

THE ATHANASIAN CREED

Early in the fourth century, a new teaching appeared which claimed that Jesus was not true God. Arius, the north African priest who first proposed this theory, was extremely persuasive, and soon the controversy was so widespread that a church council was called to settle the matter. Out of that meeting in A.D. 325 came the Nicene Creed, which clearly confesses Jesus to be true God. That creed, which was expanded in A.D. 381 in order to defend the divinity of the Holy Spirit, is still widely used today as a confession of the triune faith.

Despite the clarity of the Nicene Creed, the controversy continued for some time. Toward the end of the fifth century, another creed was written that marvelled at the mystery of the Trinity in a way that no creed had ever done. It was once thought that Athanasius (d. 379), the ardent opponent of Arius at the Council of Nicaea, wrote this creed. Research, however, has shown it to be a fifth-century document and written by an unknown author. In considerable detail, it spells out the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation. And similar to the Apostles' and Nicene Creed, it asserts that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead and that someday all people will rise from the dead and be required to give "an account concerning their own deeds." It concludes, "This is the true Christian faith. Unless a man believe this firmly and faithfully, he cannot be saved."

Although the Book of Concord refers to the three creeds as "ecumenical," the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church do not see the Athanasian Creed as an ecumenical creed. Eastern Orthodox churches have never recognized it as such, though it is found in some of their publications. But to Roman Catholics, it is largely unknown today. Rome sees the Nicene Creed as more important, largely because it is the product of two ecumenical councils. Non-Lutheran Protestant churches often do not include the Apostles' or Nicene Creed in their hymnals, and Baptists and Pentecostals, who say they are non-creedal, do not formally confess them either.

It is important to note when Lutherans placed the three ancient creeds in the forefront of the Book of Concord, they signalled to Rome and the Reformed churches that their theological documents that followed conformed to the doctrines of these creeds. It was the Lutheran way of showing the Book of Concord did not contain any new doctrines after the Augsburg Confession had been publicly confessed and signed in 1530.

Unlike Lutherans, many Christian denominations do not use or emphasise the creeds. It is common in most Lutheran churches to confess either the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed in their Divine Services on Sundays. And many Lutheran congregations confess the Athanasian Creed one week after Pentecost Sunday, on Trinity Sunday. Thus, by regularly confessing one of the

three creeds in their Sunday services, Lutheran churches indicate the custom is a hallmark of their Lutheran identity.