

# The Roots of the Church: Church in a Changing World

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## Introduction

When one walks through the African landscape, they are often surrounded by trees that seem to have stood there forever. Picture the mighty baobab, the fig tree, and the towering acacia - trees that have weathered centuries of droughts, storms, and shifting climates. Their resilience is not accidental. It is rooted – literally - in the strength of their foundations.

Some trees send taproots deep into the soil, reaching water even in the driest of seasons. Others spread their roots wide, forming networks that connect them to the earth and to one another. Together, they form forests that endure for generations, shaping the very climate of the land.

However, not all roots give life. Some plants, lacking roots of their own, survive by parasitically draining strength from others - appearing green for a season but unable to endure. In the Church, too, there are movements and ideologies that feed off the vitality of the Gospel without being truly rooted in it. They flourish briefly, but without grounding in Scripture and faithful to confession, withering under pressure. This is a warning: not every growth is healthy, not every root is holy. Discernment in such circumstances is essential. A tree with deep roots can stand for centuries, but a forest without true roots will be swept away. The Church must remain rooted in the Word, nourished by the living water of Christ, and vigilant against anything that draws without giving, flourishes without fruit, or grows without truth.

Speaking in an interview, an agricultural consultant Bonolo (ra-Kitso) noted “that roots are not only vital for plant survival—they also serve economic and ecological purposes. Many roots are edible, like sweet potatoes and carrots. Others have medicinal properties. Roots prevent soil erosion, purify soil and water, and stabilize the entire ecosystems. In sort, roots are essential to life, resilience, and productivity.

So too is with the Church.

We face the storms of history: the hot winds of secularism, the drought of moral confusion, the flood of consumerism, and the tremors of political change. But our **hope is not** to bend with every gust, nor to retreat from the weather. Our hope lies in our roots—roots that go deep, roots that spread wide, roots that nourish us with living water.

These roots are the Word of God in Scripture. They are the Creeds that confess the faith of the Church across centuries. They are the Lutheran Confessions, born in the crucible of the Reformation. They are bold declarations of faith in times of danger—such as *Barmen Declaration* of 1934, The South African Status Confessions (1977) and the Belhar Confession.

Today, as we gather in Synod, we are reminded that if the roots are strong, the tree will stand. And if the tree stands, then the forest of God’s people - our congregations, our families, our communities - will bear fruit and offer shelter to generations yet to come.

Therefore, for the sake of the Topic of the Synod let us take a few moments and reflect on these roots. Let us deepen them. Let us spread them. And let us put our minds together, like a forest planted by the streams of living water.

## Scripture as the Primary Root of the Church

Scripture is the taproot of the Church—deep, unshakable, and life-giving. It anchors the Church in the soil of divine revelation, resisting the droughts and storms of history, ideology, and spiritual assault. Scripture is not one root among many; it is **the** root. The Word of God, manifesting the will of God in Christ for the salvation of the world, is the source/root from which all true doctrine and faithful practice must grow. Without this taproot, the Church cannot be the Church. The psalmist captures this beautifully: *“Blessed is the one who delights in the law of the Lord, and on his law meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither”* (Psalm 1:2-3). Meditation on God’s Word is like being planted beside a river - drawing life in every season, flourishing despite heat or drought. The leaves of faith remain green because the roots are nourished by living water.

For two millennia, the Church has endured persecution, heresy, division, and reform. Through it all, her survival has depended on her rootedness in Scripture. When corruption threatened, the Reformers called the faithful back to *sola Scriptura* - Scripture alone as the norm of faith. The taproot of Scripture has sustained the Church through empires, ideologies, and cultural upheaval. And today, amid poverty, injustice, and despair, we still hear the prophetic cry: *“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”* (Amos 5:24), and the comforting voice of Christ: *“Take heart, I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33).

Yet history reminds us that Scripture, though divinely inspired, can be misinterpreted or twisted. Even in the apostolic era, Paul warned the Galatians against “another gospel” (Gal. 1:6–9). To guard against such distortions, the early Church developed **creeds** - not to replace Scripture, but to summarize its essential truths in concise, authoritative formulations. These creeds are secondary roots, grounded in Scripture, offering doctrinal stability and pastoral care when storms arise in the church threatening the integrity of the Gospel. In other words, Creeds serve the Church by clarifying the faith, defending against heresy. They are communal, Spirit-guided

affirmations of biblical truth. Their authority is derivative, not independent. They help the Church remain faithful to the Gospel across generations and cultures. In this way, creeds mirror the Scriptures. Scripture gives life and the creeds preserve its shape. Together, they ensure that the Church remains planted by streams of living water, bearing fruit in season, and standing firm in the face of every storm.

### **The Creeds and Confessions as the Wide Roots of the Church**

If Scripture is the taproot, then the Creeds and Confessions are like the lateral roots of both the trees and the plants— spreading wide, giving stability, and connecting the tree to the forest.

#### The Nicene Creed: A Lateral Root of the Church

The Nicene Creed emerged in the early fourth century amid the Arian controversy—one of the most significant theological challenges in Christian history. Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, taught that the Son of God was a created being, asserting “there was a time when he was not.” Such teaching threatened the divinity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the very possibility of salvation. For if Christ were not truly God, humanity could not be truly redeemed.

To address this crisis, Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, gathering bishops from across the Christian world. He presided over this meeting even though he was not baptized. He was baptized 12 years thereafter at his death bed. Their task was to articulate and defend the apostolic faith. The resulting Nicene Creed declared that Jesus Christ is “*begotten, not made, of one substance (homoousios) with the Father.*” This confession upheld the biblical witness: that the Word was with God and was God (John 1:1–3), that Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15–20), and the radiance of God’s glory (Heb. 1:3).

By affirming the Son’s consubstantiality with the Father, the Creed preserved the truth of salvation and safeguarded the Church from reducing Christ to a lesser being. It did not invent doctrine but clarified and protected what Scripture had already revealed.

Beyond doctrinal defense, the Nicene Creed became a universal standard of orthodoxy. Unlike local confessions, it achieved ecumenical authority, transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries. It was swiftly integrated into baptismal rites, catechesis, and liturgy. Through its

recitation, Christians not only affirm right doctrine but also embody their unity across time and space—joining their voices with believers of every generation.

### The 1,700 years Anniversary of Nicaea

The commemoration of 1,700 years since the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) is a moment of profound significance for both Church and society.

**For the Church**, it is a reminder of unity in diversity. Despite denominational fragmentation, Christians—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—continue to confess the Nicene Creed as a shared heritage. It affirms continuity of the faith we proclaim today, that it is not new, but the same faith declared by the early Church. But in postmodern age of pluralism and relativism, the anniversary undergirds the enduring importance of doctrinal clarity. The commemoration is an opportunity for Churches in the ecumenical movement to translated the various Theological Agreements into church binding Ecclesial Agreements. Making Christian Unity more visible.

**For society**, the Nicene Creed offers a moral and spiritual foundation. It affirms transcendent truth in a world often shaped by relativism. By confessing the incarnation, it grounds human dignity, justice, and compassion in divine reality. It also offers a model of reconciliation: the Council of Nicaea, despite conflict, produced a unifying confession. This can inspire societies to pursue healing and dialogue across divisions.

### **Implications for Society in Southern Africa**

The Nicene Creed affirms the dignity of every human life through the incarnation—God became truly human. In contexts of poverty and injustice, this truth grounds the Church’s advocacy for human rights and development.

It offers a vision of reconciliation in a region scarred by apartheid and its consequences. The Triune God as confessed in the Nicene Creed provides healing models for today’s Society across tribal, racial, and national divides.

Finally, the Creed counters secular relativism. In a globalized, consumerist world, it proclaims eternal truth: Christ is *“Light from Light, true God from true God.”* This anchors young Christians in faith amid competing ideologies.

The Creed is not just a doctrinal statement - it is a living confession with power to transform both Church and society.

### **The Role of the Lutheran Confessions in Lutheran Unity and ecumenical engagement.**

The Lutheran Confessions, primarily contained in the *Book of Concord* (1580), have long served as a theological anchor for Lutheran identity. Including the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord, these documents articulate a Gospel-centered vision grounded in justification by faith and fidelity to Scripture. Though originally crafted to resolve sixteenth-century doctrinal disputes, their relevance has endured, shaping Lutheran unity from 1923 to the present. In the aftermath of World War I, global Lutheranism entered a new era, seeking both theological integrity and institutional cooperation. The Confessions became both bridge and boundary - defining internal identity and guiding ecumenical engagement.

**The 400th anniversary** of the Augsburg Confession in 1930 marked a pivotal moment. Amid postwar fragmentation and rising nationalism, the commemoration reaffirmed the Confessions as living documents for contemporary unity. Churches in Europe and North America reassessed their structures, using the Confessions to distinguish Lutheranism from other Protestant traditions while fostering international dialogue.

Efforts to unify scattered Lutheran churches intensified through bodies like the Lutheran World Convention (1923) and the Lutheran World Federation (1947). The Confessions provided a shared theological heritage, though tensions emerged over interpretation. In North America, the LCMS upheld strict subscription, while others adopted more historical or contextual approaches. These divergent views shaped patterns of unity and division - some emphasizing doctrinal purity, others prioritizing ecumenical collaboration. The Augsburg Confession became a key resource in interdenominational dialogues, balancing Lutheran distinctiveness with openness to shared mission.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) affirmed the Confessions as foundational to membership, yet their interpretation increasingly reflected global diversity. Churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America emphasized the liberating Gospel in contexts of poverty, injustice, and political struggle. The Confessions were no longer seen as European relics but as living witnesses to the Gospel's relevance across cultures. Unity was sustained not through uniformity, but through a shared confessional foundation interpreted contextually.

Since the 1990s, the Confessions have continued to shape Lutheran identity and ecumenical progress. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999), signed by the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church, drew directly from the Confessions' central message, demonstrating their enduring ecumenical power. Yet internal divisions persist - between confessional conservatives and progressive churches. For some, fidelity to the Confessions entails resisting cultural shifts; for others, it invites reinterpretation in light of contemporary issues such as gender, sexuality, and social justice. Despite these tensions, the Confessions remain the shared grammar for theological debate, ensuring that Lutheran discourse remains rooted in a common heritage.

From 1923 to the present, the Lutheran Confessions have served as a cornerstone of Lutheran unity—shaping identity, guiding ecumenical engagement, and providing continuity across generations and cultures. Interpreted diversely yet held in common, they function as both a unifying force and a site of theological tension. Ultimately, the Confessions are not museum pieces but living witnesses to the Gospel, sustaining Lutheran unity in diversity and grounding the Church's mission in a changing world.

### **The Lutheran Confessions**

In the sixteenth century, the Church faced storms of corruption and division. Out of that soil grew the Lutheran Confessions - roots that gave the Reformation stability.

The Augsburg Confession of 1530 is central. It is a root that proclaims salvation by grace through faith in Christ. It declares that the Church is the assembly of believers where the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered. This is not just history; it is our identity.

The Catechisms of Martin Luther - small and large - are roots that have taught generation after generation. Like small feeder roots, they reach into the soil of everyday life, teaching children and adults alike the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. They remind us that doctrine is not for scholars only but for every believer.

The Formula of Concord is another root, binding the Lutheran churches together in unity. It teaches that our hope is not in human agreement but in God's truth revealed in Christ.

Together, the Creeds and Confessions spread out wide, giving the tree of the Church stability against storms. They also connect us - like the root networks in a forest - binding congregations together, sharing nourishment, supporting one another.

### **Modern Declarations as Adaptive Roots**

A living tree does not only rely on ancient roots. It also sends out new roots when the soil changes. These adaptive roots allow it to draw life in new situations. In the same way, the Church has spoken fresh words of confession in modern times.

The **Barmen Declaration of 1934** was one such root. In the face of Nazi tyranny, the Church declared: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death." Barmen reminds us that no ideology, no political leader, no earthly power can take the place of Christ.

In our own context of Southern Africa, we know well the cost of confessing the truth. Under apartheid, the Church faced a system that denied the image of God in black people, divided the Body of Christ, and proclaimed a false gospel of racial superiority. Silence was not an option.

The Church declared a **status confessionis (1977)**: a situation where the very essence of the Gospel is at stake. To remain neutral was to betray Christ. The Belhar Confession arose in this context, proclaiming unity, reconciliation, and justice as essential to the Gospel. It declared that division along racial lines is sin, that reconciliation in Christ breaks down walls of hostility, and that God stands especially with the poor and oppressed.

This was not merely political. It was theological. To confess Christ is to confess that all are one in him, that no ideology of race can divide those whom God has reconciled, and that the Church must stand where Christ stands — with the marginalized, the suffering, the crucified of history. The witness of the Southern African churches continues to speak today. Though apartheid has fallen, the struggle for justice continues in new forms: poverty, inequality, xenophobia, gender violence, ecological destruction. The status confessionis reminds us that confession is not only about doctrine but about life, about embodying the truth of the Gospel in word and deed.

The **Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999)**: what started as a bilateral agreement between Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church was rectified by other Christian world communions namely the World Methodist Council in 2006 and the Anglican Communion, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2017. What was not possible to confess together over centuries became possible, namely that these communions can say “we confess together that we are saved by grace alone, through faith in Christ”.

These ecclesial declarations are neither replacements of the Scriptures nor of the Creeds. They teach us how to worship and confess Christ together in the face of modern challenges. The JDDJ is an Ecclesial Agreement received and authorized for implementation at the Highest level of our respective **Church Communions**.

**The Episcopal Office:** a special Root of the Church

If Scripture is the taproot and the creeds are lateral roots, then the episcopal office is like a stabilizing rootstock that secures continuity with the apostolic foundation. From the earliest period of the Church, bishops (episkopoi) were entrusted with the tasks of teaching sound doctrine, guarding the faith, and shepherding God’s people (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:7, Holy Bible, 1989). This ministry reflects the apostolic mission itself: to proclaim the Gospel and safeguard the unity of the body of Christ.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 CE) repeatedly emphasized that where the bishop is, there the community finds its visible center of unity, declaring: ‘Where the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church’ (Ignatius, Smyrneans

8:2, Holmes, 1999). The bishop's role is therefore not merely administrative but sacramental and pastoral, rooting the Church in the apostolic witness.

Later writers such as Cyprian of Carthage reinforced this understanding, affirming that the bishop embodies the unity of the Church in its local expression: 'The bishop is in the Church and the Church is in the bishop' (Cyprian, Epistle 66, Brent, 2004). The episcopal office thus ensures apostolic continuity and sacramental faithfulness, functioning as a root that nourishes both doctrine and community life.

### **The Synod** a special Root of the Church

If the bishop embodies apostolic continuity, then the synod represents the Church's communal discernment under the guidance of the Spirit. The model for synodality is found in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), where apostles and elders deliberated together over a contentious issue and concluded: 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28, Holy Bible, 1989).

The synod is therefore not a human parliament but a spiritual practice of walking together (synhodos), ensuring that discernment belongs to the whole people of God. This communal dimension was reaffirmed in the early ecumenical councils, such as Nicaea in 325 CE, where bishops collectively defended the faith against heresy (Pelikan, 1971).

In modern times, the Second Vatican Council described synodality as the participation of the whole people of God in discerning and living out the faith (Vatican II, Lumen Gentium §12, 1964). The synod acts as a root because it embodies the Spirit's ongoing guidance, balances episcopal authority with accountability, and ensures that the diverse gifts of the faithful contribute to the life of the Church (1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Holy Bible, 1989).

The episcopal office and the synod together embody complementary roots of the Church. The episcopal office safeguards apostolic faith and sacramental unity, while the synod ensures Spirit-led communal discernment and shared accountability. Each root is incomplete without the other: the bishop without synod risks isolation, while synod without episcopacy risks fragmentation.

When integrated with the other roots—Scripture as taproot, the creeds and confessions as wide lateral roots, and modern declarations as adaptive roots—the episcopal and synodal dimensions provide balance, authority, and communion. In this way, the Church remains like the ancient baobab: deeply rooted, widely connected, and resilient through the storms of history. Anchored in Christ, the true Vine (John 15:5, Holy Bible, 1989), the Church is called not only to survive but to bear fruit—offering shade to the weary, justice to the oppressed, and hope to the world.

**Conclusion: As we go from this Synod, may we not be like shallow grass that withers in the sun. Let us be like the ancient trees - rooted and grounded in Christ, nourished by Scripture and the Creed, standing strong together as a forest of faith. And may the world, looking at us, find shelter, hope, and life in the branches of the Church of Jesus Christ.**

**I thank you.**

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