

“Know Your Heresies”
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Trinity Sunday

Contrary to popular belief, the Athanasian Creed was not written to bore people attending worship on Trinity Sunday. It sure can seem that way as we move through the Creed, with its many repetitious phrases and clauses. On and on it goes, and by the end, those confessing the Creed probably more relieved its over than uplifted by its clear Trinitarian doctrine. The Apostle’s Creed is fine, the Nicene Creed is longer, but tolerable, but that Athanasian Creed is something else.

But there was a time during the history of the Church that the Athanasian Creed was very important to the health of the ministry of the Gospel. For buried within the Creed itself are the echoes of heresy after heresy that sought to divert the hearts of the faithful away from the fullness of the Trinity as discerned by the Church during its early years.

As you may know, because of Jesus, the Church struggled with understanding the basic nature of God and of Jesus himself. Up to the appearance of Jesus, the people of Israel could rest assured in the faith that God was one, and only one. But as the disciples and other followers of Jesus came to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Son of God, and thus also God, their belief in only one God was shaken. How could this be? And then with a similar discernment regarding the Holy Spirit, their confusion only grew. I’m not going to bore you with all the details of how they came to balance this seeming oxymoron, just with some of them.

The doctrine of the Trinity was eventually settled on this: that God is one God in three persons, but each person of the Trinity is not distinct, but is God, fully God, and that the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, is both fully human and fully divine. This concept of God is something that has been very hard to understand, and in fact, defies complete understanding during our earthly lives. And it might be hard to see how this doctrine makes a difference in our everyday lives today. And yet, this was something so important that Christians were willing to die for it.

So what were some of these heresies that prodded the Church to settle on the doctrine of the Trinity? There’s Modalism, Arianism and it’s opposite, Monophysitism, Docetism, Adoptionism, Montanism, Pelagianism, you’re getting all of these down, right? Of course not! There’s too many to count, too many to mention, and each one leads us away from the Trinitarian faith in a different way. For example, you might want to remember that the followers of Arias believed that Jesus was not divine, or that the monophysites believed that Jesus was not human, or you just believe that Jesus was both fully God and fully human, and so on.

But again, there’s a lot of different heresies to keep track of, and that where the Creeds come in, especially the Athanasian Creed. Its purpose is to keep the Church on the right track when it comes to believing in the Triune God, and in fact, it does this well. And the need for this continues, as heresies plague the Church, though few, if any, are actually new.

For example, the Jesus Seminar might question the divinity of Jesus, but that's just an echo of Arianism rearing its ugly head. Someone might try to substitute Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier (perhaps in an attempt to avoid gender specific language) for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but that's just an echo of the heresy Modalism. (According to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Father Son and Holy Spirit is Creator, the Father Son and Holy Spirit is Redeemer, and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is Sanctifier.) A Christian might be tempted to question the validity of a baptism performed by a pastor who ended up being a really rotten person, but that's an example of a heresy called Montanism, rejected by the Church as it recognized that the power of Holy Baptism (and Holy Communion) rests in God's actions promised with it, not in the worth of the person performing it.

This stuff, this long Creed, is important because it speaks to the need of every Christian to be able to trust in the promises of our God, that the Holy Spirit within us is fully God and thus that God is fully with us. It speaks to the need of every Christian to know and trust that our God knows what it means to suffer humiliation, pain, grief, and even death. And it speaks to the need of every Christian to preserve the faith in its fullness, and to resist the temptation to water it down, make it seem less confusing or embarrassing, because only a Triune God of Father Son and Holy Spirit can fully relate and experience the love of His Creation returned back to it. So I don't expect you to know all your heresies or to memorize the Athanasian Creed, but I encourage you to hold fast to your faith in the One God in Three Persons, including the Son who is both fully God and fully Human, and to trust in that God every day of your life, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!