trinity only as we see it worked out and made known in revelation. 3) The unity of the Father with the Son is ontologically prior to their differentiation.”^{vii}

One inherent danger in the Western view is the denial that all three persons exist together in the divine essence. The West played this truth down but never denied it for a minute. The failure to properly understand the Western view could lead to a form of Sabellianism. Sabellius was an Ante-Nicene unitarian, a modalistic monarchian. Sabellius taught that God is the one absolute Monad who reveals Himself in the world’s development in three *Prospera*, roles, each representing the entire Monad. Sabellius was condemned in 262.

Sabellianism has a modern day disciple in Oral Roberts. Roberts writes, “The Holy Spirit is Christ come back in His own invisible, unlimited form.” He also writes, “He is simply God...God manifesting Himself as the Father with a specific work to do, as the Son with a specific work to do, and as the Holy Spirit with a specific work to do.” “As an example let’s take water. It can manifest itself in three ways; as liquid, as ice, as vapor. But it is still water.”^{viii}

In the context of Western understanding, the “Filioque” is a natural even necessary statement of principle. The unity of God must be maintained by emphasizing the homogeneity of the three persons; their co-equality as God. But to the East the clause can only tear apart that unity. Eastern orthodoxy argues that adding, “and from the Son” implies there is another source of the Godhead than the Father. This was something never taught by the West. Yet what seemed to make perfect sense to the Western theological mind was blasphemous to the East.

The East

Whereas the West emphasized God's Oneness, Eastern orthodoxy emphasizes the Threeness of the divine Hypostasis. St. Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394?) brought out forcefully in his *Quod non sunt tres dii*, that what accounted for the distinctions in the Trinity was that one of the persons stood in relation of cause to the other. The East had no problem saying the Spirit proceeded from the Father *through* the Son, the Son being considered the Father's instrument and agent. The East believed the Father is the sole source of the Deity. The Son and the Spirit were derived from the Father, one by generation, the other by procession. "Their steadfast refusal to fall in line with the Latins was not the fruit of mere obstinacy but sprang from an instinctive sense of the deep principle involved."^{ix}

Eastern theology holds that the identity of each of the three persons is to be regarded as ultimate and irreducible as the common divinity is to be regarded as ultimate and irreducible. The relationships of Begetting and Procession linking them are fundamental to the whole doctrine of God. The key to the unity of the Trinity is not simply the sharing of the common *ousia*, or *substantia*, though that is shared, but in the place of the Father as Father of the Son and Him from Whom the Spirit proceeds. Whereas the West emphasized God's Oneness, the East maintained this view held by the West preserved nothing. Instead of stressing God's Oneness, the East believed that the place of the Father as the Source and Origin of all divinity was to be emphasized. The East's approach goes back to the original Nicene formula: the Son is *homoousias* with the Father in the sense that He shares in the *ousia* of the Father, and so also the Spirit.

The East position was this—the *monarchia* of the Father is the only root and cause of the Deity. This leads to their confession that the Spirit proceeds "from the Father." This is an inter-Trinitarian process. The East considers the "Filioque" of the West to be false doctrine.

There is also an inherent danger in the Eastern view. The Eastern view could lead to a form of Subordinationism. If the position of the Father is emphasized to the limitation of the positions held by the Son and by the Spirit, it could bring about the false belief that divinity is primarily and really in the Father and only secondarily and incidentally in the Son and the Spirit.

Conclusion

Standing before God's revelation of Himself in the Holy Scripture looking into His glorious Being is a blessed privilege. Strapped with human limitations it is also mind-boggling. Much of what is believed and taught by the East and by the West has come about when human minds tried to peer into and figure out the very essence of the unfathomable God. Neither East nor West denies the Trinity. The entire Christian Church confesses that there is one God who is three separate and distinct persons.

So where does that leave the question of the "Filioque?" Some Lutherans are calling for its removal from the creed since they believe it to be an unnecessary addition that causes unnecessary offense to the East. *Lutheran Forum* writes in an editorial, "As an ecumenical gesture that other Christian communities in the West might hopefully imitate, *Lutheran Forum* proposes that each of the Lutheran bodies represented in these Lutheran-Orthodox conversations instruct its commission on worship and liturgics to remove from the Eucharistic creed the words, "and the Son."^x

This proposal by *Lutheran Forum* comes after a pledge of commitment to the *Quincunque Vult* (Athanasian Creed), to the Westernized form of the Eucharistic creed and the Lutheran Confessions.

In the theological journal *Dialogue* an editorial summarizes the "Filioque" controversy this way: "The point of the story is that the idea of the double procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son is a deduction from Augustine's particular theology, that it served a local controversial function, that it became a contribution to the East-West schism, and that perhaps it ought to be dropped by the churches of the West as casually as it was inserted. Its use continues to offend the East as much on account of the lack of ecumenical consultation as on account of its content. Lutherans have felt little guilt about tampering with the texts of ecumenical creeds (e.g. changing catholic to Christian). Here is an opportunity to tamper with a text of the creed for a good reason: to make a gesture toward healing the East-West schism. The phrase could simply be omitted, perhaps inadvertently, in the next edition of *LBW*, just as the word "again" was inadvertently omitted

from the line of the Apostles' Creed, "He will come again to judge the living and the dead," in Responsive Prayers 1 and 2 in the first printing."^{xi}

I hope I have been able to show that the problem goes much deeper than simply omitting the "and the Son" from the creed. Taking it out isn't going to change the different basic approaches to the question of the Trinity taken by the West and the East.

The Lutheran doctrine of the Holy Spirit on the basis of Scripture is this: The procession of the Holy Spirit is a divine act within the essence of God. It clearly distinguishes the three persons. We confess in the Athanasian Creed: "The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding." This procession is not physical but an ineffable, unexplainable process which occurs in the majesty of God Himself. The Scripture gives no further details. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son; true God of equal majesty and glory.

If the schism between East and West is to be bridged, we should not drop the "Filioque" from the creed but the East should adopt what we confess in the Smalcald Articles, Part II.: "That the Father is begotten of no one; the Son of the Father; the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and Son."^{xii} We also confess in the Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration VIII 73: "But since Christ, according to His divinity is the second person in the Holy Trinity, and from Him, as also from the Father, the Holy Ghost proceeds, and thus is and remains His and the Father's own Spirit to all eternity."^{xiii}

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ⁱ Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. I, New York: Harper Brothers, 1905, p. 29.

ⁱⁱ Willard Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968, p. 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, London: Longmans, 1960, p. 361.

^{iv} “Let’s Change the Creed,” *Lutheran Forum*, November 1967, p. 12.

^v Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 359.

^{vii} A.I.C. Heron, “Who Proceedth from the Father and the Son, the Problem of the ‘Filioque’,” *Scottish Theological Journal*, Vol. 24, May 1971, Edinburgh; p. 152.

^{viii} Oral Roberts, *3 Most Important Steps to Your Better Health and Miracle Living*, Tulsa: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Assn. Inc., 1976, p. 54, 55.

^{ix} Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

^x *Lutheran Forum*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

^{xi} “Constantinople Revisited II,” *Dialogue, A Journal of Theology*, Vol. 20, Fall 1981, Gettysburg: p. 265.

^{xii} *Concordia Triglotta*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921, p. 461.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 1041.