

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Trinity Sunday, May 26, 2013

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 239, 240:1-2, 237, 252, 644.

Lessons: Genesis 1:1-3, Romans 8:14-17, John 3:1-17.

Sermon Text: Matthew 28:18-20

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Trinity Sunday is a time to think especially about God and the three persons in one God who is our God, the God we confess, the God we believe in.

Notice that our text says we are to baptize in the name of, not in the ‘names’ of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. And did you notice that the simple coordinating conjunction “and” is used for linking those three persons, and not another conjunction?

Our text has the clearest, plainest teaching in all of Scripture that God is three persons, all on the same level. In the original Greek language of the New Testament and in the English language, the word “and”, which joins these three persons, is a coordinating conjunction, not a subordinating conjunction. It puts the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost all on the same level.

I invite you to turn to page 53 in the front of the Lutheran Hymnal. On that page you have the Athanasian Creed printed. This is one of the three creeds, called “ecumenical” or “universal” creeds. The word “ecumenical” comes from a word which means ‘worldwide’. When we use the word ecumenical here, we mean that every person throughout the world who is a true Christian must believe these things to be saved, as the introduction to the Athanasian Creed states. We do not use the word ecumenical in the unscriptural sense of what is called ‘the ecumenical movement’, the idea that all churches in the world should get together and unite to form one world-wide church, which wants churches to set aside their differences and become one visible, physical church.

Today let’s look at

THE TRIUNE GOD AS WE CONFESS HIM IN THE ATHANASIAN CREED

- 1. The true God is three persons: Father, Son, Holy Ghost from eternity.**
- 2. The true God is the only God who is to be worshiped as God!**

This creed is named after a man who is called St. Athanasius, who lived about 292-373 A.D., a staunch defender of the Christian faith in the fourth century. Although it was not written by Athanasius, it was prepared to assist the Church in specifically combating two errors that undermined Bible teaching. One error denied that God's Son and the Holy Spirit are of one being or Godhead with the Father. One version of this false teaching is called Arianism. The other error denied that Jesus Christ is true God and true man in one person. The Athanasian Creed continues to serve the Christian Church as a standard of the truth. It declares that whoever rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ is without the saving faith.

We attribute the date 450 A.D. to the writing of this creed, although there is some uncertainty as to its precise date, author, and place of origin. However, its teachings are unmistakably clear. It clearly confesses what Christians believe and it was widely used in public worship.

If you do not read it carefully or do not understand some of the words, it may seem like this creed is talking in circles or is confusing. But remember that it was written and used as a confession to plainly show the

truth as taught in God's Word. For that reason, just like any good teacher would do, it seems to repeat, or emphasizes by repeating, so that no wrong, unscriptural ideas can be taken from it.

Remember, everything in the Athanasian Creed, as well as the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds is plainly taught in the Holy Scriptures. The Athanasian Creed is usually divided into two sections: lines 1–28 addressing the doctrine of the Trinity – that's what we are going to talk about today – and lines 29–44 addressing the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

As it identifies the three persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the first section of the creed ascribes divine attributes to each individually. Thus, each person of the Trinity is described as uncreated (*incretus*), limitless (*immensus*), eternal (*æternus*), and omnipotent (*omnipotens*).

While ascribing the divine attributes and divinity to each person of the Trinity the first half of the Athanasian Creed also stresses the unity of the three persons in the one Godhead, thus avoiding a theology of tritheism. Furthermore, although they are one God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct from each other. For the Father is neither made nor begotten; the Son is not made but is begotten from the Father; the Holy Spirit is neither made nor begotten but proceeds from the Father and the Son.

So about 60% of the Athanasian Creed emphasizes the triune God, three persons yet one God with all the attributes and characteristics of true God yet separate persons.

The creed begins: **Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic [i. e., universal, Christian] faith. Which faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.**

This means that “Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all else, hold to the true Christian faith. Whoever does not keep this faith pure in all points will certainly perish forever.”

“Now this is the true Christian faith.” **And the catholic faith** – remember, that is the universal, Christian faith, not the Roman Catholic or Eastern Catholic – **is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, Neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the Substance. 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 coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.** “We worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, without mixing the persons or dividing the divine being. For each person – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – is distinct, but the deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory and coeternal in majesty. What the Father is, so is the Son, and so is the Holy Spirit.” In the Nicene Creed, we confess of Jesus Christ as **“being of one substance with the Father.”**

Then we have two lines which may seem confusing to us today: **The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.** That simply means that “the Father is uncreated, the Son uncreated, the Holy Spirit uncreated; the Father is infinite or unlimited or limitless, the Son is infinite or unlimited or limitless, the Holy Spirit is infinite or unlimited or limitless.” In Genesis 1 we read that God created the heavens and the earth, and the Father, and the Holy Spirit, and the Son, Jesus Christ are all involved in the creation of all things. But God himself is not created. He is from eternity to eternity. Our hymnal translation of the original Latin creed uses the word “incomprehensible”. That is an archaic use of the word meaning “unlimited”. “Infinite” helps explain it, but maybe you can think of it in this way to help you understand: you can't put God in a box. He can't be enclosed in any space or area or region or even in a solar system or galaxy of the universe. In its simplest, it means God is everywhere, and that means every person of the Godhead.

The emphasis on none of the persons being created is a clarification against the false doctrines of Arianism. Arius was a heretic who lived from 250 to 336 A.D. The false, unscriptural Arian concept of Christ is that the Son of God did not always exist, but was created by – and is therefore distinct from and subordinate to – God the Father. The Arian concept of Christ is called subordinationism.

We confess **The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three Eternals, but one Eternal. As there are not three Uncreated nor three Incomprehensibles, but one Uncreated and one Incomprehensible.** “The Father is eternal, the Son eternal, the Holy Spirit eternal; yet they

are not three who are eternal, but there is one who is eternal, just as they are not three who are uncreated, nor three who are infinite, but there is one who is uncreated and one who is infinite.”

If we had time today, we could take a detour and talk about the Scriptural doctrine of creation. God created all things **“in the beginning.”** (Genesis 1:1) There is much we could say about man’s experiments and research to find the beginning or the starting point of all of what Christians believe is “creation” and man’s unending efforts to find out what caused everything to begin. And yet for the Christian it is so simple. In Genesis 1:1 is the answer to how all things came about, if only mankind will believe it!

So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty. And yet they are not three Almighty, but one Almighty. “In the same way the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty; yet they are not three who are almighty, but there is one who is almighty.”

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.

So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord. Each of them is Lord, master, omnipotent, and deserving of the highest praise and worship.

The creed goes on: **For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be God and Lord, So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, There be three Gods or three Lords. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone, not made nor created, but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding.** What does all that mean? “For just as Christian truth compels us to confess each person individually to be God and Lord, so the true Christian faith forbids us to speak of three Gods or three Lords. The Father is neither made nor created nor begotten of anyone. The Son is neither made nor created, but is begotten of the Father alone. The Holy Spirit is neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeds from the Father and the Son.”

That is an idea which doesn’t automatically make sense to our human reason. In fact, the Scriptural idea that the Holy Ghost “proceeds” from the Father and the Son caused great controversy, and is one major division causing a great schism between the Roman Catholic church and all Eastern Catholic churches – the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc. But the idea of “proceeding” is plain when we recognize God the Father and God the Son sending the Holy Spirit to mankind. We read of that in places such as Galatians 4:6: **“Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”** And we read Jesus himself saying: **“When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.”** (John 15:26) And of course, we read in John 20:22: **“And with that [Jesus] breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”** So the idea of the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son is really quite plain.

So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before or after other; none is greater or less than another; But the whole three Persons are coeternal together and coequal, so that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshiped. “And within this Trinity none comes before or after; none is greater or inferior, but all three persons are coequal and coeternal, so that in every way, as stated before, all three persons are to be worshiped as one God and one God worshiped as three persons.”

Are these ideas difficult to understand? Perhaps. But we think, not with human reason and logic when it comes to God, but we think with faith.

He, therefore, that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity. “Whoever wishes to be saved must have this conviction of the Trinity.” **“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”** (Mark 9:24) **“Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”** (KJV) May we always worship the true God! Amen.