

LUTHERAN SYNOD QUARTERLY

VOLUME 65 • NUMBER 4

DECEMBER 2025

**“God Has Given Her to Me and Me to Her”:
Martin and Katharina Luther’s Married Life**

The Nicene Creed

**Athanasius: The Man Against the World
Athanasius Contra Mundum**

**And yet they came: A reflection upon
the 200th anniversary of organized
Norwegian-American emigration**

**Explaining God’s Hatred:
Malachi 1:2–5 & Luke 14:25–27**

Book Reviews

Sermons

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The journal of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary

LUTHERAN SYNOD QUARTERLY

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Foreword

LSQ Vol. 65, No. 4 (December 2025)

THREE IMPORTANT ANNIVERSARIES FOR THE church, Lutheranism, and the Evangelical Synod were celebrated this year:

It was the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora's marriage. Rev. Paul Lange discusses their marriage in the first paper of this volume.

The second anniversary was the 1700th of the Nicene Creed. Two papers of this volume are connected to this anniversary. Rev. Paul Webber presents on the Nicene Creed and Rev. Abraham Faugstad on an important figure of the in the battle for the truth concerning the divine and human natures of Jesus, Athanasius of Alexandria.

The 200th anniversary of the organized mass migration from Norway to the United States is the third covered by this volume. Rev. Craig Ferkenstad gives us an overview of the Norwegian migration and the history of Norwegian Lutheranism in America.

In addition, Rev. Patrick Ernst elucidates the proper understanding of God's hatred of evil in an exegetical paper on Malachi 1:2-5 and Luke 14:25-27.

This volume also contains two book reviews and four sermons.

-TAH

“God Has Given Her to Me and Me to Her”: Martin and Katharina Luther’s Married Life

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Oconomowoc, Wisconsin

LSQ Vol. 65, No. 4 (December 2025)

JUNE 13, 2025, MARKED THE 500TH ANNIVERSARY OF the wedding of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora. What began as a practical arrangement driven by circumstance and theological conviction, grew into a blessed relationship of mutual faith and love that lasted nearly twenty-one years.

Luther would later say of their marriage, “God gave her to me and me to her.”¹ As husband and wife, they challenged many of the conventional marriage expectations of the time. The impact of their marriage continues to resonate today. This paper will examine factors leading to their marriage and detail their married life together.

Marriage in Luther’s Day

Like many of the teachings and practices of the Church in his day, Luther saw that marriage needed reform. In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), Luther observed:

What we would speak most of is the fact that the estate of marriage has universally fallen into such awful disrepute. There are many pagan books which treat of nothing but the depravity of woman-kind and the unhappiness of the estate of marriage, such that some have thought that even if Wisdom itself were a woman one should not marry.²

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 54: Table Talk*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 54 (Fortress Press, 1967), 7–8. Here after LW.

² LW 45:36.

The Church was responsible for many of the marriage problems. At the time of Luther, marriage was not regulated by the state but fell under the Church's jurisdiction. The Church, however, did little to regulate marriage. Although marriage was considered a sacrament, the Church did not require wedding ceremonies to be held in a church or even to be officiated by a priest. From the Church's perspective, because

marriage was made by God, and a priest could only bless what God had already decreed, a couple who promised to love one another and live together until death was considered officially married, especially if the couple had consummated their vows by sexual intercourse.³

The Church's failure to exercise control over marriage practices resulted in abuses. Couples, some as young as their early teens, would pledge to be married, engage in sexual intercourse, and then only later inform their parents and their church they were married. Individuals would pledge marriage, consummate the "marriage," only to later deny it ever happened. These and other abuses resulted in the ecclesiastical courts being inundated with cases of he-said, she-said arguments over contested engagements and marriages.⁴

The Church also taught the celibate life and the taking of vows was more sacred than marriage. It claimed marriage was "for the weak, those unable to control their base sexual nature."⁵ The life of the celibate priest, nun, or monk, however, was "superior and more pleasing to God."⁶

Despite the marriage mess it had created, the Church still found ways to profit from it. Fees were paid to the Church to allow or dissolve marriages as well as to obtain dispensations in certain cases.

Luther was determined to reform marriage. In 1520, he objected to marriage as a sacrament regarding it instead as a secular matter.⁷ In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther argued that unlike the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, marriage was

³ Michelle DeRusha, *Katharina and Martin Luther: The Radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and a Renegade Monk* (Baker Books, 2017), 137.

⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁵ Diane V. Bowers, "To Spite the Devil: Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora's Wedding as Reform and Resistance," *Religions* 11, no. 3: 116, 2020: 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11030116>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The previous year, Luther in his *Sermon on the Estate of Marriage* (1519) indicated he still considered marriage to be a sacrament. He wrote: "In the same way the estate of marriage is a sacrament. It is an outward and spiritual sign of the greatest, holiest, worthiest, and noblest thing that has ever existed or ever will exist: the union of the divine and human natures in Christ." LW 44:10.

never divinely instituted and had neither a divine promise nor a divine physical sign. Regarding marriage as a secular matter, he wrote:

No one can deny that marriage is an external, worldly matter, like clothing and food, house and property, subject to temporal authority, as the many imperial laws enacted on the subject prove. Neither do I find any example in the New Testament where Christ or the apostles concerned themselves with such matters, except where they touched upon consciences, as did St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 [:1–24].⁸

Luther implemented reforms regarding marriage. Marriages by minors without parental consent were not considered valid. Couples planning to marry were expected to receive parental blessing and were required to meet with their pastor before announcing their marriage. Premarital sex was to be avoided. Marriage ceremonies were to be held in the church, with pastor, family and friends present and the marriage vows exchanged before the Lord’s altar.

Luther also addressed celibacy. His reforms included abolishing compulsory celibacy for priests, nuns, and monks. He saw the vow of chastity as being “a devilish tyranny which no bishop had the right to require.”⁹ Such compulsory celibacy had led to immorality and “the fall of many a priest and to the decline of the priesthood in general.”¹⁰ In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), Luther asks, “Why should one not fore-stall immorality by means of marriage?”¹¹ His advice: “Whoever finds himself unsuited to the celibate life should see to it right away that he has something to do and to work at; then let him strike out in God’s name and get married.”¹²

Luther considered celibacy a gift from God, albeit a very rare gift. He wrote: “Such persons are rare, not one in a thousand,”¹³ for they are a special miracle of God.”¹⁴ The gift of celibacy had been given to the

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 46: *The Christian in Society* 3, ed. Robert C. Schultz and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 46 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 265.

⁹ Thomas A. Fudge, “Incest and Lust in Luther’s Marriage: Theology and Morality in Reformation Polemics,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* vol. 34, no.2 (2003): 323.

¹⁰ Scott Hendrix, “Luther on Marriage,” *Lutheran Quarterly* vol. 14 (2000): 337.

¹¹ LW 45:45.

¹² Ibid., 48.

¹³ “A year later, Luther increased the number: there is not one Christian in a hundred thousand.” Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (Yale University Press, 2006), 347.

¹⁴ LW 45:21.

apostle Paul and Luther himself had been granted this gift for many years.

Luther also saw marriage as a gift from God and being married as a holy vocation. He observed that many, without the gift of celibacy, were rejecting this divine gift of marriage, resulting in immorality. Luther wrote: "If you have the gift of abstinence and can live without sex, well and good. Then abstain from sex life. But if you cannot without sin abstain from uniting with a woman, then make use of the remedy which God points out to you."¹⁵ In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522) Luther says of marriage: "It is superior to celibacy and is the genuinely religious life."¹⁶

Although the Church spoke of marriage in sacramental terms, it regarded the sexual aspects of marriage as sinful and unclean. Luther pointed out this inconsistency, maintaining marriage is not less sacred than celibacy, nor are married couples less spiritual than monks, nuns, and priests. Luther saw marriage and sexual relations within marriage as being natural and divinely ordained. He wrote:

For it is not a matter of free choice or decision but a natural and necessary thing, that whatever is a man must have a woman and whatever is a woman must have a man. ... It is just as necessary as the fact that I am a man, and more necessary than sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, and emptying the bowels and bladder. ... And wherever men try to resist this, it remains irresistible nonetheless and goes its way through fornication, adultery, and secret sins, for this is a matter of nature and not of choice.¹⁷

In his *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), Luther simply stated, "My advice is, restore freedom to everybody and leave every man free to marry or not to marry."¹⁸

As word of Luther's ideas on marriage and celibacy spread, it eventually reached a convent in Nimbschen. One of the nuns in the convent was Katharina von Bora, the woman who would become Luther's wife. But before considering their marriage, let's first examine Katharina's life before Luther.

¹⁵ Martin Luther and Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 2, ed. Ewald M. Plass (Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 898.

¹⁶ Hendrix, 342.

¹⁷ LW 45:18.

¹⁸ LW 44:176.

Katharina's Early Life

Little is known about Katharina's early life. Katharina von Bora was born near Leipzig, Germany on January 29, 1499. Her father, Hans von Bora, had once been a wealthy nobleman, but had fallen on hard times. Her mother, Anna von Haugwitz, died in 1505, when Katharina was six years old. That same year, her father married a widow with no dowry and several children of her own.¹⁹ What had already been a challenging financial situation in the von Bora household became even more challenging. Later that year, Hans enrolled Katharina in the cloister school of the Benedictine nuns at Brehna. While there, Katharina received a good education in a religious setting.

When she was ten, Katharina was transferred to the Marienthron Convent in Nimbschen. She had connections there on both sides of her family: the abbess was related to her mother, and a paternal aunt was a nun. Marienthron was known for its abundance of worldly and spiritual possessions. Its property included two farms with enough land for crops and sheep-raising and was generally self-sufficient in agricultural matters. The cloister church was known for its twelve altars and the 367 relics it contained.²⁰ Katharina later said of her years at Marienthron that while there she prayed “feverishly, diligently, and frequently.”²¹ When Katharina was sixteen, she took her vows and became a nun.

As a nun, Katharina became interested in the reform movement within the church occurring in Germany at the time. In 1519, after Luther had preached in Grimma, a town near Nimbschen, “word of the Reformer's ideas rapidly penetrated Marienthron.”²² Katharina was especially interested in Luther's teachings on the importance and blessings of marriage as well as his opposition to the celibacy requirement of monastic vows.

Katharina became increasingly unhappy with her life as a nun and began considering leaving the convent. She was not alone as several other nuns in the convent felt the same way. But leaving a convent or a monastery was not easy. Anyone caught abandoning their monastic

¹⁹ Rudolf K. Markwald and Marlynn Morris Markwald, *Katharina von Bora: A Reformation Life* (Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 22.

²⁰ Martin Treu, “Katharina von Bora, the Woman at Luther's Side.” *Lutheran Quarterly* Volume 13 (1999): 159.

²¹ Albrecht Thoma, *Katharina von Bora, Geschichtliches Lebensbild* (Berlin: n. p., 1900), 192, as quoted in Markwald and Markwald, 33.

²² Jeanette C. Smith, “Katharina von Bora through Five Centuries: A Historiography,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* vol. 30, no. 3, (Fall 1999): 747.

vows could be “tortured and imprisoned for the rest of their lives.”²³ Even helping someone to leave was considered “an offense punishable by death.”²⁴

There were other considerations for Katharina if she decided to leave the convent. She had been abandoned by her family and returning to them would not be an option. Being a single woman, it was expected she would have a male guardian to manage her legal and financial affairs, but she did not know of anyone who would serve in that capacity for her. Securing employment, especially a job that would provide her a living wage, was extremely difficult for women at the time. With no dowry, the likelihood of her finding a husband would also be “challenging, if not impossible.”²⁵

By 1523, Katharina and eleven other nuns had determined they were ready to leave Marienthron. Ernst Kroker describes the nuns’ considerations at the time:

Luther’s doctrine had taken away everything that had previously given meaning to their lives: the belief that they had done a God-pleasing work with their vow of chastity, the hope of securing for themselves the right to a place in heaven through penitential exercises and monastic discipline, trust in the merit and intercession of the saints and the power of their relics to grant indulgence. What Luther’s doctrine promised them—the sure confidence of God’s grace and inner peace—they could attain only outside the convent walls.²⁶

The nuns decided to write their parents and relatives asking for help to leave the convent. As expected, their requests were met with refusals.²⁷ The nuns then decided they would ask Luther for advice and

²³ Jack Kilcrease, “Katharina von Bora Luther,” Lutheran Reformation, December 20, 2016, accessed on July 26, 2025, <https://lutheranreformation.org/history/katharina-von-bora-luther/>.

²⁴ Justin Taylor, “Martin Luther’s Reform of Marriage.” In John Piper and Justin Taylor (Eds.), *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ* (Crossway, 2005), 215.

²⁵ DeRusha, 122.

²⁶ Ernst Kroker, *The Mother of the Reformation: The Amazing Life and Story of Katharine Luther*, trans. Mark E. DeGarmeaux (Concordia, 2013), 31.

²⁷ Eric Metaxas writes: “Their relatives would have felt about breaking nuns out of a convent as someone today might feel about springing someone from federal prison: it was wrong, and it was illegal, in this case to the point of being punishable by death.” Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (Viking, 2017), 305–306.

assistance. A letter was smuggled out of the convent and taken to Luther. Concerning the nuns' situation at Nimbschen, Luther wrote:

It is a great misery, I am sorry to say, that they permit children to enter the cloister where there is no daily practice of the Word of God and they seldom or never hear the Gospel rightly preached. This is reason enough to have these persons pulled out of the cloister and snatched away by any means possible, regardless of how many thousands of oaths and vows they may have made. For God is not pleased with any worship, unless it comes freely from the heart, and consequently no vow is valid unless it has been made willingly and with love. Otherwise life in the cloister will be full of dangers, temptations, and sins.²⁸

Escape from Marienthron

Luther considered it his “Christian obligation”²⁹ to help the nuns. He and Leonhard Koppe, a merchant who regularly sold goods to the convent, came up with a plan. Koppe was sympathetic to the Evangelical cause and was willing to take the risk to help the nuns escape.

On Easter Eve, April 4, 1523, the plan commenced. Koppe arrived at the convent with his team of horses pulling a wagon to make a delivery. Later, when he left the convent, twelve nuns were hiding inside his wagon.³⁰ Koppe and the nuns continued to travel through the night, risking their lives as they traveled through the territory of Duke George, who had previously executed a man for helping a nun escape her convent. They arrived in Torgau, located thirty miles away in the territory of Luther's protector, Elector Frederick. After attending Easter services later that morning, three of the nuns were returned to their families. On Tuesday or Wednesday, Koppe transported the remaining nine nuns to Wittenberg, where they were taken to the Black Cloister, the former Augustinian monastery where Martin Luther lived.

News of the nuns' arrival spread quickly. It was reported, “A wagon load of vestal virgins has just come to town, all the more eager for

²⁸ Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften*. 2d ed. Johann. George Walch, ed. vol. 19 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1881–1910) 1669–1671. Quoted in Markwald and Markwald, 43.

²⁹ Kroker, 32.

³⁰ “The popular story is that the nuns were hidden in herring barrels, but what is known is that Koppe delivered herring to the convent. The nuns were more likely hidden in the covered wagon as if they were empty barrels.” Bowers, 9.

marriage than for life. God grant them husbands, lest worse befall.”³¹ Unable to bring even extra clothes, the nuns had little or nothing to call their own. They also had no means of support if their families would not take them back. In a letter to George Spalatin, written a few days after the nuns’ arrival, Luther wrote:

You ask what I shall do with them? First I shall inform their relatives and ask them to support the girls; if they will not I shall have the girls otherwise provided for. Some of the families have already promised me to take them; for some I shall get husbands if I can. ... Here are they, who serve Christ, in need of true pity. They have escaped from the cloister in miserable condition. I pray you also to do the work of charity and beg some money for me from your rich courtiers, by which I can support the girls a week or two until their kinsmen or other provide for them.³²

Luther spent the following days and weeks seeking homes and husbands for the nuns. He was successful in arranging marriages for eight of the nuns, leaving only Katharina von Bora.

Katharina found shelter and assisted with the domestic affairs in the home of the famous painter, Lucas Cranach the Elder, and his wife.

What to Do with Katharina?

In 1523, a romance developed between Katharina and Jerome Baumgärtner. Jerome was a graduate of the University in Wittenberg and came from a wealthy family in Nuremberg. Their relationship became serious enough that there was even talk of marriage. It was Katharina’s expectation that they would marry.³³ However, on one occasion Baumgärtner needed to return home to Nuremberg. He promised Katharina he would return before the month ended. That didn’t happen. Over the next few months, Katharina wrote Jerome several letters but never received a response.

At one point, Luther got involved and encouraged Baumgärtner to marry Katharina. On October 12, 1524, Luther wrote Baumgärtner advising him, “If you want your Katie von Bora, you had best act quickly,

³¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Abingdon Press, 1950), 286–287.

³² Martin Luther in *Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, trans. and ed. Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacobs, 2 vols. (Lutheran Publications Society, 1918), 2:179–180. Quoted in Taylor, 216–217.

³³ Bowers, 10.

before she is given to someone else who wants her. She has not yet conquered her love for you. I would gladly see you married to each other.”³⁴ As with Katharina, Luther also received no response from Baumgärtner. It seems his relatives were not at all supportive of the idea of his marrying a runaway nun with no money. Rumor had it that Baumgärtner had become engaged to a fourteen-year-old girl from a wealthy family and married her. Katharina was heartbroken.

Luther continued to try to find a husband for Katharina. He then suggested Dr. Kaspar Glatz as a possible suitor. Dr. Glatz was a pastor serving a congregation at Orlamünde. Glatz was also in his sixties and considered a miser. Katharina could not bear the possibility of a future as the wife of Pastor Glatz and refused to marry him.³⁵ Luther was not happy with her refusal, especially considering the limited opportunities for a husband available to her. He considered her response to be “prideful and snobbish.”³⁶ Imploring on Katharina’s behalf, Nicholas von Amsdorf asked Luther:

“What the devil are you doing, trying to coax and force the good Kate to marry that old cheapskate whom she neither desires nor considers with all her heart as husband?” Martin answered quickly and pleasantly, “What devil would want to have her, then? If she does not like him, she may have to wait a good while for another one.”³⁷

Luther abandoned his efforts to persuade Katharina to marry Dr. Glatz. During this time, Katharina offered two names she would be willing to consider as her husband. She told Amsdorf that if he or Luther would like to marry her, she would not refuse.

Luther’s Reluctance to Marry

Although several of his fellow reformers had married,³⁸ Luther did not see marriage in his future. In an August 6, 1521, letter to Spalatin, Luther wrote: “Good Lord! Will our people at Wittenberg give wives

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Taylor, 218.

³⁷ Ernst Kroker, “Luther’s Werbung um Katharina von Bora.” In *Lutherstudien zur 4. Jahrhundertfeier der Reformation* (H. Böhlau, 1917) 142. Quoted in Markwald and Markwald, 61.

³⁸ “Numerous reformers married in the early years of the movement: Philip Melanchthon in 1520; Justus Jonas in 1522; Johannes Bugenhagen, Andreas Karlstadt, Martin Bucer, Wenceslas Link, Thomas Müntzer, Wolfgang Capito, and Matthew Zell

even to the monks? They will not push a wife on me!”³⁹ Among the reasons Luther would give for not marrying were his age, heavy workload, lack of income, and the very real possibility of his capture and execution. As Douglas Bond points out, “It made no sense for a man under the sentence of heresy, the stake looming, to marry—only to leave his bride a widow.”⁴⁰ In another letter to Spalatin from November 30, 1524,⁴¹ Luther wrote:

I am in the hand of God, a creature whose heart He may change and recharge, may kill and make alive, at any hour or minute, but that hitherto I have not been, and am not now inclined to take a wife. Not that I lack the feelings of a man (for I am neither wood nor stone), but my mind is averse to marriage because I daily expect the death decreed to a heretic.⁴²

Another possible reason for Luther’s reluctance to marry was Elector Frederick. The Elector was a staunch defender of Luther and instrumental in protecting him. Although Luther had never met or talked with Frederick, Luther was aware of Frederick’s traditional views on priests and monks marrying. Luther knew that if he were to marry, “it would trouble the man he so respected and who had done so much to protect him.”⁴³ Luther may have been unwilling to jeopardize this relationship.

Marriage a Possibility for Luther

Although, at the time, Luther thought it best he remain single, he did not let that stop him from encouraging others to marry. In an April 10, 1525, letter to Spalatin encouraging him to marry, Luther provides the first recorded indication of his own possible openness to getting married.⁴⁴ Luther wrote:

in 1523; Ulrich Zwingli in 1524; Michael Sattler and Johannes Oecolampadius in 1528, to name a few.” Fudge, 324.

³⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 48: Letters 1, ed. Gottfried G. Krodel and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 48 (Fortress Press, 1963), 290.

⁴⁰ Douglas Bond, “Reformation Romance: Love and Marriage Luther and Katie’s Way,” Modernreformation.org. 2017, accessed on September 11, 2025, <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/essays/reformation-romance-love-and-marriage-luther-and-katie-s-way>.

⁴¹ Note the date. This was written six and a half months before Luther’s marriage.

⁴² Smith and Jacobs, 2:1521–1530, let. 648, 264. Quoted in Bowers, 5.

⁴³ Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World*, (Viking, 2017), 342.

⁴⁴ Taylor, 220.

Why don't you go and get married? I urge matrimony on others with so many arguments that I am myself almost moved to marry, though our enemies do not cease to condemn that way of life, and our wiseacres laugh at it all the time.⁴⁵

Six days later, on April 16, in another letter to Spalatin, Luther joked about his own marital prospects:

Incidentally, regarding what you are writing about my marrying [let me say the following]: I do not want you to wonder that a famous lover like me does not marry. It is rather strange that I, who so often write about matrimony and get mixed up with women, have not yet turned into a woman, to say nothing of not having married one. Yet if you want me to set an example, look, here you have the most powerful one, for I have had three wives⁴⁶ simultaneously, and loved them so much that I have lost two who are taking other husbands; the third I can hardly keep with my left arm, and she, too, will probably soon be snatched away from me. But you are a sluggish lover who does not dare to become the husband of even one woman. Watch out that I, who have no thought of marriage at all, do not someday overtake you too eager suitors—just as God usually does those things which are least expected. I am saying this seriously to urge you to do what you are intending.⁴⁷

In April 1525, Luther visited his parents in Mansfeld. While there, he shared with his father, Hans, his thoughts about possibly marrying. Hans encouraged his son to marry and thus fulfill Hans' desire for grandchildren.

Two deaths made it easier for Luther to consider marriage. First, his mentor, Johann von Staupitz, died on December 28, 1524. Staupitz had been a powerful influence on Luther's spiritual and theological development, and Luther was mindful that “it would have greatly bothered Staupitz to know his former protégé and spiritual son had married.”⁴⁸ Then, on May 5, 1525, Elector Frederick passed away. Frederick had opposed clerical marriage. With the deaths of Staupitz

⁴⁵ Smith and Jacobs, 2:304. Quoted in Taylor, 220.

⁴⁶ The “three wives” Luther mentions were likely the sisters Ave and Margaret von Schönfeld, and Katharina von Bora. They were the only remaining unmarried women who escaped from the Marienthron Convent in Nimbschen.

⁴⁷ LW 49:104–105.

⁴⁸ Metaxas, 342.

and Elector Frederick, Luther no longer had to risk his relationships with them by marrying.

There were some who discouraged Luther from considering marriage. Some felt it would be wrong for him to break his vows of chastity made to God and marry. Others feared what Luther's opponents would say and the offense it would cause. There were still others who thought by taking a wife, Luther would destroy everything he had accomplished.

While Luther left the decision of whether he should marry to God, there were well-intentioned friends who were actively looking to find a wife for Luther. However, according to Kroker, among those considered as potential wives for Luther, Katharina was not among them: "Nobody thought of Katie. That he should court a poverty-stricken runaway nun was not part of his friends' design. They would rather have seen him with a girl from a respectable wealthy family. And when he chose Katie, all his best friends clamored: 'Not this one, but someone else!'"⁴⁹

Luther Decides to Marry

By May 1525, there were hints Luther might marry Katharina. It seems others were aware of Katherina and Martin's relationship and the possibility of him marrying her. On May 4, 1525, in a letter to John Röhel, Luther wrote: "If I can manage it, before I die I will still marry my Katie to spite the devil."⁵⁰ This is the first recorded instance of Luther referring to Katharina as "my Katie."⁵¹

Upon hearing the rumor Luther was planning to marry Katharina, Hieronymus Schurff, a colleague of Luther's, warned: "If this monk takes a wife, the whole world and the Devil himself will laugh, and all the works he [Luther] has done up to now will have been for naught."⁵² To which Luther is said to have replied, "If I can arrange it, I will marry Kate in defiance of the devil and all his adversaries."⁵³

By early June, it was known around Wittenberg that Luther would take Katharina to be his wife. In a June 2, 1525, letter to Archbishop Albrecht von Mainz, Luther not only encouraged him to marry, but also expressed his own intention to marry:

⁴⁹ Kroker, 64.

⁵⁰ LW 49:111.

⁵¹ Kroker, 65.

⁵² Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (Yale University Press, 2006), 282.

⁵³ Thoma, 45. Quoted in Markwald and Markwald, 63.

If my getting married might be a reinforcement for His Electoral Grace, I would gladly be ready to follow soon as an example to His Electoral Grace, since I am still of a mind anyway, before I leave this life, to find myself in the married state, which I regard as required by God; and even if it should be nothing more than an engagement—like Joseph’s marriage.⁵⁴

A couple of other factors contributed to Luther’s decision to marry Katharina. He was well aware of his father’s desire for grandchildren and wanted to fulfill his father’s wishes. Martin and Katharina also became the subject of much gossip in Wittenberg and Luther wanted to put an end to it.

Luther’s decision to marry Katharina was not because he was so in love with her or felt she would make an ideal wife. Rather, his decision was based on a sense of Christian duty and compassion. Markwald and Markwald describe Luther’s compassion (*Mitleid*) for Katharina in this way:

Luther had decided to marry Kate *aus Mitleid*—out of compassion—for her. The sole remaining nun from Nimbschen, without husband, without means of support, protection, or stature, Kate’s plight deeply moved Luther. ... [B]ecause of his hectic schedule and constant death threats, [he] had little time or opportunity to court Kate, to know her, or to perceive her affections, emotions, sentiments, and fondness for him, or lack of the same. Martin had not explored his own feelings. All he could be sure of was *Mitleid* for Kate. Yet *Mitleid* conveys a sense of love, with a deeper and more profound meaning than that of merely feeling sorry for a person ... Luther reveals he did indeed love Kate, but not with carnal love or lustfulness.⁵⁵

There was another reason Luther decided to marry Katharina: it became “a necessity, indeed his obligation to affirm his teaching [regarding marriage] by his example.”⁵⁶ In a June 21, 1525, letter inviting Nicholas Amsdorf to their wedding banquet, Luther writes:

Indeed, the rumor is true that I was suddenly married to Catherine; [I did this] to silence the evil mouths which are so used to complaining about me. For I still hope to live for a little while. In

⁵⁴ Kroker, 62.

⁵⁵ Markwald and Markwald, 76–77.

⁵⁶ Kroker, 62.

addition, I also did not want to reject this unique [opportunity to obey] my father's wish for progeny, which he so often expressed. At the same time, I also wanted to confirm what I have taught by practicing it; for I find so many timid people in spite of such great light from the gospel. God has willed and brought about this step. For I feel neither passionate love nor burning for my spouse, but I cherish her.⁵⁷

Luther's decision to marry Katharina was not taken lightly. He later said of this time, "As I considered taking Kate as my wife, I entreated our Lord God earnestly to help me."⁵⁸ Luther came to the realization that he was armed with a "battery of reasons in favor of his proposal: his marriage would please his father, rile the pope, cause the angels to laugh and the devils to weep."⁵⁹

Luther and Katharina Engaged and Married

Once Luther decided he would marry Katharina, he acted quickly. It was not necessary for Luther to ask Katharina's father's permission to marry his daughter. When Katharina had taken her monastic vows in 1515, she had officially given up her rights as a member of the von Bora family. On June 13, 1525, just a little more than a month after Elector Frederick's death, Luther proposed to Katharina at the Cranach home. She accepted.

Marriages in Germany, at the time, usually involved two events: the betrothal and the wedding ceremony. The betrothal, often a private event, was a legally binding agreement the couple made before witnesses establishing their marriage. The wedding ceremony took place later and served as a public celebration of the marriage.

Although not the usual custom, Martin and Katharina were married on the same day they were engaged. On the evening of June 13, 1525, the 41-year-old Martin and 26-year-old Katharina exchanged their wedding vows in a small, private ceremony held in the living room of the Black Cloister. In addition to the bride and groom, only five others were in attendance: Justus Jonas, Luther's best friend; Johannes Bugenhagen, pastor of the Wittenberg city church; Lucas and Barbara Cranach, with whom Katharina had been living; and John Apel, a Wittenberg juror who had also freed and married a nun. Bugenhagen officiated using a

⁵⁷ LW 49:117.

⁵⁸ Markwald and Markwald, 69–70.

⁵⁹ Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften*, 20:1156. Quoted in Markwald and Markwald, 70.

special order of service he had written for the occasion. There are no eyewitness accounts of the wedding.⁶⁰

As was the custom, after the wedding ceremony Martin and Katharina consummated their marriage. It was also the custom that the consummation be witnessed. Jonas served as the witness. The following morning, Jonas wrote Spalatin:

This letter will come to you, my dear Spalatin, as the bearer of great news. Our Luther has married Catherine von Bora. I was present and was a witness of the marriage yesterday (and saw the bride lying in the marriage chamber). Seeing that sight I had to give way to my feelings and could not refrain from tears. Now that it has happened and is the will of God, I wish this good and true man and beloved father in the Lord much happiness. God is wonderful in His work and ways.⁶¹

With his marriage to Katharina, Luther had put into practice what he had preached. He had been arguing that marriage was better than celibacy and was intended by God for most people. By getting married, Luther could now teach and demonstrate this by his own example. For Luther, marriage was “a seal of his faith, a witness to the gospel.”⁶²

Melanchthon Not in Attendance

Noticeably absent at the engagement and wedding was Philip Melanchthon, Luther’s close friend and colleague. Melanchthon, who was opposed to the idea of Luther marrying, was “outraged”⁶³ when he received word that Martin and Katharina had married. On June 16, 1525, three days after the wedding, Melanchthon wrote a letter to Joachim Camerarius, a close friend, expressing his displeasure at Luther’s marriage:⁶⁴

Since dissimilar reports concerning the marriage of Luther will reach you, I have thought it well to give you my opinion of him. On June 13, Luther unexpectedly and without informing in advance

⁶⁰ Treu, 162.

⁶¹ Taylor, 223.

⁶² Fudge, 335.

⁶³ Ibid., 333.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that “Melanchthon ultimately regretted this letter and actually didn’t send it (he sent a more delicately worded revised version in July), but Luther’s detractors got ahold of the original letter and circulated it around Wittenberg and beyond.” Smith, 757.

any of his friends of what he was doing, married Bora, but in the evening, after having invited to a supper none but [Bugenhagen] and Lucan the painter, and Apel, observed the customary marriage rites. You might be amazed that at this unfortunate time when good and excellent men everywhere are in distress, he not only does not sympathize with them, but, as it seems, rather waxes wanton and diminishes his reputation, just when Germany has special need of his judgment and authority. ...

The rumor, however, that he had previously dishonored her is manifestly a lie. Now that the deed is done, we must not take it too hard, nor reproach him; for I think, indeed, that he was compelled by nature to marry. The mode of life, too, while indeed, humble, is, nevertheless holy and more pleasing to God than celibacy. ... I have hopes that this state of life may sober him down, so that he will discard the low buffoonery which we have often censured.⁶⁵

Melanchthon and Luther were able to patch things up, and Melanchthon attended the public wedding celebration on June 27.

Public Wedding Celebration

Although Martin and Katharina's engagement and wedding happened quickly and in private, a public celebration of their marriage was held two weeks later, on June 27, 1525. Waiting a couple of weeks for the celebration allowed time for invitations to be sent out to family and friends. It also allowed time for Martin's parents and other guests to travel from out of town.

The public celebration began with Martin and Katharina and their wedding party traveling from the Black Cloister to the city church as bells rang and crowds lined the streets. At the entrance to the church, Bugenhagen presided over the public wedding ceremony and blessed their marriage. Following the public wedding ceremony, the bride and groom and their guests proceeded back to the Black Cloister for the wedding banquet. Guests of honor were Luther's aged parents, Hans and Margarethe.

After the banquet, the celebration continued at the town hall for dancing and the introduction of prominent guests in attendance. This was followed by the presentation of wedding gifts. Among the gifts Martin and Katharina received were sizable cash gifts, valuable coins,

⁶⁵ Smith and Jacobs, 345. Quoted in Metaxas, 345.

silver cups, and chalices. Another banquet was then held with the city of Wittenberg supplying wine and venison for the occasion.

It must have been especially meaningful for Martin and Katharina to share this special day with family and friends who supported their decision to marry, given that so many others were condemning it.

Opposition to the Luther Marriage

Even before they were married, Luther and Katharina received opposition to their possible marriage and were the subject of malicious rumors. After their wedding, the opposition and rumors only escalated and intensified. Because monks and nuns took sacred vows of celibacy, they were said to be “spiritual siblings.”⁶⁶ Luther, a former monk, marrying Katharina, a former nun, was seen as especially offensive, being described as “the most blasphemous move of all,”⁶⁷ and “open and defiant incest.”⁶⁸ In 1526, King Henry VIII of England accused Luther of “disgraceful lust in violating a nun who was consecrated to God.”⁶⁹ Thomas More, the English humanist, was convinced the Luther’s marriage was nothing other than “sin, sexual lust, and worst of all, wanton, persistent, and deliberate incest. Beyond this, the ceremony in Saxony was a direct result of theological malpractice.”⁷⁰

Joachim von der Heyden and Johann Hasenberg, proteges of Duke George, attacked Luther and Katharina’s marriage. Von der Heyden wrote a message to Katharina, referring to her as “Luther’s so-called wife,” in which he attempted to prove the illegality of their marriage. Hasenberg in a letter to “M. Luder and his unmarried wife,” insisted Luther and Katharina return to their cloisters or “suffer the torments of hell.”⁷¹ Luther responded to von der Heyden:

How dare you preempt the power of a common judge and condemn publicly, and before all the world, a godly woman as though she were a perfidious, perjuring, gone astray whore. Where have you, impudent brat, learned to defame the virtue of other people?⁷²

⁶⁶ Fudge, 319.

⁶⁷ Amy Mantravadi, “The Strange Wedding of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora,” 1517.org, accessed on June 13, 2025, <https://www.1517.org/articles/the-strange-wedding-of-martin-luther-and-katharina-von-bora>.

⁶⁸ Fudge, 319.

⁶⁹ Kroker, 73.

⁷⁰ Fudge, 338. Fudge describes Thomas More as “Perhaps the most vitriolic and outspoken opponent of the Luthers’ marriage.” Ibid.

⁷¹ Markwald and Markwald, 79.

⁷² Ibid.

It was Katharina who bore the brunt of the opposition to their marriage. Michelle DeRusha writes,

Katharina was ruthlessly slandered, ostracized, and even threatened. She was a lightning rod for scandal, not just because she married, but because of *who* she married. Following the wedding, pamphlets and letters were circulated accusing Katharina of being “a ‘whore,’ a ‘dancing girl,’ and a traitor of Christ.”⁷³

Katharina continued to be the target of vicious slander throughout her married life, as a widow, and even after her death.

Adjustment to Married Life

As a couple, Luther and Katharina had to adapt to married life together. Douglas Bond writes:

Given up to the cloister when she was five, Katie had not been around men for the majority of her twenty-six years. Forty-two-year-old Luther had been a celibate priest for two decades and had heard the confession of only two women. Marriage between two people so utterly inexperienced with the opposite sex was a matrimonial train wreck waiting to happen. ... If ever a couple needed extensive premarital counseling, it was Martin and Katie.⁷⁴

Luther commenting on his first year of marriage said (1532):

Man has strange thoughts the first year of marriage. When sitting at table he thinks, “Before I was alone; now there are two.” Or in bed, when he wakes up, he sees a pair of pigtails lying beside him which he hadn’t seen there before. On the other hand, wives bring to their husbands, no matter how busy they may be, a multitude of trivial matters. So my Katy used to sit next to me at first while I was studying hard and would spin and ask, “Doctor, is the grandmaster [of the Teutonic Order in Prussia] the margrave’s brother?”⁷⁵

Metaxas writes of Katharina’s adjustment to living in the Black Cloister:

If the change to married life was jarring for anyone, it must have been jarring for Kathie. She moved from Cranach’s palatial and

⁷³ DeRusha, 167.

⁷⁴ Bond, accessed on September 11, 2025.

⁷⁵ LW 54:191.

extremely well-appointed home to the near stable that was the Black Cloister. Since the monastery had been deserted, only Luther and another monk named Brisger lived there, plus Luther's servant Sieberger, who was famously unacquainted with cleanliness and order. Brisger was soon married and moved out, and Sieberger built a small adjoining house for himself, so that the vast, tumbledown monument to men without women became Martin and Kathie's to care for.⁷⁶

Following their wedding, Luther and Katharina found themselves, as DeRusha describes: “husband and wife, two strangers sharing a bed, a home, and a life.”⁷⁷

The Black Cloister

It is perhaps not surprising that Martin, a former monk, and Katharina, a former nun, would share their married lives together in the Black Cloister, a former monastery. Built in Wittenberg in 1502, the former Augustinian monastery was only one-third completed. Prior to the Reformation, it had housed as many as 40 monks, but by the early 1520s, one after another decided to leave. By 1523, only Luther and the former prior remained. Luther had been living in the Black Cloister for fourteen years before marrying Katharina.

For the two years before her marriage to Luther, Katharina lived as a houseguest at the Cranach home, where she enjoyed the leisurely lifestyle of a noblewoman. As Luther's wife, however, that would all change. Martin and Katharina chose the Black Cloister as their home because it was the only affordable and available home for them in Wittenberg.⁷⁸ The property included a main three-story building, along with sheds, barns, a brewery, and a dilapidated chapel. When it was still a monastery, the monks' cells were located on the third floor of the main building. Martin and Katharina lived on the second floor which included living space as well as rooms that were used for lectures and hosting events. The kitchen and housekeeping rooms were on the first floor.

When Katharina arrived, she found the Black Cloister in severe disrepair. It had been sorely neglected for years, was filthy, and literally falling apart. She immediately took it upon herself to remedy the situation and make some renovations. She began by whitewashing the walls.

⁷⁶ Metaxas, 353.

⁷⁷ DeRusha, 193.

⁷⁸ Markwald and Markwald, 214.

This was no small task as the rooms were large and had high ceilings. She also tackled the garden, planting vegetables and herbs.

One of the first items Luther purchased for their home was a new mattress. He said, “Before I was married the bed was not made for a whole year and became foul with sweat. But I worked so hard and was so weary I tumbled in without noticing it.”⁷⁹

At first, the Luthers paid rent to live at the Black Cloister. But in 1532, as “an expression of thanks for Luther’s preaching, teaching, and for his work to proclaim the Word of God,”⁸⁰ Elector John of Saxony, officially transferred ownership of the property to Martin and Katharina and their heirs. Kroker writes:

The document was issued in Torgau on February 4, 1532. In that document the Elector, for himself and his descendants, gave and endowed the venerable and learned Doctor, our dear devout *Herr Doktor* Martin Luther and his wife Katherine and their direct descendants, sons and daughters, with the Black Cloister and all that goes with it, including the garden and courtyard, nothing excluded, as a true and free inheritance, free of all tax and any compulsory service, with the rights to brew, to malt, to sell beer, to keep cattle, and to conduct every other civil matter, with the single stipulation that he, the prince, and his succession retain the option to buy it if they ever sold it.⁸¹

The Black Cloister was now *Lutherhaus*.

Guests at *Lutherhaus*

Although the Black Cloister was large, it was rarely empty. Already on the evening of Martin and Katharina’s public wedding, Andreas Karlstad, a frequent adversary of Luther’s, showed up with his family at the Black Cloister seeking shelter from the Peasants’ War. They ended up staying at the Black Cloister for the next eight weeks!

It wasn’t long before the empty rooms of the Black Cloister were filled with boarders, visiting guests, and relatives. For several years, Luther had refused to charge anyone room and board to stay there, but Katharina eventually put an end to that. As Martin Treu writes: “To live with the great man under one roof was regarded as an honor that

⁷⁹ Kroker, 82.

⁸⁰ Markwald and Markwald, 84.

⁸¹ Kroker, 77.

Katharina let people pay for appropriately.”⁸² In addition to their own immediate family, the Luthers took in and raised Martin’s sister’s six orphaned children, a nephew of Katharina’s, and Katharina’s aunt, Lena.

The number of regular inhabitants at the Black Cloister usually numbered around thirty to forty. This does not include the many additional guests who would often come to stay for short periods of time. At times there were no rooms available. To accommodate so many, renovations and expansions were necessary. Most of this work was completed between 1536 and 1540, under Katharina’s direction. Supplying the many guests and boarders with food and lodging required much work and money.

Morning Star of Wittenberg

While Luther was busy with his church work, Katharina managed the household. Luther called her “The Morning Star of Wittenberg” because she usually began her day at 4 a.m. with a devotion and prayer. With a large household of servants, visitors, boarders, relatives, and immediate family, Katharina had her hands full. Metaxas says of her:

There is no question that she ran the household, doing more things than can be enumerated. Her work ranged from overseeing the much-needed paint and plaster repairs, to eventually raising hogs, cattle, and even fish. Kathie actually oversaw a fishpond that gave them trout, perch, pike, and carp, gathered via net. And then there was the nearby orchard that provided apples, pears, nuts, and peaches. Kathie also oversaw the barnyard. In addition to the pigs she raised, there were cows, ducks, and hens. It is a matter of record that the noble former nun did the slaughtering herself.⁸³

Katharina had several gardens on the cloister grounds. Luther enjoyed gardening and would, on occasion, give her a hand. Over the years, more land was purchased for additional gardens and crops. These gardens and fields provided much of what was needed for the kitchen and cellars.

Katharina also brewed beer. The Black Cloister had brewing rights allowing twelve brewings a year. Brewing beer was a complicated and time-consuming process with mixed results. Quality often varied from batch to batch. Luther liked his beer. Kroker writes: “He liked to have plenty to drink in the evening and made no secret of it either. At his age

⁸² Treu, 166.

⁸³ Metaxas, 353.

and with the work that rested on him, he believed he was allowed his nightcap with good conscience after the burden and heat of the day.”⁸⁴

While Luther liked beer, he was especially fond of Katharina’s beer. If he couldn’t have it, he yearned for it. He wrote in a letter to Katharina on July 29, 1534: “I said to myself what good wine and beer I have at home, and also [what] a pretty lady or (should I say) lord.”⁸⁵ Not only did Katharina’s beer taste good, it was also inexpensive.

Katharina was an effective and capable manager of the Luther household. Her efforts allowed Luther to focus on his work as a reformer. Luther appreciated her efforts. On one occasion, while in Schmalkalden, Luther was experiencing a severe, prolonged bout of kidney stones and thought he was going to die. He asked his friends Melanchthon, Jonas, and Cruciger to bring his final greetings, and added: “Comfort my Katie! She shall endure the pain, remembering that she has been happy with me for twelve years. She has served me not only as a wife, but also as a maid. God reward her for it!”⁸⁶

Finances

Although neither Luther nor Katharina had any personal wealth to bring into their marriage, their income was enough to make ends meet. Even before Martin and Katharina were married, his annual salary was 100 gulden. This was more than most professors in Germany received at the time.⁸⁷ After they were married, Elector John the Steadfast doubled Luther’s salary. Later, the Elector’s son and successor, John Frederick the Magnanimous, added another 100 gulden.⁸⁸ Additional income came from gifts and from Katharina’s earnings from her garden, brewings, and livestock. Markwald and Markwald note: “With this income, it should have been easy for the Luthers to live comfortably.”⁸⁹

Not long into their marriage, however, it became apparent that their income was not keeping up with expenses. The Luthers struggled to pay their bills and frequently went into debt, with Katharina feeling especially burdened by these debts. A major reason for their indebtedness was Luther’s generosity. He gave away or spent nearly all his earnings.

⁸⁴ Kroker, 101.

⁸⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 50: Letters 3, ed. Gottfried G. Krodel and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 50 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 81.

⁸⁶ Kroker, 209.

⁸⁷ Markwald and Markwald, 85.

⁸⁸ Kroker, 83.

⁸⁹ Markwald and Markwald, 86.

What remained wasn't nearly enough to cover the expenses of such a large household.

Luther also turned down other sources of income. Although his lectures were popular, often with hundreds in attendance, he refused to charge for them. He also rejected an offer of 400 gulden annually from some printers to publish his writings.⁹⁰ Although printers were making money selling his writings, Luther had no desire to earn anything from them. During Bugenhagen's long absence while implementing the Reformation in Denmark, Luther took over the parish pastor's responsibilities for the city church, without any pay. As Metaxas writes: “He simply wanted to spread the Word and trust God would provide.”⁹¹

At one point, realizing their indebtedness was out of control, Luther admitted, “I have a peculiar budget: I consume more than I take in. ... What am I to do?”⁹² Luther decided to turn the finances over to Katharina. He trusted her completely, saying, “In domestic affairs I defer to Katie, otherwise I am led by the Holy Ghost.”⁹³

Katharina didn't waste any time making some significant financial decisions. She purchased additional land in Zülsdorf so she could expand her farming operations and generate more income. Instead of providing free lodging to visitors, she began to charge them room and board to stay at the Black Cloister. She also was determined to offset Luther's generosity with her own frugality.

Katharina's careful management enabled the Luthers to finally gain control over their finances. Over time they were able to get out of debt and even to accrue a small fortune.⁹⁴ When Luther died, “he was counted among the richest residents of the city.”⁹⁵

Children

Luther believed one of the main purposes of marriage was to have children. He saw raising children in a Christian home as a noble and valuable task. In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522) Luther wrote:

⁹⁰ Kroker, 83.

⁹¹ Metaxas, 354.

⁹² *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Tischreden*. 6 vols. (Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1912–21), 4:700–02, no. 5181. Quoted in Markwald and Markwald, 87.

⁹³ William J. Petersen, *Martin Luther Had a Wife* (Tyndale, 1985), 14. Quoted in DeRusha, 189.

⁹⁴ Kroker, 83.

⁹⁵ Treu, 169.

But the greatest good in married life, that which makes all suffering and labor worthwhile, is that God grants offspring and commands that they be brought up to worship and serve him. In all the world this is the noblest and most precious work, because to God there can be nothing dearer than the salvation of souls. ...

Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.⁹⁶

Martin and Katharina were blessed with six children in a span of a little over eight years. Their children included three sons and three daughters: Johannes, Elizabeth, Magdalene, Martin, Paul, and Margarete.⁹⁷ Like many parents at the time, Martin and Katharina were not spared the high rate of child mortality. Four of their children lived to adulthood. Elizabeth died at the age of 8 months and Magdalena died when she was 13 years old. The deep grief Martin and Katharina felt at their daughters' deaths is evident in Luther's letters. In 1540, Katharina suffered a miscarriage and almost died. In addition to their own children, Martin and Katharina raised several nieces and nephews.

Luther was actively involved in raising his children and the nieces and nephews who came to live with them. Kroker writes:

While Luther put Katie in charge of taking care of the household, he stood alongside her in raising the children, and he saw to it that there wouldn't be any worry about physical welfare, spiritual food, and moral training in his house. He knew that people were watching him and his family like a hawk.⁹⁸

Regarding parenting, Luther, in *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage* (1519) writes:

But this at least all married people should know. They can do no better work and do nothing more valuable either for God, for

⁹⁶ LW 45:46.

⁹⁷ On June 7, 1526, Johannes, also known as Hans, was born. Katharina gave birth to Elizabeth during an outbreak of the plague on December 10, 1527. Magdalene, nicknamed Lena, arrived on May 4, 1529, followed by Martin on November 9, 1531, Paul on January 29, 1533, and their last child, Margarete, named after Luther's mother, on December 17, 1534.

⁹⁸ Kroker, 115.

Christendom, for all the world, for themselves, and for their children than to bring up their children well.⁹⁹

Family Life

Luther and Katharina enjoyed spending time with their children. Luther especially enjoyed the evenings at home with his family singing together as he accompanied them on his lute. When he was away from his family, he would miss them and would look forward to his return home. In his letters to Katharina, Luther would often express his love for his wife and children and include little notes such as, “Kiss Hans for me,”¹⁰⁰ or “With this I commend you to God, together with our young ones and the members of our household. Amen.”¹⁰¹ In 1530, while Luther was gone to Coburg for several months, Katharina sent him a small portrait of Magdalena to help ease his homesickness. Martin and Katharina were actively involved in their children’s lives as together they nurtured, disciplined, and raised them.

Luther was very involved in his children’s spiritual growth. Luther said in a sermon in 1530, “When I get up in the morning, I pray with the children the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and then some psalm.”¹⁰² On Sundays, Luther conducted devotions for his household, which included his wife, children, guests, and servants. Kroker includes this prayer of Luther’s:

Dear heavenly Father, since You have placed me in the honor of Your name and office and also willed that I be called and honored as father, grant me grace and bless me so that I direct and provide for my dear wife, children, and household in a godly and Christian manner. Give me wisdom and strength indeed to guide and raise them well, and give them a good heart and the will to follow and be obedient to Your teachings. Amen.¹⁰³

Throughout her life, Katharina was a student of the Bible. On one occasion, Luther said of Katharina, “My Katie now understands the Psalms better than all the papists put together.”¹⁰⁴ On another occasion, Luther tried to encourage Katharina to read the entire Bible by giving

⁹⁹ LW 44:12.

¹⁰⁰ LW 50:50.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰² Kroker, 135.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 153.

¹⁰⁴ Kroker, 117.

her a special incentive. In a letter to Justus Jonas from October 28, 1535, he wrote:

My lord Katie sends greetings; she drives the wagon, takes care of the fields, buys and puts cattle out to pasture, brews, etc. In between she has started to read the Bible, and I have promised her fifty gulden if she finishes before Easter. She is very serious and is now starting the Book of Deuteronomy.¹⁰⁵

Table Talk

Most evenings, the Luthers had guests at their dinner table. These guests included university students, friends, colleagues, and others who would gather to discuss and hear Luther's thoughts on a variety of topics, from "the ineffable majesty of God the Omnipotent, to the frogs in the Elbe River."¹⁰⁶ Luther and his guests drank beer as they talked. The conversation was often lively, even "earthy, sometimes outright crude."¹⁰⁷ Several students and friends transcribed the thousands of these conversations and compiled them in what is known as Luther's *Table Talk*.¹⁰⁸

Katharina was instrumental in making these discussions possible. In addition to determining who would stay as guests at *Lutherhaus*, she also decided who would be invited to sit at their table.

The table talks were very popular. Markwald and Markwald note: "Her table was never empty, and usually there was a waiting list of those who wanted room and board."¹⁰⁹

Katharina was also an active participant in the table talks. She had a seat at the table and joined in the conversations. She did not hesitate to voice her opinions or even to "rebuke her husband, albeit gently, in the presence of their guests for remarks she found crude or rude."¹¹⁰ *Table Talk* contains the largest surviving record of Katharina's words.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ LW 50:108–109. I was not able to find any report as to whether Katharina did finish reading the Bible in its entirety and received the 50 gulden.

¹⁰⁶ Bainton, 295.

¹⁰⁷ DeRusha, 198.

¹⁰⁸ See Luther's Works, Volume 54 and other places.

¹⁰⁹ Markwald and Markwald, 129.

¹¹⁰ DeRusha, 201.

¹¹¹ Markwald and Markwald, 143.

Katharina’s Nursing Skills

Luther had several health issues, including kidney stones, dizziness, shortness of breath, alternating bouts of diarrhea and constipation, tinnitus, ear infections, anxiety, and depression. He trusted Katharina as his own personal nurse and doctor. She was able at times to provide Luther with some relief. Others noticed how Luther benefited from her care. Wolfgang Capito, after visiting Wittenberg, wrote to Luther:

Greetings to your wife, the best woman I know. She was created to maintain your health so you will be able to serve for many years the church that was born under you, and to minister to all who place their hope in Christ.¹¹²

Using plants and herbs from her garden and other ingredients, Katharina would prepare her own medicinal remedies for Luther’s ailments. Kroker says of her, “She was tireless in her care and limitless in her home remedies.”¹¹³ Many of her remedies worked well for Luther, but not all of them. DeRusha writes:

The treatments weren’t always successful, nor were they very appealing. “Your skill doesn’t help me, even with the dung,” Luther complained in 1537, when he was suffering from kidney stones while in Smalcald.¹¹⁴

Luther was not Katharina’s only patient. She also cared for their children and guests who were ill while staying at *Lutherhaus*. On one occasion, illness swept through the Black Cloister, leaving Katharina with forty ill guests under her care. When the plague came to Wittenberg and many people fell victim to the epidemic, Luther and Katharina turned their home into a hospital and cared for the sick. Years later, their son Paul, a medical doctor, complimented his mother’s nursing skills and praised her as being “half a doctor.”¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid.,165. DeRusha writes, “In fact, as many of her critics began to observe her positive impact on Luther’s physical and mental health, their opinions of Katharina began to soften. Eventually, she earned the begrudging respect of several of Luther’s allies and advisors, who came to see Katharina not as the impediment they feared, but as an integral part of his success.” DeRusha, 185.

¹¹³ Kroker, 214.

¹¹⁴ DeRusha, 187. DeRusha adds, “Excrement and urine—both human and animal—were frequently used to treat common, chronic conditions during the medieval and early modern period.” DeRusha, 187.

¹¹⁵ Markwald and Markwald, 165.

Death of Luther

As the years passed, Luther's health continued to worsen, and he grew weaker. In January 1546, Luther agreed to go to Eisleben to mediate a quarrel between two counts over mining rights. Concerned about his poor health, Katharina tried to convince him not to go, but he insisted. She sent their sons Hans, Martin, and Paul along with Luther in case anything happened to him.

Luther was gone for about a month to Eisleben. During that time, Katharina sent him several letters expressing her concern about him and his health. Luther responded with several letters to Katharina which can be described as "cheerful and confident, affectionate, playful."¹¹⁶ But by the time she received his letter from February 14, Luther was already dead.

On February 16, Luther attended the negotiations for resolving the dispute. The next day, however, he wasn't feeling well and his friends urged him to stay in bed. His health continued to worsen over the course of the day and into the night. Markwald and Markwald describe the events of that night:

According to contemporary reports, Luther had felt a severe tightness and pressure about the heart during the evening of February 17, 1546. He awakened at one o'clock in the morning and rapidly began to lose strength. His physicians were called immediately, and they rubbed Luther with warm towels. The countess dabbed his pulse with the invigorating water Kate had sent for just that purpose. But all this loving care could not keep Martin Luther alive. His last words were those of Psalm 31:5: "Into Thy hand I commit my spirit; Thou hast redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God." Between two and three o'clock in the morning, on February 18, 1546, the reformer died in the presence of his friends: Justus Jonas; the two doctors, Augustine Schurf and Matthäus Ratzeberger; the city pastor, Johannes Aurifaber; the Count and Countess Albrecht; and Luther's three sons.¹¹⁷

On the morning of February 18, Johannes Bugenhagen, Caspar Cruciger, and Philip Melanchthon reported the sad news of her husband's death to Katharina. Melanchthon reported Katharina's reaction to the news:

¹¹⁶ Kroker, 220.

¹¹⁷ Markwald and Markwald, 172–173.

It is easy to see that the poor woman is deeply shocked and greatly troubled, but especially on account of the three sons whom the sainted Doctor had in Eisleben, not knowing how they might react to their father's death.¹¹⁸

Four days after receiving word of her husband's death, Luther's body was returned to Katharina at the Black Cloister. Katharina and their children then followed the wagon carrying Luther's body as the procession made its way to the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Bugenhagen preached the funeral sermon. Melanthon delivered the eulogy as Katharina and the children stood next to Luther's casket. Luther's body was then laid to rest in a grave in front of the pulpit.

Two months after Luther's death, Katharina expressed her grief in an April 25, 1546, letter to her sister-in-law Christina von Bora, the only letter that still survives in which she mentions her husband:

Dear beloved sister,

I know that you take pity on me and my poor children. For who could not be deeply grieved and saddened over the loss of such a dear and precious man as my husband has been. He gave so much of himself in service not only to one town or to one country, but to the whole world. Yes, my sorrow is so deep that no words can express my heartbreak, and it is humanly impossible to understand what state of mind and spirit I am in. ... I can neither eat nor drink, not even sleep. ... God knows that when I think of having lost him, I can neither talk nor write in all my suffering and crying.

Katharina,

Dr. Martin Luther's widow.¹¹⁹

When Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora married on June 13, 1525, they had no idea how richly the Lord would bless their union. What began as a practical arrangement, driven by circumstance and theological conviction, grew into a blessed relationship of mutual faith and love that flourished through both blessings and trials. Considering each other a gift from God, their marriage remains a powerful witness to matrimony as a holy and blessed estate even today. One imagines Luther was thinking of his and Katharina's own marriage in his 1531 wedding sermon:

¹¹⁸ Kroker, 221.

¹¹⁹ Markwald and Markwald, 176.

God's Word is actually inscribed on one's spouse. When a man looks at his wife as if she were the only woman on earth, and when a woman looks at her husband as if he were the only man on earth; yes, if no king or queen, not even the sun itself sparkles any more brightly and lights up your eyes more than your own husband or wife, then right there you are face to face with God speaking. God promises to you your wife or husband, actually gives your spouse to you, saying: "The man shall be yours; the woman shall be yours. I am pleased beyond measure! Creatures earthly and heavenly are jumping for joy." For there is no jewelry more precious than God's Word; through it you come to regard your spouse as a gift of God and, as long as you do that, you will have no regrets.¹²⁰ 

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¹²⁰ WA 34:52.12–21, translated by Hendrix, in "Luther on Marriage," 347.

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The Nicene Creed

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THIS YEAR IS THE 1700TH ANNIVERSARY OF WHEN the Nicene Creed was adopted by the council held in the city for which the creed is named. Ever since then, this creed has been confessed and passed down as an orthodox expression of the Christian Faith. But the Nicene Creed did not come into existence in a vacuum. And then after it was adopted, there were a number of further developments which resulted in the version of the Nicene Creed that is confessed in churches today. The goal of this paper is to present an overview of that history, and then conclude with a discussion of a recent development pertaining to the use of the Nicene Creed which is worthy of consideration.¹

In the first generations of the Christian Church, it was believed that Jesus is the son of God and the savior of the world. This can be seen both in the doctrinal writings of theologians and also in the worship of the church.² However, it has been observed that, in those early years, when the church lived under the threat of persecution, there was not a widespread felt need to resolve the tension that exists in the paradox that Jesus Christ is both God and man, eternal and also a son.³

¹ The difficulty of treating this history, which is both long and well-known by some, in a paper of this length is that details which some learned men believe are important will be omitted or not emphasized. This author regrets any disappointment that is felt by any of the men in this room because of this, especially Pres. Emeritus Schmeling, Dr. Schmeling, Dr. Teigen, and the most fearsome final boss, one's own father.

² Daniel Liderbach, *Christ in the Early Christian Hymns* (Paulist Press, 1998), 41.

³ Ibid., 35.

There were a number of Christological heresies that arose in those early years. One of the first was Gnosticism, which wanted to de-emphasize physical things in general, and the incarnation of Jesus in particular. There were also the heresies of Origen, who taught that only God the Father possessed the fullness of the godhead. Both the Son and the Holy Spirit emanate from the Father, and they derive their divinity from him. The “further out” that the Son and the Spirit emanate from the father, showing their distinct identities, the less united they are with the father, and the less divine they become.⁴

After Origen, many theologians went in one of two directions. Either they stressed the unity between the Father and the Son, and by connection the full divinity of the Son. Or they emphasized the distinctions between the Father and the Son, and the Son’s subordination to the Father, therefore minimizing his divinity. As these teachings spread, it resulted in a growing tension in the Christian Church.⁵

In the third century, Paul of Samosata, the bishop of Antioch, proposed that Jesus was not truly the divine Son of God at all. He had merely been adopted as God’s Son at his Baptism. But it was still possible to say that Jesus was the eternally-begotten Son of God, because God the Father knew, from eternity, that He would adopt Jesus as His Son. Paul’s goal in this teaching was to preserve the oneness and unique divinity of God the Father. But he also denied the divinity of the Son, as well as that of the Holy Spirit.⁶ At that time Antioch was the location for one of the great theological schools. One of the emphases of that school was presenting the Christian faith in such a way that it would be more appealing to pagan philosophers and academics. Paul of Samosata’s position at Antioch meant that his teachings were able to quickly and easily spread.⁷

The school of Antioch soon became a center for subordinationist thought. A student of Paul of Samosata’s, Lucian, became a teacher there, and two of his students were Eusebius, the future bishop of Nicomedia, and Arius.⁸ It is not hard to see how Arius and his teachings came from this school, which taught a Christology that was

⁴ Thomas G. Weinandy and Daniel A. Keating, *Athanasius and the Council of Nicea* (Augsburg Fortress, 2017), 8–9. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1tm7h5s>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ Hermann Sasse, “The Great Ecumenical Creed,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1975): 42–43.

⁸ Forrest Bivens, “The Doctrine of the Eternal Generation of the Son: A Study of its Historical Development,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1986): 40.

influenced by adoptionism and subordinationism. And even though not every student who studied at Antioch came away with the same extreme positions that Arius would hold to, they were certainly primed to be sympathetic to his positions.⁹

Eventually, Arius came to serve in Baukalis, a suburb of Alexandria.¹⁰ Arius was a gifted preacher and poet, and soon he became one of the most popular preachers in the city, serving at one of the largest churches.¹¹ In the year 318 or 319 (scholars are not agreed), Arius began to openly preach his heresy. His teaching can be briefly summarized in this way: that there is only one unbegotten, eternal, God; this one God is absolute and cannot communicate or share his being with another, because that would imply that he is divisible and changeable; so it is impossible that this one true God can have a son who is his equal; therefore, the Son of God should be regarded as the first and most perfect creature, who was created by God the Father before the beginning of time.¹²

When the bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, heard of this he immediately saw that if this teaching persisted and spread, it would be the end of the Christian faith. Christianity would devolve into paganism, because no earthly creature can possibly be the Savior of the world. Jesus would be viewed as a sort of mythological character, and “the entire liturgy of the church in which he is worshiped would become a great lie.”¹³

One would assume that Alexander demanded that Arius stop teaching this, and publicly recant. And when Arius refused, Alexander removed him from all his posts in the city. But this did not mean that Arius was willing to disappear quietly. He believed he was in the right, so he appealed to the people of Alexandria, and to other bishops with whom he had studied at Antioch for support. Soon there were demonstrations in the streets of Alexandria, with the people chanting the sayings of Arius. And those bishops who were friendly to Arius wrote letters in support of him, and against Alexander.¹⁴

In the year 320 or 321, Alexander called for a gathering of bishops from Egypt and Libya. This local council condemned Arius and his

⁹ H. J. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils* (Herder Book Co, 1937), 8.

¹⁰ Bivens, 40.

¹¹ Sasse, 42-43.

¹² Schroeder, 8-9.

¹³ Bivens, 43.

¹⁴ Justo Gonzalez, *The story of Christianity* (Prince Press, Peabody Massachusetts: 1984), 162.

followers. But instead of silencing Arius, this only seemed to inspire him. Arius left Egypt and traveled to Palestine and Nicomedia, where his classmate and supporter, Eusebius, was bishop.¹⁵ Apart from Arius himself, this Eusebius would prove to be the greatest proponent of Arianism.¹⁶

Arius had the support of many bishops and priests. It is likely that all or most of them held to a version of subordinationism.¹⁷ But it is unlikely that all of Arius's supporters understood the full ramifications of what he was teaching. But still, when their classmate at Antioch was attacked, they quickly came to his aid, probably in no small part to defend the honor and reputation of their school.¹⁸

After Arius had been condemned by that local council in Alexandria, his teachings were approved by a similar gathering held in Antioch. The Arian controversy had grown into a real schism which threatened to divide the church.¹⁹ Arius also showed his skills at persuasion by winning the support of Eusebius of Caesarea,²⁰ who was considered by many to be the most learned person in the world.²¹ This state of confusion and division was how Emperor Constantine found the Christian Church in the East when he became ruler of the whole Roman Empire in the year 324.

It is impossible to study the history of the Nicene Creed without also devoting some time to the emperor who called for the council that adopted it. The first time when Constantine made his Christian sympathies clearly known was on the eve of the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312. There Constantine claimed to see the ✸ in the sky, with the message, "You will conquer by this sign." After his victory, Constantine became the undisputed ruler of the western half of the Roman Empire. And soon after this, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which decriminalized the Christian Faith.

There are some, including Hermann Sasse, who hold to the position that in 313, Constantine was not a Christian, only a friend of the Christian church.²² But others, including this author, believe that

¹⁵ James Korthals, "The Seven Ecumenical Councils," in *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1997): 17.

¹⁶ Schroeder, 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹ Bivens, 43.

²⁰ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Harper and Row, 1960), 231.

²¹ Gonzalez, 129.

²² Sasse, 41.

Constantine was not just a friend of the Christian church, but had actually been raised as a closeted Christian by his mother. There was also no obvious political benefit for Constantine to embrace Christianity, because at that time, Christianity was much stronger in the eastern half of the Roman Empire than the West. Most Christians were also from the lower classes, while the upper class was still pagan.²³ And that the fact that Constantine would only be baptized on his deathbed should not be seen as proof of a later conversion, but was due to misunderstandings about Baptism and the sins it washed away.²⁴

After 313, Christians in the western half of the Roman empire were free to practice their religion without fear. But life was not the same for Christians living in the eastern part of the empire. The emperor there was Licinius, who was not a Christian.²⁵ Even though Licinius did not actively engage in harshly persecuting all Christians like other emperors before him, he viewed Constantine as his rival. And when he became aware that many of his Christian subjects were praying for Constantine, he saw this as a threat to his rule.²⁶ But instead of solidifying his authority in the East, the actions taken by Licinius against Christians had the opposite effect, giving Constantine the justification he wanted to seize control of the entire empire.²⁷

In the year 324 Constantine defeated Licinius and became ruler of the entire Roman Empire. That same year, Constantine wrote a letter to the eastern provinces in which he stated that he wanted all his citizens to worship the one, true, Christian God. He also made money available from the imperial treasury to be used for repairing and expanding damaged Christian churches, and building new ones. But even though Constantine showed a clear desire that all his subjects would become Christians, he forbade forced conversions.

It is not likely that Constantine knew very much about the Arian controversy before becoming ruler of the eastern half of the empire. But when he became ruler there, he first tried to resolve the conflict by sending a letter to all the principal actors in the controversy, including Alexander and Arias, in which he asked them to lay aside

²³ Gonzalez, 121.

²⁴ The majority of the sources referenced for this paper assume that Constantine's profession of faith was genuine. Not all are agreed as to when Constantine became a Christian.

²⁵ Gonzalez, 117.

²⁶ Ibid., 117.

²⁷ Ibid., 116.

their differences.²⁸ This first effort was not successful. It shows that Constantine was not, first and foremost, a theologian. He was a politician, whose main concern was to maintain political and religious peace in the empire.²⁹

Constantine also showed his political nature with his next move, calling for a council of the entire church to settle the matter, he hoped, once and for all. It is admirable, though, that Constantine called for this council instead of simply using his power to try to decide the matter for Arius and his supporters. This is because, at that time, the Arian party would have seemed to have the upper hand. And Constantine's residence was in Nicomedia, where the bishop was one of Arius's most fervent supporters.³⁰

Constantine understood that this controversy concerned the whole Christian church, so he did not want it to be decided locally, but by representatives from the whole Christian church. So he invited every bishop in the empire to attend the council to be held at Nicaea. It cannot be known for sure, if Constantine also sent invitations to bishops outside his empire. But it is possible that he did, because there were also representatives at the council who were not his subjects.³¹

Choosing Nicaea as the location for the council was intentional. Nicaea was a large city that was only twenty miles away from Nicomedia, the location of the imperial residence. This proximity would allow Constantine to keep an eye on the council while also seeing to the affairs of the empire.³² Something else Constantine did to try to make this council as universal as possible was facilitating the travel for all the representatives who were able to attend.³³ In spite of this, almost all the bishops who attended the council came from the East, with only a handful of representatives from the western half of the empire.³⁴

The council of Nicaea was the first time in history when the whole Christian Church was put on such full public display. The following is how Eusebius of Caesarea described the scene:

²⁸ Ibid., 126.

²⁹ Daniel Liderbach, *Christ in the Early Christian Hymns* (Paulist Press, 1998), 58.

³⁰ Hall, 125.

³¹ Schroeder, 12.

³² Korthals, 16–17.

³³ Hall, 128.

³⁴ Korthals, 18. This is also borne out in the attendance of lay-delegates at the annual ELS convention in Mankato. Just because the costs for travel are equalized does not mean that men from Florida or Utah are going to have as simple a time attending the convention as men who live within easy driving distance.

They were gathered, the most distinguished Ministers of God from many churches in Europe, Africa, and Asia. A single House of prayer, as if enlarged by God, sheltered Syrians and Salesians, Phoenicians and Arabs, delegates from Palestine and from Egypt, Thebans and Libyans, together with those from Mesopotamia. Pontus, Galatia, Pamphylia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Phrygia sent their most outstanding bishops, together with those from the remotest areas of Thrace and Macedonia.³⁵

This assembly was not only impressive from the sheer number of participants. It was also because some of the bishops who had come to the council bore in their bodies marks from previous times of persecution. Paul of Neocaesarea had hands that had been paralyzed with red hot irons. Potamon from Egypt had one of his eyes gouged out. Paphnutius had lost an eye and his left knee had been mutilated. Compared to those great men of the faith, who had suffered for Christ, and now were given seats of honor, the deacon Athanasius might have been easy to miss. But by the end of the council everyone would know who he was.³⁶

The clergy who participated in the Council of Nicaea could be divided up into three groups. The first was the orthodox faction, which strongly confessed the full deity of the Son. Some of the leaders of this first group were Alexander of Alexandria and Eustathius of Antioch. Athanasius was also part of this group. Although he was not a bishop, and therefore not a voting member of the council, he would become their chief spokesman.³⁷

The second faction at the council were the confirmed Arians, who unapologetically maintained that the Son of God is a creation of the Father, not equal to Him. This group numbered about twenty bishops, who were led by Eusebius of Nicomedia. Also representing this faction was its namesake, Arius, who like Athanasius was not a bishop, but had still been invited by the emperor to be part of the council and defend his views.³⁸

The third group at the council cannot really be considered a faction, because they made up the majority of those present. This group was made up of men of varying academic abilities who were not sure what to think of the controversy, and were saddened to see how the Christian

³⁵ Gonzalez, 163.

³⁶ Schroeder, 13.

³⁷ Korthals, 18.

³⁸ Ibid., 19.

Church had become divided at the very moment when it was finally able to live and grow freely. The most significant member of this group was Eusebius of Caesarea.³⁹ Emperor Constantine was also present for the council, but he did not participate in the debates.⁴⁰

There is no record of the proceedings from the council that has survived to this day. So it is impossible to know all of what was said by whom, and when. But because both Arius and Athanasius were given the floor to speak, it is safe to assume that they both presented their positions which can be known from other sources.

For Arius, the controversy was not centered only on the doctrine of Christ. It was also, even primarily, focused on the doctrine of God the Father. Arius taught that God is a “monad,” a primal, indivisible, incomparable, being. Not only is God unlike all things, he is also far removed from all things. God is uniquely unoriginate and unchangeable, which means that it is impossible for him to give existence to another being who is also equally unoriginate and unchangeable.⁴¹

Arius also taught that if God is truly one, as the Bible says, then it is impossible for the Son to also be God. And if God is eternal, then he could not have always been a father. He only became a father when he gave life to the Son as the first and most like God of all creatures. But unlike the father, the Son is changeable, which is why he was able to undergo the change of becoming a man and being able to suffer and die. While a created being could endure such changes and limitations, God the Father could not, so it is impossible for the Son, who became incarnate, to truly be God.⁴²

Therefore, because there is only one unbegotten, eternal, God, it necessarily means that the Son was created, even though he was born before time. And it is precisely because of the limitations of the Son, and the differences between him and the Father, that he is able to communicate with the human race as the mediator between God and men.⁴³

Perhaps more simply, the Arian position can be summarized in four points: (1) the Son must be a creature, formed by God the Father out of nothing. Even though he is a perfect creature, above the rest of creation, he still owes his existence to the will of the Father; (2) there must have been a time when the Son did not exist, “when he was not.” The alternative is antithetical to monotheism; (3) because the Son is a creation of

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰ Schroeder, 15.

⁴¹ Weinandy, 10.

⁴² Ibid., 10–11.

⁴³ Liderbach, 40.

the Father, referring to him as God or the Son of God are just honorary titles, because it is not possible for the Son to be truly God; (4) the Son cannot be more than a demigod. In relation to the father, he is no more than a creature. Therefore, it is necessary to deny that Jesus is divine.⁴⁴

In opposition to Arius, Athanasius and the other men who defended the orthodox position were able to point to the basic truths that had always been believed by Christians, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, himself truly God. If the Son is not God, then it is idolatrous to worship him. This was a point that even the most uneducated bishops at the council would have been able to grasp.⁴⁵

Athanasius also argued that between the Father and the Son, there is no subordination of essence, there is only a subordination of order and dignity. The fact that the Son is begotten of the Father does not require that he is any less God than the Father. Instead, it shows the distinctions in the relationship between the persons of the Trinity.⁴⁶

But perhaps the strongest, and clearest, argument that was made at Nicaea was when Athanasius showed the connection between the question of who Christ is, and his redemptive work. The person and work of Christ are inseparably bound together. So, if Christ has truly redeemed the human race from the curse and the power of sin, and reconciled it to God, therefore he must be God, not just a creature, not even the greatest, most God-like creature. Otherwise, he would not have been able to redeem other creatures from sin and death. In this way, Athanasius presented the act of redemption as relying just as much on divine power as the act of creation.⁴⁷

Athanasius was able to win over the unsure majority to the orthodox side. But this was also due, just as much, to the shock of hearing the Arian position clearly presented, especially the assertion that the Son of God is just a creature. The focus of the council quickly shifted to condemning the teachings of Arius as clearly as possible. It was decided that the best way for this to be done would be by composing a creed that would express the Christian faith in such a clear way that an Arian would be unable to subscribe to it.⁴⁸

The exact process by which the Nicene Creed was formulated is not entirely clear from history. Some records show that the Arians tried to take the lead in this and proposed a creed which would allow for

⁴⁴ Kelly, 228–231.

⁴⁵ Schroeder, 13–14.

⁴⁶ Bivens, 41.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁸ Gonzalez, 164–165.

their teachings. But this proposal was overwhelmingly rejected. Then Eusebius of Caesarea presented a creed that was already used in some parts of Palestine. This creed was similar to the Nicene Creed, but it did not include ὁμοούσιος to express the unity of the Father and the Son.⁴⁹

'Ομοούσιος was not an entirely new term for the Christian church. Earlier this phrase had been used by those who wanted to deny distinctions between the persons of the Godhead. So many were concerned to now see it brought into this discussion. But when it was explained that ὁμοούσιος only expresses unity of essence between the Father and the Son, and does not deny distinctions between them, the phrase was accepted. Other reasons why this phrase was included in the creed is because it made it impossible for any honest Arian to subscribe to it, and because Constantine also gave his approval for the use of the phrase.⁵⁰

The council decreed:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible. And in our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, the only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, being of one substance (ὁμοούσιος) with the Father, through whom all things were made, those in heaven and those on Earth, who for us men and for our salvation came down and became flesh, was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

However, those who say, "there was a time when he was not," and, "before he was born he was not," and that he was made from nothing, or who say that the Son of God may be of a different hypostasis or essence, or may be created subject to change and alteration, such persons the Catholic Church anathematizes.⁵¹

Some things surely stand out to modern readers about this version of the creed that was adopted at Nicaea. First, it focuses on the controversy at hand, saying very little about the Father or the Spirit. And second, it concludes with a condemnation of Arius and his teachings, which is not still confessed in churches today.

⁴⁹ Korthals, 20. Again, not all scholars agree on this history, especially the view that the Nicene Creed was based on a creed presented by Eusebius of Caesarea.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁵¹ Weinandy, 12–13.

But focusing on the second article of this creed, it is clear that its main purpose was to reject the notion that the Son of God was a creature or any less divine than the Father. This is accomplished, not only with ὁμούσιος, but also by saying that the eternally begotten Son is God from God, light from light, true God from true God.

As one light enflames another, in which the first light is not diminished, and the second light is distinct from the first, so God the Father begets the Son, and so the Father and the Son, while distinct, are both truly God.⁵²

But along with condemning Arianism, the second article of the Nicene Creed also condemned other heresies that were related to the person and work of the Son. One of these was the doctrine of Apokatastasis, taught by Origen, which held that Jesus is the savior, not only for the sinful human race, but also for fallen angels. The Nicene Creed rejects this by stating, “Who for us men (ἀνθρώποις) and for our salvation.” And by stating that the Son came down to earth and became flesh, the Nicene Creed also rejected the aforementioned Gnostic heresies which denied the physical realities of the incarnation.

This creed was adopted almost unanimously by the council. At first, five refused to sign their names to it, including Eusebius of Nicomedia.⁵³ But when Emperor Constantine let it be known that he wanted the decision of the council to be accepted by all, Eusebius and another holdout signed, leaving only Arius and two others to be condemned and banished.⁵⁴ With the council completed, Emperor Constantine threw a lavish banquet for all in attendance. This banquet was described by Eusebius of Caesarea as resembling a dream more than reality.⁵⁵

Most Christians, and maybe even many pastors, probably assume that the adoption of the Nicene Creed signaled the defeat of Arianism. But that assumption could not be further from the truth. The emperor had made it known that he wanted the creed accepted by all. Many of the bishops who had come to the council favoring Arianism signed the creed, not because they believed it, but in deference to the emperor,⁵⁶ or to escape punishment.⁵⁷

⁵² Ibid., 14–15.

⁵³ Korthals, 20.

⁵⁴ Schroeder, 17.

⁵⁵ Hubert Jedin, *Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church*, trans. Ernest Graf (Herder and Herder, 1960), 21.

⁵⁶ Bivens, 45.

⁵⁷ Schroeder, 60.

After the council, Constantine tried to force acceptance of its decisions by banishing bishops who continued to teach Arianism. But instead of squashing dissent, these actions had the effect of inspiring opposition to the creed, and especially its chief spokesman Athanasius, who had become the bishop of Alexandria.⁵⁸

Even though he had eventually signed the creed, Eusebius of Nicomedia was also removed from his post as bishop there. But by making use of his connections to the royal family and employing a strategy of gaining Constantine's personal favor, within two years, Eusebius was allowed to return to Nicomedia.⁵⁹ There he was able to exert great influence on Constantine. Eusebius understood that now that the empire and the church had become intertwined, the fate of doctrine depended, as much as anything else, on the wishes of the emperor.⁶⁰

As long as Constantine was living, no one dared to seriously challenge his creed. But its opponents were able to achieve other victories. One of these was engaging in a slander campaign against Athanasius, which resulted in him being deposed as bishop of Alexandria.⁶¹ There were also those bishops who had been part of the unsure majority at Nicaea who signed the creed, but still saw danger in ὅμοούσιος. "How can the cry of Jesus on the cross be taken seriously if the Father and the Son are of the same substance?"⁶² Constantine was even convinced to recall Arius from exile, although he died soon after returning. And when Constantine was near death, and he asked to be baptized, he received the sacrament from Eusebius of Nicomedia.⁶³

When Constantine died, he left the empire divided between his three sons. In an effort to bring religious peace to the empire they now ruled together, his sons agreed that all exiled bishops from all sides should be allowed to return. This meant that Athanasius was able to return to Alexandria. But he was unwelcome there. So eventually he made his way to Rome where he gained the support of the bishop and other clergy to join him in defending the Nicene Creed.⁶⁴

Eventually, through murder and intrigue, Constantine's son, Constantius, became the ruler of the whole empire. Constantius had already been the ruler of the eastern part of the empire, where Arianism

⁵⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁹ Gonzalez 166.

⁶⁰ Kelly 224.

⁶¹ Ibid., 238.

⁶² Bivens, 45.

⁶³ Gonzalez, 166.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 176.

was flourishing. Constantius was, himself, inclined towards Arianism. Jerome would later write of his ascension, “The whole world woke up from a deep slumber and discovered that it had become Arian.”⁶⁵

But even Constantius and the bishops with whom he was most closely allied favored Arianism, he did not use his power as emperor to revoke the Nicene Creed. Like his father before him, Constantius wanted religious harmony and peace. And for the rest of his life he tried to bring this about. This does not mean that he did not, at times, resort to bribery or threats, but Constantius did not act violently towards those bishops who wrote against him.⁶⁶

In the year 359, Constantius called for another council to settle the dispute. But oddly this council was held in two locations. In the West it was held at Rimini, in Northern Italy, and for the eastern church the meeting was held in Salucia, in modern-day Turkey. But these parallel councils only served to further cement the theological divide between East and West. The bishops at Rimini reaffirmed the Nicene Creed, while those gathered at Salucia failed to reach any agreement. This was even in spite of the fact that Constantius had threatened to banish any bishop who was not willing to subscribe to the statement that the Father and the Son are *alike* in substance, not *ὁμοούσιος*.⁶⁷

That threat from Constantius was indicative of a softening of the Arian position. The strict position that had been taken by Arius in the past of a different essence of the Son compared to the Father had now been replaced by a milder form of the heresy which promoted a similarity of essence, *ὁμοιούσιος*. But even in its milder form, this teaching was still opposed to the faith confessed in the Nicene Creed.⁶⁸

When Constantius died in 361, he was succeeded by his relative Julian, more commonly known as Julian the apostate. As his title suggests, Julian had apostatized from Christianity and embraced the traditional paganism of the Roman Empire. Julian wanted to see the whole empire return to the glory and religion of its past. He ordered that all exiled bishops be allowed to return home, hoping this would lead to increased conflict and the destruction of Christianity from the inside out.⁶⁹ But the ascent of a pagan to the throne of what was now supposed to be a Christian empire caused many to rethink their position

⁶⁵ Ibid., 167.

⁶⁶ Hall, 144.

⁶⁷ Jedin, 22–23.

⁶⁸ Korthals, 22.

⁶⁹ Jedin, 23.

against the Nicene Creed. This, paired with splintering in the Arian camp, led to much greater acceptance of the Nicene doctrine.⁷⁰

This new unity was shown at a local council held in Alexandria in 362, at which Athanasius was able to come to agreement with many who had previously had reservations with ὅμοούσιος.⁷¹ Even though they were not present at this council, Athanasius was also aided in this effort by the Cappadocian Fathers who were able to clear away many misconceptions about the Nicene Creed with the summary, “one essence, three persons.”⁷²

So not quite forty years after it was first adopted, the Nicene Creed finally enjoyed broad acceptance. But the third article of the creed was still much shorter than what is confessed today. This would change with the advent of a new heresy, Pneumatomachianism, the teaching that the Holy Spirit is not divine.

When Julian the apostate died, he was succeeded by Theodosius, who in matters of faith could hardly have been more different than Julian. Theodosius had been raised as a Christian in Spain, firmly holding to the faith confessed by the Nicene Creed. In response to Pneumatomachianism, and also Apollinarianism,⁷³ Theodosius called for a council to be held at Constantinople in 381.⁷⁴

This significance of the Council of Constantinople for this paper is that this council expanded the third article of the Nicene Creed to nearly the form in which it is confessed in the western church today, with the third article now declaring: “And in the Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of Life, who proceeds from the father, who is worshiped and glorified in the same way as the father, who has spoken by the prophets.”⁷⁵ This new version of the Nicene Creed was universally accepted in the East and the West. In history it does not replace the Nicene Creed of 325, but the two stand together with equal importance.⁷⁶

But even though the new form of the Nicene Creed was accepted by the whole church, time would show that not everyone was agreed on the meaning of the expanded third article. It has been observed that the representatives from the East understood the phrase, “who proceeds

⁷⁰ Kelly, 238.

⁷¹ Bivens, 47.

⁷² Jedin, 23.

⁷³ This was the teaching that Jesus had no human mind or soul. The incarnation meant that the divine Son of God had assumed an empty human body.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 26–27.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 26–27.

⁷⁶ Bivens, 48.

from the Father,” to mean that the Spirit proceeds from the Father only, not through the Son. The representatives from the West understood this phrase to mean that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* from the Son.⁷⁷ Without a new heresy, the *Filioque* controversy had begun.

In the year 431, the Council of Ephesus was called to deal with Nestorianism. This council ended up as a mess, with representatives coming, and going, and condemning each other.⁷⁸ But the positive achievement of this council which is relevant to this study was its declaration that, “under penalty of excommunication, no other creed than the Nicene Creed already adopted was to be used or composed.”⁷⁹

A form of the creed that included the filioque first appeared when the Visigoths were brought into the communion of the Roman Church. When the local council of Toledo codified this addition to the creed, the pope protested, not for doctrinal reasons, but because he believed it was improper for a local gathering to make changes to an ecumenical creed.⁸⁰

In the year 867, Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople accused the western church of heresy because it was confessing that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Even though communion was eventually restored before Photius died, it was an uneasy peace. And when communion between the East and the West was finally broken in 1054, the filioque was cited as a major cause for the separation.⁸¹

There are two reasons why the insertion of the filioque into the Nicene Creed by the western church was so offensive to eastern Christians. The first reason could be traced back to the Council of Ephesus, which declared that only the Nicene Creed which was already adopted was to be used in the Christian church.⁸² The eastern church believed the West was now breaking that agreement.

In the West, it was taught that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father in a principle, primary, sense, and that the Spirit proceeds from the Son in a derivative, secondary sense. But in the East, the procession of the Holy Spirit was not understood through the lens of different

⁷⁷ Jedin, 27.

⁷⁸ Kelly, 327.

⁷⁹ Schroeder, 74.

⁸⁰ David Webber, “The Nicene Creed and the Filioque: A Lutheran Approach,” *Logia* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1999). <https://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/lutherantheology/filioque.html>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Schroeder, 74.

senses of procession. Instead, it was simply taught that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.⁸³

The Council of Florence was called in 1438 to settle this dispute. This truly was an ecumenical council, with representatives from the East and the West. At this council, the representatives from the West assured the representatives from the East that the filioque does not imply different, distinct, processions of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. Instead, as the council decreed, “The spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son eternally as if from one source and cause.”⁸⁴ The representatives left this council believing that the schism between the East and the West had been healed. But the agreements reached at this council were ultimately rejected by the eastern church.⁸⁵

This is how it came to be that the Nicene Creed was adopted, fought over, expanded, and eventually confessed in two slightly different forms. But there is still a recent development that is worth including in this study. This is the recent decision by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to recommend removing the filioque from the form of the Nicene Creed that is confessed in its churches. This action is part of the greater efforts of the LWF to commit, it seems, as much theological adultery as possible before its European and North American member churches shrink into nonexistence.

In a statement released by The Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church, it is stated that the version of the creed which includes the filioque has always been part of the Lutheran tradition. But because the eastern church has always objected to the insertion of the filioque,

We suggest that the translation of the creed without the Filioque be used, in the hope that this will contribute to the healing of age-old divisions between our communities, and enable us to confess together the faith of the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople.⁸⁶

⁸³ Webber.

⁸⁴ Webber.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ The Joint International Commission on Theological Dialogue Between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church, “Common Statement on the Filioque,” May 2024. <https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/Lutheran-Orthodox-Joint-Statement-Filioque-EN.pdf>. This recommendation was “received” by the national convention of the ELCA in August 2025, after which the convention attendees confessed a form of the Nicene Creed without the filioque.

At its recent churchwide assembly, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) voted to “receive” this recommendation, after which the convention attendees confessed a version of the Nicene Creed without the filioque.⁸⁷ This decision is consistent with the approach of the ELCA in recent years to pay ransoms without hostages, and gladly giving everything while getting nothing. But is there some wisdom in this decision? The Lutheran confessors acknowledged that there is an ordering among the persons of the Trinity, with the Father being the source and the cause for the Son and the Holy Spirit; and that form of the Nicene Creed which was adopted at the Council of Constantinople states that “the Spirit proceeds from the Father, but not that He proceeds from the Father alone.” In other words, the absence of the filioque is not a denial of the filioque.⁸⁸

It should not be difficult for the Confessional Lutheran Church to admit today that maybe it was not a good idea to add any new phrases to the Nicene Creed.⁸⁹ Maybe the form of the creed that has been handed down in the Book of Concord violated the agreement of the Council of Ephesus, and is not in full keeping with the lesser truth St. Paul refers to in Galatians 3:15, “with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.” But even if these things are true, it does not change the fact that removing the filioque from the creed would only be perceived by regular, faithful, Christians as a doctrinal change, indicating that there was something incorrect with the words that were removed. So the filioque should not be removed from the creed, even

⁸⁷ 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly—Day 4, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2025/08/2025-elca-churchwide-assembly-day-four/>.

⁸⁸ Webber. Also Luther:

We recognize and believe in three distinct Persons in the one Godhead and do not jumble the Persons together nor divide the essence. The distinction of the Father, as we have heard, is this, that He derived His deity from no one, but gave it from eternity, through the eternal birth, to the Son. Therefore the Son is God and Creator, just like the Father, but the Son derived all of this from the Father, and not, in turn, the Father from the Son. The Father does not owe the fact that He is God and Creator to the Son, but the Son owes the fact that He is God and Creator to the Father. And the fact that Father and Son are God and Creator they do not owe to the Holy Spirit; but the Holy Spirit owes the fact that He is God and Creator to the Father and the Son. (Martin Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 15 [Fortress Press, 1972], 309–310.)

⁸⁹ John C. Lawrenz and Glen L. Thompson, “History of the Ancient and Medieval Church” (1997), p. 107; in David Webber, “The Nicene Creed and the Filioque: A Lutheran Approach,” *Logia* 8, no. 4 (1999). <https://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/lutherantheology.filioque.html>.

though it also does not need to be added to the creed in those places where it was never present.

It can be easy to skim over the history of the Nicene Creed, wrongly assuming that controversies were settled much more quickly and neatly than they actually were. But, in a sense, the history of the Nicene Creed shows its true value. It was written to address matters of spiritual life and death. And it has been handed down through the generations to the Christian Church today because the heresies it condemns are just as dangerous for Christians as they were 1,700 years ago. And the truths it presents about the triune God are still just as necessary and life-giving. 

Athanasius: The Man Against the World Athanasius Contra Mundum

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BESIDES AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO AND MARTIN Luther, there might be no more well-known name among Lutherans than Athanasius of Alexandria. The common Lutheran layman in the pews will likely recognize the name from the annual use of the “long creed.”¹ Even a forgetful seminarian might recall from his course on early church history the famous adage: *Athanasius contra mundum*. As Christians celebrate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea a renewed interest and discussion of this important figure has rightfully arisen.²

Athanasius was reintroduced to many in the twentieth century through the British apologist, writer, and literary scholar, C. S. Lewis, who penned a winsome introduction to Athanasius’, *On the Incarnation*. In his introduction, Lewis pleads with the modern reader to engage with the books of the past, which he argues are much easier to engage with than the modern historical experts.³ It’s no coincidence that of all Athanasius’ writings, Lewis wrote an introduction for *On the Incarnation*. While it is Athanasius’ most well-known writing, it also shares Lewis’ fascination with the Son of God becoming man.

This paper will provide a historical account of Athanasius’ life, a review of his theological positions through his writing *Against the*

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Fortress Press, 2000), 23–25.

² Council of Nicaea, 325.

³ C.S. Lewis in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Popular Patristics Series (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011).

Greeks—*On the Incarnation*, and reflections on what modern Christians can learn and appreciate from the most important theologian in the early to mid-fourth century. Athanasius is one of the theological giants upon which the Christian church stands. If it were not for his tenacious desire to retain the mystery of Christ, a Savior who alone can save the sinner from sin and death, the world would be different. The fourth century needed a man against the world, and God provided one.

A Sketch of Athanasius' Life

Early Life

Athanasius likely did more for the monastic movement than any other through his biography of the desert monk, Antony.⁴ Unfortunately, Athanasius did not provide an autobiography of his own life. The majority of what is written on him comes from later sources which must be received somewhat carefully. Athanasius did not speak to his early years, though he does discuss many of the significant events in his life such as his times in exile through his writings and letters. Scholars are limited about what they can say regarding the early life of Athanasius.

Athanasius was born between 295–300 in Alexandria, Egypt.⁵ He was a small man in comparison to Arius who was tall and slender.⁶ Most recognize Athanasius' use of rhetoric and understanding of the various philosophical schools to indicate that he received a liberal education. He

⁴ Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, vol. 4, pp. 188–221, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 14 vols. (1890–1900; Eerdmans, 1978), hereafter NPNF². This biography was a first of its kind in the Christian church. After *vita Antoni*, Jerome wrote the *Life of Paul of Thebes* (c. 380). Vitas became more common and popular in time.

⁵ One of the reasons historians lean towards 298 is that his enemies would later oppose his nomination as bishop claiming he was under the canonical age of 30. Some scholars suggest that he was raised by Christian parents and others say by non-Christian parents. Some say he was from a wealthy family, and others say poor. We cannot say with certainty. However, Anatolios may give one helpful reason for thinking he came from pagan family: “The tradition that Athanasius was of ‘pagan’ parents might partly explain his concern with the theme of Christianity vs. ‘the Greeks,’ taken up in his first major doctrinal work, *Against the Greeks—On the Incarnation*.” Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius, The Early Church Fathers* (Routledge, 2004), 4.

⁶ Barnes suggests that Athanasius might have possibly had red hair and refutes what he calls a “modern myth” that Athanasius was dubbed “the black dwarf” by his enemies. Peter Barnes, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Life & Impact* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2019), 34. Interestingly enough, the oft quoted “black dwarf” description has even been removed from the most recent edition of Justo Gonzalez’s, *The Story of Christianity*.

knew Greek and Coptic but was unfamiliar with Hebrew. Athanasius was trained in the Alexandrian School, and this is where Robinson suggests Athanasius possibly first met and learned from Peter the bishop and martyr of 311 and where Athanasius would be introduced to Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria (312–328).⁷

The earliest account of Athanasius is recorded by Rufinius who tells of Bishop Alexander's introduction to Athanasius. Alexander, on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Peter was expecting some clergy to breakfast after the service in a house by the sea. Sozomen records:

In the meantime he chanced to cast his eyes towards the sea, and perceived some children playing on the shore, and amusing themselves by imitating the bishop and the ceremonies of the Church. At first he considered the mimicry as innocent, and took pleasure in witnessing it; but when they touched upon the unutterable, he was troubled, and communicated the matter to the chief of the clergy. The children were called together and questioned as to the game at which they were playing, and as to what they did and said when engaged in this amusement. At first they through fear denied; but when Alexander threatened them with torture, they confessed that Athanasius was their bishop and leader, and that many children who had not been initiated had been baptized by him. Alexander carefully inquired what the priest of their play was in the habit of saying or doing, and what they answered or were taught. On finding that the exact routine of the Church had been accurately observed by them, he consulted the priests around him on the subject, and decided that it would be unnecessary to rebaptize those who, in their simplicity, had been judged worthy of the Divine grace. He therefore merely performed for them such offices as it is lawful only for those who are consecrated to initiating the mysteries. He then took Athanasius and the other children, who had playfully acted as presbyters and deacons, to their own relations under God as a witness that they might be brought up for the Church, and for leadership in what they had imitated. Not long after, he took Athanasius as his table companion and secretary. He had been well educated, was versed in grammar and rhetoric, and already when he came to man's estate, and before he attained the bishopric, he gave

⁷ Archibald Robinson, 'Prolegomena' to *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, (NPNF² 4:xiv).

proof to those conversing with him of his being a man of wisdom and intellectuality.⁸

This famous account of Alexander meeting Athanasius as a boy is believed by some notable scholars, but there are also those who question the legitimacy of the account. Either way, it does indicate that Alexander had singled out Athanasius early as youth for his ability and piety.

Athanasius' theological acumen and desire to serve in the church must have been noticed, since he became a reader (lector) in the church of Alexandria and then ordained by Alexander as a deacon in A.D. 318. Alexander soon made Athanasius his personal secretary, and it was this role which put Athanasius in the position to accompany Alexander to the first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 called by Constantine the Great. It would only be three years later that Bishop Alexander would choose Athanasius as his successor, despite Athanasius' reluctance.⁹

Background to Nicaea 325

Apart from Athanasius, the most important figure of the early fourth century is Constantine the Great.¹⁰ After his father's death, Constantine became Caesar over Britain, Gaul, and Spain in July 306. Shortly after, Constantine restored the property to the churches taken during the Diocletian persecutions. At the battle of the Milvian Bridge outside of Rome where Constantine defeated Maxentius, he experienced a vision of the cross carrying the message, *In Hoc Signo Vinces* ("with this sign, you shall win"). In 313, Constantine issues the Edict of Milan which provided for the freedom of worship—including the toleration

⁸ Sozomen, *Church History* 2.17, (NPNF² 2:269).

⁹ When Alexander fell ill and Athanasius became aware that he would be chosen as his successor, he fled to escape the honor. On his deathbed, Sozomen writes,

[Alexander] called upon Athanasius, who was then absent. One who bore the same name, and who happened to be present, on hearing him call this way, answered him; but to him Alexander was silent, since he was not summoning this man. Again he called, and as it often happens, the one present kept still, and so the absent one was disclosed. Moreover, the blessed Alexander prophetically exclaimed, 'O Athanasius, thou thinkest to escape, but thou wilt not escape': meaning that Athanasius would be called to the conflict (NPNF² 2:269).

Though desiring to avoid the office and flee, Athanasius remained, feeling obligated to acquiesce to Alexander's request.

¹⁰ Constantine I, c. 272-337; r. 306-337. For a fair and helpful review of Constantine's life as the first Christian emperor, see Glen Thompson, *From Sinner to Saint? Seeking a Consistent Constantine*, in Edward Smith, *Rethinking Constantine: History, Theology and Legacy* (James Clarke & Co., 2014), 5-25.

of Christianity. By 324 Constantine won control of the eastern Roman Empire.

It was not long after becoming Caesar in 306 that Constantine became involved with ecclesiastical issues.¹¹ Yet, the Christological controversy, which began between 318–320, would consume the rest of his reign.¹² Whether it is credited to his Christian or political aspirations, Constantine had a great desire for unity in the church. Constantine's initial attempts to settle the dispute between Arius and Bishop Alexander through his personal advisor, Hosius of Cordoba, would prove unsuccessful. This would lead to the need for a council. In addition to the rising disputes between Arius and Alexander, there were other issues bothering the church including when to celebrate Easter and how to handle the Meletians.¹³ These three important issues served as the primary impetus for Constantine to call for the first ecumenical council in June 325 at Nicaea.¹⁴

Athanasius: Nicaea & Beyond

We know little of the role Athanasius played at Nicaea. He accompanied Bishop Alexander as his secretary. In this capacity, it is unlikely that he personally addressed the council. While later historians assume a significant role for Athanasius at Nicaea, none of the three eyewitness testimonies (Constantine, Eusebius of Caesarea, or Athanasius) claim to have him in the spotlight. This is not to discredit the influence

¹¹ Donatists appeal to Constantine (313) which resulted in the council in Rome (313) and then the council in Arles (314) which ruled against the Donatists.

¹² For most of us who have only studied the Arian controversy briefly, our understanding of the Arian controversy is very two-sided. Yet, as are most things, the controversy was more complicated and the opinions more nuanced. The Arians were not a monolithic group. While it is helpful to simplify the debate into two distinct sides (e.g., Arian or pro-Nicene), these labels can also be misleading. Eusebius of Caesarea would be a good example. For a helpful introduction to the theologies leading up to Nicaea, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea & Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, (Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹³ The Syrians, Cilicians, and Mesopotamians celebrated Easter according to the Jewish calendar, which brought them out of line with the rest of the church. The Melitian schism was a disagreement between Melitius, a newly appointed bishop, and Peter, bishop of Alexandria, over the status of those who had lapsed during the Diocletian persecution. Peter has been suggested as taking a more lenient stance which was rejected Melitius who wanted a stricter response.

¹⁴ Constantine originally had called for the council to be held in Ancyra, but we learn that he later changed it to Nicaea to be more convenient for the Western bishops to attend and for the better weather. While there are no extant copies of his initial invitation, Constantine's second letter where he changed the location is preserved in Syriac.

Athanasius may have had behind the scenes at Nicaea or his lifelong championing of Nicene doctrine. We are simply unaware the extent of his role at Nicaea. However, Athanasius does provide an interesting comment in his *Encyclical Letter of the Council of Egypt* where he writes,

And their hatred of him [Athanasius] was greatly increased after they had experience of his piety towards Christ, in the Council assembled at Nicaea, where he spoke boldly against the impiety of the Arian madmen.¹⁵

The rulings of Nicaea would vindicate the Alexandrian bishop, Alexander, while sending Arius, who had denied the full divinity of the Son, into exile. The council also made decisions regarding the date of Easter and “forbade the translation of bishops from one diocese to another, and tried to address the rupture of the Egyptian Church due to the Melitian schism.”¹⁶ The Nicene Creed became the standard for orthodox Christology, with its “*homoousius*” formula and anathematizing of anyone who would say about the Son of God,

There was a time when He was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is from a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change.¹⁷

Despite what many may hope, a council or vote does not necessarily settle a debate. Although victorious at Nicaea, Athanasius would have to continue to contend for Nicene theology for the rest of his life—from his home or in exile... again, again, again... and again. Theodoret cites Eustathius in his *Church History*:

“I will now proceed to relate how these different events occurred. A general council was summoned at Nicaea, and about two hundred and seventy bishops were convened. There were, however, so many assembled that I cannot state their exact number, neither, indeed, have I taken any great trouble to ascertain this point. When they began to inquire into the nature of the faith, the formulary of Eusebius was brought forward, which contained undisguised evidence of his blasphemy. The reading of it before all occasioned

¹⁵ Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians* 5 (NPNF² 4:103).

¹⁶ Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the Spring equinox. Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 11.

¹⁷ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Prince Press, 2004), 232.

great grief to the audience, on account of its departure from the faith, while it inflicted irremediable shame on the writer. After the Eusebian gang had been clearly convicted, and the impious writing had been torn up in the sight of all, some among them by concert, under the pretence of preserving peace, imposed silence on all the ablest speakers. The Ariomaniacs, fearing lest they should be ejected from the Church by so numerous a council of bishops, sprang forward to anathematize and condemn the doctrines condemned, and unanimously signed the confession of faith. Thus having retained possession of their episcopal seats through the most shameful deception, although they ought rather to have been degraded, they continue, sometimes secretly, and sometimes openly, to patronize the condemned doctrines, plotting against the truth by various arguments. Wholly bent upon establishing these plantations of tares, they shrink from the scrutiny of the intelligent, avoid the servant, and attack the preachers of godliness. But we do not believe that these atheists can ever thus overcome the Deity. For though they 'gird themselves' they 'shall be broken in pieces,' according to the solemn prophecy of Isaiah." These are the words of the great Eustathius.¹⁸

The battle was won, but the war had just begun for Athanasius against the Ariomaniacs.

In 328 Athanasius would succeed Alexander as the bishop of Alexandria, but it did not come without opposition. The Meletians and Arians joined hands in seeking to prevent his appointment. The young bishop followed in the footsteps of his predecessor to faithfully promote Nicene Theology. It was around this time that he wrote his central doctrinal work, *Against the Greeks—On the Incarnation*. While Athanasius does not mention the name of his opponents or refer to the council of Nicaea and its terminology, he clearly defends the divinity of the Word who became incarnate in Christ Jesus. Despite expressing the triumph of the divine Logos seen in the empty tomb and its ongoing influence in the world in *On the Incarnation*, the young Bishop would find himself enduring not so triumphant of times. Athanasius was in a difficult situation with enemies among both the Melitians and powerful supporters of Arius. As Khaled Anatolios, a church historian, explains, "Eusebius of Nicomedia, who had been advocating on behalf of the Arius, forged an alliance with the Egyptian Melitians, which enabled

¹⁸ Theodoret, *Church History* 1.7 (NPNF² 3:45).

them to bring their case against Athanasius to the emperor's court."¹⁹ This would lead to Athanasius' first exile to Trier in Gaul.

The Council of Tyre & First Exile (335–337)

With the rulings of Nicaea, there were no faults that the enemies of Athanasius could find in his teachings. Since they could not attack his teaching (though they later would), they attacked his person. The Melitians had come up with some serious accusations: ordering Macarius, one of his priests, to break the chalice and overturn the altar of Isychras, a Melitian priest; arranging the murder of a bishop by the name of Arsenius; and orchestrating his own election as bishop through bribery.

Athanasius was accused of murdering Arsenius who was from Thebes, Egypt (over four hundred miles away). This would be a difficult accusation to disprove. In his *Defense against the Arians* he explains their calumny,

Arsenius they placed in concealment, in order that he might seem made away with, when he did not make his appearance; and they carried about a hand, pretending that he had been cut to pieces. As for Ischyras, whom they did not even know, they began to spread a report that he was a Presbyter, in order that what he said about the cup might mislead the people. Ischyras, however, being censured by his friends, came to me weeping, and said that no such thing as they had reported had been done by Macarius, and that himself had been suborned by the Meletians to invent this calumny.²⁰

Athanasius was able to persuade Constantine of his innocence when he revealed the purportedly murdered Arsenius was very much alive and well—with no missing hand! However, due to the persistent accusations against Athanasius by Eusebius of Nicomedia, they persuaded the emperor to call a council in Tyre to settle the issue. It was this council that set up a commission to investigate the charges. Unfortunately for Athanasius, the “Mareotic” commission was entirely biased against him and found him guilty of some of the charges. However, Athanasius, aware of the commission’s bias, had already fled to make his case before the emperor. Athanasius explains that Constantine was initially sympathetic towards him, but later changed his mind when he heard a new charge that Athanasius’ opponents had invented: threatening that he

¹⁹ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 12.

²⁰ Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians* 2.5.63 (NPNF² 4:133).

would stop the grain from being exported from Egypt.²¹ Anatolios explains,

On this matter, which involved the vital livelihood of the empire, Constantine was less disposed to give Athanasius the benefit of the doubt. Whether due to this new accusation or simply Constantine's desire to consolidate the unity of the empire by neutralizing Athanasius's dogmatic opposition to Arius, the Alexandrian bishop was exiled to Trier, in Gaul, in 335.²²

Despite the populace's plea and protests at the removal of their bishop, Constantine did not recant. Athanasius remained in exile until the emperor's death in 337.

Athanasius Returns & Second Exile (337–346)

After Constantine's death his three sons ruled in his place: Constantinus, Constans, and Constantius. Constantinus, sympathetic to Athanasius, ordered an imperial edict which allowed the exiled bishops to return to their sees. Yet, Athanasius' joyful return was short-lived. Those who would be quipped as "Eusebians" under the leadership of Eusebius of Nicomedia brought more charges against Athanasius. The council in Antioch in 339 would affirm the previous rulings at Tyre in 337 and declared Athanasius' return to Alexandria as illegitimate. He was replaced by Gregory of Cappadocia who would rule by force reminiscent of not-so-distant Diocletian persecutions.²³ Athanasius' pastoral nature is evident in his *Festal Letter* to his congregation in Alexandria during this turbulent time,

But, as faithful servants of God, knowing that He is our salvation in the time of trouble:—for our Lord promised beforehand, saying, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad, for your reward is great in heaven." Again, it is the Redeemer's own word, that affliction shall not befall every man in this world, but only those who have a holy fear of Him:—on this account, the more the enemies hem us in, the more let us be at liberty; although they revile us, let us come together; and the

²¹ Athanasius, *Defense Against the Arians* 87 (NPNF² 4:146).

²² Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 13.

²³ Athanasius details the atrocities that occurred under Gregory and Philagrius in his *Encyclical Epistle*, (NPNF² 4:91–96).

more they would turn us aside from godliness, let us the more boldly preach it saying, “All these things have come upon us, yet have we not forgotten You,” and we have not done evil with the Ario-maniacs, who say that You have existence from those things that exist not. The Word which is eternally with the Father, is also from Him.²⁴

Athanasius would spend his exile in Rome with an invitation from Pope Julius. During this time there were repeated efforts by his supporters to return him to his see in Alexandria through pleas and the calling of councils.²⁵ There was a growing divide between the Eastern and Western bishops with each becoming wary of the others theological leanings.²⁶ However, through a series of events and encouragement from Constans, Athanasius was able to reconcile with the Eastern emperor Constantius who had invited Athanasius to make his case before him. This ultimately led to Athanasius’ return to Alexandria where he enjoyed, “the longest period of uninterrupted residency in his 46 years as bishop.”²⁷

The Golden Years (346–356)

Athanasius’ return to Alexandria was jubilant! He would later describe this as a joyful period with virtue abounding among the people. Unfortunately, after the murder of Constans by his general Magnentius, the waters were muddied. While Constantius sought revenge for his brother’s death, both he and Magnentius sought Athanasius’ support. However, when Constantius eventually gained control of the entire Roman empire, he was able to further his anti-Nicene agenda in full force.

²⁴ Athanasius, *Festal Letter XI* (NPNF² 4:537).

²⁵ The Western emperor Constans called a council in Sardica in 343. The Eastern bishops sent a delegation which included five members from the Mareotic Commission which had condemned Athanasius at Tyre. When they saw the Western group included Athanasius and other exiled bishops they withdrew from the council. Anatolios writes, “Making their way back into the Eastern part of the kingdom and the jurisdiction of Constantius, they stopped at Philoppolis, where they excommunicated Athanasius, Marcellus, and Pope Julius, as well as Hosius of Cordoba” (*Athanasius*, 22).

²⁶ “The rupture between East and West was thus broadened, with the Western bishops tending to interpret the anti-Sabellian caution of the Eastern bishops as ‘Arian’, while the Eastern bishops were disposed to see the strongly anti-Arian stance of the West as tending to Sabellianism” (Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 23).

²⁷ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 23.

When Constantius sought to distance himself from Nicene doctrine, it served as a catalyst for Athanasius to go back and draw upon “unimpeachable authority of the Council of Nicaea and the necessity for adhering to its definition of the relationship between the Father and the Son,”²⁸ as seen in his writing, *On the Council of Nicaea (De Decretis)*. Prior to this, Athanasius had sought to win his case for orthodoxy through the faithful exegesis of Scripture without focusing on the terminology and language of the Nicene Creed.

So, what would you do if you were the emperor and this bishop kept writing against your efforts? Constantius sent his commander, Syrianus, along with five thousand troops to storm the church of Theonas, where Athanasius was worshiping with his congregation. Athanasius retells this amazing event in his *Defense of his Flight*:

It was now night, and some of the people were keeping a vigil preparatory to a communion on the morrow, when the General Syrianus suddenly came upon us with more than five thousand soldiers, having arms and drawn swords, bows, spears, and clubs, as I have related above. With these he surrounded the Church, stationing his soldiers near at hand, in order that no one might be able to leave the Church and pass by them. Now I considered that it would be unreasonable in me to desert the people during such a disturbance, and not to endanger myself in their behalf; therefore I sat down upon my throne, and desired the Deacon to read a Psalm, and the people to answer, ‘For His mercy endures for ever,’ and then all to withdraw and depart home. But the General having now made a forcible entry, and the soldiers having surrounded the sanctuary for the purpose of apprehending us, the Clergy and those of the laity, who were still there, cried out, and demanded that we too should withdraw. But I refused, declaring that I would not do so, until they had retired one and all. Accordingly I stood up, and having bidden prayer, I then made my request of them, that all should depart before me, saying that it was better that my safety should be endangered, than that any of them should receive hurt. So when the greater part had gone forth, and the rest were following, the monks who were there with us and certain of the Clergy came up and dragged us away. And thus (Truth is my witness), while some of the soldiers stood about the sanctuary, and others were going round the Church, we passed through, under the Lord’s guidance, and with His protection

²⁸ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 25.

withdrew without observation, greatly glorifying God that we had not betrayed the people, but had first sent them away, and then had been able to save ourselves, and to escape the hands of them which sought after us.²⁹

Narrowly escaping, Athanasius fled into the desert. In his *Apologia de Fuga*, after showing all the egregious efforts and actions taken by his enemies Athanasius does not mince words explaining where his enemies learned this evil: “Let them, I say, tell us, from whom they learned to persecute? They cannot say, from the Saints. No, but from the Devil.”³⁰

Third Exile (356–362)

As Luther at Wartburg, Athanasius’ time in hiding in the Egyptian desert was quite prolific.³¹ Interestingly enough, it was also at this time that Athanasius began to use the term *homoousius* to apply to the Holy Spirit. Due to Athanasius’ clarity regarding the Holy Trinity, Gregory of Nazianzus would later write,

He was the first and only one, or with the concurrence of but a few, to venture to confess in writing, with entire clearness and distinctness, the Unity of Godhead and Essence of the Three Persons, and thus to attain in later days, under the influence of inspiration, to the same faith in regard to the Holy Ghost, as had been bestowed at an earlier time on most of the Fathers in regard to the Son.³²

Despite the vast and theologically sound documents produced by Athanasius at this time, his efforts could not stop the political setbacks. Gonzalez summarizes,

Imperial policy was openly in favor of the Arians. Several synods were forced to declare themselves for Arianism. Eventually, even Hosius of Cordova and Liberius of Rome, both well advanced in years, were forced to sign Arian confessions of faith. Although many bishops and other church leaders were convinced that Arianism was unacceptable, it was difficult to oppose it when the state supported it so decisively. The high point for Arianism came when a council

²⁹ Athanasius, *Defense of his Flight* (NPNF2 4:254–265).

³⁰ Athanasius, *Defense of his Flight* 24 (NPNF² 4: 263).

³¹ *Life of Antony* (356), *Defense before Constantius* (357), *Defense against the Arians* (357), *Defense of His Flight* (357), *Letters to Serapion* (357–359), *History of the Arians* (357–358), *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* (359).

³² Nazianzus, *On the Great Athanasius* 33 (NPNF² 7: 279).

gathered in Sirmium openly rejected the decisions of Nicea. This was what orthodox leaders called the “Blasphemy of Sirmium.”³³

It was this unfortunate series of events when creeds were signed by both Eastern and Western delegations who conceded to compromising positions opposing the doctrine of Nicaea, that led to St. Jerome’s infamous statement, “The whole world woke up from a deep sleep to discover that it had become Arian.”³⁴

The tide would seem to change with the death of emperor Constantius in 360 and the ascent of his cousin, Julian. Then in 361, George, Athanasius’ replacement in Alexandria, who had retained control through ruthless force received his own judgement—

being brutally attacked and killed by a vengeful Egyptian mob. In 362, Julian issued an edict allowing all bishops banished by Constantius to return to their sees. Twelve days later, Athanasius appeared in Alexandria, though his stay would last only eight months.³⁵

Fourth & Fifth Exiles (362–366)

With the rise of Emperor Julian, who was later given the title, “Julian the Apostate,” Athanasius had a moment of peace. Julian was uninterested in either side of the Christological debates because he sought to restore paganism to the empire. At first, he seemed unconcerned with Athanasius, but he soon realized the opposition he faced in promoting paganism with this staunch and popular defender of the faith at the helm in Alexandria. First, he ordered Athanasius to leave Alexandria and then Egypt altogether. Julian did not think highly of the bishop:

Athanasius—for I am informed that the man is a clever rascal—then you must know that for this very reason he has been banished from the city. For a meddlesome man is unfit by nature to be leader of the people. But if this leader is not even a man but only a contemptible puppet, like this great personage who thinks he is risking his head, this surely gives the signal for disorder. Wherfore,

³³ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (Prince Press, 2007), 178–179.

³⁴ Jerome, *The Dialogue Against the Luciferians* 19, (NPNF² 6:329). For a comprehensive list of the councils which took place during the fourth century along with helpful summaries and documents, see <https://www.fourthcentury.com/councils-and-creeds/>.

³⁵ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 31.

that nothing of the sort may occur in your case, as I long ago gave orders that he depart from the city, I now say, let him depart from the whole of Egypt.³⁶

Athanasius returned to Alexandria in February 362 but would begin his exile under Julian in October of that same year. The emperor, however, had not just sentenced Athanasius to exile, but to death. Therefore, Athanasius fled for his life to the desert. Yet, it appears that Julian became aware of his likely escape to the desert, and so he sent soldiers to arrest Athanasius. As Athanasius fled on the Nile River towards Thebaid, he learned that his pursuers were close behind. Instead of following advice to make his escape into the desert, Athanasius ordered the steersman to turn the boat around towards Alexandria. Theodoret records this harrowing tale:

So they rowed to meet the pursuer, and on came the bearer of the sentence of execution, and, said he, “How far off is Athanasius?” “Not far,” said Athanasius, and so got rid of his foe, while he himself returned to Alexandria and there remained in concealment for the remainder of Julian’s reign.³⁷

This exile would not last much longer than a year. Julian died in battle with the Persians. It was under Jovian, a sympathizer and admirer of Athanasius, that he would return from exile.

When Jovian died, he was succeeded by Valens who was a staunch defender of Arianism, which led to Athanasius’ fifth and final exile. If we have learned anything from the life of Athanasius, it is that political favor changes like the wind. Due to the unrest in Egypt caused by a rebellion led by Julian’s relative, Valens reversed his position and ordered Athanasius to be recalled to his see in Alexandria. In fact, “He was escorted back to the Church of Dionysius by the imperial *notarius*, Brasidas.”³⁸

The Final Years (366–373)

Athanasius’ remaining years in Alexandria were lived in peace. The overall opinion had changed for the good. He had the beloved support of the Egyptian people, and the Nicene theology was widely confessed.

³⁶ Julian, *To the Alexandrians*, accessed 18 August 2025, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_letters_1_trans.htm.

³⁷ Theodoret, *Church History* 3.5 (NPNF² 3:98).

³⁸ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 32.

Athanasius continued to write in response to emerging Christological debates, as seen in his *Letter to Adelphius* and the *Letter to Epictetus*, which would hold sway in later Christological debates.³⁹ In his annual festal letter in 367 to the churches of Alexandria, he lists the twenty-seven books he believed constituted the New Testament. The staunch defender of the church, who spent 17 of his 46 years as bishop in exile, died on May 2, 373.

Athanasius' Theological Positions

As the early Christian church grew, they needed to articulate their belief in one God, but three persons over against the Jews who denied the Trinity and divinity of Christ and the pagans with their many gods. It was never a question about what they believed, but how to clearly confess the one true Apostolic faith. The Christian church had to react to the false teachings of Gnosticism, Marcionism, Montanism, Manichaeism, and Monarchism, with all its derivations, and Subordinationism. One of the most crucial questions was the relationship between Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Arius seems to have been concerned that when the Bishop Alexander expressed the unity of the Trinity, he fell into the error of Sabellius.⁴⁰ Arius sought to maintain the immutability of God. Weinandy helpfully summarizes Arius' main point:

If the Son issued from the Father and shared in his same nature, and in this sense were thus 'one in essence (ομοούσιος) with the Father, this would demand that there would be two Gods. The 'issuing', in and of itself, would divide the one divine nature into two. Moreover, for Arius, even to conceive of the Son as coming forth from the Father by way of issue or emanation manifests that one is rendering unto the incorporeal God corporeality, for only material bodies are changed, divided and compounded.⁴¹

Arius believed that in order to maintain the oneness of God, the Son must be a creature. He argued that the one eternal nature of God would require his becoming a Father, "if God were eternally the Father, and thus too the Son, this again would imply that the eternal unoriginate oneness of God would be destroyed."⁴² Hence, Arius argued,

³⁹ The Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451).

⁴⁰ Socrates, *Church History* 1.5 (NPNF² 2:3).

⁴¹ Thomas Weindandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Ashgate, 2007), 54.

⁴² Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 56.

“God was not always a Father;” but “once God was alone, and not yet a Father, but afterwards he became a Father.” “The Son was not always;” for, whereas all things were made out of nothing, and all existing creatures and works were made, so the Word of God Himself was “made out of nothing,” and “once He was not.”⁴³

Almost every historian notes Arius’ logical way of thinking, which is reflected in Socrates explanation of Arius’ thought,

If... the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he had his subsistence from nothing.⁴⁴

Man’s reason seeks to answer what appear to be divine contradictions. While Arius’ explanation settled his reason’s incompatibility of the Son being eternally begotten, it ultimately robbed the believer of the comfort of a Savior who can fully atone for the sins of the world. Athanasius, on the other hand, was unafraid of maintaining the mystery of God. He was a biblical theologian, and a humble exegete. As you read Athanasius, you will become a better theologian yourself. His use and understanding of both the Old and New Testament is remarkable. It would be valuable for any person to see how Athanasius thoroughly refutes the many passages misused by his opponents. However, what may be even more valuable and helpful is to understand why he was so adamant for the Nicene cause, and why he believed it was so necessary for the eternally begotten Son of God to become man.

Against the Greeks—On the Incarnation

Humanity was made in the image of God. Man was distinct from God’s other creatures. Humanity found its purpose and joy in walking with God and knowing him. Yet, in man’s fall he became more and more like the creature—living a debased life, giving itself over to creaturely passions and desires, and worshiping the creature rather than the Creator. Athanasius describes humanity’s fall as a process of de-humanization or de-creation.⁴⁵ Instead of worshiping the one God, “they have

⁴³ Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.5 (NPNF² 4:308). Arius explained that there were two different “Word.” The Word of the Father, and the Word which would be later applied to the Son. This hermeneutic allowed him to say that Christ was not eternal.

⁴⁴ Socrates, *Church History* 1.5.2 (NPNF² 2:3).

⁴⁵ This writer wonders if Athanasius’ description of creation, the fall, and redemption, inspired the C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When Narnians knew Aslan

come down to many and diverse objects; and having turned from the Word of the Father, Christ the Saviour of all, they naturally have their understanding wandering in many directions.”⁴⁶

Athanasius shows that the creation of the world was through the Word. The Father spoke to Him, “Let the heaven be made,” etc. He was not speaking to his creation. Instead,

He gives the command thus: “Let us make man,” and “let the green herb come forth.” By which God is proved to be speaking about them to some one at hand: it follows then that some one was with Him to Whom He spoke when He made all things. Who then could it be, save His Word? For to whom could God be said to speak, except His Word? Or who was with Him when He made all created Existence, except His Wisdom, which says: “When he was making the heaven and the earth I was present with Him?” But in the mention of heaven and earth, all created things in heaven and earth are included as well. But being present with Him as His Wisdom and His Word, looking at the Father He fashioned the Universe, and organized it and gave it order; and, as He is the power of the Father, He gave all things strength to be, as the Saviour says: “What things soever I see the Father doing, I also do in like manner.”⁴⁷

Athanasius explains that it was necessary for the “renewal of creation” to have been done by the same Word that made it from the beginning.⁴⁸ This is one of Athanasius’ overarching points throughout all his writings—that the storyline of Scripture was God’s eternal Son becoming man.

For in speaking of the appearance of the Saviour among us, we must needs speak also of the origin of men, that you may know that the reason of His coming down was because of us, and that our transgression called forth the loving-kindness of the Word, that the Lord should both make haste to help us and appear among men. For of His becoming Incarnate we were the object, and for our

they thought, talked, and pursued the good. When Narnians went away from Aslan, they were led to wicked and debased schemes, eventually becoming unintelligible brutes—who could not think nor speak.

⁴⁶ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 23 (NPNF² 4:16).

⁴⁷ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 46 (NPNF² 4:29).

⁴⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 1 (NPNF² 4:36).

salvation He dealt so lovingly as to appear and be born even in a human body.⁴⁹

If God would abandon mankind which he had made to their corruption he would appear weak and cruel. However, if God simply overlooked man's transgression and his law requiring death for sin, it would make him a liar.

For it were monstrous for God, the Father of truth, to appear a liar for our profit and preservation. So here, once more, what possible course was God to take? To demand repentance of men for their transgression?... But repentance would, firstly, fail to guard the just claim of God.⁵⁰

God is both loving and just. Therefore, payment needed to be made.

For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God comes to our realm, howbeit he was not far from us before. For no part of Creation is left void of Him: He has filled all things everywhere, remaining present with His own Father. But He comes in condescension to show loving-kindness upon us, and to visit us. And seeing the race of rational creatures in the way to perish, and death reigning over them by corruption; seeing, too, that the threat against transgression gave a firm hold to the corruption which was upon us, and that it was monstrous that before the law was fulfilled it should fall through: seeing, once more, the unseemliness of what had come to pass: that the things whereof He Himself was Artificer were passing away: seeing, further, the exceeding wickedness of men, and how little by little they had increased it to an intolerable pitch against themselves: and seeing, lastly, how all men were under penalty of death: He took pity on our race, and had mercy on our infirmity, and condescended to our corruption, and, unable to bear that death should have the mastery—lest the creature should perish, and His Father's handiwork in men be spent for nought—He takes unto Himself a body, and that of no different sort from ours. For He did not simply will to become embodied, or will merely to appear. For if He willed merely to appear, He was able to effect His divine appearance by some other and higher means as well. But He takes a body of our kind, and not merely so, but from

⁴⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 4 (NPNF² 4:38).

⁵⁰ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 6-7 (NPNF² 4:39-40).

a spotless and stainless virgin, knowing not a man, a body clean and in very truth pure from intercourse of men. For being Himself mighty, and Artificer of everything, He prepares the body in the Virgin as a temple unto Himself, and makes it His very own as an instrument, in it manifested, and in it dwelling. And thus taking from our bodies one of like nature, because all were under penalty of the corruption of death He gave it over to death in the stead of all, and offered it to the Father—doing this, moreover, of His loving-kindness, to the end that, firstly, all being held to have died in Him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (inasmuch as its power was fully spent in the Lord's body, and had no longer holding-ground against men, his peers), and that, secondly, whereas men had turned toward corruption, He might turn them again toward incorruption, and quicken them from death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of the Resurrection, banishing death from them like straw from the fire.⁵¹

In order for God's wrath to be appeased “it was necessary for none other than God the Word Himself to become incarnate.”⁵² The second half of Athanasius', *On the Incarnation*, he makes an apologetic case for the legitimacy of Christ's ministry—miracles pointing to his divinity, fulfillment of Scripture, a public death and resurrection, a drastic change in the disciples, and swift upheaval of the many pagan religions of the day.

The entire purpose of Christ's incarnation is summarized in Athanasius' oft-quoted verse, “For he was made man that we might be made God... he endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality.”⁵³ Yet, he humbly encourages his readers:

For while He Himself was in no way injured, being impassible and incorruptible and very Word and God, men who were suffering, and for whose sakes He endured all this, He maintained and preserved in His own impassibility. And, in a word, the achievements of the Saviour, resulting from His becoming man, are of such kind and number, that if one should wish to enumerate them, he may be compared to men who gaze at the expanse of the sea and wish to count its waves. For as one cannot take in the whole of the waves with his eyes, for those which are coming on baffle the sense of him

⁵¹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 8 (NPNF² 4: 40).

⁵² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 10 (NPNF² 4: 41).

⁵³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54 (NPNF² 4: 65).

that attempts it; so for him that would take in all the achievements of Christ in the body, it is impossible to take in the whole, even by reckoning them up, as those which go beyond his thought are more than those he thinks he has taken in. Better is it, then, not to aim at speaking of the whole, where one cannot do justice even to a part, but, after mentioning one more, to leave the whole for you to marvel at. For all alike are marvellous, and wherever a man turns his glance, he may behold on that side the divinity of the Word, and be struck with exceeding great awe.⁵⁴

It is only through Jesus Christ, who became man and suffered the insolence of men, that we could receive life and immortality. This mystery of the impassable, unchanging, and eternal Son of God becoming man is beyond our human reason. Therefore, Athanasius encourages humble faith in the truth revealed to us in Scripture.

If Christ was only a creature and not eternal God, our salvation lies in the balance and we have made him an idol. The first and greatest of sins which leads to all perdition is questioning that which the Lord has spoken.

Now because they did not thus consider these matters, the Arianists, being opponents of Christ, and heretics, smite Him who is their Helper with their tongue, and blaspheme Him who set [them] free, and hold all manner of different opinions against the Saviour. Because of His coming down, which was on behalf of man, they have denied His essential Godhead; and seeing that He came forth from the Virgin, they doubt His being truly the Son of God, and considering Him as become incarnate in time, they deny His eternity; and, looking upon Him as having suffered for us, they do not believe in Him as the incorruptible Son from the incorruptible Father. And finally, because He endured for our sakes, they deny the things which concern His essential eternity; allowing the deed of the unthankful, these despise the Saviour, and offer Him insult instead of acknowledging His grace. To them may these words justly be addressed: Oh! unthankful opponent of Christ, altogether wicked, and the slayer of his Lord, mentally blind, and a Jew in his mind, had you understood the Scriptures, and listened to the saints, who said, 'Cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved,' or again, 'Send out Your light and Your truth;—then would you have known that the Lord did not descend for His own sake, but for ours; and

⁵⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54 (NPNF² 4:65–66).

for this reason, you would the more have admired His loving kindness. And had you considered what the Father is, and what the Son, you would not have blasphemed the Son, as of a mutable nature. And had you understood His work of loving-kindness towards us, you would not have alienated the Son from the Father, nor have looked upon Him as a stranger, Who reconciled us to His Father. I know these [words] are grievous, not only to those who dispute with Christ, but also to the schismatics; for they are united together, as men of kindred feelings. For they have learned to rend the seamless coat of God: they think it not strange to divide the indivisible Son from the Father.⁵⁵

Reflections on Athanasius

There are many things which we twenty-first century Christians can gain from the life and writings of Athanasius. There are four that I would like to leave you with. First, bear your cross with patience. We don't search for crosses, they come to us. Athanasius was reluctant to serve as the Bishop of Alexandria. Yet, he knew his duty and embraced his calling as a servant in God's church. Despite receiving many unjust accusations, fleeing for his life, and time in exile, Athanasius found comfort in his Savior.

Now what does this mean, my beloved, but that we also, when the enemies are arrayed against us, should glory in afflictions, and that when we are persecuted, we should not be discouraged, but should the rather press after the crown of the high calling in Christ Jesus our Lord? And that being insulted, we should not be disturbed, but should give our cheek to the smiter, and bow the shoulder? For the lovers of pleasure and the lovers of enmity are tried, as says the blessed Apostle James, 'when they are drawn away by their own lusts and enticed.' But let us, knowing that we suffer for the truth, and that those who deny the Lord smite and persecute us, 'count it all joy, my brethren,' according to the words of James, 'when we fall into trials of various temptations, knowing that the trial of our faith works patience.' Let us rejoice as we keep the feast, my brethren, knowing that our salvation is ordered in the time of affliction. For our Saviour did not redeem us by inactivity, but by suffering for us He abolished death. And respecting this, He intimidated to us before, saying, 'In the world you shall have tribulation.' But He did

⁵⁵ Athanasius, *Festal Letter X* (NPNF² 4: 531).

not say this to every man, but to those who diligently and faithfully perform good service to Him, knowing beforehand, that they should be persecuted who would live godly toward Him.⁵⁶

Secondly, be a humble student of Scripture. There will always be mysteries of God which we can neither fathom nor explain. Many of the greatest errors in church history have stemmed from men seeking to rationalize the divine and seeking to understand him through human parallels. When we defend or confess the truth, we must be content to let Scriptures speak, tipping our hat to the Holy Spirit who knows and searches the depths of God. We do not need to rationalize or explain God. Certainly, "holy Scripture is of all things most sufficient for us."⁵⁷

Thirdly, be bold. Athanasius was unafraid to confess the truth even at the expense of his own personal loss and harm. When Emperor Constantine urged Athanasius to reinstate Arius into the church, Athanasius held firm. Athanasius would not and could not, unless Arius recanted his previous heretical statements in addition to confessing the Nicene doctrine to be true. Yet, we are to remember why we can be bold. True boldness requires humility before God. It is not based on our own strength or wisdom, but on standing on the impenetrable Word of God.

Stood we alone in our own might,
Our striving would be losing;
For us the one true Man doth fight,
The Man of God's own choosing.
Who is this chosen One?
'Tis Jesus Christ, the Son,
The Lord of hosts, 'tis He
Who wins the victory
In ev'ry field of battle.
ELH 251:2

Finally, when pastors, laymen, and church bodies contend for the truth, we must always remember why we are concerned for the truth. At the heart of every doctrinal dispute is a concern for the believer—comfort for the sinner. Proper theology is for the glory of God and for the comfort of the Christian. When God is rightly glorified, man is comforted rightly. Athanasius knew that this debate was no mere

⁵⁶ Athanasius, *Festal Letter XIII* (NPNF² 4: 541).

⁵⁷ Athanasius, *To the Bishops of Egypt* 4 (NPNF² 4: 225).

battle over words or a matter of interpretation—but the very heart of the Gospel.

Thus too Paul, while he conducted himself after the example of the Lord, exhorted us, saying, 'Be followers of me, as I also am of Christ.' In this way he prevailed against all the divisions of the devil, writing, 'I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ.' For the enemy draws near to us in afflictions, and trials, and labours, using every endeavour to ruin us. But the man who is in Christ, combating those things that are contrary, and opposing wrath by long-suffering, contumely by meekness, and vice by virtue, obtains the victory, and exclaims, 'I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me;' and, 'In all these things we are conquerors through Christ Who loved us.' This is the grace of the Lord, and these are the Lord's means of restoration for the children of men. For He suffered to prepare freedom from suffering for those who suffer in Him, He descended that He might raise us up, He took on Him the trial of being born, that we might love Him Who is unbegotten, He went down to corruption, that corruption might put on immortality, He became weak for us, that we might rise with power, He descended to death, that He might bestow on us immortality, and give life to the dead. Finally, He became man, that we who die as men might live again, and that death should no more reign over us; for the Apostolic word proclaims, 'Death shall not have the dominion over us.'⁵⁸

Conclusion

Athanasius contra mundum is a fitting epitaph for this fourth century theologian, Alexandrian Bishop, and defender of the faith. Like many great men whom God has raised to combat theological and political evils, he did not seek this position out. Yet, bound to his duty and strengthened by the Lord, he played a pivotal role in preserving the orthodox Christology which we enjoy today. It behooves us to remember our leaders who have faithfully taught the word of God to us and imitate their way of life (Hebrews 13:7). May we be emboldened to combat the theological errors of our day, not begrudging our duty, but

⁵⁸ Athanasius, *Festal Letter X* (NPNF² 4: 531).

thanking God that we have a treasure so great to believe, confess, and defend.

*“For he was made man that we might be made God.”*⁵⁹

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria 

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⁵⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54 (NPNF² 4: 65).

And yet they came: A reflection upon the 200th anniversary of organized Norwegian-American emigration

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ONE OF THE LAST THINGS NORWEGIANS DID before leaving their homeland was to go to their home parish and sign the “*Udflytte*,” which was the moving-out page of the parish register. They would sign their names, ages, relationship to one another, farm name, date of departure, and their destination. Time after time, these records showed the destination to be America.

It has been said that the preacher was often upset when so many people came to sign the “*Udflytte*” record. He would warn them about leaving their home country and scold them for leaving behind their aged parents.

“You think that you will find in the land that you are going the same music? The same streams? The same summer? Think you that the flower that blooms by your mother’s cot, blooms on foreign shores no less? Nay. You will not find it so! For clouds will hide the sun from you and darkness the stars. Soon will you forget the speech and customs of your father. And however life will deal with you, you will live in exile.”¹

And yet they came.

¹ Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, “The Atlantic Crossing,” transcript of oral recording, April 23, 2022.

1825

This year, 2025, marks the bicentennial of organized mass migration from Norway to the United States of America. In the summer of 1825, a small fifty-four foot herring boat known as the Restauration departed from Stavanger, Norway. After fourteen weeks at sea, it arrived in New York City. This ship, with its seven crew members and forty-five passengers, is regarded as the Norwegian Mayflower.

Two hundred years later, this event was observed on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. On July 4, the date of the original sailing, an exact-size replica of the Restauration set sail with great fanfare from Stavanger, Norway, reproducing that voyage. Retracing the original journey, it arrived in New York on October 9, where Crown Prince Haakon of Norway welcomed the ship. But this is not just a story of two-hundred years ago. This voyage marked the beginning of organized Norwegian migration to America, with more than 900,000 Norwegians following in the wake of the Restauration. Today there are more than 4.5 million people living in the United States with Norwegian ancestry.

Within four decades of this sailing, forebearers organized the Norwegian Synod. Although the 1825 sailing was not a direct cause of the formation of the Norwegian Synod, it opened the door to the mass emigration that did lead to the formation of the Synod.

The story of the sailing of the Restauration actually begins a decade earlier. During the time of the Napoleonic Wars, the United Kingdoms of Denmark-Norway sought to remain neutral. Fearing that the Danish naval fleet would fall into French hands, the British Royal Navy bombarded Copenhagen in 1807 and seized control of the seas. At that time, the British captured a small Danish fishing boat. The seven people onboard were put on a prison ship off the coast of England. During the seven years that these men were living in miserable conditions, they were frequently visited by Quakers. At the end of the war, some of these men took the Quaker faith with them when they returned to their homes and communities near Oslo and Stavanger. These Quakers were dissenters to the Church of Norway and were threatened and persecuted by the Norwegian government.

Having heard of religious freedom in America, fifty-two men, women and children emigrated in 1825. This was the first organized mass emigration from Norway to America. They embarked on a small herring boat that had never sailed upon the deep ocean. As a small single-masted ship, it is referred to as a “sloop” and the passengers called “sloop people” [*sluppefolkene*] or “Sloopers.” There were ten married

couples with nineteen children, along with five unmarried men, one unmarried woman, and a crew of seven men. One child was born during the crossing.² Their arduous voyage lasted ninety-seven days and took them on a southerly route across the Atlantic Ocean that was common for merchant ships wanting to take advantage of the trade winds.

The Sloopers arrived in New York on October 9, 1825. Unfortunately, the ship was in violation of an American law of having too many passengers for the size of the small ship and it was impounded. However, a petition was made and later granted by President John Quincy Adams to release the ship and wave the fine. The immigrants first settled at Kendall, south-west of Rochester, New York and later moved to the Fox River Valley settlement south-west of Chicago, Illinois.

And yet they came.

1925

Anniversaries are the opportunity to remember one's identity. One hundred years ago, the anniversary of migration was regarded as a part of a greater Norwegian nationalism both in Norway and in the United States.³ The anniversary followed a time of Norwegian romanticism with artists such as Adolph Tidemand and J. C. Dahl. There were authors like Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. It was the time of Edvard Grieg and Ole Bull. In 1904, Norway achieved full independence and sought to reestablish her national identity. Regular annual emigration had not begun until 1836, but by 1925 more than

² Ingrid Semmingson, trans. Einar Haugen, *Norway to America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 10–11.

³ “For the 100th anniversary in 1925, crowds gathered at the Minnesota state fairgrounds for four days, June 6–9, with guests including King Haakon VII, Queen Maud and Crown Prince Olav along with representatives from Norway's parliament, clergy and academia. On the American side were President Calvin Coolidge and First Lady Grace Coolidge; the governor-general of Canada, Lord Byng and his wife Lady Evelyn Byng, thirteen members of congress from various states, and six governors. Bands and choirs from the Norwegian Lutheran colleges Augsburg, Concordia, Luther and St. Olaf and throngs of Norwegian Americans filled a stadium.” (Sons of Norway, “A Royal Reception,” accessed October 9, 2025, <https://www.sofn.com/virtual-voyage>)

“At the 1975 sesquicentennial, events marking 150 years were centered around Leif Erikson Day in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Concerts, folk music and dance, worship services and dinners were among the events. Distinguished guests included King Olav V, anthropologist and explorer Thor Heyerdahl who delivered the keynote address, and agronomist Norman Borlaug [among others]. After the events, the Royal Family departed to pay visits to the Norwegian Lutheran colleges of the Midwest.” (Sons of Norway, “A Royal Reception,” accessed October 9, 2025, <https://www.sofn.com/virtual-voyage>)

800,000 Norwegians immigrated to America. In terms of population, only Ireland had sent more emigrants to North America than Norway.⁴ The American settlements moved to Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and beyond. First-generation immigrants also established six colleges. Norwegian immigrants organized the Norwegian Synod in 1853. The year 2028 will mark the 175th anniversary of the Synod!

In 1825, only one passenger on the *Restaurasjon* was officially a Quaker.⁵ Some passengers were Haugean Lutherans or their sympathizers. This was a religious movement whose members had been persecuted for their beliefs and were eager to seek religious freedom in America. The *New York American* newspaper reported about the arrival of the Sloopers saying,

They belong to a religion called the Saints corresponding in many points to the principles of the Friends. We understand furthermore that they have sought an asylum in this favored land from religious persecution and that they will shortly be succeeded by a much larger body of emigrants.⁶

Even though religious oppression was not a cause of subsequent emigration, many emigrants did follow.

Although the Church of Norway was the only accepted faith in Norway, a variety of practices were tolerated during the nineteenth century. Rationalism, which stressed intellectual reason and knowledge, was a dominant view. We recall the catechization of young Ulrich Vilhelm Koren prior to his confirmation when he was asked what sort of blood a fish has. The answer that it was “red and cold” was supposed to be evidence of God’s wisdom.⁷

But this was not the only view held within the church. A revived orthodoxy also was growing. By the mid-eighteenth century, there were two professors at the University of Oslo (at that time known as Royal Frederick University) who exerted a profound theological influence.

⁴ “Restaurasjon – the icon of Norwegian expatriate history,” accessed October 9, 2025, <https://www.restaurasjon.no/en/skutens-historie/historie>

⁵ E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian-Americans*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), 56.

⁶ *New York American*, October 22, 1825, quoted in Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America 1825–1860* (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian American Historical Association, 1931), 44–45.

⁷ H. A. Preus, “Ulrik Vilhem Koren: A Biography,” in *The Clergy Bulletin* 10 no. 10 (1951): 104.

Gisle Johnson was a professor of systematic theology and history, and Carl Caspari was a professor of Old Testament studies.

The third strain of belief was Haugeanism. This nineteenth-century pietism was promoted by Hans Nielsen Hauge as a reaction to the rationalism emphasizing good works and a feeling of conversion over doctrine. It was tolerated within the Church of Norway because it operated within the confines of the state church.

The Quaker faith, however, was not acceptable within the church. A century earlier, in 1741, the Conventicle Act was enacted by King Christian VI in reaction to pietism. It said in part:

1) In addition to the public service, which every subject who professes the Evangelical Church and the Augsburg Confession should diligently seek after, it should be properly called teachers [*Lærere*] who have the power and freedom to teach and preach the Word of God publicly and privately, and for the sake of further edification to hold meetings in their own or other suitable houses, where the Bible is read and lessons are drawn from it ...

2) In such a meeting, the priest [*Præsten*] who has arranged it should himself be present ... but in the priest's absence it is occasionally permitted for his catechist [*Catechet*] or, where there is none, another godly and well-trained student [*Studiosus*] who is accountable to the priest, to be present on his behalf and see that everything goes properly and that no injustice, or untimely judgments about others, or irrelevant matters are brought forward.⁸

The Conventicle Act prohibited lay preachers from holding conventicles or religious gatherings without the approval of the local pastor of the Church of Norway. Although directed against pietistic gatherings, the Conventicle Act restricted the practice of both the Quaker faith and the gatherings of the Haugeans. Both groups shared similar views in opposing the perceived authoritarianism of the Church of Norway.

Both Quakers and Haugeans were conscious of the fact that they had much in common. 'It was as Haugeans ... that the revival of a spiritual life came to the prisoners at London before they made connection with the Friends.' The most important thing that the two groups had in common was their earnest piety, their insistence

⁸ "Oversikt over innholdet i konventikkelpakten 1741," trans. Google, accessed 3 October 2025, https://www.fagsider.org/kirkehistorie/lover/1741_konventikkelpakten.htm#pp1.

upon the necessity of an awakened spiritual life, their distrust of formalism.⁹

The Conventicle Act was revoked in 1842 after the Sloopers had sailed to America.¹⁰

As was the situation in Norway, three strands of Lutheranism also developed among the Norwegian immigrants in North America. The orthodoxy of the State Church was embraced in 1853 by those who organized the Norwegian Synod, considering themselves to be a continuation of the State Church of Norway. Nine years earlier, the Eielsen Synod—which was later succeeded by Hauge's Synod—was established by individuals who espoused many of the teachings of Hans Neilsen Hauge and despised educated clergy and those who wore long black robes.¹¹ A third strand of Lutheranism developed later with the 1870 organization of the Danish-Norwegian Conference which claimed to have more moderate views and was guided by the slogan of “life and spirit” as opposed to “dead orthodoxy” and dogmatics.¹² This synod, while claiming to be a middle road was in actuality united by a common disdain for the Norwegian Synod.

In 1917, these three largest Norwegian Lutheran church bodies with a combined membership of nearly one-million congregants merged to form the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America.

This new organization was an eloquent witness to the growing solidarity among Lutherans, and its merger convention in St. Paul was the scene of great enthusiasm. With 2,362 delegates, the impressive ceremonies on June 9 and 10 of that quadricentennial year are regarded as the greatest church demonstration ever held by Norwegians anywhere in the world.”¹³

⁹ Blegen, Theodore C., *Norwegian Migration to America, 1825–1860* (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Society, 1941), 31.

¹⁰ When the ordinance was revoked, it allowed dispensations for the establishment of church congregations outside the state church. The Quakers received such a dispensation in 1842 and the Roman Catholic in the following year. The Dissenter Act of 1845 allowed Christian denominations other than the Church of Norway to establish themselves in the country. However, monastic orders remained banned until 1897 and Jesuits until 1956.

¹¹ The official name of the Eielsen Synod was the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

¹² Ingrid Semmingsen, *Norway to America: A History of the Migration*, trans. Einar Haugen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 135.

¹³ Abdel Ross Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955), 257.

As the merger procession of clergy and delegates entered the auditorium, they were greeted by an estimated 8,000 people. Choir director, F. Melius Christiansen led the St. Olaf college choir while Carlo Sperati conducted the Luther College concert band.¹⁴

The arrival of the Restauration on October 9, 1825 set in motion a series of events that not only led to the Merger of 1917 in St. Paul, Minnesota, but also the reorganization of the Norwegian Synod at Lime Creek, Iowa in 1918.

In 1925, the “Norwegian-American Centennial” was observed as an expression of ethnic pride.¹⁵ When the emigrant left his home, he naturally had a feeling of nostalgia. That sentiment was expressed in farewell songs left with family and friends. The noted historian Theodore Blegen records one such song:

Farewell, valley that I cherish,
Farewell, church and trees and home,
Farewell, parson, farewell parish,
Farewell kith and kin, my own,
Lovely gardens, walks of beauty,--
Would to God this were undone!--
Home, you stay me in my duty,
Calling, “Leave me not, my son!”¹⁶

And yet they came.

2025

Anniversaries are not only reminders of identity, they also are the opportunity to reaffirm that identity. Here is an occasion to recall the cultural ethos of why an organization was founded and still exists.

“Norwegian-Americans throughout their history have evinced an exceptional degree of ethnocentrism … more so than all other northern

¹⁴ E. Clifford Nelson, 223.

¹⁵ Leif Erickson Day was observed in local communities for a number of years before President Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed October 9, 1935 as a national Leif Erikson Day. In 1964 the United States congress authorized and requested the president to proclaim October 9 of each year as Leif Erikson Day. The date of October 9 was specifically chosen because that already was an historic date commemorating the arrival of the Restauration in New York in 1825.

¹⁶ Theodore C. Blegen, “Grass Roots History” (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1947), 44.

European nationalities.”¹⁷ This is seen, for example, at the 2018 centennial convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) where King Harold of Norway sent a greeting to the synod:

I send my best greetings and good wishes to the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church on the occasion of the organization’s centennial anniversary on 17 June 2018.¹⁸

In 2025, the sailing of the Restauration is being observed on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Crown Prince Haakon of Norway spoke at a convocation held at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. He said:

Thank you for keeping alive the stories that bind us together across oceans, across generations, and across time.¹⁹

This story is about Norwegians, but it could just as well be the story of the Saxons in Missouri, the Prussians and Pomeranians in Wisconsin, the Franconians in Michigan, or the Wends in Texas. In the midst of changing social times, anniversaries such as this must be observed as more than ethnic observances within the melting pot of American culture which is two-hundred years removed from the event. The vision of a new land has faded and the courage of the Sloopers has faded from memory. This event has little significance in the melting pot of either American history or the history of Lutheranism.

Yet, the story of the Restauration is also the history of the ELS. Every student who has attended Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary has heard this story. Bethany Lutheran College was purchased by second-generation Norwegian-Americans. In 1943, the first history of the reorganized ELS was published. The first words of that ELS history are:

Migrations of Norwegians to the United States on a large scale began in 1825, when the small sloop “Restaurationen,” [sic] which sailed from Stavanger Norway, on the ninth of October, landed in New York with fifty-three immigrants.²⁰

¹⁷ Odd Lovoll, *The Promise Fulfilled: A Portrait of Norwegian Americans Today* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 2.

¹⁸ Harald, King of Norway in *Proclaim His Wonders* files: Convention 2018 (Mankato, Minnesota: Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives), S.924.

¹⁹ His Royal Highness Crown Prince Haakon, Luther College Convocation (Decorah, Iowa), 6 October 2025.

²⁰ Sigurd Christian Ylvisaker, Christian Anderson, George Lillegard, eds., *Grace for Grace: brief history of the Norwegian Synod* (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book

Anniversaries, especially church anniversaries, are a time to remember more than just names, dates, and events. A church anniversary is a time to pause and reflect upon the faith that motivated the founding fathers and mothers. It is a time to remember the faith that they wished to preserve for future generations.

Norwegian-American migration has affected both the doctrine and practice of our synod. As the ELS observes her dual anniversaries of 1853 and 1918, she remembers that the Synod was founded upon the confessions of the Lutheran Church. Two influential professors in Norway especially left their impression upon the church. Gisle Johnson studied at Erlangen and became a professor at the University of Oslo in 1849, and was one of the most significant Norwegian theologians of the nineteenth century. In opposition to pietism, Gisle Johnson promoted a warm piety which was reflected in the lives of succeeding generations of many Norwegian immigrants in America. His fellow professor, C. P. Caspari instructed students in Old Testament theology and studied extensively on Grundtvigianism. In 1862, these two professors published the first Norwegian translation of the *Book of Concord*. This was published in three editions during their lifetime. They helped to shape a revived confessionalism within the church of Norway instructing more than one-hundred men who would serve as pastors in the United States. That confessionalism was brought to America by the men who established the Norwegian Synod and prompted them to say of the Missouri Synod Lutherans:

We learned nothing new from you ... but what we had already learned in Norway, theoretically—the two great Lutheran fundamental principles—we saw here for the first time plainly and victoriously appear alive throughout the whole church body. ... We saw the glory of the Lutheran Confession, already well-known to us by word, actually carried out as we had never seen it before.²¹

The Norwegian forefathers who established the Synod brought colorful trunks with them as they embarked on emigrant ships. In those trunks were Bibles, catechisms, possibly a postil of sermons, and a hymnbook. From those hymnbooks come a liturgical and hymnodic treasure. Rite I in the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* is a derivative of

Company, 1943), 9.

²¹ U. V. Koren, "Why is there no church unity among Norwegian Lutherans in America?" trans. C. U. Faye, *The Clergy Bulletin*, XII (November 1952), 39.

the Danish-Norwegian Order written for the Church of Denmark-Norway reflecting Martin Luther's German Mass.

Later Norwegian immigrants carried a newer hymnbook prepared by Magnus B. Landstad which was published in 1870 and used in Norway until 1985. In large part, it was due to this hymnbook that Norway received her own unique hymnody. Prior to this, the hymnody of Norway had consisted primarily of Danish hymnbooks which were not felt to satisfy the needs of the Norwegian church. Landstad introduced contemporary Norwegian language into the Norwegian hymns. Seven of Landstad's original hymns appear in the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*. Among them are:

I Know of a Sleep in Jesus' Name
Lo, Many Shall Come from the East and the West,
Speak, O Lord, Thy Servant Heareth,
The Sun Has Gone Down, And Peace Has Descended on
Country and Town,
When Sinners See their Lost Condition.

Three years after the publication of Landstad's hymnbook, a Chorale-book [*Koralbog*] was published containing musical tunes. This book was prepared by Ludvig Mathias Lindeman, who is regarded as the man who taught the Norwegian people to sing. He visited the Norwegian mountain villages and documented the peoples' hymn singing. He did not make use of the original rhythmic forms of the chorale tunes because he did not want to change the tunes that were currently sung by the Norwegian people. Hymns sung to his tunes incorporate a distinctive Norwegian "lilt." Fourteen of Lindeman's original hymn tunes appear in the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*. Among them are:

Fred Til Bod [Alleluia! Jesus lives!]
I Jesu Navn [In Jesus' Name]
Kirken Den Er Et Gammelt Hus [Built on the Rock]
Naar Mit Øie [Come to Calv'ry's Holy Mountain]

The immigrants also brought a unique architecture for their church buildings. The traditional Norwegian Lutheran church building has a semi-circular rail that goes from one side of the altar circling to the other side. This is a reminder that as communicants gather around the Savior, the circle is completed by those saints whose bodies are buried

beyond the altar in the church cemetery. This beautiful image is reflected in the concluding words of the Communion Exhortation:

You should also unite in giving thanks to Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for so great a gift, and should love one another with a pure heart, and thus *with the whole Christian Church* have comfort and joy in Christ our Lord. To this end may God the Father grant you His grace; through the same, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.²²

As a congregation or a synod pauses to reflect at the time of an anniversary, it is the time to recall more than just names, buildings, and events. While these are important, church anniversaries are a time to pause and recall God's great acts in a Christian congregation. Here are the blessings of the heroes of faith who went before us, upon whose shoulders we stand. The great apostle exhorts us to "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Carefully consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7, EHV). This is the time to rejoice in the blessings of Word and Sacrament in the midst of a group of special people in a special place.

There is a farewell emigrant song often attributed to Martha Clausen, wife of Pastor Claus Clausen written when she and her husband emigrated from Denmark. The beloved hymn is found in the 1913 *Lutheran Hymnary*.

And now we must bid one another farewell;
The peace of our God keep you ever!
God's peace in our bosom and all will be well,
Or whether we meet or we sever.
May Christ, our dear Lord,
Be our sure reward
When we from this world pass forever!

The final words in this stanza are translated into English as "when we from this world pass forever." Literally, these words say "when we emigrate [*udvandre*] from this world." Is that not a fitting way to describe the Christian life and Christian hope? This world is only a foretaste of that which is to come. "Now we see indirectly using a

²² *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (Mankato: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1996), 53. Emphasis added.

mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I was fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, EHV).

Anniversaries not only look back to the past but remind the Christian of the future and encourage those who follow to place their hope in the Triune God and what He has promised. The hymn concludes:

Oh, help us dear Father, and Christ Thou the Son,
That gladly our course we may finish!
And Thou, Holy Spirit, Thou comforting One,
Thy love in our hearts so replenish,
 That we by Thy might,
 May fight the good fight,
Till won is the crown everlasting.²³

Alt Av Naade 

²³ *Lutheran Hymnary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1913), 51.

Explaining God's Hatred:

Malachi 1:2–5 & Luke 14:25–27

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“**M**Y PARENTS HATE ME, AND THEY'RE RUINING my life,” So says the disgruntled teenager, assuming the mysterious acts and advice of his parents are surely evidence of his destruction, if even just that of his social life.

Part of the impetus for this study was to give clear yet nuanced ways to answer questions like these: “Jesus says we shouldn't even be angry at others. How can God command us to hate our family members in Luke 14?” “How can the Bible say that God, who is love, hates people, as in Malachi 1?” Like the teenager years later appreciating the work of his parents, that Christians can know that even God's hatred is no contradiction to his good and gracious will in Christ. Moreover, this hatred gives nuance to any overly simplistic view of God and his will, so that people would realize God does recognize and confront evil in his way and in his time.

Exegesis: Malachi 1:2–5

Context

Since Malachi means, “my messenger [angel],” some believe it is not the personal name of the prophet but a title. Luther wrote,

The Hebrews believe that this Malachi was Ezra. We let that pass, because we can know nothing certain about him except that, so far

as we can gather from his prophecy, he lived not long before Christ's birth and was certainly the last prophet.¹

The LXX labels the book as ἀγγέλου αὐτοῦ from verse one, "The oracle of the Lord to Israel by the hand of his messenger."

However, there are good reasons to believe the book was written by a prophet named Malachi. Names with direct meaning in Hebrew are extremely common in the Old Testament. In addition, Malachi 1:1 says that the oracle came "בְּידֵי מֹלֶךְ" "by the hand of Malachi," which is an expression used repeatedly in the Old Testament for God speaking through specific prophets (2 Kgs 14:25; Isa 20:2; Hag 1:1; Zech 7:7).

What is perhaps most important to our discussion is the time frame of the book. Written around 450 BC, Malachi was written after the Babylonian Captivity.²

Text and Translation

אהבתִי אַתֶּכָם אָמַר יְהוָה וְאָמַרְתֶם בַּמָּה אַהֲבָתֶנוּ הַלֹּא-אָח עָשָׂו
 לְיַעֲקֹב נָאָס-יְהוָה וְאָהָב אֶת-יַעֲקֹב
 וְאֶת-עַשְׂוֹ שָׂנְאָתִי וְאָשִׁים אֶת-הָרִיו שְׁמָמָה וְאֶת-גְּנַחַלְתָּו לְתִנּוֹת מִדְבָּר
 בַּיּוֹתָא מָר אֶדְוָם רְשָׁנָנוּ וְנִשְׁׂוֹב וְנִבְנָה חֲרָבֹת בָּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאֹות
 הַמָּה יְבָנוּ וְאַנְּנִי אֶהָרָס וְקָרָאוּ לְהָם גְּבוֹל רְשָׁעָה וְהָעָם אֲשֶׁר-זִעְמָם
 יְהוָה עַד-עוֹלָם

וְעַיִּיכְם תְּرָאֵנָה וְאַתֶּם תְּאַמְּרוּ יְהוָה מָעֵל לְגַבּוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל

2. "I have loved you," says the Lord, but you say, "In what [How] have you loved us?" "Wasn't Esau a brother to Jacob?" answers the Lord, "Now I have loved Jacob,
3. but Esau I have hated. I have left [made] his hills a desolate place and his property to the jackals of the wilderness."
4. If Edom says, "We are beaten down, but we will return and [re] build the desolate place," thus says the Lord of armies, "They will build, and I will tear down, and [people] will call them 'the guilty country' and 'the people which the Lord is angry at forever.'"

¹ AE 35:332.

² R. Reed Lessing and Andrew E. Steinmann, *Prepare the Way of the Lord: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 554; cf. *The Lutheran Study Bible: English Standard Version*, ed. Edward A. Engelbrecht (Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 1543.

5. And your eyes will see, and you will say, "The Lord [will] be magnified even beyond the territory of Israel!"

Israel/Edom Background

By the end of the Old Testament, to say there is a backstory to the Israel–Edom relationship is an understatement.

Conflict began with the Lord's prophecy to Rebekah, then pregnant with twins, "Two peoples from within you shall be divided; ... the older shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23). Esau and Jacob were born, and the reversal of seniority played out, first through Esau's trading of his birthright and then through Jacob and Rebekah's deception of Isaac to get the blessing of the firstborn. Because of this, "Esau hated Jacob" and planned to kill him (Gen 27:41). However, the brothers meet years later, after Jacob completed his time with Laban. In a moment as powerful as forgiveness is always meant to be, Esau comes to Jacob, not with anger, but love, and the two reconcile (Gen 33:1–17).

The conflict, though resolved between the brothers, becomes a perpetual feature between their descendants, the Israelites and the Edomites. Note that when the Old Testament speaks of these peoples, it uses the name of the people/the nation and the respective ancestor interchangeably (Jacob/Israel, Esau/Edom).

Esau's descendants (which are covered in the ninth *toledoth* list of Genesis [Gen 36]) generally occupied a territory to the south of Israel that stretched from the edge of the Sinai wilderness eastward, with its northern border touching the southern edge of Israel, the Dead Sea, and Moab. The Edomites formed a kingdom in the region long before the establishment of a monarchy among the Israelites (Gen 36:31), evidenced by the fact that they were powerful enough to refuse the Israelites passage through their land when Israel returned to Canaan from Egypt (Num 20). Edom was not destroyed in the conquest of Canaan, and God even commanded preferential treatment toward Esau's descendants (Deut 23:7). Nevertheless, the Edomites are described as an enemy of Israel from the time of Saul (1 Sam 14:47, ca. 1040s BC) through to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Captivity (ca. 587 BC, see verses below). In that destruction and plundering of Jerusalem, the Edomites played a particularly aggravating role:

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem,

how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare,
down to its foundations!” (Ps 137:7)

Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob,
shame shall cover you,
and you shall be cut off forever.

On the day that you stood aloof,
on the day that strangers carried off his wealth
and foreigners entered his gates
and cast lots for Jerusalem,
you were like one of them. (Obad 10, 11)³

Egypt shall become a desolation
and Edom a desolate wilderness,
for the violence done to the people of Judah,
because they have shed innocent blood in their land. (Joel 3:19)

To be clear, God’s hatred is not a central theme of the book of Malachi. The book is focused on Israel, on the insincerity of its priests and the moral laxity and stinginess of its people. The post-exilic writing of Malachi reflects the Lord’s faithfulness to Israel at a time when they might doubt it either because of the exile or because of their own sins, which God is about to call out.

God’s Hatred

The hatred toward Esau is a corollary of that faithfulness. If Israel is questioning God’s love because of the treatment they’ve suffered, not only from foreign empires, but from Edom, the nation God promised their supremacy over (Gen 25:23), God assures them that he’s stood by his promises. Their enemies are his enemies, and “the Edomites were public enemy number one.”⁴ “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” (Mal 1:3) God asks, emphasizing that from a human perspective, the two brothers and their descendants should receive more-or-less equal treatment. Instead, God has shown gracious favor toward Israel for the sake of his promises, rooted in the promise to send Christ (Gen 28:13–15; cf. Gen 12:3; 18:18, 19; 22:18; 26:4). Even though the Edomites had their day when Jerusalem was being destroyed, God points his people to

³ The book of Obadiah is devoted to the Edom/Israel conflict and God’s response to it from an exilic perspective (ca. 587–553 BC).

⁴ Lessing and Steinmann, *Prepare the Way*, 555.

the punishment he brought on Edom (note the perfect tense מִשְׁאַלְתִּי in Malachi 1:3). In 553–552 BC, the Babylonian King Nabonidus effectively destroyed the kingdom of Edom. This destruction is likely the one the Lord references here.

The verb in question for our study, נָנַנְתִּי, is the most common Hebrew verb translated “to hate” and the standard opposite of “love.” In many cases, the emphasis of נָנַנְתִּי is on the corresponding action and not so much on the attendant emotions we associate with the word. God’s hatred acted out in the destruction of Edomite infrastructure is driven more by justice or *lex talionis* (law of retribution) than by uncontrollable anger. Lessing and Steinmann point to a similar understanding, “Here [hate] connotes that a relationship does not exist between Yahweh and Esau. Confirming this understanding is that in Mal 1:2, בְּרִיתָהּ connotes Yahweh’s covenant that he established with Israel.”⁵ The Lord’s love for Israel is not pure emotional affection: he is about to point out all the things Israel is doing to offend him. His love is the love of promise, the love of Hosea for his whore, the love of Christ for his Church. When Malachi 1:2b, 3a are translated in Romans 9:13, God’s love for Israel is translated with ἀγαπᾷω.

When someone asks, “Pastor, why did God say he hated the Edomites, when the Bible so clearly says he loves the world?” or comments, “God hates the sin but loves the sinner” (which is a misleading statement, as if guilt only applies to the action, not the person, and redemption leaves the sin untouched), steer the discussion into the interplay of law and gospel. God hates sin and anything that opposes his will and word, so he also hates the people who carry out that sin and opposition (see Prov 6:16–19). In this case, it was the Edomites who by their harassment of Israel were setting themselves against God’s purpose and promise. The emphasis of the passage, though, is on God’s grace. Israel, in blood and sinfulness the same as the Edomites, receive God’s blessings only because he has chosen them for his purpose.

Malachi 1:2–5, A Primer on Election

Let’s go back to Esau and Jacob for a moment. After all their conflict, the two brothers reconciled in Gen 33. The nations that grew from their descendants never did. Yet the Old Testament is, for Christians, a book of preparation, a book with built-in cliffhangers, chief among them being the expectation of a Savior-King still yet to rise from David’s line.

⁵ Lessing and Steinmann, *Prepare the Way*, 555.

Several details indicate that this unresolved conflict between Israel and Edom is one such cliffhanger. Already in God's prophecy to Rebekah, the relationship between the boys is expected to play out writ large with the nations they give rise to. Therefore, the resolution of the brothers' personal conflict sets up the reader to expect a resolution between their respective descendants. By the end of the Old Testament, that greater reconciliation hasn't happened, but Amos anticipates it, "In that day [eschatological future] I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,' declares the Lord who does this" (Amos 9:12). The nation with the longest-lasting conflict with God's people will in fact become part of the chosen people ("called by my name") and share in its eternal prosperity, which the rest of Amos 9 goes on to describe. In fact, if that reconciliation is in mind, "the older will serve the younger" (Gen 25:23) when Edomites will come under the sway of Israel's true king, Christ, and in faith serve the Descendant of the younger brother, Jacob. God's hatred in the 400s BC is not the outburst of a capricious God, but part of his plan to deliver Christ to the world and integrate even Edomites into the people of God through that Savior.

In Romans 9:13, Paul quotes Malachi 1:2, 3. According to Paul, God's love for Israel and hatred toward Edom align with the parameters of election. If you are like me, Romans 8 is one of your workhorse chapters for hospital visits and death beds, and for good reason. Yet the promises made in Romans 8 are rooted in God's grace-driven election:

We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom 8:28–30)

As noted by Peter Prange, Romans 8 begs a question, especially in the first-century church, "If God doesn't forsake his own—if nothing separates the elect from his love—then how do you explain what has happened to the children of Israel? I thought *they* were God's elect!"⁶

⁶ Peter M. Prange, "God's purpose in Election: A Review of Paul's Thought in Romans 9:10–18," (WLS Essay File, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, accessed

Paul uses Abraham to clarify. Abraham was saved through faith in God's promise, not his worthiness or bloodline. Therefore, his true descendants as far as God's election was concerned, true Israel, consist of those who share his faith in the promise, the gospel. Paul uses Isaac and Ishmael as examples of those who share physical ancestry to the patriarch but don't share the title of God's "chosen people" (Rom 9:6–8).

However, a reader could still see some worthiness in God's choosing of Isaac: Isaac was the legitimate son, Ishmael the bastard. So Paul moves one generation down the line, to Jacob and Esau. No one can say that Jacob was the more deserving recipient of God's election and favor. They were brothers, and in fact, Jacob was the younger, less deserving one. Nevertheless, God chose Jacob "in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls" (Rom 9:11). Does God's choice seem arbitrary from our human perspective? Well, Paul has an answer for that, too. "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ... You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" (Rom 9:14, 19, 20) Edom and Israel were used to illustrate the undeserved nature of grace and how election happens in accord with that grace, in Christ, and not on the basis of merit, past, present, or future.

Believers might still struggle with the statement that God "hated" Edom, but understanding God's hatred is not so much a matter of explanation, but faith, faith in the God revealed in Christ. God doesn't exclude Edom from salvation, but accomplishes salvation for them in the work of Jesus and, until the remnant of Edom is gathered into the church, sets himself against the Edomites and everyone who works against will and word.

In the end, doesn't God detest and hate all who fight his will, whether it's trying to destroy his people or, in the case of every human, choosing sin, and hasn't God shown the same grace in having made us, "his enemies" (Rom 5:10), reconciled by the death of Christ? The coexistence of God's hatred and love corresponds to the coexistence of law and gospel; the specific application of that hatred and love, which can seem mysterious to human eyes, corresponds to the depths of election which are beyond us to reason out.

We Christians can even be glad that God hated Edom for the sake of Israel because he therefore makes our enemies his enemies. Yet even as we pray "deliver us from evil," which includes our enemies, we pray

for them (Matt 5:43–48), so that our deliverance from their evil would come through their repentance and conversion to the saving faith.

Even if God doesn't bring the visible downfall of the church's enemies, we shouldn't be surprised. The kingdom is still hidden in weakness and apparent defeat (cf. Matt 5:10, 11). God "makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45), and yet he accepts our outrage over injustice and sin, expressed in faith, as we leave vengeance in his hands (cf. imprecatory Psalms).

Exegesis: Luke 14:25–27

Context

The immediate context of Luke 14:25–27 includes teachings about inclusion in the kingdom and descriptions of discipleship.

The pretext covers Jesus' teachings at a dinner he attended in the house of a Pharisee. He tells one parable about humility, lest a person assume a more important position and be put down to a lower one (Luke 14:7–11). He tells those present not to show partiality in their dealings with people (Luke 14:12–14). Finally, he warns them against letting mundane concerns override the priority of God's kingdom under the assumption that they're in the kingdom by some quality in themselves (Luke 14:15–24). The passage Luke 14:25–27 follows immediately, though they occur in another episode as Jesus teaches crowds that were following him.

After the verses under consideration, Jesus tells two parables, both of which focus on the theme of counting the cost of an endeavor before beginning (Luke 14:28–32). The chapter closes with a blanket statement demanding complete self-denial and Jesus' words about salt, which, though not stated, serves as a picture of disciples (Luke 14:33–35).

Text and Translation

25 Συνεπορεύοντο δὲ αὐτῷ ὄχλοι πολλοί, καὶ στραφεὶς εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς,
26 Εἴ τις ἔρχεται πρός με καὶ οὐ μισεῖ τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ
τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφούς καὶ τὰς ἀδελφάς, ἔτι τε καὶ τὴν
ψυχὴν ἑαυτοῦ, οὐ δύναται εἶναι μου μαθητής.
27 ὅστις οὐ βαστάζει τὸν σταυρὸν ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἔρχεται ὅπίσω μου οὐ δύναται
εἶναι μου μαθητής.

25. Now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and said to them,
26. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he is not able to be my disciple.
27. “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me is not able to be my disciple.”

Family Hatred by the Disciple

The Greek counterpart to **ἀντίψ**, μισέω is the most common word translated “hate” in the New Testament and used to translate **ἀντίψ** in the Romans 9 quotation of Malachi 1:2, 3.

It is more general than βδελύσσομαι, “hate” or “detest,” whose original connotation is the reaction to a disgusting smell. In the New Testament, the object of βδελύσσομαι is most often idols or people associated with false worship. It usually expresses hatred for things that are intrinsically bad.

μισέω, on the other hand, is a more general word, and some contexts suggest not absolute aversion for something, but comparative approval (“to love less [than],” i.e., “to distance yourself from one option in order to value and prioritize another” [Luke 16:13]).

Luke 14:25–27, Sweeping Sanctification or Airtight Justification?

The shade of μισέω in this context is so important because Jesus’s command to hate family members demands explanation; otherwise, Christ is contradicting the fourth commandment. The main question is what effect Jesus is intending to have in his hearers, convicting sin or guiding Christian life? Is Jesus is directing these words at believers, disciples who need instruction in sanctification? Is he speaking to those who still need to be brought to repentance and faith, in which case he’s driving them along to reach the goal of justification? Is he speaking to both, and what does that mean for our understanding of his hatred language?

Sweeping Sanctification

The dominant interpretation reads Jesus’s words as sanctification preaching, Christ stating the active commitment of a disciple in the strongest possible terms.

μισέω is qualified as a readiness to cut ties with family members should they threaten or interfere with one’s attachment to Christ.

Johannes Ylvisaker: “[The disciple] must be willing to relinquish that which is most precious ... even as he is ever willing to part with that which he hates. In this respect he shall hate even his own, albeit he is bound to them by the ties of natural love.”⁷ L. T. Johnson:

The term ‘hate’ is the opposite of ‘love.’ The terms denote attitudes and modes of action, not emotions. The point is not how one feels toward parents and family but one’s effective attitude when it comes to a choice for the kingdom.⁸

Proponents of this reading see Matthew 10:34–39 as a direct parallel to Luke 14:25–27.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”
(Matt 10:34–39)

Further support for this instruction being aimed at shaping the obedience of believers is that Jesus has already taught “crowds” (Luke 5:1–3; 9:11), even instructing those who had gone out to hear John’s preaching of repentance and be baptized (Luke 3:7–10; 7:24). Lenski writes about the Greek construction (“If anyone comes to me and does not hate, ... he cannot be my disciple”),

The condition is one of reality, i.e., Jesus thinks and speaks of somebody who really wants to be a disciple of his. ‘Come to me’ means:

⁷ Johannes Ylvisaker, *The Gospels: A Synoptic Presentation of the Text in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John with Explanatory Notes* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1932), 490.

⁸ Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (The Liturgical Press, 1991), 229–30. For more explanations in this vein, see Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible: The New Testament*, vol. 1 (Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 347; Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture (Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 580–581; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, New Testament Commentary (Baker Book House, 1978), 734–735.

with the desire to attach himself to me as disciples attach themselves to a master or rabbi.⁹

Just notes that “[Jesus] has engaged in continual catechesis of the Twelve, the seventy(-two), and the crowds. As was clear in the Sermon on the Plain, not all disciples are called to be apostles, but all disciples are learners, students, catechumens.”¹⁰

Therefore, these commentators frame the verses’ purpose for the present day as calling believers to greater commitment and sanctification which submits the whole experience of family and life to Christ’s direction.

Airtight Justification

However, the context of the verses suggest that Jesus may be preaching repentance as much as obedience.

As much as some in the crowds may have been taught by Jesus before and could be believers, “the crowd(s)” in the gospels are generally a mix of those with faith (Luke 5:18–20), those curious and amazed by Jesus’s signs (Luke 11:14), and those who are skeptical or even opposed to his teachings (Luke 11:14–16, 37–54).

The issue of audience informs our understanding of the parallel to these verses in Matthew 10:34–39. Crucially, the words in Matthew can be considered instruction aimed at sanctification because Jesus is speaking only to the Twelve. This is not the case with the instruction in Luke 14.

In other words, believers can read Luke 14:25–27 and hear in them third-use law, a pep-talk for the lukewarm church. But the context suggests that Jesus is speaking to many people who, though they were “accompanying him” (Luke 14:25), were not all believers, and therefore they were still understanding what it meant to *become* disciples.¹¹ Notice that the demands Jesus makes are constitutive of being a disciple. δύναται εἰναι (vv. 26, 27) is translated in all major translations as “cannot be.”

⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (The Wartburg Press, 1946), 785.

¹⁰ Just, *Luke* 9:51–24:53, 580.

¹¹ Contra Lenski, the simple particular present/first class condition of Luke 14:26 does not define the spiritual status of the audience Jesus is addressing. Daniel Wallace writes, “The first class condition is popularly taken to mean the condition of reality or the condition of truth. ... This is saying too much about the first class condition” (*The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* [Zondervan, 2000], 309–10). Instead, Wallace describes a first-class condition as “assumed true for the sake of argument” (*New Testament Syntax*, 311).

However, colloquial English often uses “cannot” to express permission instead of the true sense, which is ability.¹² The condition Jesus sets up is not so much a condition that, if met, will grant a person permission to be a disciple. Rather, these conditions must be met in order for someone to have the possibility or ability to be a disciple. For these original hearers, the harsh rhetoric would have been heard not so much as a test of Christian sanctification as an impossible barrier to entry.

If one jumps ahead to the end of these verses first, it becomes clear that the whole time Jesus is leading up to death as the entry point for discipleship. The initial demand, hatred for the family (Luke 14:26), is just the first step on the way to crucifixion (Luke 14:27). A person who is cut off from family is a person not fully alive in the matrix of community and filial bonds they were created to live within (consider the phrase “You’re dead to me” spoken to someone still alive). Then comes the hatred of life as the hearer knows it, and finally comes not just death, but the humiliation of bearing a cross to the place of your own execution (see below for more on the telos of cross bearing). The cross represents an end of everything that came before as well as complete estrangement from every shred of human dignity a person might claim or hold up as proof of their self-worth as a member of God’s people.

Unbelievers come to Jesus with all kinds of things in their spiritual hands, proofs that they should be “let in” (to grace, the kingdom, the feast of salvation) and accepted by him. The teachings of Christ before these verses and after deal with these themes: entry into the kingdom and measuring up in a spiritual sense. If Luke 14:25–27 is understood as bringing the hearers on the journey to justification, Jesus is knocking those grounds for self-justification out of their hands one by one.

First comes family. Lest the Israelites thought that their blood was so special, God reminded them through Malachi that it was his gracious choice and promise, not their worthiness, that made them his people. Lest the crowds think that their family connections gave them an “in” with God, Jesus reminds the people that no blood connection automatically gets you the title of “God’s disciple,” which was a message many needed to hear (Luke 3:8, 9; 16:24; John 8:39). Such a nepotistic theology of glory is salvation by law, plain and simple. Instead of holding up your record of good deeds, you hold up the family tree. If you love

¹² A child asks his father, “Can I come to the store with you?” The father responds, “No, you can’t.” The father is not saying that it’s impossible for the child to come with him to the store. He is denying the child permission to come along.

your family because you see them as a means of grace, in that regard you should hate them instead.

Next comes life, $\psi\chi\eta$, the still-sinful soul we live in that is bound to lead us down incorrect spiritual paths on our own. Jesus' teachings at the house of the Pharisee which precede our verses, drive home the futility of trusting in ourselves or our earthly track record for justification: "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. ... And the master said to the servant, ... 'None of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet'" (Luke 14:16, 20, 23, 24). In the foreground of the parable are the earthly priorities that distract people from God's kingdom (the banquet). In the background of the parable is an implied understanding among those who made excuses that they'd still be on good terms with the man who held the banquet. If they felt their relationship with this powerful man would be jeopardized by their absence, they would have come. Instead, they assume that they will remain in his grace because of some other quality in them, even though they rejected his invitation, and that they can feast in the future on their own terms. They assume wrongly (Luke 14:24). Not only are they excluded, but the feast is full of social outcasts who heed the invitation and come to the feast, recognizing it as the gift it is because they would never deserve to be there on their own.

Those who assume that they will remain in God's grace because of some quality in themselves are loving their own souls. They are loving their pitiful works of civic righteousness and happily live in assurance of *opinio legis*, that those works make them loveable to God and circumvent repentance. They should hate their whole life, recognizing it as the damning evidence it is, so that they would come to the feast poor and mindful of the gospel gift.

Once Jesus has cut people off from their family and their own efforts as ways to get the title of "disciple," Jesus points them to the cross. Any reference to cross bearing in the first century would have unmistakably been heard as a reference to certain death, and one that would leave no pride intact. Yes, many Christians would be crucified in the coming centuries, but not all, so clearly one *could* be a disciple without enduring physical crucifixion. For anyone reading these words in the gospel of Luke, after the fact, the primary connection they would make to this demand would be Jesus' cross. Even those who originally heard Jesus' words would understand them later in light of Jesus' crucifixion. One

is a disciple by virtue of his or her connection to the crucified Jesus. Any cross bearing we do in the sense of active sanctification is just a natural byproduct of our incorporation into Christ crucified, as in Galatians 6:14, “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

These verses are often preached as illustrating the continuous burdens Christians bear because of their faith. The present tense of $\betaαστάζω$ suggests this could be the case. However, present-tense verbs are not infinite in their duration. They are limited by context. In the case of bearing a cross, the finite end of cross bearing is crucifixion. While Simon of Cyrene did bear a cross without being crucified, the practice of bystanders carrying the cross of the criminal was not the norm.¹³ The bearing of a cross is a move toward death and, in light of following Jesus on that journey, toward resurrection. The spiritual death and resurrection catechumens have to undergo is repentance ending with faith in God’s justifying word. This is what occurs in the regenerating, repentance-working sacrament of baptism: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Paul makes clear that new obedience is a result of the death and burial of the old self, but the sense of our incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus is lost if our obedience is the cross bearing which leads to death in the first place. If the cross bearing and resultant death is seen as the final nail in the coffin of self-justification, the sense is preserved. Only when we die to our trespasses and sins can we be raised with Christ as obedient disciples.

Moving into the parables which follow these verses (Luke 14:28–32), it is implied that both the builder and the king do not have enough to complete the task they set out to do. If these words are directed primarily at an audience of the unbelievers, and those individuals are meant to see themselves as the builder and the king, how do the parables direct them to enter the fellowship of “disciples”? Do your best and God will do the rest? No. If someone tries to build his way to God, he won’t have enough. If someone tries to fight the opponents of sin, death, and the devil on his own, he’ll be defeated. By the end of this instruction, there’s no earthly thing left for these people to trust in as a way to qualify themselves as disciples. There’s nothing left except Jesus.

¹³ Plutarch (AD 46–about 120): “Each criminal who goes to execution must carry his own cross on his back” (*Moralia. On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* 554 A-B).

When the Levites were commanded to kill their family members and friends after the golden calf debacle, it was enacted repentance that they were carrying out, a hatred and purging of what's close, even part of us and our own flesh and blood (family) (Exod 32:29). This is what Jesus is first and foremost commanding the crowds to do, to purge out everything idolatrous that would keep them from God's justifying grace.

Look further down the context of Luke 14 and we find the comparison of disciples to salt. The salt deserving only to be "thrown away" is reminiscent of the individuals mentioned in just the previous chapter, Jews who will be "cast out" while "people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God" with "Abraham and Isaac and Jacob" (Luke 13:29, 28).¹⁴ Again, those with physical lineage back to the great patriarchs won't be admitted to the kingdom on that basis and will be thrown out if they expect to be. On the other hand, those will be put in places of high honor who enter the kingdom by God's grace alone, recognizing by their very recent pagan ancestry that blood ties are no spiritual leg to stand on (see this theme also in the first banquet parable at the Pharisee's house, Luke 14:7-11). Magnus Landstad captured the justification theme of these passages:

There many shall come from the east and the west

And sit at the feast of salvation

With Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the blest,

Obeying the Lord's invitation.

Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

But they who have always resisted His grace

And on their own virtue depended,

Shall then be condemned and cast out from His face,

Eternally lost and unfriended.

Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!¹⁵

The condemned and hated by God are those who "on their own virtue depended," whether that virtue is family, works, or the idea that some part of the old self is good and can be spared death by the law.

¹⁴ Just, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 583.

¹⁵ "There Many Shall Come from the East and the West," *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, ed. Dennis W. Marzolf, Harry K. Bartels, Mark E. DeGarmeaux (MorningStar Music Publishers, 1996), 200:1-2.

In this understanding, the text is not first and foremost boot camp for disciples, but arrows of law directed at the gremlins of self-justification lurking in everyone. Hate *them*. Alone in the cross of Christ can anyone be a disciple, forgiven by grace for Jesus' sake, and it's only by claiming that cross for oneself that everything else, family and all of life, will be put in its proper place.¹⁶

As much as we need to distinguish sanctification and justification theologically, the two views of this text are not contradictory. Augustine prayed, "O God, grant what you command, and [then] command what you desire" (*Confessions* 10:29). Is Jesus granting what he's commanding through his proclamation (the hatred for self-justifying family ties, cruciform death of repentance, enough to build the tower and fight the war) or commanding what he desires (right priorities, self-denial, effort in sanctified living)? The answer is best seen as both. We return to Romans 6:4 (emphasis added), "We were *buried therefore with him by baptism into death*, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too *might walk in newness of life*."

However, there is a need to recognize the text as rich in repentance and Christological language. It keeps preachers from making these verses a moralizing hammer of law void of the power present in Jesus' cross and resurrection and given in baptism. It also locates the ability to be a disciple in Jesus' work, not one's own.

Application and Conclusion

God's hatred, and the hatred he commands in us, is useful pastorally for those who still look for justification in the wrong places and show their false security in comments like this: "I was born and baptized here—of course I should be able to take communion" (even though they haven't been to church in 30 years and have lived an openly sinful life); "My family has been here forever" (as if the faith of the ancestors sanctifies the gene pool); "There are good and bad people in the church and outside the church" (as if the purpose of Christianity were purely moral improvement). In sentiments like these, we see people assuming God's grace is theirs because of factors other than Christ crucified, risen, and delivered in Word and Sacrament. If their Christian identity is rooted in their blood relation to others in the church, past or present, they need to hate those connections and consider them the worst thing to trust in. If they use comparative morality to judge themselves acceptable to God, they have to hate that life and recognize that instead of patting them

¹⁶ Just, *Luke* 9:51–24:53, 580–581.

on the head for their “good” deeds, God crucified his Son for them. He hates them, and we should share in that hatred so that the only thing we trust in for the basis of God’s love is Christ, the one hated in our place and whose cross and righteousness make us acceptable to the Father.

“My parents hate me, and they’re ruining my life.” Well, teenager, maybe they are. Maybe your parents are destroying what you think is important, ruining your life as you know it, and yet like your heavenly Father doing everything they can to save it. LSQ

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Book Reviews

LSQ Vol. 65, No. 4 (December 2025)

Book Review: Christ Through Us: A Pictorial History of the Wisconsin Synod, 1850–2025

John A. Braun and Joel D. Otto. *Christ Through Us: A Pictorial History of the Wisconsin Synod, 1850–2025*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 2025. 268 pages. Price: \$29.99

This year marks the one hundred seventy-fifth anniversary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) founded in 1850. As part of the observance, a new synod history has been produced. The book gives a fresh new perspective on the history of the WELS. It is filled with pictures and personal notes, which show the grace and mercy that the Savior poured out on the synod throughout the years.

Many histories of the WELS have been written over the course of time:

The History of the Wisconsin Synod (Koehler), *Continuing in His Word*, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, and *A Tale of Two Synods*, to name a few. This history, however, is different from these. It is a pictorial history of the synod laid out as a coffee-table book. The variety of the pictures from the history of the synod is amazing. In the volume, photographs are offered so that one can visualize the synodical stories that are often so well known. This illustrates the old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. Members of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) will notice that the format of the book is modeled on Craig Ferkenstad's recent book, *Proclaim His Wonders*.

The book is divided into seven informative chapters, chronologically arranged. The first chapter, entitled, "Immigrants Bring Their Faith in Christ (1850–1860)," gives the origins of the Wisconsin Synod. The vast majority of the original members of the synod came from northern

and eastern Germany. The young synod received support from the German mission societies and from the eastern American synods, especially the Pennsylvania Ministerium (13). Support from the Pennsylvania Ministerium is more clearly enunciated than in earlier histories where the emphasis on the German societies predominated. Those whose origins are in the Minnesota and Michigan Synods possibly would have liked to see more of their particular synod's history in this chapter. However, the page on Father Heyer of the Minnesota Synod was excellent (23).

Interesting terminology is used to distinguish the different type of Lutherans in America in this history. It speaks of "old" Lutherans, "mild" Lutherans, and "new" Lutherans. "Old" Lutheran is common terminology used in history to refer to the Buffalo Synod and the Missouri Synod. However, the terms "mild" and "new" Lutherans do not on face value seem as clear and distinct. "Mild" Lutheranism appears to mean those that did not want to be as strict and rigid in doctrine, practice, and liturgical rites as "Old" Lutherans, yet still maintaining the Lutheran heritage of the Confessions. "New" Lutherans, conversely, tried to conform to the general Protestantism of America. The authors view the founders of the Wisconsin Synod as "mild" Lutherans (11).

"The Young Synod Embraces Confessionalism (1860-1890)" is the designation of the second chapter. The leaders of the synod who moved toward confessionalism were beyond a doubt John Bading

and Adolph Hoenecke, but there were other important men such as Philipp Koehler and Gottlieb Reim (17). Bading was drawn to orthodox Lutheranism in Europe while attending the mission seminary in Hermannsburg where he studied under Louis Harms (30). Hoenecke was brought to living faith in Christ studying under August Tholuck who also pointed him to the writings of the great orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians (52). Hoenecke is known in Lutheranism today for his outstanding dogmatics. This movement toward orthodox Lutheranism climaxed in fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1869, and the founding of the Synodical Conference in 1872 (50). With the establishment of the Synodical Conference, fellowship with the ELS began which continues to the present.

Chapters 3 and 4 review the growth of the Wisconsin Synod from 1890 to 1945. In 1892, a federated synod was formed, known as the Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Other States (73). A merger of the synods occurred in 1917, including the Nebraska Synod (100). In 1918, the Pacific Northwest District was added to the merged synod (102) and the Dakota-Montana District in 1920 (105). An example of the mission zeal of these German Lutherans was Henry Braun of the Hutchinson, Minnesota area. From his parish, he served as *Reiseprediger* throughout much of the western part of the state (105).

The synod supported the African American mission in the southern

states and the work in Nigeria of the Synodical Conference. In the 1880s, Wisconsin began mission work among the Apache people in Arizona. Here Harders, Upfinger, and Guenther were familiar missionary names (122–124). Members of the ELS may remember that William Kessel, who served many years in the ELS, was part the Guenther family. After World War I, a Poland mission began serving German Lutherans in the former German territory in Poland (120).

The structure of the synod's educational system began to solidify during this period. This included its preparatory high schools, its teacher's college in New Ulm, Minnesota, its pastoral training college in Watertown, Wisconsin, and its seminary at Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, that was later moved to Thiensville (Mequon), Wisconsin. Among many interesting facts about the synod's schools, faculties, and student bodies is an intriguing page concerning the first female graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College (63).

An emphasis known as Wauwatosa Theology developed while the seminary was located in that city. It was assumed that Walther and the Missouri fathers stressed the teaching of the Lutheran dogmaticians and put less emphasis on exegesis of the text of the Scriptures. The Wauwatosa professors highlighted a careful exegetical study of the Scriptures (88). They maintained that each new generation of theologians must study the Bible in order to make its teaching their own. Such exegesis should be compared with the Confessions and

the fathers. Their view could disagree with the fathers, but they needed to be sure that they knew better than the fathers. If their exegesis disagreed with the Confessions then they knew they were not Lutheran for the Confessions are the correct interpretation of the Scriptures. During this time, Wisconsin's teaching of church and ministry was clearly enunciated (89). John Philipp Koehler was the creative genius of Wauwatosa Theology while August Pieper was a powerful advocate of it. Closely associated with the Wauwatosa Gospel was the Protestant Controversy which was a tragic episode in Wisconsin Synod history (106–108).

There are several interesting notes in this section. The Pomeranian Bertha Pieper whose sons became leaders in both the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods is featured (59). George Brumder, the synod's first publisher and his family connections with synod pastors is noted (68–69). Philipp von Rohr, longtime synod president and his operation on the dining room table by James Mayo, is presented (97). The Ackermann resignation at DMLC as a result of anti-German prejudice is included (104).

Chapter 5, "Challenges and Opportunities (1949–1961)" centers on further expansion in mission work and the dissolution of the Synodical Conference. During this period, work began in Africa and Japan. It is interesting that the Habben name is connected with both fields. Albrecht Habben served in Africa (150–151), and later Kermit Habben spent his entire ministry in Japan (184–185). In home missions, the synod reached the

ends of the country, both California (155–157) and Florida (158–159).

One of the saddest chapters in the history of Lutheranism in America was the demise of the Synodical Conference. Already during the 1930s, divergent views arose between Wisconsin and Missouri (160). Missouri produced a number of union documents with the American Lutheran Church that were ambiguous and compromising in doctrine. The rift between Missouri on the one hand and the ELS and Wisconsin on the other continued to widen. Missouri began to make a distinction between prayer fellowship and joint-prayer so that its members could pray at meetings with church bodies with whom they were not in fellowship. In 1945, forty-four of Missouri's pastors drew up a statement known as the *Statement of the Forty-Four* in which they openly rejected the old Missouri stand on church unity and related doctrines (161). There were even questions concerning inerrancy at the St. Louis seminary. As the hope of settling these differences gradually faded, the ELS with deep regret declared at its convention in 1955 that its fellowship relations with the Missouri Synod were suspended (162). The Wisconsin Synod broke fellowship with Missouri in 1961 (163–164). Still, this suspension was not without the loss of some members to both the Missouri Synod and to the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC), formed in 1960 (166). In 1963, both the ELS and Wisconsin withdrew from the Synodical Conference (160). This ended both synods' association

with the Missouri and the Synodical Conference, which had been such a blessing through the years. In 1967, the two remaining synods in the Synodical Conference, Missouri and the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (SELC-Slovak), dissolved the organization. The SELC then merged with the Missouri Synod.

The final two chapters of the book bring the history of the Wisconsin to the present day. Questions arose concerning Wisconsin's ability to make it on its own after the separation from Missouri. Had it been too dependent on the big sister synod? "The synod was in only 16 states and two overseas mission fields and was only about 232,000 communicant members strong" (173). However, the synod met the challenge with the Savior's help. In home missions, the phrase was coined "Every state by '78" (187), and the synod nearly made it. In world missions, the synod reached new fields with the Gospel of Christ the Savior from sin, death, and the devil. The educational system of the synod continued to grow, and finally it was strengthened through amalgamation (220–223). Two hymnals were produced, two catechisms, and the *Northwestern Lutheran* became *Forward in Christ*.

In 1967, representatives of the ELS and the WELS organized the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum to give them an opportunity for mutual assistance and strengthening in their common faith. It was to review the work of each synod and give special attention to any concerns that might surface in the relationship between the two bodies

while encouraging one another in the Lord's work (190).

While the forum benefited the two synods, still there was a desire for the formation of a world-wide organization of church bodies in confessional agreement. Such an organization, the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC), was established at Oberwesel, Germany in 1993. The conference was to have both a doctrinal and mission emphasis. It was to maintain and promote a Lutheran confessional stance throughout the world. It also was to encourage a mission-minded attitude among its constituency (232–233).

A beneficial addition to the book would have been a timeline of the history of the Wisconsin Synod much like the timeline of the synod produced in a recent copy of the *Concordia History Institute Quarterly* 98, no. 2 (Summer 2025): 9–19. Also, it seemed that little was said about the presidency of Carl Mischke during whose time the synod had major growth. At the same time, one realizes that only so much can be included in a history such as this.

John Braun and Joel Otto have produced a superb history for the hundredth seventy-fifth anniversary of the WELS founded in 1850. Priceless pictures allow the reader to relive the great events of this history. This coffee-table book is one of the finest keepsakes that this reviewer can imagine for the anniversary. It is a valuable resource for the study of WELS history and Lutheranism in America in general. The book would be a great addition to any church library and a meaningful gift

for those interested in synod history. A free synod history Bible study on this book is available and can be downloaded at online.nph.net. It's also a fine visual aid and resource for Lutheran school teachers. John Braun and Joel Otto are to be congratulated for all their diligent work and efforts.

— Gaylin R. Schmeling

LSQ

Book Review: *Here We Stand: A Lutheran Response to Child Abuse*

Nessan, Craig L., and Victor I. Vieth, eds. *Here We Stand: A Lutheran Response to Child Abuse*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2025. xxxvi + 435 pages. Price: \$58.00.

How many books tackle the tough topic of child abuse? Possibly too numerous to count. How many tackle this topic from a *Lutheran* perspective? *Here We Stand* ensures that there is at least one.

Craig L. Nessan and Victor I. Vieth have compiled a volume that brings together writers from the three largest Lutheran denominations in the U.S. to address the challenging topic of how the church should respond to child abuse. Nessan and Vieth represent two of these denominations: the ELCA and WELS, respectively. The various articles in the book are “an attempt to reclaim our Christian and Lutheran heritage by once again centering our faith on all that Jesus and Luther tell us about our obligation to children” (xxi). A helpful

summary of each article is included, along with brief biographical information about each of the sixteen contributors.

The book comprises three major sections. The Lutheran foundations for how to address child abuse are addressed in the first section, marshalling support especially from Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. For example, in the fourth chapter, Winston Persaud draws on the Fourth Commandment to show how Lutheran theology addresses child abuse. Persaud references Luther's Large Catechism to emphasize the vocation of parent and warns about idolatry, expressed through the unscriptural wielding of power over others, especially children. That is, although parents are given authority over their children, they do not have limitless power which might be expressed through abuse. Drawing on Luther's "Heidelberg Disputation," Persaud distinguishes between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory, focusing on the fact that God is present with those who suffer child abuse.

The second section delves primarily into specific challenging Scripture passages pertaining to the church's reaction to child abuse (and other applicable sins) and provides a Lutheran interpretation of them. Articles include "Bathsheba and the Nature of David's Sin," in which John D. Schuetze surveys commentaries that make Bathsheba complicit in immoral behavior but concludes that "David 'used' or 'abused' or 'assaulted' Bathsheba sexually..." (137). Schuetze argues in another

article that in the context of the confessional, a pastor is not bound to keep strict confidence when the sin confessed is child abuse (this argument is also taken up by Vieth in another article). Timothy C. Bourman encourages pastors to be more trauma-sensitive in their preaching and includes five homiletical principles for attaining such.

Editors Nesson and Vieth close with a section containing articles specifying how Lutheran theology addresses child abuse, including viewpoints of Luther and Walther. Many of these articles are written (or co-written) by Vieth, such as "Augustine, Luther, and Solomon: Providing Pastoral Guidance to Parents on the Corporal Punishment of Children." In this article, Vieth maintains that even though corporal punishment has been accepted by many throughout history, the dangers of it should discourage its use today. Vieth also presents how to apply law and gospel to victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse, drawing from C. F. W. Walther's work. In this article, Vieth also presents a detailed look at some of the dynamics of child molesters.

Since this volume is a compilation of articles from numerous authors, it is challenging to evaluate it comprehensively. Adding to that challenge is the range of theological background of the authors. It is evident, however, that each of the authors represented in *Here We Stand* have a deep concern for those who suffer child abuse, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, those who perpetrate child abuse. That's possibly the best lens through which to view

these articles: we don't want to reject what a particular author writes simply because they come from a Lutheran church body different from our own. That's not to say that we have to agree with all the emphases presented, either. For example, in "Lutheran Commitments to Children and Child Wellbeing: Theological Foundations and Contemporary Challenges," written by Marcia J. Bunge, we don't need to feel compelled to agree with her advocacy for "gender justice" as contained in an ELCA statement on faith, sexism, and justice. But Bunge does advocate for more awareness of the problem of child abuse to be brought about in church education programs and seminaries.

The second section of this book includes an article by Vieth that focuses on how the physical abuse Luther suffered as a child (at home and at school) affected his life and ministry. It's clear when one reads Luther that he has a special place in his heart for children, his own and in general. Vieth makes a strong case that such a caring attitude on Luther's part resulted, in part, from the abuse he suffered as a child.

Though such an attitude can also be derived from Scripture itself, Luther's advocacy for children was relatively novel in his day.

The articles with which a number of pastors might disagree are the two dealing with the sanctity of the confessional seal. As referenced above, Schuetze argues in "Matthew 18 Also Includes Verse 6" that pastors should not feel compelled to keep

a confession of child abuse private.¹ Schuetze states, "In general, a pastor needs to hold in confidence what is confessed to him" (141), but goes on to say, "Nowhere in the doctrines of Christian admonition, the ministry of the keys, or the Eighth Commandment does Scripture teach a doctrine of confidential or privileged communication" (142) as defined by various state laws. Vieth agrees with Schuetze's approach when he states in another article, "The Lutheran concept of private confession is a human doctrine not found in Scripture" (213) and says even more strongly, "It is heretical to elevate any human tradition to a level where it forces a pastor to violate the clear commands of Christ, and to needlessly expose a child to ongoing abuse or an early grave" (224–225).

Pastors in the ELS will note that these statements do not align with the statement adopted by the synod's Doctrine Committee in 2019, "Private Absolution and the Confessional Seal," in which the committee states, "A confession made by an individual seeking absolution for a particular sin must not be revealed, *even if the act was criminal and even if the law may compel its disclosure*" (4, emphasis added). An argument could be made, however, that maintaining the confessional seal in an absolute sense in cases of child abuse might provide an "out" for the

¹ In Matthew 18:6 Jesus says, "But, if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a huge millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (EHV).

abuser. Vieth includes an account of Roman Catholic priests who sincerely confessed the sin of child sexual abuse but, knowing they would not be turned in to the police by the priest to whom they were confessing, felt that they could continue in their sin (218). Thus, a pastor must make a decision regarding what he would do if a child abuser confesses this sin to him.²

One of the greatest challenges for a Lutheran pastor is to apply God's law and gospel appropriately. Vieth provides a helpful article in the context of child sexual abuse: "What Would Walther Do? Applying Law and Gospel to Victims and Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse." I found this article to be a helpful reminder that the *way* we preach law and gospel must be considered from the perspective of the abused. For example, if a person comes to us who is struggling with alcohol or drugs or anger or ..., do we focus on that issue

or see it as a potential symptom of past (or current) abuse? Preaching the law to a person struggling with these sins might be missing the bigger picture. *Why* has that person turned to those behaviors? Could it be they've done so as a coping mechanism? Consider the "brokenness of the victim" (293) before adding to their burden. In like manner, Vieth gives appropriate advice on applying law and gospel to the perpetrators of child abuse, not letting them off by offering "cheap grace" and reminding them that—even when they receive Christ's forgiveness—there may be earthly consequences of their sin.

This volume would be a worthy addition to the pastor's bookshelf. You will probably not agree with everything it contains, whether such disagreement would arise from purely theological reasons or proper application of biblical principles. But we in the Lutheran Church need to be better educated in general on the topic of child abuse. I have never met Craig Nessan; I have met, listened to, and consulted with Victor Vieth on numerous occasions. His passion for advocating for the "least of these" is tireless and undaunted. That passion is reflected in this book, not only in the articles he wrote, but in those he and Nessan included. This book will open your eyes in many ways and enhance the way you and your flock minister to God's people and to anyone you meet.

— Michael K. Smith

² Just recently, the state of Washington has decided not to enforce a relatively new law requiring clergy to reveal information regarding child abuse they hear in the confessional setting (see <https://washingtonstatetestandard.com/2025/10/10/washington-will-not-require-clergy-to-report-child-abuse-disclosed-in-confession/>.) The ELCA is considering a document that would direct its clergy to report child abuse they learn about in the confessional (https://wng.org/roundups/lutheran-denomination-considering-making-clergy-mandatory-reporters-1760998850?fbclid=IwY2xjawNm_VZleHRuA2F1bQIxMQAxBHthnj97oedRgtNEIf-PToRi68-qr-PbDr54f8yFnEBZn7Dx98A4-nNYnrh_C_aem_icb2bFpcr9dM9xith-t2gUA).

Homily on 1 Peter 5:1–4: “Jesus Called You to Shepherd His Sheep.”

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Text: *So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4; ESV)*

Prayer: O Lord Jesus Christ, only Shepherd and [Overseer] of our souls, who suffered for us and bore our sins in Your own body on the tree, we give You hearty thanks for all Your goodness and mercy, and most humbly ask You to grant that with Your stripes we may be healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; but turn us again to You and impart Your grace to us, that, being dead to sins, we may live unto righteousness, and evermore serve You, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 106)

“**P**ASTOR, I THINK WE NEED TO LIGHTEN UP ON our Communion practice.”

“Pastor, our church isn’t that different from the church across town.”

“Pastor, you’re the reason they stopped coming.”

“Pastor, we never had any problems when Pastor So-And-So was here.”

“Pastor, if we don’t make some changes, this church is gonna close.”

“Pastor, you pushed her away when you told her she couldn’t take Communion.”

“Pastor, why are you picking on him? We’re all sinners. You need to be more loving.”

“Pastor, I don’t think we should condemn anyone. Jesus tells us not to judge.”

“Pastor, you just have to get your way, don’t you?”

“Pastor, you’re just a big bully!”

“Pastor.” The word comes to us from Latin through French. It means “shepherd.” What does a shepherd do? A shepherd leads the sheep to good pasture and clean water. A shepherd protects the sheep. A shepherd gives extra attention to the aging, the sick, the weak, and the vulnerable. A shepherd seeks after the sheep that wander and become lost. A shepherd stands in and does his work even when the sheep would rather have “room to roam,” more flexibility, more freedom. A shepherd does all these things out of love for the sheep. He wants them to be happy, healthy, and strong.

The sheep who are happy, healthy, and strong thank him for it. They let him know his work is appreciated. They are glad to hear his voice. They follow his lead. They trust his guidance. They aren’t interested in any other pastures or any other shepherds. They are content in this place with this man. They are a tremendous gift to the shepherd.

But not all the sheep are so easy on the shepherd. Some are constantly testing boundaries—hopping over fences designed for their protection and safety. They cast their eyes on neighboring pastures; these look so appealing, so vibrant, so green. On the other side of the fence, sheep from other flocks coax them closer. They wander further and further away from the shepherd who is most concerned with their care. They don’t understand how heavy their actions weigh on their shepherd. They get themselves in trouble, and then they put the blame on him.

And when a sheep blames the shepherd—when a parishioner blames a pastor—there could very well be some truth in what they say. There is no such thing as a perfect pastor. We pastors know how impatient we can be, how easy it is to lose our focus and go through the motions, how we can forget Who we work for. We know how tempting it is to play favorites, how self-righteousness and pride can overshadow our love, how reluctant we can be to meditate on the Word of God and pray.

If sin did not trouble the under-shepherds of the Lord, then He would not have had to warn us like He does through the Apostle Peter's pen. He warns us to fulfill our responsibilities, "*not under compulsion... not for shameful gain... not domineering over those in your charge.*" That is the attitude of hirelings, and we are no hirelings.

We are servants of the Most High God, called to "*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight... willingly, as God would have you... eagerly... being examples to the flock.*" That is a tall order, a tall task, far above our ability to do it. But we didn't choose this work. We were chosen for this work. The merciful Lord looked down on our weak flesh, our timid hearts, our unsteady minds, and said, "You will be a shepherd of My sheep."

But with Moses we say, "*Who am I that I should go? They will not believe me or listen to my voice. I am slow of speech and of tongue*" (Exod 3:11, 4:1, 4:10). With Jeremiah: "*Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth*" (Jer 1:6). With Peter: "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord*" (Luke 5:8). With Thomas: "*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*" (John 14:5).

Jesus has the answer for every one of our objections. We imagine the work is all about us, our strengths and weaknesses, our ability and vision, our fortitude and courage. But Jesus says, "*I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak*" (Exod 4:12). "*For to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak*" (Jer 1:7). "*Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men*" (Luke 5:10). "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6).

Your calling to shepherd the flock is a calling from Him. The work you do is His work. That means He takes full responsibility for commissioning you to serve in His name. He knows the burdens you carry—He took them on His own shoulders up Calvary. He knows the sins you've done—He suffered eternal punishment to atone for everyone. He knows the weakness of your flesh—He came to redeem you and all men from the sin and death that each one of us deserves.

Jesus made no mistake in calling you to be a shepherd. He also leaves no doubt that He will equip and sustain you to do the work. The gifts you deliver to His sheep through Word and Sacrament are also gifts He gives to you, because you are a sheep in the Lord's flock along with those you serve. The grace and peace He delivers to them, He delivers to you.

Pastor, you have sinned; you have fallen short.

Pastor, Jesus forgives you; He gives His body and blood *for you*.

Pastor, “*when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*” 

Sermon on Philippians 2:4–8: Trinity 13

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Text: μὴ τὰ ἔαυτῶν ἔκαστοι σκοποῦντες, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ ἔτέρων ἔκαστοι. τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἀρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι Ἰσα θεῷ, ἀλλὰ ἔαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὐρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐταπείνωσεν ἔαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ· *Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.* (Philippians 2:4–8)

PERHAPS SOMEONE HAS SAID TO YOU: “DON’T tell me what to think.” We certainly hope that at Bethany we are teaching you *how* to think, *how* to solve problems, *how* to approach challenges and opportunities in life. We will not really tell you *what* to think. We will encourage you to understand certain *things that are important to know* about, and also certain things that we hope you will think and believe. But no one will force you to believe the Christian faith. We *can’t* do that. It’s the work of the *Holy Spirit* to call people into the Christian faith. We pray that you will understand the Christian faith as the Bible teaches it—whether you believe it or not. We pray that the Holy Spirit will use His Word to guide you to believe Scripture as the truth and the Word of God.

There are things in the world that are true, and things that are false. We may disagree on what we think is *important*, but as a Christian institution we set forth our faith in one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that Jesus is the true and eternal Son of God. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, that the Ten Commandments are God's eternal will for mankind. We believe that all people are sinners because Adam and Eve passed on their sinfulness to us. We believe that we are saved only by the grace of God through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

That becomes the point of what Paul says in our text from Philippians. *"Let this mind [this attitude, this thought] be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."* Jesus is true God, Lord of the universe. But He *"made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men."* *"Let this mind be in you!"* Paul basically says to us Christians: "Think like this!" "Have Jesus' attitude." Jesus was God but didn't brag or boast. He was humble.—Be humble. Be kind. Be considerate. *"Look out not only for [your] own interests, but also for the interests of others."*

Jesus tells us to *love* our neighbor, even to love our *enemies*. This is contrary to our first thoughts and contrary to the way of the world. But *love* is what God *is*, and what God *does*. He loves us so much that He died for us. We should love those around us so much that we put *them* before ourselves. We want the people around us to be well and also to have eternal life. We can't *believe* for them, but we can *pray* for them and be an example of a redeemed and forgiven child of God—not perfect, but forgiven. Jesus was perfect and sinless, but took our sins on Himself, paid for our guilt, and gave us His righteousness.

We have an expression that people are "full of themselves." They are proud and arrogant. They are selfish, boastful, and self-centered. This is our inclination as sinful human beings. We think of ourselves as "number 1," as most important. "I want what *I* want."

We need to recognize that we are not in charge. We are not God. We are not our own. We belong to God as His creatures, made in His likeness. We are not the most important thing in the world.

Christ, who *is* God, emptied Himself, made Himself of no reputation, took on the form of a servant. Paul says: *"Let this mind be in you!"* We can't take away anyone's sins,—but we can serve them humbly as children of God. We can invite them to know the love and forgiveness of God. We can show the love and humility that Jesus showed for us. We can show them that Jesus died for them too.

It's easy for us sometimes to think we are better than those "sinners" who are outside the church. Our mind can say: "At least I don't do *that*!" But just one sinful thought or one sinful word means that we do not deserve heaven—and we sin more than that each day, maybe each hour or each minute. We are no more deserving of heaven than the worst sinner.

That's why Jesus came to take our place.—But that's also why we can be *sure and certain* of our salvation. It is a gift. It is from outside of us. It's *not* because we are *better*. We *aren't*. It's *not* because we sin less. We sin every day. Salvation is ours because Jesus who is *sinless* took our place. His mind and His attitude was not: "Foolish mankind! You're done for! Off to hell with you." No. Jesus' attitude was: "I will bear that punishment for you. I will take your place. I will suffer the torments of hell, so you can inherit heaven."

We *want* our neighbor, our friend, our family member, to be in heaven with us. Jesus died for them too. That should be our attitude and concern. Love them as Jesus loved us. Pray for them. Be kind to them. Let them know the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And entrust them to God the Holy Spirit to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify them into the one true faith, into the Holy Christian Church, into the communion of saints, and into everlasting life. LSQ

The Nicene Creed: Romans 9:5

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Prayer: Triune God, be Thou our stay; oh, let us perish never! Cleanse us from our sins, we pray, and grant us life forever. Keep us from the evil one; uphold our faith most holy, grant us to trust you solely with humble hearts and lowly. Let us put God's armor on, with all true Christians running our heav'nly race and shunning the devil's wiles and cunning. Amen, amen! This be done; so sing we, "Alleluia!"

Text: *Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised. Amen. (Romans 9:5)*

ONE OF THE HIGH POINTS ON OUR TRIP TO Turkey in 2005 was to visit the city of Nicaea, modern day Iznik, where the Nicene Creed was formulated. Our tour guide promised that we would see the very church where the Council of Nicaea occurred. Obviously, I was thrilled, but Rebecca was thinking more of buying Iznik tile. Were we really going to see where the creed was written? Sure enough, we drove right up the ruins of the church. However, I soon discovered that this was the location of the second council of Nicaea in 787 and not the first and more important one in 325. That building, one of Constantine's palaces, was submerged near the sea front. But at least Rebecca got Iznik tile.

Today we are commemorating the 1700th Anniversary of the day (June 19, 325) when the First Ecumenical Council accepted the Nicene Creed, the most important creed of Christendom, which is common to all Christian churches throughout the world. As we confess the Nicene

Creed at every celebration of the Lord's Supper, so it has been a part of the eucharistic celebration of every historic Christian church for many centuries. *But what is the significance of the Nicene Creed? Why is this creed so important?*

I. First, the creed maintains that Christ is God as the Father is God. An outwardly pious pastor named Arius in Alexandria, Egypt, the second greatest city in the Roman Empire, was teaching that the second person of the Trinity, the Son, was less than God the Father. He could be called God but only in a figurative sense. The Father was without beginning, but the Son had a beginning, the first and highest of created things. He was like God, but not God as the Father is God. Arius had an excellent gift of propaganda. He composed songs and hymns that were sung in the streets with interesting phrases like "There was when the Son was not." The heresy spread like the wild fires in California.

To combat this error, a council or general synod was held at Nicaea in northwestern Turkey called by Emperor Constantine himself. More than 300 churchmen (bishops) were present, coming from all over the empire, some as far away as Britain and Spain. Even Nicholas of Myra, later known as Santa Claus, was there. It was a sight to behold. Men who had been mutilated in recent persecutions were housed in deluxe accommodations in the emperor's palace.

At the council, a powerful witness to the truth of Scripture arose who was also from Egypt, Athanasius by name. He knew and inwardly digested the Scripture truth of our text which declares that "Christ is God over all, forever blessed" (Rom 9:5), and many other texts such as "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1), and "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), and Christ is "the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20). Therefore, Athanasius defended with all his might the main phrase placed in the creed: "One Lord, Jesus Christ ... God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, *being of one substance (homoousios) with the Father, by whom all things were made.*" Being *homoousios* with the Father, the Greek original, meaning being one substance with the Father, is the center of the creed. He is begotten not made. He was begotten of the Father from all eternity; eternally generated by the Father (Psalm 2:7; John 1:1). There never was when He was not. Being of one substance with the Father, declared that He is absolutely equal to the Father as touching His Godhead.

This battle is still faced today. There are many who believe that Jesus was a good man and teacher. They may even be willing to say He is the greatest man that ever lived, but He is a man and no more. The numbers of those individuals are increasing. Now we can self-righteously leave here today and say "Well I don't believe that. I believe that Christ is true God of one substance with the Father." But are we allowing Jesus to sit on God's throne in our heart? What is on His throne in our hearts today? What we fear, love and trust most in life is our god as Luther taught. *What is on the throne of our heart?* Is it Christ, or is myself? Is it wealth and pleasure begrudging those around us of all the nice things that they have? Is it bitterness toward my spouse and family because they keep me from doing what I want to do? Is it bitterness toward God because I face one struggle or sickness after another? Is it the things that I watch on the internet late at night when no one is around? Is it bitterness and old rivalries with fellow pastors or delegates so we can hardly greet each other on the convention floor? We have all pushed Christ off his throne in our hearts again and again and indeed deserve nothing but punishment.

II. This is why the creed maintains secondly that Christ is the divine Savior who for us men and our salvation became true man. The creed asserted the true doctrine of Scripture, but when the bishops went home the Arian party made a concerted effort to overthrow the doctrine of Nicaea. Yet, Athanasius stood firm on the scriptural *homousios* doctrine that God the Son is one substance with the Father. The struggle continued on, and often it appeared that the whole world stood against Athanasius and Athanasius against the world. Slowly, however, with the help of three younger theologians, the three great Cappadocians (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa), the Nicene doctrine prevailed.

At the Council of Constantinople in 381, the doctrine of Nicaea was reaffirmed. The battle of Athanasius, who had died in the meantime after enduring five exiles, had not been in vain. This council also condemned the heresy which rejected the deity of the Holy Spirit and added much of what our present Nicene Creed states concerning the Holy Ghost.

Athanasius defended the teaching of the Nicene Creed with his life because he knew that his only hope of salvation was found in a divine Savior. A Savior that was not God could not save. This is our only hope too, now and in the hour of our death. Only a divine Savior could bear

the great burden of all sin, even the sins of pushing Him off the throne of our heart.

In the holy incarnation, He who was God from all eternity became true man, our human brother, in the Virgin's womb, because our Savior and Substitute also had to be one of us. He took upon Himself our flesh made from dust, so that through unity with His divinity He might conquer sin, death, and all our foes in that flesh and raise us to His divine glory, eternal life in heaven. He became as we are, a son of man, so that we might be as He is, the sons of God, sharing in divine life. He partook in our suffering, death, and hell so that we could partake in His glory, life, and heaven, a wonderful exchange (*Der fröhliche Wechsel*).

He routed all our enemies and then He entered into death itself, tearing it apart, ripping it to pieces, so now death for the Christian is the gate way into the new and glorious existence of heaven. That heavenly treasure, obtained for all through His incarnation, holy life, and great passion, was announced and offered to all by His glorious resurrection, declaring the whole world not guilty and righteous in Christ. Much greater than V-E Day, Victory in Europe Day (May 8) eighty years ago, or V-J Day, the resurrection proclaims Christ vanquished all our foes and now open is fair Eden's door.

The creed explains that the blessings of Christ's redemptive work are present for us in "one baptism for the remission of sins" and in the other means of grace. Here the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, works faith in the Savior, strengthens our faith-life, and preserves us in the true faith in the Savior unto our end.

The heart and core of the Nicene confession is belief in "one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, by whom all things were made." There never was when He was not. Being of one substance with the Father proclaims that He is absolutely equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, yet he also became true man for our salvation. Therefore, we have a divine Savior who could give His divine life and blood as a sufficient ransom price for all men and overcome the sharpness of death, opening the kingdom of heaven to all believers. Even now He is holding us secure. We indeed worship the Holy and Blessed Trinity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, the Triune God, Trinity in Person and unity in substance of majesty coequal. LSQ

Sermon on Revelation 21:1–5

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Text: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, because the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And the sea no longer existed. And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And from the throne I heard a loud voice that said, “Look! God’s dwelling is with people. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain, because the former things have passed away.” The one who was seated on the throne said to me, “Look, I am making everything new!” He also said, “Write, for these words are trustworthy and true” (Revelation 21:1–5, EHV).*

IN JESUS THE CHRIST, DEAR FELLOW REDEEMED,

My work car is a 1997 Honda Civic. It has over 275,000 miles on it, and it's beginning to show the signs of its age. It burns a little oil, and it has a power steering leak. About four weeks ago when I changed the oil, I noticed it's now got an oil leak as well. There's some rust beginning to show because of the Minnesota salt. Through the twenty-four years that I've owned it, I've repaired it many times trying to make it run like new. But I'm having to face the hard reality that the day is probably fast approaching when I'm going to need a new car. I'm a little attached to that Honda Civic, because I've put on a lot of those 275,000 miles. The writing's on the wall. It'll be a sad day when I have to say goodbye to that car.

Something that's even sadder for me though is the wear and tear that I'm seeing on my car I'm also starting to feel in my own body. I don't have any leaks yet. But I can feel the rust starting to build under the surface. My body just doesn't perform the way it used to. And unlike a car, I can't go out and buy a new one. You may laugh right now, but your day is coming. We would love to be new. We would love bodies that always functioned as if they were new. But in the rust and decay of this world, and the moths and the death that eat away at us, what great comfort our text has for us. God says, "Look, I'm making everything new." These words are trustworthy and true.

How do we understand the vision that John was seeing here? First of all, he says there's a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away. I don't have time to dig into that today, but what I do want to focus on is the new Jerusalem.

He says that he saw a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. What does that mean? What is being depicted? Well, in the book of Hebrews, it teaches us that those who by faith have come to Mount Zion have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. John wasn't really seeing a city. That's not what was represented. Notice he goes on and he speaks about it as if it's a woman. That she's adorned as a bride for the groom. So that new Jerusalem, that Mount Zion, which we approach by faith, which we become members of by faith, is the church. John was viewing the church on Judgment Day when this earth, the first earth and the first heaven have passed away. Today I want to challenge you to see that he was seeing you and that when God says he is making everything new, he was including you. How can we know that these words are trustworthy and true?

If you spend enough time around brides, and as pastors we get to do that probably more than other people, you will notice how protective they are of their dresses. That toddler with the glass of Coke is banished because that dress needs to be perfect and white. If we symbolically are all brides of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, how protective have you been of your dress?

Now when we look at sins, it's amazing to me how dirty sexual sins can make us feel. I've had people, men and women, express to me in their guilt of sexual sins, "Pastor, I feel so dirty." And it's true, those sins are dirt. But do not think that it's only sexual sins that make you dirty before God. Your lies, your greed, your laziness, all of those sins are mud smeared into your dress. It's exactly as Isaiah said. "All of us have

become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. Like the wind, our sins sweep us away" (Isa 64:6, NIV).

What is amazing about this image coming down out of heaven is that this bride—you and me—have been made acceptable to the Bridegroom, to the Lamb who was slain, and we are made acceptable not by our own merit, but because by faith we have washed our robes in His blood and been made white. Jesus took away every stain of your sexual impurity, whether in thought, word, or deed. Jesus took away the stain of your lies and your laziness and your greed and whatever other guilt is plaguing you. You are washed clean. You are now perfect and holy in God's eyes. In the book of Ephesians, Paul tells us that we're now holy and blameless, specifically, because God washed us in baptism.

So now you've got all this guilt plaguing your mind and your heart. You remember the things that you have done. God is challenging you not to look at them, but to look at your Bridegroom. To look at the one who loves you and has forgiven all of your sins.

When Satan comes, and he will come, and he tries to tell you that you are not worthy to be connected with Christ, that someone with your sins could never be loved by him, and someone with your weaknesses and failings could never be part of the new Jerusalem, you can tell him, "You have the true assessment of my guilt. But you are not the one who loves me. The Lamb does. He was willing to die so that I can be in heaven. He was willing to shed His blood to wash me clean and make me His precious possession. So, Satan, you shut up, because the Lamb's word is stronger than your word. He declares that he loves me."

How can you know this is true? Because our bridegroom didn't just die. We aren't marrying a dead bridegroom. We're marrying the living Lamb. We're connected with a living Savior. His resurrection proves that he has the power and ability to wash us clean and that God has accepted his sacrifice on our behalf. The resurrection declares to you that you now are citizens of heaven and that the barriers between you and God have been swept away in the flood of his blood. So these words are trustworthy and true: You are the new Jerusalem. You are the bride of the Lamb. You will live with God forever.

Our cars are going to rust. Our bodies are going to get old and many of us, if not all of us, will be in the grave before this day that John saw comes true. But God is making everything new, even you. The Lamb loves you. Your sins are forgiven. You are a citizen of the Jerusalem above. To God be the glory now and forever. Amen. 



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