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Editor's Note

Our articles for this issue are the three major plenary papers given at our last theological symposium in September 2025, which celebrated the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene creed. We are very pleased to publish these excellent papers; they are both scholarly and accessible and will reward the reader not only with new historical and theological insight but with a deeper sense of what the Nicene Creed actually is and how it functions in the church today.

John Mc Guckin's article explores the ecumenical significance of the creed, looking at the complex historical developments that led up and into Nicaea and the promulgation of the creed itself in AD 325. His careful recounting and interpretation of these events shows the dynamic that the church has had to struggle with in every era. The simple faith of catechumens bumps into the complexity of thought and language. Like us today, the Christians of the fourth century were searching for faithful ways to simplify and clarify their doctrine of Christ and so support the church's unity in the truth. Paradoxically, this task of working for unified and clear confession is anything but simple; it requires us to *enter into* intricate theological distinctions and arguments.

The same line of thought is present in the second paper, by Joel Elowsky. He says, "It takes work to understand what you are confessing." This essay examines the controversy with Arius over the divinity of Jesus, and the conflict over the proper use of key terms from the perspective of today's confessor of the Nicene Creed. He brings the issue to bear, as did the bishops at Nicaea, on the question of salvation. Who actually was it that died for us? Elowsky answers ". . . if our salvation depended on anyone less than God, we were in a world of hurt." This makes it necessary that our confession of the creed be not only external and formal but an experience, something that involves us deeply.

The last of the three papers, by Jason Lane examines the place of the Nicene Creed in the Reformation theology of Luther and Melanchthon. Luther moved to seeing Scripture as the sole authority for the church's teaching and life sometime before 1520 and ultimately rejected the prior claims of the pope and councils to be primarily normative. The question then arises for Lutherans as to what kind of authority the Nicene Creed (as the product of a council) actually has in our tradition. Lane examines the work of Luther and Melanchthon as well as recent scholarship on this issue. He traces the pathways through the documents and finally reflects: "Luther

simply presupposes the creed's importance for the church and puts it to work in his preaching, teaching, and biblical exegesis." Jason Lane provides examples of how Luther does this, noting where and how he deploys the Nicene Creed's distinctions and language.

All three of these papers deal with the historical material, but also take up the task of answering the question: What is the importance of the Nicene Creed *today*? If people don't even really know about it or what it means, is it even still important? As Elowsky admits, "that's a good question." Reading these articles will, I think, provide you with some thoughtful answers.

Stephen Pietsch
Dean of Theological Research and Publications

Encomium for Glenn A. Nielsen

It is my honor to speak these words of tribute to my dear colleague and friend, Dr. Glenn Nielsen, upon his retirement from forty-four years of ordained ministry. In doing so, I wish to reflect on four significant roles that he has filled as a faculty member during his thirty-six years of service at this seminary. Those roles are Preacher, Teacher, Director, and Encourager.

First, we thank God for Glenn's role as preacher. Preaching has been Glenn's great love, and throughout his ministry career he has undertaken to refine his skill as a master preacher. Glenn's first call from this seminary in 1982 was to Immanuel Lutheran Church in St. Charles, Missouri. It was there that his delight in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ was honed. In that parish setting, he developed the desire to grow in the preaching task through graduate study, first at Concordia Seminary, where he received his STM in 1987, and then on to Northwestern University to earn a PhD in 1993. Northwestern is a premier school in communication, and that is what Glenn studied for the sake of communicating the Gospel, especially through homiletics. In his preaching he has employed rhetorical arts to proclaim the timeless Gospel in fresh and creative ways. I try never to miss a sermon that he preaches in chapel, because I know he will ignite my imagination with metaphors and narrative as well as involve my multiple intelligences. His preaching engages not only the ears but also the eyes as he employs visual objects to reinforce theological truths. Beyond the seminary chapel, Glenn recognized that the most authentic context for preaching is in congregations, so throughout these decades he has continued to regularly preach in parish settings, including Grace Chapel in north county and his home church of Timothy in the city. This has kept him fresh and real in his preaching because he has remained committed to connecting with ordinary people in the pews. Most importantly, he has remained committed to the core task of preaching—the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we thank God for Dr. Nielsen's role as teacher. His love of preaching led him to a love of forming preachers through homiletical instruction. Professor Nielsen was called to the faculty of this seminary in 1990. Yes, 1990! That's over three and a half decades that he has taught seminary students to preach! His teaching has transferred his passion and skills for preaching to multiple generations of students. Through these years he has continuously taught the first-year homiletics course, introducing seminary students to the craft of preaching and laying the foundation

for faithful and fruitful proclamation of the Word. He has passed on his interest in creative preaching to students in both core courses and elective ones, including at the doctoral level. Almost twenty-five years ago I audited his Doctor of Ministry course entitled "Current Trends in Homiletics." Afterwards I told him that it was the best preaching course I had ever participated in. I stand by that assessment to this day. And remember, Professor Nielsen's doctorate was in communication, so he uses effective communication and pedagogical skills to engage his students in the classes. It's no surprise that he is frequently asked by graduates to come to their districts and circuits to teach them more about preaching and was commissioned by the Synod to teach a module in its "Preach the Word" series. His teaching has also been passed on in print, with articles and preaching resources that are too numerous to detail here.

The third role that Glenn Nielsen has performed for us at Concordia Seminary is that of director. I could say "administrator," but I think that the title "director" is more fitting because that is what he did. Not only did he direct programs, but especially he directed *people*. He directed them to serve the Lord! He has been the Director of the DMin Program, Director of Placement, and most recently Director of Certification. But, of course, he is most recognized for his role as Director of Vicarage. He assumed this role as a very young man in 1990 and continued in it until 2023—a whopping thirty-three years! That has got to be a record for any directorship at this seminary! Why did he stay in that role so long? It's because he valued its impact. And he made vicarage an impactful experience for our seminary students (this includes the internship experience for deaconesses). Year after year the Noel-Levitz surveys of our final year students and graduates identify vicarage as one of the most formative components of pastoral and diaconal education. This is due largely to Glenn's influence.

The fourth and final role that Dr. Nielsen embodied is that of encourager. This is not an official role to which he was assigned, but an informal one that he voluntarily embraced. He regularly brings encouraging words to his students, faculty colleagues, and program staff members. I experienced this immediately upon arrival at the seminary in 1998. I took over the directorship of the Doctor of Ministry program from Glenn, and he patiently and caringly guided me through that transition as I learned the ropes of its responsibility. I also experienced Glenn's encouragement and guidance in a challenging time in the mid-2000s while serving as Acting Director of Placement. In those years we had a bumper crop of assignments—over three hundred vicars and candidates to assign at one Call Day! Glenn was the Director of Vicarage, and we collaborated to find assignments for all these vicars and pastoral candidates. What little hair I had turned white, and what lot of hair Glenn had turned whiter! But he encouraged, aided, and supported me through the challenge. His encouraging demeanor has been the hallmark of his personal and pastoral visits to vicars and their supervisors every autumn (he visited all the vicarage sites over a two-year period). He

encourages all of us with his daily offerings of jokes, lifting our spirits with humor. And as encouragement also comes in the form of comfort, he has used the ministry of Noah the Comfort Dog to bring comfort and encouragement to many on and off the seminary campus!

Through these forty-four years of ordained ministry and thirty-six years of service to Concordia Seminary, this "Son of Encouragement," Glenn Nielsen, has been encouraged by his wonderful wife, Sue. She is the one who supported him during his graduate studies in St. Louis and Chicago. She is the one who remained at home with their four children during Glenn's numerous trips away visiting vicars, presenting at conferences, and meeting with district presidents. She is the one who journeyed with Glenn through the valley of the shadow of death at the untimely loss of their son Matthew, together bearing the burden of grief and sharing the hope of the resurrection. As we honor Glenn today, we also honor you, Sue, for the service and sacrifice you offered in sharing your husband with the seminary, the church, and with us! We also thank Glenn's three living children—Holly, Tim, and Beth—who are here today, for sharing your dad with us during those years you were growing up on this seminary campus. Thank you all!

Glenn, the resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus has accompanied you through these decades of life and ministry. Moreover, he has equipped and strengthened you to fill these roles of Preacher, Teacher, Director, and Encourager. We thank him, the Lord of the Church, for the gift that he has given us in you! And we give him glory for all that he has accomplished in and through you to serve his church, to serve us.

David Peter

In Memoriam
Paul L. Schrieber (1949–2026)

The Reverend Doctor Paul L. Schrieber died in the Lord Jesus on Thursday, March 5, 2026. The funeral service was held at his home church, St. John's Lutheran Church in Red Bud, Illinois on Friday, March 13. The responsive Psalm was Psalm 14, the Old Testament reading was Job 19:21–27, the Epistle reading was 2 Corinthians 4:13–18, and the Gospel reading was John 10:11–16. His pastor, the Reverend Mark Winkelman served as the liturgist, the Reverend Doctor Jeffrey Gibbs served as the preacher, basing his message on Proverbs 30:5, and the Reverend Doctor Thomas J. Egger served as the lector. Interment took place at St. John's Lutheran Cemetery.

A 1975 Master of Divinity graduate of Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois, Paul Schrieber received his Doctor of Theology from Concordia Seminary (1983) and his Bachelor of Arts from Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne, Indiana (1971). He joined the Seminary faculty in 1981. Before joining the seminary, he served as a visiting instructor (1976) and was a faculty member at Concordia Teachers College in River Forest, Illinois, for five years. He retired in 2003 after twenty-two years of distinguished service as a professor of exegetical theology. In 2008 the rank of professor emeritus was conferred on Paul Schrieber during the 169th Commencement at the Seminary.

In addition to his professorial duties, he was active in preaching and teaching in many settings, including ethnic minority ministries. He also served on the former LCMS Board for Communication Services and was a member of the KFUO Radio board. He was also a musician who shared his gifts by playing timpani for special services at the Seminary, and he served as a church organist and accompanist for numerous choirs.

It was my great joy and privilege to serve with Paul on the faculty of Concordia Seminary. Paul was able to bring the Old Testament to life and reveal in a powerful way how its theology still speaks to the church and Christians. His doctoral dissertation of 1983 under Horace Hummel dealt with the Aaronic priesthood, where he presented a thoroughgoing refutation of source-form-redaction critical positions and gave a positive treatment of the theology of these texts. He was able to show how the priesthood of ancient Israel through Christ found its continuity with both the pastoral office and the priesthood of all believers. (See his article "Priests Among Priests: The Office of the Ministry in Light of the Old Testament Priesthood," *Concordia Journal* in July

1988.) On the pages of the *Concordia Journal* Paul dealt with the topic of the Ministry in the Lutheran Confessions and Walther as well as writing many book reviews and homiletical helps. And in the classroom his students appreciated his excellent and faithful teaching. Throughout the years Paul served the Lord and his church mightily and steadfastly despite suffering under Parkinson's disease.

Seminary President Thomas J. Egger comments: "Paul served Concordia Seminary from 1981 to 2003. He was a faithful servant, a stimulating teacher, and a blessing to many. In my seminary studies, I was blessed to have several classes with Dr. Schrieber, who instilled in his students a love of learning, a devotion to Scripture and a humble dependence upon God the Holy Spirit in the task of reading and reflecting upon these sacred texts. I look forward to seeing him again at the resurrection of the dead."

We give thanks to Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord of the church, for the life and service of Paul L. Schrieber. Most fitting to Paul are the words of the hymn "For All the Saints" sung at his funeral service:

> Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might;
> Thou, Lord, their captain in the well-fought fight;
> Thou in the darkness drear, their one true light.
> Alleluia! Alleluia!

And we remember the words of the apostle John:

> And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them." (Revelation 14:13)

Paul R. Raabe

In Memoriam
David Wollenburg (1945-2026)

David Wollenburg—pastor, chaplain, professor, husband, and father—was a man of truly extra-ordinary service to our Lord and those he was called to serve. What I learned in knowing David in the small slice of his rich life of service, is for me an icon of whom David was to all those he served and supported in his four score years as a baptized child of God.

As God's child and disciple of Jesus, David was joyfully grateful for Christ's promises, consistently Gospel focused in mission, caring toward others, firm in confession, decisive in priorities, unflappable in conflict, wise in situational awareness, clear in direction, creative in pedagogy, forward looking in resolve, patient under pressure, and always encouraging toward others because his hope was in Christ alone. I experienced these qualities as he advised and mentored me as the director of the SMP program which he helped to establish and served as its first director. I since learned these traits characterized all David did in his many areas of service!

David was first and foremost a pastor. He was called to serve four congregations in the pastoral office. As one of his daughters shared, it was a joy to watch him "pastor." Pastor Wollenburg's clear preaching and teaching of the Gospel was combined with personal care for each member of the flock. While his calls to parish ministry were at times interrupted by other calls to military chaplaincy and seminary education, he never ceased being a pastor who taught the Word of God and was present for Christ's sheep.

In his seminary student days, David was encouraged to enter chaplain training to be ready to serve both his church and country. After being a pastor and seminary admissions counselor for several years, he was called to active duty as a chaplain in the United States Air Force. Over his career, Chaplain Wollenburg served thirty-three years in active and reserve duty in the Air Force and Air National Guard as both a minister to servicemen and educator of chaplains. Those who served with Colonel Wollenburg and were ministered by him describe how he had the gift of being straightforward (even blunt) while also being very approachable. You knew he cared.

David loved his seminary and his synod. During tumultuous days in the early 1970s after professors and students left Concordia Seminary during a time of steadfast confession of the authority of God's Word, David was called to help rebuild the student body as the first admissions counselor. Later, when the church needed him to return as professor, he answered the call to teach and helped pioneer pastoral

education using emerging distance technology. As he taught classes, he also served as director of the DELTO (Distance Education Leading to Ordination) Program and was the first director of the SMP (Specific Ministry Pastor) Program. David was well qualified, not only because of pastoral and organizational experience but also academically. His Doctor of Ministry thesis surveyed the history of pastoral formation in the LCMS and examined use of distance education in the DELTO Program. Earlier in his career, Dr. Wollenburg also wrote a much-cherished work seminarians have used for years, *Campus Symbolism: Devotions for New Students.*

His last accolade is also the most cherished. While Pastor-Chaplain-Professor Wollenburg was answering those other calls, the vocation of husband and father was his top priority. And with father comes grandfather and great-grandfather (PawPaw and Great-PawPaw) to twenty progenies as of this writing. His dear wife, Jerry, of fifty-eight years and four children attest to how their home was a place where God's grace was freely shared, and life was lived in the love of their Lord. At his funeral, his grandchildren read God's Word and sang praises to God as they comforted one another with the Gospel in which David and Jerry nurtured their family, in which they also found comfort in 2022 when their son Carl passed away.

At his funeral, David's service to others was also experienced as the preacher and former seminary colleague, Andy Bartelt, pointed us to his favorite text: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful life" (1 Peter 2:9). As a fellow chaplain and mentee, Steve Hokana from the LCMS chaplaincy office, shared in words of remembrance during the service, "Baptized and redeemed, and forgiven! Everything David did reflected his gratitude to Jesus who loved him first." To that I can only say, Amen!

W. Mart Thompson

Articles

1700 Years On
Nicaea's Paradigmatic Status for the Oecumenical Faith

John A. McGuckin

John McGuckin is the Nielsen Emeritus Professor of Early and Byzantine Church History at Union Theological Seminary, and emeritus professor of Byzantine Christian Studies at Columbia University, New York. He currently serves in the theology faculty of Oxford University, and as professorial fellow at St. Irenaeus Institute, Radboud University, Nijmegen. He is the Archpriest and rector of St. Gregory's Orthodox Chapel in St. Annes on Sea, UK.

Thank you all, so much, for the invitation to address Concordia on this occasion of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. I would like to look at the issue in four short treatments. The first is a very brief historical outline of what that meeting was and why it happened; the second will be about its theological statement, and whether that met or resolved the issues in crisis, in whole or in part; the third will be a look at how it tried to lay down a standard of legal governance of churches; and lastly, to what extent this first of all international Christian legislatures can still offer us any useful paradigms of authoritative contemporary Christian ecumenicity.

The Historical Background

We all probably know the outlines of the story, so let me just rehearse it quickly, to set an initial context. We know a lot about an idealized view of the church in the late first century from *Acts of the Apostles* but have very little knowledge concerning the actualities of its detailed devolvement and governmental principles over the next one hundred and fifty years. But we can deduce strong probabilities from what would emerge later. The first is that the various local communities spread extensively, especially in the nexus of the coastal ports and inland trading hubs. These very early communities seem to have been aligning with each other on the principle of observed best practice: something gained by looking over their shoulders at other Christian

communities in their purview. This was how they shared what would become a liturgical canon of holy scriptures and developed a spreading system of governance by Elders increasingly directed by a senior Overseer or Episcopos; known to us now by the early English word "Bishop." Bishops stirred the communal developmental pot considerably. Already by the year 150, Tertullian mentions that the Greek Christian world regularly met in common gatherings of bishops of a larger area (a province) which were known as synods, or "comings together." These synods, by the mid-200s, had become a standard way of Christian communities to resolve larger-scale problems, or to set down standards of good practice. To this synodical province-wide system we might add that certain urban centers of the Late Roman world were actually supercities which had attracted bright talent from all over the world (including Christian intelligentsia) and whose historic culture, advanced legal courts, and schools made them obvious ports of last appeal in times of trouble. Such cities playing that role among the very early Christians were Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. To their cultural ascendancy was also added an impressive Christian heritage. As well as a center of canon law, Rome was also the city of martyrs; Alexandria was the world center for literary analysis but also renowned for its philosophers and theologians; Antioch was not only a city of rhetoricians but also a cradle of the original Gospels and a trendsetter of liturgical style. These super cultural centers set the development of international commonality in the second and third century church.

By the middle of the third century three ecclesiastical cogwheels of: episcopal synods, super city precedences, and emergences of notable theological writers, created the potentiality for international Christian tensions (wrong gear selection as it were) on a larger scale than ever before. The particular gear slip that resulted in Nicaea started almost exactly one hundred years before the crisis occurred. Around 220, a theologian in that febrile city of Alexandria composed the first great systematic work of theology Christians had yet seen: *On First Principles*. It has authority and brilliance in many parts. It gave the church rules of exegesis that would become definitive; but it also tried to present evangelical metaphysics in terms recognizable to philosophers, and in so doing added what many simpler Christians regarded, at the time, as dangerously speculative innovations. The bishop of his supercity, Demetrios of Alexandria, was alarmed by the book and tried to censure Origen by an appeal to his fellow Roman super bishop, Pope Pontianus. But other bishops supported Origen and ordained him as a presbyter in Palestine where he set up the first known Christian university.

One of his many deep *scholia*, or questions posed to his senior class, was the issue: if the Son of God was born of the all-originating Father, was his existence within history or out of it? And was his rank equal or inferior to that of the Father who begot him? We should remember here that a *scholion*, as posed in the ancient schools, was a question that the professor did not intend to fully answer, since it was designed to be an intellectual workbench for the assiduous student.

Alexander eventually called a local synod of his other Egyptian bishops and excommunicated Arius.

This is our key background: but now we move onward a century to the year 320. Various schools in different parts of the Christian world had still been mooting this issue of advanced metaphysics. Alexander, the current fourth century bishop of the Alexandrian church, himself was a devoted reader of Origen, and had set up a regular seminar for his clergy to discuss points of theology. He and his close associates tended to the preferred overall Origenian solution that the Son of God was born before time and thus could be said to have an origin but not a beginning, since the latter was a time-bound notion. But one of his senior presbyters, named Arius, had trained in a different school, at Antioch and, in a meeting in 320, challenged his bishop's basic premises, by insisting at the symposium that if the Father gave the Son an origination, then the Son logically must have had a beginning in his origination and before that could not have existed. We can imagine that this challenge stopped an otherwise happy clergy retreat, and since the issue would not lie down and go away, Alexander eventually called a local synod of his other Egyptian bishops and excommunicated Arius for teaching that the Son of God had a beginning in time, and was thus a creature, albeit a very exalted one: which is probably what Arius intended to say as well—but which was a corollary, or implication, of the initial argument. Knowing his rights under canon law, however, Arius appealed against this judgement to other important bishops,[1] especially those whom he knew shared his views: not least Eusebius of Nicomedia, the incumbent of the imperial city, who had the ear of the emperor Constantine, and who now gave Arius his support.

Arius's supporters in Alexandria started writing a Greek slogan on the walls: *En Pote Hote Ouk En* "There was a time when he (the Word) was not," to which Alexander and his deacon Athanasius, arranged to have their supporters go around and add "*Ouk*" to the front of the phrase: the absolute negation: "There was not a time when he was not." Arius also produced a poetic version of his teachings on Christ and the Word (the *Thalia*) hardening his position in several ways by searching out biblical proof texts that he applied literally, insisting, for example, that the Book of Proverbs[2] taught that God "made" Wisdom in the beginning as a medium of his creative works. This was now a perfect storm involving all the core elements that coalesced to make a theological crisis in antiquity: first, the involvement of a supercity episcopacy; second, the emergence of a controversial theologian's writing in opposition to a major bishop and his synod; third, a clash of different provincial synods; and fourth, a public challenge to the commonality of belief on a major issue, which had hitherto been vaguely presumptive more than clearly formulated.

An added complication was that although the emperor Constantine was clearly a friend of the church, he was currently embroiled in the final states of the civil war he had initiated twenty years earlier, now in the final stages of unseating the eastern emperor Licinius who had himself begun to classify the church as his enemy, thereby allowing Constantine to appear as the champion and liberator of all eastern Christians. Constantine wanted to use the church structures in the East, especially the superintendent powers of local bishops, to advance his own reach into the hinterland of the Greek territories. The present state of episcopal disunity rising out of the clash between Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Alexander of Alexandria, frustrated his plan to elevate bishops to the rank of imperial magistrates. This was why, in autumn of 324, Constantine sent a letter to Alexandria urging reconciliation, in the hands of Hosius, his Latin episcopal consultant. In November of that same year Hosius, presumably following the emperor's mandate, directed a council at Antioch at which Eustathius was elected to the episcopate there, and supporters of the Arian cause were deposed. A more general synod was announced at the emperor's pleasure at Ancyra for 325, which was later changed to Constantine's own base camp at Nicaea[3] so that those attending could also participate in his own twentieth anniversary celebrations. Bishops were allowed the use of state transports to facilitate their travel. The local bishop at Nicaea, Theognis, was a supporter of Arius and knew his colleague Eusebius of Caesarea would support him also. Ranged against them from the outset would be the core group of Alexander of Alexandria and his deacon Athanasius, Eustathius of Antioch, Hosius of Cordoba and the two delegates of the Roman Pope Sylvester.[4]

The Nicene Statement of Faith

The meeting at Nicaea, was the greatest gathering of international bishops the Christian church had ever witnessed to date. It opened on May 20, 325, and closed on August 25. It produced its famous statement of faith, the Creed[5], or *Ekthesis*, on June 19. The meeting opened at Constantine's field palace in an atmosphere of great excitement. Delegates were gathering from all over the Roman world and a mass of other attendees had also turned up: monks, merchants, and especially rhetoricians who spent several weeks beforehand giving sets of philosophical speeches to anyone who wanted to dispute, on what intellectual issues needed to be clarified and how they thought best to do it. By the end of May the imperial troops sent away the non-essential parties, allowing only bishops to enter the imperial hall for the proceedings.

The bishops also had, clearly, already been busy. It seems their first idea of solution was to have submitted written denouncements of all their enemies to the emperor directly, but this was foiled by Constantine himself, who began proceedings by ostentatiously bringing a burning brazier in before his throne and one by one burning all the petitions and mutual recriminations he had received from everyone. After thus clearing the ground to make it obvious that what followed was to be the official trial of

events, he began to direct business as if it were some kind of magisterial occasion. This was his inauguration of a plan that he later put into formal legal effect when he raised all Christian bishops to the status of parallel local magistrates, able to hear the causes of all those who appealed to them in local civil cases, bypassing the provincial law courts.[6]

The arguments among the bishops were directed by Hosius, the emperor's chosen delegate through whom he tried to bring the assembly to uniformity; but it proved increasingly difficult to come to a general resolution. Bishops Maris of Chalcedon and Secundus of Ptolemais offered a statement of faith drawn up in agreement with Arius's theology and objecting to the synod's condemnation of his *Thalia* treatise. They too would eventually be condemned by the synod: which shows how things were going generally against the Arian theology; but there was a lot of resistance among the assembled bishops to commit to anything deeply specific about the actual question at hand: the nature of the divine relation of Father and Son: an apparently straightforward enough question to ask the church in what was now its fourth century. Was the Word-Logos God in an absolute sense or not? Was Jesus divine or not?

Of course, the Arius-Alexander dispute, built over the head of Origen, had made that simplicity of question a lot more complicated. The synodal majority seemed to have early on accepted the solution Origen himself preferred: namely that a being originated outside time could still be called eternal. What now emerged as of issue in the relation of divine Father and Son was this question: Could one be of the same being, without actually being that same being? I'll run that once again, shall I? Could the Son be of the Father's being (the same essential nature) without being just a synonym for the actual Father. And if he could, so as to be truly divine, how could this be squared with the Christian confession that God is one, not multiple? It was a rather fearful, but understandable, reluctance to get into a morass of new, non-biblical, theological statements that held the synod in a stalemate. But by June it was obvious that something had to make a breakthrough.

That chance came with the issue of the trial at Nicaea of one of the church's leading contemporary intellectuals: bishop Eusebius of Caesarea. He had been censured at Hosius's earlier synod of Antioch in 324 for objecting to Hosius's preferred refutation of Arianism by affirming that the Son was the same substance as the Father (*Homoousion*), and thus divine, just as he was. Eusebius was head of the university town of Caesarea Palestina, and was the chief guardian of the school of the famous Origen. His objection was not rooted in his desire to defend Arius, rather to defend the point that his ancient mentor had

It was a rather fearful reluctance to get into a morass of new, non-biblical, theological statements that held the synod in a stalemate.

insisted on: that divinity is totally devoid of all material substance, wholly spiritual; and therefore, a term like "same substance" was a very inappropriate materialist analogy to apply to Godhead. Because of his resistance at Antioch in 324 Eusebius had been provisionally deposed from office. Now, at Nicaea, he appealed that decision and was rehabilitated because he offered to the assembly his church's ancient baptismal creed as proof of his faith in the divine Son of God: the creed of the ancient and venerable church of Jerusalem.

Here, the synod members saw a green light out of their stalemate. This liturgical creed could be the basis of restating the fundamental faith of the whole church. All it needed on top of the old traditional statement that Eusebius offered was a set of explanatory amendments. But these amendments the bishops now offered could thus be seen not as innovations at all, simply glosses on what the ancient creed had always meant. So, the solution proposed itself, and this is why the Nicene statement of faith is fundamentally a baptismal affirmation such as that required of any neophyte with a few amendments. If anyone criticized the bishops for making the faith too technical, they could well reply that they had only restated what any novice was required to know about Christianity, with a few clarifications.

Well actually, those clarifications are quite extensive, and very subtle. To the very simple credal confession of a new believer, namely that: "I believe in the Almighty Father who made all things, and in his heavenly Son who came enfleshed to save us by suffering and dying, rising to glory and returning as Judge in the eschaton, and also in the Holy Spirit"—(a quincunx within a triad, any structuralist might notice) the synodical fathers added no less than seven distinct amendments or extending-clarifications: six of them to do with Christology, and the final one to make specific the church's belief in the Holy Spirit. That final statement about the Holy Spirit they deliberately left bare and exposed: for it had been church *praxis* up until then not to make any written statement about the Holy Spirit and only permit the baptizing bishop to give a secret discourse on his nature and work on the evening before the actual baptisms. This archaic "doctrine of the secret" (the *arcana mystica*) was not going to be altered by the Nicene synod, and in fact it took another fifty-seven years, until the Synod of Constantinople in 382, before those clauses on the Spirit were extended and clarified.

Athanasius of Alexandria used the homoousion as a quick litmus test to see if his disputants were Orthodox or Arian.

So, those six christological amendments to the creed represent all the chief work that the synod agreed to set its hand to. I won't go into all of them. Clearly some are simple dittographies of the preceding clause; a rhetorical flourish meant to emphasize

by repetition with a nuanced crescendo. For example to its statement of the true divinity of the Son of God the synod took the original baptismal affirmation: that *Jesus was the Son of God through whom all things were made* (two statements taken directly from the New Testament[7]); and added on to it a fivefold repetitive emphatic list: The Only Begotten, Begotten before all ages, Light of Light, True God of True God, Begotten not made. Each of these statements was boldly offered to stand against Arian theology: so, in that sense the synod members were being proactive and decisive. Even so, they played very safe indeed, for each of those five statements is a fairly explicit citation of the apostolic faith as already recorded in the New Testament texts.[8]

What has often been said to stand out in this process as a completely nonbiblical nail-in-the-coffin for Arianism, as it were, is the seventh affirmation: that the Son is of the same essence as the Father: *Homoousion*. We note that no attempt is made to semantically define *Homoousion*. But it is incorrect to say that this is wholly unbiblical. In the first instance it is clearly an integral part of that list of six earlier statements all set to the subordinate explication of the creedal line: "The Only Begotten of the Father." As such, like the other clauses, it is a subordinate biblical exegesis in its integral character and can only be read that way. Secondly, it is, of and in itself, a biblical allusion to Hebrews 1:3. The modern NIV version reads this as follows: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." What the Greek actually says is, that the Son is the: παπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ: the radiance of God's glory (which is where the clause "light of light" came from) and the "very imprint of his substance." And this is because, until much later in the fifth century, the words *hypostasis* and ousia were both synonyms for the essence of a thing. And in this instance, it can be clearly seen that the simpler term *homoousion* is used here as a stand in for Hebrews' use of *hypostasis*.

The great Anti-Arian theologian Athanasius of Alexandria, who was present at Nicaea, and who succeeded his bishop and mentor Alexander of Alexandria six months after the council, used the homoousion for the rest of his life as a quick litmus test to see if his disputants were Orthodox or Arian; but in his more private writings he expressed some regret that the term used at the synod was so vague and so ready to be mocked by the intelligentsia as open to materialist interpretations. He himself wished they had used the phrase ταυτότης της ουσιας or "identity of essence." That insight would have to brew for another generation until the later Cappadocian Fathers spelled out a more complete Trinitarian theology in the following generation.

So, overall it is clear that the synodical fathers took a rather simple set of statements about the Son of God, as found in the old Jerusalem baptismal creed; namely that he was the Son of the Father through whom the world was made and, in opposition to the Arian teaching that he was essentially an elevated creature, amplified them with specific New Testamental glosses to show that the Son was also

divine, within, not additional to, the divine essence of the Father. On such a basic and important point of theology—one which in ancient times, and even today for many in Judaism and Islam, seemed to external critics to compromise Monotheism—the fathers of Nicaea were very tentative and very careful in no instance to go beyond the apostolic witness of the New Testament. Even the famous *homoousion*, as we have seen, was a recycled New Testament confession.

But there is one other aspect of their theological construct that we ought to notice: and it is equally important but perhaps less noticed than this. Read the christological statements closely and slowly and one clear message emerges: all of the attributed aspects (what they called the *epinoiai*) of the Son of God, are attributed to the self-same subject whether those aspects are what we might call "heavenly" (such as eternal generation, or creative power in the making of the cosmos), or "earthly" ones (such as suffering and dying). The Son of God, whether in his glory, or his passion, is addressed as one and the same single subject. The logical corollary of this—and it was not something the conciliar fathers deliberately constructed but something that had been in the traditional creed from the outset—was that Jesus himself can be said to be divine. And yet, as every Christian knew, he was truly human. How that single divine subjectivity could be combined with an acceptance of different states of being, one unlimited, one circumscribed, was not something they either realized they needed to address or felt willing even to go there. That would be a slow-fused theological bomb that would detonate in the following generation and be the subject of intense and controversial debate across the next six oecumenical councils from the fifth into the eighth centuries. It would cause a profound and still unhealed fracture in the eastern Orthodox churches after the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and to this day the issue still marks deep differences in the spirituality of the western catholic and protestant communions.

The Anathemata and Canonical Legislation of Nicaea

Such was the theological workload, and the accomplishment of the Synod of Nicaea. In case the simpler folk did not quite get what the christological acclamations had done, which was a worry for the bishops attending, as they all knew they had to give an account to their churches when they got home, the synod appended to the credal text six cannon blasts aimed at the essence of the Arian theology: damning six reductionist statements concerning the Son of God's eternity and ontological unchangeability. It quoted them from Arius's writings and then anathematized them outright. We are able to see the account Eusebius of Caesarea wrote back to his church members to explain the events of Nicaea in which he makes himself out to be the hero of the event and everyone else coming round to his views more or less. It is a fantasy history, but perhaps typical of the way receptionism is shaped by the local version of events given. This tendency of rhetoric to obscure as much as it clarifies perhaps

explains for us why there are so many repetitive dittographies in the final version of the *Ekthesis*: so as to rule out excessively elastic exegesis on the part of dissenters.

The work of the synod was not quite finished, however. Having got the clergy together in such an international assembly it seemed good to the emperor and to the senior super-bishops to resolve matters of international governance that had long been causing mutterings between churches. Constantine wanted the high clergy to serve as local magistrates and here was their chance to put their own house polity in order. To the theological work of the synod, therefore, they added "canons." Canon is the term for a law or law-code in the church. The Greek word means "rule" or "measure." Nicaea produced twenty canons.[9]

The first legislates that any man who has voluntarily agreed to castration should be denied promotion to the priesthood. Some have mistakenly interpreted this as indicating a continuance of Jewish religious law that demanded bodily integrity for those serving in the temple. But the law here explicitly allows those who have been castrated by slave masters or in time of war to be admitted to orders freely. It is not a Jewish influence here. What is really going on in this canon is an attack against one of the leading Arian theologians of the day: Leontios of Antioch. He was a skillful writer and favored by the imperial household. As a presbyter of Antioch, he fell in love with a young girl called Eustolia, and unable to marry her, wanted to live with her without the imputation of sexual immorality. He chose castration which was, in that era, regarded as an acceptable ascetic pathway for a pagan philosopher; but his lifestyle was looked on askance by many in the church. Pressure eventually caused him to be suspended from clerical orders but in 344, during the Arian ascendancy in Antioch he was placed on the episcopal throne by the emperor Constantius II. So, this first canon, as well as the third which is related, is a specific and additional attack on one of the leading Arian writers of the era.

The second canon and many others of the twenty after it, called for a stabilization of church procedures after a long period of persecution where necessity often led to cutting of corners. Canon two specifically demands that no one should be baptized from paganism and then swiftly made presbyter or bishop. In earlier times of troubles, the local Christians had sometimes sought the aid of legally trained pagans, magistrates or rhetors, to protect them and their corporate rights; offering them the episcopal throne in return. This canon implies such protection is no longer necessary under a Christian emperor. Many of the other laws are designed to regularize a very disrupted Eastern church as it emerged from major persecutions and radical secessions caused by conflicting theologies. The chief theme among the twenty laws is that bishop's authority should be moderated by provincial synods where general good counsel could serve to underline good practice (canons 4–5). Bishops and priests ought not to move around, and no one should ordain outside his own jurisdiction. The canons also set terms for the readmission of dissidents and believers who had denied the faith in times

of persecution. Converts from sects which confessed the Trinity were to be admitted generously, with their sacraments acknowledged and their ranks preserved. Those from unitarian sects were all to be admitted as laity needing baptism.

Canon six established the principle of major capital cities of the empire having a kind of senior supervisory role. Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch were most in mind here. Jerusalem was also admitted to this list in terms of honor (canon 7), though not necessarily of jurisdictional sway. This system grew rapidly afterwards into the governance of international Christianity by means of five patriarchal sees. Constantinople, once it had grown to high imperial status in the late fourth century was added into this mix; and the grinding together of these four super-sees through later Christian history (for Jerusalem always remained a venerable by-water of later Christian affairs) caused almost as many crises as problems it ever solved.

Does Nicaea have any abiding paradigm status today?

Even from this account, which barely gives a sense of the tensions, arguments, and background conflicts which caused the Council in the first place, it must surely be sensed that the meeting could well be seen as a bewilderment to many who attended. And yet, in terms of the longer history, the result was simplified into a great victory over the Arian theologians who had suggested that Jesus was a holy creature of God, but not part of the divine being. It did not advance any significant distance at all into solving the question that its clear affirmation obviously caused—which was how could Christianity affirm Monotheism and yet also sustain the full divinity of the Son of God alongside the Father. This would be left to a later generation of theologians at the two Councils of Constantinople in 381 and 382. Their work, and their synodical creed, has also gone down in history, and is now commonly known as the Nicene Creed, and recited at the eucharistic liturgy in many churches: so great was their reverence for the foundational work of the Council of 325, and their desire not to be seen departing from it by the additions they made to it. As part of many academic celebrations that have been occurring all over the world in this anniversary year, I was recently invited to an Anglican event in Britain, discussing the Nicene Creed in detail, and when I received the papers suggesting how the invitees should shape their remarks, it dawned on me that the conference organizers had mistaken the synod of 382 for that of 325, and had no idea at all of their mistake. So, I thought it best to slip away discreetly rather than spoil the whole tenor of their meeting.

Such simplifications, rendering great events into cartoons, as it were, that can easily be passed on so that the substance of the message survives the complexities of the historians, scholars, and theologians (who are not all the same thing by any means) are an important part of receptionism in the church. And tonight, I would like to end by considering Nicaea for what it might really mean to us in this day and age. Few believers in my experience as theologian and priest ever come to me tormented by the

issue of whether eternal generation rules out or can include supremacy of being. Few believers ever seem to me to be greatly occupied in their religious lives by issues of the intertrinitarian relations. And that is probably just as well. But that does not mean that somewhere in the church such foundational metaphysics need to have been wisely addressed. The Nicene fathers, at the simplest level, taught clearly enough that Christian faith, from its biblical origins, confesses the historical Christ as the eternal Son of God who shares the essential being of God the Father. It makes that affirmation not on the basis of metaphysical speculation per se, but rather on the close reading of the many liturgical confessions of praise of the work of Jesus, which are found in the New Testament texts: and there they found that work to be summed up in the dynamic that Christ presented the Father absolutely and authentically to the world and in so doing saved that world from error and alienation from God.

Few believers ever seem to me to be greatly occupied in their religious lives by issues of the intertrinitarian relations.

Simplifications can often be good and important things in their own right. And Nicaea can still offer many happy hours of metaphysical discourse for those who wish to go along that road. But for most of us present this evening there is another lovely simplification that Nicaea can and should offer us: and it is this: it stands as the one great syllogistical synopsis of the New Testament faith in Christ that so many generations of Christian believers have always looked back on as a flag flying on the beachhead. It's role as the flag of common Christian identity is something that is not likely to diminish in the ages ahead, but rather to become all the more important as the church of Christ finally emerges (one hopes) out of the many centuries of the past where so much time was spent in recriminations and narrow apologetics. Inter-Christian dialogue has too often degenerated into narrow-minded sniping. Our duty, following Christ's own solemn prayer to the Father[10] that all his disciples ought to be One should rather have been a patient seeking for a common hymn of joyous belief, and celebrating, in the face of a puzzled and disbelieving world, how great is the commonality of our Christian faith and how relatively few those things which truly divide us. Nicaea, taken as a common coin of ecumenical discourse can tell us in all simplicity what really matters in primary theological discourse; and to that extent how much else is actually a subset that we shouldn't lose our tempers over.

Endnotes

1 In turn (wrongly) accusing Alexander of teaching the old discredited Sabellian Monism in his theology.
2 Proverbs 8:22 in the Septuagintal version used in the early church.
3 The site of Nicaea is now on the eastern extremity of the lake of Iznik in ancient Bithynia (modern Turkey). It started as Constantine's campaign camp after he completed his conquest of Licinius in the east and emerged as the sole ruler of the Roman empire—hence the title *Nikaia*—or "Victory town."
4 The presbyters Victor and Vincentius.
5 The "Nicene Creed" now recited at the eucharistic celebrations of so many Christian churches today is not that of Nicaea, but the creed of the Council of Constantinople 382 which was an extended amendment of the original of 325.
6 It would make access to justice much cheaper and easier for poor people and ensure that Christian standards of justice would also play a part in proceedings: by no means always the case in the notoriously bribe-ridden civil courts using professional pleaders.
7 E.g., Lk 1:35; Mk 3:11; Col 1:16.
8 C.f. Jn 3:16; Ps 2:7 and Heb 1:5, 5:5; Ps 109:3 (LXX), Jn 1:1. and Prv 8:25; Jn 1:9–13 and Jn 8:12; Jn 1:1–2, Jn 17:3 and 1 Jn 5:20.
9 They are available online at: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.vi.i.html
10 Jn 17:21–23.

Confessing and Experiencing the Nicene Creed

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The central figure of the Nicene Council who confessed a creed was not Athanasius. He was just a deacon at the time of the council, an assistant to his bishop, Alexander. The person at the center of Nicaea was Arius, a presbyter, a priest from a suburb of Alexandria who apparently accused his bishop, Alexander, of heresy. I always tell students that that's not a good idea, although Arius was a senior member of the clergy, probably in his sixties or so by then. He wasn't a newbie like Athanasius, who was close to the same age as a lot of seminarians when this all started. Arius was a master at popularizing his teaching. He had this collection of what were titled *Thalia*, some have called them banquet pieces or short ditties—short memorable aphorisms that would stick in people's brains: "There was when the Son was not" "God was not eternally a father" and things like that.[1] You get the idea. It's actually a pretty good pedagogical tool to help you remember stuff.

So, in the spirit of Arius, I would like to begin this lecture with my own poem, in the style of a limerick but with six lines instead of five. It goes like this:

> There once was a man named Arius,
> What he said was truly nefarious.
> He said God is One,
> But excluded his Son,
> Which is really quite precarious—
> So Nicaea judged him deleterious.

I know, don't quit my day job. But I want you to stop and think for a minute. How does an idea like the one Arius had get traction like it did. The emperor of the known world, Constantine, called a worldwide church council for God's sake to deal with what he had to say.

Confessing the Creed

Also think about this. Seventeen hundred years later we're still talking about the church's response to Arius and his creed. The bishops wrote a creed of their own. Apart from Scripture, which of course is divinely inspired, how many other man-made documents have the type of longevity and relevance the Nicene Creed has had in the church? This 1700-year-old document is recited on Sundays in Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and even some Evangelical and Baptist churches. It is truly a unique phenomenon if we stop and think about it. On Sunday morning, we are saying largely the same words, albeit in translation, that Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose, Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, Gregory the Great, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, J. S. Bach, Walther, and others throughout the history of the church have confessed and that are still being confessed by the majority of Christians today on all seven continents. The same Christian faith confessed in 325 and 2025, confessed in Beijing and Boston, Kampala and Kiev. What accounts for this longevity, for this universality?

The fathers present at Nicaea in 325 would give the credit to the Holy Spirit. And rightfully so. "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," the bishops would say. And the Holy Spirit does have a long history in the church, even if the creed is not inspired in the same way that Scripture is. I think we could all agree that the Spirit still had a hand in its production though. I might also add the historical note that the creed was clarified and expanded fifty-six years later at the Council of Constantinople in 381 to address heresy that arose after Nicaea. And so technically, what we say on Sunday morning is actually the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. But that's too long for the church secretary to put in the bulletin so we just call it in the Nicene Creed.

The Creed and the American Constitution—an Analogy

The creed is in one sense like the American Constitution.[2] The words themselves don't change. They are the cantus firmus, preserved sacrosanct as originally written. But over the years our country has added amendments to the constitution—I think we're up to twenty-seven. The last one was first suggested in 1789 but was not ratified until 1992. Amendments like the first ten, known as the Bill of Rights, were written to address issues not specifically addressed in the original constitution. But these amendments cannot contradict the original document, nor can they replace it.

It takes work to understand what you are confessing.

It is the same with the creed. This pattern of amendment started already at the Council of Constantinople when it was recognized that things were being taught about the Holy Spirit that made him into an inferior creature just like Arianism had done to the Son. This was the first time the creed was amended. Another example could be the filioque which was added by the Western church to combat Arianism in Spain. Just like the Constitution, it is not easy to amend the creed. With the Constitution, think about it; the whole nation gets involved. You need two thirds of both the house and Senate and then, on top of that, you need three quarters of the states to ratify it. It should be no different in the church, which is why pastors or churches should not go around amending or rewriting the creed in their bulletins to make it more relevant. What do you call someone who changes the creed on their own? A heretic. At least that's what the church has called them.

Is It Just an Argument Over Words? Yes and No

The Emperor Constantine thought that the disagreement between Arius and his bishop was really just an argument over words—logomachy. And in one sense, he was right. It was an argument over words, which we'll get to in a minute. But it was also more than that. One of the chief issues the Nicene Creed addresses is a perennial issue in human history: the human capacity to demote God—specifically the second person of the Trinity, the Son. The basic logic is that since the Son became incarnate, he must somehow be less than God. Arianism is a prime illustration of this. But this has been a tendency in one way or another of most heresy. This, to my mind, explains the chief reason the Nicene Creed has been the touchstone for orthodoxy the past 1700 years and why it will continue to be relevant for generations to come. But it takes work to understand what you are confessing.

Two Key Terms

Think for a minute about the two key words or phrases that the creed uses to describe the heart of the relationship of the Son to the Father. The creed describes the Son as "the only begotten Son of the Father" and as "being of one substance with the Father." This is not the kind of language you will hear at your average church potluck or backyard barbecue, or, dare I say it, your average circuit conference. We say these words every Sunday—confess them, actually—but the majority of our people have no idea what they mean. But I want to be fair to Arius. Afterall, heretics are the best teachers of the church.

The Theology and Terminology of Arius's Creed

Arius submitted a creed to his bishop, Bishop Alexander, in 320 to justify his

theological position to his bishop. The creed is long so I cannot include all of it here. I do want to include here the parts where he talks about the Son being begotten and where he rejects the term homoousios, so you can hear it straight from the heretic's mouth. And I should also mention that this is one document historians agree is authentically by Arius, even if it was preserved by his opponents[3]:

> We acknowledge one God, only unbegotten (μόνον ἀγέννητον), only eternal (μόνονἀίδιον), the only one without cause or beginning (μόνον ἄναρχον) . . . the begetter of his only begotten Son [Υἱὸν μονογενῆ] before endless ages; through whom also he made both the ages and all that is; begetting him not in appearance but in truth, **causing him to subsist by his own will immutable and unchanging, perfect creation of God, but not as one of the creatures, a begotten being** (γέννημα)**, but not like one among other generated things** (τῶν γεγεννημένων) in the sense of an emanation (προβολὴν) as Valentinus taught, nor as Manichaeus explained the begetting as 'a homoousios portion of the Father,' nor as Sabellius' portioning out of the monad, speaking of a 'Son-Father' [υἱοπάτορα], . . .
> . . . . But, as we say, at the will of God having been created before times and before ages, and gaining life and being from the Father, his Father also gave him real existence . . . The Son was begotten by the Father outside of time [ἀχρόνως], and **created and established** [θεμελιωθεὶς] before the ages. He was not before he was begotten, but was begotten outside of time before all things. He alone was made to subsist by the Father. For he is not eternal, or co-eternal, or co-unbegotten/unoriginate with the Father, nor does he have his being together with the Father, as some say in regard to relations, which would introduce two unoriginated sources [ἀρχὰς]. But as the Monad and beginning of all things, God thus is before all things. Therefore, also he is before the Son. . . . For he is his beginning, as his God and the one who existed before him. But if the phrases "from him," and "from the womb" and "I came from the Father and I come" are understood by some to mean he is part of [God] as homoousios, or as a projection, then the Father is composite and divided, and changeable, and a body, according to them, and as far as they are concerned, suffers what happens to bodies, as the incorporeal God.[4]

Believe it or not, he has a lot more to say. But you get the idea. The Son was created by his Father, just like human fathers bring their children into existence. Arius

equates begotten with being made. He would ask women in the marketplace: Did you exist before you had kids? Or, as I like to say, "Did you have a life before you had kids?" Either way, the answer is yes. So then, the Father must have existed before the Son. That's a reasonable conclusion. So then, the Son must be less than the Father because the Father brought him into being.

But my bigger question is this: why go to such lengths to insist on this subordination of the Son to the Father?

And then Arius would bring up passages like Proverbs 8:22, which in the Greek translation of the Septuagint says that the Lord created Wisdom—which they understood as the Son—to be the first of his works. Or John 14:28 where Jesus says the Father is greater than I. Or there is the passage in Psalm 2:7 that gets quoted in Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you," or Psalm 45:7 "You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of joy more than your companions." Or Philippians 2:6-11 where God highly exalts his Son as a reward for what he has done – or so it would seem. They all seem to imply that the Son is less than the Father, that he was begotten at a certain point, when he was created, and then exalted for a job well done.

In summary, Arius has gone to great lengths to emphasize that the Son is not God in the same sense that the Father is, nor is he on the same level or even in the same category of divinity that the Father is. But my bigger question is this: why go to such lengths to insist on this subordination of the Son to the Father? His priority is something with which Lutherans can actually identify: divine monergism. This was his chief concern. The will of the Father is what is responsible for all of creation as well as its redemption. The Father brought all of creation including, in a special way, his own Son into existence by the exercise of his will, ensuring that God the Father alone receives all glory and honor for our creation and redemption. The Son cannot receive this glory and honor except by participation and relation to the Father; otherwise, it would put him on the same level as the Father, which to Arius's mind is sheer modalism.

This is why he also has an issue with the term homoousios. The noted historian R. P. C. Hanson has a long discussion about who first used this term and how it ultimately got included in the creed.[5] But let's just stay with Arius's creed for a minute. He obviously doesn't like the term. He sees it as a term used by both Valentinus the Gnostic and Sabellius the Modalist. It's a term with a checkered history, to say the least. And to top it all off, it's not in the Bible.

Modalism was one of the big heresies of the third century. The other was Gnosticism. Gnosticism taught a lot of things and there were lots of different versions

The two words the Creed of 325 focuses on are Arius's words: begotten and substance/essence.

out there. But one of the big questions the main version called Valentianism tried to answer was how the One became Many. It offered an explanation similar to the Big Bang theory today. Just like the Big Bang sent out shock waves from that initial explosion that produced matter, in the same way the One God sent out shock waves, or what they called aeons, that were made of paired spiritual beings who then created the next aeon and the next until way down the line at about the thirtieth level, there was one pairing that went bad and produced Sophia, which then produced matter, which the Gnostics considered a spiritual abortion. Not good. It's kind of complicated and I can't get into all the details now, but the key point is that all these spiritual beings were seen as a material part of the One. They were of the same substance as the One. They were homoousios. Gnosticism taught there was a secret knowledge that could help you get back to the One and escape the flesh in order to be totally spiritual. It was an early example of people who say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious."

At least one initially orthodox bishop named Paul of Samosata opposed Gnosticism. Rather than allowing for all these differentiated spiritual beings, Paul of Samosata emphasized that God is one. But how he explained that oneness is how he got into trouble. He said God is one but appears in different modes at different times to accomplish his work. He first appeared as Father to bring creation into being, then as Son to redeem us and then as Holy Spirit to birth the church. To use an analogy, sometimes I'm a father, at other times a husband, and at other times I'm a professor. But it's still all me, the same person. Sabellius taught that God is one person (*prosopa*) who operates in these different modes. In this way, he said, the Father and Son were homoousios, of the same essence of the one person who is God. Arius says he doesn't like the term because it was like the substance of God, his ousia, was being portioned out. But God is simple, he insists. God is one. You can't go portioning him out. And he's right. This was the main reason Arius and those who followed him rejected the term homoousios. It seemed to reduce God's essence to material that could be portioned out or shared between the Father and the Son. And that's not how orthodox Christians talk about God.

I spent all this time presenting Arius's view because I want to demonstrate more briefly why the creed focuses where it does.

The Nicene Creed's Answer to Arius

When you compare the Nicene Creed to the Apostles' Creed, you notice immediately that while the Apostles' Creed is pretty straight forward in talking about the Son's

time as a human being on this earth, the Nicene Creed talks about that too but spends much more time on the Son's relationship to the Father. And all this is because of Arius. Remember, the Creed of 325 has different wording than the later Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 that we confess on Sundays. The two words the Creed of 325 focuses on are the words we discussed earlier. They are Arius's words: begotten and substance/essence. "Them there's fightin' words," as Yosemite Sam used to say. The Son is described as "one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten (γεννηθέντα) from the Father as only begotten (μονογενῆ), that is, from the essence of the Father (ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρός), God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made (γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα), the same essence (ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρί) with the Father, by whom all things came into being (ἐγένετο), both those in heaven and those on the earth." The creed of 325 goes even further in anathematizing "those who say, "there was when he was not" or "before he was begotten (γεννηθῇ) he was not," or, "he came into being (ἐγένετο) from what was not," or argue that the Son of God is from another hypostasis (ὑποστάσεως) or substance (οὐσίας/ousia), or that he is created (κτιστὸν) or changeable (τρεπτὸν) or alterable (ἀλλοιωτὸν), these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes."

This creed was obviously composed specifically to address the Arian heresy. Notice both our terms are front and center: begotten and ousia. But what do they mean? That's a loaded question since they obviously meant different things to different people. Arius thought "begotten" meant coming into being, having an origin. The Nicene Fathers recognize that the word has that meaning when speaking of human beings. But it cannot mean that when talking about God because God is eternal. He does not come into being. So, if they are going to consider the Son to be God—which is what the Bible says in John 1:1 and John 10:30 and elsewhere, then it cannot mean "come into being." So, they define what it means when they refer to the Son as the "only begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father. And then they show how this plays out: God *from* God, Light *from* light, true God *from* true God. Think of begotten like this: horses beget horses, cats beget cats, humans beget humans, and God begets . . . God. In our English translation of the Creed, we say God of God, light of light, very God of very God, but the Greek actually says God *from* God (Gk. εκ). And so, if the Son is *from* God, then begotten cannot mean the Son was "made." He's begotten, not made because he is of the same substance with the Father.

Substance, or essence, is what makes something this and not that.

That word substance, or ousia, comes up three times in the creed. It describes the Son as (1) coming from the substance of the Father, (2) as being the same substance as the Father is, and then in the anathemas it clarifies that (3) the Son of God is not

The council knew that if our salvation depended on anyone less than God, we were in a world of hurt.

from another substance (but from the substance of the Father). Substance, or essence, is what makes something this and not that, which is also what the term hypostasis does, which is why you see both terms in the anathemas. They were almost synonymous at this time. The church fathers used the term essence, or ousia, to talk about God not just because this was the way the Greek philosophers talked. They also believed it was biblical. Plato must have known Moses, they thought, when he chose that term ousia to describe God because in Exodus 3:14 it is the term God uses as his name. The Hebrew, of course, is Yahweh, but in the Greek Septuagint Yahweh is rendered ὁ ὤν (ho ōn), the one who is being. The one who exists on his own without anyone bringing him into being. We are all contingent beings, created beings. God has existed from eternity. He was never brought into being. His Son is the same way. He is not just another divine being, no matter how exalted Arius made him. He is God, *the* Son of God. We are called sons of God, but this is by grace and adoption. He is the only Son of God by nature. This is what you are confessing when you confess the Nicene Creed.

Why is this important? Because it answers *who* died for you. This is why the creed's authors went to such great lengths to demonstrate the Son's equality with the Father. It was *this one*—the Greek uses the definite article τὸν to point backward and also forward—"who for us men and for our salvation came down" to accomplish our salvation by taking on our flesh and becoming human, so that he could suffer and on the third day rise from the dead. The fact that he took on human flesh does not make him any less God. He is "ONE Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God." He remained fully God when he took on our flesh and made it his own. He never stopped being God. And the council knew that if our salvation depended on anyone less than God, we were in a world of hurt. There is more I could and probably should say, but I am going to have to leave it there, so we can get to the second part of the paper: experiencing the creed.

Experiencing the Creed

A small attempt at humor: what do you call someone who doesn't understand the Creed? A Christian. Ligonier Ministries takes a survey every two years. They call it the State of Theology Survey. Philip Jenkins talks about this in a May 2025 article he wrote for the *Christian Century*. It chronicles the disconnect between your average twenty-first-century US Christians and the official teachings of their church. Jenkins says the results of the survey reveal, "More than 65 percent agree at least somewhat with the purely Arian statement that "Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God." (For

whatever reason, Catholics seem to be the most happily Arian segment of American believers, but Protestants are not far behind.) On the other side of the equation, the share of believers strongly rejecting that statement, asserting their historical solidarity with Athanasius, is less than 20 percent . . . It seems that for modern Christians, the Council of Nicaea was something that happened to other people."[6]

We may confess the creed every Sunday. But how many of our people know what they're saying? Someone asked me recently if the Nicene Creed is still relevant today if people don't even really know what it means? That's a good question.

Think about this for a moment. What is the fastest growing religion in the world right now? Some say Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostalism. What about Islam? What do Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims (and some Pentecostals) all have in common? They're all Arian. And apparently so are many US Christians if the Ligonier survey is accurate. This is another one of the reasons that the Nicene Creed is still relevant today. Because the question remains the same: Who died for you? We take our Christianity for granted and just assume everyone knows our basic beliefs.

The question remains the same: Who died for you?

But there's more. Let me take you from fourth-century Egypt to twenty-first-century Egypt to show what a difference it can make as to where you're a Christian. There is a video clip that captures the lived experience of our fellow Christians in Egypt from the Coptic tradition. It bears remembering that the Arian controversy first appeared in Egypt. These Copts now live in a demi status that makes them second or third-class citizens in a country where Islam is the state religion and sharia law governs much of civil and religious life. They are shouting out the Nicene Creed in protest.

From what I could find, this video originally surfaced after the Palm Sunday bombing of Coptic churches in Alexandria in 2016, not long after I had been there teaching Coptic monks about Cyril of Alexandria. Talk about experiencing the creed! I hope the irony is not lost on you. They are shouting the Nicene Creed publicly at the top of their lungs in a Muslim dominated country. Islam is basically Arianism 2.0. Muslims specifically state that they do not believe in the only begotten one. But don't take my word for it. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem has inscriptions on the inside and outside of the mosque. Here is a translation from the outer inscription on the Dome of the Rock taken from the Muslim sight "Muslim Awareness":

> In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is One. He has no associate. Say: He is God, the One! God, the eternally Besought of all! He does not beget nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him. . . . There is no

> god but God. He is One. Praise be to . . . God, Who hath not taken unto Himself a son, and Who hath no partner in the Sovereignty. . . .[7]

Thank you, Arius. There's an inscription on the inside that says basically the same thing. John of Damascus the seventh century Syrian church father thought that Mohammad got his information about Christianity from an Arian monk. Which would make more sense than the other theory that it was a Nestorian. But think about this, one of the fastest growing religions in the world today is in direct opposition to the theology of the Nicene Creed. The lived experience of Christians in those Muslim dominated countries is one of oppression and persecution because of their faith in Jesus as expressed in the Nicene Creed. And they're willing to go to jail for it.

A second lived experience of the creed comes from the other side of the world in China. When I taught English there in 1987, I was able to share the gospel almost every day. I had a teaching assistant at the time who was interested in Christianity. I gave him the New Testament to read in English. He read through it in a week and then, hungry for more, asked if I had anything else. On short notice, I gave him an English copy of the creed. He quickly read through it. But his comment to me was telling. He said, "Well, this just says the same thing as the book you gave me." The lived experience of the creed for him was a handy summary—an elevator speech if you will—of what the Christian faith is. What he said to me was further testimony that the creed simply teaches what Scripture teaches. Those who reject the creed are ultimately rejecting Scripture.

Which brings me to a third lived experience of the creed that should be very familiar to all of you. It comes in what happens on Sunday morning in the liturgy and the prayers we pray. We offer our prayers to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, which has been the tradition of the church since the beginning. Arians could point to this as a type of subordination, as Jungmann points out in his book *The Early Liturgy*. The Arians "could point to the liturgical prayer, to the doxologies, everywhere customary in that time in the Catholic Church, which read: *Gloria Patri* per *Filium in Spiritu Sancto*. The Catholics themselves, so [the Arians] said, grant that the Son is less than the Father, because they address their prayer to the Father through the Son, hence they consider him as in some sort of intermediary stage below the Father."[8] We still pray our prayers this way today. What's the answer to the Arians? 1 Timothy 2:5. "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." He is our mediator as the God-man. As man, the Son is less than the Father. As God, they are equal. He is God and man and yet one person, not two. This is why the Creed confesses "And in One Lord Jesus Christ." It's as if its writers anticipated the Nestorian controversy that would come around 100 years later.

On a related note, I find it interesting that, as far as I can tell, it seems like the

politicians were more interested in having it be a part of the liturgy than the bishops. From Constantine on down, the Nicene Creed was a way to ensure unity in the empire by having everyone confess the same faith. And one thing politicians know is that religion can be divisive. Just look at what is going on in Gaza at the moment. Mark Chapman in his article "Why Do We Still Recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist?" makes the following observation:

> In the Western church the use of the creed in the liturgy seems to have begun after the Third Council of Toledo in 589; after King Reccared and the Visigoths had been converted to orthodox Christianity from Arianism it was presumably important to remind them regularly of precisely what that orthodoxy consisted: the creed was ordered to be said immediately after the Our Father and thus shortly before reception of communion.[9]

The Nicene Creed has been a part of the liturgy for so long that we forget it was not always there. The average lay person knows that it is used on communion Sundays and the Apostles' Creed on non-communion Sundays—although they're not sure why. To be honest, liturgical scholars aren't sure either, so I'm not going to go down that rabbit hole. But its insertion into the liturgy serves as an identity marker—one that we perhaps need even more than ever now with everybody talking about how they are spiritual but not religious. I find that "spiritual" people have little use for creeds. I also find they usually have a lot more in common with Gnosticism than with orthodox Christianity.

The Nicene Creed professes a common faith, a common doctrine about God, but we should not forget that it was also meant to be doxology[10] —similar to the Te Deum. The Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglicans all have a chanted version of the Nicene Creed. As far as I'm aware, The LCMS does not, although we do have Johann Sebastian Bach's Credo in his B Minor Mass that is based on the Nicene Creed. Bach knew how to tease out the musical meaning of the phrases of the creed in a way that allows you to spend an extended period on just one phrase. It's not a bad model for how to approach the creed devotionally. His text painting of the Crucifixus is a master class in how music can speak to the soul in a way that words alone cannot. I wonder what would happen if we found a talented musician who could put the Nicene Creed to music. Luther set the Apostles' Creed to music. But apart from Bach, who else has a musical version that we could actually sing in church to help it be received as doxology? Maybe it's a project for our next iteration of the hymnal. Maybe someone like Flame could set it to rap or make a hip-hop version—although I understand not everyone would be down with that. Let me be clear: I'm not advocating for it to be rapped in a church service. But it would be a great piece for a battle rap session, or at a concert. Just a thought.

This brings me to a final experiencing of the creed to conclude. In Jungmann's book on *The Early Liturgy* he makes another interesting observation:

> In the present-day liturgical movement [granted that's the 1960s for him but I think it is probably where many in the Missouri Synod are still today], primitive Christianity is often held up before our eyes as a model, an exemplar of liturgical observance. We are to believe that Christians of old, contrary to the tendency of modern individualism, knew no other, or scarcely any other form of prayer than liturgical prayer: the common celebration of the Sunday, the common celebration of the Eucharist, the common liturgical prayer-hours and vigils for which clergy and people assembled regularly. . . . The idea that the life of the primitive Christians revolved exclusively around the liturgy is not correct. And it cannot be correct, simply because it would be unnatural and in contradiction to the rules laid down in the Gospels. How could the Christian life exclude private and personal prayer?[11]

He points out that the same one who instituted the Eucharist also said, "When you are praying, go into your closet and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret" (Mt 6:16).[12]

His point is that there was a very strong devotional life outside of Sunday mornings among the faithful. You don't have to pit one against the other. Both the first century *Didache* and the third century *Apostolic Tradition* talk about taking time out for prayer at least three times a day: morning, noon and at night. This of course can be traced back even earlier to the Jewish tradition and it also gets expanded quite a bit in the monastic tradition. How would it be if you experienced the creed not only on Sunday, but in your devotional life? Assuming you have one. The point is to explore the possibility of experiencing the creed devotionally and not just as rote recitation on Sunday morning. The rote recitation helps you remember it—and hopefully helps you take it with you during the week.

We should recognize that every word the fathers included in the Nicene Creed is freighted with meaning and is like an index of Scripture.

Because the Nicene Creed is in agreement with Scripture, it can be an added source for your spiritual development. Because we recite it instead of singing it, the connection may not seem self-evident. To fully take advantage of the Creed, we should recognize that every word the fathers included in the Nicene Creed is freighted with meaning and is like an

index of Scripture. It's a very concise document that was written to direct us back to the Scriptures and ultimately to the central message of Scripture—our salvation in Christ Jesus and the life that he has for us now and in the life to come. After all, the central phrase in the Creed is, "Who for us and for our salvation." This was not just some arcane doctrinal controversy. Our very salvation was at the very heart and core of the debates that went on—and it was a debate over how to interpret Scripture.

How I approach the Nicene Creed is similar to how Luther approached the Lord's Prayer in the Small Catechism. He spoke about the significance of each phrase and what it means to our spiritual lives. What does it mean that God is our Father? How do we hallow his Name? Luther slowed down the rote repetition of the prayer to have parents and their children and teachers and pastors think about what each phrase means for their spiritual life. The problem with rote memorization is that it can become just that—rote. But the equal and perhaps greater opportunity of rote memorization is that we now have it in our memory banks, like a well-worn path. We can bring it up to our recollection with little effort whenever we need to. This is what Luther teaches in the Small Catechism for the Lord's Prayer. I submit to you that I think we can do the same thing with the creed, even though it is a document of the church and not inspired Scripture. But neither is Portals of Prayer and yet we still use it devotionally.

We need to develop what my former colleague at Eastern University, Philip Carey, calls a "creedal imagination." A creedal imagination not only helps with thinking about the Trinity but also helps shape and form you as a Christian. This is what Dr. Cary had to say:

> . . . a creedal imagination is a way of being educated, trained, and formed in the virtues necessary for Christian life and good theologizing. Along with these virtues come various skills, patterns of experience and habits of perception as well as pieces of knowledge. It's like learning to be a musician or scientist: you don't just learn a bunch of theories; you learn to become a kind of practitioner; as a result, you perceive the world differently, make different kinds of judgments and live differently from someone who is unmusical or scientifically illiterate.[13]

This is the lived experience of the Nicene Creed in a nutshell. It shapes and forms us in a way that moves beyond theoretical speculation to each of us becoming "a kind of practitioner" who sees the world differently and operates in the world differently because of the creed. Instead of being conformed to the world, the creed offers us an opportunity to renew our minds as we think more deeply on it, using it as a tool not only to think more deeply on Scripture but to remind us of our identity as children of God who express our belief in the One who created, redeemed and sanctified us. What might this look like?

I won't have time to take you through the whole creed, but maybe I can conclude this section with one example. I already talked about what it means for the Son to be the "only begotten" and "of one substance with the Father," although there is more we could say, especially considering how often begotten or begat appears in Scripture. Those would be good test cases. But due to limited space I want to focus on one phrase in particular that is in the expanded creed of 381 and begs for further reflection. Of all the things the fathers chose to highlight about the Holy Spirit, there is that phrase "the Lord and Giver of Life." They didn't confess that he was consubstantial with the Father and the Son, or that he was God. That has always frustrated me. I have a theory as to why, but again our time is limited. But just stop a second and think about this loaded phrase "the Lord and Giver of Life."

It may or may not help you to know that the Greek word they used wasn't "bios" that speaks about biological life, but "zoe," which is the same word Jesus uses when he talks to the disciples in John 10:10: "I have come so that they may life and so that they may have it to the full." Whether it's the Greek Ζωοποιόν (zōopoion) or the Latin *vivificantem*, the idea is that the Spirit is the vitalizer, but also the perfecter of the work of the Trinity at creation but also in every other area of our physical and our spiritual life. When they used that simple word zōopoion, they knew it was pregnant with Scripture from Genesis and the creation account, to the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, to the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 to Jesus's description of baptism in John 3, to the water and blood pouring from his pierced side in John 19, to Paul's fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5 and Romans 8, all the way to the river of life streaming out of Jerusalem in Revelation that is bordered by twelve trees for the healing of the nations. All that from one little word in the Creed. Each of those connections speaks to your own spiritual life and formation.

And so, this, along with the other things I mentioned, is ultimately what I am trying to get at when I talk about confessing but also experiencing the Creed. In that vein, I would like to close with one more limerick:

> There once was the great Athanasius,
> What he said was truly bodacious.
> Father and Son,
> Are equal as one,
> For your faith, that is quite advantageous—
> And I hope this truth is contagious.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Endnotes

1 Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1987, 2001), 100, where Williams provides quotes from the Thalia preserved by Athanasius.

2 There are those who argue that the Constitution is a living document, which the Law School of the University of Chicago defines as "**one that evolves, changes over time, and adapts to new circumstances**, without being formally amended." https://www.law.uchicago.edu/news/living-constitution (bold type in original).

3 Cf. Williams, 95–96.

4 Translation by author.

5 R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (T&T Clark, 1988, 2005), 181–201.

6 Philip Jenkins, "Nicene myths," *The Christian Century* (May 2025); https://www.christiancentury.org/features/nicene-myths. Accessed 5/17/2026.

7 https://www.islamic-awareness.org/history/islam/inscriptions/dotr. Accessed 6/27/2025.

8 Josef Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1959), 192.

9 Mark Chapman, "Why Do We Still Recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist" *Anglican Theological Review* 87.2: 209.

10 Michael Perham, *Lively Sacrifice* (SPCK, 1992), 115, cited in Chapman, 211.

11 Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy*, 97–98.

12 Cf. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy*, 98.

13 Dr. Phillip Cary, private email; February 7, 2007, quoted in Christopher Hall, *We Believe: Experiencing the Creed through Ancient African Christianity,* Book 1 (ICCSPress, 2019), 54.

Do Lutherans Believe in Sola Scriptura?
Luther and Melanchthon's Interpretation of Nicaea and its Relevance for the Church Today

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The recent seventeen-hundredth anniversary of the Council of Nicaea has afforded the church opportunity to evaluate again the history of Christian dogma and its relationship to Holy Scripture. The confession at Nicaea that Jesus is consubstantial with the Father *(homoousios)* is the first official instance in church history that brings into question the origin of Christian doctrine. At the very least, Nicaea and Constantinople represent a clear development in the church's doctrinal formulation. The church was pressed to use the term *homoousios*, and this extra biblical term has become the mark of orthodox Christianity for centuries. A denial of the term risks the abandonment of orthodoxy altogether. Arianism, in this sense, caused a development in Christian doctrine insofar as it forced a development of doctrinal terms. Terminology, such as "Trinity," "Eucharist," and "Means of Grace," have been used by the church to both confess and teach articles of faith. Whether a term properly communicates the biblical doctrine or whether the development of terms indicates a change in the church's confession, her dogma, and her practice has been a matter of great debate.

How one describes this historical development of the doctrinal formulas betrays one's posture toward Christian doctrine and ultimately one's posture toward Holy Scripture. New Testament studies that present low Christologies and high Christologies suggest that the Apostolic Writings show signs of internal developments concerning the person of Christ—some more primitive than others. Studies in the history of dogma (*Dogmengeschichte*) that trace the rise of doctrinal challenges in the

church—such as Arianism, Nestorianism, Pelagianism—have often hypothesized that the doctrine of the church developed organically in her response to these errors rather than arising from a clear understanding of the teachings found in Holy Scripture.

Interest in the theory of doctrinal development rose to its apex in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century with the publications of biblical critics who doubted the veracity of the Scriptures as divine revelation. The search for the historical Jesus led many in the European academy to view the Scriptures as a product of the church and her redactors. Scripture, they thought, revealed not the will of the Living God or the historically reliable revelation of Jesus Christ, but the *keyrgma* or proclamation of early Christian communities. God was not the source of Scripture; Christians were. Their own historical circumstances and the surrounding cultural influences gave rise to the canonical texts.

The great confidence in historical *Wissenschaft* in the research universities of Germany extended beyond biblical studies to an analysis of *Dogmengeschichte. Dogmengeschichte,* the study of the history of Christian doctrine, operated under the assumption of New Testament studies that doctrine evolves. The formidable liberal Protestant Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), for instance, asserted, "the claim of the church that the dogmas are simply the exposition of the Christian revelation, because deduced from the Holy Scriptures, is not confirmed by historical investigation. On the contrary, it becomes clear that dogmatic Christianity (the dogmas) in its conception and in its construction was *the work of the Hellenic spirit upon the gospel soil.*"[1] As Hans Schwarz notes, Harnack's theory of Hellenic influence was not for him an adulteration of the message, "but a factor to be taken into consideration in the development of the Christian faith."[2] The scholar of *Dogmengeschichte*, as Harnack and others conceived of it, sought therefore to reconstruct the historical circumstances that led to various progressions in the church's doctrine and thus arrive at the historical truth of the development. To oversimplify the matter, the domain of doctrine was psychology, sociology, and thus anthropology, and not theology as derived from God's revelation in Scripture.

Critical analysis of doctrinal developments appears to be a modern problem, but it was, in fact, the very problem that Luther addressed in his day. In his work, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther contended with his Roman Catholic opponents, who—for a very different reason than liberal Protestants—believed that the Council of Nicaea established new doctrine in the church and therefore proves the magisterial authority of church councils. Luther writes, "The council did not invent this doctrine or establish it as something new as though it had not previously existed in the churches but rather defended it against the new heresy of Arius."[3] Luther's understanding of doctrinal truth comes clearly into view. Christian doctrine originates in God and is revealed to mankind in Holy Scripture. The faith confessed by the church comes through Scripture and no other source. Thus, for Luther, the

articles of faith cannot arise from within the church, nor can they be established by councils or popes. In the same passage, after pointing out that for three-hundred years Christians had prayed to and worshipped Christ as true God, he argues,

> I have to point this out in passing, for the pope's hypocrites have lapsed into such gross folly that they think that councils have the power and the right to set up new articles of faith and to alter the old ones. . . . No council ever did it or can do it; the articles of faith must not grow on earth through the councils, as from a new, secret inspiration, but must be issued from heaven through the Holy Spirit and revealed openly; otherwise . . . they are not articles of faith. Thus the Council of Nicaea (as was said) did not invent this doctrine or establish it as something new, namely, that Christ is God; rather, it was done by the Holy Spirit, who came openly from heaven to the apostles on the day of Pentecost, and through Scripture glorified Christ as true God, as he had promised the apostles. It remained unchanged since the days of the apostles until this council, and so on until our own day—it will remain until the end of the world, as he says, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" [Mt 28:20].[4]

Luther's certainty that the only source for doctrine is Scripture and that Scripture is clear in presenting truth, allowed him to be flexible in his treatment of doctrinal formulas not found in Scripture. For instance, in his treatise in 1521, *Against Latamus*, he acknowledges that the Son's consubstantial nature with the Father does not rest merely on the term *homoousios*.

> Human words are not sacred, for they are novelties which were not used by the Apostle [Paul]. You may object that *homoousion* has been accepted in opposition to the Arians. But there were many, and these the most notable, who did not accept it, and Jerome wished to have it surpassed. And so little did they escape danger with this invented word that Jerome complains that he does not know what poison hides under its letters and syllables. Indeed, the Arians railed at it even more than at the Scriptures. Hilary had no reply to them except that this term signifies what is in fact the case and what is contained in the whole of Scripture.[5]

This freedom to question the dogmatic terminology handed down from the council requires us to examine further how Luther and the Lutheran church of the sixteenth century received Nicaea and what their reception may mean for us who teach and confess Christ today.

To understand the importance of the ancient creeds for Luther, it will be necessary to understand how he came to judge doctrine and doctrinal formulations against Scripture alone. The creeds are vital for the life of the church because they teach exactly what Scripture says. Therefore, a brief historical sketch of Luther's own shift concerning the source of doctrine—from a consensus of various church authorities to a principle of Scripture alone—will demonstrate how Luther trusted Scripture as God's own speaking. Scripture establishes doctrine and gives the Spirit, who teaches man to know God rightly in Christ.[6]

Then, based on Jennifer Wasmuth's recent book on the role of the Nicene Creed for Luther and Melanchthon, "*Wyr gleuben all an eynen Gott" Das Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan in seiner Bedeutung für Martin Luther und Philipp Melanchthon*, we examine the importance of Nicaea in the sixteenth century and how the reformers understood the ancient creeds in relation to Scripture. She shows how the reformers taught students to present the Creed as the substance of the Scripture's teaching and a summary of the entire body of Christian doctrine. The Creed includes all the articles of faith from Scripture that pastors must preach and teach to the church. The Creed also gives Christians a way to know the whole message of Scripture about Christ and serves as the hermeneutical key to interpreting biblical texts. If the church must live by every word that comes from God's mouth; the creeds, the catechism, and even more broadly the Lutheran Confessions organize and present the word of Christ to the church, so that we might learn who he is and what he has done, believe him, and worship him rightly.

Finally, by way of illustration, Luther's sermon on Colossians 1:9–20, preached on November 21, 1537, sets forth the high article of faith concerning the divinity of Christ. Here we have just one example of how Luther implemented Melanchthon's instruction to preach the articles of faith from Scripture. The text presents Christ as consubstantial with the Father and gives Luther the opportunity to extol Christ and the Nicene formula of *homoousios*. Luther's sermon demonstrates how Scripture is the source of the doctrine of Christ's divinity. The term *homoousios*, though a human expression, is thoroughly divine because it confesses the truth revealed in Scripture.

A constant threat to the church in any age is that her pastors and teachers grow weary of teaching God's word as it is written and instead seek to add their own contextual interpretation. As with Rome and liberal Protestantism, this can happen by imagining that doctrine develops. But even if one holds firmly that doctrine does not change, the temptation remains to contextualize Scripture to meet the needs of the church today. Our vocabulary shifts from Scripture to express doctrines in ways that Scripture may not. This contextualizing tendency happens most readily for pastors in the homiletical task, where the preacher seeks to be authentic and relatable rather than preach with the authority granted by God and his word. What Johann Anselm Steiger observed of homiletical trends in Germany three decades ago can

easily be true among Lutheran preachers today. He writes:

> The preacher apparently may no longer be the witness of the divine word which has its foundation in the authority of God, the author of Scripture, who alone attests to the credibility of the proclamation. Instead, the authenticity and credibility of the preacher is supposed to replace the authority of God's word. But no preacher can do that.[7]

The primary defense against preaching and teaching words of men or commending ourselves, as we will see in Luther and Melanchthon, is to let Scripture be its own interpreter.[8] Although Luther taught that Scripture interprets us,[9] he saw, especially in his early disputes with Rome, that Scripture must first interpret itself.[10] Luther understood the authority of the preaching office and the authority of the sermon as a derived authority from God's word. The Holy Spirit must serve as the expositor of his own word, and only then can the sense of the Scriptures be clear. He speaks authoritatively with his own grammar, logic, and sacred rhetoric.[11] This essay cannot get into all the practical implications of preaching with apostolic, that is, divine authority, as if God himself is speaking. But it may be enough for today's trouble to see that confidence in Scripture's sufficiency to interpret itself is indispensable for the dogmatic-homiletical task in the church today, just as it was for Luther and Melanchthon then.

Luther's Turn to Sola Scriptura

Luther's understanding of authority in the church, even as late as the fall of 1518, reflected the traditional thought of the late medieval age. He had been taught and generally accepted that the church's doctrine rests on a consensus of authority: Scripture, the pope, councils, the church fathers, and plain reason. These authorities established checks and balances to maintain stability and peace in the church. It was acceptable and even fashionable to posit various theories of ecclesiastical authority, and at different times one authority superseded the others. In Luther's day, the papacy and the authority of the councils jostled for the upper hand.[12] Although the authority of Scripture was assumed, how the church interpreted Scripture and from it established doctrine was commonly disputed.

While Luther was busy working through the Psalms and the Letters of St. Paul in the lecture hall (1513–1518), papal authority had won the day. At the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517), in a 1516 decree at that council called, *Pastor aeternus*, Pope Leo X "reasserted the supremacy of the papacy as a mark of the true church."[13] Cardinal Cajetan's explanations to Luther in the fall of 1518 assumed, based on the Pope's decree, that the power of the papacy was superior to Scripture and the councils.[14] Luther appeared to be unaware of the decree and thought that

the Cardinal was positing a sectarian opinion within the church. In his surprise, he replied with what he thought was clear to all: the pope cannot be above Scripture and the councils that Cajetan brought forth to legitimize papal supremacy had contradicted each other.[15] Luther's line of argument indicated that he was already prepared to move beyond the spiritual authority of either papal supremacy or conciliarism. In his dispute with Johannes Eck at Leipzig the following year, Luther's view that Scripture alone is the only source for the church's teaching would become public, resolute, and remain to the end of his life.[16]

Luther's turn to Scripture as the sole authority of the church is significant for our own consideration because Scripture was never factually rejected by his opponents. Until the Enlightenment, the church had not questioned the divine origin of the Bible. And yet, despite believing that Scripture is the word of God, Luther's opponents could not accept that Scripture alone establishes the doctrine without the interpretation of the church. For Luther, this was enthusiasm. In the Smalcald Articles III: viii, 3–4, Luther labeled both the radical reforming "spirits" (Müntzer, Karlstadt, and others) and the papacy as enthusiasts, because they both believed they could have the Spirit and truth apart from the Scriptures and the external word of the gospel. "This is all the old devil and old snake, who also turned Adam and Eve into enthusiasts and led them from the external Word of God to 'spirituality' and their own presumption—although he even accomplished this by means of other, external words."[17] The point of contention in the church, therefore, has always concerned the interpretation of Scripture, since faith and life hang in the balance. How ought we to read and interpret the Bible? Who ought to determine its interpretation and establish the apostolic doctrine that is to be believed? How do we know which "external word," that is, whose preaching is truly from God?

According to current Roman Catholic doctrine, not much has changed since Luther's day. The Scriptures are, for Roman Catholics, wrapped in mystery and Christians by themselves cannot rightly or, more exactly, authoritatively interpret them. The church's magisterium must determine the right interpretation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that "the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, 'does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence."[18] The Tradition, according to the Catholic *Catechism*, "comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus' teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit."[19] Since the apostles did not immediately have a written text of the New Testament for the church, but rather preached and taught what they had received directly from Christ, Catholics believe that the New Testament itself "demonstrates the process of living Tradition."[20]

The Catholic Church teaches, as one might hear Luther teaching in the

Smalcald Articles above, that God's word can either be written or oral. But unlike Luther, Catholics teach that both modes of transmission are equally authoritative because both are inspired by the Holy Spirit.[21] In order to establish the continuity between the apostolic age and those who have received both the Scriptures and the oral tradition, Catholics turn to the magisterium of the Church. The magisterium is technically not an authority of itself, but it possesses authority to interpret the Scriptures and the Tradition. Thus, the catechism teaches in accord with *Dei Verbum* (1965),

> The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.[22]

Luther came to believe with Augustine and many other interpreters that the Scriptures reveal their own meaning; they are self-authenticating or *autopistos*.[23] The interpretation of Scripture, the *res* or substance of the Scriptures that Luther believed is clear, is derived by confessing what God says not in one place, but in all places in Scripture. The external word mentioned above includes for Luther both Scripture and the preached word (*mündlich Wort*). The preached word, however, can be nothing else than the proclamation derived from Scripture. In this context, Luther's use of the term "preached word" is synonymous with biblical doctrine and Christ as the doctrine's chief article. To show that Scripture interprets itself, is its own authority, and sets forth clearly the saving doctrine for the life of the church and every Christian, Luther developed explanations of the biblical teaching as a whole—book by book, verse by verse. His biblical prefaces of the New Testament in 1522 serve as one attempt, but his whole life of preaching and commenting on Scripture was an effort to show how Scripture itself reveals Christ and everything he has commanded. As Robert Kolb observes, the early church fathers labeled this guide to interpreting Scripture, which was derived from Scripture and had creedal character, as "the apostolic tradition" or "the rule of faith" (*regula fidei*). Melanchthon called it the "body of doctrine" (*corpus doctrinae*) or the "doctrine of the gospel" (*doctrina evangelii*).[24] The ecumenical creeds were regarded as the most succinct summaries of the rule of faith. But the Catechism and the Augsburg Confession would serve the same purpose, just as the entire *Book of Concord* ought to serve that purpose for the Lutheran church today.

With this rule or body of doctrine, Luther believed that any baptized Christian could rightly interpret Scripture. This dogmatic point of the perspicuity of Scripture was for him non-negotiable. Even if Luther admitted that books such as James,

Revelation, Daniel, and Esther were unclear to him, he was convinced that the apostolic message of the Scripture, the res or subject matter of Scripture, namely Christ, is utterly clear. He allowed Scripture to interpret Scripture and interpreted even those difficult books fruitfully for the church. Luther knew from experience that when Christians know Christ by faith, as he is presented to them simply in the creeds of the church, this knowledge and trust guides them in their reading of Scripture, so that they are not confused or misled but rather strengthened in faith as they come to know him in his word.

The Reception of Nicaea by Luther and Melanchthon

In her recently published monograph, *Wyr gleuben all an eynen Gott*, Jennifer Wasmuth offers a thorough investigation of the reception of the Nicene Creed in the writings of Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon. Wasmuth explores whether the use of the Nicene Creed in the sixteenth century could be instructive in Lutheran ecumenical dialogues today. Although LCMS Lutherans will find it difficult to agree with Wasmuth's ecumenical aspirations or her own ecclesiological commitments to the Lutheran World Federation, she nevertheless concludes her study rightly with the following observation about Luther and Melanchthon's reception of the creed. She writes:

> For Luther and Melanchthon the NC [Nicene Creed] had its primary 'Sitz im Leben' in liturgy and piety. It was a symbol of the Divine Service and, according to a number of expressions from Melanchthon, it was also the symbol that is able to deliver comfort in life and in the afflictions of death. The ecumenical reach of the NC for Luther and Melanchthon shows itself perhaps most vividly in this entirely practical dimension: man comes to know himself, in the Divine Service and in prayer, as a member of the true catholic church that lives by faith in the gospel, just as it is confessed in the NC."[25]

In other words, Luther and Melanchthon saw the creed not merely as the *fides quae*, the doctrine that the church confesses, but also the *fides qua*, the faith by which we confidently hope in God and His sure promise of everlasting life in and for the sake of Christ.

The reformers maintained that the Nicene Creed, as well as the Chalcedonian definition of Christ, remained the presupposed standard of orthodoxy. In Augsburg Confession and the Smalcald Articles, both Luther and Melanchthon sought common ground with Rome by means of the ancient symbols. They used the creeds as a defense of orthodoxy against the radical reformers and anti-trinitarians. Finally, the reformers used the creeds to teach their students how to confess the Divine Majesty and the person and work of Christ.

Above all, Luther and Melanchthon saw the Nicene Creed as a source of

confidence for Christians in their piety and prayer, and a source of strength in every temptation. In other words, the Nicene Creed, wherever it is truly believed and confessed, is a mark of both the true church with her orthodox doctrine and a mark of a true Christian, for whom the creed is both *lex credendi* and *lex orandi*. Modern ecumenical dialogue, Wasmuth laments, seems to ignore the pastoral use of the creed for God's people and thus the creed remains, as she calls it, "a symbol for conference ecumenists."[26]

One of the reasons why efforts to use Nicaea in ecumenical dialogue have largely failed may be found in the very definition of the church and her fellowship as confessed in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII: "that in our churches the Gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments are dispensed in accordance with the divine word."[27] The church is confessed liturgically and so the unity of the church is found not merely in the *signa* of any confessional statement, including for Luther even the *homoousios*, but ultimately in the *res* of what Christ gives and what the church receives by faith. "Fides est λατρεία [faith is that worship/Gottesdienst], which receives the benefits of God."[28] The Nicene Creed confesses the Triune God, extols His benefits, and therefore it belongs to true worship and true church.

Historical Notes on Luther and Melanchthon and the Nicene Creed

Before getting to an example of Luther's use of the creed in his preaching, a few historical notes on the Nicene Creed in the sixteenth century are necessary. Wasmuth's book demonstrates that Luther and Melancthon presupposed the Nicene Creed due to its inclusion in the liturgy of the West. It hardly needed an apology. Although Luther preached and taught the substance of the Nicene Creed, as I will demonstrate, explicit statements of praise for Nicaea appear rarely in Luther. And even when he is thinking of the creed, he is almost always referring to the Apostles' Creed. It is a matter of some debate why that is, but one reason from his 1539 treatise, *On the Councils and the Church*, seems clear. Luther took the many canons of the Council itself to have erred from Scriptural teaching. To give one example: the council declared that Christians cannot take part in warfare, which clearly stands at odds with Romans 13:1–7 and the institution of the temporal sword. Luther argued that, if the council is so important, should not the Pope and the Emperor put down their swords and remain true Christians according to the council? His larger point is that those who want to uphold the councils do not abide by them and therefore they make a mockery of the church. So it is today for those who move under the banner of *sola Scriptura*, but do not believe and live according to the Scriptures. Beyond this treatise on the councils and his inclusion of the hymnic version of the Nicene Creed in the *German Mass*, Luther rarely mentions Nicaea or the creedal text. Again, Luther simply presupposes the creed's importance for the church and puts it to work in his

preaching, teaching, and biblical exegesis.

Melanchthon, by contrast, wrote two major treatises on Nicaea, one in 1539 (in the same year as Luther's *On the Councils*) titled *De ecclesia et de autoritate verbi Dei*, and another in 1550 called, *Enarratio Symboli Niceni*. By the early 1530s, Melanchthon and Luther became aware of the anti-trinitarian teaching of Michael Servetus (1509–1553), who in 1553 was charged with heresy and executed by burning along with all his books in the city of Geneva. Already in Melanchthon's 1533 edition of the *Loci Communes*, he used the Nicene articulation of *homoousios* against Servetus's anti-trinitarian teaching. Melanchthon's intensified interest in Nicaea was in direct response to Servetus and others outside the church who denied the Holy Trinity and the divinity of Christ. Melanchthon also taught the Nicene Creed as a means to fortify the internal stability of the Lutheran doctrine. Wasmuth argues that Melanchthon's use of the Nicene Creed establishes not only a *Schriftprinzip* (a principle of Scripture) in the Lutheran church but also a *Traditionsprinzip* (a principle of doctrinal tradition). He did not regard the creed merely as norm for Christian doctrine or *kerygma*. He equated it with the *doctrina Evangelii* itself. The creeds were the substance of what must be preached in the church.[29]

Melanchthon's instruction on preaching and teaching became codified for pastors in the Lutheran Church Orders of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. To quote just one, the Mecklenburg Church Order of 1552 states:

> All pastors must know and learn for themselves this summary of doctrine and all its necessary parts and set them forth to the people purely, orderly, and understandably, so that the people can in an organized way take note of all the parts and recognize the right teaching from the false sect. [...] They should especially teach the catechism and explain the symbols in a useful way to the people, so that the can comprehend the necessary parts in an organized way. Therefore, the pastors should frequently repeat this instruction during opportune times.[30]

It was expected that the preacher had taken the doctrine to heart and learned the richness of the biblical doctrine, both for himself and for his hearers.

Luther's Sermon on Colossians 1:9-20 on November 21, 1537

To illustrate this orderly way of instructing people in the faith from Scripture with the creeds as the res of the Christian message of Christ, we now turn to Luther's sermon on Colossians 1 from the fall of 1537. He published two sermons on Colossians 1 preached. For our purposes here, we will take up the first sermon.

The title reads: "From Jesus Christ, True God and Man and from His Office and Dominion that He Carries Out in Christendom." Luther calls Colossians 1:9–20 "the

most significant passage in all of St. Paul's letters and for this reason one must make every effort to preach it, hear and learn it, and mark and keep it well. For Christ is the Beginning and the Fulfiller of faith (Heb 12)."[31] He notes that the text speaks both of Christ's person—who He is as true God and man, and nevertheless in one, undivided Person—and also of Christ's office and work, that is, what He has done for our salvation and what we have in Him.

Luther takes verse 14, "in whom we have redemption through His blood, namely, the forgiveness of sins," to be a creedal statement. Paul himself does exactly what Melanchthon had suggested in the Mecklenburg Church Order that every pastor do. "He writes a fine little summary of what Christ, God's Son, has done for our salvation and established, so that no one may complain that it's too long or too dense to learn it and keep it."[32] Setting forth the doctrine from Scripture and giving the catechetical summary of the text is necessary for teaching the simple such lofty articles of faith. Luther also takes time to define dogmatic terms from the text. He views Paul's use of the term redemption (*Erlösung*) as a broad term to describe all that Christ does for our salvation. The main point of that redemption, however, is the forgiveness of sins.

At the phrase "through His blood" Luther sees at once all of Christ's atoning work. Christ is the victor over sin and death, who has taken from us God's wrath and condemnation. Yet Christ does not merely triumph over God's wrath, he triumphs by taking God's wrath on himself. His merit and blood redeem us. "All our merit and boasting is taken clean away and everything is attributed to the blood and merit of Christ."[33] Christ's blood, Luther says, is the payment for our sins.[34] The Father has given his Son to redeem us. The entire story of salvation revolves around the forgiveness of sins. Luther follows Paul's logic that redemption is the forgiveness of sins (1:14) through which everything that pertains to salvation will be accomplished:

> Wherever the chief article of redemption is, namely, the forgiveness of sins, there everything follows immediately by which our salvation is made complete. By it eternal death is taken away as wages of sin and eternal righteousness and life is given. As it says in Romans 6, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord." Now because we are reconciled to God and washed through the blood of Christ, so is everything in heaven and on earth reconciled according to Ephesians 1. Because God is gracious to us and forgives sin, so everything laughs with us: heaven and earth, angels, sun, moon, stars, and all creatures. They are all together with us and our joy. And we have nothing but joy and life in God and his creation.[35]

Luther's treatment of Colossians 1 takes together the First and the Second

Articles of the Creed, and the forgiveness of sins of the Third Article is attached to the Second by Christ's redemptive work. God the Father is the Creator, but, because of sin, we cannot know him rightly or have any right relationship with him or his creatures. According to Luther, only by Christ "making peace by the blood of his cross" (1:20) and redeeming sinful humanity by the forgiveness sins can man be reconciled to God and be filled with joy and life with God and created things. Luther does not see a distinction here between "first-article gifts" and "second-article gifts," as if one could speak about the blessings of creation without first being reconciled to God in Christ. The gift is Christ and with him comes everything else in creation. Luther thereby excludes any notion of human reason leading to faith or of nature communicating grace. The Second Article of the Creed has theological preeminence over the First, because the First Article cannot be believed without the Second, and the Second cannot be believed without the Third according to Luther's explanation in the Small Catechism.

When Luther comes to Col. 1:15, "who is the image of the invisible God," he teaches the *homoousios* without using the term. He emphasizes the great mystery that God's own blood redeemed us and exclaims, "I am shocked that the heretic Arius could have ever jumped over this text and missed it. It is spoken so powerfully: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. Through Him everything was made, etc.'"[36] The doctrine of Christ's divinity flows directly out of the Scriptures. Luther believed the teaching was so clear that even Arius could have seen it. In defense of the biblical doctrine of Christ's divinity, Luther challenges the Arian heresy that claimed Christ is only a creature.

> He is the image *[Ebenbild]* in such a way that he and the Father are the same Godhead, and yet they are not one but two Persons. Were he not equal to God, he could not be the image of God, since no creature can be the image of the Divine Essence; no creature has that in him. Were he not a distinct Person, he could again not be God's image, because the image assumes two Persons: one from whom the image is taken and one who is the image.[37]

The presentation of the Son's divinity is not a matter of semantics; it is the way that Scripture speaks or refrains from speaking.

Luther draws on other passages from Scripture to clarity the distinction between the image (icon) of the invisible God and a creature. After concluding that Scripture does not call any creature, either man or angel, the image of God (*Ebenbild*), he supports the claim from Genesis 1:26 and Genesis 5:2. Luther argues that according to the Septuagint the terms κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν and κατ' εἰκόνα θεοῦ mean "after our image" and "after the image of God." Luther states, "but concerning the divinity of Christ, St. Paul speaks quite differently. Christ is the image of God. That is to say:

Christ is in every way the same and equal to God the Father, and is truly, eternally God."[38] These doctrinal distinctions appear throughout the sermon to teach his hearers the doctrine of Christ. In fact, nearly the entire sermon is concerned with the definition of terms based on the doctrine revealed in this text and through all of Scripture.

One final example of Luther's presentation of an article of faith that arises from the text is the term "invisible God." He does not raise the question to speculate about possible meanings with the congregation but attempts to give a clear answer from what presents itself to him in Scripture. He answers: "he [Paul] does this not only to show what God's essence is in heaven, but also to show what God's government is on earth."[39] He continues,

> I understand this word [invisible God] primarily to speak about God's government, which is twofold. The first government of God is God's visible government, which has to do with us Christians and is called the kingdom of God. In his church and Christendom he reigns through the word of his gospel and the Holy Spirit: he preaches, baptizes, absolves, administers the Sacrament.... The other government is invisible and hidden to us, how God made heaven and earth and everything in them; how he still rules the world according to his secret and hidden will and counsel; how it happens that a man lives and does this or that thing, and another does not live and do this or that; how it happens that two men go off to war and one is struck down and the other stays alive.[40]

Again, Luther presents the biblical teaching concerning God's twofold government. Even if one may quibble whether St. Paul's mention of the invisible God warrants a discourse on God's reign over his church and world according to his twofold government, no doubt arises that Luther's teaching is derived from Holy Scripture and therefore bears the mark of apostolic authority. He instructs his hearer in many areas of faith and life based on one or more terms presented in the text. First, it was "redemption, then it was "image," and here it is "invisible God." From these terms Luther teaches the article of redemption and forgiveness of sins, the two natures of Christ, and God's twofold government.

Conclusion

Many in Christendom today are skeptical of the assertion that the sense of Scripture is clear, that the meaning of any given biblical passage has one clear intent, even if the interpreter may not sense it. Luther and Melanchthon were convinced that the gospel which has power to save (Rom 1:16) is revealed in Holy Scripture. Orthodoxy has always been established by a faithful interpretation of the Scriptures. But what may appear obvious, that Scripture teaches the doctrine of Christ and his apostles, has

become increasingly uncertain, especially in the homiletical task. Human perspectives and cultural references tend to cloud out God's revelation. Any real sense the hearers may have had that God is addressing his church through his word is lost.

Our study of Luther and Melanchthon show how Lutheran pastors might strengthen their preaching and establish God's people in the faith. This is true for anyone who teaches the faith to others. First, Luther and Melanchthon understood that God's word is, in fact, powerful and from God. God's word is not a cultural artifact of the first century Christians or ancient Israel to be examined briefly before trading it in for something more applicable to our twenty-first century sensibilities. Neither is Scripture a good starting point for proclamation. Scripture is God's own grammar and gives credibility to the sermon. Scripture authorizes the preacher to proclaim what God says in the text, both law and gospel. Preaching from the text and instructing congregations in the doctrine of Christ and his apostles is to preach as a minister of the word, as one who has pledged not to preach the words of men but God's words. It would be a surprise if any LCMS pastor were to believe that Scripture is not God's word or that doctrine had changed over time based on historical circumstances and should evolve to fit the cultural context of the church today. Nevertheless, preachers may have difficulty preaching God's word with the clarity and authority of Scripture if they are not convinced of the Scripture's clear message. Luther and Melanchthon help direct preachers to the summary of Christian doctrine found in the creeds of the church. The doctrine confessed in the creeds must be proclaimed to God's people, not merely as a summary of doctrine or as abstract truths, but as the very gospel itself, which establishes saving faith and guards Christians from error.

In the dogmatic tradition, Lutherans have maintained the distinction between the authority of Scripture, the *norma normans*, and the authority of the confessions of the church, the *norma normata*. For Luther and Melanchthon, Lutheran sermons are informed and normed by Scripture, and, like our Lutheran Confessions, are to be a true exposition of the Sacred Scriptures. The aim should not only be to present the articles of faith accurately, but as Luther and Melanchthon taught, to take them to heart and believe them, so that Sunday after Sunday, the hearers learn from their pastor as from God everything they need for faith and life in Christ.

Endnotes

1 Quoted in Hans Schwarz, *Theology in a Global Context: The Last Two Hundred Years* (Eerdmans, 2005), 129. Cf., Adolf von Harnack, *Outlines of the History of Dogma* (1889).

2 Schwarz, *Theology in a Global Context*, 129.

3 "On the Councils and the Church" in *Annotated Luther*, 3:370

4 "On the Councils and the Church" in *Annotated Luther*, 3:371

5 *LW* 32:243–244; *Against Latomus* (1521).

6 For a fuller appraisal of Luther's view of Scripture as the norm of doctrine and life, the source of the means of grace, and as means of grace itself, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Baker Publishing, 2016), 75–97; Robert Preus, *Doctrine is Life: Essays on Scripture*, ed. Klemet Preus (Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 263–306; Michael Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (The Wartburg Press, 1944), 65–102.

7 Johann Anselm Steiger, "Rhetorica Sacra Seu Biblica: Johann Mattäus Meyfart (1590–1642) und die Defizite der Heutigen Rhetorischen Homiletik," *Zeitschrift Für Theologie und Kirche* 92, no. 4 (Dezember 1995): 517–558 Here: 522. Steiger gives an account and analysis of Meyfart's *Teutsche Rhetorica oder Redekunst* (1634), who wrote LSB #674, "Jerusalem, O City Fair and High" Steiger calls the Age of Baroque "the most effective epoch of instruction in homiletical rhetoric" (519).

8 Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Weimerer Ausgabe, 1. Abteilung: Schriften, Bd. 1–64*, Joachim K. F. Knaake et al. (1883–1990), WA 7:97, 23 (Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per bullam Leonis X., 1520).

9 Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Eerdmans, 2007), 15.

10 Erik Herrmann observes "that one of the most important things that Luther can say about the Scriptures is that they are the Word of God. They are not just the most ancient, authoritative texts of the Christian faith; they are more than a historical reference point for the church's origin story. They are the viva vox, the 'living voice' of God. They not only record what God said in the past, but they continue to be His present speech, God speaking and His address for today." "Martin Luther's Approach to the Bible" in John T. Pless and Larry M. Vogel, eds., *Luther's Large Catechism with Annotations and Contemporary Applications* (Concordia Publishing House, 2022), 15.

11 Luther, WA, 39/II:104, 24 "Spiritus sanctus habet suam grammaticam." See also, Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 80–82.

12 Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (Yale University Press, 1980), 135–181 Regarding the whole of the Middle Ages, Ozment notes that exclusive papal authority was not the rule. He writes, "The papacies of Gregory VII and Innocent III and the scholastic synthesis of Thomas Aquinas were exceptions, not the norm" (180).

13 Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Fortress Press, 1981), 58.

14 For the nuances of Cajetan's papalism, see Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 59–60.

15 Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 60.

16 It appears that Luther privately had become resolute enough to suffer for the sake of his teaching, knowing that he had it from God. Two months before appearing before Cajetan, and aware that he must go, Luther wrote to Spalatin, "In all this I fear nothing, as you know, my Spalatin. Even if their flattery and power should succeed in making me hated by all people, enough remains of my heart and conscience to know and confess that all for which I stand and which they attack, I have from God, to whom I gladly and of my own accord entrust and offer all of this. If he takes it away, it is taken away; if he preserves it, it is preserved. Hallowed and praised be his name forever. Amen." *LW* 48:74, "A Letter to George Spalatin, 28 August 1518."

17 Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 322; SA III, viii, 5.

18 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Paulist Press, 1994), 26, §81 refers to Pope Paul VI's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*: Dei Verbum (18 November 1965).

19 *Catholic Catechism*, §83.
20 *Catholic Catechism*, §83.
21 *Catholic Catechism*, §81.
22 *Catholic Catechism*, §85.
23 Richard Muller defines autopistos as it came to be understood among Lutherans and Calvinists in the seventeenth century: "If Scripture is trustworthy in and of itself (in se and per se), no external authority, whether church or tradition, need to be invoked in order to ratify Scripture as the norm of faith and practice." Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2017), 49, "autopistos."
24 Kolb, Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God, 99.
25 Jennifer Wasmuth, *Wyr gleuben all an eynem Gott: Das Nicaeno-Contantinopolitan in seiner Bedeutung für Marin Luther und Philipp Melanchthon*, vol. 141, *Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation* (Mohr Siebeck, 2024), 494. Author's translation.
26 Wasmuth, *Wyr Gleuben All an Eynem Gott*, 495.
27 *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930), 61 AC VII:2, (German, author's translation; hereafter BSLK).
28 BSLK, 170; Ap IV:49.
29 Wasmuth, *Wyr Gleuben All an Eynem Gott*, 470–77.
30 Wasmuth, *Wyr Gleuben All an Eynem Gott*, 327; cf., Sehling, KO 5:162.
31 Luther, *WA* 45:266, 20–21.
32 Luther, *WA* 45:268, 33–35.
33 Luther, *WA* 45:272, 11–12.
34 Luther, *WA* 45:272, 20.
35 Luther, *WA* 45:272, 27–37.
36 Luther, *WA* 45:274, 19–23.
37 Luther, *WA* 45:274, 24–275, 11.
38 Luther, *WA* 45:275, 24–26.
39 Luther, *WA* 45:280, 15–16.
40 Luther, *WA* 45:280, 23–281, 10.

Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived
Why the Nicene Creed Matters

Welcome to *Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived*. We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life because it's tangible. Theology learned and lived.

The *Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived* podcast is produced by the department of Theological Research and Publications at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The following is a transcript of portions of the episode titled "Why the Nicene Creed Matters" recorded in May of 2026. You can find it and other episodes of the podcast on all major podcast hosting apps and as always on our website, concordiatheology.org.

Jessica Bordeleau:

What do writings from the fourth century have to do with Christians today? We frequently say one together as a group in church services, the ancient Nicene Creed. It has influenced the church for 1700 years, but why does it matter to me? Here to discuss is Dr. Joel Elowsky. He's been a professor of historical theology here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis since 2014. He's the director of the Seminary Center for the Study of Early Christian Texts and is a researcher for the Center of Early African Christianity.

Dr. Elowsky, you're internationally acclaimed as an expert on the writings of the early church, and you've been in dialogue with the Vatican. You've

written, edited, and translated over a dozen books; but you also have experience as a parish pastor. You started a church in New Jersey and pastored people in that congregation. All this makes you the perfect person to answer my questions! I want to know more about the Nicene Creed and why it matters.

Joel Elowsky:
Who wouldn't?

Bordeleau: Exactly. I'll start at the beginning. What is the Nicene Creed?

Elowsky: Well, interesting that you should ask that question. We call it the Nicene Creed, but the creed we say on Sunday mornings is actually what I would call the Nicene-Constantinople creed. The thing we confess on Sunday mornings is a combination of what was confessed at Nicaea in 325 BC, but then over the next fifty years they had a bunch of debate about some issues. They had another council at Constantinople in 381 BC. The creed that was produced out of that council is actually the one we say on Sunday morning, with an expanded third article on the Holy Spirit.

Bordeleau: So, the creed that we say is the third edit?

Elowsky: Yes.

Bordeleau: You talked about councils, what are councils?

Elowsky: The church would call councils to help resolve issues that were dividing the church. But the thing about a council at that level, is that it was called by the emperor. Emperor Constantine saw some issues that were affecting the empire as well as the church. If you're a politician, the last thing you want is division, especially when he had just fought a bunch of wars to bring the empire together in the early 300s. So, all of a sudden, the church is having problems and that becomes the emperor's problem. Just think about how divisive religion can be, think about some of the problems in the world today. How many of them have their basis in religion? Constantine called that council because he could see that there was division in his empire. Personally, I think he was also concerned about the Christian faith.

Bordeleau: What were the specific points of disagreement?

Elowsky: There were three main issues. First of all, there was a question about when to celebrate Easter.

Bordeleau: That doesn't sound like a big deal. That was a major division in the church?

Elowsky: Yes, it was. The pagans and philosophers poked fun at the Christians. They were mocking the Christians saying that they can't even celebrate the most important festival of their religion together! They're not even celebrating on the same day, so how can you call this a coherent religion?

The second issue was empire-wide persecution. What if you were a Christian who gave in? Can you still be part of the church? That was a question to discuss as well. When Bishop Peter of Alexandria was put in jail for being a Christian, Bishop Meletius of Antioch decided to take over the work of ordaining pastors without asking Bishop Peter for permission. It's pretty important that you can look to your ecclesiastical supervisor, but now you've got two of them. So, there were divisions again. Peter died, but Meletius kept doing this despite the next bishop's orders. By the time they get to Niceia they have to resolve this. That's the second issue. So, I've started with the ones that are less well known.

Bordeleau: Those issues don't seem very significant to me.

Elowsky: Right, but at the time, believe me, they were.

These are parts of the issues, but the main thing that the Council of Nicaea dealt with was a little different. The third issue gets to the heart of the matter. A presbyter, so a priest, in a suburb of Alexandria did something which I caution seminarians never to do. He contradicted his bishop <laughs> and accused him of false doctrine. Not a wise move, right? He said that his bishop was teaching what's known as modalism. Modalism says that God appears in different forms. Sometimes he appears as father, sometimes as son, sometimes as spirit. He came up with this theological statement that he was sure was at the core of the problem. How do you talk about the Son in relationship to the Father? And he said, "there was when the Son was not" So the Father always existed, but the Son came into being, maybe in eternal ages or whatever, but he came into being, he's a created being.

Bordeleau: That would be a problem.

Elowsky: That's a huge deal.

Bordeleau: What about verses like "all things were made through him" and "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God . . ." and "the word became flesh"?

Elowsky: Yep, and that's the problem. He'd say "No, the word was not God, but a God." Huge problem, right? This happened in like 318 BC, and it got the attention of more bishops. The guy's name was Arias. I even created a rhyme for Arias.

Bordeleau: You write limericks about early church fathers? <laughs>

Elowsky: Do you want to hear it?

Bordeleau: Please.

Elowsky: Well, there once was a man named Arias.
What he said was truly nefarious.
He said, God is one,
but excluded his son,
and for the church that was quite deleterious.

Bordeleau: Amazing. That was great. <laughter>

Elowsky: It captures the essence of what he was saying: God is one, but the Son isn't part of it. He's a separate, created being. He's part of creation, not our creator. It's not quite as cut and dried as we sometimes make it out to be. Basically, he said that the Son is not God in the same way that the Father is God. Now, do you see a problem with that? Why?

Bordeleau: Because that's not how God has revealed himself to us in scripture, right? Jesus is the incarnation of God, so he's God put on flesh. How could he be perfect if he was a created being? He was perfect in our place. "The Father and I are one," Jesus said that all the time.

Elowsky: Yes. My question to you is ultimately, who died for you?

Bordeleau: The Son of God.

Elowsky: And if it's anybody less than God, guess what? You're in a world of hurt. Nobody but God can pay for the sins of the world. Nobody but God can bring you back into unity with him. That ended up being the precipitating thing that caused Constantine to call the council.

Arias was a smart guy. He was very good at making alliances with bishops. He got kicked out of Alexandria and was excommunicated, but Arias had somebody on his side who knew the emperor. That's how he was able to get this little idea in Alexandria spread throughout the empire. That's when Constantine could see that there were some problems.

Bordeleau: At that time, did they have the collection of epistles and gospels? Did they have scripture to go back to and figure out these things?

Elowsky: Yes, but they didn't have the Bible established yet. It would have been what we call the Septuagint version. That's the Greek version of the Old Testament plus the Greek New Testament. Arias appealed to Proverbs 8:22. It says something like "the Lord *established* me, or *brought me forth*, at the beginning of his ways, for his works." That's from the Hebrew. But if you read the Greek, here's what it says: "The Lord created me at the beginning for his ways for his works."

Bordeleau: And if Jesus is speaking this Psalm, then he's saying that he was created.

Elowsky: Exactly. And that's why Arias would say he's not the same as a father because he's created.

Bordeleau: He said that based on one verse?

Elowsky: There are a few others, but that was the key one. It was probably one of the most common passages of scripture in the early church. So, what do you do with that, Jessica? It says right there he's created.

Bordeleau: Well, look at the whole rest of scripture. Right?

Elowsky: Well, I think you quoted quite a bunch of it for us already, in a good way. I want you to understand the strategy was about how you interpret the Bible. I love what you did, bringing in other passages. The first chapter of John is tied to the first chapter of Genesis and even Proverbs chapter

eight. They're all connected to establish that it's none less than God who's in charge of all. Jesus says in Matthew 28:19, you baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Why would he introduce creatures into your baptism? That's a pretty strong argument too.

The 325 BC debate was all about the Son. But as you noted, we've got that whole extra section, the third article. In the 340s BC or so, maybe 350s BC, they started to realize that as goes the Son, so goes the Spirit and as goes the Spirit, so goes the Son. There were some people who would talk about the Holy Spirit kind of as a force or just the breath of God, almost like *Star Wars*, you know? "Use the force!" They saw the Holy Spirit as just a force that came out from God. Problem with that, of course, is that he's included in the Trinitarian baptism. Also, there's Acts chapter five when Anaias and Sapphira sell their property for the community but publicly lie about the price. Peter confronts them saying "You've lied to the Holy Spirit," and "You have not lied unto men, but unto God." Peter's establishing the Holy Spirit is God by divine inspiration. There was a lot of debate for those years about what to call the Holy Spirit. It all boils down to the fact that if the Holy Spirit is in the Trinity, then he has to be God. He can't be anything short of that.

When talking about the Holy Spirit in the third article, they just used the language in scripture like 2 Corinthians and John 15:26. "With the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified." We don't worship anybody but God or glorify anybody with God. They confessed the divinity of the Holy Spirit. They just didn't use that term because of some of the debate that was happening at the time. The ultimate creed is faithful to scripture but also reflects the theological discussions at the time.

The Nicene Creed totally confesses the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; all as God. All involved in our salvation too. This creed that we say on Sundays is a succinct confession of what we believe, teach, and confess. If you think about it, it's a summary of the Bible, the message of salvation.

It provides a summary, an elevator speech if you will, of what we believe, teach, and confess as Christians. That's what a creed does. It's really a gift that we've got everything there. It's an important statement of faith, but I wouldn't want to leave your listeners with the impression that it's *just* that. You can also look at this devotionally. "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, maker of heaven and earth." Think

about that and just stop there for a second. What you're confessing is that it's God who did it. You could take a long time thinking about that, just recognizing that you're part of that creation. That the Son chose to become part of our creation just blows my mind. God not only made it but then decided to live in it. And why would he do that, Jessica?

Bordeleau: Only out of love for us.

Elowsky: Exactly. God so loved the world that he took on this limiting flesh, which of course didn't limit him. He still was God the whole time and yet he was also one of us, right? That shows us that God's not far off or distant but somebody who's right there with you every step of the way.

Personally, for me emotionally, I think it's the third article that I gravitate towards the most. Especially that first phrase: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life."

What does it mean to give life? Well, you know; you're a mom. There's this special feeling there that you can hardly express, right?

Bordeleau: Right.

Elowsky: That's physical life, but I think it also means spiritual life. The fact that he's called you to faith and life with him forever. He will raise you on the last day. When we say the creed on Sunday mornings, sometimes I wish we'd just stop at a phrase. Just think about this one for a while. What does this say to me, right now, that he's "the Lord and giver of life who proceeds from the Father and the Son." And there's a lot to think about there. And then you can go into scripture and see how the Holy Spirit is just, life wins, you know?

Bordeleau: You should write a devotion book about that.

Elowsky: Oh, we wrote a whole book series on it! *Ancient Christian Doctrine Series* published by InterVarsity Press. It takes you through every phrase of the creed, devotionally as well as doctrinally. I wrote the volume on the Holy Spirit. It's written for laity as well as pastors.

So, this creed united the churches. It's an ecumenical creed; it's the same creed that the Catholic, Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglicans say on Sundays.

When Baptists and many evangelicals use a creed in their worship service, they say it too. There are still things that divide us, but it doesn't hurt to talk about what unites us!

If a church doesn't agree with the creed, then they aren't confessing Christianity. You've got 1700 years of church being church that's pushing back against you on that. And if you look at our Lutheran confessions, for instance, we have it right at the front. The first thing in the Book of Concord are the Apostles Creed, Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. We're not doing anything new. This is what the church has always confessed. We've got a God who's not a distant God but is with us every step of the way. In the book of Matthew, Jesus says, "I'm with you always, to the very end of the age."

Bordeleau: The final question on the show is always this: What do you want our listeners to remember?

Elowsky: I want them to remember that God doesn't care about getting his hands dirty or giving up everything. That's what he did when he gave up his Son, and that's at the heart of the creed. It says, "for us and for our salvation." This is a God who's not disinterested in you. He's invested everything in you and for you. Rejoice in that gift and let other people know about it!

Bordeleau: So, the Nicene Creed matters today; it is actually a matter of life and death.

Elowsky It is. Yes.

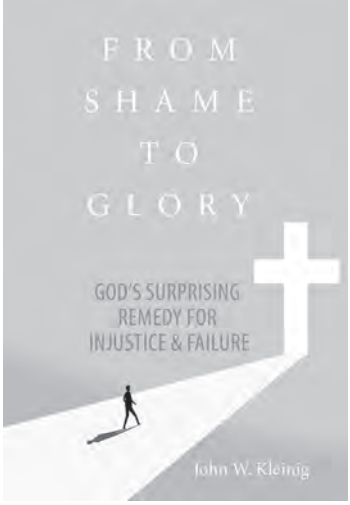
Bordeleau: That's it for today. Dr. Joel Elowsky, thank you for being on the show.

Elowsky: My pleasure, thank you!

Bordeleau: You can find more episodes of *Tangible* on all the major hosting apps, YouTube, and as always on our website, concordiatheology.org. We have a lot more free resources there. Check it out! I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, because it's tangible. Theology is learned and lived.

Reviews

FROM SHAME TO GLORY: God's Surprising Remedy for Injustice and Failure. *By John W Kleinig. Concordia Publishing House, 2026. Paper. 208 pages. $17.99.*



From Shame to Glory is a bold title. It might make a prospective reader think of the kind of spiritual self-help literature that is so prolific today, promising the Christian ways to overcome their own shame through perfecting certain spiritual techniques or practices. Kleinig's book could not be further from this! It is a biblical account of how *God* removes human shame and puts in its place not just honor or self-esteem, but his very own heavenly glory.

Like many, over the years I have struggled with pinning down what exactly shame is and how it works. Its exact nature is elusive, and it seems to operate in complex ways. Our culture has scaled it down to just another kind of victimhood. It is popularly believed that if we have a healthy self-image and we are otherwise well adjusted, we should feel no shame, nor be shamed by others. It has been reduced to "bad feelings about yourself which others put on you." There is much more to it than this. In chapter 2 Kleinig sets about *naming* shame, getting at what it is and how it works. He explores the personal emotions and feelings associated with shame, and its cultural and social dimensions. He agrees with the basic and widely held distinction that guilt, while so often deeply entwined with shame, is nevertheless distinctly different from it. Guilt is related to our wrong actions and words; shame is related to our wrong *being*, our damaged *identity*. However, shame is best and most clearly understood not just as a purely internal emotional experience of the individual, but also as external and intrinsically associated with our relationships, both to God and other humans. The picture of shame sketched in this chapter is deepened and sharpened by the chapters that follow later.

The core of this work is the careful and detailed biblical survey provided in chapters 2–5. As the story is explored, shame's complex spiritual layers unfold, through Scripture's characters and events. Kleinig moves methodically through the Old Testament origins of shame in the fall (Gn 3). and the comprehensive spiritual, physical and other personal consequences of shame in the generations of Israel. He continues with a penetrating New Testament analysis of the Second Adam whose ministry redeems and removes

the shame of those who believe in him. Kleinig works methodically through the narrative, piece by piece, finally focusing in on its christological heart:

God sent His Son to rescue people from shame through His shameful death on the cross. Jesus goes the way of the cross, the way of divine folly rather than human wisdom, the way of divine weakness rather than human power, the way of divine lowliness rather than human glory. Through the death of Son on the cross, God debunks the human quest for fame. He deliberately chooses those who are regarded as nobodies in human society and calls them to follow His Son, on the way by which He leads them through shame to glory. He makes Christ everything for those who are otherwise regarded as worthless and insignificant. He unites them with His crucified and risen Son so that they are vindicated by Him with His righteousness, and made holy by Him with His holiness, and delivered from shame by Him, as their Redeemer. (105)

In this biblical exploration and in other parts of the book, Kleinig treats the special significance of sexuality and shame. Shame finds particularly strong purchase in our sexual identity. Adam and Eve, first created in all their sexual glory with male and female physicality, respond to their newfound shame following their disobedience by covering their nakedness. Their glory as man and woman became their shame. To this day we carry this wound with us. Sexual shaming is therefore especially devastating and long-lasting.

In this work Kleinig does not set up arbitrary categories or structures to explain shame. Nor does he simply adopt the categories and structures offered by psychology or neurology, though he does use terminology from this milieu when it is useful (where for example, he refers to shame's effect on our *identity*). His main strategy is instead to allow the scriptural picture of shame to emerge in a natural and unforced way, as he describes and interprets it in relational rather than technical terms.

From a biblical and theological perspective, shame is a complex and many-sided reality. It operates both negatively and positively, according to different situational dynamics. It is the damage response we sinners have when the effects of sin and evil (our own or that of others) impact us. Though painful it may in some situations be appropriate and salutary. This why we speak about those who have no such sense as "shameless," as if something were missing from their humanity.

Compared to the most influential and widely appreciated Christian book on shame in recent times, Curt Thompson's *The Soul of Shame* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), Kleinig takes a far richer biblical view of shame and the Christian response to it. Thompson describes the neurological seat of shame in the brain and how the brain can be helped to greater self-acceptance through reframing the sufferer's inner story and cultivating loving relationships in Christian community. Kleinig's book, on

the other hand, is rooted in a consciously monergistic Lutheran theology. No amount of our cultivation and reframing can remove or heal shame, which is part of the fatal damage of our fallen state. While psychological therapy can be and is helpful in damage control, it cannot decisively deal with shame any more than it can deal with sin or death. Only God's *extra nos* intervention can remove it, and has done so in the person of Christ, who faced the shame of the cross so that by faith in him we may not be *put to shame.*

It could be said that this book uncovers the authentic scriptural "theology of glory," which does not bypass the theology of the cross but keeps it central. We need to face up to the experiences of shame that come to us in life, and we can do this because Jesus faced the shame of the cross, and through his suffering and death, wiped away the shame of all those who trust in him.

One of the many helpful spiritual insights Kleinig offers is the judgement that biblically, the true antidote to shame is not honor, self-worth, confidence, or fame—the much sought after human solutions. God's antidote is nothing less than *glory*. We were created to share in the weight of God's glory, and when our shame is healed in Christ, we receive again that glory of God, hidden in this age, but revealed in eternity.

As with Kleinig's approach to the Christian life in his other writings, so here he wants the reader to see that receiving God's healing and release from shame is not a matter of just "knowing about it" or having some abstracted "concept" of it. It is an embodied, personal, and relational experience which we receive, most especially in the Divine Service (chapter 6). Here God delivers his transforming gifts to us through his Word. In the ordo of the liturgy God performs His restoration of our shame-wounded souls and gives us the gift that directly redeems our deep injury from the fall, our shame over our exposed naked bodies. Jesus gives us his own body and blood, which hung naked in shame on the cross, but was raised and clothed in glory, to live eternally.

In chapter 7, Kleinig explores the power of gracious speech, in avoiding shaming others, in restoring others' shame and sometimes, in gently allowing shame to do its necessary work in the heart and conscience. It is important for Christians to understand the subtle and nuanced dynamics of shaming and being shamed in the context of the church's life, where we so often fail to understand the spiritual damage we do to one another. Kleinig spends significant space teaching on this issue and brings out helpful and often ignored insights about how shame and restoration operate in personal relationships.

There are poignant moments of self-disclosure in this deeply compelling book, which demonstrate the raw vulnerability of shame and its pain. It is written from a disposition of deep empathy, which elicits the reader's personal reflection on their own experiences of shame, and stimulates repentant consideration of the ease with which, even in the church, we unjustly

and lovelessly shame one another.

John Kleinig's prose is clear and accessible. Its style is reminiscent of his 2008 book, *Grace Upon Grace* in the way it uses simple uncomplicated sentences with active verbs, which help the reader quickly and easily understand what the author means. Kleinig skillfully draws together the shame-to-glory narrative of Scripture, placing Christ's redemptive work at the center. It is theologically and pastorally rich even though it is delivered with a minimum of technical jargon. This is what makes this work, like many of John Kleinig's others, helpful and important for academic and non-academic theologians alike.

Stephen Pietsch

BECAUSE JESUS TAUGHT IT: Christianity Through the Eyes of the Church Fathers. *By Marcus "FLAME" Gray. Concordia Publishing House, 2025. Paperback. 205 Pages. $17.99.*

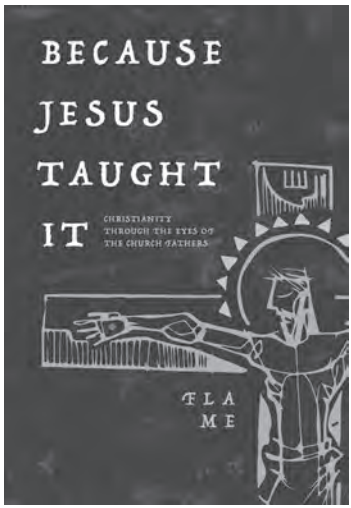
I have not had the good fortune to meet Flame. But several years ago, I attended a concert that he graciously held at the seminary. By the time the concert was over, I was captivated. FLAME had proclaimed God's Word with a beauty and clarity that I have rarely experienced.

In his book, *Because Jesus Taught It*, you will experience the same beauty and clarity of thought that I experienced that night. The book reads like silk. Once I started, I was reluctant to put it down. FLAME is a gifted communicator, and the fact that he is using his gifts to spread the gospel humbles me.

Toward the end of his book, FLAME writes, "I oftentimes make this statement: I hold to 'ancient Christianity as preserved through confessional Lutheran thought'" (191). *Because Jesus Taught It* is FLAME's account of the journey he took to reach the place where he could say such a thing about himself and mean it.

FLAME shows us that the journey was not a short, simple stroll. He had to traverse some steep terrain, from a lifetime immersion in Full Gospel Baptist and Reformed Baptist churches, to Concordia Seminary, where he fell in love with the church fathers and Lutheran theology. Do not be fooled. This is not a path as easy to navigate as it sounds. But FLAME has the kind of curious mind and heart that opened him up to the trip.

I need to emphasize that this book does not simply take the reader on a cognitive trip through the dry desert in



doctrinal disagreement land. It is much more than that. It involves FLAME's heart as much as his mind. It is deeply relational. The most poignant section for me was when he described the state of his inner life when he came to the seminary (117–129). Here you see a soul under judgment, not only God's judgment, but also self-judgment—searching and hoping for some freedom that he found in our sacramental theology and gospel-centered preaching.

Throughout *Because Jesus Taught It*, FLAME speaks with grace and kindness, especially towards those with whom he disagrees. It is evident that FLAME loves people and loves to bring the gospel to others in speech and song. His gentle and open stance towards others is a model for the type of discourse that is sorely lacking in our church today.

I learned so much from this book because FLAME not only knows the church fathers well and knows the disagreements they had with people over baptism, the Lord's Supper, and other teachings, but he is supremely attuned to present day disagreements over the sacraments. He does a great job teaching us who have grown up in the Lutheran Church, how others view what we hold as precious and central to our faith—but often take for granted. After reading his book, I had a new appreciation for the beauty and depth of our theology. FLAME also increased my understanding of how relevant our theology is and how to speak it clearly to people who have no idea what we are talking about.

My favorite part of the book is when FLAME is talking about Christology and invokes an article written by my colleague, Dave Maxwell. (To my great delight, FLAME sprinkles his book with names of my friends whose teaching influenced him. This is so cool to see.) In less than ten pages (160–169), FLAME manages to explain the importance and relevance of what are infamously known as "the three genera," *genus idiomaticum, genus maiestaticum*, and genus *apotelesmaticum*. FLAME pulls off what is to me an incredible feat. He explains the terms, roots them in Scripture, relates them to the Lord's Supper, and shows how beautiful and relevant they are for modern Christians. Wow.

I think that pastors, teachers, DCE's, deaconesses and other leaders would love this book. I would recommend it for Bible study groups, confirmation instruction, and private study. In a culture where young people are dropping out of church or finding reasons not to attend, FLAME makes a compelling case for worshipping together as a community and receiving God's gifts in unity. This book is worth our close and continued attention.

Timothy E. Saleska

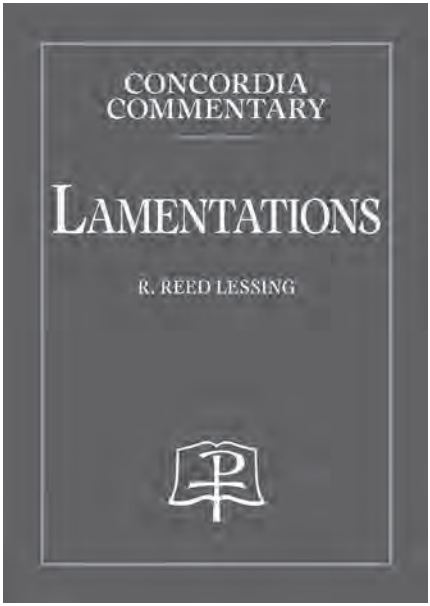
LAMENTATIONS. Concordia Commentary. *By R. Reed Lessing. Concordia Publishing House, 2024. Hardcover. 493 pages. $69.99.*

In this, his fifth contribution to the Concordia Commentary series, R. Reed Lessing does the unthinkable; he invites Lutherans, and all people, to lament, to

voice their fear, pain, frustration, and anger, to lay it on the line and be honest with God. How refreshing!

Characteristic of Lessing's approach and thinking is this statement from the first excursus, "A cerebral analysis of Lamentations views the book as an ancient writing that we dissect. There are historical, rhetorical, philological, and theological ideas to master, and then, presto, the interpretive task is complete. But what about the book's strong emotional content? its highly charged expressions of anger, rage, fear, doubt, and hope?" (177).

In keeping with the goals of the commentary series, Lessing expertly enacts the "cerebral analysis." He gives careful attention to the historical, rhetorical, philological, and theological matters of Lamentations as can be seen in his introductory material, in the textual notes, and throughout. But he doesn't stop there. He engages with the "strong emotional content" of the book and considers its purpose and benefits for the original audience and for today's readers and hearers. Acknowledging that Lamentations is often neglected and can feel alien, he states, "Yet the book still provides a framework for working through sorrow—giving us the emotional honesty needed to heal" (xi).



Lessing begins by "Making the Case for Lamentations." One could ask why Christians need lament given the victory of Jesus, but Lessing argues that lament is still necessary in this life, in a world still deeply affected by suffering, pain, despair, and evil. He acknowledges that we are not those first addressed by the book, those who suffered the incredible events of 587 BC, yet we and those around us still suffer today. Lamentations "corrects euphoric and celebratory notions of faith that romantically portray the Christian life as consisting of only sweetness and light." Additionally, "The cries of anguish in Lamentations help us avoid a one-sided, happiness-only mindset that fails to deal forthrightly with life's tragedies" (8–9). With this in mind, the rest of the commentary seeks to help its readers learn from Lamentations and apply its words, thoughts, lessons, and its grasp on hope in YHWH.

The rest of the introduction accomplishes what one would expect, giving a history of interpretation and establishing this commentary's approach;

dealing with the historical setting, authorship, addressees, and the like; discussing the genres of lament and dirge; reviewing aspects of Hebrew poetry, especially enjambment and the acrostic form; exploring the voices one hears in the book; reviewing theodicy and how it relates to Lamentations; and making observations about the text of Lamentations, its place in the canon, and a general outline of the book. Amidst this material, I especially appreciated Lessing's treatment of Christological Features (24–29) wherein, among other things, he shows the parallels between what happens in Lamentations and what happens to Christ. Also of import is the section Pastoral Features in Lamentations (33–36). Here Lessing helps pastors consider the application of Lamentations in their ministries. Even the Historical Setting portion is surprisingly helpful. Knowing this history well, I was tempted to skip this, but Lessing does a nice job of summarizing and focusing on important points that lead to a meaningful reading of Lamentations. In the section on Poetry, the discussion of enjambment is helpful but too brief. This important feature in Lamentations is not familiar to many. Actual examples laid out for the reader would be more beneficial than listing a few to look up. The same could be said for the "*qinah* meter" that typifies four of five chapters of the book.

Of particular interest to me was the treatment of the alphabetic acrostic pattern that shapes the first four chapters of Lamentations and, in a less obvious way, the fifth chapter as well. It was my interest in acrostics that first got me interested in this oft-neglected book. Lessing's introduction to this topic (70–75) is a helpful overview and start. Of great help is that his translations, text notes, and commentary all emphasize this structure by including the Hebrew letters as their organizing feature. English readers of Lamentations will not see the acrostic pattern unless it is pointed out. Hebrew readers will likely miss it if they are reading an electronic version. In print copies of BHS and BHQ it is made obvious by the editors, and in this commentary, it is made absolutely plain in the ways mentioned above. Also helpful is that early in the text notes for each chapter and in the summary that begins the commentary for each chapter, Lessing discusses the acrostic pattern and how it shapes the chapter. The lack of alphabet in the fifth chapter is a startling development after the previous four chapters. This and other changes in the poetry "announce the book's conclusion" according to Lessing. I believe it does more, as I have written elsewhere. The lack of alphabetical order helps display the absolute brokenness and chaos of the situation; however, the twenty-two verses, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, provide structure in the chaos and undergird the message that YHWH is still in control, and their prayer will be answered.

Also helpful is Lessing's treatment of The Voices in Lamentations (75–83). In my own reading and rereading I have traced these voices for myself. Lessing

has helped me see and hear them more clearly and distinctly and to recognize their import for reading Lamentations well. The acrostic pattern divides the book into five chapters, but the voices help Lessing outline each chapter. His attention to the voices also helps him show the different viewpoints represented as well as the movement and development through the book.

Following each chapter's commentary, Lessing adds an excursus. Though labeled excurses, these short theological reflections are substantial and even crucial to what he is trying to accomplish.

Anyone interested in the Book of Lamentations will benefit greatly from Lessing's excellent work in this volume. Anyone interested in engaging openly and honestly with suffering, pain, grief, trauma, and evil should be sure to work slowly and carefully through this commentary. In Lamentations the Lord has given his people the opportunity to learn from the faith-filled suffering of former saints. Reed Lessing helps the reader learn and apply the lessons that Lamentations offers. I look forward to continued interaction with Lamentations and to Lessing's assistance in that endeavor.

Philip Werth Penhallegon

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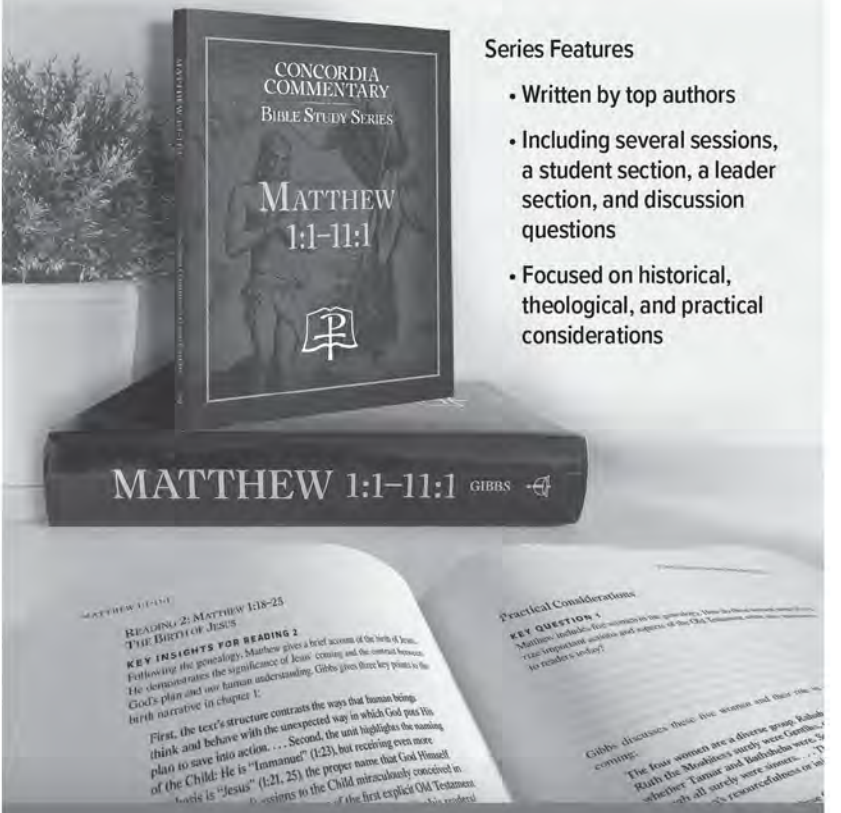

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