

UNIT ONE:

The Content of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

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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.

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the Almighty,	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).
maker of heaven and earth, of all things, seen and unseen.	<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>
<p>[A NOTE ABOUT THE FIRST ARTICLE]</p> <p>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.</p>	
SECOND ARTICLE	
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,	<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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<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>

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God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,	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).
begotten, not made,	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.”
of one Being with the Father;	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.
through him all things were made.	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).
[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.	
For us and for our salvation,	<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>

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he came down from heaven,	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.
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary	incarnate: To become human (literally “in the flesh”). 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.
and became truly human.	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). [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.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;	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). 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”).
he suffered death and was buried.	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. 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).

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On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures;	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).
he ascended into heaven	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).
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.	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).
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.	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).

THIRD ARTICLE

We believe in the Holy Spirit.	
<p>[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).</p>	

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the Lord, the giver of life,	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).
who proceeds from the Father	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.
[and the Son]	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.
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,	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.
who has spoken through the prophets.	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.

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<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>

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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.