

Commentary on the Athanasian Creed

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Introduction

The Athanasian Creed is a summary of the Biblical truths regarding the Trinity and the Incarnation assembled against the various false teachings that rose up against those doctrines in the first centuries of the church. As such, in order to shed light on what is being said in the Athanasian Creed and why it matters, we will look at it through the lens of many of those errors it stands opposing.

Additionally, a comment on the anathema statements (the statements of condemnation). When we confess this creed, we are not denying the salvation of those who are merely ignorant of or unable to articulate certain aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity or of the Incarnation. That would be to deny the salvation of the Old Testament believers as well as likely most if not all the believers in the New Testament. Rather, we are confessing that saving faith is in the one true God revealed in the scriptures, and that faith which would deny and reject the truths of the Trinity and the Incarnation is not ultimately a faith which is in the God of the Bible.

In practical terms for us today this means, among other things, that we do not consider Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses to be Christians. Even though they claim the term for themselves and make use of the Bible for their teachings, nevertheless we consider them to be outside of our faith and outside of Christ.

1. Polytheism

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." - Deuteronomy 6:4

As Christians, we are scripturally bound to confess monotheism, the belief that there is only one deity. Therefore we reject polytheism, the belief in a plurality of deities. "But", the question may well be asked, "Christians believe in three divine persons, how is that really any different from polytheism?"

To shed light on this question, let us look at the incarnate Christ. When we speak about Christ's humanity we are speaking about those aspects of Christ that pertain to his being human, such as his flesh and blood. When we speak about Christ's deity we are speaking about those aspects of Christ that pertain to his being God, such as his divine power and glory. Going slightly deeper, we can think about the humanity of Christ in the abstract, i.e. strictly insofar as it is humanity, and see that it is the same humanity which all men possess. But we can also think about the humanity of Christ in the concrete. When we think about the humanity of Christ in the concrete we are not merely thinking about any and all human flesh and blood. We are thinking about that particular flesh and blood (and everything else that pertains to humanity) which is the flesh and blood of Christ. Thus, when considered in the abstract, there is but one common humanity which all men share and have in common. But when considered in the concrete, there are as many humanities as there are human persons; with each person having their own flesh and blood along with everything else that pertains to humanity.

Now we return to the question at hand, how Christianity confesses a plurality of divine persons but not a plurality of deities. In polytheism it is held that as is the case with human persons and the human substance (humanity), so also is the case with divine persons and the divine substance (deity). Thus in polytheistic view, just as there is necessarily a plurality of as many actual concrete humanities as there are human persons, there is also necessarily a plurality of deities equal to the number of divine persons. To take an example from Greek mythology, let us briefly consider Zeus and Poseidon. Both Zeus and Poseidon would have been considered to have divine power and divine glory, at least what the polytheistic Greeks thought to be divine power and glory. But though they both were thought to have divine power and glory, the actual concrete power and glory which Zeus was thought to have was distinct from that of Poseidon. The two divine persons were considered to each have their own particular concrete divinity and so between Zeus and Poseidon there were considered to be two deities, one for each divine person.

Christianity does confess three divine persons, but three divine persons who all possess one common concrete deity rather than each having their own deity. The Father does not have his own divine power and glory which is distinct from that of the Son or the Holy Spirit. Rather, we believe that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all share a single common divine power and glory along with all the other divine attributes.

This is confessed in the Athanasian Creed in the following statements:

This is the true Christian faith, that we worship one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God without confusing the Persons or dividing the divine substance.

For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is still another, but there is one Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, equal in glory and coequal in majesty. What the Father is, that is the Son and that is the Holy Spirit: the Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated; the Father is unlimited, the Son is unlimited, the Holy Spirit is unlimited; the Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal; and yet They are not three Eternals but one Eternal, just as there are not three who are uncreated and who are unlimited, but there is one who is uncreated and unlimited.

Likewise the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty.

And yet there are not three that are almighty but there is one who is almighty.

So the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God.

So the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord, and yet they are not three Lords but one Lord.

For Just as we are compelled by Christian truth to acknowledge each person by Himself to be God and Lord, so we are forbidden by the Christian religion to say that there are three Gods or three Lords.

2. Modalism

“If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true.”... “And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me.” - John 5:31, 37

Here we treat again the error that would assume there are as many divine persons as there are divine substances, but in the opposite direction. Polytheism, in which a “tritheistic” Christianity would be included, expands the number of deities to match the number of divine persons. Modalism on the other hand accepts that there is a single divine substance, but concludes that there is only therefore a single divine person.

To give an example of Modalism, we will look at the reasoning that gave birth to the Oneness Pentecostals (a contemporary Modalist group) around a century ago. First, they take the Great Commission in Matthew 28 where Jesus commands his disciples to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”. Then they look at the book of Acts which speaks of the disciples baptizing “in the name of Jesus”. From this it was concluded that: Jesus is the name of the Son (which we would agree with), Jesus is the name of the Father, and Jesus is the name of the Holy Spirit (both of which we would disagree with).

In Modalism, the person who is the Father is the same person who is the Son and also the Holy Spirit. “Father”, “Son”, and “Holy Spirit” are considered different “modes” (hence the name) in which the single divine person manifests himself towards creation rather than eternally distinct persons within the Trinity.

But this is not how the Bible teaches us to think about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Bible does not teach us that the Father and the Son are the same person, or different characters played by the same person, or different forms that God can take. Rather, the Bible teaches us to believe that the Father is the father of the Son, that the Son is son of the Father, and that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of the Father and the Son. The Athanasian Creed confesses these relationships by using the verbs that correspond to these said relationships. The relationship wherein the Father is the father of the Son and the Son is the son of the Father is signified by the verb of “begetting”. The relationship wherein the Holy Spirit is the spirit of the Father and the Son is signified by the verb of “proceeding”.

We see these relationships as well as the distinction of Persons confessed in the Athanasian Creed in the following statements:

This is the true Christian faith, that we worship one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God without confusing the Persons or dividing the divine substance.

...

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten by anybody.

The Son was not made or created, but was begotten by the Father.

The Holy Spirit was not made or created or begotten, but proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father and not three Fathers, one Son and not three Sons, and one Holy Spirit and not three Holy Spirits.

3. Arianism

“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”

- Colossians 1:16

[Note that we are not looking at Aryans with a “y”, but at Arians with an “i”. “Aryans” generally refers to either the Indo-European speaking people group thought to have moved into India and surrounding lands in ancient times, or the blonde haired and blue eyed super race believed in by the Nazis. “Arians” refers to those who follow in the error of Arius. It is the latter that we are looking at here.]

Arius taught that the Son is a creature, created by the Father as the highest creature of all creation, with the Father alone being considered truly God. He also taught that, though the Son was born (created) before all worlds, the Son did not always exist but came into existence at his birth. This is expressed in the standard summary of Arius’ view, which comes from Arius himself, that “There was a time when the Son was not.”

This error is rejected for a number of reasons. First of all it is rejected on the basis of the verse from Colossians quoted above as well as John 1:3 which teach that all created things were made through the Son, thus declaring the Son to be above creation rather than part of creation. It is also rejected on the basis of the passages that teach that the Son is God.

These passages include explicit passages like John 1:1 where we read that “*the Word was God*”, and John 20:28 where Thomas says to Jesus (note that he is saying this to Jesus) “*My Lord and my God.*” The passages which teach that the Son is God also include less explicit passages. One of the strongest of these is Isaiah 40 which prophesies the voice in the wilderness preparing the way of the LORD. All four Gospels say that the voice in the wilderness is referring to John the Baptist. The reason this is significant is that, according to Isaiah, the one John is preparing the way for is “the LORD”. That is, the one true God of the Old Testament, Yahweh or Jehovah. And when it is declared by the prophet Isaiah that John is preparing the way for God himself, who is it that shows up? Jesus.

The error of Arius has also been rejected since ancient times by reason of the Scriptural depiction of God the Father as the father of God the Son. Arius took “father” as figurative language for “creator”, thus making God the Father’s fatherhood of the Son equivalent to his being the “father” of mankind or the Wright brothers being the “fathers” of aviation. However this would make the Son no more truly son of the Father than Adam was spoken as “the son of God” (Luke 3:38) or than creation is said to have God as father. However the Bible puts the relationship between the Father and Son on a higher standing than that which exists between either God and Adam or God and creation.

The defenders of Trinitarian Christianity held that the Father was the true and natural father of the Son. The historic Trinitarian position is that the Son is not the son of God in the sense that Adam is said to be the son of God, but in the sense that Seth was the son of Adam. That, as the Creed states, “*The Son was not made or created, but was begotten by the Father.*” Just as God is called Creator because He truly is the creator, and called Almighty because He truly is almighty, so too the Father is called father because he truly is the father of the Son.

The terms “father” and “son” properly signify this relationship wherein the son receives his nature from and by virtue of the nature of his father and is thus of the same kind as his father. Thus Adam is the father of Seth because Seth has his humanity from the very humanity of his father Adam. So too, when

the Creed states that the Son was begotten by the Father it is stating that the Son is truly God and has his deity by virtue of the deity of the Father. While a phenomenon such as adoption does confer all the rights and privileges that are conferred by natural begetting, it is still an adaptation of the original proper concept of “father” and “son” and constitutes a relationship wherein two are functionally father and son who are not naturally father and son.

The situation an Arian interpretation of “father” leaves us with is one in which the Father is never truly and properly a father. The Trinitarian view however acknowledges not only figurative and adoptive senses in which God is father (in relation to creation and believers respectively), but also holds that “Father” is a true and proper term for God because he is the natural father of the Son.

Arianism is rejected especially in the following parts of the Athanasian Creed:

The Son was not made or created, but was begotten by the Father.

...

And among these three Persons none is before or after another, none is greater or less than another, but all three Persons are coequal and coeternal, and accordingly, as has been stated above, three Persons are to be worshiped in one Godhead and one God is to be worshiped in three Persons.

...

He is God, begotten before the ages of the substance of the Father, and He is man, born in the world of the substance of His mother, perfect God and perfect man, with reasonable soul and human flesh equal to the Father with respect to His Godhead and inferior to the Father with respect to His manhood.

4. Binitarianism

“Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” - Acts 5:3b-4

This is a more comprehensible term than the ancient “pneumatomachi”, and it refers to those who would affirm the deity of the Son while denying the deity of the Holy Spirit. That the Holy Spirit is also God is seen in the above passage where Peter calls the Holy Spirit God as well as those passages that include the Holy Spirit in divine works such as creation (Genesis 1:2), resurrection (Romans 8:11), and speaking through the prophets (Mark 12:26, Luke 1:67, 2:26, Acts 1:16 etc.). It is additionally seen in those passages that place the Holy Spirit alongside both the Father and the Son, notably the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 but also at the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:22) as well as passages in the epistles (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 2 Corinthians 13:14). That is not to mention the many passages that place the Holy Spirit alongside either the Father or the Son.

The Creed confesses this in an obvious way when it says the Holy Spirit is God and has the various attributes of God. But it also confesses this when it states that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son” rather than being created or made. Similar to how the Son has the nature of the Father because He is truly begotten of the Father, the Holy Spirit has the nature of the Father and the Son because he is truly the spirit of (which is what is signified in the Creed by “proceeds from”) the Father and the Son. Seeing as humanity is a composite nature, being both physical and spiritual, my spirit does not possess the whole of my humanity. But as God is spirit, to say that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of the Father and the Son is to say that the Holy Spirit possesses the whole divine nature.

[At the time the Athanasian Creed was becoming popular, the procession of the Holy Spirit was also used as a way to confess the true deity of the Son by confessing God the Holy Spirit to be truly the spirit of God the Son as well as the spirit of God the Father.]

This error is rejected throughout the first section of the Athanasian Creed dealing with the Trinity where the Holy Spirit is constantly placed right alongside the Father and the Son as truly God.

5. Judaism

“No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.”
- 1 John 2:23

As a final mention for the section on the Trinity I have included Judaism, though the principle applies to all those who would deny the Son however vehemently they would affirm the Father. As they are one in nature, you cannot have the Father without also having the Son. Nor can you deny the Son without also denying the Father. It should be noted however that here we are speaking of rejection and denial of the Son rather than ignorance of the Son as would be the case with the Old Testament believers.

This error is rejected in the Creed virtually every time the Son is mentioned.

6. Docetism

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” - John 1:14

The Gnostic mystery religions were some of the earliest opponents of the truths of Christianity. While there was variety between different Gnostic groups, one prominent Gnostic teaching was that the god who created the physical world was an evil lesser god who was attempting to spoil the work of the good true god who created the spiritual world. Thus we needed to be set free from the illusory prison of this material world and brought to the full realization of ourselves as purely spiritual beings.

As this belief began to incorporate Christian imagery, there were implications for what they taught about the Incarnation. One of the most significant of these implications was their teaching that Jesus took on only an appearance of flesh and blood. And consequently, that Jesus only appeared to suffer and die.

This idea runs contrary to Christian teaching from beginning to end. Christians have always confessed a belief in, as the Apostle's Creed states, “God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth”. We have always confessed that the Son was born of Mary, that he suffered, died, and rose again bodily from the grave. We have always confessed a hope that on the last day God will also resurrect us bodily as well.

This error is particularly in focus when the Creed confesses that Christ took on “human flesh”, and that he “suffered for our salvation”.

7. Apollinarianism

“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”

- Hebrews 2:17

This was the error which held that the incarnate Christ possessed a human body, but the divine nature took the place of what would normally be the human mind or spirit.

The Bible does not present Jesus to us as having only a partial humanity. Rather the Bible calls us to believe that the Son became like us in every way except for sin (Hebrews 2:17, 4:15).

This is rejected in the following paragraph from the Creed in the expressions “perfect man” and “with reasonable soul”:

He is God, begotten before the ages of the substance of the Father, and He is man, born in the world of the substance of His mother, perfect God and perfect man, with reasonable soul and human flesh equal to the Father with respect to His Godhead and inferior to the Father with respect to His manhood.

8. Nestorianism

“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” - Revelation 1:17b-18

With this error and the next we return to dealing with the same kind of error we began with, making as many persons as there are natures, though now we deal with it in relation to the Incarnation rather than the Trinity.

Nestorianism is the term given to the error that would so separate the deity of Christ from his humanity as to end up with two Christs. The controversy began around the designation of Mary as the “theotokos” meaning roughly “the one who gave birth to God”, often translated more simply as “the mother of God”. The Protestant mind may understandably hesitate at such a designation, but it is stating a fundamental truth about who Jesus is. This designation is not claiming that Mary was the origin of Christ’s divine nature or of the Trinity. Rather, it is making the same fundamental claim as has been made in many a Good Friday sermon that ponders the wonder that the same one who created the oceans declares “I thirst.” Mary is called the mother of God because the one who is her son is also God. Nestorianism would reject this true union in one person of divinity and humanity in favor of what amounts to each nature being its own distinct person. To take the above quote from Revelation as an example, in a Nestorian view of Christ, the one who is the first and the last is not really the one who died.

Nestorianism is rejected in the following statements:

Although He is God and man, He is not two Christs but one Christ: one, that is to say, not by changing the Godhead into flesh, but by taking on the humanity into God, one, indeed, not by confusion of substance but by unity in one Person.

For just as the reasonable soul and the flesh are one man, so God and man are one Christ, Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, is seated on the right hand of the Father, from where He will come to judge the living and the dead.

9. Eutychianism

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” - Romans 1:1-4

Whereas Nestorianism keeps the two natures and makes two Christs, Eutychianism maintains a single Christ but does away with the two distinct natures. The result of this was a human nature that was not only taken up by God the Son, but that one nature was basically absorbed and dissolved into the other nature such that we could no longer say that Jesus has true and perfect humanity or deity. Like Apollinarianism, this error runs afoul of the Bible’s presentation of Jesus as true and perfect man.

This is also rejected in the same statements that reject Nestorianism:

Although He is God and man, He is not two Christs but one Christ: one, that is to say, not by changing the Godhead into flesh, but by taking on the humanity into God, one, indeed, not by confusion of substance but by unity in one Person.

For just as the reasonable soul and the flesh are one man, so God and man are one Christ, Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, is seated on the right hand of the Father, from where He will come to judge the living and the dead.

Comments on the Final Judgment Statements

“At His coming all men shall rise with their bodies and give an account of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire.”
- Athanasian Creed

As Protestants who believe in justification by faith, how do we take these statements? We take them the same way we take the parable of the sheep and the goats of Matthew 25:31-46 which makes very similar statements. That is to say that we do not deny that those who inherit eternal life are those who have done good. However, we reject the notion that those good works are good enough to deserve eternal life or that those works are the basis on which we inherit eternal life.

This is summarized nicely in the following sections of Article 20 of the Augsburg Confession:

We begin by teaching that our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace for us, for this happens only through faith, that is, when we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who alone is the mediator who reconciles the Father. Whoever imagines that he can accomplish this by works, or that he can merit grace, despises Christ and seeks his own way to God, contrary to the Gospel.

...

It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God's will and glorify him. It is always faith alone that apprehends grace and forgiveness of sin. When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works. Before that, when it is without the Holy Spirit, the heart is too weak. Moreover, it is in the power of the devil, who drives poor human beings into many sins. We see this in the philosophers who undertook to lead honorable and blameless lives; they failed to accomplish this, and instead fell into many great and open sins. This is what happens when a man is without true faith and the Holy Spirit and governs himself by his own human strength alone.

Consequently this teaching concerning faith not to be accused of forbidding good works but is rather to be praised for teaching that good works are to be done and for offering help as to how they may be done. For without faith and without Christ human nature and human strength are much too weak to do good works, call upon God, have patience in suffering, love one's neighbor, diligently engage in callings which are commanded, render obedience, avoid evil lusts, etc. Such great and genuine works cannot be done without the help of Christ, as he himself says in John 15:5 "Apart from me you can do nothing."

Text of the Athanasian Creed

(source: <https://www.aflc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Creeds.pdf>)

Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all else, hold the true Christian faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish for eternity.

This is the true Christian faith, that we worship one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God without confusing the Persons or dividing the divine substance.

For the Father is one Person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is still another, but there is one Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, equal in glory and coequal in majesty. What the Father is, that is the Son and that is the Holy Spirit: the Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated; the Father is unlimited, the Son is unlimited, the Holy Spirit is unlimited; the Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal; and yet They are not three Eternals but one Eternal, just as there are not Three Who are uncreated and Who are unlimited, but there is One who is uncreated and unlimited. Likewise the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty.

So the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God.

So the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord, and yet they are not three Lords but one Lord.

For just as we are compelled by Christian truth to acknowledge each Person by Himself to be God and Lord, so we are forbidden by the Christian religion to say that there are three Gods or three Lords.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten by anybody.

The Son was not made or created, but was begotten by the Father.

The Holy Spirit was not made or created or begotten, but proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father and not three Fathers, one Son and not three Sons, one Holy Spirit and not three Holy Spirits.

And among these three Persons none is before or after another, none is greater or less than another, but all three Persons are coequal and coeternal, and accordingly, as has been stated above, three Persons are to be worshiped in one Godhead and one God is to be worshiped in three Persons.

Whoever wishes to be saved must think thus about the Trinity.

It is also necessary for eternal salvation that one faithfully believe that our Lord Jesus Christ became man, for this is the right faith, that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at once God and man: He is God, begotten before the ages of the substance of the Father, and He is man, born in the world of the substance of His mother, perfect God and perfect man, with reasonable soul and human flesh, equal to the Father with respect to his Godhead and inferior to the Father with respect to His manhood.

Although he is God and man, He is not two Christs but one Christ: one, that is to say, not by changing the Godhead into flesh, but by taking on the humanity into God, one, indeed, not by confusion of substance but by unity in one Person.

For just as the reasonable soul and the flesh are one man, so God and man are one Christ, Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, is seated on the right hand of the Father, whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. At His coming all men shall rise with their bodies and give an account of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire.

This is the true Christian faith. Unless a man believe this firmly and faithfully, he cannot be saved.