

## The Athanasian Creed



Roman 8:13 "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. . . When we cry (out), 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

On March 25, 1783, a meeting of Episcopal clergy at the Glebe House in Woodbury, Connecticut, elected Samuel Seabury to be the first American bishop, and so he sailed off to London on July 7<sup>th</sup> of that year to be consecrated. In England, however, his consecration was considered to be impossible because as an American citizen, he could no longer take the required oath of

allegiance to the English King. Seabury then turned to the Scottish Episcopal Church to consecrate him. The Episcopalians in Scotland were not then and are not now the established church, and required no fealty to the crown, so Seabury was consecrated in Aberdeen on November 14, 1784, on the condition that he promised to promote the Scottish consecration prayer for Holy Communion rather than that of the 1662 English prayer book, and that he include the Athanasian Creed in the American Prayerbook. Seabury succeeded with the first request, as every American prayerbook has contained a version of the Scottish consecration prayer, but not the latter. It was not until the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 200 years later, that the Athanasian Creed first appeared in an American Prayerbook, and even then, it appeared only in the innocuous section in the back of the book entitled "Historical Documents of the Church."

Nonetheless the so-called Athanasian Creed was widely accepted in the West during the Middle Ages, and was widely used by the Roman Catholic Church, by the Lutherans, the Anglicans, the Reformed Church, and the Presbyterians. Indeed, successive Books of Common Prayer of the Church of England, from the first one in 1549 to last one in 1662, provided for the recitation of the Athanasian Creed on 19 occasions each year, a practice that continued until the 19th century, when vigorous controversy regarding its statement about eternal damnation saw its use

gradually decline. A Dutch theologian in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the first to question whether the creed's author was actually Athanasius. And modern scholarship seems to have confirmed that he was not, since the Creed was little known in the East in the early Church, was not mentioned in any of the ecumenical councils, was written in Latin, not Greek, and first appeared no sooner than the sixth century, 200 years after the death of Athanasius.

And so, this Creed attributed to St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexander, immodestly begins: "Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith . . . And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance" or so says a creed which the American church has never really much appreciated. And I can sympathize with those who are reluctant to recite it publicly on any kind of regular basis, for it is also rather long and very dogmatic.

It continues ". . . For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, the Holy Ghost uncreate. The Father

incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternal, but one eternal. As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible. . .” and so forth and so on it goes. But it seems to me that it is this very Creed which is incomprehensible!

The Athanasian Creed ends as it began, “This is the Catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.” The Creed itself is quick to condemn those who do not understand the Catholic faith in exactly the manner in which the Creed does. It is all too reminiscent of the fourth century of the early Church when everyone seemed to be arguing with everyone else about so many points of theological dispute. It was all too much carping and fighting over words and the translations of words, too many condemnations, too many anathemas. Every different understanding of the faith became another heresy for the list. There was Apollinarianism, Arianism, Patripassionism, Macedonianism, Modalism, Monarchianism, Sabellianism, and so forth and so on, a virtual encyclopedia of heresies and misunderstandings. A correct Christian understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity became more and more a theological game and a mathematical puzzle. The simple faith of the children of God who cry out “Abba, Father,” was seemingly lost, and so was

their inheritance. The average Christian soon became afraid of trying to articulate his own faith for himself, for fear of excommunication or eternal damnation. Beliefs became formulated instead by the Church Fathers with creeds, creeds which were then accepted by blind faith, as thinking about the mysteries of Christianity became a matter for only well-trained theologians and schoolmen.

I am afraid that much the same situation exists today when it comes to modern interpretations of the Christian faith. Christians often find modern theology just as obscure and just as difficult to technically understand or appreciate. The relevance is all lost. Modern theologians are no less confusing and no less ambiguous in their language than were the writers of the Athanasian Creed. Today it is not the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, but the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier. There are no more Persons in the Trinity, but now Modes or movements. Now there is the Primordial Being, the Expressive Being, and the Unitive Being; God of course is now the ground of all being. Everything has become existential and ontological. The relationship itself between the members of the Trinity is confusingly spoken of in modern theology in terms of procession, filiation, generation, spiration, and of course, my favorite, circumincession. It is still all too much for the average

Christian, and thus usually ignored or quickly forgotten.

There is too much focus here on orthodoxy, and not holiness. On knowing what is right, rather than doing what is right. And we all understand what we are called to do. We just recited and reaffirmed our own baptismal vows last Sunday morning for Pentecost. However unsure or unsteady of what we actually believe, let us struggle then to fulfill those promises, to love our enemies, serve our neighbors, say our prayers, feed the hungry, visit the sick, strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. The Trinity was not so much a thing to be understood, or an idea to be grasped, but a mystery to be experienced. For Christianity in the end, it seems to me, is not a system of beliefs or a way of thinking as much as it is a way of life. The late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, reminded the Church earlier last century of a spiritual law which we seem to have forgotten; that religious experience must always precede theological interpretation, and not vice versa. We should therefore spend more time trying to experience God in our lives, and less time in trying to understand or define him. For Christians, Jesus is indeed experienced as a unique reflection of the Mystery of God, which somehow makes God more real and accessible to us. Our words and our phrases and our feeble doctrines cannot ever really articulate the Truth of all of

this, they can only hint at it. For in the end God does, and must, remain a mystery, not to be understood, but to be experienced. AMEN.