

The Council of Nicaea: A Study Guide



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

A Letter from the Presiding Bishop

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

Introduction

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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.

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