

# The Athanasian Creed and the Holy Trinity

*A Sunday Morning Adult Bible Study—Rev. Dr. Jayson S. Galler*

Revised June 2012 for Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Kilgore, Texas

- Athanasian Creed, also known as *Symbolum Quincunque* (*vult salvus esse*), and other titles. Used almost daily in Medieval morning devotions, now generally used only on Trinity Sunday. Luther called it “the most important and glorious composition since the days of the apostles.” One of the so-called “ecumenical” creeds. Included in *The Book of Concord* (the Lutheran Confessions) and therefore binding and normative.
- Since the ninth century the Athanasian Creed was thought to be the work of Athanasius, the Greek Bishop of Alexandria (d.372/373), known for anti-Arianism (Arius d.336, author of heresy that denied full Divinity of Jesus Christ, created Logos before ages, etc.) at Council of Nicea. Legend says Athanasius composed the creed during exile in Rome, but it was not known until later (e.g., not in Athanasius’s own writings) and known first in Latin. Presupposes controversies that came later.
- One theory is that the Creed originated in Southern Gaul (France) around the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The full form was known at the close of the 8<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup>. Some speculate the Creed was originally two distinct and separately composed parts later put together. Origin doesn’t really matter.
- Clear and precise summary of ecumenical councils. Brief sentences artistically arranged and rhythmically expressed. Two major parts (paragraph numbers correspond to *LSB* pp.319-320).
  - First ([1]3-26) gives orthodox doctrine of the Holy Trinity, said to be in strict Augustinian form. Explicitly rules out the subordination of the Persons, where Nicene and Apostolic don’t. (Likely later controversies and creeds arose because predecessors were not so precise.) Persons are more than a form or manifestation but less than an independent separate being. (Avoids Sabellianism [a.k.a. the Modalist form of Monarchianism, named for Sabellius, who tried to safeguard monotheism and unity of the Godhead but did not do justice to the independent subsistence of the Son, related to Patripassians, who said the Father suffered as the Son] and Tritheism [which denies the unity of the substance, Monophysites who said one nature in Christ, common nature an abstraction and persons actually separate substances or natures].)
  - Second (27-39[40]) gives a succinct statement on Christ, as settled at Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451. Proper relation between divine and human nature, excluding Nestorian (two separate persons, one Divine and one Human, in Christ) and Eutychian or Monophysite heresies (as above).
- Some things in the Creed may need clarifying:
  - 1, 3, 19, 40: “catholic” or “universal” faith, held always, everywhere, by everyone who believes. Nicene Creed’s “catholic” translated into German before Luther as “Christian”.
  - The “damnatory clauses” (2, 19?, 40) make this faith “indispensable condition of salvation”. Not just a warning, but an exclusion from heaven of those who reject the truth confessed. Hard for some to hear, because we want to think other religions are going to the same place. Clearly Jews, Muslims, JWs, Mormons, etc. are excluded. Saving faith is impossible without knowledge of the Trinity, the Divinity of Christ, and His work of redemption (Acts 4:12; John 8:21; 14:6). The “intolerance” is Biblical.
  - 3-4: Faith = worship (seeking and receiving forgiveness), emphasized again midway (25)
  - 4: One substance (Godhead) not to be divided. Three persons (Father, Son, Holy Ghost) not to be confounded
  - 6 ff.: Godhead one, glory co-equal, majesty co-eternal. All uncreate(d), incomprehensible (“That cannot be contained or circumscribed within limits; ... infinite; immense;” modern sense of beyond the reach of our understanding not far off, but not most modern sense of unintelligible),

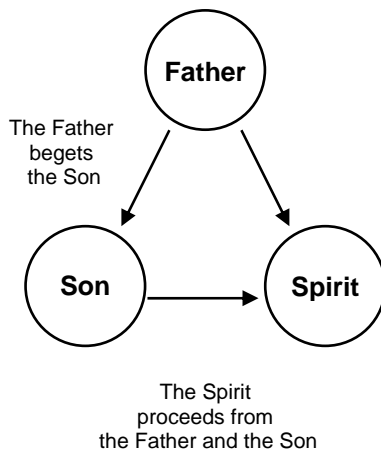
eternal, almighty, God, Lord.

(Note well [e.g., 11 ff.] the “anti-thesis” part of confessing the truth, saying what is not true.)

- 19: What is “Christian verity”? “Truth”, ultimately from Latin *verus* “true”. (Like “very”: ultimately from Latin *verus* for “true”; “Really or truly entitled to the name or designation; possessing the true character of the person or thing named; properly so called or designated”.)
- 20 ff.: Intra-trinitarian distinctiveness:  
Father: not made, not created, not begotten  
Son: not made nor created, but begotten  
Holy Ghost: not made nor created not begotten but proceeding

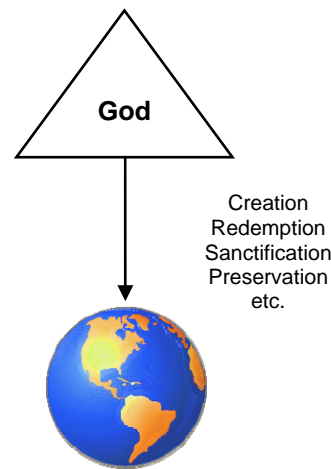
## Intra-Trinitarian Relationships

*Persons to each other are distinct*



## Trinity's relationship to us

*Works toward the world are indivisible*



- 24-25: No difference in rank, coeternal and coequal
- 28: Believe *and confess*.
- 28 ff.: Two natures in Christ, like fire and iron in glowing poker.
- 30: Reasonable or rational soul: “in opposition to the Apollinarian heresy, which limited the extent of his humanity to a mere body with an animal soul inhabited by the divine Logos”
- 31: “Inferior to” or “less than” as in John 14:28 (other passages could be adduced for other points)
- 35: Analogy of our union of body and soul
- 36-37: Quick recap of salvific events
- 38-39: Public judging on the basis of works as evidence of faith (no soul sleep, judged at death, could even say judged now)
- Other points about the Trinity (as time allows)
  - Natural knowledge of a Holy God Who demands and rewards
  - Christian knowledge derived from God’s Word and Trinitarian
  - Trinitarian Controversies (Unitarianism and Tritheism)
  - Objections to Trinity
  - Trinity in Old Testament
  - Reason and the Trinity
  - Terminology not “necessary” for salvation but because of enemies’ attacks on Scripture

<sup>1</sup> Whoever desires to be saved must,  
above all, hold the catholic faith.  
<sup>2</sup> Whoever does not keep it whole and  
undefiled will without doubt perish  
eternally.  
<sup>3</sup> And the catholic faith is this,  
<sup>4</sup> that we worship one God in Trinity and  
Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the  
persons nor dividing the substance.  
<sup>5</sup> For the Father is one person, the Son is  
another, and the Holy Spirit is another.  
<sup>6</sup> But the Godhead of the Father and of  
the Son and of the Holy Spirit is  
one: the glory equal, the majesty  
coeternal.  
<sup>7</sup> Such as the Father is, such is the Son,  
and such is the Holy Spirit:  
<sup>8</sup> the Father uncreated, the Son uncreated,  
the Holy Spirit uncreated;  
<sup>9</sup> the Father infinite, the Son infinite, the  
Holy Spirit infinite;  
<sup>10</sup> the Father eternal, the Son eternal, the  
Holy Spirit eternal.  
<sup>11</sup> And yet there are not three Eternals, but  
one Eternal,  
<sup>12</sup> just as there are not three Uncreated or  
three Infinites, but one Uncreated and  
one Infinite.  
<sup>13</sup> In the same way, the Father is almighty,  
the Son almighty, the Holy Spirit  
almighty;  
<sup>14</sup> and yet there are not three Almighty's,  
but one Almighty.  
<sup>15</sup> So the Father is God, the Son is God,  
the Holy Spirit is God;  
<sup>16</sup> and yet there are not three Gods, but  
one God.  
<sup>17</sup> So the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord,  
the Holy Spirit is Lord;  
<sup>18</sup> and yet there are not three Lords, but  
one Lord.  
<sup>19</sup> Just as we are compelled by the  
Christian truth to acknowledge each  
distinct person as God and Lord, so  
also are we prohibited by the catholic  
religion to say that there are three  
Gods or Lords.  
<sup>20</sup> The Father is not made nor created nor  
begotten by anyone.  
<sup>21</sup> The Son is neither made nor created,  
but begotten of the Father alone.  
<sup>22</sup> The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of  
the Son, neither made nor  
created nor begotten, but proceeding.

<sup>23</sup> Thus, there is one Father, not three  
Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one  
Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.  
<sup>24</sup> And in this Trinity none is before or  
after another; none is greater or less  
than another;  
<sup>25</sup> but the whole three persons are  
coeternal with each other and coequal,  
so that in all things, as has been stated  
above, the Trinity in Unity and Unity  
in Trinity is to be worshiped.  
<sup>26</sup> Therefore, whoever desires to be saved  
must think thus about the Trinity.  
<sup>27</sup> But it is also necessary for everlasting  
salvation that one faithfully believe  
the incarnation of our Lord Jesus  
Christ.  
<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it is the right faith that we  
believe and confess that our Lord  
Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at the  
same time both God and man.  
<sup>29</sup> He is God, begotten from the substance  
of the Father before all ages; and He  
is man, born from the substance of  
His mother in this age:  
<sup>30</sup> perfect God and perfect man,  
composed of a rational soul and  
human flesh;  
<sup>31</sup> equal to the Father with respect to His  
divinity, less than the Father with  
respect to His humanity.  
<sup>32</sup> Although He is God and man, He is not  
two, but one Christ:  
<sup>33</sup> one, however, not by the conversion of  
the divinity into flesh, but by the  
assumption of the humanity into  
God;  
<sup>34</sup> one altogether, not by confusion of sub-  
stance, but by unity of person.  
<sup>35</sup> For as the rational soul and flesh is one  
man, so God and man is one Christ,  
<sup>36</sup> who suffered for our salvation,  
descended into hell, rose again the  
third day from the dead,  
<sup>37</sup> ascended into heaven, and is seated at  
the right hand of the Father, God  
Almighty, from whence He will come  
to judge the living and the dead.  
<sup>38</sup> At His coming all people will rise again  
with their bodies and give an account  
concerning their own deeds.  
<sup>39</sup> And those who have done good will  
enter into eternal life, and those who  
have done evil into eternal fire.  
<sup>40</sup> This is the catholic faith; whoever does  
not believe it faithfully and firmly  
cannot be saved.