

THE ATHANASIAN CREED

Some people don't like the Athanasian Creed, chiefly because it seems at the end to make salvation dependent on being good, rather than presenting doing good as the fruits of faith in God. It can be rightly understood.

Admittedly, the Creed is very long. It has no connection with Athanasius, who lived in the East in the fourth century. He wrote in Greek, and the Athanasian Creed is in Latin. The East rarely uses either the Apostles Creed or the Athanasian Creed. The East rejects the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son. Someone, probably in Spain, wrote the Athanasian Creed, probably about 590 AD. It reflects some of the doctrinal expressions that arose in controversies after the time of Athanasius. Some of its most distinctive passages, statements that come like surprises, such as: "*The Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty, and yet there are not three who are almighty but there is one who is almighty*" are found almost word for word in Augustine's great work *On the Trinity*. Luther called this Creed the grandest production of the church since the times of the apostles.

The first half confesses faith in the Trinity, and the second half confesses faith in the incarnate Jesus Christ.

The section about Jesus having "a reasonable soul" reflects the condemnation of Apollinarius, about 380 AD. He held that, if Jesus had a human mind and soul he would not have been unchangeable, but able to be tempted and sin. Those who opposed him insisted that, if Jesus had not had a human mind and soul, He would not have redeemed our human minds and souls.

The statements that Jesus is "not two Christs but one Christ", that He is complete God and complete man, and the part that rejects the idea of a confusion of the natures of God and man in Him recall the *Definition of Chalcedon*, of 451 AD. There is no division or separation in His one person. In Jesus Christ the distinctive qualities of Godhead and manhood are preserved, without mixing, using the analogy of mixing liquids, and without confusion, using the analogy of mixing dried things, like wheat and barley.

The Western form of the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed both have the statement that the Holy Spirit goes out from the Father and the Son. Those who wrote it understood it to say that the person of the Holy Spirit is eternally derived from both the Father and the Son. The verse in the New Testament that lies behind this is John 15:26. It is clear from Jesus' words there that He is speaking about the coming of the Spirit to us in the world. Both the Father and Jesus send the Spirit to us. In that verse "proceed" is parallel to "send."

The Athanasian Creed begins and ends with the assertion that the truths it confesses are necessary for salvation. This important reminder, which we have in the Nicene Creed, "for us men and for our salvation", should prevent us from idly speculating about the mystery of the Trinity or the mystery of the two natures in Jesus Christ apart from the benefits that come to us from this God, who is three persons in one nature, and from Jesus Christ, who is two natures in one person.

This statement is particularly important these days, when the World Council of Churches is having dialogue with non-Christian faiths, and when Pope John Paul II has joined leaders of non-Christian religions in prayer meetings. We should remember that people who believe that salvation comes through good works and well as by faith are more likely to argue: "Muslims perform fine works of love. Therefore they may be on the road to heaven equally with worshippers of the Christian God." The statement in the Creed, "*Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish for eternity*" is a sobering warning against such universalism.

The Athanasian Creed also includes strong rejections of false teaching. Our current Nicene Creed also says, of Jesus Christ, "not made". The first form of the Nicene Creed had also added anathemas to a current baptismal creed. It read, at the end, specifically against Arius: "*And those who say, 'There was when He was not', and 'Before His generation He was not' and 'He came to be from nothing', or those who pretend that the Son of God is 'of other hypostasis or substance' or 'uncreated', or 'alterable', or 'mutable' the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes.*" This reminds us that it is often only at the point where people declare what they refuse to accept that their statements become clear and unmistakable. In a similar way, the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* not only says what it believes, teaches, and confesses, but also what it rejects and condemns. There is something very dangerous in the modern "ecumenical" approach of withdrawing the condemnations of each other's teachings that churches made at the time of the Reformation and after it. Many of the Lutheran churches these days are following the lead of the LWF-sponsored dialogue with the Roman Catholics, and withdrawing the condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions of the papacy as the Antichrist. The

procedure leaves open the questions: “Where does the truth really lie?” and “Which one taught according to the Scriptures?” Statements should be withdrawn only if they have been wrong. Clear teaching is impossible without clear distinctions, and without rejection of what is not so. Teachers may as well give up teaching “two times two are four” if they tolerate “three” or “five” as well.

The truth is not subject to change. What is new is not true, and what is true is not new. Giving up certain expressions, like the word “nature” for the two entities in Jesus Christ would give the impression of a surrender of the traditional faith, or indicate a conviction that the fathers had been wrong to express the truth in this way.