

Today, many churches like ours will observe Trinity Sunday and will use something called the Athanasian Creed. Why?

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Imagine that you're seventy years old, and the civil government has sent you into exile five times over the past thirty years. What would you do? A normal person would consider his options. With a lifetime of accomplishments, Athanasius deserved better than a one-way ticket to nowhere.

In earlier years, Athanasius had been elected bishop of Alexandria; he'd written a landmark book identifying Jesus as God; and he had played a significant role at the council of Nicea—the first worldwide conference of the church.

He ended up fighting his whole life for what he thought had been decided at Nicea: the Biblical teaching that Jesus was fully human and fully God: begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things are made. When the council voted in favor of this creed, which we still speak today as the Nicene Creed, Athanasius thought that the opposing viewpoint (a teacher named Arius said that Jesus was created and therefore not equal with God) would finally be put to rest.

But he was wrong. People who agreed with Arius not only hung around, but managed to gain positions of power. They whispered into the emperor's ear that Athanasius, who kept publicly insisting that the emperor enforce the Nicene decisions, trafficked in murder, sorcery, and treason.

Emperor Constantine, who valued peace above anything else, held a hearing. Condemned on trumped-up charges, Athanasius was sent packing to what today we would call Germany. When Constantine died two years later, Athanasius was allowed to return to his post. Two years after that, when followers of Arius gained control of key leadership positions in the church, Athanasius had to flee to Rome for asylum. On and on it went for decades, where Athanasius would repeatedly lose and regain his office. When he was allowed to return to Alexandria at age 68, he no doubt was looking to end his service in peace. Not quite. Within two years, Valens, the western emperor and—you guessed it, a follower of Arius—ordered Athanasius banished again.

To make a long story short, Valens reversed his decree four months later, and Athanasius was allowed to come back, and for seven more years he served in Alexandria until his death in 373 AD. Arius' point of view still held firm sway in the church. It seemed that Athanasius' bold stand for the truth—and all the heartache it had caused him—had been for nothing.

However, eight years later, when Emperor Theodosius took the throne, the teachings of Arius were banned, and the decision of the Council of Nicea was reaffirmed. The church never considered Arian teaching an option again, and the Nicene Creed is still used as a

basic statement of the universal, Biblical, true Christian faith. For this we have—at least in part—Athanasius to thank.

I share his story with you today for a couple of reasons. First of all, today, in your bulletin you'll find a little something called the Athanasian Creed. From time to time this creed is spoken on Trinity Sunday, because it carefully says what can be said about our triune God. And as you scan this document, which Athanasius at least had a hand in writing, you can see his concerns rising to the surface, such as: '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; 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; Perfect God and perfect man...' In other words, Jesus is no second class citizen, he wasn't just a nice guy that God chose, Jesus is God. Period. Whether or not we're conscious of it, this was a battle the church had to fight. People like Athanasius had to endure terrible difficulty just to say that Jesus is true God and true man, and those who say that Jesus is only God or only man have got it wrong.

This Day of the Holy Trinity is the only festival in our Church Year that is not based on a historical event, like Pentecost, for example, or Jesus' birth. Instead it is based on the nature of God himself. Some might therefore say that it is based on a teaching or a doctrine. That seems a little impersonal to me, but whatever you say about Trinity Sunday, the bottom line is this: it is of eternal importance to know who God is, and the way God has described himself to us is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There are an awful lot of people out there who will tell you they believe in "God." But what God are they talking about? The grandfatherly god of a child's drawing? The inventor god who created the world and then stepped away to watch things unfold? The faceless Force that runs through the universe? Or the God that Peter refers to in His Pentecost sermon: The Father who sent His Son; the Son who send His Holy Spirit; the God of Holy Scripture? The God who has acted in time and history to produce forgiveness of sins and endless life through the cross and empty tomb of the Son, Jesus Christ? If you want to call this personal knowledge of God "doctrine," that's fine. And I hope that you will see for this very reason that having the right doctrine really matters. It's the difference between a God who is watching us from a distance and a God who came down here and got his hands dirty, who got his heart and his body broken just to tell us that he loves us and wants us back. That's what's at stake when we talk about doctrine. Doctrine is not a dirty word. Doctrine is knowing God the right way—the way he wants to be known. And when you get right down to it—what is more important than that?

Athanasius felt that knowing God the right way was so important that he was willing to lose his job and the respect of his peers. To him, it wasn't even a choice. He would not stay silent. How about you? When you know that standing for the truth might hurt someone's feelings or make somebody mad, what do you do? When I consider that question myself, I know that I must repent before the Lord and seek his forgiveness.

If you share this conviction with me—there is hope and good news. The God who

explains himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit offers full pardon and forgiveness to those who trust in the sacrifice of Jesus, the Son. The Father waits for us and welcomes us with open arms. The Spirit fires faith in our hearts. That same Holy Spirit changes us into bold and loving Christians, people who will speak the truth in love and who will live that love and whatever happens, happens.

Some folks will get upset at that. They'll claim that truth is relative—there are no absolutes. Others won't really care one way or the other. And once in a while you'll even run into some Christians who suggest that love and doctrine don't go together real well. When that happens, we can take a page from Athanasius. Love doesn't let a child play on a busy street; or stick his hand in boiling water, and it's love that causes us to share this simple message: There is a right way to know God—a way he wants to be known—and when you know him that way, you have everything.