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DAMNED IF YOU DON'T

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You could be excused for forgetting that the Church of England receives and believes three Creeds. The third, the Athanasian Creed, has been virtually erased from most churches and dropped from modern liturgy books (except of course An English Prayer Book - Church Society/OUP 1994). This third creed has faced many problems. First, because, despite its name it has long been accepted that it does not seem to have been produced by Athanasius. Secondly, it is rather too long and even when all churches used the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) most did not use the Athanasian Creed on the 13 Sundays which the rubrics require. Thirdly, it is too definite in its pronouncements and finally because of its language of damnation.

This last problem, surrounding the statements made about salvation, is a major stumbling block and not simply to theological liberals.

At the beginning, twice in the middle and once at the end the Creed makes assertions of what it is necessary to believe in order to be saved. If we assert that salvation comes through faith in Christ alone then surely this Creed is going too far. It seems to be saying that unless you hold particular views about particular doctrines, such as the Trinity, then you cannot be saved. This seems to make our knowledge rather than Christ the grounds of our salvation.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the Creed seems to require us to accept truths which are far more detailed than we read straight from the pages of Scripture. How can we expect to say that we fully accept and believe what is said in this Creed? Should we send all enquirers to do a theology degree in order that they can fully hold this faith?

One solution to this problem is to draw attention to the fact the Creed does not say that we must believe this faith, but rather that we must hold it. C.S. Lewis no less in his introduction to a translation of Athanasius' Incarnation of the Word sought to defend the statement: The operative word is *keep*; not *acquire*, or even *believe*, but *keep*. The author, in fact, is not talking about unbelievers, but about deserters, not about those who have never heard of Christ, nor even those who have misunderstood and refused to accept him, but of those who having really understood and really believed, then allow themselves, under the sway of sloth or of fashion or any other invited confusion to be drawn away into sub-Christian modes of thought. They are a warning against the curious modern assumption that all changes of belief however brought about, are necessarily exempt from blame.

The problem with this position is that the Creed does in fact use the word believe, twice. The difficult clauses from the BCP translation are as follows:

WHOSOEVER will be saved : before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith.

He therefore that will be saved : must think thus of the Trinity.

Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation : that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the Catholick Faith : which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.

A further argument that has been advanced concerns translation. Our BCP is based on a Latin text. The argument is that this particular Latin text was a translation of a Greek text by people who thought that the Greek was original (Athanasius wrote in Greek) whereas it appears that the oldest form of the Creed was in fact Latin, a different Latin version. Confused? I have not been able to

confirm the details of this argument. Nevertheless, it does not help greatly since as Anglicans we have been bold to affirm that this Creed 'may be proved from by most certain warrants of holy Scripture'. Is Article 8 wrong? Should we change it?

Saving faith

The Creed is certainly difficult at first sight but it is worth reflecting on the nature of saving faith. Reformed Christians has always distinguished three dimensions to saving faith; Knowledge (noticia), Assent (assensus) and Fiducia (faith=trust).

These three aspects of faith are illustrated in John chapter 14. There we find Jesus speaking to His disciples about who He is. That is, He is speaking about the facts of our faith, the **knowledge** that underlies saving faith. Jesus then asks Philip directly if he believes this (Jn 14.10). This is when knowledge becomes personal. I as an individual must own these facts; I must **assent** to them. But Jesus begins the discourse by telling the disciples, do not be troubled, 'believe also in me'. Some modern translations do render this '**trust** also in me'. This is where saving faith goes beyond mere assent, it involves us actually casting ourself on the Saviour, clinging to Him as the sole grounds of salvation. It is a relationship of trust and dependence, like little children (Mk 10.15).

Saving faith is only saving faith when it is owned and turns into a real relationship of trust and dependence. But underlying it is a bedrock of facts. Sadly, there are people who believe it is possible to have faith without facts. Faith becomes some abstract virtue, the opposite of doubt, but they would see the attempt to tie faith to facts as a contradiction. This is not biblical faith. True saving faith is based on facts.

The Creeds are concerned primarily with knowledge. In liturgical useage they are to be assented to (for which reason the 'I believe' format is far more appropriate) but they are first and foremost statements of the grounds of our faith.

The act of believing is simple, it involves assent and trusting in Christ. But should the facts of our faith also be plain and simple. Do the Creeds actually create a barrier to real faith? Consider one of the key facts with which the Lord Jesus confronted Philip. *Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me?*

If Jesus said this to you would you assent to it? If not then you do not truly believe in Him. But if you do assent to it, can you say that you really understand it? Certainly you can say the words, you might even have a decent shot at explaining it, but do you really understand its depths? We accept its truth because this is what Jesus actually taught and demonstrated. But, surely we can do no more than scratch the surface of what this incredible truth means, and yet, if this statement were not true our faith would be futile, built on sand. More importantly for our purpose if we refuse to believe and hold onto this truth, no matter how much beyond our understanding it may be, our salvation actually crumbles. It was for this reason that Athanasius and others fought hard to uphold the Nicene Creed and indeed the truths which are reflected in the Creed that bears Athanasius' name.

Trinity

What does it mean to say Jesus is in the Father and the Father in Him? The Scriptures reveal and the church came to accept and to teach that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one, and yet distinct. The first half of the Athanasian Creed sets this out in elaborate (almost painful) detail. It is possible to fall from this path in many places.

Some err by asserting that Christ is not divine. This makes Christianity idolatrous as many have accused it of being. But also it means that Jesus is simply one of us, He is no more able to save

than we are. He could be a good example (but, since in this case he had deceived people, he would not be a very good example). He could certainly not be the Saviour.

Or suppose you assert that there are three deities; three Gods called Father, Son and Spirit. (This is Arianism.) If this were so, how can the Son be the Saviour? The Saviour must be one with the Father because *'none other could create anew the likeness of God's image for me except the Image of the Father, none could render the mortal immortal except the Lord Jesus Christ who is Life itself'* (Athanasius : The Incarnation 20.1)

Suppose, in contrast, you assert that God is One and that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are merely manifestations of the One God. (There are many variations on this theme including Monarchianism and Sabellianism.) This view makes a mockery of the language of scripture and was condemned in the early Church because it means that God suffered and died on the cross. But it also presents us with a God who we cannot truly know because He is first one thing and then another. Each encounter is with a character, a persona, not with the real thing. Moreover, the love of the Father for the Son becomes simply love of self.

The Athanasian Creed teaches forcefully and at great length that we worship one God in three Persons.

Two natures

What are we then to conclude about Jesus, if He is truly divine, the Son of God, in what way is He human? This is dealt with in the second half of the Athanasian Creed.

If Jesus is not human at all then how can He save us, since He cannot represent us, He is not the second Adam. If Jesus is human and divine in what way do the human and divine come together in Him?

Perhaps the eternal Son takes over and replaces part of the human being in the union. The chief theory in this camp being that the divine mind replaced the human one (Appolinarianism). But the resulting being is less than human, He is not one of us. How can the divine mind have truly known temptation? He cannot save us. Moreover, this view encourages people to think that the human mind is not important in salvation.

A further view is that in the incarnation the divine and human nature become merely one nature (Eutychianism). However, this means that salvation does not involve the saving of human nature, but its destruction. This view rears its head in many forms of mysticism both ancient and modern.

Through this minefield the Athanasian Creed treads upholding that there is in Christ 'perfect God, and perfect Man', 'yet he is not two, but one Christ.'

The only Saviour

The argument of the Christians in the early centuries was that all these alternative views were not just inadequate, but that they were contrary to Scripture and that they changed the nature and fact of salvation. Therefore, to assert some of the alternatives is to actually trust in a being who is not able to save and, in fact, does not exist.

If the Lord Jesus Christ is not God, the eternal Son of God, fully man and fully divine, as the catholic faith asserts Him to be, then He is not able to save us. To deny and to turn away from this truth is therefore to deny the very grounds of our salvation and so we cannot be saved.

Therefore, although the language of the Creed is strong and perhaps unpalatable to modern Christians, the Creeds reminds us of truths which we must not forget; we can only be saved because our faith rests on a Saviour who is able to save; the Lord Jesus Christ who is in the Father, and the Father in Him.