

The Council of Nicaea: A Study Guide



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

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A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDING BISHOP

September 2025

Dear church,

This year Christians around the world are commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the first ecumenical council, which convened in Nicaea. The council, seeking unity, wrestled with disputes about the divine nature of Jesus. The resulting consensus – later expanded in 381 – was the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, a clear articulation of the Christian faith. This anniversary is an opportunity for us to reflect on what we have inherited from Nicaea: our commitments to Christian unity and conciliar ecumenism; our practices of respectful debate, deliberation, and discernment; and, most importantly, our common confession of the faith together with the saints throughout the ages.

Earlier this year the ELCA published a study guide to help us reflect upon the joint statement issued last year by the Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church. I invite you to continue in this journey of reflection and shared learning through a new ten-unit study guide series “The Council of Nicaea: A Study Guide.” This series provides rich historical context alongside contemporary questions which seek to expand our understanding of the council.

This is a time to commemorate and live into the God-given gift of our visible unity. It is also a time for self-critique and deeper reflection around what it means to be part of the body of Christ. This study guide series will help guide us through a wide range of subjects examining the complex historical realities in which the council took place alongside our own theological framing as Lutherans. The series has been developed around ten distinct subject areas, allowing users to create their own configuration for learning. Each unit can stand on its own, but together provide a holistic perspective to better understand the Council of Nicaea 1,700 years ago as well as today.

I'd like to offer my gratitude for all who helped shepherd this project over the past few months, including Dr. Man-Hei Yip, Assistant Professor of Systematics at Wartburg Theological Seminary and Rev. Dr. H. Ashley Hall, associate professor of theology and chair of the Theology Department at Creighton University, who served as co-authors of this series. I would also like to thank the Rev. Dr. Carmelo Santos, Director for Theological Diversity and Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Engagement; Kathryn Lohre, executive for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations; and Kristen Opalinski, manager for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, who have supported this work on behalf of the Office of the Presiding Bishop.

I pray that this study guide series provides you with an opportunity to continue in the spirit of the first ecumenical council – to learn, reflect, and live more fully into the gift of Christian unity we share.

In Christ,



The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPOLITAN CREED

From Evangelical Lutheran Worship

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],*
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

*Or, "who proceeds from the Father." The phrase "and the Son" is a later addition to the creed.

The year 2025 marks the 1700th anniversary of the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea, a pivotal moment in the history of Christianity. This ecumenical council, which gathered Christian leaders from across regions, cultures, and languages, was a defining event in the development of the Christian faith. At the council, these leaders worked to articulate the church's core beliefs, codifying them into a creedal form for public affirmation of faith in Christian worship and education.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), along with other world communions and ecclesial bodies, is commemorating this historic event. The term, “commemoration” was preferred over “celebration” to honor this ecumenical endeavor, as a commemoration emphasizes a reflective remembrance of the event, rather than a triumphant celebration of its outcome. In commemorating the Council of Nicaea, we, as part of the global Church, remember and recognize the efforts to bring Christians together. This includes inviting and clarifying thoughts over the relations between Jesus the Son and God the Father¹ and the expression of the Trinity. However, we also acknowledge the need to continue reviewing and reflecting on the Council, the Creed, and the process of forming and shaping this foundational Christian confession. Lingering issues, such as inclusion of marginalized voices, the *filioque* clause, and the role of faith in the context of empire, the role of the secular state in church affairs, the use of gendered language to name God, among others, deserve our attention.

The Council of Nicaea, indeed, represents a visible sign of Christian unity, but true unity does not necessitate conformity. Rather, it encourages exploring new perspectives on the complex matters, asking questions, listening to one another, and discerning new meanings together in our world plagued by division and hatred.

WHY USE THIS STUDY GUIDE?

This study guide serves as a resource for approaching the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea. It aims to:

- Deepen understanding and appreciation of the foundational tenets of the Christian faith.
- Highlight the key issues in the theological debate and the ecclesial impacts of the resulting Nicene Creed.
- Seek to enrich worship experience as believers affirm their faith in the triune God.
- Create a framework for reading and re-engaging with the Council and the Creed in today's world from multiple perspectives.
- Inspire parishioners to seek ways to strengthen ecumenical relationships in their respective contexts.
- Cultivate a greater appreciation for Christian unity, encouraging believers to stand united in showing mercy, compassion, and promoting human flourishing in this power-hungry world.
- Provide materials, such as a glossary and references, to further encourage study of the subject matter.

WHO MIGHT USE THIS STUDY GUIDE?

This study guide offers more than just an academic exercise - it provides a thoughtful theological and pastoral response to the evolving times. Designed to engage anyone interested in learning about the Council of Nicaea and the Creed, the guide also aims to facilitate ongoing discussions among believers about their faith and the life of the church. Church leaders passionate about Christian education and ecumenical efforts will find this resource particularly useful.

¹ The predominant use of gendered, male-centric language in theology reflects the prevailing theological perspectives and trends of the era. This phenomenon should prompt us to thoughtfully discuss the language used to refer to God, given that the divine can be conceptualized as feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS STUDY GUIDE?

This highly adaptive study guide offers a flexible range of resources that can be tailored to diverse teaching and discussion settings. Although the topics are closely connected, with some content overlap, the guide is designed to allow each topic to be studied independently. Users have the option to work through the guide sequentially or select specific topics of particular interest to the group. Additionally, the guide includes guided questions that address contemporary challenges, encouraging participants to share perspectives and engage in thoughtful, civil conversation within the church and broader community.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE?

The unit begins with a Quick Connect that summarizes the topic being discussed. This is followed by a Glossary, which defines key terms or explains concepts used in the text, Creed, or Christian faith. Next comes the Narrative, which highlights the main issues surrounding the topic. Participants are encouraged to read the Narrative beforehand to familiarize themselves with the topic, which can enrich the discussion, especially when time for discussion is limited. The Narrative and Guided Questions are designed to be thought-provoking, fostering ongoing reflection and conversation.

Acknowledgements

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About the Authors

The Rev. H. Ashley Hall (Ph.D., Fordham University) is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Theology Department at Creighton University (Omaha, Nebraska). He is a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA, serving part-time at Kountze Memorial Lutheran Church.

Dr. Man Hei Yip (Ph.D., Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia) is an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary (Dubuque, Iowa).

UNIT ONE: The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed



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in America

UNIT ONE:

The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed

QUICK CONNECT

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed outlines a Christian worldview from a Trinitarian perspective that is rich in biblical references. The word “outlines” is intentional. The creed is not meant to end theological reflection and discussion. Rather it establishes a perimeter within which theological conversations are to occur. In that sense, the creed insistently “holds the mystery” (we may even say “stumbling block”; see 1 Corinthians 1:23) as well as profound consolation (John 16:33) of the faith ever before us: the one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the Son/Logos, who became a real human person for our sake; and the ongoing work of the Triune God in the world through the ministry entrusted to the church.

NARRATIVE

FIRST ARTICLE	
We believe	The Nicene Creed uses “we” as a <i>collective</i> expression of faith from the universal church. The use of “we believe” is distinct from the “I believe” of the Apostles’ Creed, which was a personal affirmation of faith at baptism. By saying “we believe,” we are “confessing,” “stating” and “affirming” the basic content of faith within a Trinitarian context.
in one God,	<p>in: Our faith (understood as “trust”) is not in ourselves but in the one greater than ourselves: God. Thus our trust is <i>in</i> the goodness of the God who fulfills promises of liberation and restoration (Exodus 3:1-11; Luke 1:67-79; Romans 6:20-23). In God, our trust is secure (Galatians 2:16-17; 2 Timothy 1:12).</p> <p>one God: This is not merely an abstract, philosophical concept of God but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the one revealed in the law and the prophets (Deuteronomy 6:4; Romans 3:28-30). In a polytheistic world, Jews and Christians affirm their unique belief that there is only one God (or that only one God is worthy of worship). In this creed, Christians affirm that this one God, as revealed by Jesus, is Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mark 1:10-11; Matthew 28:19-20; John 14:13-17).</p>
the Father,	The Old Testament occasionally speaks of God as “Father” or as a parental figure in general (Hosea 11:1-4). However, Jesus makes “Father” (<i>Abba</i>) his primary way of addressing God (among several instances, see Matthew 10:32; John 5:17, 43). <i>Abba</i> is a term of affection and intimacy, expressing trust in God’s loving guidance. As such, <i>Abba</i> subverts the patriarchal worldview that the word Father might otherwise reinforce. Jesus teaches his followers to approach God in the same way (Matthew 5:16, 6:8-13; Galatians 4:4-7; Romans 8:15-16). Thus, with this title, the creed unites its articulation of faith with what Jesus emphatically taught. At the same time, the use of <i>Abba</i> does not limit nor negate the many and diverse images for God found in Scripture.

The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed

<p>the Almighty,</p>	<p>The Greek word of the creed is <i>Pantocrator</i>. The English translation “Almighty” derives from the Latin “omnipotent” (all-powerful). Scholars generally note that “all-ruling” is a closer translation, getting to the sense of God as the one who holds all things together, both sustaining and driving all things toward their intended purpose. See “Lord of Hosts” as a parallel descriptor of God’s rule and power (1 Samuel 1:11; 2 Samuel 5:10; Psalm 24:10).</p>
<p>maker of heaven and earth, of all things, seen and unseen.</p>	<p>maker of all things: All creatures exist because of God. God is the only being without a beginning or an end. The creed bridges the classical philosophical idea of God as the “first cause” as well as the biblical description of God creating the cosmos from nothing (Genesis 1; Psalm 104; Acts 4:24).</p> <p>heaven and earth, seen and unseen: this phrase is another way of saying “everything that is.” Everything we know about reality and everything we have yet to discover both has its cause in God and is sustained by God (Revelation 21:1-5).</p>

[A NOTE ABOUT THE FIRST ARTICLE]

Of course, this article does not summarize everything that one might say about God! Remember, however, that the purpose of the first article is to lay out some basic affirmations about God from Scripture that will “ground” the statements that follow about Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

SECOND ARTICLE

<p>We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,</p>	<p>We believe: As in the first article, we are affirming our trust that Jesus reveals the same God made known to us in the Old Testament. Here, the creed rejects the heresy of “Marcionism,” which affirmed that the God depicted in the Old Testament/Jewish Scriptures was a different God (one of only anger and vengeance) than the one proclaimed by Jesus.</p> <p>Lord Jesus Christ: The most commonly used biblical title for Jesus (see Romans 13:14; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 7; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:3).</p> <p>Lord: The Greek word is Kyrios. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it was the title used for Yahweh. To refer to Jesus as Lord is to assert his divine authority (Philippians 2:11; 1 Corinthians 12:3). Likewise, to assert “one Lord” here and “one God” in the first article affirms the unity of power and purpose shared by God and Jesus.</p> <p>Christ: Meaning “anointed one,” Christ is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word <i>Messiah</i>. It is an important marker of Jesus’ self-understanding and the disciples’ grasp of his teaching authority (Mark 8:29; Matthew 16:16; Luke 9:20; John 11:27; Acts 18:5, 28; Romans 6:11; 1 Corinthians 3:1; Galatians 2:4; Philippians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 4:16).</p>
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The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed

<p>the only Son of God</p>	<p>Son: As with Jesus' emphasis on God as Abba/Father, so too we see Jesus referring to himself as "Son." This is also what the "voice from heaven" (the Father) declares at the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:11; Matthew 3:17; Luke 3:22; John 1:32-34) and again at the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13; Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36). The same is used by the evangelists to describe Jesus (see Luke 1:35).</p> <p>only Son of God: While Scripture speaks of all the baptized as adopted children of God (Romans 8:14; Galatians 4:4-7), the point of this passage is to speak of the unique relationship between God and Jesus, the incarnate Logos. That Jesus is the Son of God belongs to him by nature (on account of who he is); it is not something he received later (e.g., at his baptism, transfiguration or resurrection, as some supposed). The Logos is uniquely of God and greater than any divine creature, such as an angel (Hebrews 1:4-14).</p> <p>Logos (Word): Though not used in the creed, the biblical word "Logos" looms large in the creed's framework, especially that "the Son of God" is the same as "the Logos of God" as described in John 1:1-4 and especially v. 14: "And the Word [Logos] became flesh [incarnate] and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." In the fourth century, Arius affirmed the biblical proclamation that Jesus was the incarnate Logos, but he understood the Logos to be a creature (having a beginning), which meant it could not be equal to God. The rest of this section of the creed will directly counteract the claims of Arius.</p>
<p>eternally begotten of the Father,</p>	<p>begotten of the Father: The Son/Logos originates in the Father (as all things do). With this affirmation, the creed avoids the claim that there are two gods. "Begotten" is the term used in John 1:14, "only begotten son."</p> <p>eternally begotten: Yet the Logos is always "in" and "with" the Father; God has never been <i>without</i> Logos (again, see John 1:1-4). Thus we should think of the relationship between Father/Son (God/Logos) as an eternal relationship. Certainly we should avoid projecting the biological production of physical creatures, in which parents always precede their children in time. Rather the image is closer to the way our minds form thoughts and words (see Genesis 1, "and God said"). In this way, we might better reflect the biblical language of the union between Father/Son (God/Logos) along with the Bible's other affirmation that the preexistent Logos was sent to become human (that is, the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth) (John 3:16-18; Philippians 2:5-11).</p>

The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed

<p>God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,</p>	<p>These are not exact biblical phrases, but they capture the emphatic declaration that though the Son/Logos is “begotten,” the Son/Logos is not a lesser being or a creature (like a demigod or angel). “Light from Light,” in particular, captures a biblical theme (Genesis 1:3-5; Exodus 10:3; Psalm 26:1; Psalm 36:9; Isaiah 2:5; 1 Timothy 6:16; James 1:17). Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) perfectly reveals the same light to the world (John 1:4-5, 9; 3:19; 8:12; see also 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 and 4:5-6).</p>
<p>begotten, not made,</p>	<p>The creed caps these series of affirmations about the equality of Father and Son by drawing a sharp distinction between these two words. Arius claimed that the Logos was “made” (created), leading him to assert that “the Father was not always the ‘Father’” because “there was a time when the Logos was not.”</p>
<p>of one Being with the Father;</p>	<p>The creed introduces a phrase from the Greek language to summarize the biblical perspective on the relationship between the Logos and the Father: <i>homoousios</i> (of the same being/essence/nature). This phrase is the linchpin that holds the previous affirmations together. In short, whatever it means to be “God,” the Logos is of the same nature. Again, the goal is not to solve the mystery by entirely defining the inner relationship of the Trinity. Rather this phrase defines a fundamental perspective through which we understand God’s self-revelation.</p>
<p>through him all things were made.</p>	<p>The creed reaffirms Scripture with this claim that the Logos created all things with and by the Father (John 1:1-4 and its reference to Genesis 1; see also Hebrews 1:1-4).</p>
<p>[NOTE:] This first half of the second article of the creed affirms how Jesus (as the incarnate Word) is one with God. The following section speaks of Jesus’ unity with our humanity and outlines the effects of the incarnation on our behalf. That is, it describes what the incarnation of the Word accomplished for us and for creation.</p>	
<p>For us and for our salvation,</p>	<p>For us: Prior English versions of the creed read “for us men and for our salvation.” Affirming simply “for us” reflects a shift in how the English language is used (i.e., no longer exclusively using “man” to mean “human”) and more closely follows the Greek, which gestured to the wider, inclusive understanding by using the word <i>anthropos</i> (human).</p> <p>for our salvation: From the beginning, it is a fundamental claim that Jesus offers salvation (Matthew 1:21; Luke 1:69; John 3:16; 1 John 4:10, 4:14). In particular, the incarnation of the Logos offers salvation by restoring what had been lost through sin (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 44-49; Ephesians 1:10; Hebrews 2:9; Revelation 21:1-7, 22-27). Scripture offers more than one model for how to understand salvation. Salvation, however, is not merely a future event. The New Testament emphasizes the gifts of salvation “now” as a present, active reality (and the gifts of peace, joy and reconciliation it brings) (Romans 1:6, 3:21, and 5:9; 1 Corinthians 1:18, 21; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Ephesians 2:5-8; 1 Peter 3:21; 1 John 3:2).</p>

The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed

<p>he came down from heaven,</p>	<p>This phrase reaffirms the preexistence of the Logos, who was one with God but who “descended” to take up our human experience. This is clearly described in one of the oldest Christological texts in Scripture: the Kenosis Hymn (Philippians 2:5-11). Though this language gestures to a three-tier universe (with heaven “above” the earth), we need not assume such a perspective to grasp the theological point: the one who was in union with God and who was not, by nature, subject to death, chose to empty and humble himself for our sake.</p>
<p>was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary</p>	<p>incarnate: To become human (literally “in the flesh”).</p> <p>of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary: This phrase affirms both the biblical testimony about the circumstances of Jesus’ birth (Luke 1:34-38; Matthew 1:18-25) and the unity of action among the three persons of the Trinity.</p>
<p>and became truly human.</p>	<p>The Logos/Word became a human person in the fullest sense. Said another way, the Logos became an ordinary person, sharing the same human nature as every other human, with a body, soul and mind (Matthew 13:55; Luke 4:22; John 6:42). While simply asserted here, a later Christological controversy (see the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon) would reaffirm and develop this point. With this phrase, the church denies that Jesus merely appeared to be a human (a god in disguise) and that his humanity was “supercharged” (like that of a comic book hero).</p> <p>[NOTE:] Some critics perceive a flaw in what is not mentioned here: there is no reference to the teachings of Jesus; we move from his birth right to his death. The substance, they argue, has been hollowed out. But the creed was never meant to replace the reading of Scripture. The purpose of the creed is to frame our reading so that we may know who is speaking in Scripture: the eternally begotten Logos of God, who became truly human for our sake.</p>
<p>For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;</p>	<p>For our sake: This statement affirms that the work of salvation is God’s activity and is accomplished by Jesus Christ, the incarnate Logos, alone (John 14:6; Acts 4:11-12).</p> <p>Pontius Pilate: Though it seems odd to mention the Roman governor who put Jesus to death, this historical fact tethers the creed to concrete history (the incarnation was not “once upon a time”).</p>
<p>he suffered death and was buried.</p>	<p>he suffered: Because the humanity of Jesus, the incarnate Logos, was real, his suffering was real. He was not immune to human physiological or emotional development or exempt from physical or emotional pain.</p> <p>and was buried: Though this phrase is simpler than the one found in the Apostles’ Creed (“he descended to the dead”), the point is the same: Jesus truly died, just as he foretold (Mark 9:30-32; Matthew 16:21; Luke 9:22; Luke 24:6-9).</p>

The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed

<p>On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures;</p>	<p>Just as the death of Jesus was real and emphatic (that Jesus lay in the tomb for three days), so too his resurrection was real. He was not a ghost, nor was his resurrection a mere metaphor (Luke 24; John 20, 21; 1 Corinthians 15). Likewise, the creed not only points to the Scripture’s affirmation of the resurrection but also points to the fact that Scripture explains the death and resurrection of Jesus as an essential reality of the incarnation itself (Luke 24:26-27, 44-47).</p>
<p>he ascended into heaven</p>	<p>Just as the Logos “descended” from heaven, so too must he return (see previous note on “he came down from heaven”). The ascension is an important biblical affirmation (see Luke 24:51 and Acts 1:6-11; see also John 3:13, 6:62, 20:17). The ascension emphasizes not the <i>absence</i> of Jesus but the <i>completion</i> of his work of redemption through the incarnation (Ephesians 4:7-12). Moreover, especially in Luke’s account, the ascension marks the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the new creation (Acts 1:9-11 and Acts 2:1-5).</p>
<p>and is seated at the right hand of the Father.</p>	<p>This biblical phrase (Matthew 26:64; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:25; Hebrews 1:13) refers to the active and ongoing work of divine power. It is less about identifying a particular place (somewhere “up there”) and more of an assertion of equality between Father and Son. Wherever God is active, there is the Logos (1 Peter 3:22).</p>
<p>He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.</p>	<p>The fact of God’s rule (see above, <i>Pantocrator</i>) also affirms that God will judge with justice and mercy (Genesis 18:25; Deuteronomy 32:35-36; Isaiah 30:18; Romans 2:6-16). Such an understanding takes seriously the reality of sin and injustice. Jesus often referred to himself as “the Son of Man,” an apocalyptic figure from Daniel (7:13-14) who will judge the world with divine authority. Jesus himself speaks of such judgement and his role as judge on the “last day” (Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:22, 12:44-50; see also Romans 2:16; 2 Timothy 4:1, 18; and Revelation 22:12). Once God’s work of restoration is ultimately completed, it can never be undone (Luke 1:33); even death and hell will be destroyed (Revelation 20:14).</p>

THIRD ARTICLE

<p>We believe in the Holy Spirit.</p>	
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[NOTE]: The original Nicene Creed (as completed in 325) ended with this simple affirmation of the Holy Spirit. As such, the creed articulates a Trinitarian faith without explaining the relationship of the Holy Spirit to God the Father and of the Holy Spirit to God the Son. There are two likely reasons for such brevity. First, the main business before the council (to address the relationship between the incarnate Logos and God) had been accomplished. Second, it is also very likely that there was no consensus on the relationship of the Holy Spirit to God the Father and the Son. In the section that follows, we see the expansion of the third article concerning the Holy Spirit made at the Council of Constantinople (381). With this expanded version, we now have the more complete creed used by the church to this day (properly speaking, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed).

UNIT ONE:

The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed

<p>the Lord, the giver of life,</p>	<p>The bishops who gathered at the Council of Constantinople were familiar with the criticisms that still lingered (even among those who affirmed the Nicene Creed), namely that <i>homoousios</i> was a nonbiblical phrase. They worked around this concern by using two biblical titles for the Holy Spirit: “Lord” and “Giver of Life.” That is, because the Spirit gives life (John 6:63; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Galatians 5:25; 1 Peter 3:18), the Spirit shares equally in the nature and power of God/the Lord/the Almighty. Therefore the Holy Spirit is a <i>person</i> (as the Father and Son are persons) and not simply a power manifested by God. Further, the lordship and life-giving work of the Spirit is tied to the work of the church. Where the Holy Spirit rules, there is truth and life (John 14:26; 16:13 and Acts 2:33; 5:32; and 8:29-39).</p>
<p>who proceeds from the Father</p>	<p>The distinction between the <i>generation</i> of the Son (see above) and <i>procession</i> of the Holy Spirit follows biblical language (John 15:26). Like the Logos/Son, the Holy Spirit has its origin in the Father. However, the Father is never without the Holy Spirit. Christians read Genesis 1 – in which God creates with and through the Word/Logos and Spirit – through a decidedly Trinitarian lens.</p>
<p>[and the Son]</p>	<p>This phrase (<i>filioque</i> in Latin) was not originally in the creed but was added a few centuries later by some Christians in western Europe. The phrase has been a source of conflict and ecumenical dialogue. See the study guide in this series for more information.</p>
<p>who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,</p>	<p>The first commandment is clear: God alone is worthy of worship (Exodus 20:2-3; Deuteronomy 5:6-7). In light of the previous affirmations of the creed (namely that the Logos is “of one being with the Father” and the Holy Spirit is “Lord and Giver of Life”), the Son and Spirit rightly receive worship and praise alongside the Father. There is one God in three divine persons.</p>
<p>who has spoken through the prophets.</p>	<p>The shortness of this phrase hides its power. The creed asserts that the same Holy Spirit that was with Jesus and that continues to guide the church is the exact same Spirit who spoke through the Prophets. Thus there is one God with one consistent revelation and one continuous arc of salvation “to the Jew first and then to the Gentile” (Romans 1:16). Thus no Christian can dismiss the testimony of the Old/First Testament as irrelevant. Likewise, the same prophetic Spirit is an ongoing gift to the church (see 1 Corinthians 12:4, 13; 14:1-4, 32). Here is another example of the creed’s rejection of the heresy Marcionism.</p>

The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed

<p>We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.</p>	<p>church: The assembly of all the baptized, wherever the gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are administered harmoniously.</p> <p>one: The unity of the Church is rooted in the work of the Triune God. In baptism we are made members of the body of Christ. Thus, through baptism, every member of the church is united through divine grace (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27; Ephesians 4:3-6), which holds us together across our various gifts (Ephesians 4:7-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-17).</p> <p>holy: The church is holy because of the word and sacrament entrusted to it. The sinfulness of its members (or failings of its ministers) does not diminish the sanctifying work of the Triune God in the world (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 5:17-19; 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13).</p> <p>catholic: A word that means “throughout the whole” and implies diversity and inclusiveness (Galatians 3:28). The one church endures across time and geography (and human divisions). Previous Lutheran versions of the creed used “Christian” (following Luther’s German paraphrase of the Greek). The current version more closely follows the Greek vocabulary and meaning.</p> <p>apostolic: This characteristic speaks to a continuity with the first generation of Christians. This is “conservative” in that we commit to hold fast to what has been handed over to us. This is also “prophetic” in that we commit to a bold imitation of the apostles to go where we are led, to face new challenges and to overturn old divisions through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.</p>
<p>We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.</p>	<p>The shift to “we acknowledge” (or “we confess”) speaks to a guiding rule for our common life in the church. In baptism, sin is washed away (Acts 2:38; 22:16) and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are truly given (Acts 2:37-47; 19:3-6). This is the work of the Triune God, upon which no subsequent human requirement can improve, whether it be circumcision (as in Paul’s time; see Galatians 5-6), being “born again,” ordination or anything else. The one baptism establishes the essential equality of everyone in the church, even amid our varied gifts and callings.</p>
<p>We look for the resurrection of the dead,</p>	<p>That Christ will return to judge has already been stated. With this affirmation (expectation, really), we personalize the confession of faith. This divine work has a profound effect on me, and so I am bold to repent and live a new life in Christ and affirm that death is not the end (Romans 8:31-39). We can say with Job, “I know that my vindicator lives and ... in my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26).</p>
<p>and the life of the world to come.</p>	<p>Salvation is for the sake of this world, and this world is being renewed and transformed by divine grace. So we again express our expectation, our hope, that God will bring the work to completion (Revelation 21).</p>

UNIT ONE: The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed

Amen.	Though the creed is not a prayer, we nonetheless end with the same affirmation of trust in God's goodness by affirming, "may it be as you have spoken" or even "this is most certainly true!"
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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What insights have you gained from this examination? What would you like to explore further?
2. With this new insight and curiosity, how might you envision the creed as part of your prayer life and works of service?
3. How might you affirm the content of the creed in your own language or with contemporary images and idioms?
4. How might you explore how the creed is adopted by Christians of other cultures and expressed in different languages?

FOR FURTHER READING

Though the Apostles' Creed is different from the Nicene Creed, its affirmations are similar enough that Martin Luther's explanation in the Small Catechism and Large Catechism are helpful companions.

In 1538, Luther also wrote a commentary on four summaries of Christian faith (the Apostles', the Nicene, the Athanasian and the Te Deum) entitled "The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith." This can be found in the series Luther's Works, vol. 34 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 197-229.

If you are interested in the wider discussion of the diverse kinds of images used to describe God, the following may be helpful:

Streufert, Mary J., *Language for God: A Lutheran Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022). ISBN: 978-1506473963.

A helpful study of how traditional Trinitarian theology functioned in Luther's works is:

Helmer, Christine, *The Trinity and Martin Luther* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017). ISBN: 978-1683590507.

A relatively recent and very readable commentary on the Nicene Creed and its meaning can be found in:

Johnson, Luke Timothy, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Image Books, 2003). ISBN: 0-385-50248-6.

For more detail on some of the theological issues raised in the Christological controversy that surrounds the faith of the Nicene Creed, readers will find the following resource helpful:

McFarland, Ian A., *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019). ISBN: 978-0664262976.

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Likewise, the following three books offer a bit more detail on the historical and theological significance of the council:

Anatolios, Khaled, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018). ISBN: 978-1540960696.

Ayres, Lewis, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). ISBN: 978-0198755050.

Behr, John, *The Nicene Faith: Formation of Christian Theology* (2 vols.) (Crestwood: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2004). ISBN: 978-0881412666.

More academic and detailed studies on the Council of Nicaea and its influence can be found here:

Fontes Nicaenae Synodi: The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304–337), ed. Samuel Fernández (Paderborn, 2024). ISBN: 978-3506796400.

The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea, ed. Richard Kim Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). ISBN: 978-1108448116.

UNIT TWO: Arianism and the Christological Debate



Evangelical
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in America

UNIT TWO: Arianism and the Christological Debate

QUICK CONNECT

Arius (256-336) was a priest and teacher in the city of Alexandria in northern Egypt. A person of sincere faith and great intellect, he formulated a theological perspective and vocabulary that affirmed the divinity of Jesus as the incarnate Logos of God while also affirming the absolute principle of monotheism (there is only one God). His key idea is that the Logos was like God but not the same essence as God. Unfortunately, though his system was very popular, it failed to affirm other essential aspects of the Christian proclamation, namely how Jesus offers salvation. Though he was condemned at the Council of Nicaea, his popularity increased after the council.

GLOSSARY/KEY TERMS

Logos: A Greek word referring to the “word” (sometimes “wisdom”) of God. A key term in Greco-Roman philosophy, it is also important in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., in the Greek translation of Genesis, God creates the world through the Logos). It is the principle Christological claim about Jesus in the Gospel of John (“The Word [Logos] became flesh and lived among us,” John 1:14).

Homoiousios: “Of like/similar essence.” This specialized theological word summarizes Arius’ perspective that the Word was “like the nature of God.” This stands in contrast with the statement in the Nicene Creed, “of one being with the Father” (*homoousios*, meaning “the same essence”).

Arian: A broad umbrella term used to describe a theology and theologians that did not accept the Council of Nicaea. Generally “Arian” describes a theological perspective, influenced by Arius, that the Son/Logos is a created being and therefore subordinate (not equal) to God.

Septuagint: The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from the second century B.C.E., most commonly used by both Jews and early Christians in the Mediterranean world. Much of the discussion about Scripture and theological terminology revolves around the Greek language.

NARRATIVE

One prominent scholar notes that “the [Christological] crisis of the fourth century was the most dramatic internal struggle the Christian Church had experienced thus far” and that, in the aftermath of that crisis, “Arius himself came more and more to be regarded as a kind of Antichrist among heretics.” Despite the controversy around him, Arius himself seems to have written only a few works. Most of what survives to our own time are a few letters and fragments on his main theological work, the *Thalia*. To speak of Arius as a “heretic” is to say that his theological ideas are not compatible with the proclamation of the universal church, that it is outside the mainstream of Christian thought and practice. It is necessary to begin with this clarification because so many of his opponents – of this time and in centuries afterwards – used the title “heretic” to imply someone of flawed moral character who intentionally distorted the church’s teaching and intended to promote knowingly false ideas to lead others astray.

Most historical theologians today would assert that Arius was part of a vigorous theological debate about a foundational Christian teaching. It is less that Arius deviated from the established consensus and more that the argument prompted by his ideas moved the broader church to formulate a central teaching more clearly. Precisely because the solution was not immediately obvious – Scripture and esteemed theologians

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could be quoted with equal zeal by both sides of the debate – we should avoid casting aspersions on his moral character. Moreover, most historical theologians would also say that Arius' ideas are outside what would become the mainstream of Christian thought – it would take some time for the Creed of Nicaea to be “tested” and “received” as an authentic expression of faith. The popularity of Arius' Christological perspective in his own time speaks to how much it made sense to a lot of people and reflected their own understanding (one that would endure for several centuries afterward). Likewise, historical theologians are aware of how nontheological concerns (political connections, personal animosity, administrative maneuvering, etc.) figured in the events around the Council of Nicaea. The champions of the Nicene faith (such as St. Athanasius) were at times guilty of slander and unscrupulous machinations in their efforts against Arius and the movement that bore his name (Arianism). Granting all that, we can both honor Arius' erudition and sincere faith while also acknowledging that his theology does not provide for a consistent narrative of God's work of salvation on our behalf through Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Word.

Arius' principle theological concern was to protect Christianity's affirmation of radical monotheism: that there is only one God and that God alone should be worshiped. This is the First Commandment (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5; see also the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone,” in Deuteronomy 6:4) and one that Jesus absolutely affirmed (Matthew 22:36-40). The keystone of Arius' Christological conviction was in upholding this principle clearly and consistently.

In our investigation of Arianism, it would help to identify the intellectual framework (or “theological worldview”) from which Arius operated. He and most of his colleagues took the humanity of Jesus as obvious. The deeper question was: “How best to explain the relationship between Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) and God?” Said another way: “If Jesus is the incarnate Logos, then how is the Logos like God?” While these questions may seem esoteric (something that only theologians with too much time on their hands would ponder), they get at fundamental, basic realities of Christian life: Can one pray to Jesus or should one pray only to God “the Father”? Do prayers to Jesus invite the charge of polytheism (a belief in and worship of multiple gods)?

Arius was clearly concerned that Christians who did not properly distinguish between God and Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) could indeed be in danger of one of two heresies: either polytheism (saying there are two gods, or three if we include the Holy Spirit) or Sabellianism (sometimes also called modalism): that there was no real distinction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Rightly convinced that there was but one God and that there was an important distinction between the Logos and God, Arius established his perspective on the foundational idea that God is without beginning or end. That is, the very definition of God (affirmed in classical Greek philosophy but certainly consonant with Scripture) is that God is the “uncreated Creator.”

Arius searched the Bible for guidance to help explain the relationship between God and the Logos. Again, Arius focused on the relationship between God and the Logos (the Word) as his starting point because Scripture declares: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1-3, 14). As he continued to study the Bible, Arius found guidance from other passages, especially Proverbs 8:22. Here Wisdom (*Sophia* in the Greek Septuagint, which could be understood as a synonym for Logos) is personified and proclaims: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.” Arius, like many Christians, believed that one passage of the Bible can help explain another passage. From Proverbs, Arius focused on the word “created” (“The Lord God *created* me”). So here, Arius argues, the Logos itself proclaims to us its relationship

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to God. The Lord God (God the Father) is “uncreated.” The Logos of God is “created.” If the Logos is created, it is not fully divine since, by definition, God must be uncreated. Therefore, there is a ranking: God the Father (the only one who is God in the fullest sense) and the Logos (who is divine and the first, greatest creature, second only to God). From here, Arius makes one of his most noteworthy claims: “There was a time when the Logos was not.” If this is an accurate perspective, then Arius has defended monotheism while also carving out a way to assert the divinity of the Logos without confusing it with God. He has also not taken anything away from the Logos, since Arius asserts (with the Gospel of John’s reference to Genesis) that all things were created through the Logos. According to Arius, we can conclude that the Logos is *like* God – but not the same as God.

Finally, another set of biblical titles become helpful in shaping Arius’ perspective: “Father” and “Son.” Jesus consistently referred to God as *Abba* (an affectionate term for Father) and even taught his disciples to call upon God in the same way (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4). The logic of the created order underlines Arius’ understanding that the Logos is created. Just as “fathers” are naturally prior to “sons,” so it is between God (the Father) and the Logos (the Son, incarnate as Jesus). Therefore Arius could say, “God ‘the Father’ was not always ‘Father;” insofar as “father” makes sense only in the context of offspring or a dependent (in this case, the Logos once it was created by God). Finally, Jesus’ own self-revelation as the Son of God affirms Arius’ distinction: biological sons often resemble their fathers, but the two are not confused, because they remain two distinct entities.

While many were convinced by the clarity of Arius’ thought and his faithfulness to biblical language, others were convinced that his system created more problems than it solved. Arius’ critics asserted that Arius misapplied biblical language, leading him to a conclusion that was fundamentally at odds with the collective testimony of Scripture. In particular, the critics of Arius noted that only God can give us our being in creation and only God can restore that nature to us in our salvation. If Scripture declares that “all things came into being through the Logos” and that through the incarnation of the Logos, we are saved, then the Logos must act with the same power and nature as God. By insisting (for the sake of monotheism) that the Logos must be subordinate to God the Father and not equal in power or nature to God, Arius has made the Logos a mere agent, intermediary or messenger of God. Certainly no mere messenger and no creature can affect the salvation of the cosmos – but Christians from the very beginning have proclaimed that Jesus, the incarnate Logos, saves. Those who opposed Arius noted that the key flaw in his understanding was that he began with a philosophical principle of God as “uncreated” (again, a characteristic of God they did not deny) instead of the primary biblical image of God as Creator and Liberator. In the end, Arius sensed a need to “protect” God’s divine nature from the incarnation; God could never truly be united with any finite, material reality (such as human nature). As such, Arius’ critics charged that he sidestepped the scandal of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:18-29).

The Council of Nicaea was convened in 325 to address this theological controversy. Within their deliberations, two words emerged to summarize the competing positions: *homoiousios* (that the Logos is *like* God in nature/essence/being) and *homoousios* (that the Logos is of the *same* nature/essence/being as God). Those who affirmed that the Logos was *like* God but not the *same* nature tended to agree with Arius. Once again, these two terms emerge in the context of the Greek language. They were part of the Christian theological discourse in prior centuries but were not used in sacred Scripture. The question was: which perspective best captures the arc of biblical testimony about God?

By the end of the council, a creed was formed that specifically rejected the theology of Arius. Nonetheless Arius continued to garner support, even after the council, as some bishops and imperial leaders (including Constantine) searched for language and means that would foster compromise. Indeed, by the time Arius

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died in 336, he enjoyed official support from the emperor and the church whereas his opponents (especially St. Athanasius) were put into exile. When Constantine was baptized just before his death, it was at the hand of an Arian bishop (Eusebius of Nicomedia). The Christian Roman emperors that followed him (especially Constantius II, Valentinian and Valens) were either Arian or tolerant of Arian ideas. Most bishops followed suit. Just 20 years after the council, the Nicene faith was the minority position, certainly among those in power. It would take the deliberate and energetic work of some theologians (especially “the Cappadocians” – saints Basil, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa) to help turn the tide and see the Nicene Creed restored under the Emperor Theodosius in 381.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What insights did you gain from this description of Arianism? In what ways did the teachings of Arius make sense to you? Where do you see the limitations of Arius’ theology? Why is it necessary to assert the unity of being, power and purpose between the Logos/Son and God?
2. The church universal has a history of condemning individuals whose beliefs do not align with scriptural teachings. In its efforts to defend orthodoxy, the church may risk hastily condemning those whose ideas differ from its own. This raises important questions: How do we define heresy? What can we learn from those labeled heretics? When is it necessary to address divisive issues? How can we avoid too quickly condemning and labeling as heretics those whose ideas differ from our own?
3. How might the practices of praying and reciting the creed speak meaningfully to people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds? What other cultural wisdom and philosophical traditions could help expand our understanding of Jesus’ identity and his relationship with God?
4. The Council of Nicaea was unable to address all the theological disputes of the time. However, it was able to establish a credal statement that has become central to Christian faith and practice. How does this Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) help shape our faith? What other spiritual practices do we need to cultivate to continue growing in faith?

FOR FURTHER READING

Behr, John, *The Nicene Faith: Part One* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), especially chapter four. ISBN: 978-0881412666.

Evans, G.R., *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology of the Early Church* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), especially chapters 15 and 16. ISBN: 978-0-631-23187-5.

Fredriksen, Paula, *Ancient Christianities: The First Five Hundred Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025). ISBN: 978-0691157696.

Gonzales, Justo L., *The Story of Christianity: Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), specifically “The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicea,” 181-192. ISBN: 978-0061855887.

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Wilken, Robert Louis, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), specifically “The Council of Nicaea and the Christian Creed,” 88-98.
ISBN: 978-0300198386.

William, Rowan, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (revised edition) (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001).
ISBN: 978-0802849694.

UNIT THREE: The Emperor Constantine and His Influence on the Council



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

UNIT THREE: The Emperor Constantine and His Influence on the Council

QUICK CONNECT

Constantine (272-337) was the emperor of the Roman Empire who ended the persecution of Christians and made Christianity one of the state-sponsored religions of the empire. During the controversy over how best to describe the relationship between Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) and God, Constantine used his authority as patron of religious life in the Roman Empire to convene an ecumenical council in the town of Nicaea, in present-day Turkey.

GLOSSARY/KEY TERMS

Pagan: Describes any number of polytheistic religions in the ancient world. Not to be confused with its modern use to identify contemporary, nature-centered spiritual practices.

Edict of Milan: An imperial declaration that granted religious freedom throughout the Roman Empire in 313. It most directly benefited Christianity.

Pontifex Maximus: In the Roman republic, this person was charged with overseeing the polytheistic religious rites to ensure peace between the gods and the people and fulfillment of all required religious rituals. Later this was a role assigned to the Roman emperor.

NARRATIVE

The Council of Nicaea was called to address a substantial theological controversy. Given the reality of political structures and expectations of the times (especially since Christianity was one of the officially sponsored religions of the Roman Empire), it fell to the Roman emperor, Constantine, to convene and eventually enforce the decisions of the council. This fact has led to conflicting interpretations of Constantine's influence. For some, the fact that Constantine convened this council (thus providing the means for resolving a major dispute) means that he should be held as a saint (even called "equal to the apostles" by some Orthodox Christians). For others, the fact that he stopped enforcing the Nicene Creed and became an Arian leads to a more ambivalent assessment. And for still others, his role in using the apparatus of the state to interfere in religious questions and persecute dissenters established a dangerous precedent in the relationship between the church and the empire. For such critics, this "imperial church" created an "imperial creed," one with a narrow theological vision focused solely on the forgiveness of sin in the afterlife, omitting the ministry and teachings of Jesus while also neglecting to address the systems that perpetuate injustice and oppression. At the same time, there are still others who acknowledge the inherent dangers of an "imperial church" and who also note that the tools to criticize and deconstruct the "imperial church" are embedded in the faith affirmed by the council itself. The fact that the creed asserts "one Lord, Jesus Christ" opposes any absolute claims made by a political ruler. Also, the fact that bishops were made imperial authorities gave them a platform to speak truth to power, even threatening excommunication for emperors who acted immorally (see the cases of St. Basil versus Valens, St. Ambrose versus Theodosius, and the pointed sermons of St. John Chrysostom, who, as bishop of Constantinople, railed against imperial corruption and excess). These can be models for Christian leaders around the world today for speaking out on behalf of the vulnerable. In exploring these complex issues around the formation of the creed and how it was enforced, it is appropriate to examine the role of Constantine, his influence and his relevance for our own context.

UNIT THREE: The Emperor Constantine and His Influence on the Council

Constantine was the son of a Roman general and politician, Constantius Chlorus, and Helena (who would later be declared a saint). Both Helena and Constantius were of humble backgrounds, but Constantius made his career in the Roman army, advancing up the ranks. When Constantine was about 14 years old, his father left his mother to marry the daughter of the Roman emperor. Constantius took his son, Constantine, with him to serve in the army of the Roman provinces in what is today France, Germany, the Netherlands and England. In 293, Constantius was made *caesar* of the western half of the empire by the emperor Diocletian. In a shrewd decision, Constantius sent his son, Constantine, to the eastern half of the empire to serve under Diocletian. When Diocletian resigned as emperor due to poor health in 305, Constantius was elevated to the office of *augustus*/co-emperor. He continued to serve as a military officer, leading a campaign in northern England, and Constantine joined him there. After a year, Constantius became ill. On his deathbed, Constantius encouraged his army to declare their allegiance to Constantine. After a brief civil war, Constantine defeated rival claimants and became *augustus* of the Roman Empire.

A decisive moment in Constantine's pursuit of becoming emperor occurred in 312. His opponent, Maxentius, controlled the only bridge into the city of Rome. According to material written long after the event, Constantine had a dream in which he was told that he would conquer through the sign of the cross. Other sources do not mention such a dream and state only that Constantine attributed his victory to the God of Christianity. Whatever the cause, he and his co-emperor, Licinius, would usher in a profound reversal for Christians. In 313, they issued the Edict of Milan, which not only ended the state-sponsored persecution of Christians but also made Christianity one of the officially supported religions of the empire. Though Christians rightly praise this document, it did not apply only to them. Remarkably the edict grants toleration for all religions practiced in the empire.

It is not clear why Constantine ended the persecution of Christians and other religious traditions. It is entirely possible that he attributed his political success to the influence of the God of Christianity. Even if so, he did not become a Christian at that time, nor did he stop fulfilling his public, polytheistic ritual duties as emperor. It is also possible that his decision was entirely pragmatic. One estimate puts the population of Christians in the Roman Empire during this time at 10%. The effort to systematically find Christians (both as citizens and as those who held political office), put them on trial and execute those who refused to renounce their faith must have been a tremendous imposition on government bureaucracy and finances. Granting Christians the freedom to practice their religion removed a burdensome and unsustainable task from the Roman government.

Soon after the Edict of Milan, a theological controversy erupted among Christians over how best to describe the relationship between Jesus and God. To what extent, if any, could Jesus be described as divine? If we assert that Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) is divine, then how can Christians still claim to be monotheists? One theologian, Arius of Alexandria, suggested that we could say that Jesus/the incarnate Logos was "like" God but not the same as God. Others rejected Arius' ideas, saying that only God (and not a being who was merely *like* God) could offer salvation. This disagreement soon spread through the Christian Church, pitting some bishops and teachers at fierce odds with each other.

Faced with such a sharp internal division within one of the officially sponsored religions of the empire, Constantine invoked an established authority held by Roman emperors: *pontifex maximus*. Broadly speaking, the title of *pontifex maximus* was given to Roman emperors to indicate their responsibility to serve the polytheistic religious piety of the people. Not only was the emperor required to give material support for the temples and priests; he was also required to ensure peace among and within the various religious traditions. Since Christianity was now one of these officially sponsored religions, the emperor's responsibilities for

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religious peace were no different. What was different, in contrast to pagan polytheism, was the forum Christians had used to settle their disputes: a council. In 325, Constantine convened a council to meet in Nicaea, which was near Nicomedia (the capital at that time). He intended the council to resolve the dispute and formulate a conclusion that he could enforce. As emperor, charged with oversight for religious peace, Constantine used imperial resources to pay for the travel, housing, food and resources needed for every available bishop and their entourages to attend the council. As an aside, we can note that in the following centuries, the church began to search for more self-control and autonomy from imperial influence. Many consolidated around the idea that a bishop – either the bishop of Rome or perhaps the bishop of Constantinople – or an autonomous group of bishops should have authority to convene councils during disputes, and not the emperor. But this would be a long and complex history to record here.

The consensus reached at the Council of Nicaea did not hold for very long. Constantine ended up rescinding the official enforcement of the conclusions of Nicaea, and several Arian bishops not only returned to power but gained influence in the imperial court. Not until another council, the Council of Constantinople, was called, in 381, would the Nicene Creed be both affirmed and expanded.

Constantine continued to support both polytheistic religion and Christianity (both Nicene and Arian) within the empire. But his contributions of public support and funding for Christianity were significant. With the support of his mother, Helena (with whom he reconnected after his father's death), many Christian churches were built throughout the empire, especially in Rome (old St. Peter's Basilica) and Jerusalem (the Church of the Holy Sepulchre). At some point, Constantine did become a Christian, but he held off receiving the sacrament of Baptism (waiting until later in life to get baptized was a common practice at the time). In 337, he became very ill. When it was clear that he was dying, Constantine requested baptism from an Arian bishop (and distant relative), Eusebius of Nicomedia. Thus Constantine died an Arian Christian – the very religious heresy rejected by the council he convened at Nicaea. Nonetheless, under the influence of his actions, Christianity had become a vital part of the religious landscape of the Roman Empire and was supported by the imperial government.

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

Roman pagan polytheism assumed that encouraging and maintaining proper worship of the gods was an obligation of the government for its citizens. As the empire expanded, other polytheistic religions were also supported and encouraged. Judaism and Christianity presented problems for this system – polytheistic religions were largely “tolerant” and “fluid.” They did not expect “conversion” in the same way. Though the people (and their gods) were subjugated by the expanding Roman Empire, they were expected to continue worshiping their own gods. That is, as long as you honored the gods of your own people, you could also worship other gods from other cultures. Because Jews and Christians insisted that they could worship only the one, true God (and required all converts to abandon previous polytheistic practices), the Romans and other pagan polytheists considered them atheistic (they did not honor all the gods) and intolerant. Likewise, because polytheistic religion and civil life were intertwined in the Roman Empire, the Christians' refusal to participate in polytheistic civic rituals led them to be called antisocial and unpatriotic. It was for this reason that Christianity was persecuted before 313.

The Edict of Milan marks an important development in religious toleration. Though Christianity grew significantly once the persecutions were ended, the edict did not end the practice of polytheism in the Roman Empire. Though it began to decline in popularity, polytheism endured for many centuries afterward. Though Christianity greatly benefited from the religious toleration declared by the edict, such religious freedom

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essentially ended in 380, when the emperor Theodosius declared that Nicene Christianity would be the only official, state-sponsored religion of the Roman Empire. This gave Christianity a privileged position in society, establishing a constitutional framework that would endure throughout most of Europe (and even North America) until the 18th and 19th centuries.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What implications can be drawn from Emperor Constantine's role in convening a council to resolve religious disputes?
2. After enduring persecution, Christianity became a privileged religion, protected by the Roman Empire. What advantages did Christianity gain from being an officially sponsored faith? Additionally, what concerns arose from the close relationship between the church and the imperial state, especially when it came to preaching the gospel's truths to those in power?
3. Do the creed's emphases reflect the recurring themes announced by prophets and preached in the gospels? If so, how? If not, how might the exclusion of these important biblical teachings have served the imperial purposes of the time?
4. How can praying and studying the creed help us recognize the importance of faith in resisting imperial ideologies that impact vulnerable communities today?
5. The history of Christianity is complex, with the church shifting from being marginalized to becoming a dominant force under the Roman Empire. During this time, churches were involved in silencing, proselytizing and even conquering others in the name of the gospel. What can Christianity learn from this past as it seeks to defend the freedom of religion? What does it mean for the church to bear witness to the gospel in diverse religious contexts today?

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UNIT FOUR: Expanding the Nicene Creed: The Council of Constantinople



Evangelical
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in America

UNIT FOUR: Expanding the Nicene Creed: The Council of Constantinople

QUICK CONNECT

While we commemorate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the creed we say today is not the version produced in 325. The version of the creed now universally used is an expanded version created by the Council of Constantinople in 381. That later council affirmed the conclusions of Nicaea and also articulated the theology of the Holy Spirit and the work of the church. Thus, properly speaking, we affirm the “Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.”

NARRATIVE

Three months. That is how long the bishops and theologians met during the Council of Nicaea and how long it took them to draft a short summary of the Christian faith. The goal of writing something clear but also attentive to the nuances and mysteries of the triune God revealed in Scripture is no easy task. In a previous unit, we summarized the content of the Nicene Creed as it described the essence of faith as it related to Jesus, namely, what Jesus shares in common with God (being fully God) and what Jesus shares in common with humanity (being fully human). After all that attention and discussion at the council, you can imagine a collective sigh of relief. Then imagine that, just as the ink was drying on the paper, some bishop or theologian said, “But what about the Holy Spirit?” A collective groan might have gone up, wads of crumpled paper thrown at the person, as the exhausted participants expressed their desire to put an end to this task and finally go home. The version of the Nicene Creed in 325 ended with the simple affirmation “We believe in the Holy Spirit.”

The description above is entirely imaginative – but also not too far from the truth. The fact is, the bishops and theologians were gathered there to resolve a conflict over the nature of Jesus as the incarnate Logos of God. The topic of the Holy Spirit was not the source of conflict that brought them there, but that does not mean that they were all of the same mind. The simple affirmation “we believe in the Holy Spirit” was probably the broadest consensus they could muster at that point.

Of course, Christians believed in the Holy Spirit from Scripture. They heard the powerful testimony of unity between Father and Spirit in the life and work of Jesus. They knew that, just as the voice from heaven proclaimed Jesus to be “my beloved Son,” the Holy Spirit was manifested with Jesus at his baptism. They knew how the Spirit led and comforted Jesus during his 40 days in the desert. They heard the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit as comforter. They knew how the resurrected Jesus gifted the apostles with the Holy Spirit (also called, the Paraclete). They knew how the apostles were led and sustained in their ministry by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, they affirmed a sense of the Trinity – that the self-revelation and work of God was as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As such, they read their received Scripture (the “Old” or “First” Testament, given to the Jewish people) with new eyes to perceive the work of the Holy Spirit: in the Spirit that moved over the face of the deep at creation, in the pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites through the desert, and in the inspiration of the prophet’s proclamations. All that was clearly affirmed and universally recognized.

What was not clear to Christians was how best to describe or define the Holy Spirit. Was the Holy Spirit a person (as we speak of “God the Father” and “God the Son/Logos” as persons) or merely an expression of divine power, that is, a thing used or sent by a person? The incarnation of the Logos as the historical person Jesus of Nazareth made speaking of him as a “person” quite obvious. Likewise, God (the Father) as a person was also quite clear from Scripture: God speaks, has will, has power. But does Scripture speak clearly enough to warrant referring to the Holy Spirit as a person in the same way? Some, even among those who accepted

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the conclusions of Nicaea in 325, worried that calling the Holy Spirit a co-equal person of the Trinity (that the Holy Spirit shared the same essence as the Father and Son) was not supported by Scripture and might push Christianity into polytheism, a criticism already made by Jewish and pagan critics of Christianity.

The work of refining the language and framework for the Holy Spirit as a co-equal person of the Trinity fell largely to a constellation of remarkable theologians called “the Cappadocian Fathers” (named for the region they came from, in what is, today, central eastern Turkey): St. Basil “the Great” (330-379), St. Gregory of Nazianzus “the Theologian” (329-390), and St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394). All three were bishops concerned to explain the basics of Christian faith to their congregations. While vigorous defenders of the Nicene faith, the Cappadocian Fathers lived at a time when Arian Christianity was dominant. St. Athanasius, the long-suffering defender of Nicaea, was their hero. They understood that part of defending the Nicene conclusions about who Jesus was also required explaining further the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Just as Arian Christianity argued that Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) was divine but not equal to God (the Father), some Christians argued that the Holy Spirit was likewise divine but not of the same essence as God or even of the Logos. In this view, the three divine beings were ranked: only God (the Father) was God in the fullest sense. The Logos and the Holy Spirit were seen as the first and second creatures made by God and therefore not of the same being/essence as God.

The Cappadocian Fathers turned not only to the biblical testimony but also to the practical, pastoral focus of the church’s sacramental ministry to argue that the Holy Spirit was a co-equal person of the Trinity. In a document entitled “On the Holy Spirit,” Basil begins with a clear affirmation of the Christian faith: that in the sacrament of Baptism, we are made holy; we are sanctified and given real grace, wherein our old nature is washed away and we put on Christ. He notes that baptisms are always done in the “name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.” If the Holy Spirit is an equal partner (with Father and Son) in sanctifying the baptized, does it not also stand to reason and Scripture that the Holy Spirit is equal in nature and therefore equally worthy of worship and praise? St. Gregory of Nazianzen was invited to Constantinople (the imperial capital) to serve the smaller, Nicene congregation there (while the Arian bishop had possession of the official cathedral). In a series of sermons, called the Theological Orations, he laid out the basic catholic/orthodox Trinitarian theology both against the Arians and in support of the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. These sermons have become classics of theological education. Lutheran reformer Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) praised them highly and used them to instruct future pastors and teachers.

Gregory’s arrival in Constantinople coincided with the elevation of Theodosius as emperor. In contrast to his predecessors, Theodosius was a staunch defender of the Nicene faith. Together, Theodosius and Gregory worked to convene a second ecumenical council that met in Constantinople from May to July 381. Gregory and the like-minded bishops affirmed the Nicene Creed and expanded its content.

Nearly all the edits to the Nicene Creed of 325 related to the Holy Spirit’s work in union with the Father and Son. When referring to the incarnation of the Logos, the council at Constantinople inserted the phrase “and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.” This is a reference to Luke 1:35, affirming that the incarnation of the Logos is accomplished through the cooperation of “the Most High” (God) and the Holy Spirit. The biggest revisions are in the third article. Whereas the original version of Nicaea ended with “We believe in the Holy Spirit,” the bishops and theologians at Constantinople added the whole paragraph as it is now used in the church.

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A few things to highlight in their addition to the third article: As we noted elsewhere, some bishops did not like the phrase “of one being with the Father” (*homoousios*) because it was a philosophical word not found in Scripture. That is, while they did not object to the conclusion that the Logos and Father were of the same essence, they objected to the particular technical phrase. The bishops at Constantinople were in a conundrum: while it would make perfect sense to affirm the equal nature and authority of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Logos by using the same phrase used at Nicaea (*homoousios*), they knew it would repel some. They decided instead to use biblical images to describe the Holy Spirit: “Lord” and “Giver of Life.” Are they then calling into question the equality of the Holy Spirit? By no means, for any being worthy of these titles is no other being than God. And in case anyone misses their point, it is affirmed later in the phrase “with the Father and Son [the Holy Spirit] is worshiped and glorified.” This was exactly the point made by St. Basil in “On the Holy Spirit.” Equality of action implies equality of being/nature/essence; equality of being necessitates equal praise and honor.

Finally, note how the third article unites past, present and future. Christianity is not a new religion but a participant in God’s continuous arc of salvation, from the first covenant through the second. Thus, the Holy Spirit of Christianity is the same Holy Spirit that inspired (“spoke through”) the Jewish prophets. Implicitly rejected here is an old heresy called Marcionism, the belief that the Jewish Scriptures are false, antiquated and corrupted, such that Christianity must reject the Old Testament. Likewise, the Christian faith is not “once upon a time,” focused only on what God did “way back then.” Rather it is a dynamic, ongoing testimony of God’s work here and now through the life of the church. Through baptism and forgiveness of sin within the communion of saints, the triune God is working to restore all things, ultimately freeing them from the powers of sin and death.

Thus, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed offers a comprehensive summary of the Christian faith, testifying to the saving grace of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – revealed in the First/Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as a living testimony and power to our own day and context. Thanks be to God!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

It is sometimes said that the Holy Spirit is the “forgotten person” in the Trinity. That is, most of us are comfortable praying to God (Almighty, Creator, Father) and to Jesus (Son, Christ, Logos) and less so to the Holy Spirit. One criticism of Christian theology is that it is marred by Christocentrism, an exclusive focus on Jesus Christ to the detriment of attention to the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christocentrism is contrasted with a theology that is properly Christocentric (as modeled by Martin Luther), which sees the incarnation as revealing both the unity and distinction of all three divine persons. Where do you see the work of the Holy Spirit in the regular life of the church?

1. More specifically, where do you see the Holy Spirit highlighted in our Lutheran understanding of word and sacrament? Where do you hear the Holy Spirit mentioned in preaching, in the liturgies of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper?
2. Where might you sense the need to invoke the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the church’s work in the world?
3. Have you sensed the Holy Spirit’s work in collective discernment, where perhaps people are divided over what the Holy Spirit might have us do? How did the Holy Spirit work to bring unity amid diversity?

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The idea of the Trinity, that one God exists in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – developed during the early church and became more defined by the end of the fourth century. The Nicene Creed of 381 (also known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed) played a significant role in affirming and shaping how we understand and express our belief in this triune God. Is this concept new to you? What are your thoughts on how our understanding of the Trinity has developed over time and how we express our belief about who God is?

The unity of love within the divine being, expressed in the Holy Trinity, shows us that the three persons of the Trinity are equal in status, without any hierarchy, and always exist in communion with one another. What can we learn about love from the unity of the three persons in the Holy Trinity? How does the idea of the Trinity being equal and in communion change the way we interact with others? In what ways does the inner life of the Trinity guide the church in its mission work?

FOR FURTHER READING

In light of the 1,700th anniversary, the Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue Between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church has issued a statement on the work of the Holy Spirit in creation, salvation, the world and the liturgy. It concludes with five recommendations.

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



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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.”

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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

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UNIT SIX: Women and the Council of Nicaea



Evangelical
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UNIT SIX: Women and the Council of Nicaea

QUICK CONNECT

Women have had an essential, public role in the church's structures of ministry and pastoral care since the beginning of the Christian movement. Yet the nature of the role of women's leadership is a matter of some historical uncertainty and controversy. Women were clearly leaders in the early church. Many are even addressed as "apostles," such as Mary Magdalene (the "apostle to the apostles") and Junia (Romans 16:7). Most scholars agree that women were patrons and influential voices who played a leading role in the early house-churches of the first few centuries. But as the structures of ministry in the church became more formalized (into bishop, priest and deacon), the public role of women was confined to the roles of deaconess and "widow." Despite this limited role, the ministry of deaconess was significant. The Council of Nicaea mentions the role of deaconess in its administrative regulations (canons) for the church. Even without an official role in the council's deliberation, women were very active in the collective discernment of the church on the Christological controversy that surrounded the Council of Nicaea.

NARRATIVE

When we reflect on the topic "Women and the Council of Nicaea," we are challenged by historical circumstances. On the one hand, an ecumenical council is a forum of bishops and their theologians. At that time, all bishops were men. Therefore, if we try to discern the number of women who spoke at the council or who voted on various propositions, the answer is definitively "zero." Yet because of those same historical circumstances, given the breadth and the intensity of the controversy, it is impossible to imagine that women were absent from the conversation. Thus, in marketplaces, in hallways, in living rooms, in congregational fellowship, in public baths, in classes preparing converts for baptism – in short, anywhere women were active in church, society or family life – women were surely part of the chorus of faithful Christians wrestling with the theological principles at stake. Even if women did not have official voice in the forum of ecclesiastical power or procedures, women were speaking not only with each other but with their families, friends and co-workers about the nature of Jesus Christ.

The argument over the best way to describe the relationship between Jesus (the incarnate Logos) and God (the Father) seemed to seep into the fabric of every aspect of daily life during the fourth century. The theological controversy was not just among clergy and theologians; apparently nearly every Christian was concerned with an articulation of the faith that was most consistent with the proclamation of the earliest disciples. One bishop during this time complains that the Christological question was unavoidable:

The whole city is full of it, the squares, the marketplaces, the cross-roads, the alleyways; old-clothes men, money changers, food sellers: they are all busy arguing. If you ask someone to give you change, he philosophizes about the Begotten and the Unbegotten; if you inquire about the price of a loaf [of bread], you are told by way of reply that the Father is greater and the Son inferior; if you ask "Is my bath ready?" the attendant answers that the Son was made out of nothing.—St. Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Divinity of the Son and the Spirit" (August 383)¹

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Divinity of Son and the Holy Spirit/De deitate filii et spiritus sancti*, in Jacques Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, vol. 46, column 557B (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique), 1857; for a more recent version see, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* vol. X part 2 (ed. E. Rhein), Brill, 1996.

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Even if this bishop, in his frustration, exaggerated the extent of the conversation, there is no doubt that the theological debate leading up to the Council of Nicaea and the generation or two afterward captured the attention of the broader church.

Women had an official role in the structures of the church, as deaconesses. A deaconess (like a deacon) assisted the bishop in two primary arenas: the material well-being of the poor and needy (both within the congregations under their care and in the charitable works of the church in society) and in the liturgy of Holy Baptism. Deaconesses were able to visit poor and sick women on behalf of the church when the social conventions of the time would have precluded male clergy from visiting a woman who was alone or in a physically vulnerable situation. One can also imagine that a deaconess might have heard the concerns of female parishioners who might not otherwise have spoken to male clergy. Likewise, most people who became Christian at this time did so as adults. As surprising as this may be to us, baptisms (for men, women and children) were done in the nude. Folks back then were not at all scandalized by this, since very few homes had running water and most daily bathing was done in public bathhouses (segregated by gender). Likewise, the newly baptized were anointed with oil from head to toe – also a common hygiene practice in public baths. Early Christian sources indicate that the deaconess would help undress female candidates, lead them into and out of the large fonts used for baptism, pour the water or assist with immersion while the bishop stood behind a screen (speaking the words of the baptismal rite), and perform the anointing of those candidates. (For descriptions of early Christian baptism, see the following early Christian sources from the second to the fourth century: the *Didache*, Justin Martyr's *First Apology*, Hippolytus's *The Apostolic Tradition*, the *Didascalia*, and the *Apostolic Constitutions*). Many of these early Christian sources also note the kinds of ministers and ministries of the church. In addition to deaconesses, some of these sources also mention widows – mature women who seemed to have worked alongside deaconesses in the church's ministry to poor, sick and older women.

All this is to say that, since the beginning, women were clearly active in the public ministry of the church. The question of “ordination,” however, is a complicated one. While women played an essential role, there is no clear evidence that women were ever ordained as bishops or priests. Yet, at the same time, it is also very clear that certain women were officially “ordered” (set aside, dedicated, consecrated) for the church's public ministry as deaconesses and widows.

Interestingly, the Council of Nicaea specifically mentioned deaconesses. After the council formulated the creed, it followed the short summary of faith with an official list of statements and perspectives that are forbidden (anathemas). These are positions that one emphatically may not hold and still be considered in good standing with the universal church. After that, the council presented a series of canons; that is, rules and regulations for the proper governing of the church. One of these canons, Canon 19, dealt with a group of people (lay and clergy) from a heretical sect that denied the Trinity but now wished to restore union with the wider church. The canon states that they must be baptized, because the “baptism” they received was not done in the triune name and was, therefore, invalid. After a proper baptism, any clergy among them should receive the laying on of hands and be properly ordained. Intriguingly, deaconesses are listed among “the clergy” mentioned in the canon – that is, those who have been ordained (with deacons, priests and bishops) into their respective role. As such, this canon of Nicaea would certainly seem to affirm that deaconesses are ordained: official leaders of the church's public ministry, affirmed with the prayers of the collective church and the laying on of hands by a bishop. The role of deaconess continued to evolve in the centuries that followed – or “devolved,” perhaps, since the ministry became defunct in the Middle Ages. Among Lutherans, the role of deaconess was revived in the 19th century and continues to this day.

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Canon 19 of the Council of Nicaea is situated at a liminal point in church history regarding the public ministry of women in the church. As noted earlier, women served as patrons and leaders in the church of the first and second centuries. They set a pattern of female leaders in the church who would follow in the third and fourth centuries. Among them were wealthy women, sometimes married or related to Christian leaders, who used their positions to support the church: St. Helena of Constantinople (mother of the Emperor Constantine), St. Pulcheria (sister of Emperor Theodosius and a consecrated virgin) and Theodora (wife of Emperor Justinian). Others used their wealth to support Christian missionaries, such as St. Macrina the Elder (an early convert and patron of St. Gregory the Wonderworker, the apostle to Cappadocia). Other women were learned theologians, known in their own right for their pastoral wisdom, such as St. Macrina the Younger (granddaughter of the previously mentioned Macrina the Elder and older sister of the previously mentioned St. Gregory of Nyssa), St. Monica (mother of St. Augustine of Hippo), St. Melania the Younger and St. Marcella of Rome (patron of St. Jerome). With the revival of deaconesses in the 19th century, the decision over 50 years ago to ordain women as pastors in both the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church, and the renewed sense that deacons (male and female) belong to the church's ordained ministry, the ELCA is beginning to echo the wider sense of ministry and affirmation of the many and varied gifts of all baptized Christians present in the early church. Indeed, in contrast to the first ecumenical council, women – both lay and ordained – are leaders in the vibrant and ongoing work of ecumenical discernment in the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Women have been crucial in establishing the Christian church, yet their contributions are often overlooked or minimized. How can we better recognize and honor the vital part women have played in the history of Christianity?
2. The absence of women's voices in the Nicene Creed reflects the male-centered worldview that has affected and sometimes dictated the language and images we use to understand God. Identify how the triune God is portrayed in the creed. How have the themes, languages and images used in the creed shaped the way we imagine and conceptualize the divine?
3. No single word or image can fully describe the three-in-one nature of God. The Bible itself uses many images to describe God and God's activity. What overlooked or new ways of speaking and depicting the Trinity can help us better understand this mystery?
4. While Father/Son is a primary image used by Jesus in Scripture, it is by no means exclusive. Consider some of the other images for God (fire, rock, wind) and their use in Scripture, worship and teaching. Consider some of the maternal images for God used in Scripture (a mother-bear in Hosea 13:8, a hen in Matthew 23:37-39, and a nursing mother in Numbers 11:12 and Isaiah 49:15 and 66:13). Finally, consider the way Jesus uses images of women as models of faith (the woman searching for a lost coin in Luke 15:8-10 and the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8).
5. Consider the ways in which Jesus' use of the term *Abba* (a loving, caring, engaged father) subverts any attempt to impose a patriarchal understanding of God (as a cold, stern, distant disciplinarian).

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UNIT SEVEN: The Council of Nicaea, Easter, and Judaism



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QUICK CONNECT

The main purpose of the Council was to clarify the church's teaching about the relationship between the Logos and God. However, in addition to such theological matters, the council issued several regulations for the administration of the church within its newly granted imperial status. One concern was to formulate a common date for celebrating Easter – a perfectly reasonable expectation for one of Christianity's most important holidays. However, in doing so, the Council revealed anti-Jewish attitudes. These attitudes would contribute to a growing negative assessment of Judaism by Christianity for centuries to come, both causing and enabling much harm to the Jewish people.

NARRATIVE

For several centuries, the festival of Christmas has always on a fixed date: December 25. Why does the festival of Easter change nearly every year? For instance, in 2025, Easter was April 20; in 2026, it will be April 6. The answer is complicated by several factors. The gospels tell us that the death and resurrection of Jesus occurred in the context of the Jewish festival of Passover (also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which commemorates the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt). So, since the earliest centuries, Christians have tied their celebration of Easter to the date of Passover. According to the Torah (Leviticus 23:5 and Numbers 9:3), Passover is to be celebrated starting at dusk on the 14th day of the first month (the first month of the spring season, later known as Nissan). The Biblical/Jewish calendar is based on the cycles of the moon. (However, because this lunar calendar falls short of aligning with the solar year, the timing of Passover would gradually shift to different seasons.) In order to assure that Nissan would consistently fall in the spring (based on the cycle of the earth around the sun), Jews would add an extra month every few years. Some early Christians celebrated Easter on the first Sunday of the Passover Feast, responding to the fact that, according to all four of the canonical Gospels, the resurrection of Jesus Christ took place on the first day of the week. Others focused on Jesus' death and set Easter on the night between the 14th and 15th of Nissan, the first day of Passover. The Roman calendar followed the cycles of the sun and, from the perspective of a solar calendar, the festival of Passover is a "moveable feast" – it does not and cannot follow a comparable fixed date. The result was that each year Christians in the Roman Empire were not using the same calendar as Jews, each year the Christian date for Easter had to be "translated" from the Jewish calculation for Passover.

While all the available bishops were gathered at Nicaea, it seemed wise to determine in a clear and uniform way when this great Christian holiday would be celebrated each year, without any need to rely on the Jewish calendar. The council affirmed that Easter would be celebrated "the Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the vernal equinox." This was an attempt to provide what they believed to be a more accurate calculation (following the vernal equinox, which is always March 20 or 21 in the northern hemisphere, using a solar calendar). Thus, the earliest date for Easter could be only March 22 (which happened in 1818 and won't occur again until 2285); the latest possible date for Easter could be only April 25.

The council's decision fixed the issue and provided a unifying date for Easter for quite a while – until the calendars were changed. At the time of the council, Romans were using the Julian calendar (which was initiated in 45 B.C.E.). However, due to improved astrological calculation of the earth's rotation around the sun, the Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1582 (and remains in use today). While more scientifically accurate,

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the new calendar was issued by papal decree; this meant that some Protestant countries were slow to accept it. Within most Orthodox churches, the Julian calendar was retained. Thus, since the 16th century, Christians have seldom celebrated the most holy day in their calendar at the same time.

However, as far back as the 1960s, reestablishing a common date for Easter has been a topic of ecumenical dialogue. In 1997, the Aleppo Statement (sponsored by the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches) offered a study of the question and encouragement toward the goal. The 1,700th anniversary of the Nicene Council adds a fitting urgency to resolve the issue. Earlier this year, the World Council of Churches hosted a conference and issued statements from ecumenical leaders about the challenges and hopes toward finding a common date. You can read the summary report, “Toward a Common Date for Easter” (Faith and Order Paper #241, World Council of Churches), [here](#).

Aside from the technical issues of reconciling various calendars (and the hope of a common date in the future), a much deeper concern must be addressed: the shameful anti-Jewish attitudes expressed among Christians about determining the date of Easter. Alongside the desire for greater accuracy and uniformity for celebrating Easter, there is an expressly stated desire to not be subservient to Jews in the calculation of the date. St. Athanasius, in a letter to fellow bishops in north Africa, notes with disapproval that some Christians were celebrating Easter on the same day as the Jewish Passover. Emperor Constantine, reflecting on the Council of Nicaea, noted that “It is vexing to hear the Jews boast that without them, the Christians would not be able to observe Easter.” *The Apostolic Constitutions*, written soon after the Council of Nicaea, urges Christians not to celebrate Easter the same day as Passover because “now redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, . . . there is nothing in common between you and [the Jewish people]” (*Apostolic Constitutions* 5.17.1-3, referenced in pg. 5, footnote 6, in “Toward a Common Date for Easter,” cited above).

More than just reflecting the “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity (acknowledging that the two were now separate, autonomous religious traditions), such quotations reflect “supersessionism,” an idea that Christians have not only replaced Judaism as God’s favored people but also that Jews are now punished by God. Part of the reason for this change in attitude is surely attributed to culture. By the fourth century, in contrast to the earliest generations of Christians, most people were becoming Christian with no cultural or religious connection to Judaism. The Roman Empire had a complicated and often contentious relationship with Judaism. While Jews were exempt from the Empire’s requirements for polytheistic social ceremonies, many Romans considered the absolute monotheism of Judaism as extreme and intolerant. Rome also engaged in brutal warfare to conquer and control Judea. This effort would culminate in the “Jewish-Roman Wars” (66-135), which would see the destruction of the second Temple and the ban of Jews from the city of Jerusalem. There were periodic attempts by Roman emperors (viz., Tiberius and Claudius) to expel Jews from Rome; tensions occasionally flared between Gentiles and Jews in the larger cities of the Empire. By the fourth century, Roman/Gentile Christians largely reflected such cultural and political prejudices and provided theological justifications for them. Indeed, throughout the Middle Ages and into modernity, Easter was a particularly fraught time for Jews, who were often held to be responsible for killing Christ, or accused of reenacting that event by murdering a Christian child and using the blood in the baking of matzah (unleavened bread) eaten on Passover. This became known as the “blood libel,” so well known that Jews were often afraid to leave their homes from Good Friday through Easter Sunday.

Christians today cannot ignore either the anti-Jewish sentiment reflected in the drive to find a standard date for Easter at the Council of Nicaea or the enduring brutal (and often violent) legacy of such ideas in the history of Christian interactions with Judaism. The ELCA has provided several resources for Christians to not only

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reflect and repent of past harms but also build new interactions based on a more faithful vision articulated by Scripture. See especially:

- “[Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations](#)” (1998).
- “[Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community](#)” (2013).
- “[Preaching and Teaching With Love and Respect for the Jewish People](#)” (2022).
- Additionally, discussions with the Orthodox Church in the United States produced a significant document regarding faith in the Holy Trinity, available [here](#).
- It has also developed a document known as “[The Aleppo Statement](#)”, which discussed the possibilities of finding a common date for Easter.
- The Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue in the USA offered a “[Common Response to the Aleppo Statement on the Date of Easter/Pascha](#),” along with a Table which details future dates for [Easter](#).
- The primary dialogue is international with the Lutheran World Federation – Orthodox Joint Commission, more information is available [here](#).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What new insights did you gain from the narrative? What new understanding did you develop about Jews and Judaism through this learning experience?
2. What are some common biases, misconceptions and misinterpretations we have about Jews and Judaism, particularly regarding the beliefs and practices they hold dear? What efforts can we make to accurately represent Jews and Judaism in our discussions and portrayals?
3. How important is it to keep the date of Easter tied to Passover? Does that effort hinder or help greater appreciation for Christianity’s roots in Judaism?
4. Do you live in an area with Jewish communities (synagogues or temples)? If so, what can your congregation and synod do to ensure dialogues that lead to mutual appreciation and common witness? In what ways can you help combat the sin of supercessionism while also respecting the theological and cultural differences in how Jews and Christians interpret Scripture and understand themselves to be “the people of God”?
5. How might a shared date for Easter encourage opportunities for common worship and witness among Christians?
6. Do you live in an area with a significant population of Orthodox Christians? If so, what might you do to interact with them on this issue (along with other issues related to the 1,700th anniversary, such as the filioque)? If not, how might you learn more about their concerns on these issues?

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UNIT EIGHT: The Role of the Nicene Creed in the Lutheran Tradition



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QUICK CONNECT

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (with the filioque) plays a normative role in the Lutheran Confessions (i.e., the Book of Concord) and in the teaching, liturgy and governing documents in the longer arc of the Lutheran tradition. In contrast to other Protestant traditions, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed remained a regular part of weekly Lutheran worship well into the 18th century. Its “recovery” in the liturgy in the early 20th century in Lutheran liturgical resources (reaffirming the bond between how the church confesses its faith in both teaching and worship) has meant that Lutherans are asked to engage the creed in a more comprehensive expression of Christian discipleship.

GLOSSARY/KEY TERMS

Mass: A term that is synonymous with the divine liturgy and necessarily includes Holy Communion. It refers to the historic principal parts of Christian worship on Sundays and festival days: Kyrie, Gloria, Collect/Prayer of the Day, Readings, Homily, Creed, Prayers of Intercession, Offering, Eucharistic Prayer/Words of Institution, Lamb of God, Distribution of the Consecrated Bread and Wine, and Dismissal. The Apology to the Augsburg Confession insists that Lutherans had not abandoned the Mass: “At the outset it is necessary, by way of preface, to point out that we do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it. Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord’s Day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. We also keep the traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things”¹

NARRATIVE

The controversies that initiated the Lutheran Reformation did not relate to the substance of the faith as articulated in the Nicene Creed. Though Lutherans’ disputes with the Roman Catholic Church of that time were substantial, Lutherans adamantly affirmed the Christological and Trinitarian faith of the received tradition. As the reformation movements multiplied, however, Lutherans and Roman Catholics alike would find themselves in theological conflicts with other Protestant movements. These conflicts were often over the proper interpretation of the Christological and Trinitarian statements in the creed (namely the mode of Christ’s presence in the eucharist, the work of the Holy Spirit through the sacraments, the nature of baptism, and the triune God) and even over the value of the creed itself. The Christological and Trinitarian debates of the 16th century were often tied to the liturgical and sacramental experiences of Christians and what constituted faithful, proper worship and discipleship.

It is perhaps best to begin our examination of the Nicene Creed in the Lutheran tradition with the liturgical tradition that shaped the Lutheran reformers, a tradition that they wholeheartedly handed over to future generations. The Christian life is founded upon worship of the living God, and it is through worship – especially in word and sacrament – that God works (as through instruments) to bless and restore the gathered assembly. It all begins in the sacrament of Baptism. There is a strong connection between Trinitarian theology and baptism. By affirming what God does for us in baptism, we may better proclaim the nature of the triune God. St. Athanasius (died 373) and St. Basil of Caesarea (330-379) both emphasized that since baptism makes

¹ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), Article XXIV, 258.

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us holy, restoring the image of God and redeeming us from the powers of sin and death, and since all three persons of the Trinity are involved in this work, there can be no ranking or separation of the three divine persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As St. Basil affirms, “If we are obliged to believe in that into which we have been baptized, then we must make our confession of faith in the same terms as our baptism.”² This way of thinking became normative in the Christian tradition, and the Lutheran reformers often referred specifically to this treatise when explaining both baptism and the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

The creeds help to shape a Christian worldview, and for late-medieval Catholicism and Lutheranism, this was primarily accomplished in the liturgy. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed entered the normal order of Sunday worship (i.e., the Mass, the divine liturgy) in the early sixth century. In the Western church, the inclusion of the creed in the liturgy made progress from west to east, starting in Spain and France in the eighth and ninth century and spreading to Charlemagne’s court at Aachen and to wider use in western and northern Europe in the early 10th century. Under the influence of Holy Roman Emperor Henry II, the Nicene Creed was added to the liturgy in Rome in the early 11th century. Among the eastern churches, the Nicene Creed was used at both baptism and the divine liturgy. In the western churches, the Apostles’ Creed was used at baptisms while the Nicene Creed was used in the Mass throughout the Middle Ages.

The Lutheran liturgical reforms did nothing to supplant the Nicene Creed in the Mass. Luther’s *Formula Missae et Communionis* of 1523 (his reform of the Latin Mass) retained not only the Latin language but also the traditional place and purpose of the Nicene Creed (which, at that time, was between the gospel reading and the sermon). The creed was either spoken or sung. Luther even encouraged retaining the traditional piety of kneeling when the incarnation was proclaimed (“and became truly human”). Luther’s “German Mass and Order of Service” (1526) was the ingenious result of his desire to create a liturgy that fit the tone and vocabulary of the German language. Though the German Mass was intended for use among “the unlearned lay folk,” it has a beauty and creativity even in its simplicity. Instead of trying to fit German words and phrasing to Latin plainchant, Luther provided a paraphrase of the Nicene Creed in a German hymn, “Wir Glauben All’ an Einen Gott” (“We All Believe in One True God,” *ELW* 411). Luther’s liturgical reforms ensured that the Nicene Creed would be affirmed (either in Latin or in German) every Sunday (though Olavus Petri’s Swedish Mass of 1531 allows for either the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed to be used).

This brief study cannot summarize the role of the Nicene Creed in Lutheran liturgies as Lutheranism became a global movement. For our context, however, here is a general summary of Lutheran worship in North America. The earliest Lutherans in the New World were Dutch, Swedish and German. When these communities had pastors, they followed the liturgies they brought with them from Europe. In some circumstances, when there were no Lutheran pastors and the community could not afford its own congregation, Lutherans often worshiped with their neighbors who had established congregations, usually Anglican, Presbyterian or Moravian. In the early 18th century, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711-1787), a missionary pastor, was sent to help serve and build up the German-speaking Lutheran communities in the English colonies. Muhlenberg was a person of extraordinary energy and dedication. One of his first tasks was to create a ministerium (basically, the first Lutheran synod), which became the Ministerium of Pennsylvania. Then, in 1748, Muhlenberg drafted a common liturgy, for use in the Ministerium, that included the Nicene Creed. In the two centuries that followed, there were many streams of immigrants from Lutheran areas of Europe (the various territories of what are today Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden). Each brought their liturgical preferences, which sometimes modeled the liturgy back home, while some wanted to adapt to the worship styles in the dominant

² St. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), 101.

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forms of American Protestantism, especially Methodism and Presbyterianism. By the late 19th century, the Nicene Creed had receded from use in many Lutheran liturgies. In the early and middle 20th century, however, renewed interest in liturgical studies – both within Lutheranism and as an ecumenical interest – helped lead to a recovery of both earlier Lutheran and earlier Christian forms of worship. This broader, historical and ecumenical endeavor helped lead to the structure of liturgy reflected in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (the “green book”) and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (the “cranberry book”).

In the first 300 years of the Lutheran tradition, doctrine and teaching followed worship. At the Diet of Augsburg (1530), Lutherans asserted that they had not departed in any way from the faith articulated in the three chief creeds of the church (Apostles’, Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Athanasian). In the Augsburg Confession, Article One (“Concerning God”) and Article Three (“Concerning the Son of God”) affirm the content of the Nicene Creed and condemn the same positions rejected at the council. Several Lutheran reformers (including Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon and Caspar Cruciger) wrote commentaries on the creeds, explaining their content and encouraging their use to proclaim the free and unmerited saving work of the triune God. They charged pastors and teachers to be “guardians” of the creeds, using them as clear guides for the interpretation of sacred Scripture concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus the creeds reflect the light of Christ, guiding us through difficult or unclear passages. As such, Lutherans affirmed that the creeds are essential for the clarity with which they summarize the heart of Scripture and for the comfort they can bring to those who seek a loving God. Therefore affirmation of the creeds has been part of the ordination vows for rostered leaders and in the constitutions of the ELCA and its predecessor bodies.

For those who wish to recover a sense of continuity with both the Lutheran tradition and the wider ecumenical movement, this understanding of the creeds is both instructive and inspiring for the work entrusted to the universal church today. For one such example, when the very first bilateral dialogue in the United States between Lutherans and Roman Catholics met in 1962, they chose the Nicene Creed as their first subject of study. Based on the unity of principles found in the shared expression of the creed, the dialogue has persisted for over 50 years, resulting in some groundbreaking ecumenical studies. While we seek to understand the historical context of the formation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed – in the heart of worship and the heart of Christian teaching – that work is toward a greater end: to preach Christ, crucified and risen, so that all may know the love of God through the Word of God made flesh.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does your congregation recite the Nicene Creed during the year as part of the liturgy? Is it ever sung (perhaps using Luther’s hymn mentioned above, ELW 411)? How does the inclusion of the Nicene Creed in our worship reflect the values and beliefs of Lutheranism?
2. As you think about what it means to recite the creed in the liturgy, consider also what it means to do so in unity with Christians around the globe and throughout time.
3. These studies have mentioned how reciting the creed helps to shape a worldview, to indicate what it means to be a Christian, how Christians read and interpret Scripture, and how Christians are called to worship and to serve in the world. Where do you see your personal faith informed (or even challenged) by the creed? Where do you see your congregational, synodical and churchwide expressions of the church informed (or even challenged) by the creed?

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4. Not all churches incorporate the Nicene Creed into their liturgy or worship services. How does inclusion of the creed in Lutheran worship support ecumenical relationships with other Christian traditions? What specific elements of the creed resonate with ecumenical efforts, and why are they significant for building relationships with other faith communities?

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UNIT NINE: The Council of Nicaea and the ELCA Today



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QUICK CONNECT

When the bishops gathered at Nicaea, they were doing something both traditional and innovative. By gathering, they were following a well-established practice of collective discernment and prayer to address complicated issues. This practice has its inspiration in Scripture itself (see Acts 15). What was innovative, however, about the gathering in 325 is that it was an *ecumenical* council – it consisted of bishops throughout the entire Roman Empire. The Nicene Council helped to reinforce the expectation in the church that issues of major importance require the participation of various voices. Our habit in the ELCA of gathering in synods and at triennial churchwide assemblies (which now include a wider diversity of voices, visions and vocations) is a legacy set, in part, by the Nicene council. Thus our patterns of Christian discipleship – in prayer, teaching and collective discernment for the ongoing work of the Spirit – is done in conformity with both the ancient church and our Christian siblings around the world and across denominations.

GLOSSARY/KEY TERMS

Council: Sometimes called a synod, this is a gathering of bishops and their theological advisers to address controversies and the proper administration of the church.

Ecumenical: From the Greek, meaning “of the whole inhabited world.” The word has three meanings in Christian theology. First, something can be “ecumenical” when it involves representation from around the world (from many different cultures, languages and perspectives). Thus, for instance, the Council of Nicaea (325) and the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) are said to be ecumenical because of the geographical span of the bishops and theologians who participated. Second, in a similar but nonetheless distinct way, something is “ecumenical” when it involves Christians divided by doctrine, practice and/or institutional structure who engage in dialogue for greater understanding and, if possible, to remove the barriers that divide them (either for altar-pulpit fellowship, common witness on contested issues or coordination for service in the world). The ELCA has been actively engaged in ecumenical dialogue. Finally, something can be described as “ecumenical” when it is received and affirmed by the wider church. For instance, even though the number of participating bishops at Ephesus in 431 was relatively small, that council’s teaching that Mary can best be described as the “God-bearer” (Theotokos) because of who Jesus was is part of the mainstream consensus of Christian thought today.

Creed: A short summary of basic principles (these can be political, social or religious statements). As such, creeds are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather they establish a perspective through which a person views or understands the world. The Bible has affirmations that function as creeds, such as “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4) and “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:11). We also refer to specific creeds as aids to understanding the Christian life. For instance, Lutheranism acknowledges three chief creeds: the Apostles’, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan and the Athanasian. These creeds are understood to be derived from Scripture and serve to guide our fundamental interpretation of Scripture. By knowing who Christ Jesus is, we may more clearly find and proclaim him in and through Scripture.

Discernment: Though often used to describe the process of assessing a call to ordained ministry, discernment is a much wider process by which the gathered assembly prays, listens and discusses where the Holy Spirit might be leading the church (“It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” Acts 15:28). Christian discernment is as much about a process – how to bear with one another (Colossians 3:13), how to uphold the body of Christ among its various members and gifts (1 Corinthians 12) and how to speak the truth in love

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(Ephesians 4:15) – as it is about an outcome (“what would God have us do?”). In seeking unity, how might we avoid imposing uniformity?

NARRATIVE

We can think about the Council of Nicaea in terms of both outcome (what doctrinal statements it formulated) and process (how collective decision-making was accomplished in the church). Both are formative in the life of the ELCA. Previous units in this study guide have described in some detail the doctrinal concerns that necessitated the council and the authoritative teachings that followed. This unit will focus more on the process, using the Council of Nicaea as a model for how the ELCA (and other Christians) discern the will of God in our own time, even if we are not always aware of the model that inspires our processes.

The truth is best discerned in community. Jesus gathered a group of disciples, many of whom lived and traveled with him throughout Galilee and Judea. Before he leaves them, Jesus instructs them to remain together in the days ahead. In a longer series, called “the Farewell Discourse” in the Gospel of John (13:31 – 17:26), Jesus speaks of the unity that the disciples will share with the Father and the Holy Spirit if they also abide in Jesus’ teaching and example. After his resurrection, Jesus regathers the disciples, appearing to them when they are huddled together (John 20:19-23). Since Jesus gives them the gifts of both peace and the power of the Holy Spirit in this moment, it is hard to ignore the essentially communal nature of the church. Jesus even returns when one of their number is missing (John 20:24-29). As the church was born at Pentecost, the disciples were both gathered and then sent out in a singular mission (Acts 2). When the first conflict arises over Gentile converts to Christianity, the apostles remember the admonishment of Jesus and gather for discernment (Acts 15). Even when perfect harmony eludes them, their concern is ever for peace and faithfulness.

The church of the second and third centuries had several councils or synods. These were, however, on a smaller scale, usually gatherings of clergy within a city or a region. These councils were called to elect a bishop or deal with a controversy. Whatever the reason for gathering, their purpose and value remained the same as in the biblical model: to pray, listen and discern together what may be wise, good and faithful for the good order of the church. When the bishops gathered at Nicaea in 325, they were following a well-established process for overseeing the teachings and practices of the church. What was remarkable about Nicaea, however, is that it was the first ecumenical council, involving bishops and theologians from all over the Roman Empire. No gathering of that size and scope had been attempted before; indeed, without state support, such a gathering would not have been possible at that time. As other controversies emerged, other councils met to discern and resolve theological disputes. Chief among the ecumenical councils that followed Nicaea were Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451) and the Second Council of Nicaea (787).

In the centuries that followed, the church held many councils and synods, some regional and some ecumenical. Some councils and synods were significant, while many were unremarkable. Nonetheless, their ordinary habit of gathering set an enduring pattern of Christian life. Our own Lutheran reform movement was nurtured at such a “council.” Lutherans had advocated for another ecumenical council to address their concerns for reform. The many colloquies (formal dialogues) and diets (congresses that gathered secular and ecclesiastical authorities) in the 1520s-1540s were an attempt to resolve differences even when an ecumenical council proved impossible to muster at that time. The Council of Trent was the eventual outcome of such calls, though the strict papal control over the agenda and outcome meant that Lutherans would not participate. The Lutheran summary of faith presented to the Diet of Augsburg (1530) provided an enduring statement of Lutheran theological identity, as it became the Augsburg Confession.

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Regarding the Nicene Creed as establishing the content of our faith, the ELCA enshrines and affirms the creed's teachings in its constitution (see Chapter 2, "Confession of Faith"), settings for Holy Communion and ordination vows for rostered leaders. The Council of Nicaea's process for discernment is also reflected in the broad and deep practices we experience through congregational meetings, synod assemblies, churchwide assemblies and development of social teaching. As far as possible, the ELCA seeks the presence and participation of the whole people of God in such gatherings: clergy and laity; people of varied gender, racial and ethnic backgrounds; people of diverse sexual identities; people from different expressions of the church; global partner synods; and ecumenical guests. Such commitments help us to be church together for the sake of the world.

Both the history of how the Nicene Creed was formed and the ongoing collective nature of theological discernment speak to the lived, contextual expression of Christian faith. Understanding how creeds and doctrine are formulated within a particular linguistic and cultural context raises important questions about continuity (What must be kept from generation to generation?) and innovation (What must be reformulated and revised for faithfulness in our own time?). To paraphrase St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), how shall we faithfully proclaim the beauty and truth of the gospel, "which is ever ancient and yet ever new"? The Lutheran Confessions (see the Book of Concord) wrestle with this question as well. As a reform movement, Lutheranism both affirmed changes and argued for a return to earlier (premedieval) doctrines and practices. Sometimes existing problems call for new solutions and perspectives. Sometimes new challenges call for a return to earlier articulations. How shall we know the difference? Moreover, how shall we model Christian fellowship amid heated, contentious perspectives? What can we learn from Nicaea about helpful and unhelpful ways of dealing with faithful dissent within the faith community? These are the enduring questions of our faithful, apostolic discernment – both as individuals and as the assembly of believers (the church).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Consider and evaluate: The narrative presents a picture of the church as the body of Christ, which listens to and reflects on the word of God. This understanding is then articulated within a specific theological framework that nourishes Christians in expressing their beliefs. As part of the body of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), through its "three expressions of church," holds assemblies and meetings to discuss matters of faith. These discussions, which include the important work of commissions and task forces entrusted to conduct in-depth studies of particular issues, eventually lead to the formulation of social messages and statements that constitute our social teachings. As an ecclesial body, the ELCA does not merely adapt to changes; it also discerns the signs of the times. This allows the church to call a thing what it is (see Martin Luther's "Heidelberg Disputation," 1518) and faithfully witness to the gospel, as well as God's justice and mercy, while being continuously inspired by the Holy Spirit to do God's work.
2. How do you see your role within the body of Christ, and in what ways do you actively participate in the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)?
3. What pressing issues or challenges do you believe are facing us as the body of Christ today and should be named and discussed?
4. When conflicts occur within the church or community, what approaches do you think would be effective in resolving these issues while maintaining unity and integrity?

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FOR FURTHER READING

Orsy, Ladislav, *Discernment: Theology and Practice, Communal and Personal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020). ISBN: 978-0814685075.

Rusch, William G., *Ecumenical Reception: Its Challenge and Opportunity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007). ISBN: 978-0802847232.

Stjerna, Kirsi I., and Brooks Schramm, eds. *Spirituality: Toward a 21st Century Lutheran Understanding* (Lutheran University Press, 1999). ISBN: 978-1932688047.

The ELCA has also produced several resources for fostering collective discernment around contentious issues:

- [“One Body, Many Members.”](#)
- [“A Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity.”](#)
- [“Talking Together as Christians About Tough Social Issues.”](#)
- Willer, Roger, [“So That You May Discern”](#) *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, April 2016.

UNIT TEN: Christian Unity Today



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

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QUICK CONNECT

This unit is a comprehensive synthesis of the themes addressed in the previous units, highlighting key issues that warrant further investigation while simultaneously envisioning the potential for Christian unity.

NARRATIVE

The pursuit of Christian unity has faced significant challenges, both historically and in contemporary society. In his work *The Church in Council*, Norman Tanner observed, “Unity within the early church should not be exaggerated; Christianity then was quite a fractious body of believers. In many ways Christians are more united today than they have ever been before, except perhaps briefly after Pentecost. Full unity may be the ideal, but in the meantime imperfect unity should be appreciated and treasured.”¹ The ecumenical movement, which promotes Christian unity worldwide, was born out of “imperfect unity.”² This acknowledges that the early church’s pursuit of Christian unity was a multifaceted endeavor shaped by a confluence of political and religious factors. Convened in 325, the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council in Christian history, was a pivotal event that brought together church leaders to address core Christian beliefs. However, we should not romanticize this event, as the space for this work did not emerge from a context of tranquility and accord. To make progress toward greater unity, we need to approach the complexity of the council realistically.

In the aftermath of his rise to power as the sole ruler of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, Emperor Constantine sought to promote religious unity as a means of ensuring political stability and cohesion within his immense territory (see Unit 3). While Constantine’s role in this process remains a subject of ambivalence and controversy, establishing doctrinal unity and consensus was itself no simple task. The religious landscape of the time was already filled with theological debates and disagreements among various factions, and to many others, these different schools of thought were considered heresies. The theological context of the Council of Nicaea was neither peaceful nor agreeable. Instead it arose from simmering tensions and competing ideas. The bishops and church leaders who gathered at Nicaea were not merely coming together for a casual conversation over tea; they were engaged in a serious struggle to define the very nature of Christian belief and practice.

One of the primary purposes of the Council of Nicaea was to address the Arian controversy, which centered on the nature of the relationship between God (the Father) and Jesus Christ (the Son). Arius of Alexandria had asserted that Christ had a beginning and was created before time, meaning that Jesus could not be coeternal with the Father but was subordinate to the Father. (For details about how Arianism disputed Christ’s full divinity, see Unit 2). The council rejected Arianism and promulgated the Nicene Creed, affirming that the Father and the Son were consubstantial (of the same substance). It further established the doctrine of the Trinity – one God existing eternally in three distinct persons: Father, Son (incarnated in Jesus Christ) and Holy Spirit.

¹ Norman P. Tanner, *The Church in Council: Conciliar Movements, Religious Practice and the Papacy from Nicaea to Vatican II* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), viii.

² Two Libyan bishops, Secundus of Ptolemais and Theonas of Marmarica, refused to sign the Nicene Creed. Furthermore, some other attendees, such as Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea, believed the creed left little room for alternative approaches to understanding God, potentially leading to the condemnation of differing theological ideas. This raises further questions about what constitutes heresy and how theological conflicts might be more faithfully resolved. See Rebecca Lyman, “[The Theology of the Council of Nicaea](#),” *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, April 25, 2024.

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The consensus reached at the council of 325 did not fully resolve the Arian dispute. Meanwhile, discussion regarding the Holy Spirit gained attention. The original Nicene Creed of 325 simply affirmed the existence of the Holy Spirit, stating, “[We believe] in the Holy Spirit.” Not until the later version of 381 were more details provided about the Holy Spirit being of the same substance as the other two persons of the Trinity (see Unit 4).

The Western churches also began to adopt the *filioque*, which stated that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. This addition to the creed was made officially by Pope Benedict VIII in 1024 as part of the ongoing struggle against Arianism. Unfortunately this and other accumulated grievances between the Eastern and Western churches ultimately led to the Great Schism of 1054, dividing the Orthodox and Catholic traditions for nearly a millennium. (For details about the *filioque*, see Unit 5).

The Nicene Creed has faced several other criticisms in the last century. First, there are questions about its contribution to severing Christianity from its Jewish roots. In the early days of Christianity, the church maintained some Jewish traditions. However, during the reign of Emperor Constantine, laws were introduced that discriminated against Jews, which led to a decline in the acceptance of Jewish customs within the Christian community. The Council of Nicaea was convened to unify the Christian faith, but it also affirmed a decidedly non-Jewish identity for the church. While Easter would still be calculated in relation to the Jewish festival of Passover, several documents related to the Nicene Council reveal that Christians did not pursue further associations with Judaism. Another concern is that the creed could be used to express a supersessionist theology, the belief, rejected by the ELCA, that the church replaces the Jewish people as God’s covenanted people – an issue the church continues to grapple with. (For details about issues around Easter, Judaism and the creed, see Unit 7. To learn more about Jewish-Lutheran relations, visit the [ELCA website](#) for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations.

Additionally, the creed has been criticized for its lack of attention to gender and the role of women in articulating the faith. It makes no explicit mention of women or their place in the faith community, reflecting the patriarchal structures of the time, in which men held positions of authority and leadership. The creed’s language, crafted by male bishops, also shows a preference for masculine pronouns when referring to God and emphasizing the Father-Son relationship within the Trinity, even though the Scriptures offer other, more expansive possibilities.³ Put another way, while Jesus himself tends to use the Father-Son language in describing his own relationship to God, which is not a minor thing to be missed, the language used for God is not exhaustive. The availability of more expansive language for God in Scripture is an important topic that requires further discussion and attention within the church. The ELCA addresses some of those issues in the social statement: Faith Sexism and Justice: A Call to Action, available [here](#). It is also important to acknowledge the vital roles women played in the early church as disciples and evangelists, and to ensure that their contributions and experiences are properly reflected in Christian theology and ecclesial life (for details about women and the creed, see Unit 6).

What we have seen so far: The task of promoting Christian unity unfortunately creates additional problems, further dividing the church and people of faith. However, we should remember that 1,700 years ago, when churches convened to settle doctrinal disputes, they grappled with unity in a context where Christians had been recently persecuted under the Roman Empire, before Christianity became an important unifying force. In these complex, in-between spaces, unity was actually born.

³ Mary Streufert argues that an inclusive approach to the language and images of God expands our understanding of God beyond traditional male descriptions and symbols. It highlights that God transcends all genders and embraces a variety of identities. See Mary J. Streufert, *Language for God: A Lutheran Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022).

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The question “Where now for visible unity?”⁴ posed by the World Council of Churches as the church gathered to commemorate the 1,700th anniversary of the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea, is highly relevant and urgent in the current contexts. The world is witnessing the rise of authoritarianism, trade wars, and ecological injustice, factors that have amplified divisions among people and intensified violence against the vulnerable and marginalized. Christian unity, then as now, was not something to be taken for granted.

By the grace of God in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church has witnessed a renewed sense of ecumenical spirit and collaboration. The willingness and determination to engage in meaningful dialogue across differences have become encouraging signs of visible Christian unity.

In 2024, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Orthodox Church issued a joint statement titled “Lutheran-Orthodox Common Statement on the Filioque.” This was an important step in addressing the *filioque* and strengthening the ecumenical relationship between the two churches. The document outlines:

We, representatives of The Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church, have come together in a spirit of love and Christian communion to discuss the Church-dividing issue of the procession of the Holy Spirit. We both affirm the full divinity and personhood of the Holy Spirit, which was expressed in different ways in the eastern and the western traditions. We know that the Filioque was inserted in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed by the Latin Church in response to the heresy of Arianism centuries after the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed’s composition. The Eastern Church has always protested this insertion. As part of the Latin tradition, the reformers inherited the Creed with the Filioque and did not consider it problematic. Valuing this old and most venerable ecumenical Christian text, we suggest that the translation of the Greek original (without the Filioque) be used in the hope that this will contribute to the healing of age-old divisions between our communities and enable us to confess together the faith of the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).⁵

In 2025, churches both East and West celebrated Easter on the same day, which coincided with the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. As we know, this council was significant in establishing the celebration of Easter for Christians worldwide. When the calculation for the date of Easter was set by the council, there was a shared use of the Julian calendar in the Roman Empire. This was the common calendar in Europe up to the 16th century (enduring even through the Great Schism of the 11th century). In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII introduced the Gregorian calendar. Since then, these two branches of Christianity have often observed Easter on different dates. This year marked a momentous occasion as the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches celebrated Easter at the same time. The confluence of a shared date for Easter will occur again in 2028 (April 16), 2031 (April 13) and 2034 (April 9). The Eastern Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople, Patriarch Bartholomew, and Pope Francis expressed a desire to take “a decisive step forward toward unity around a common date for Easter” as it will truly be able to “live the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea as a call to persevere on the path toward unity.”⁶

⁴ [“Toward the Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order: Commemorating the Council of Nicaea: Where Now for Visible Unity?”](#) World Council of Churches, 3.

⁵ [“Common Statement on the Filioque,”](#) Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church, May 27, 2024.

⁶ Kate Quiñones, [“CNA explains: Why Eastern and Western Easter Dates Differ – and Why 2025 Is Different,”](#) Catholic News Agency, April 17, 2025.

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Unity in diversity does not require suppressing disagreements or erasing differences, which would promote conformity. Rather, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Jesus Christ is grounded in a God who embraces differences, as revealed through the triune nature and vision of the divine. Inspired by the expansiveness and vastness of God's love, we of the universal church seek to learn from one another, gain wisdom from diverse perspectives and journey together toward greater unity.

This study guide acknowledges that 2025 marks a period of tumultuous times, particularly for marginalized communities worldwide. While the guide does not shy away from naming these emerging challenges in the United States and abroad, it encourages users to reengage with the Christian faith as expressed in this creedal format. The goal is to reflect on how the Christian faith can deepen Christian witness in our current contexts through an intercontextual reading of the council and the creed today. The aim is that these new understandings will strengthen ecumenical relationships and inspire future collaborations, such as standing united in showing mercy and compassion, and promoting human flourishing.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Christian unity, then as now, was not something to be taken for granted. Christian unity has never been easily attained, either historically or in the present day. What are some of the dynamics currently unfolding within Christian communities in our society that challenge Christian unity?
2. How do such broader sociopolitical factors shape and influence unity among Christians?
3. The ELCA ecumenical declaration "The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" states that "the unity of the church, as it is proclaimed in the Scriptures, is a gift and goal of God in Christ Jesus. Ecumenism is the joyous experience of the unity of Christ's people and the serious task of expressing that unity visibly and structurally to advance the proclamation of the Gospel for the blessing of humankind. Through participation in ecumenical activity, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America seeks to be open in faith to the work of the Spirit, so as to manifest more fully oneness in Christ." In what ways can we contribute to fostering Christian unity within our local settings?

FOR FURTHER READING

ELCA ecumenical declaration, "[The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.](#)"

"[WCC General Secretary Sermon: Unity in the Body of Christ,](#)" World Council of Churches, June 1, 2025.