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

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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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

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.

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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