

CHRIST OUR SAVIOR LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Athanasius Contra Mundum

Athanasian Creed

Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all else, hold to the true Christian faith. Whoever does not keep this faith pure in all its points will certainly perish forever.

Now this is the true Christian faith: We worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, without mixing the persons or dividing the divine being. For each person – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – is distinct, but the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory and coeternal in majesty. What the Father is, so is the Son, and so is the Holy Spirit. The Father is uncreated, the Son uncreated, the Holy Spirit uncreated; the Father is infinite, the Son infinite, the Holy Spirit infinite; the Father is eternal, the Son eternal, the Holy Spirit eternal; yet they are not three who are eternal, but there is one who is eternal, just as they are not three who are uncreated, nor three who are infinite, but there is one who is uncreated and one who is infinite. In the same way the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty; yet they are not three who are almighty, but there is one who is almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; yet they are not three Gods, but one God. So the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord; yet they are not three Lords, but one Lord. For just as Christian truth compels us to confess each person individually to be God and Lord, so the true Christian faith forbids us to speak of three Gods or three Lords. The Father is neither made nor created nor begotten of anyone. The Son is neither made nor created, but is begotten of the Father alone. The Holy Spirit is neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeds from the Father and the Son. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits. And within this Trinity none comes before or after; none is greater or inferior, but all three persons are coequal and coeternal, so that in every way, as stated before, all three persons are to be worshiped as one God and one God worshiped as three persons. Whoever wishes to be saved must have this conviction of the Trinity.

It is furthermore necessary for eternal salvation to truly believe that our Lord Jesus Christ also took on human flesh. Now this is the true Christian faith: We believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and man. He is God, eternally begotten from the nature of the Father, and he is man, born in time from the nature of his mother, fully God, fully man, with rational soul and human flesh, equal to the Father as to his deity, less than the Father as to his humanity; and though he is both God and man, Christ is not two persons but one, one, not by changing the deity into flesh, but by taking the humanity into God; one, indeed, not by mixture of the natures, but by unity in one person; for just as the rational soul and flesh are one human being, so God and man are one in Christ. He suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty, and from there will come to judge the living and the dead. At his coming all people will rise with their own bodies to answer for their personal deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, but those who have done evil will go into eternal fire.

This is the true Christian faith. Whoever does not faithfully and firmly believe this cannot be saved.

If you could, as we get started, please turn to the Athanasian Creed. It's on pages 132-133 in the front part of the hymnals. It's long, which is why it has never been widely used in public worship the way the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are. When it has been used, it's usually been on Trinity Sunday. I'd like to use it today as the basis for the sermon, supplying a little more background and explanation than the introductory paragraph on the top of page 132, and then making a few contemporary applications towards the end.

The natural place to start is with Athanasius himself, a man who lived from about AD 300-375. His enemies called him the "Black Dwarf," and the short, dark-skinned bishop of Alexandria, Egypt had plenty of enemies because of his stubborn insistence that Arianism, the popular "orthodoxy" of his day, was in fact a soul-destroying, salvation-robbing heresy.

Arianism was the brainchild of a priest named Arius, who reasoned that since the Bible said Jesus was God's only begotten Son, then "There was a time when the Son was not." His idea caught on and before long people everywhere were singing a catchy tune with Arius's "There was a time when the Son was not" as its lyrics. But Athanasius argued such talk denied the Trinity. Christ, he contended, is not of a like substance to God, but the same eternal substance as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

To Athanasius this was not splitting theological hairs. He knew that if you lose the doctrine of the Trinity, then you lose everything. For a Jesus who is less than true God is also less than a real Savior from sin, death and hell. So, salvation itself was at issue. And so, in 325 AD when bishops from throughout the Empire came together at Nicaea for the purpose of settling the controversy, it was Athanasius, who so turned the tide that Arius and Arianism were officially recognized as heretic and heresy. By meeting's end the emperor was pleased that peace had been restored among the Christians. Athanasius was hailed as "noble champion of Christ." And the diminutive Egyptian churchman went home happy that Arianism had been defeated.

But it hadn't.

Within mere months the defeated Arians had altered the Trinitarian creed agreed upon at Nicaea, convinced the emperor to order Athanasius to restore the unrepentant heretic Arius back into the fellowship of the church. When Athanasius refused, his enemies accused him of literally everything and anything: murder, rape, embezzlement, sorcery, and treason. All of it laughably false. But Constantine exiled him anyway, as would three more Roman Emperors, on four separate occasions over the next forty-five years and always for the same reason. Athanasius just wouldn't compromise the doctrine of the Trinity even though seemingly everyone else had. And so people mocked him as, "Athanasius contra mundum," Athanasius against the world.

But Athanasius never gave in. So much so that not long after his death it was Arianism that was ultimately exiled from Christian teaching with the result that those who call themselves Christians throughout the world universally confess what Athanasius had confessed . . . what the Bible had plainly taught all along: that "we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God": Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This Creed, then, is named in honor of Athanasius and is a testimony to his unwavering defense of the essential Christian doctrines of the Trinity and of the dual natures of Christ. If you've been glancing over it as I've been talking, you've noticed how thorough it is. It tells us what we should believe and what we shouldn't. To the point of sounding repetitious. But this kind of language eliminates ambiguity, guards against future alterations, and removes the idea that it was okay to agree to disagree about things God's Word has plainly revealed in his Word.

I had to laugh the other night during the Tigers game when one of the broadcasters teased his partner saying, "It never ceases to amaze me how we both went to the same school but got completely different educations." It's not funny when five people witness an accident and have five differing accounts of what happened. My point is most everything in this word is subject to interpretation. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. One man's trash is another man's treasure. It's cold in church. It's hot. Comey's testimony hurt Trump. Comey's testimony helped Trump. The Athanasian Creed, however, reminds us that God is not and is never subject to interpretation. He is exactly who he's plainly revealed himself to be in his Holy Scriptures: one God in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "Whoever wishes to be saved must have this conviction of the Trinity," the Creed boldly states at the end of its section on the Trinity.

There are similar statements about the Christian faith at the beginning and end. They help us realize this creed isn't talking about believing, about the strength or weakness or amount or sincerity of one's personal faith. It's talking about *the* faith, about *what* is believed; in other words the doctrines Christianity holds and espouses.

The question this creed answers is "Are you a Christian, if you deny Jesus is true God and true man?" It plainly says, "No, you're not." Christians believe what the Bible says about Christ. You'd think it wouldn't have been necessary to state such an obvious thing, let alone have to write a lengthy creed about it. But like after that first meeting in Nicaea, the question keeps coming up. Today it might sound like this: Are you a Christian, if you believe all religions basically lead to the same place and what really matters is how sincerely one believes their personal beliefs without judging the content of the beliefs of someone else? The Athanasian Creed still correctly says, "No, you're not a Christian, if that's what you believe... even if all your friends, the internet, and even the entire world believes it."

That doesn't mean your judgmental. The Creeds and the Christian faith isn't about you. Their about God. And the Athanasian Creed tells us he's still not customizable to the spirit of our times. He is still not subject to our interpretation. He is who he says he is and he's done what he's explicitly said he's done for us in the substitutionary life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ his Son our Lord and Savior, whether anyone believes it or not.

The Athanasian Creed, along with the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are needed norms against the subtle encroachment of false doctrine that is constantly trying to obscure what and who the Christian faith are really about. They remind us that the content of our faith does not come to us naturally. It has to be taught, as Jesus

commissioned his church to do in all the world. The terminology and doctrinal depth of the Nicene and especially the Athanasian Creed also remind us of how much we still need to learn about the faith... that doctrine worth suffering and dying over is also doctrine worth digging into ourselves so that we know it and can confess it when called upon. Ultimately in our day and age these Creeds are reality checks against believing things that aren't Christian while assuming they are.

“Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all else, hold to the true Christian faith. Whoever does not keep this faith pure in all points will certainly perish forever. Now this is the true Christian faith: We worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God ... We believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and man ... This is the true Christian faith. Whoever does not faithfully and firmly believe this cannot be saved.”

Amen.