

## The Athanasian Creed

**IF YOU'VE EVER RECITED THE ATHANASIAN CREED** in a worship service, please send me an email to tell me about it!

In truth, I've never heard this creed used in church, and it's not difficult to see why. Even a quick glance shows you that in addition to being *much* longer than either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, this creed is also sufficiently repetitive as to get tedious. (You can find it with all the CRC's confessions in the back of our *Psalter Hymnal*.)

But wait: this incredibly long creed has a brief introduction and an even briefer conclusion. The opening states that the faith professed here needs to be kept "whole and unbroken"—and if anyone fails to do so, that person will "perish eternally." Then at the very end we read, "This is the catholic [universal] faith: one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully." That's a real zinger!

If it seems a bit on the severe side, that's doubtless a reflection of the fact that the Athanasian Creed centers on the two biggest teachings the early church had to tackle: the nature of God and the nature of Jesus Christ.

No matter which religion you're talking about, it's clear that knowing your God is about as important as it gets. If atheists are correct and there is no God, then religion is just what atheists claim it to be: deluded silliness. Then again, if there *is* one true God, not only is religion warranted, there is also no more important pursuit than determining who God is.

But putting it that way sounds a little dry, so let's warm things up and remind ourselves that, for Christians, it's not just a matter of right knowledge but of love. We are to love the Lord our God with everything we've got. And when you love someone, you want to know everything about your beloved.

Believe it or not, that's the aim of the Athanasian Creed: to help us know our beloved God better.

Specifically, this creed wants us to understand the sublime mystery of the Trinity. Our God is just *one* God, but he exists as a community of three persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have absolutely everything in common—each is uncreated, immeasurable, eternal, almighty, even as each person of the Trinity is properly seen as the true God and Lord of the universe.

But for all they have in common, they can be distinguished too.

The Son, not the Father or the Spirit, was the one who became human inside the womb of Mary. The Spirit, not the Father or

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the Son, was the one poured out in power at Pentecost. This is the God we love.

The other main concern of this creed is to help us understand the Savior we love. Here, too, we have to wrap our minds around a mystery: Jesus is just one person, but he is both divine and human. As divine, the person who was born of Mary in Bethlehem existed from all eternity. But his human nature did have a starting point when the virgin Mary became pregnant by the power of God.

Yet Jesus is not a hybrid, he's not a mixture, and he's not two different persons. He is one person who is both divine and human. Both. That's the Savior we love.

Someone once said that the gospel message is like a body of water. In one sense it's shallow enough for a baby to splash around in without danger of drowning. In another sense it's a vast ocean into whose never-ending depths a person could dive forever. Our Christian faith, in other words, is both as simple as saying, "Jesus is Lord!" and as mysteriously complex as a statement like the Athanasian Creed. It's both. Just like God: both one and three. Just like Jesus: both one and two.

These may not be simple ideas. But they are glorious ones because they come from the One who loved us while we were yet sinners and whom we now get to love back forever and ever. ■



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