

The Athanasian Creed

© The Rev. Dr. Curtis I. Crenshaw, 30 May 2010¹

Introduction

Have you heard people say that doctrine divides? That is supposed to be a statement against doctrine, but it just demonstrates the ignorance of the objector. By the way, doctrine also unites. The three creeds of the Church (Apostles', Nicene, and the Athanasian) were written to divide and to unite. These creeds unite the orthodox and separate out those who deny the faith.

But why have creeds in the first place? Does not doctrine divide? The Church knew from the beginning that truth mattered, that we must safeguard Christianity by proclaiming the basics to all the world.

Some want to say that Jews are saved because they believe in the God of the Old Testament. Is that true? No, they actually don't, for the God of the Old Testament was Trinitarian, and they reject Him. Others say that Muslims are saved because they believe in the one God who is creator? Is that true? No, the one God who is creator is Father, Son, and Holy

¹ I use underlining to help me preach. In other words, I do not make a separate copy of the sermon just for reading.

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Spirit. If they reject this God, they do not believe in the true God.

Does this sound narrow minded? Truth is always that way. Two times two is four, not five, and if someone says it is five, they are wrong.

In this day of relativism and diversity at university, it is good to have something that is the same. But all three branches of the Church, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant, hold to the Nicene Creed and most to the other two creeds. The Lutherans in the Formula of Concord, Anglicans in the 39 Articles, and the Roman Catholic Church hold to all three. The Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith holds to them by substance.

Where did we **begin our Bible study** the very first night we met in my house as we began St. Francis? It was John 1. Why? Because John is strongly Trinitarian and Incarnational. The truth of the Athanasian Creed. Why did we spend 3 ½ years in the Gospel of John? The truth of the Athanasian Creed. Now you know why I did that. We needed to be grounded on positive truth, not just a reaction to homosexuality in ECUSA.

It was with some minor resistance that we now have the Athanasian Creed in our BCP. There were a few objections to it, but Bp. Sutton said it was historic, biblical, and especially with such weak theology today on God's righteousness that we needed its statement on hell. It passed virtually unanimously at the REC General Council in 1999. Likewise there were minor objections to it in the formation of the ACNA, but it passed handily at the formation meetings.

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Now take out your sheet with the Athanasian Creed that was handed out for us to say. Notice that it is two parts: the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation. That is what I've emphasized since we began St. Francis, and now you know where I got it.

Guess what Christian cults ALWAYS compromise? Those two precious doctrines. Of course, God is so much greater than just saying these words, but He is not less than these words! Some say "No creed but Christ," but which Jesus do we want? The Jehovah's Witnesses always deny the deity of Christ and thus deny the Holy Trinity. Mormons deny the oneness of the Holy Trinity. Many in the word-faith movement deny that the Son of God functioned as God while on earth. Many of the liberal churches today deny the Virgin Birth, which is not mentioned in this creed, but nevertheless is assumed. Christian Science denies everything. And just about everyone wants to get rid of the doctrine of hell, and many others want to add universalism, that all will be saved.

But this Creed says in clear terms that it is not sincerity that matters but truth, the truth of who God is, who Christ is, and then what Christ has done in His death and resurrection. We must all be committed to truth, not just to sincerity, for without truth we have nothing but cotton candy, that which is sickly-sweet and artificial.

This creed was produced when people thought that one's beliefs mattered, but today no one cares. In fact, it is the lack of belief that is praised today, and if anyone really believes things like this Creed, he/she is considered just plain weird and intolerant. Let us be intolerant regarding these truths.

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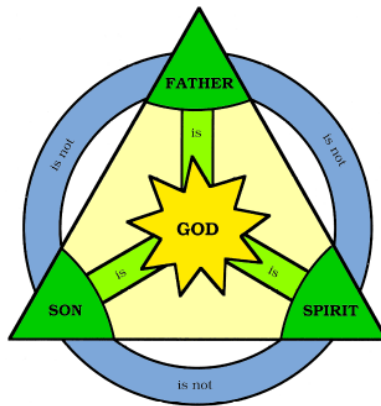
Now let us look at the creed. It **has two parts**: the Holy Trinity (3-28) and the Incarnation (29-40). The beginning (1-2) and the end (41-42) give the anathemas for denying who God and Christ are.

How many doctrinal statements have you read with this kind of detail on the Holy Trinity? How many doctrinal statements of churches have you read that give more than one or two sentences on the Holy Trinity or the person of Christ?

The seminary I attended (Dallas Theological Seminary) to this day only has one sentence on the Holy Trinity.

Each year the faculty at Cranmer House sign an oath not to teach anything contrary to the three creeds, the 39 Articles, the BCP, and of course the Holy Scripture.

I. Holy Trinity



(Go over the symbol.) Begin with the Father and go clockwise, then counter-clockwise. Then begin outward from each person and go to the middle. BUT it is heresy to go from the center out. In other words, we cannot say “God is Father,” “God is Son,” “God is Holy Spirit.” This would be like

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saying, “All men have two legs; therefore, everything that has two legs is a man,” but what about a chicken?

The **basic grasp**: (1) There is one God (hold up one finger); (2) there are three persons, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (We must name them; hold up three fingers). (3) These three persons are equally divine in every way (two fingers horizontally).

The most basic teaching of Christianity ever is on the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, but if you don't understand the fine points, don't worry about it. Welcome to the club. Here are the main points:

We have the Holy Trinity at Christ's baptism (Matthew 3), and at the Great Commission where Jesus is speaking:

¹⁸ And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the NAME [singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

We hear a lot today about “God,” but no one wants to say who He is. Our culture wants a generic god, one that will not judge us based on right belief.

False ideas of the Holy Trinity:

- Not three gods in one person. This denies there is one God. **BUT** we say **one God** in three persons.
- Not three persons, each with His own nature. This is three gods again, the Mormon view. **BUT** we

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say one God in three persons with **only one divine nature**.

- Not one person with three roles. This was rejected in the early church as Sabellianism or patripassianism, the Father suffered on the cross. **BUT** we say one God in three distinct persons, each of whom can and does communicate with the other two persons as distinct from themselves.

And these persons are so distinct that they have communicated with one another from all eternity. Each one knows all things but from a different perspective. The Father cannot say "I died on the Cross," but He can say "My Son died on the Cross." It was an early heresy to say the Father suffered for our sins; He did not, the Son did. Likewise the Holy Spirit cannot say, "I proceed from myself," but He can say, "I proceed from the Father and the Son."

The History of Baptism demonstrates that the Holy Trinity was the belief of the Church from the earliest times:

For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water (Justin Martyr, died AD 165, Apology 61).

Sealed in (the name of) the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Tertullian, died AD 215).

There is one Baptism, in the Name of the Trinity (Ambrose, died AD 397).

Further, what can now be said by those, who have gathered a notion of inferiority from the Bap-

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tismal **formula**,—from our being baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? (John Chrysostom, died 407).

God, the Holy Trinity, loves us, and has saved us as we see in Ephesians chapter one.

FATHER: ³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him **in love**, ⁵ **having predestined us to adoption as sons** by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, ⁶ **to the praise of the glory of His grace**, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:3-6).

SON: In Him we have **redemption through His blood**, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace. . . . that we who first trusted in Christ should be **to the praise of His glory** (Ephesians 1:7, 12).

HOLY SPIRIT: ¹³ In Him you also *trusted*, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, **you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise**, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, **to the praise of His glory** (Ephesians 1:13-14).

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In each case, one person of the Holy Trinity is glorified in the work of redemption, and also we are saved by that person in His work.

And the Trinity is necessary for salvation as John says in 1 John 2:22-23:

²² Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

II. The Incarnation

Now the Incarnation part of the Creed begins in point 29, so let's look at this also. Please follow as I explain:

- Point 29: This is necessary for salvation, as John under inspiration says:

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world (1 John 4:1-3).

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- Point 30: Christ is both God and man.
- Points 31-33: as God, He is equal to the Father, and as man He is equal with us.
- Point 34: He is not two persons but one.
- Points 35-36: When He came to the earth, He did not give up His deity or the use of His deity.
- Points 38-42: It is important to believe what Christ has done: He was dead but now alive and that it is He who will come at the Last Day to judge the world. Those who accept this faith “shall go into life everlasting”; and they who reject it “into everlasting fire.”

III. Application to Our Lives

We must never think that the Son of God won for us the love of God the Father, but it was **because** the **Father loved us** that He sent His only begotten Son into the world to save us, as John 3:16 says:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Moreover, it was **because** the **Son loved us** and received joy in saving us that He came into the world:

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, **who for the joy that was set before Him** endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2).

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And surely the Holy Spirit, being always of the same mind as the Father and the Son, also receives great pleasure in applying the merits of redemption to us, for He presents Jesus to us as He convinces us of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11).

Conclusion

My paternal grandfather and an uncle worked on the Mississippi River for years with the civil engineers. They would try to remove hazards from the river. Imagine a man being interviewed for the position of river boat captain.

- Boss: "Do you know where the hidden rocks are?"
- Potential captain: "Actually, I don't."
- Boss: "Well, do you know where the sunken logs are?"
- Potential captain: "I'm afraid I don't know where those are either."
- Boss: "Surely you can tell me about the shallows."
- Potential captain: "I'm afraid I can't."
- Boss: "Then what in the world makes you think you can be a river boat captain?"
- Potential captain: "I know where the channel is."

The best cure for heresy is to know the truth, and the Athanasian Creed, though ancient, is still true, and tells us where the "channel" is: Trinitarian and Incarnational.

AMEN.