

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.