7. The Trinity and the Filioque

All seven traditions compared here confess one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and Christ as one person who is truly God and truly man. The one standing dispute among them on this doctrine concerns a single Latin word added to the Nicene Creed: *Filioque*, "and the Son." It is the oldest doctrinal difference between Catholics and Orthodox, and it raises two questions: how the Spirit is eternally related to the Father and the Son, and who may change a creed that East and West once confessed in the same words.

Shared ground: the Trinity of the councils

The Council of Nicaea (325) confessed the Son "of one substance" (*homoousios*) with the Father. The Council of Constantinople (381) completed the creed, confessing the Holy Spirit as "the Lord and giver of life," worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son. The Council of Chalcedon (451) confessed Christ as one person in two natures, without confusion, change, division or separation. Each tradition states this faith in its own documents:

Catholic

Where it confesses the Trinity and Christ: CCC 232–267 (the Trinity), 245–248 (the procession of the Spirit)

How it holds the creeds: The creeds of the councils are dogma, together with later definitions (Lyons II, Florence).

Orthodox

Where it confesses the Trinity and Christ: The Creed of 381 in its original wording; the first seven Ecumenical Councils

How it holds the creeds: The Creed is "sealed" and admits no addition or change (Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs, 1848, §§5, 20).

Lutheran

Where it confesses the Trinity and Christ: Augsburg Confession I (accepting "the decree of the Council of Nicaea" on one divine essence in three persons) and III (two natures "inseparably enjoined in one Person")

How it holds the creeds: The three ecumenical creeds stand at the head of the Book of Concord (1580).

Reformed

Where it confesses the Trinity and Christ: Westminster Confession 2.3 (three persons "of one substance, power, and eternity") and 8.2 (two natures joined "without conversion, composition, or confusion"); Belgic Confession 8–11

How it holds the creeds: Councils "may err," so they are "a help" to faith, not its rule (Westminster 31.3).

Anglican

Where it confesses the Trinity and Christ: Thirty-Nine Articles I, II, V

How it holds the creeds: The three creeds "ought thoroughly to be received and believed," because they can be proved from Scripture (Article VIII).

Methodist

Where it confesses the Trinity and Christ: Articles of Religion (1784) I, II, IV

How it holds the creeds: The doctrine is kept, but Wesley's abridgement omits the Anglican article on the three creeds.

Baptist

Where it confesses the Trinity and Christ: Second London Confession (1689) 2.3; Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. II

How it holds the creeds: No creed is binding; confessions "are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience" (1925 statement, reprinted with the BF&M).

Baptists confess the Trinity as the teaching of Scripture rather than on the councils' authority: the Second London Confession sets out the doctrine with proof texts and calls it "the foundation of all our communion with God," agreeing with the creeds without making them a test.

What the Filioque is

The creed of 381 says of the Holy Spirit, in Greek, *τὸ ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐκπορευόμενον*, "who proceeds from the Father," echoing Christ's words: "the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father" (John 15:26). The Latin creed used in the Western liturgy reads *qui ex Patre Filioque procedit*, "who proceeds from the Father and the Son" (CCC 246).

The dispute is about the Spirit's eternal origin within God, not about Pentecost. All sides agree that the Son sends the Spirit into the world: "whom I will send unto you from the Father" (John 15:26; also John 16:7). The question is whether the Son also shares, from all eternity, in the Father's bringing forth of the Spirit. Part of the difficulty is linguistic: a 1995 Vatican clarification noted that the Greek term *ekporeusis* "signifies only the relationship of origin to the Father alone," while the Latin *processio* is "a more common term" for coming forth.

How the word entered the creed

Date	Event
c. 400–420	Augustine, *On the Trinity*: the Spirit proceeds from the Father "principally," and also from the Son, because the Father gave the Son this in begetting Him (15.17.29; 15.26.47).
447	Pope Leo I confesses the Spirit's procession from the Father and the Son in a letter to Bishop Turribius of Astorga (CCC 247).
589	Third Council of Toledo: the Visigoths, renouncing Arianism, sign a creed containing the words. It is the earliest conciliar text with the addition, though who first added it "cannot be ascertained" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*), and the council treated the creed as unchanged.
809–810	Charlemagne's Council of Aachen approves the addition. Pope Leo III approves the doctrine but advises leaving the word out of the creed, and has the creed without it set up in Greek and Latin on two silver shields in St Peter's.
867	Patriarch Photius's encyclical to the Eastern patriarchs lists the addition among the errors of the Latins. His *Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit* argues, chiefly from John 15:26, that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone.
1014	At the request of Emperor Henry II, Pope Benedict VIII allows the creed with the Filioque to be sung at Mass in Rome; most historians date Rome's adoption to his reign.
16 July 1054	Cardinal Humbert lays a bull of excommunication on the altar of Hagia Sophia. Among its charges, it wrongly accuses the Greeks of removing the Filioque from the creed.

1274	Second Council of Lyons: the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son "not as from two principles, but as from one principle," and those who deny it are condemned.
6 July 1439	Council of Florence, *Laetentur caeli*: the Fathers' "through the Son" means the Son is, with the Father, cause (Greek) or principle (Latin) of the Spirit, and the word was "licitly and reasonably added to the creed." Mark of Ephesus is the only Eastern bishop who refuses to sign, and the union is rejected in the East.
28 November 2025	At İznik (ancient Nicaea), for the council's 1,700th anniversary, Pope Leo XIV, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and other church leaders recite the creed together without the Filioque.

The Orthodox case

- **The monarchy of the Father.** The Father alone is the source of the Son, by begetting, and of the Spirit, by procession. To make the Son a second source of the Spirit either sets up two principles in God or blurs what belongs to the Father as a person. This was Photius's central argument.
- **Christ's own words.** Christ said that the Spirit "proceedeth from the Father" (John 15:26), not from Himself; His promise to send the Spirit concerns the mission in time. The Spirit is called "the Spirit of his Son" (Gal 4:6) and "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom 8:9) because He rests on the Son and is given through Him. John of Damascus put it this way: "we do not speak of the Spirit as from the Son: but yet we call Him the Spirit of the Son" (*Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.8), while speaking of the Spirit as "proceeding from the Father through the Son" in the sense of manifestation (1.12).
- **Authority.** The creed belongs to an ecumenical council, and one part of the Church may not change it. The Council of Ephesus (431, canon 7) forbade anyone to compose "a different Faith" from that of Nicaea; Pope Leo III himself declined to insert the word; and the 1848 Encyclical holds that no one may make any "addition, or diminution, or alteration" to the creed (§5).
- **Florence was not received.** A union refused by Mark of Ephesus and rejected by the Eastern churches cannot bind them.

Catholic reply: The Father remains the "first origin" of the Spirit (CCC 248), and Lyons and Florence expressly deny two principles. Ephesus forbade a different faith, not a word that explains the same faith; the Council of Constantinople had itself enlarged the creed of 325.

The Catholic case

- **Scripture.** The Spirit "shall receive of mine," and "all things that the Father hath are mine" (John 16:14–15). The Son sends the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7), breathes Him on the apostles (John 20:22), and the Spirit is "the Spirit of his Son" (Gal 4:6) and "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom 8:9). Florence reasoned that the Father gave the Son "everything the Father has, except to be the Father," and so also that the Spirit proceeds from Him, as Augustine had argued.
- **The Fathers.** Latin Fathers taught the procession from both (Augustine; Leo I in 447), and Greek Fathers spoke of the Spirit as coming "from the Father through the Son." Florence read the two formulas as one faith, and the 1995 clarification points to Maximus the Confessor, who wrote a letter from Rome reconciling the two approaches.
- **Complementary, not rival, formulas.** The Catechism calls the Eastern and Western emphases a "legitimate complementarity, provided it does not become rigid" (CCC 248), while acknowledging the Filioque remains "a point of disagreement with the Orthodox Churches" (CCC 247).
- **The 1995 clarification.** It affirms the Father as "the sole Trinitarian Cause (*Aitia*) or principle" of the Son and the Spirit, acknowledges the "conciliar, ecumenical, normative and irrevocable value" of the creed of 381, says Rome has refused to add "and the Son" to the Greek text, and calls the liturgical use of the original creed "always legitimate in the Catholic Church."
- **Practice.** In Greek the original text is used; Eastern Catholic churches generally omit the Filioque as a Latinization (EWTN News); *Dominus Iesus* (2000, §1) quotes the creed without it; and popes have omitted it at ecumenical services, as at İznik in 2025.

Orthodox reply: Omitting the word at ecumenical services leaves the dogma in place: Lyons II condemned those who deny it, and Florence defined it. Even a joint body, the North American Orthodox–Catholic Theological Consultation (2003), asked the Catholic Church to use the creed of 381 without the Filioque "for catechetical and liturgical use" and to declare the Lyons condemnation "no longer applicable," while urging both sides to "refrain from labeling as heretical the traditions of the other side."

Protestants and the Filioque

The Reformation churches inherited the Western creed and kept its teaching. The Smalcald Articles (1537) confess that "the Holy Ghost proceeds from Father and Son" (Part I, art. 2); the Belgic Confession (1561) that the Spirit "proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son" (art. 11); the Thirty-Nine Articles that the Holy Ghost is "proceeding from the Father and the Son" (Article V); Westminster that the Spirit is "eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son" (2.3); and the Second London Confession (2.3), citing John 15:26 and Gal 4:6, keeps the Westminster wording. Methodist Article IV and the Assemblies of God's Statement of Fundamental Truths also keep it. When the Lutheran theologians of Tübingen sent the Augsburg Confession to Patriarch Jeremias II (1576–1581), the Filioque was among the points he rejected.

Anglicans have gone furthest toward the Orthodox position:

- **Moscow Agreed Statement (1976).** The Anglican–Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission agreed that "the Filioque clause should not be included in this Creed."
- **Lambeth 1978, Resolution 35.3,** asked all member churches to "consider omitting the Filioque from the Nicene Creed."
- **Lambeth 1988, Resolution 6.5,** after the Dublin Agreed Statement (1984), called the clause "a major point of disagreement" and recommended that in future liturgical revisions the creed "be printed without the Filioque clause."
- **Cyprus Agreed Statement (2006),** *The Church of the Triune God*, says Anglicans and Orthodox agree about "the inadequacies of the filioque" (II, §46); the Anglican–Oriental Orthodox statement of 2017 describes the clause as inserted by the Latin West "without the authority of an Ecumenical Council."

Practice varies: the Episcopal Church, for example, "accepts the Nicene Creed with or without the filioque." Among other Western bodies, Old Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican theologians at the Bonn Union Conference (1875) agreed that the addition "did not take place in an ecclesiastically regular manner."

Eternal procession and temporal mission. Many proposals for agreement distinguish the Spirit's eternal origin from His being sent in time. The 2017 Anglican–Oriental Orthodox statement says Anglicans generally interpret the Filioque as referring to the Spirit's mission "from the Father, through the Son and by the Son, to the world." Catholic teaching, by contrast, holds that the Filioque concerns the eternal procession itself (CCC 246).

Why it matters

- **For the Orthodox,** it is a question of authority, since one see changed the common creed without an ecumenical council, and of the doctrine of God, since the Father's role as sole source is at stake.
- **For Catholics,** it is a legitimate clarification of what the Fathers, Greek and Latin, already meant, defined by councils that Catholics count as ecumenical.
- **For Lutherans, Reformed and Methodists,** the Western formula is confessional inheritance, judged to agree with Scripture; Anglicans have been most willing to drop it for unity with the East.
- **For most Baptists and evangelicals,** it is rarely discussed. Holding no creed binding, they give little weight to the question of who may change one; what matters is what John 15:26, John 16:14–15 and Gal 4:6 teach. The Baptist Faith and Message does not address the procession.

Where it gets contested: whether the Greek "from the Father through the Son" and the Latin "from the Father and the Son" express the same faith (Florence and the 1995 clarification say yes; Mark of Ephesus and the 1848 Encyclical say no); whether the creed of Toledo (589) contained the words in its

original form; whether 1014 is the right date for Rome's adoption; whether adding an explanatory word to a conciliar creed changes the faith or only clarifies it; and whether the condemnations of Lyons II and the definition of Florence still bind Catholics in dialogue with the Orthodox.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition confesses the procession of the Holy Spirit, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

The Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son "as from one principle and a single spiration," a doctrine Pope Leo I already confessed in 447. The Father remains the first origin of the Spirit, so the Eastern "from the Father through the Son" and the Latin Filioque are a "legitimate complementarity." The Latin Creed keeps the word, but the Greek text of 381 is held normative and is used whenever the Creed is said in Greek.

Sources: CCC 246–248; Council of Florence, *Laetentur caeli* (1439); Second Council of Lyons (1274), const. 1; Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Greek and Latin Traditions regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit* (1995).

Orthodox

The Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father alone, the one source of the Son and the Spirit. The Son sends the Spirit in time and the Spirit rests on Him, so He is "the Spirit of the Son" without being "from the Son." The creed of an ecumenical council may not be changed by one church: the 1848 Encyclical calls the Filioque a "novel doctrine" and "essentially heresy." Lyons II and Florence were never received.

Sources: John 15:26; John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.8, 1.12; Photius, *Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*; Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs (1848), §§5, 20.

Lutheran

The Augsburg Confession opens by accepting Nicaea's teaching on one divine essence in three persons, and the Book of Concord places the three ecumenical creeds first. The Smalcald Articles confess that "the Holy Ghost proceeds from Father and Son." When the Tübingen theologians sent the Augsburg Confession to Patriarch Jeremias II (1576–1581), the Filioque was among the points he rejected.

Sources: Augsburg Confession I, III; Smalcald Articles, Part I, art. 2; Book of Concord (1580), the Ecumenical

Reformed

The Reformed confessions keep the Western formula: the Spirit "proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son" (Belgic) and is "eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son" (Westminster), with John 15:26 and Gal 4:6 among the proof texts. Councils "may err," so the creeds are received because they agree with Scripture, as "a help" to faith rather than its rule.

Sources: Belgic Confession (1561), arts. 8–11; Westminster Confession 2.3, 8.2, 31.3.

Creeds; Tübingen–Jeremias correspondence (1576–1581).

Anglican

Article V keeps "proceeding from the Father and the Son," and Article VIII receives the three creeds as provable from Scripture. Since the Moscow Agreed Statement (1976), Anglicans in dialogue with the Orthodox have agreed the clause "should not be included in this Creed," and Lambeth 1978 and 1988 asked provinces to consider omitting it in future liturgies. Practice varies; the Episcopal Church accepts the Creed "with or without the filioque."

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles I, V, VIII; Moscow Agreed Statement (1976); Lambeth Conference 1978, Res. 35.3; Lambeth Conference 1988, Res. 6.5; Cyprus Agreed Statement (2006), II §46; Episcopal Church, *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, "Filioque.".

Methodist

Article IV of the Methodist Articles of Religion keeps the Anglican wording: the Holy Ghost, "proceeding from the Father and the Son," is "very and eternal God." Article I confesses three persons "of one substance, power, and eternity." Wesley's abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles dropped the article on the three creeds, so the Methodist articles affirm the doctrine without naming the creeds.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion (1784), I, II, IV (United Methodist Book of Discipline).

Baptist

The Second London Confession confesses "the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son," citing John 15:26 and Gal 4:6, and calls the Trinity "the foundation of all our communion with God." The Baptist Faith and Message (2000) confesses "the eternal triune God" but does not address the procession. Baptists hold no creed binding: confessions "are only guides in interpretation."

Sources: Second London Confession (1689) 2.3; Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. II and preamble (1925 statement, item 4).

See also: The Orthodox perspective; Timelines of the traditions; The Church Fathers; Peter and the papacy; Common ground; Glossary: Filioque.

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