

The Athanasian Creed

Colleagues,

With Trinity Sunday fast approaching, this week's Thursday Theology is an exchange between Bishop Marcus Lohrmann and a congregant from his synod who asks him some trenchant questions about the Athanasian Creed. The Rev. Dr. Lohrmann (whom we last quoted in [ThTheol #703](#)) is a pastor and pastoral theologian, as well as bishop of the ELCA's Northwest Ohio synod. In this note from 2007, which we gratefully reproduce here, he outlines the Biblical underpinnings of the closing lines of the Athanasian creed, and he offers (as he puts it) a "Lutheran" reading of those lines which at first seem so very un-Lutheran. We pray that his thoughts will help guide your own thinking about the Athanasian Creed in the days leading up to Trinity Sunday.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

The Athanasian Creed: Some Good Questions and a Response

A member of one of our congregations sent me an e-mail in which she asked some good questions about the Athanasian Creed, a creed that is used in many of our congregations on Trinity Sunday. With her permission, I share the questions:

Today's service included the reading of the Athanasian Creed. This is an important creed for us to read and hear as it really tries to explain the Trinity, a very difficult concept for most of us to understand.

However, the last part of the creed seems to say that we are entered into "eternal life" through the good we do. Our actions

will decide whether we have “eternal life,” or “eternal fire”:

At his coming all the people shall rise bodily to give an account of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, those who have done evil will enter eternal fire. This is the catholic faith. One cannot be saved without believing this firmly and faithfully.

This is seemingly totally incompatible with what Luther taught and how I have been raised in the Lutheran community. I have been taught that it is through “faith” in Jesus Christ, his death on the cross and then resurrection that forgiveness [is assured] for the faithful.

This concept of forgiveness and eternal life through “faith” alone is the “core” of our Lutheran faith. Am I wrong?

Therefore, I come to you to ask the following questions:

- Am I misunderstanding this part of the creed?
- Am I misunderstanding the core of Luther’s philosophy and the Lutheran religion?
- If this section of the creed is not what we really believe, then why do we read and recite it?
- Is there not a better text to recite that supports our Lutheran beliefs?

These are great questions! Below is my response:

Athanasius was one of the “fathers” of the Church who lived in the fourth century and who played an important part in the formulation of the Nicene Creed which was developed at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD. One of the concerns of that Council was to describe the nature of God. The Athanasian Creed was written by Christians in about the sixth century amidst renewed debates about the nature of God, and it was given the name “Athanasian Creed” in memory of Athanasius. The creed seeks to

stress the unity of the divine essence, one God in three persons. Erwin Lueker in Lutheran Cyclopedia points out that "Luther regarded it as possibly the grandest production of the church since the time of the Apostles" (p. 256). This Creed has been used in the Church since the sixth century. Because of its comprehensive statement on the Trinity, it is often used on Trinity Sunday.

I can appreciate your reaction to the first paragraph. I think it can offend "modern sensibilities" and, if not properly understood, cause distress and confusion. I think that by accepting it, the Church wanted to say, "The story of the God revealed in Jesus Christ is critical. It is a matter of life and death. To value the person and work of Christ we need to see in that the reality of God." The phrase "Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish for eternity" is strong language intended to urge the hearer to be willing to stake their life on this cross-centered story.

I can also appreciate your reaction to the last paragraphs. They can offend Lutheran sensibilities which emphasize that we are justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ without works of the Law (see Romans and Galatians).

Interestingly enough, however, this is language that reflects some Biblical language. For example, the Gospel of Matthew stresses the "doing of righteousness." Check out the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-8; or Jesus' words in Matthew 7:24, "Everyone then who hears these words and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock;" or 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven." Matthew 25 speaks of God's judgment in the light of how we have responded to the poor, naked, imprisoned, hungry, etc. The Old Testament is filled with warnings directed against those whose

worship and words are true but are judged “empty,” inviting the wrath of God because care for the poor, for justice, for humility was missing. Here you might think of the Micah text, “What does God require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” Many other texts could be cited in the New Testament as well. Scripture does speak of the need to give an account of deeds. Paul can even use that language.

Yet, it is also true that when we see what the Law of God requires, we are tempted to either despair or self-righteousness. To those who despair, God offers the promise of mercy in Christ. Faith is invited. And when such faith is confessed, there is evidence of the Spirit of God. Paul: “No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” To those who are self-righteous, Christ speaks words of judgment.

In terms of the words in the text, I do read them in a “Lutheran” way, although they are words that belong to the Christian community beyond the Lutheran community. When I am asked on that day to “give an account of my own deeds,” I will “plead Christ” and pray, “Dear God, for the sake of Jesus Christ, when you look at me, please see your beloved Son, who has promised to clothe me in his righteousness.” The “account” that I will give is the account of him who has forgiven and claimed me as his own. I would do a similar thing with the last paragraph. To “do good” is not first and foremost to do “right behavior.” It is to live and act in faith, that is, trusting in God’s promises in Christ.

I like John 14-17 for this stuff. In these chapters, Jesus encourages us to abide in him. To act apart from Christ is to be branches cut off from the vine. To abide in Christ is to trust in him who gives lives. What works should we be doing to get “life”? Jesus offers us a pun in response. “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he sent.” Again, “to do good”

is to be “in Christ,” to trust oneself to God’s promises in Christ even when our consciences condemn us.

With regard to the last paragraph, again I think the writers intend to say what Scripture says at John 3:16 and elsewhere: To believe this story, to hang one’s heart on it, that is, on Christ, is to get life. Apart from that one gets judgment. The final judgment is of course God’s to make. But it is our task and privilege to share and embody this word of Life that is Christ for the world.

Having said all of the above, I would not recommend using this creed with great frequency but I think it is worth revisiting. If nothing else, its use prompts the great questions you have asked. However, given your questions, I’m not sure it is helpful to use if we fail to take time to “unpack” it. Otherwise our words can be only a “noisy” gong. The use of the three creeds also serves to remind me that whenever I gather at the Lord’s Table I am joined to Christians of every time and place. As I work, by God’s grace and forgiveness, at living the faith in the present, I need to hear the confession of those who have claimed and encouraged Christ in the past.

Submitted by:

Bishop Marcus Lohrmann

April 2, 2007

Two from the “Oops” Department–

- a. Bob Schultz, featured in #726, lives in Seattle, not Portland.
- b. Last week’s offering was #727, not #227.

Our thanks to the eagle-eyed reader who spotted these and told us.

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