

The Great Schism

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What caused the split of the Church between East and West?

While the Church was unified for almost a thousand years, there developed differences in doctrine and practice that separated them. While Orthodoxy has preserved the teachings of the first Seven Councils without change, there have been changes introduced in the other groups who call themselves Christians. We will briefly take a look at how this split occurred. Why is it important to know about this? Because this history affirms that the fundamental nature of Orthodoxy is that its doctrines do not change and that it holds the truths as proclaimed in the Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Church.

The Great Schism must not be conceived as the result of only one specific quarrel. There were political and cultural differences that arose along with doctrinal issues. The split occurred over a long period of time and formally came to a head in 1054 in what is known as the Great Schism.

Political and Cultural divergence

If we go back to the time of the Apostles there was a political and cultural unity because of the [Roman Empire](#). The Empire embraced many different national groups, often with languages and dialects of their own. But all these groups were governed by the same Emperor. The [Romans](#) had assimilated the Hellenic culture so there was a broad Greco-[Roman](#) civilization in which educated people throughout the Empire shared. Both Greek and Latin was understood throughout the Empire with Greek being the common language of commerce at that time. These facts greatly assisted the early Church in her missionary work.

This unity gradually disappeared. In the third century the empire was divided into two parts, East and West with two emperors. Constantine furthered this process of separation by establishing a second imperial capital in the east, Constantinople. Then came the barbarian invasions at the start of the fifth century: apart from Italy, the west was carved up among barbarian chiefs.

The separation was carried a stage further by the rise of Islam. The Mediterranean, which the [Romans](#) once called "our sea," (Mare Nostrum) passed largely into Arab control. Cultural and economic contacts between the eastern and western Mediterranean became far more difficult.

Being isolated from [Byzantium](#), the west proceeded to set up a "Roman" Empire of its own. On Christmas Day in the year 800 the Pope crowned Charles the Great, King of the Franks, as Emperor. Charlemagne sought recognition from the ruler at [Byzantium](#), but without success. The [Byzantines](#) regarded Charlemagne as an intruder and the Papal coronation as an act of schism within the Empire.

Matters were made more difficult by problems of language. Educated men were no longer bilingual. By the year 450 there were very few in western Europe who could read Greek, and after 600, although [Byzantium](#) still called itself the [Roman Empire](#), it was rare for a [Byzantine](#) to speak Latin. Photius, the greatest scholar in ninth century Constantinople, could not read Latin; and in 864 a "[Roman](#)" Emperor

at [Byzantium](#), Michael III, even called the language in which Virgil once wrote (Latin) "a barbarian and Scythic tongue."

Charlemagne's Court was marked at its outset by a strong anti-Greek prejudice. Men of letters in Charlemagne's entourage were not prepared to copy [Byzantium](#), but **sought to create a new Christian civilization of their own**. Perhaps it is in the reign of Charlemagne that the schism of civilizations first becomes clearly apparent.

Charlemagne, rejected by the [Byzantine](#) Emperor, was quick to retaliate with a charge of heresy against the [Byzantine](#) Church. He denounced the Greeks for not using the filioque in the Creed and he declined to accept the decisions of the seventh Ecumenical Council.

The barbarian invasions and the consequent breakdown of the Empire in the west also strengthened the autocratic structure of the western Church. In the east there was a strong secular head, the Emperor, to uphold the civilized order and to enforce law. In the west, after the advent of the barbarians, there was only a plurality of warring chiefs, all more or less usurpers. For the most part it was the Papacy alone, which could act as a center of unity, as an element of continuity and stability in the spiritual and political life of western Europe. By force of circumstances, the Pope became an autocrat, an absolute monarch set up over the Church, issuing commands — in a way that few if any eastern bishops have ever done — not only to his ecclesiastical subordinates, but to secular rulers as well. The western Church became centralized to a degree unknown anywhere in the four Patriarchates of the east. There developed monarchy in the west and collegiality in the east.

There were differences in world views and how they thought. The Latin approach was more practical, the Greek more speculative. Latin thought was influenced by juridical ideas, by the concepts of [Roman](#) law, while the Greeks understood theology in the context of worship and in the light of the Holy Liturgy. When thinking about the Trinity, Latins started with the unity of the Godhead, Greeks with the threeness of the persons. When reflecting on the Crucifixion, Latins thought primarily of Christ the Victim, Greeks of Christ the Victor. Latins talked more of redemption and Greeks of deification.

Role of the Pope

As suggested, these factors led to a different role for the Pope than the traditional role of a Patriarch. The Pope became an absolute authority over all of the Western church, while in the East there was still the sense of a conciliar approach. The Orthodox held that any doctrine difference had to include the entire Church and that no single person had the ability to make changes in doctrine. The absolute authority rested with the Ecumenical **council** as it had since the council of Jerusalem held by the Apostles.

Doctrinal divergence

The second great difficulty was the filioque. The dispute involved the words about the Holy Spirit in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Originally the Creed ran: ***"I believe... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and together glorified."*** **This, the original form, is recited unchanged by the east to this day.**

But, the West inserted an extra phrase ***"and from the Son"*** (in Latin, filioque), so that their Creed now reads ***"who proceeds from the Father and the Son."*** It is not certain when and where this addition was first made, but it seems to have originated in Spain, as a safeguard against Arianism. At any rate the Spanish Church interpolated the filioque at the third Council of Toledo (589), if not before. From Spain the addition spread to France and thence to Germany, where it was

welcomed by Charlemagne and adopted at the semi-Iconoclast Council of Frankfort (794).

It was writers at Charlemagne's Court who first made the filioque into an issue of controversy, **accusing the Greeks of heresy because they recited the Creed in its original form.** But Rome, with typical conservatism, continued to use the Creed without the filioque until the start of the eleventh century. In 808 Pope Leo III wrote in a letter to Charlemagne that, although he himself believed the filioque to be doctrinally sound, yet he considered it a mistake to tamper with the wording of the Creed. Leo deliberately had the Creed, without the filioque, inscribed on silver plaques and set up in Saint Peter's. For the time being Rome acted as mediator between Germany and [Byzantium](#).

It was not until after 850 that the Greeks paid much attention to the filioque, but once they did so, their reaction was sharply critical. **Orthodoxy objected (and still objects) to this addition in the Creed,** for two reasons. First, the Ecumenical Councils specifically forbade any changes to be introduced into the Creed; and if an addition has to be made, certainly nothing short of another Ecumenical Council is competent to make it. The Creed is the common possession of the whole Church, and a part of the Church has no right to tamper with it. In the second place, Orthodox believe the filioque to be theologically untrue. They hold that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, and consider it a heresy to say that He proceeds from the Son as well. It may seem to many that the point at issue is so abstruse as to be unimportant. But Orthodox would say that since the doctrine of the Trinity stands at the heart of the Christian faith, a small change of emphasis in Trinitarian theology has far-reaching consequences in many other fields. **Not only does the filioque destroy the balance between the three persons of the Holy Trinity: it leads also to a false understanding of the work of the Spirit in the world, and so encourages a false doctrine of the Church.**

Besides the issues of the role of the Papacy and the filioque, there are certain lesser matters regarding Church worship and discipline which have caused trouble between east and west: the Greeks allowed married clergy while the Latins insisted on priestly celibacy; there are different rules of fasting; the Greeks used leavened bread in the Eucharist and the Latins use unleavened bread or "azymes."

Formal Schism 1054

The formal break came when Michael Cerularius was Patriarch of Constantinople and St. Leo Pope in Rome. In 1053, Cerularius circulated a treatise criticizing in strong terms the practices of the Western church. Cerularius said the fact that Catholics did not allow their clergy to marry was contrary to scripture and tradition. He objected to the Catholics' use of unleavened bread in their Eucharist. But his most serious concern was that the Latin Church had added the word "filioque" to the Nicene Creed, saying the Holy Spirit proceeded from both Father and Son.

Cerularius excommunicated all bishops of Constantinople who used the Western ritual and closed down their churches. This incensed Leo. He demanded that Cerularius submit to the Pope. Any church which refused to recognize the pontiff as supreme was an assembly of heretics, he said - a synagogue of Satan. The Eastern patriarch wasn't about to accept this characterization. The five patriarchs, Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Constantinople and Rome were equals in his eyes. The bishop of Rome, as patriarch of the West, was given the courtesy title of "first among equals" and in a tie vote he could make the final determination according to tradition. Rome's growing claims to authority were deemed unacceptable to the other patriarchs, who believed (and who still believe) that Christ alone is the head of the Church.

Leo sent legates, headed by an unyielding man, Cardinal Humbert, to discuss the issues. Before they could complete their mission, Leo died. Humbert was so rude to Cerularius that Cerularius refused to speak with him. Aggravated by this treatment, the legates marched into St. Sophia on July 6, 1054, and placed a bull on the altar, excommunicating Cerularius. After this act, Humbert made a grand

exit, shaking the dust off his feet and calling on God to judge.

Cerularius convoked a council and once more blasted Western practices. Humbert was anathematized. The Orthodox condemned all who had drawn up the bull. There was now no chance of reconciliation between the factions. The once united Church was now divided into two: Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic.

In more recent times there have been further differences.

In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII introduced the new, Gregorian calendar and the East still uses the old Julian calendar to determine the date of Pascha. Consequently, East and West celebrate Pascha on different dates.

In the 1800's the Roman Catholic Church established both Papal Infallibility and Mary's Immaculate Conception to be dogmas of the universal Church. They also [brought numerous Byzantine Rite communities in Eastern Europe and the Ukraine into communion with Rome, forming the greater part of the Byzantine Catholic Church.](#)

In 1950 the Pope defined Mary's Assumption (aka Dormition) as a dogma.

How did the Crusades impact the East?

The Crusades made the split firm. For those in the East the crusades were seen as "Frank Invasions". The first crusade was a bloody success. The first city sacked was Antioch. While under Muslim control, Antioch was inhabited primarily by Christians. It was sacked and pillaged. Antioch was followed by Jerusalem in 1099. As a result of the invasion Latin Patriarchs were set up leaving the cities under two patriarchs, those who were appointed by Constantinople and those appointed by the conquerors with allegiance to Rome. The worst was the 4th Crusade (1204) which was a disaster and disgrace. The Crusades were originally bound for Egypt and then to go to the Holy Land, but it was delayed and the mercenary soldiers were running out of money and set out on a campaign for stolen goods. Constantinople was the richest city in the world at the time. This is where they headed and defeated the [Byzantine](#) Army and sacked the city. They destroyed churches and undertook systematic acts of sacrilege. Women and children were killed and women raped. It was a horrible scene. The holy relics were stolen and many that are to this day seen throughout Europe came from this Crusade as Constantinople was the center of Christianity and its most precious relics. The Latins then set up a government and their own bishops. All this was done with the blessing of the Pope in Rome.

Attempts at Reunion

After the Crusades the hatred was high in the East against the Western world. Now the split became generally accepted. There were firm doctrinal differences such as the "filioque" and each claimed to be the True Church. Shortly after the fourth crusade Constantinople was recaptured by Emperor Michael VIII in 1261. But the impact of the fourth crusade was such an economic, political and military blow to the Empire it proved to be a mortal one. This was the beginning of the end of the [Roman](#) Empire.

Michael sought alliances to protect him from the onslaught of the Turks and thought that a reunion of the Church was a prerequisite to security. There was a council meeting that took place in Lyons in 1274 in which a union was agreed to. The Eastern Church accepted the "filioque" clause. But there was a popular uprising because the political nature of this agreement was seen by the people and the monks in the monasteries.

Again in 1438 Emperor John VIII sought political and military assistance and another council was held at Florence. The Emperor and the Patriarch attended and the East agreed to the Western doctrine and to keep their different rites. Again it was rejected by the populous and repudiated by its Eastern signers. In 1453

Constantinople fell to the Turks and all of the east was under Muslim rule. This lasted for 400 years. Orthodox Christianity entered a long period of suppression.

Today, the Ecumenical Patriarch continually works towards unity of the Church, but without giving up what Orthodoxy has stood true to for over 2000 years.

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