UNIT EIGHT:
The Role of the Nicene Creed in the Lutheran Tradition

Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

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QUICK CONNECT

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (with the filioque) plays a normative role in the Lutheran Confessions (i.e., the Book of Concord) and in the teaching, liturgy and governing documents in the longer arc of the Lutheran tradition. In contrast to other Protestant traditions, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed remained a regular part of weekly Lutheran worship well into the 18th century. Its "recovery" in the liturgy in the early 20th century in Lutheran liturgical resources (reaffirming the bond between how the church confesses its faith in both teaching and worship) has meant that Lutherans are asked to engage the creed in a more comprehensive expression of Christian discipleship.

GLOSSARY/KEY TERMS

Mass: A term that is synonymous with the divine liturgy and necessarily includes Holy Communion. It refers to the historic principal parts of Christian worship on Sundays and festival days: Kyrie, Gloria, Collect/Prayer of the Day, Readings, Homily, Creed, Prayers of Intercession, Offering, Eucharistic Prayer/Words of Institution, Lamb of God, Distribution of the Consecrated Bread and Wine, and Dismissal. The Apology to the Augsburg Confession insists that Lutherans had not abandoned the Mass: "At the outset it is necessary, by way of preface, to point out that we do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it. Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord's Day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. We also keep the traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things"[1]

NARRATIVE

The controversies that initiated the Lutheran Reformation did not relate to the substance of the faith as articulated in the Nicene Creed. Though Lutherans' disputes with the Roman Catholic Church of that time were substantial, Lutherans adamantly affirmed the Christological and Trinitarian faith of the received tradition. As the reformation movements multiplied, however, Lutherans and Roman Catholics alike would find themselves in theological conflicts with other Protestant movements. These conflicts were often over the proper interpretation of the Christological and Trinitarian statements in the creed (namely the mode of Christ's presence in the eucharist, the work of the Holy Spirit through the sacraments, the nature of baptism, and the triune God) and even over the value of the creed itself. The Christological and Trinitarian debates of the 16th century were often tied to the liturgical and sacramental experiences of Christians and what constituted faithful, proper worship and discipleship.

It is perhaps best to begin our examination of the Nicene Creed in the Lutheran tradition with the liturgical tradition that shaped the Lutheran reformers, a tradition that they wholeheartedly handed over to future generations. The Christian life is founded upon worship of the living God, and it is through worship — especially in word and sacrament — that God works (as through instruments) to bless and restore the gathered assembly. It all begins in the sacrament of Baptism. There is a strong connection between Trinitarian theology and baptism. By affirming what God does for us in baptism, we may better proclaim the nature of the triune God. St. Athanasius (died 373) and St. Basil of Caesarea (330-379) both emphasized that since baptism makes

1 *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), Article XXIV, 258.

us holy, restoring the image of God and redeeming us from the powers of sin and death, and since all three persons of the Trinity are involved in this work, there can be no ranking or separation of the three divine persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As St. Basil affirms, "If we are obliged to believe in that into which we have been baptized, then we must make our confession of faith in the same terms as our baptism." [2] This way of thinking became normative in the Christian tradition, and the Lutheran reformers often referred specifically to this treatise when explaining both baptism and the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

The creeds help to shape a Christian worldview, and for late-medieval Catholicism and Lutheranism, this was primarily accomplished in the liturgy. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed entered the normal order of Sunday worship (i.e., the Mass, the divine liturgy) in the early sixth century. In the Western church, the inclusion of the creed in the liturgy made progress from west to east, starting in Spain and France in the eighth and ninth century and spreading to Charlemagne's court at Aachen and to wider use in western and northern Europe in the early 10th century. Under the influence of Holy Roman Emperor Henry II, the Nicene Creed was added to the liturgy in Rome in the early 11th century. Among the eastern churches, the Nicene Creed was used at both baptism and the divine liturgy. In the western churches, the Apostles' Creed was used at baptisms while the Nicene Creed was used in the Mass throughout the Middle Ages.

The Lutheran liturgical reforms did nothing to supplant the Nicene Creed in the Mass. Luther's *Formula Missae et Communionis* of 1523 (his reform of the Latin Mass) retained not only the Latin language but also the traditional place and purpose of the Nicene Creed (which, at that time, was between the gospel reading and the sermon). The creed was either spoken or sung. Luther even encouraged retaining the traditional piety of kneeling when the incarnation was proclaimed ("and became truly human"). Luther's "German Mass and Order of Service" (1526) was the ingenious result of his desire to create a liturgy that fit the tone and vocabulary of the German language. Though the German Mass was intended for use among "the unlearned lay folk," it has a beauty and creativity even in its simplicity. Instead of trying to fit German words and phrasing to Latin plainchant, Luther provided a paraphrase of the Nicene Creed in a German hymn, "Wir Glauben All' an Einen Gott" ("We All Believe in One True God," *ELW* 411). Luther's liturgical reforms ensured that the Nicene Creed would be affirmed (either in Latin or in German) every Sunday (though Olavus Petri's Swedish Mass of 1531 allows for either the Apostles' or Nicene Creed to be used).

This brief study cannot summarize the role of the Nicene Creed in Lutheran liturgies as Lutheranism became a global movement. For our context, however, here is a general summary of Lutheran worship in North America. The earliest Lutherans in the New World were Dutch, Swedish and German. When these communities had pastors, they followed the liturgies they brought with them from Europe. In some circumstances, when there were no Lutheran pastors and the community could not afford its own congregation, Lutherans often worshiped with their neighbors who had established congregations, usually Anglican, Presbyterian or Moravian. In the early 18th century, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711-1787), a missionary pastor, was sent to help serve and build up the German-speaking Lutheran communities in the English colonies. Muhlenberg was a person of extraordinary energy and dedication. One of his first tasks was to create a ministerium (basically, the first Lutheran synod), which became the Ministerium of Pennsylvania. Then, in 1748, Muhlenberg drafted a common liturgy, for use in the Ministerium, that included the Nicene Creed. In the two centuries that followed, there were many streams of immigrants from Lutheran areas of Europe (the various territories of what are today Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden). Each brought their liturgical preferences, which sometimes modeled the liturgy back home, while some wanted to adapt to the worship styles in the dominant

2 St. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 101.

forms of American Protestantism, especially Methodism and Presbyterianism. By the late 19th century, the Nicene Creed had receded from use in many Lutheran liturgies. In the early and middle 20th century, however, renewed interest in liturgical studies — both within Lutheranism and as an ecumenical interest — helped lead to a recovery of both earlier Lutheran and earlier Christian forms of worship. This broader, historical and ecumenical endeavor helped lead to the structure of liturgy reflected in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (the "green book") and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (the "cranberry book").

In the first 300 years of the Lutheran tradition, doctrine and teaching followed worship. At the Diet of Augsburg (1530), Lutherans asserted that they had not departed in any way from the faith articulated in the three chief creeds of the church (Apostles', Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Athanasian). In the Augsburg Confession, Article One ("Concerning God") and Article Three ("Concerning the Son of God") affirm the content of the Nicene Creed and condemn the same positions rejected at the council. Several Lutheran reformers (including Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon and Caspar Cruciger) wrote commentaries on the creeds, explaining their content and encouraging their use to proclaim the free and unmerited saving work of the triune God. They charged pastors and teachers to be "guardians" of the creeds, using them as clear guides for the interpretation of sacred Scripture concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus the creeds reflect the light of Christ, guiding us through difficult or unclear passages. As such, Lutherans affirmed that the creeds are essential for the clarity with which they summarize the heart of Scripture and for the comfort they can bring to those who seek a loving God. Therefore affirmation of the creeds has been part of the ordination vows for rostered leaders and in the constitutions of the ELCA and its predecessor bodies.

For those who wish to recover a sense of continuity with both the Lutheran tradition and the wider ecumenical movement, this understanding of the creeds is both instructive and inspiring for the work entrusted to the universal church today. For one such example, when the very first bilateral dialogue in the United States between Lutherans and Roman Catholics met in 1962, they chose the Nicene Creed as their first subject of study. Based on the unity of principles found in the shared expression of the creed, the dialogue has persisted for over 50 years, resulting in some groundbreaking ecumenical studies. While we seek to understand the historical context of the formation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed — in the heart of worship and the heart of Christian teaching — that work is toward a greater end: to preach Christ, crucified and risen, so that all may know the love of God through the Word of God made flesh.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does your congregation recite the Nicene Creed during the year as part of the liturgy? Is it ever sung (perhaps using Luther's hymn mentioned above, ELW 411)? How does the inclusion of the Nicene Creed in our worship reflect the values and beliefs of Lutheranism?

2. As you think about what it means to recite the creed in the liturgy, consider also what it means to do so in unity with Christians around the globe and throughout time.

3. These studies have mentioned how reciting the creed helps to shape a worldview, to indicate what it means to be a Christian, how Christians read and interpret Scripture, and how Christians are called to worship and to serve in the world. Where do you see your personal faith informed (or even challenged) by the creed? Where do you see your congregational, synodical and churchwide expressions of the church informed (or even challenged) by the creed?

4. Not all churches incorporate the Nicene Creed into their liturgy or worship services. How does inclusion of the creed in Lutheran worship support ecumenical relationships with other Christian traditions? What specific elements of the creed resonate with ecumenical efforts, and why are they significant for building relationships with other faith communities?

FOR FURTHER READING

Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, 1-III, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), specifically "The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church," 1-36.

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