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Holy Trinity Sunday
June 11, 2006

The Universal Faith

Introduction

Once a year, on Holy Trinity Sunday, we recite this longest of all the church's early creeds: the "Quicumque Vult," the Athanasian Creed. We confess with the whole true church that everyone who wants to be saved must place their whole trust in precisely *this* God, and *this* God-man Jesus Christ.

I. History

The late theologian Jaroslav Pelikan once remarked that Christianity, unlike other world religions, is a religion of creeds. The Jews proclaim "the Lord our God, the Lord, is one." Muslims confess "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet." Christians recite, well, things like the Athanasian Creed. How come? Because, as Dr. Pelikan put it: "religious faith in general, prayer addressed 'to whom it may concern,' sentiment about some transcendent dimension otherwise undefined, doesn't have any staying power. In the darkest hours of life, you need to believe something specific."

Unlike the Nicene Creed, but like the Apostles' Creed, we don't have a lot of facts and details about how this creed was written. We don't know if it was Athanasius himself who wrote it, or someone else who based it on Athanasius' beliefs and ideas. We don't know exactly when it was written, except sometime between 400 and 600 AD. We do know that all the churches of the west – the ones that would eventually become the Roman, Lutheran, and Anglican churches – accepted it as a statement of faith and worked it into their liturgies.

II. Theology

This particular creed is laser-light focused, despite its length, on the question first of all of God's nature. Is the true God of the universe who reveals himself in sacred Scripture just some "guy upstairs" or just the "good Lord?" Has he left himself so undefined that we can say whatever we like about him – or her?

At Ebenezer Lutheran Church in San Francisco (I might point out that this not an LCMS church), members are encouraged to pray a Rosary to the Goddess. You can find this suggested prayer on their website:

Our Mother who is within us, we celebrate your many names.

*Your wisdom come, your will be done
unfolding from the depths within us.*

Each day you give us all that we need.

*You remind us of our limits
and we let go.*

*You support us in our power
and we act with courage.*

*For you are the dwelling place within us
the empowerment around us
and the celebration among us
now and for ever. Amen*

Now if you're a member of a church like the Church of the Brethren, the Church of Christ, the Mennonite Church, or some other church that rejects creeds, you'll need to sit down, pull out your Bible, and start figuring out whether these prayers are good or bad. Or you can say, "No, we do not believe in a God of many names. We do not believe in a God who 'unfolds from the depths within us.' We believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons, but one Lord and one God."

The Athanasian Creed puts into words the wonderful nature of the God we worship. First, that he is one God – we do not believe in a universe of multiple supreme beings. Second, we believe that God is three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Each person is distinct, and is worthy of being addressed as eternal, uncreated Lord and God. Yet at the same time our God is one in will and purpose, one in his very *essence* and *being*.

This is the God who was in the beginning, the Spirit who hovered over creation, and the Word that brought light into darkness. This is the God who says, "Let us make man in our own image." This is the God who asked Isaiah, "Who shall I send, and who will go for us?"

This same God is the Father sent his only begotten Son into the flesh, to save, not judge, the world. This God is also the Spirit who blows where and when he wills to bring about new birth. By water and the Word, the Spirit has made us sons and daughters of the Father, so that the Father's Son Jesus Christ is now our brother.

If this God is our mother, she must be outside of us so that she might give birth to us. How can she be, as the folks at Ebenzer Lutheran Church pray, inside of us if she is our mother? Wouldn't she be our daughter, then? Does that mean Jesus has two mothers, one within him and one from whose womb he came? And about the Holy Spirit?

III. Christology

But the Athanasian Creed isn't just about God – it's also about Jesus. It's only because of Jesus that we know God as being three persons. Because of Jesus God is now, in Luther's words, "baked into the same cake as us." The Son of the Father is now not only fully God and Lord, eternal and incomprehensible, but also fully human, with a real human soul and body. Everything that can be said about God can be said about Jesus. And everything that can be said about humans, except our being sinful, can also be said about Jesus the incarnate Son of God.

He is both God and man, and yet one person. At one and the same time, Christ is both creator and creature, the bridge between the one who made the universe and the universe itself. He is the one on whom angels ascend and descend between the realm of the Father and our cosmos. He is the one who can ascend to the highest heaven, and therefore – THEREFORE! – be present with us always, even to the end of the age.

ILLUS: In the movie "The Wizard of Oz," the Wizard appears in the world as giant floating head, booming out his commands in a loud voice to his frightened subjects. But when Dorothy and her friends look behind the curtain, what do they see? A man, just a man. What a disappointment!

The Bible's revelation of God is quite the opposite. From Genesis through Revelation, we are given more and more peeks behind the curtain, and every time we look we leave more and more in awe and wonder.

Each peek behind the curtain at the essence and persons of God leaves us wanting to shout all the louder: I KNOW OUR GOD! "I believe in one God...one Lord Jesus Christ...and the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life."

IV. Practicality

A) Know God, not Just Believing In God

Of course, in the words of Dr. Pelikan again, "To believe one thing is to disbelieve another." To recite the Athanasian Creed is to deny all who would say something else about God. By saying we KNOW God, we're also saying we know who God is NOT.

God is not...

- A mysterious, impersonal force binding the universe together, or
- A state of being we can all achieve, or
- Some blind watchmaker who started the universe off but has let it on its own

Jesus is not...

- Some wise prophetic teacher, or
- A new 'law-giver' like Moses, Buddha or Muhammad,

ILLUS: A lot of people know there's a President of the United States. They know he lives in Washington, DC. I'll see his White House this week. But very few people KNOW the PRESIDENT. If you know there is a President, you may write a letter to the White House, and some secretary may answer it. But if you know the PRESIDENT, you're going to be able to call and arrange a visit.

Being Christian doesn't mean claiming to know there is a God. When people came to the apostle James and said, "Yah, I believe in God" he replied "Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." (James 2:19) Believing there is a God is like seeing the floating face of the Wizard and saying, "Yah, I believe there's a Wizard," or looking at the White House and saying, "Yah, I believe there's a President."

Being Christian means claiming to KNOW God, and being KNOWN BY him. We have come to KNOW God in the face of Jesus Christ, and therefore we KNOW who God actually IS, in his very BEING. So we believe he knows each of us, individually and personally.

B) This Knowing is the "Greatest Good Deed"

To prove that our "knowing God" is not the same as just "believing God," we have these wonderful words at the end of the creed:

*When Christ comes to judge the living and the dead,
... all men will rise again with their bodies;
and will give account of their own works.
And they that have done good will go into life everlasting
and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.*

Faith in God, KNOWING GOD, is the first great work done by God in every true Christian. After all, what is the first commandment?

You shall have no other gods. You shall not make for yourself a graven image...and you shall not bow down and serve them.

The apostle John writes in his first letter:

The man who says, "I know God," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

Faith is the keeping of the 1st commandment, and seeing that nothing, not work or shore or school or Devil or temptation, nothing, stands between us and the worship and service of God. Faith puts that worship and service first above all other things.

Otherwise it's not faith – it's just intellectual belief, which, as James points out, even the Demons have. The Demons will not be in heaven. Their belief in God will not save them. Neither will mere "human belief" in God. Only God-given, living faith can save.

Those in whom God has created such faith will find, when they rise on the last day, that the Lord has worked miraculous and wonderful deeds through them. And the first and greatest of those good works will be their faith.

Those without such faith and trust in God will find that everything good thing they have ever done was, in the prophet Isaiah's words, "filthy rags." They will hear the words of Jesus, "I never knew you. And you never knew me. You believed I existed. But you never served me, couldn't be bothered to find out what sort of worship I desire. Depart from me, evildoers."

Conclusion

ILLUS: When I started seminary we heard a rumor that we would be asked to recite the Athanasian Creed from memory. Scared to death, we started the work of memorizing the creed. I'm not embarrassed to admit it was hard work. I'm also not embarrassed to admit that was when I came to love this creed. Not just the words, but what they stood for. I loved the privilege God had given me to know this much about him, to know his persons and his work on my behalf. To KNOW he LOVES ME, and be able to recite my love for him in words.

Moses told the people of Israel, before they entered the land of Israel, to remember the laws the Lord had given them. They were to impress this law into their hearts, to impress them on their children, to talk about them constantly. That's what I was doing in memorizing that creed. Learning the wonderful works of our one God in three person. So with all the saints of God and the hosts of heaven I gladly say:

Whoever wishes to be saved should above all cling to the single universal faith:

Whoever does not guard it whole and inviolable will doubtless perish eternally:

And this is the universal faith:

That we worship one God in Trinity

And the Trinity in Unity

Neither confusing the persons

Or dividing the substance.

This is MOST CERTAINLY TRUE.

AMEN!