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ATHANASIAN CREED: THE HOLY TRINITY
Lent Midweek 3; March 11, 2026

The Athanasian Creed was named after the young priest and secretary to Bishop Alexander, who fought for the orthodox faith that is still confessed in the Nicene Creed. The Athanasian Creed is the last of the ecumenical creeds we confess, but we know very little about its origin. Written long after St. Athanasius died, it reflects the teaching of early Church fathers opposed to lingering Arianism in the Church, but none of them are known as the author. Written about 100-200 years after the Nicene Creed, it probably originated in what is today southern France. The earliest copy of the Athanasian Creed is in a sermon by Caesarius of Arles, France, who died in AD 542. It was not well-known in the rest of the Church for several hundred years.

The Athanasian Creed is somewhat familiar to us because of the tradition of the congregation confessing it once a year on Trinity Sunday— something I know all of you look forward to.

The first part of the Creed confesses the Holy Trinity. Before getting to that, let's consider the final verses: "At [the Son's] coming [on Judgment Day] all people will rise again with their bodies and give an account concerning their own deeds." (So far, so good.) "And those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire" (*Athanasian Creed* 38-39). I am often asked if this contradicts the Gospel. Aren't we saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone? Yes. Are we saved by our works? No! The Athanasian Creed does not teach that we are saved by works, but that the saved do good works which God will recognize on Judgment Day.

To help with Lutheran concerns about this statement, I chose as our Third Reading this evening Jesus' own words recorded in John five. **"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live... And [the Father] has given Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment."**

The lines in the Athanasian Creed that Lutherans often take issue with are a summary of Jesus' own words in John 5. Only Christians by grace and through faith can do good works; non-Christians can only do evil because they have no faith and they will be condemned to the eternal fire of hell because they are evil unbelievers.

Now, let's move on to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as confessed faithfully and in great detail in the Athanasian Creed. Those who deny the Holy Trinity – that there is one God in three Persons and Three Persons in one God – (along with the two natures of Christ) are condemned in the Creed. “Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally... This is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved” (1-2, 40). Lutherans, again, might have questions or concerns. First, faith is more than understanding doctrine, but trust in God, faith that even infants can have but are unable to express, much less explain. Second, what does it mean to be “catholic”?

“Catholic” is not hard. The word means “universal” or “whole,” and refers to the faith confessed and believed, not an organization. Lutherans confess what the true Church of all times and all places has confessed. We are “catholics” with a small “c.” We confess this faith, but we are not Roman Catholics who submit to the Pope as God's human authority over us, nor the organization the Pope rules.

“The catholic faith is... that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity.” The Athanasian Creed confesses about the Holy Trinity what the Bible teaches, not a philosophy of God that was developed by Greek and Latin scholars. The Creed does not quote a bunch of Scripture passages but draws its doctrine from Scripture and organizes God's Word by comparing and contrasting what is true and false about God.

The terminology used to confess the one God in three persons used standard meanings of terms at the time. The word “person” was understood as something that subsisted of itself and is not a part or quality of another. The three persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are distinct from each other. At the same time, they share the same “essence” or “substance,” that of God Himself.

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A wrong way to confess the Trinity would be to say: Sometimes God is the Father, like when He created, then He became the Son when He became man to save us, and now He comes to us as the Holy Spirit to sanctify us. That is wrong because God always has been, is now, and will be all three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The right way to distinguish the Persons of the Holy Trinity is in how they relate to each other. The Father begets the Son from eternity, but the Father is not begotten of the Son or Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son but is no less God. All are Lord, infinite, eternal, and so on. The Three are distinct from each other as we ascribe to each their primary works of creating, redeeming, and sanctifying, yet they are one in essence and they work together in all these things and are never apart from each other in doing them.

Christianity is unique among all religions. Many religions confess that there are many gods, that is, polytheists. Most ancient religions in the east and west as well as modern-day Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are polytheistic. All of them deny the unity of God the Holy Trinity. Some religions other than Christianity confess that there is only one god, monotheists such as Judaism and Islam, but none of them confess the One God who is the Holy Trinity.

How the Athanasian Creed begins and ends emphasizes why this is important. "Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally... whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved" (1-2, 40). The Athanasian Creed confesses the God who saves us by faith in Him.

That the one God is the Holy Trinity, and that the Son is fully God and man in one Person, are "mysteries," something confessed as true yet cannot be explained fully by us. The Holy Trinity reveals Himself to us in His Word as He works as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We confess our faith in God the Holy Trinity, one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God, and the two natures of Jesus Christ, God's Son. In these mysteries, God has made Himself known to us as our Savior. **"For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved"** (Ro 10:10). Amen.