

A POWERFUL AFRICAN



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"Berry Good News!"

by:

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A Powerful African

If you attend a traditional liturgical church,¹ you have undoubtedly heard of "The Athanasian Creed." Of **the three major creeds** of the Christian faith, i.e., **Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian**, the *Athanasian Creed* is the most lengthy and presents the faith in greater detail than the other two creeds. It needs to be said at this point that the creed named after **Athanasius, an African Christian, was not** actually written by him. An unknown Church leader gleaned material from the writings of Athanasius and put together this powerful statement of orthodoxy.

WHO WAS ATHANASIUS?

He was born of Christian parents in the city of **Alexandria, Egypt** in the year 297AD. He received a well-rounded education and was well versed in the holy Scriptures. **Athanasius** felt the call of God upon his life and entered the ministry at a young age. He was ordained a deacon in his native city of Alexandria. He quickly rose in the ranks of the Church leaders and was part of the **Church Council held in Nicaea**. It was at this Council in 325 AD that the leaders of the Church condemned the Arian heresy. **Arius**, who this heresy is named for, was excommunicated from the Church as a result of action taken by the Council. It was also at this Council that **the Nicene Creed** was developed.

Around 327 AD **Athanasius** was elected bishop of the church in Alexandria. This was an important ministry. By this time the office of bishop had been elevated to a place not known in the early New Testament churches during the days of the original apostles. Originally a bishop was a **presbyter** [pastor-overseer-elder]

¹ Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox churches

in a local church. As the structure of hierarchy developed and became acceptable in the churches, **the office of bishop** exerted authority over a number of churches in given geographical areas. The faith of Christ had spread throughout Northern Africa. In fact, it was not until the rise and spread of **Islam** that the Christian churches of North Africa were no longer a major force in that part of the world. Many of the early leaders of the Christian faith came from North Africa. **The Coptic churches in Ethiopia** trace their beginnings to Mark. Many looked to the diocese² of Alexandria for spiritual oversight and guidance. It is said that this city had the greatest library in the world of that day.

Athanasius was an **uncompromising defender of the faith** as it had been handed down from the original apostles. He **refused** to compromise his orthodox beliefs even though at times he was banished from his church and diocese several times. In fact, on five separate occasions he had been banished. On one such occasion he was exiled to Trier or Treves, the capital of Gaul.

In addition to serving as the chief pastor (bishop) of Alexandria he was looked upon as **the spiritual overseer** of Christian desert hermits dwelling in Egypt as well as **overseer of Ethiopia**. In that day some Christians, in their desire to give their all to Christ, believed that they had to withdraw from the world and spend their lives alone in prayer and study of Scripture in the desert as hermits. This was the beginning of what became orders of **monks and nuns** in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. **The Reformers** of the sixteenth century largely rejected this concept though some orders have since risen among **Anglicans and Lutherans**.

² A diocese is a geographical area over which a bishop exerts oversight.

On one occasion soldiers of the emperor entered the church where **Athanasius** pastored and killed a number of congregants as well as wounded many others in the congregation. **Athanasius** was able to flee out into the desert where he was protected for six years. With **Athanasius** out of the picture an *Arian* bishop seized control of the diocese. This *Arian* bishop proceeded to subvert the orthodoxy that had been the cornerstone of the church in Alexandria.

During his exile in the desert, **Athanasius** wrote a number of important theological works. He had a keen intellect and is considered a doctor of the Church. We still have some of his writings today. His works include: "The Decrees of the Council of Nicea," "History of the Arians," and "Orations Against the Arians."

Eventually he was able to come out of hiding and return to his congregation and diocese where he ministered for the last seven years of his life. During this time he was instrumental in firmly **reestablishing** apostolic doctrine, not only in his area of the world, but **throughout** the whole Church. Shortly before his death he was able to see **the triumph of orthodoxy over the Arian heresy** at the Council of Constantinople in 381. It was through the efforts of **Athanasius** that he was able to bring together theologians from both the East and the West. At that time the theologians of the East emphasized that **the Godhead**⁴ is made up of three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The theologians of the West insisted that God is One. Through the efforts of **Athanasius**, along with **Basil and Hilary**, this Council came to the agreement that indeed there is One True God, revealed in Three Persons: **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**.

³ Arianism was a heresy that had strayed from orthodox Christian belief and had infiltrated into the churches.

⁴ The term 'Godhead' refers to the more commonly used term: Trinity or tri-unity of God.

This was a great triumph for orthodoxy which is Trinitarian. The doctrine of the Tri-unity (Trinity) is **an essential part** of the faith of the apostles. This doctrine is continually attacked by enemies of orthodoxy. Without exception **every major cult rejects** the doctrine of the Trinity.

Athanasius is one of the great saints of the faith. He has been called "**The Champion of Orthodoxy.**" In the Eastern Orthodox Churches he is usually referred to as "**The Father of Orthodoxy.**" The exhortation recorded by Jude was taken very seriously by **Athanasius**. This exhortation needs to be heeded today as a growing number are straying from the faith that was established by our Lord and by the original apostles.

"I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." (Jude 3b) NIV.

Throughout his ministry **Athanasius** remained faithful to the cause of Christ. It was not until February 366 that he was finally given peace to minister without fear of persecution and banishment. From that point on he was permitted to pursue the work that God had placed upon his heart. From then until his death we are told that **he refused to compromise** the faith of the apostles. He actively combated heresy, built a number of churches, aided in equipping, encouraging and comforting fellow Christian workers, and continued to strengthen orthodoxy until his death.

God continues to call-out men and women who will boldly proclaim the faith of the apostles. There is a need for Christian leaders in our day to seek to emulate such leaders as **Athanasius**. He went home to be with the Lord on May 2, 373. He passed from this earthly realm to his heavenly reward in old age. It is said that he died quietly in his own home.

A tribute to **Athanasius** states: "**His chief distinction as a theologian was his zealous advocacy of the essential divinity of Christ as co-equal in substance with the Father.**"

Undoubtedly, **Athanasius**, was one of the greatest, if not the greatest defender of the divinity of our Lord. Through the centuries the biblical doctrine of the Tri-unity (Trinity) of God has been identified with the name of **Athanasius**. On the anniversary of his homegoing (**May 2**) some Christians like to take a moment or two to remember and honor this great leader of the faith.

A PRAYER HONORING ATHANASIUS
(This prayer is from "Celebrating Common Prayer")

**Everliving God,
whose servant Athanasius courageously
testified
that Jesus Christ is truly with us
in the Word made flesh:
grant us so to see the glory of Your Word
and to grow into his likeness,
that we may be fulfilled in the knowledge of
You,
the only God;
though Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom with You and the Holy Spirit,
be honor and glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

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