

UNIT FIVE:

The *Filioque* Controversy and the East/West Schism



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

UNIT FIVE: The Filioque Controversy and the East/West Schism

QUICK CONNECT

The “filioque controversy” revolves around the insertion of the phrase “and the Son” (filioque in Latin), regarding the Holy Spirit, into the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in 589. The Council of Constantinople had added the current version of the third paragraph to offer a more complete description of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, asserting that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified.” A subsequent regional council (the Council of Toledo, 589) revised this to read “proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified.” This later revision (with the additional phrase “and the Son”) became the standard version of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed used in western, Latin-speaking churches. Protestants continued to use this altered version of the creed. For our Orthodox Christian siblings, no church has the right to edit the content of an ecumenical creed.

GLOSSARY/KEY TERMS

Filioque: A Latin phrase meaning “and the Son.” It was inserted into the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed at the Third Council of Toledo in 589. The original version (from 381) reads: “The Holy Spirit ... proceeds from the Father, and with the Father and Son he is worshipped and glorified.” The revised creed (with the filioque) reads: “The Holy Spirit ... proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and Son he is worshipped and glorified” (italics added).

Gothic: A Germanic group of people who lived north and west of the Alps, outside the Roman Empire.

Patriarch: In the Christian tradition, a patriarch is a bishop given administrative oversight over several dioceses. At the Council of Nicaea, one of the canons (rules) officially acknowledged that the three episcopal cities had exercised oversight for their respective regions: Rome, Antioch and Alexandria. The council added Jerusalem to this list. In 381, the city of Constantinople (as the new capitol) was also added. The bishops of these cities are known as “patriarchs” and have had the right to use the title “pope” (from pappas, an affectionate term for a fatherly leader).

Catholic: A word that means “universal” in the Greek and Latin languages. It has come to be synonymous with the Latin-speaking, Nicene-affirming church of western Europe, which acknowledges the bishop of Rome as the governing patriarch of the universal church.

Orthodox: A word that means “correct teaching,” it has come to be synonymous with the Greek-speaking, Nicene-affirming church of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean (including North Africa, Turkey and the Holy Land). While acknowledging the bishop of Rome as a very important patriarch of the church, Orthodox Christians affirm the bishop of Constantinople as the governing patriarch and a synodical process (through councils) for collective decision-making.

UNIT FIVE: The Filioque Controversy and the East/West Schism

NARRATIVE

Arianism continued to thrive in certain regions of the Roman Empire, even after the Emperor Theodosius declared the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed to be the standard of orthodoxy in 381. This unit will first examine how Arian teachings were able to persist and will then discuss how the Western church introduced the *filioque* to the 381 version of the creed. Unfortunately, whatever the sincere theological concerns that motivated the addition, the filioque became one of the key factors leading to the Great Schism of 1054, which has divided the church into Eastern and Western branches of Christianity for over a millennium.

Very little is known about Ulfila (whose name means “little wolf”), but he had a tremendous impact on the church. Ulfila (died 383) was a missionary bishop. Sometime around 336, he was ordained by the Arian bishop of Constantinople, the powerful Eusebius of Nicomedia. Ulfila was charged with being the “apostle to the Goths,” a loose confederation of Germanic (non-Roman) people. The Roman Empire had a long and sometimes fraught relationship with the Goths. By the fourth century, relations had soured, such that the Goths would sometimes carry out raids within the empire. Ulfila had been born to Greek-speaking Roman parents, but when he was a child, his family was kidnapped by Gothic invaders. Out of this tragedy came a unique opportunity: by the time he was grown, Ulfila was fluent in Greek, Latin and Gothic. He could move easily between the languages and cultures. He translated the Bible into Gothic, developing a unique alphabet in the process. He was highly respected by both Goths and Romans, blending his authority as both a bishop and a tribal ruler in his own right. Under his leadership, Arian Christianity became the dominant religion among the Gothic people. Ulfila was committed to Arius’ affirmation that God (the Father) was “uncreated” and that the Logos was “created.” He wrote a creed testifying to this fact. For centuries afterward, even after Arianism had lost its influence in Roman society, the Gothic people were staunchly Arian. Subsequent missionaries of the Nicene faith, such as St. Martin of Tours (died 397), met with determined resistance from the Gothic Christians. Not until Clovis (died 511), a Frankish king who renounced Arian Christianity in favor of Nicene Christianity, would the Roman congregations and Gothic congregations become more united in faith through a shared recitation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

This brings us to the context in which the *filioque* emerged. Another Gothic leader, Reccared (died 601), also converted to Nicene Christianity. With the Nicene bishop of Toledo, the new Christian king sought to consolidate Christians and counter the influence of Arian Christianity within his territory. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was the accepted standard for orthodox doctrine. However, some worried that the creed, as written, could still imply a “ranking” among the persons of the Holy Trinity. Namely, by saying that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and with the Father and Son [the Holy Spirit] is worshipped and glorified,” is there an implied affirmation of Arius’ idea that the Father is greater than the Son if the Son is not involved in the procession of the Spirit? Again, this may sound overly scrupulous today, but in the contentious and unsettled political and theological context of that time, we might understand the desire for absolute clarity. To avoid any misunderstanding, the Third Council of Toledo took the bold step of revising the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed to add the phrase: “[the Holy Spirit] proceeds from the Father *and the Son*, and with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified.”

From here, the story of the *filioque*, its acceptance in the creed and its use in the liturgy of the church takes a path with many, various turns. We can summarize that the version of the creed with the *filioque* was not immediately or universally accepted among Catholic Christians. For instance, Popes Hadrian (died 795) and Leo III (died 816) rejected the edit, not for what it affirmed but because one should not edit received ecumenical creeds.

UNIT FIVE: The Filioque Controversy and the East/West Schism

Two quick observations here. First, one could note that because the Council of Constantinople had itself revised the creed formed by the Council of Nicaea, why was it so different for the Council of Toledo to revise the creed again? The answer lies in the greater authority given to the Council of Constantinople. It was an ecumenical council (involving the participation of bishops from the wider church and widely accepted), whereas the Council of Toledo was a much smaller, regional gathering. Second, one could argue that, outside of discussions in episcopal courts or theological schools, the issue of the *filioque* was not entirely pressing among “everyday” Christians. This is because, at that time, the creed was not used in the liturgy. A significant shift occurred, in the western church of the ninth century under the Carolingian reforms, in which reciting (or singing) the creed during the Mass became the norm. This change moved the *filioque* into the center of Christian worship. As an aside, Orthodox Christians (at least in Constantinople) had been reciting the creed (without the filioque, of course!) since the sixth century. Not until the 11th century was the liturgy in Rome to include the creed (with the *filioque*). Once embraced by the Roman patriarch, the revised creed became the standard in western and northern Europe. While this inclusion united the Western (Catholic, Latin) church, it caused a rift with the Eastern (Byzantine, Orthodox) church.

With the *filioque*, Christianity was presented with a scandal: Christians (Catholic and Orthodox) were not reciting the same creed week to week. This scandal remains to this day, as Roman Catholics and most Protestants who use the creed continue to recite the *filioque*. Since the ninth century, our Orthodox siblings in the faith have protested the *filioque*. Attempts to resolve the issue tend to revolve around a few key issues: there are those who disapprove of what is being said (that is, that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father), and there are those who do not deny the unity of Father and Son in the procession of the Spirit but who argue that the change to the creed was unauthorized.

In more recent times, ecumenical dialogue has affirmed the sensitive nature of the question and recognized the conflict as an obstacle to Christian unity. Roman Catholics and most Protestants defend the theology that informed the *filioque* while also affirming that it need not be recited in the creed (more recent Lutheran and Anglican resources have placed “and the Son” in brackets; see *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* for an example). When the patriarchs of Rome and Constantinople have prayed together more recently (in 2006 and 2021), the *filioque* was not included. Likewise, while Orthodox Christians would still staunchly oppose adding the phrase to the creed, they acknowledge that a not-insignificant number of Greek-speaking theologians also affirmed the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son. A general consensus is emerging among the Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Protestants for whom the creed is authoritative that the *filioque* need not be a church-dividing issue.

The Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church has recently produced a common [statement](#) on the *filioque*.

You may also watch a [presentation](#) on the Joint Statement (“Bridging East and West: A Joint Statement on Filioque”), sponsored by the World Council of Churches (May 2025).

Likewise, a new [study guide](#) on the joint statement – with liturgical resources for common worship – is now available.

This joint statement builds on previous dialogue between Lutherans and Orthodox Christians, such as the 1998 [statement](#) “A Lutheran-Orthodox Common Statement on Faith in the Holy Trinity.”

UNIT FIVE: The Filioque Controversy and the East/West Schism

There have been similar studies and ecumenical statements from Anglican-Orthodox dialogue and Roman Catholic-Orthodox dialogue, for instance, “The Filioque: A Church Dividing Issue?,” a 2003 [statement](#) of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

(Questions are adapted from “Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Statement on the Filioque: A Study Guide,” p.12.)

The *filioque* was introduced to emphasize the divine nature of the Holy Spirit, thereby affirming the co-equality and co-eternity of the three persons of the Trinity. What are the distinctive Lutheran perspectives on the Holy Spirit, particularly regarding the relationship among the persons of the Trinity?

1. Why do you think the place of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity is so important? What does it have to do with our relationship to God?
2. What benefits are there to omitting the *filioque* when reciting the Nicene Creed during public worship? What are the advantages of keeping the filioque in the Nicene Creed?
3. What lessons does the *filioque* controversy offer about Christian unity, reconciliation and ecumenical efforts? (To learn more, refer to Unit 10, “Christian Unity Today.”)

FOR FURTHER READING

Ecumenical Perspectives on the Filioque for the 21st Century, ed. Myk Habets (London: T&T Clark, 2015).

Hockenberry, Jennifer, “[What the Filioque? Creeds and Community](#),” *Women of the ELCA*, May 18, 2025, www.womenoftheelca.org/blog/post/what-the-filioque-creeds-and-community. A very approachable summary of the filioque and its significance.

Siecienski, A. Edward, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).