

Dear Doctor

Recently I read a book written by a man with a Ph.D. in Physics. In the book he says that his mother, when she introduces him, is quick to say, “My son is a doctor but not the kind that helps people.” I can sympathize. I have a Doctor of Ministry degree, but my daughter often says to me, “You’re not a real doctor.” To her, and to a lot of other people, only medical doctors are real doctors. Which is kind of funny because originally the word “doctor” meant “teacher.” In the 10th century certain people who were well-versed in scripture were referred to as “Doctors of the Church.” It wasn’t until three centuries later that medical professionals were called “doctors.”

Prior to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, twenty-five people, both men and women, were officially recognized as Doctors of the Church. Saint Ambrose, Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, and Pope Gregory I were the four Great Doctors of the Western Church, and the four Great Doctors of the Eastern Church were John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Athanasius of Alexandria. These were men whose teachings had great impact in forming and shaping the Christian church. Given that Lutherans share at least the first fifteen centuries of church history with all other Christians, especially the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, we too can celebrate and learn from these Doctors of the Church.

The Doctor of the Church especially on my mind today is Athanasius of Alexandria. Many things make Athanasius interesting. For one thing, he

was an African, being born in Egypt, just as St. Augustine was also born in Africa. We Lutherans recall that Augustine had a great influence on Martin Luther. Modern people tend to neglect the study of history and we often don't realize how influential Africans were in the early church – or how influential they are becoming again in the church today. But there is much more about Athanasius than just his ethnicity that makes him interesting.

Athanasius lived and worked at a very difficult time in the life of the church, the fourth century A.D. During his lifetime, while he served as a priest and bishop, there was a struggle going on for the control of the Christian church between those who followed the right teaching and those who did not, between the orthodox and the heretics. The heretics were called the Arians because they followed a man named Arius. They have no connection to the Aryan Nation or Aryan Brotherhood today. Arius spread false teachings about the nature of Jesus Christ.

False teachings about Christ, the technical term is Christological heresies, were rampant in the early church. There were those who said that Jesus didn't have a real body; he didn't eat and sleep and feel pain the way do. He was like a ghost, they say. Others said that God's Spirit just possessed the body of the man named Jesus temporarily from Jesus' Baptism until right before the crucifixion. God just used and then discarded Jesus' body, they said. Some said then, like Jehovah's Witnesses say today, that Jesus was really just the angel Michael in a different form. That's just plain wrong.

Arius' false teaching was slightly more subtle. He said that God the Father created God the Son. The slogan Arius used was "there was a time when he

[Jesus] was not.” In other words, Jesus the Son of God was not eternal or co-equal with God the Father. Jesus was subordinate, lower than, subject to God the Father.

I must confess that as a young person growing up I was an Arian myself without really thinking about it very much. I just assumed that God the Father had to be greater and more powerful than Jesus His Son. I don't ever really recall the doctrine of the Holy Trinity ever being discussed in Sunday School or preached about in a sermon. It seems to me that I never really heard the truth about the Trinity until I was an adult. And I suspect that a lot of people are similarly confused today. Now, on one hand, God's nature is a mystery that we can never fully understand. But on the other hand, there are things that God has revealed to us in Holy Scripture about Himself and it is important for us to know Him in that way. That is where we rely on Doctor's of the Church to instruct and inform us from their knowledge of scripture; we want to know God as He truly is.

Athanasius threw himself fully into the fray between the Arians and the orthodox. It's hard for us to imagine the culture of that time and place, and how focused everyone was on religion. Virtually everywhere a person went people were talking about the battle between the Arians and the orthodox: in the market place, the theater, wherever. And there was no separation of church and state as we have today. So when an Arian took control of the local government, he deposed the orthodox Bishops, and when an orthodox ruler took over, he reinstated them. That happened to Athanasius several times after he was elected Bishop of Alexandria. Several times he was exiled, and several times he was called back to be Bishop again.

All the while Athanasius continued to speak and write eloquently and persuasively on behalf of the traditional doctrine of the Holy Trinity. He stood up for the truth about Jesus Christ at great personal risk and despite much suffering. We could learn much from him about patience, persistence, and keeping the faith in tough times. Athanasius truly was a hero of the church. He was a Doctor of the Church in that he was a great teacher, but he also filled the role of “doctor” in that he applied strong medicine to cure the church’s heretical sickness and heal its wounds.

It’s kind of ironic then, that the creed that bears his name, the Athanasian Creed, probably was not written by Athanasius. Most scholars agree that it was actually written a century or two after his death and then attributed to him because it takes a firmly orthodox position on the Trinity as Athanasius always did. It’s believed that the Creed was written for the clergy to memorize and use in their teaching. Again, I must confess that I have memorized the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, but not the Athanasian.

The Athanasian Creed strikes us as kind of strange today. It’s longer than the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed and oddly repetitious. But even more so, it has damnatory clauses at its beginning, middle, and end threatening hellfire to those who don’t believe correctly about the Trinity. That’s not how we usually approach teaching today, but the point is that whoever does want to be saved needs to receive in faith the gospel truth about the nature of God and the nature of Christ. Christian theology is not “anything goes” or “make it up as you go along.” Some things are to be accepted, not debated. The parts of the Creed that sound works righteous, that sound as if we are judged

by what we do, need to be heard within the context that we are, as Jesus says, known by our fruit. The faithful person, the one who loves Christ, will produce good works. It really is God's grace received in faith that saves us, not our works, but, as St. James says, works and faith are inseparable. You can't have one without the other. Goodness and piety are the natural outgrowths of faith.

So, you may well ask, what would be so wrong if the Arians or the other heretics were right? Why is it so important that God the Father and God the Son be One? Would any other belief really destroy the idea of justification by faith? Well, if Jesus is not fully divine, then God doesn't know what it is like for us to suffer. If Jesus didn't really die as a human being, then the debt for our sins hasn't really been paid. If Jesus is less than God, then God didn't empty himself totally for our salvation. If Jesus wasn't really human, then the resurrection means nothing. Only someone who was 100% God and 100% man could fully conquer death and atone for our sins. Only faith in such a God-man would be salvific for us.

This is heavy stuff. Maybe it seems like so much theological hair-splitting. The good news is you don't need to be a Doctor of the Church to be a Christian or to be saved. As we said, no human being can fathom the full mystery of God's Triune nature and we are saved by grace. But as God's people, it behooves us to acknowledge the Holy Trinity, and stand in awe before the mystery, and praise the God who loved us so much that he died and rose again for our sake. That's what it's all about. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.