

UNIT SIX:

Women and the Council of Nicaea



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

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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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FOR FURTHER READING

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