

The Athanasian Creed

This account of the catholic or universal faith of the church further clarifies the doctrine of the Trinity. It also offers what is recognized as a classic statement on Christology. Dire warnings are attached for anyone who fails to hold unswervingly to the whole of the creed. As jarring as these notes sound to modern ears, they remind us that rightly knowing God has always been a matter of utmost importance to the church.

The main emphasis of the first part of the Athanasian Creed is the unity, distinctness, and equality of the divine persons. These traits are set out in nearly a dozen triads of assertions about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, sometimes in abstractions (they share the same “qualities”) and sometimes in particulars (each is almighty, each is Lord). The painstaking care shown in the setting out of these points makes for clarity of presentation with minimal technical language.

The second part of the creed proclaims Jesus Christ as God and man equally, insisting on both the unity and also the distinctness of Christ’s divinity and humanity. Without naming any particular heresy, the creed addresses those errors that supercharge Christ’s humanity and those that allege that at the incarnation Christ became some new hybrid creation that was neither properly human nor fully divine.

Also called “The Exposition of the Catholic Faith” or “Quicumque Vult” (from its opening Latin words), the Athanasian Creed was thought in the Middle Ages to have been penned by Athanasius of Alexandria. The text first appeared about a century after his death, and, since attempts to identify its true author(s) have not yet been successful, many Christian communities have chosen to retain the name of Athanasius in connection to this creed.

[1] Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic^[1] faith. [2] Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.

[3] Now this is the catholic faith: that we worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity, [4] neither confounding their persons nor dividing the essence. [5] For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. [6] But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. [7] Such as the Father is, such is the Son and such is the Holy Spirit. [8] The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated. [9] The Father is immeasurable, the Son is immeasurable, the Holy Spirit is immeasurable. [10] The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal. [11] And yet there are not three eternal beings; there is but one eternal being. [12] So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings; there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being. [13] Similarly, the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty. [14] Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being. [15] Thus, the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. [16] Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God. [17] Thus, the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord. [18] Yet there are not three lords; there is but one Lord. [19] Just as Christian truth compels us to confess each person individually as both God and Lord, [20] so catholic religion forbids us to say that there are three gods or lords. [21] The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone. [22] The Son was neither made nor created; he was begotten from the Father alone. [23] The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten; he proceeds from the Father and the Son. [24] Accordingly, there is one Father, not three fathers; there is one Son, not three sons; there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits. [25] None in this Trinity is before or after, none is greater or smaller; [26] in their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other. [27] So in everything, as was said earlier, the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity, is to be worshiped. [28] Anyone then who desires to be saved should think thus about the Trinity.

[29] But it is necessary for eternal salvation that one also believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully. [30] Now this is the true faith: that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is both God and man, equally. [31] He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is man from the essence of his mother, born in time; [32] completely God, completely man, with a rational soul and human flesh; [33] equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity. [34] Although he is God and man, yet Christ is not two, but one. [35] He is one, however, not by his divinity being turned into flesh, but by God’s taking humanity to himself. [36] He is one, certainly not by the blending of his essence, but by the unity of his person. [37] For just as one man is both rational soul and flesh, so too the one Christ is both God and man. [38] He suffered for our salvation; he descended to hell; he arose from the dead on the third day; [39] he ascended to heaven; he is seated at the Father’s right hand; [40] from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. [41] At his coming all people will arise bodily [42] and give an accounting of their own deeds. [43] Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

[44] This is the catholic faith: that one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully.

1. "Catholic" means universal; that is, there is one church across all times, places, and peoples. ↩