

What Do Lutherans Have to Offer?

An Ecumenical Conversation at the 1700th Anniversary of Nicaea

Joel Elowsky

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO

What do Lutherans have to offer in an ecumenical conversation on Nicaea. We are, after all, Trinitarian. I received this artwork from some students who were hanging around outside my door. Perhaps a bit of explanation is in order. We have three professors on the campus - all named Joel. . . . There is a bit of subordinationism going on in this Joelity, but I won't say who is subordinate to whom.

But I digress. But let me digress just a little bit more. But before I do, I want to tell you the direction I am taking this paper. The first part of the paper will be looking at Nicaea and two key terms in the Creed, begotten and homoousios. You will be hearing a lot from Arius because his teaching was the primary reason for the Nicene Creed coming into existence. I am doing this to make the second part of the paper more intelligible where I explore what Lutherans did with the creed and the council then that informs what we do now with what was decided at Nicaea and how this might inform our ecumenical discussion.

I want to begin the first part of the lecture by talking about the central figure of the Nicene Council who confessed a creed. It 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 60s or so by then. He wasn't a newbie like Athanasius who was pretty close to the same age as my youngest son who was just ordained this summer and took his first call in East Brunswick, NJ.

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. It's what Luther tried to do in the Small Catechism. 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. I thought the head of your society would appreciate this. It goes like this:

There once was a man named Arius

What he said was truly nefarious

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

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 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.

Also think about this. 1700 years and we're still talking about the church's response to Arius and the creed they wrote in response. 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, JS 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 56 years later at the Council of Constantinople in 381 in order 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 27. The last one was first suggested in 1789 but was not ratified until 1992. Amendments like the first ten known as the

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>.

Bill of Rights were written to address issues not specifically addressed in the original constitution. But these amendments can't contradict the original document nor can they replace it.

It's 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 and elsewhere. At any rate, 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 2/3s of both the house and Senate and then, on top of that, you need ¾ 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 why 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're confessing.

Two Key Terms

Think for a minute about the two key words or phrases that it 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 BBQ, 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. After all, heretics are the best teachers of the church.

The Theology and Terminology of Arius' Creed

Arius submitted a creed to his bishop, bishop Alexander, in 320 to justify his theological position to his bishop. The creed is really long so I can't include all of it here, but 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, btw, this is one document historians agree is authentically by Arius, even if it was preserved by his opponents³:

We acknowledge one God, only unbegotten (μόνον ἀγέννητον), only eternal (μόνον αἰδίον), the only one without cause or beginning (μόνον ἀναρχον) . . . 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 (προβολήν) 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 [ἀχρόνωος], and **created and established** [θεμελιωθεῖς] 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 [ἀρχάς]. 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.

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. Oh. . . . And then Arius would bring up passages like Proverbs 8:22 in the Greek translation of the LXX which 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**

³ Cf. Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987, 2001), 95-96.

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: why go to such lengths to insist on this subordination of the Son to the Father? His priority is something Lutherans can actually identify with: 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 into being including, in a special way, his own Son. He did this by the exercise of his divine 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’ mind is sheer modalism.

Which 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 the term and how it ultimately got included in the creed.⁴ But let’s just stay with Arius’ 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 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. 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 30th level, there was one 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 of these spiritual beings were seen as a material part of the One. They were of 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

⁴ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (New York: T&T Clark, 1988, 2005), 181-201.

to bring creation into being, then as Son to redeem us and then as Holy Spirit to birth the church. To use an analogy, I'm a son, I'm a father, and now I'm a grandfather. 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 doesn't like the term, he says, because it was like the substance of God, his ousia, was being portioned out. But that can't be because God is simple. God is one. You can't go portioning out his essence. 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 a material, even if it was spiritual material, that could nonetheless be portioned out or shared between the Father and the Son, and by extension the Spirit. And that's not how orthodox Christians talk about God.

I spent all this time presenting Arius' view because I want to demonstrate more briefly why the creed focuses where it does and then we will see what Lutherans do with this and the Council more generally.

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—all because of Arius. The two words it focuses on are the words we discussed earlier. They are Arius's words: begotten and substance/essence. As Yosemite Sam would say, "Them there's fightin' words." 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 πατρὸς), God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made (γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα), the same essence (ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρὶ) 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 (γεννηθῆ) 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 (οὐσία/ousia), or that he is created (κτιστὸν) or changeable (τρεπτὸν) or alterable (ἀλλοιωτὸν), these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.”

These anathemas were removed in the creed of 381, perhaps to make it more amenable to liturgical use or maybe they were no longer needed. 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 can't mean that when talking about God because God is eternal. He doesn't come into being. So, if they are going to consider the Son to be fully God, then it can't 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. 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 (ek). 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.

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 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 of these 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 despite the charge of the Arians that it is not a term found in the Bible. The Fathers believed Plato must have known Moses' writings 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 *ehyeh - Yahweh*, but in the Greek LXX we read *ego eimi Ho on*, the one who is being. So tell them Moses that the one who exists on his own without anyone bringing him into being is the one who is sending you. In other words, we are all contingent beings, created being. God has existed from eternity. He was never brought into being. His Son is the same way. He's 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.

Why is this important? Because it answers WHO died for you and accomplished your salvation. 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's more I could and probably should say, but I'm going to have to leave it there, so we can get to the second part of the paper: How Luther and his followers received Nicaea and its Creed and the implications for our relationships with other churches and religions today.

Part 2 – Luther, the Lutherans, Nicaea and Ecumenism

Let me begin by providing some historical background for how Luther viewed councils more generally and then I will get into some specific insights about Nicaea from a Lutheran perspective.

One of the earliest Lutheran reactions to the Council of Nicaea comes from the pen of Luther himself. In 1519, at the Leipzig debate, Luther had already insisted that both popes and conciliar decisions be subjected first and foremost to the authority of Scripture. By the next year, in his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, Luther was already hoping for a general council of the Christian church that would be free and open to reform.⁵ His subsequent excommunication at the Diet of Worms in 1521 dimmed that hope considerably. Over the years, Rome rebuffed various attempts at calling a council, and Luther and the other reformers had grown frustrated with their delay tactics. The Smalkaldic League was formed in the mid- 1530s as a defensive alliance against any type of aggression from the Holy Roman Emperor to force Protestant compliance with Catholic teaching and practice. Luther wrote his *Smalkald Articles* in 1537, published in 1538, which was also around the time when he was composing his longer treatise in three parts, *Von den Consiliis und Kirchen, On the Councils and the Churches*, which the editors of Luther’s Works have rendered *On the Council and the Church*, for a number of reasons, they explain. But chiefly, “Luther’s doctrine of the church, as he developed it in the treatise, consistently pointed to the one, ecumenical, Christian Church which is represented by all believers rather than by pope and councils.”⁶

The polemical atmosphere of the 1520s and 30s motivated Luther to ask for a council, but one not chaired by the pope. Luther stated more than once that popes and councils could err and be deceived, but he also readily recognized that councils could and did also correct error. And so, he actually spent a lot of time learning about the councils and the church throughout history. While there were seven ecumenical councils, Luther only trusted the sources for the first four, which are what he treats in the second part of the treatise *On the Councils and the Church*. This is where we find his discussion on Nicaea. If I might summarize his chief concern—he actually lists 12—but he was chiefly concerned that a council should not be able to establish any new doctrine, nor can it command any good works not already found in Scripture. He, in fact, insisted that councils should condemn new articles of faith, like the one propounded by Arius,⁷ and any ceremonies or practices that bind consciences.

Quia and Quatenus Subscription to Nicaea

⁵ Luther’s Works, Vol. 41:5. This introductory material is adapted from the introduction to Luther’s *On the Councils and the Church*, 5-7.

⁶ LW 41:8.

⁷ LW 41:123.

And so, my first observation about Lutherans and Nicaea borrows from our approach to our Lutheran Confessions and Scripture. We have both a quia and quatenus approach to the council of Nicaea. I'm going to start with the latter.

Quatenus Subscription to Nicaea

We have a quatenus subscription to the decisions of the council itself. In other words, *in so far as* those decisions agree with Scripture, we can allow the canons and decrees their proper weight. We base this on the fact that just as we no longer observe all the prescriptions of the first church council held in Jerusalem in Acts 15, we no longer need to observe the canons of Nicaea, although we may find some of them instructive. The decisions made about the dating of Easter, for instance, is fine, as far as it goes. But it doesn't go very far, since we're still not observing the same date for Easter – even after Nicaea “resolved the issue. And as far as the 20 canons decided at Nicaea, even though they were sent out to the churches with force of imperial decree, they were not always followed. Luther reads those canons through 16th century eyes, observing that not only are the canons not all followed and contradictory to other canons that were promulgated at other councils, but that if you read between the lines, the canons present a picture of ambitious bishops who were involved in a number of power struggles – at least that's how Luther reads the histories. Constantine is Luther's champion at Nicaea in dealing with these bishops when he takes all of the letters they had written against each other or about their pet concerns – what we today might call blogs – and burns them unopened in front of the whole assembly. I think when he looked at Constantine, he saw the German princes like Frederick the Wise and others who were helping him oppose the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.

I fully realize that critiquing church councils is not just a Lutheran thing. Gregory of Nazianzus is my patron saint because he had this to say about church council meetings: “To tell the truth, I believe it advisable to flee all the councils of bishops; for I saw nothing good resulting from the councils, not even the abolition of evil, but rather sheer ambition and quarreling over precedence.”⁸ Flee church council meetings. That's perhaps one of the most relevant pieces of advice I ever heard from a church father. Granted, Gregory was writing about the Council of Constantinople in 381, from which he resigned as presider. But he had seen enough other councils, especially those run by the Arians after Nicaea, to mistrust the motivations of those who brought resolutions to the floor. Luther notes that Gregory “speaks the truth when he says that the bishops are ambitious, haughty, quarrelsome, and vehement in the councils. You will find that corroborated in this council [Ephesus 431]. By the same token, not all who teach correctly or uphold the true doctrine are necessarily holy. For Balaam also is a true prophet [Num. 24:16], and Judas is a true apostle [Matt. 10:4], and the Pharisees occupy the seat of Moses and teach the truth [Matt. 23:2-3]. Thus we too must have something else and something more reliable for our faith than the councils. That ‘something else’ and ‘something more’ is Holy Scripture.”⁹

⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle* 130, To Procopius; PG 37:225-26, quoted by Luther; LW 41:120.

⁹ LW 41:120.

Quia Subscription to Nicaea

And so, Lutherans have a quatenus subscription to the decrees and canons of the council, but we have a quia subscription to the Creed that was promulgated there—and its later expansion at Constantinople in 381. In other words, we bind ourselves to the creed *because* it is in agreement with Scripture. There are some Protestant churches that view the creeds as optional; some who view them as malleable and changeable to more contemporary concerns. As I mentioned, my son Luke was just ordained into the ministry as a Lutheran pastor this last summer. He pledged fealty not only to the Lutheran Confessions, but to the three ecumenical creeds. The Nicene Creed is neither optional, nor malleable as a confession of the Lutheran faith. It is part and parcel of who we are as Lutherans.

Lutherans accept the Creed approved at Nicaea and expanded at Constantinople because it agrees with Scripture. We also recognize it is an ecumenical creed. It is what we hold in common with our Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters. And so, in one sense, we have nothing new to bring to the discussion. It is a common faith we all share. But in another sense, I do think we bring a perspective that recognizes the tradition but is also willing to critique the Tradition in so far as that tradition departs from Scripture because we continue to hold to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, even as we recognize that Scripture is never alone but is always interpreted in a community. We hold to *Sola Scriptura* as *norma normans*, the norming norm for everything the church teaches about faith and life. We hold to the Creed and our other Confessions as *norma normata*, that which is normed by Scripture. Lutherans should not be opposed to Tradition or traditions that are in agreement with Scripture. We actually value them as valuable teachers and exemplars of the faith.

But it is also our singular focus on the message of salvation that the Creed offers as the reason for our Lord's incarnation that is the principle value we see in Nicaea. We hold with the fathers of Nicaea that if it is anyone less than God accomplishing our salvation, our salvation is not accomplished at all.

Luther's Smalkald Articles and Nicaea – a Test Case in Ecumenism

I alluded to Luther's Smalkald Articles earlier. As I mentioned, by the late 1530s, Luther was expecting a council to be called and so he prepared "a few articles"¹⁰ on the faith that he and his colleagues could appeal to in order to express what they believed. He begins with what the Wittenbergers and the Roman Church have in common:

The First Part of the Articles deals with the lofty articles of the divine Majesty, namely:

1. That Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons in one divine essence and nature, is one God, who created heaven and earth, etc.

¹⁰ KW, 300.

2. That the Father was begotten by no one, the Son was begotten by the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.
3. That neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit, but the Son, became a human being.
4. That the Son became a human being in this way: he was conceived by the Holy Spirit without male participation and was born of the pure, holy Virgin Mary [Lat. *semper virgine*].¹¹ After that, he suffered, died, was buried, descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God, in the future will come to judge the living and the dead, etc., as the Apostles' and the Athanasian creeds and the common children's catechism teach.

These articles are not matters of dispute or conflict, for both sides confess them. Therefore, it is not necessary to deal with them at greater length now.¹²

There is a lot we could talk about in this quote.¹³ For the purposes of this paper, I think the last sentence is telling. What he confesses in these articles, he says, is not a matter of dispute or conflict, for both sides confess them. He is emphasizing what the two sides have in common, something that comes up in the liturgy every Sunday that we confess together in the Nicene Creed. It was recently pointed out to me, however, that Luther edited the second to last sentence. In an earlier version, according to a footnote in the BKS, he originally said both sides “*believe and confess them.*” The German in the BKS has “[glauben und] bekennen, with [glauben und] in brackets.¹⁴ Why take out the reference to faith? The explanation given in the footnote is that Luther took out the word “believe” because he did not trust that Catholics believed what they were saying. Why not? We could perhaps explain it away by noting that he wrote these articles later in his life, perhaps a bit more guarded because of how he had been treated, especially by the pope—not just because he was getting old and cranky at the tender age of 54.

¹¹ See BKS, 414.

¹² Luther, *Smalkald Articles* I; KW, 300.

¹³ Notice that he uses the language of Nicaea in his first point, without mentioning Nicaea there, or in his point 4 where he does mention the Apostles Creed and the Athanasian Creed along with the Catechism. I've found that elsewhere in Luther's writings, where he will speak about the Apostles and Athanasian Creeds, along with the Te Deum, while including the Nicene Creed as an after-thought. I don't think this means he had anything against the Nicene Creed. But I think he saw the Apostles Creed emphasizing Christ's work and the Athanasian Creed being a fuller explanation of Christ's person in relation to the other members of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed was sung in the Mass every week, so perhaps he didn't think it needed further comment. But I wouldn't make too big of a point about this. See, for instance, his treatise, “The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith” which he lists as the Apostles and Athanasian Creeds and the Te Deum, with the Nicene Creed tacked on at the end without comment, except to say that it is directed against Arius and sung in the mass every Sunday. See LW 34:201-229.

¹⁴ The footnote reads: “Luther schrieb zunächst, “glauben und bekennen”, tilgte dann aber die ersten beiden Worte wieder, weil er den Katholischen den Glauben nicht zutraute. . . . Was hilst ihn, das er mit dem Maul hoch ruhmet den rechten Gott, den Vater, Sohn und heiligen Geist und trefflichen Schein fürwendet eines christlichen Lebens? Gleichwohl ist und bleibt er der grösset seind Christi und der rechte Antichrist. Translation: ” Luther initially wrote “believe and confess,” but then deleted the first two words because he did not trust that Catholics believed [what they were saying’ . . . In Luther's Words (1544) “What helps him [the pope] if he praises the true God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with his mouth and to put on the appearance of a Christian life? Nevertheless, he is and remains the greatest enemy of Christ and the true Antichrist.”

But in the very next article he provides the explanation for what he is doing in making the distinction that we *confess* the same thing – but we don’t necessarily *believe* the same thing. This is one of those hard ecumenical discussions that I feel I need to include as part of our conversation. After noting what we have in common in our confession of the creed in the first part of this article on the divine majesty, he continues his discussion with the office and work of Christ for our redemption. And he does this in relation to the doctrine of justification, the article on which the church stands or falls for Lutherans, citing Rom 4:25:

“That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” [Rom 4:25]); and he alone is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). After citing further passages he goes on to say, without any equivocation that Christ’s work outlined in the Creed “may not be obtained or grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[28, 26]: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”; and also, “that God alone is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away.”¹⁵

What Luther is saying, is that you can have the Nicene doctrine correct on the equality of the Son to the Father, and still get wrong the benefits of that union for us and for our salvation. What do you believe about the God who has died for you. Luther talks about this in his Large Catechism discussion of the First Commandment:

“You are to have no other gods.” “What does “to have a god’ mean, or what is God? Answer: A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.”¹⁶

And so, when Luther saw the papacy and Catholics adding good works to faith, he saw this undermining the trust in God alone. Faith and God belong together. The Nicene Creed begins with faith. But how do you define and express that faith: I believe. We believe. Both are correct, but there is also a nuance to each. I believe is *fides qua*. In other words, this is my faith and what I believe and trust in. We believe could also be this, but is more often thought of in the sense of *fides quae*, the doctrinal content of the faith, what we all have in common. Luther’s approach to

¹⁵ Luther, *Smalkald Articles* I.II; KW, 300-1.

¹⁶ Luther, LC 1.1; KW 386

the creed goes both ways, but when he looks at the implications of the creed for the Christian's faith and life, it's *fides qua* that is the more important of the two.

He and Melanchthon both believed that the doctrine of the Creeds is the content of the Gospel, and vice versa. It is something which every preacher must know in order to distinguish the true Gospel from a false one. What we see here and in the Smalkald Articles in Article I.I is that He agreed that Lutherans and Catholics are on the same page with the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the person of Christ. In the Augsburg Confession, Art. 1 Melanchthon says something similar. After the inclusion of the three ecumenical creeds, which are part and parcel of the documents every candidate for ordination vows to uphold, the Augsburg Confession begins by stating what we all have in common: "The churches among us teach with complete unanimity that the decree of the Council of Nicea concerning the unity of the divine essence and concerning the three persons is true and is to be believed without any doubt. But by the time we get to the third article on the Son, cracks start to appear in the façade of unity since they make the point that Christ's atoning sacrifice was a "sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to conciliate God's wrath [Lat.]." ¹⁷ In his 1528 Great Confession, Luther condemns "both the new and old Pelagians who will not admit original sin to be sin, but make it an infirmity or defect." ¹⁸

The Reformation approach to Nicaea rejoices in what we share in common in our Confession of the faith with Christians throughout the world. ¹⁹ And yet it considered reformation as still necessary because of how that faith was being applied in the heart and life of the believer. We see this especially in Luther's Small and Large Catechisms, where his concern was that the faith was not only being learned but also taken to heart. This is why he takes the chief parts of the faith and not only explores what they mean for understanding the faith, but for living out that faith in love towards God and towards our neighbor. But it is always based ultimately on the *fides qua*. We just looked at Luther's exposition of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism. The Small Catechism condense his thought. What does it mean to have a God? "We should fear, love and trust in God above all things." Anything else that gets inserted, including works, has become a god, including works, if we trust in them for our salvation.

Conclusion

The Lutheran Church is part of the Western tradition, which is why I spent the majority of my time there. The Reformation was an attempt to reform the tradition we came from and considered home. There was largely no quarrel with the Eastern Church due to the common Confession of Nicaea and the other ecumenical creeds. This is not to say there are not issues, such as the filioque. But that phrase was added to the Creed of 381, not 325, so I did not get into that. I

¹⁷ KW 38

¹⁸ Luther, *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*; LW 37:363.

¹⁹ Luther in his 1528 treatise *On Rebaptism* held that the Catholic church shared with Lutherans seven marks of the church: "the true Holy Scriptures, true baptism, the true sacrament [of the altar], the true keys for forgiveness of sins, the true office of proclamation, and the true catechism."

realize the LWF has agreed to go back to the Greek wording of 381. I can understand the sentiment, even if I don't agree with the decision.²⁰ But that is a discussion for another day.

Speaking from my own LCMS tradition for just a second, Lutherans, at least of the LC-MS variety, have not been known for their ecumenical relations. After all, according to the Synod in its Constitution under Article III: Objectives:

The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall—

1. Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3–6; 1 Cor. 1:10), work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy.²¹

It further notes in article VI that it requires of its members “Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every kind.”²² Article VI gets quoted more than Article III. Many in our tradition forget that not only are we to avoid unionism. We are also to avoid sectarianism, as well as heresy. We are to avoid being a sect. I realize the NALC, AELC, and ELCA and other Lutheran bodies may not all have the same type of concerns. I only bring it up because I come from a tradition whose Constitution actually says we should be talking *more* with other church bodies, rather than *less*. And Nicaea gives us an opportunity to do so, as does this conference. Catholics and Orthodox may not subscribe to our Lutheran Confessions, but they do subscribe to the Nicene and the other ecumenical creeds. Those ecumenical creeds are front and center of our Lutheran Confessional documents as well. Let us rejoice in that even as none of us wants to paper over our differences, which are still important.

So let me conclude with one final limerick that ends on kind of an ecumenical note.

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

²⁰ Besides discarding 1000 years of the western tradition on this issue, I think it also neglects the present dangers of Arianism that alive and well in the 21st century, especially with Islam, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses and Oneness Pentecostals. The filioque is Scriptural and was utilized by fathers in the eastern and western traditions, including Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor. While it is true that this addition was done without the participation of the eastern churches, we should also acknowledge that many of the ecumenical councils were conducted with minimal western participation. It also true that we should not go around changing creeds. There is even a canon to that effect. But history demonstrates that this is precisely what happened with the original 325 creed of Nicaea in 381, with minimal western representation.

²¹ Handbook: Constitution, Bylaws, Articles of Incorporation: The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, p. 11. <https://files.lcms.org/folder/2023-handbook>, accessed 8/6/2025.

²² Ibid, 13.

And I hope this truth is contagious