

A Lutheran – Orthodox Common Statement on Faith in the Holy Trinity

(1) Our theological dialogue as Orthodox and Lutherans has made clear to us that each of our churches believes in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God. We recognize one another's churches as churches believing in the Holy Trinity. We also recognize that our churches do not simply believe in, but worship the Holy Trinity. In our worship we not only confess our faith in the Trinity, but we encounter each of the persons of the Holy Trinity in their distinction from one another and their unity with each other as the one God.

(2) In our worship, Lutherans and Orthodox both explicitly confess faith in the Holy Trinity in the words of the Nicene Creed. Our churches are both committed to the Nicene Creed as ecumenically binding dogma, that is, as a statement of the apostolic faith in the Holy Trinity which is permanently normative for all Christians. We may therefore briefly summarize our shared faith in the Trinity by reference to the Nicene Creed.

(3) As Lutherans and Orthodox we both confess faith in "one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Confessing faith in God the Father, we together believe in the monarchy of the Father. The Father is the supreme principle, origin, source, and cause of all that exists and has life. He alone is unoriginate, and all that is, uncreated and created, originates from him. The Son and the Spirit are from his very being, whereas everything else is made by him from nothing, through his Son, and by his Spirit.

(4) As Lutherans and Orthodox we confess together faith in "one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God." This eternal Son of God is "begotten, not made." Unlike any creature, he does not come to be out of nothing by an act of God's will. He is eternally generated or begotten by the Father, receiving from the Father the Father's own divine nature or essence (ousia) which is undivided. He is therefore "one in essence [homoousios] with the Father." Although he is other than the Father, a hypostasis or person distinct from the Father, the Son is fully the one God, just as the Father is. Therefore as Lutherans and Orthodox we reject any form of Arianism, according to which the Son of God is less than fully God, and entitled to less than fully divine honor and worship.

(5) As Lutherans and Orthodox we confess together that this same eternal Son of God, "for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, and was made man." Fully God from all eternity, the Father's only-begotten Son became fully human in time, accepting the whole reality of human life and death. We therefore confess together that in Christ two natures, divine and human, are inseparably united in one person, so that there is one Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true human being. The eternal Son of God himself was truly born, suffered, was crucified and died in the flesh; this same Son was buried in the flesh, rose from the dead on the third day, and ascended to the Father's right hand in heaven. The only-begotten and incarnate Son reveals the Father to us, and sends the Holy Spirit into the world.

(6) As Lutherans and Orthodox we confess together faith in "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life." Like the Son, the Holy Spirit receives his existence from the Father, though the Spirit "proceeds from the Father," while the Son is "begotten" of the Father. Like the Son, he receives from the Father the Father's own divine nature, and so he is one in essence with the Father and

the Son. He is other than the Father and the Son, a hypostasis or person distinct from both, yet fully the one God, just as the Father and the Son are. The Creed attests this not only by calling him "the Lord, the giver of life," attributing to him divine names and actions which belong to God alone, but also by saying that "with the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified." Because he is true God, to him belongs that honor and worship which are due to God alone.

(7) Our dialogue has discussed extensively the historical and theological issues surrounding the one point in the Creed on which Lutherans and Orthodox have traditionally disagreed with regard to faith in the Holy Trinity: the procession of the Spirit. Together with other churches rooted in Latin-speaking Christianity, Lutherans have traditionally confessed the creedal faith in the Holy Trinity by saying that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son [Filioque]," and Lutheran theologians have traditionally defended both the addition of the phrase "and the Son" and the truth of the teaching embodied by this addition. Orthodox have traditionally opposed both the addition of the Filioque clause to the Creed and the teaching that the Spirit proceeds from the Son. Our dialogue has progressed to the point where we can make the following statements regarding this historic dispute.

(8) Lutherans, together with many other Western Christians, now widely recognize that the addition of the Filioque to the Nicene Creed, which took place locally by a unilateral action of the Latin Church and without the action of an Ecumenical Council, was illegitimate and contributed to disunity among Christians. Moreover, many Lutherans are now convinced that the original Creed without the Filioque addition could and should be restored in their worship. This need not contradict the Lutheran Confessions, which commit Lutherans to "the decree of the Council of Nicaea" (CA I). It is especially important to note that this article commits Lutherans not simply to the teaching of "the synod of Nicaea," but to the decree—that is, the text—of Nicaea, and to the specific doctrinal decisions embodied in that text. But the text of "the synod of Nicaea," that is the text of A.D. 325, amplified by the First Council of Constantinople of A.D. 381, as reported in the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), does not include the Filioque. It simply says that the Holy Spirit is to ek tou patroH ekporeuomenon ("the one proceeding from the Father"), in line with the Gospel of St. John (John 15:26). On this basis, Lutherans can now acknowledge that the Filioque is not ecumenical dogma, but has the status of a local tradition which is not binding on the universal church.

(9) For this reason the Lutheran members of this dialogue are prepared to recommend to their Church that it publicly recognize that the permanently normative and universally binding form of the Nicene Creed is the Greek text of A.D. 381, and that it undertake steps to reflect this recognition in its worship and teaching. This would be a way of enacting in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America the Lutheran World Federation resolution of 1990, which found it "appropriate" that member churches "which already use the Nicene Creed in their liturgies may use the version of 381, for example in ecumenical services," and further found it appropriate that Lutherans preparing common vernacular texts of the Nicene Creed together with Orthodox churches "may agree to a version without the 'western' filioque."

(10) At the same time, Lutherans are not prepared to regard the teaching that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as a heresy—a teaching against faith in the Holy Trinity. It is part of their confessional documents, and many of the chief teachers of the Lutheran tradition, including Luther himself, taught it vigorously. Lutheran recognition that the Filioque is not part of the Nicene Creed in its original and ecumenically binding form is not, therefore, to be equated

with Lutheran rejection of all theological teaching which ascribes to the Son a role in the procession of the Holy Spirit, still less with an acknowledgment that all such teaching is heretical. Nevertheless, Lutherans are open to further exploration of the relation of the Spirit to the Son in conversation with Orthodox and in careful dialogue with their concerns.

(11) Orthodox very warmly agree with the Lutherans that the Filioque does not belong to the normative Creed as recognized by the Council of Constantinople of A.D. 879/880, which was accepted unanimously by both East and West. At the same time, Orthodox do not regard the teaching that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father to be one which they can accept. This teaching is opposed to the monarchy of the Father and to the equality of the Spirit to the Father and the Son as a hypostasis or person distinct from both, as expressed by the original Creed. On the other hand, Orthodox may accept the teaching of the "double procession" of the Spirit from the Father and the Son in the patristic sense that the Spirit is sent from the Father through/and the Son in the mystery of our salvation in Christ. The relation of the Son to the Spirit in the context of salvation (oikonomia) is not the same with their relation in the eternal Trinity (theologia). Thus for Orthodox the dispute over the Filioque can be narrowed down to accepting or rejecting the distinction between how the Trinity is eternally in themselves and how they appear in Christ. That the Holy Spirit eternally comes forth from the Son, so as to depend for his being and his possession of the one divine nature on the Son as well as on the Father, is a teaching which Orthodox uniformly oppose.

(12) Despite our differences in theological perspective, Lutherans and Orthodox agree on certain basic theological commitments, which constitute criteria of acceptable Trinitarian teaching. In particular they agree that any acceptable Trinitarian teaching: (a) must affirm the monarchy of the Father; (b) must affirm that the divine essence exists only in the three distinct, equal, and undivided persons of the Trinity, without confusion of their personal properties; and (c) must affirm the consistent Christian teaching of the intimate relation of the Son and the Spirit in the economy of salvation.

(13) In our dialogue, we have prayed and worked for fuller and more widely acknowledged unity between our churches in the Trinitarian faith. In many areas of faith in the Holy Trinity, our dialogue has reached substantial agreement. We look forward to a time when our churches will affirm the Nicene faith through common liturgical usage of the unaltered creed of A.D. 381. We trust that such common affirmation of faith will lead to the resolution of those theological differences which are still before us.

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