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Nicene Creed, Filioque Clause (“who proceeds from the Father ~~and the son~~”)

The “Filioque Clause” in the Nicene Creed, was, and still is, a controversy in the church in relation to the Holy Spirit. Filioque (in Latin pronounced as /fili'okwe/) is a Latin term added to the original text of the Creed, attributed to the First Council of Constantinople, which convened in the year 381. In the late 6th century, some Churches in the West, namely the Latin (Roman Catholic) Rite, added the words “and from the Son” or Filioque. After the later Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus and the First Council of Nicaea, some Churches in the East (Orthodox), argued that the Filioque was then a violation, since the words were not included in the text by either the First Council of Constantinople or the First Council of Nicaea. It has been an enduring issue of great controversy between us, “The Church of the West” and “The Church of the East,” the Orthodox.

So, the clause is an addition to the original text, which says that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.” “Filioque” is an addition, meaning “and the son.” This enduring issue of great controversy comes down to the question, “From whom did the Holy Spirit proceed, the Father, or the Father and the Son?” The addition of the Filioque seems to answer this question, indicating that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father “and Son.” Ah, but the East did not (and still does not) see this answer as universally definitive for the Church. There was so much contention over the Filioque, that it soon became an issue, between East and West, which eventually led, among other issues, to the split between them in the year 1054. To this day, there is no universally definitive agreement and the Filioque remains controversial, even anathema (vehemently disliked) to the East. In the Gospel of John we read, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name (John 14:26). Further, in John 15:26, we read, “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, He will testify about me.” Thus, it is indicated, at least in the Gospel of John, that the Holy Spirit is sent out by both the Father and the Son. Perhaps the essential matter in the Filioque has been, from the perspective of the West, a desire to protect the deity of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Opposition to the Filioque, especially from the East, is that the clause “from the Father and the Son” makes the Holy Spirit “subservient” to the Father and Son. Those, especially in the West, who uphold the Filioque Clause believe that the Holy Spirit proceeding from both the Father and the Son does not impact the Spirit, being equally God with the Father and the Son. The aspect of God’s person that is the Holy Trinity is a mystery that we will never be able to fully grasp. God, who is an infinite being, is ultimately incomprehensible to our finite human minds.

The question of whether the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father, or by the Father and the Son, likely cannot be decisively answered, nor does it absolutely need to be. The Filioque clause will perhaps have to remain a controversy and a major cause of conflict. This will then have important implications for how one understands God in the doctrine and mystery of the Holy Trinity, which is central to the majority of Christian Churches, both in the West and in the East. Moving forward in our polity, the Lambeth Conference of 1988 recommended that the phrase

be dropped from the Nicene Creed in Anglican churches. The 1994 General Convention of the Episcopal Church resolved to delete the Filioque from the Nicene Creed in the next edition of the Book of Common Prayer.