

THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF THE ATHANASIAN CREED

JAMES M. HAMILTON JR.*

Abstract: *This essay exposits the chiastic structure of the Athanasian Creed and contends that understanding the Creed's literary structure facilitates understanding the Creed's message. The Creed is widely recognized to consist of two parts, the first on the Trinity, the second on the incarnation. What has not been noted in scholarship is that each part is a self-contained chiasm, with the two chiasms joined together by the overarching inclusio at beginning and end.*

Key words: *Athanasian Creed, chiastic structure, Trinity, incarnation*

I first became acquainted with the Athanasian Creed as an adult. In the summer of 2005, as a faculty member of Southwestern Seminary's Houston Campus, I had the opportunity to join the school's Oxford Study Tour. While in a famous English bookstore, Scott Swain, Jason Duesing, and I all purchased copies of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. My oldest son was a toddler at the time, and on returning home, I would often read to him from the Book of Common Prayer as I rocked him before his nap. Sometimes I read him a series of collects (prayers), other times I read him the Litany, but most often I read what the Prayer Book notes is "commonly called the Creed of Saint Athanasius," and that the Prayer Book calls "Quicunque Vult," the Latin of its first words, "Whosoever will."¹

At the time I was pastoring a church plant in Houston, and our order of worship often included a responsive reading or corporate confession of faith. As much as I loved the Athanasian Creed, I thought it was too long to be used in that context. Shortly after I joined the faculty of Southern Seminary in 2008, relocating to Louisville, the Lord opened a door of service at Kenwood Baptist Church. From

* James M. Hamilton Jr. is Professor of Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280. He may be contacted at jhamilton@sbs.edu.

¹ I have seen no recent arguments that the Creed was actually written by Athanasius, with many pointing out that it could not have been because whereas Athanasius wrote in Greek, the original language of the Creed seems to be Latin. Also, the Creed appears to rely on and even quote Augustine's *De Trinitate*. For instance, Augustine writes in *Trin.* 1.2.7, "The Father has begotten the Son, and therefore he who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and therefore he who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, himself coequal to the Father and the Son, and belonging to the threefold unity." Quoted in Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Brooklyn: New City, 1991), 70. The title, "Athanasian Creed," or in some cases, "The Faith of St. Athanasius," seems to arise from the Creed articulating his theology, and thus I will normally refer to it as the Athanasian Creed to denote his views but not his composition. For the history of discussion of the Creed, as well as the manuscripts through which it has come down to us, see J. N. D. Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed: Quicunque Vult; The Paddock Lectures for 1962–3* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964), 1–17. Kelly also catalogs parallels in language from Ambrose, Augustine, Vincent of Lerins, and several writers from south Gaul (24–34).

our earliest days at Kenwood back in 2009, we regularly recited the Apostles' Creed at the end of our main Sunday morning worship service.

Not long ago there was considerable online controversy about the doctrine of the Trinity, and I remember my colleague Stephen Wellum saying that he thought churches would be well served to use not only the Apostles' but also the Nicene Creed. My fellow pastor Denny Burk and I collaborated to produce a fresh translation of the Nicene Creed, which we led Kenwood to recite at the end of our worship services in 2018. That first year we did not include the "filioque" clause. After returning to the Apostles' Creed in 2019 and 2020, we added the filioque and recited the Nicene Creed again in 2021. We had discussed the possibility of using the Athanasian Creed, but again it simply seemed too long to recite on a weekly basis.

Shortly before Christmas of 2021, Crossway published *Be Thou My Vision: A Liturgy for Daily Worship*, put together by Jonathan Gibson. I was intrigued by the way he had divided the Athanasian Creed into three parts and thought that perhaps we could follow his division and recite a third of the Creed at the end of our worship services. Having grown to love the old language of the Creed from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, however, I did not favor the updated edition Gibson chose for *Be Thou My Vision*.

In discussion with our elder board, and consulting what another church had done with the Athanasian Creed,² my fellow elder Matt Damico and I worked up a rendition of the Creed in which we replaced the phrase "the Catholick Faith" with "the true Christian faith" at beginning and end, and we altered "the Catholick Religion" also to "the true Christian faith."³ We also interpreted the Latin clause *descendit ad inferos* to mean "descended to the dead," as the term *inferos* seems to refer either to "below" or to "the dead." Other than that, I aimed for an NKJV style updating of language that largely retained the phrasing of the version of the Creed I knew from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

Our elders agreed that before we began reciting the Creed (initially in thirds, now in its own two parts) as a congregation, we should introduce it to the church. Accordingly, on April 3, 2022, I taught the Creed in a "whole-church Sunday School session" before our main Sunday morning gathering at Kenwood Baptist Church. In preparation, I studied the Creed the same way I study a biblical text before I preach it. In this process, I became convinced that the Athanasian Creed, like Augustine's great work, *The Trinity*,⁴ has a chiasmic structure.⁵

² See <https://sdpc.org/athanasian-creed>.

³ The phrase at the beginning is *catholicam fidem*, while at the end we find *fides catholica*. Interestingly, according to Schaff, Usher's text of a Greek translation of the Creed reads, τὴν ὀρθόδοξον πίστιν, "the orthodox faith," or, "the right faith," or as we prefer, "the true Christian faith." Kelly writes that "it has been conventional to ascribe [the Athanasian Creed's] translation into Greek to the closing years of the 13th century at earliest. There are grounds, however, for supposing that this date needs to be pushed back at least a century" (*Athanasian Creed*, 45). Cf. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: The Greek and Latin Creeds, with Translations*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1919), 70n2.

⁴ For Edmund Hill's explanation of this chiasmic structure, see his "Introduction" in Augustine, *The Trinity*, 26–27.

The aim of this essay is to exposit and advocate the theology of the Athanasian Creed by explaining its chiasmic structure.⁶ In what follows I will use the wording of the Creed we recite at the end of our Sunday morning gatherings at Kenwood Baptist Church. The full text of our version of the Creed, in chiasmic format, can be found in the appendix to this essay.

Let me comment at the outset on the skepticism some express about the relationship between the existence of actual chiasms and the frequency of claims to find them. Denny Burk told me that as I began to teach on the Creed that morning at Kenwood, the moment he realized I was claiming a chiasmic structure he felt an inward groan (“Oh no, here we go again”), but by the time I was finished he was convinced that it is really there.

I simply request, dear reader, that you consider the evidence, that you contemplate the sound theology and beautiful literary structure of the Creed, and that you test everything and hold onto the good.⁷

I. THE CREED'S TWO CHIASMS

It is widely acknowledged that the Creed falls naturally into two parts, the first dealing with the Trinity, the second with the incarnation. These two parts are bracketed by a “necessary belief inclusio,” whereby the opening statement of part one matches the closing statement of part two. Consider the opening and closing lines of the Creed side by side, with corresponding statements italicized:

Opening	Closing
Whoever desires to <i>be saved</i> must above all hold to <i>the true Christian faith</i> . <i>Anyone who does not</i> keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally. And <i>the true Christian faith is this</i> :	<i>This is the true Christian faith</i> . <i>Anyone who does not</i> believe faithfully cannot <i>be saved</i> .

Note the three assertions made in both opening and closing: (1) that the creed presents “the true Christian faith” (with “is this” at beginning and “this is” at

⁵ For book-length discussion of chiasmic structures, see Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Wayne Brouwer, *The Literary Development of John 13–17: A Chiasmic Reading*, SBLDS 182 (Atlanta: SBL, 2000).

⁶ I have not seen other claims that the Athanasian Creed is chiasmic, so this idea seems to have gone largely undetected. In his monograph on the Creed, Kelly discusses the Creed’s structure, but he is primarily concerned with its division into the two sections, on Trinity and incarnation, and does not mention their chiasmic structures. See Kelly, *Athanasian Creed*, 54–59. A discussion of the structure of the Athanasian Creed similar to Kelly’s is found in Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 130–31.

⁷ For discussions of best practices in verifying chiasmic structures, see Joshua Berman, “Criteria for Establishing Chiasmic Structure: Lamentations 1 and 2 as Test Cases,” *Maarav* 21 (2014): 57–69; Craig Blomberg, “The Structure of 1 Corinthians 1–7,” *CTR* 4.1 (1989): 3–20; Wayne Brouwer, “Understanding Chiasm and Assessing Macro-Chiasm as a Tool of Biblical Interpretation,” *CTJ* 53.1 (2018): 99–127.

end—in Latin, *haec est* appears at beginning and end);⁸ (2) both beginning and end speak of “anyone who does not” believe the whole (in Latin, *quam nisi* appears in opening and closing statements); and (3) the Creed is concerned with what one must believe to “be saved” (the Latin phrase *salvus esse* appears at start and finish).

Within this inclusio that encompasses the whole Creed, two narrower inclusions denote, respectively, the end of part one and the beginning of part two. The end of part one is linked to the beginning of part two, even as the end of part one also reaches back to the beginning of part one, and the beginning of part two likewise matches the end of part two. Consider the two middle statements side by side:

End of Part 1	Beginning of Part 2
Any therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.	Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that one also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Both of these statements are concerned with thoughts and beliefs necessary to salvation, and as noted, the first reaches back to the beginning, while the second reaches forward to the end. Both opening and closing of part one speak to those who “will” or “desire to be saved” (in Latin, the beginning of part one opens, *Quicumque vult salvus esse*, while the end of part one opens, *Qui vult ergo salvus esse*). Similarly, the opening of part 2 speaks of how one must “believe” rightly the incarnation, and the closing says that those who do not “believe” faithfully cannot be saved (both statements employing forms of the Latin verb *credo*, believe, and the adverb *fideliter*, faithfully).

These statements should cause no trouble for those who believe that the Trinity is a first order doctrine, a doctrine one must believe in order to be Christian. Those who do not believe in the Trinity are not Christians. This the Creed asserts.

Having established the way that the broad inclusio binds the two parts of the Creed together, even as the two narrow ones mark out the discrete sections, we will consider the chiasmic structure of the first part of the Creed, on the Trinity, then turn our attention to the chiasmic structure of the second part, on the incarnation.

II. THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF PART ONE: THE TRINITY

In an essay testing “Criteria for Establishing Chiasmic Structure” on Lamentations 1–2, Joshua Berman writes,

I take it as a starting point that, in order to establish the existence of a large chiasmic structure, it must fulfill three criteria:⁹

- 1) The parallel components of the structure must be congruent— ... easily recognized as distinctly similar...

⁸ For the Latin text of the Athanasian Creed, see: “Quicumque (Athanasian Creed),” <https://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Symbola/Quicumque.html>.

⁹ Berman refers to three criteria and delivers four; perhaps he means three of the four must be met?

- 2) The structure as a whole should avoid gaps—the spacing of the elements should be uniform...
- 3) The proposed structure should neatly encompass the boundaries of an easily recognizable pericope...
- 4) Most germane for our purposes, the components of the structure should be significant and not randomly selected...¹⁰

These criteria will be evident throughout this discussion. We have seen above how the first and last elements balance one another in the inner inclusio around the first part of the Athanasian Creed. When we place the first and last statements of part one side by side, their unique similarity to one another stands in stark relief:

Part 1 Opening (A)	Part 1 Closing (A')
Whoever desires to be saved must above all hold to the true Christian faith. Any one who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally. And the true Christian faith is this:	Any therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.

Including this first outer ring, part one contains a total of five rings comprising ten units, and we can preview the ten corresponding units of the chiasmic structure as follows (the A and A' units in the text box just above are in bold font here, and the units under discussion will be denoted likewise as we move through the enclosed rings to the center of part one):

A Necessary Belief

B
 C
 D
 E
 E'
 D'
 C'
 B'

A' Necessary Belief

The second and second-to-last statements (B and B') in part one are unique in two ways: first, they use the phrase “in Trinity” (Latin, *in Trinitate* in both), and second, they speak of Christians worshipping the “Trinity in unity” (the two Latin phrases are, first, *et Trinitatem in unitate veneremur*, and second, *et Trinitas in unitate veneranda sit*). At no other point in the Creed are these distinctive phrases used. They balance one another almost at the beginning and almost at the end. Here are the two statements side by side:

¹⁰ Berman, “Establishing Chiasmic Structure,” 58.

Second Statement (B)	Second-to-Last Statement (B')
That we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.	So that in all things, as is aforesaid: the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity is to be worshipped.

A Necessary Belief

B Worship of the Triune God

C

D

E

E'

D'

C'

B' Worship of the Triune God

A' Necessary Belief

The inclusio around the Trinity section (A and A'), then, calls first for right believing in the opening (A), then for right thinking in the closing (A'), and then the statements just inside the outer ring (B and B') both call for worshipping “God in Trinity and Trinity in unity.” The first line of the second of these statements (B', “So that in all things, as is aforesaid”) indicates that the phrase “the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity is to be worshipped,” serves to summarize everything said to that point. Meanwhile, back at the beginning, the second line of the first of these statements (B) serves to introduce what follows with the words “neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.”

In these second and second-to-last statements, then, the Creed confesses who it is that Christians worship: the Triune God. The balancing function of these uniquely worded assertions first affirms and then demands the right response of believing people to God's revelation of himself—worship.¹¹

That second line of the first of these two statements (B), “neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance,” declares the thesis statement of the Creed's Trinity section.¹² These are the two big ideas that the rest of part one will exposit: first, that Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct from one another (“neither

¹¹ It seems Fairbairn and Reeves fail to appreciate this emphasis on worship when they complain that with the Athanasian Creed “we have moved from creeds that profess our allegiance to God, to his Son, and to his Spirit to a document that commands us *what* to believe in order to be saved.” Fairbairn and Reeves, *Creeds and Confessions*, 121–22. As their discussion proceeds, they acknowledge the importance of the call to worship only to reiterate what is, in my estimation, their erroneous conclusion.

¹² Kelly writes regarding the first part of the Creed on the Trinity, “The two heresies envisaged are Sabellianism and Arianism.... Sabellianism, or modalism, is the doctrine which denies the reality and permanence of the personal distinctions in the Trinity ... the Arians of all schools ‘divided the substance’ because they held that the Son, so far from being of one and the same substance as the Father, was of a different, and incidentally inferior, substance.” Kelly, *Athanasian Creed*, 76–77.

confounding the persons”), and second, that Father, Son, and Spirit share the same divine nature (“nor dividing the substance”).

We take our English term “substance” from the Latin *substantia*, which term the Vulgate used to render the Greek word *ὑπόστασις* in the phrase, “the exact imprint of his *nature*” in Hebrews 1:3 (ESV). While the CSB, ESV, and NAS render *ὑπόστασις* as “nature,” the NIV chooses “being” and the NET “essence.” Hebrews 1:3 asserts that the Son exactly represents the substance of the Father, and the Creed affirms the same.

The two big ideas, the distinctiveness of the persons (“neither confounding the persons”) and their undivided being (“nor dividing the substance”), receive immediate exposition in the two-part statement (joined by “But,” *See*) of the third section of part one of the Creed (C), and then in the matching third-to-last section (C') we find another two-part statement (joined by “And,” *E*):

A Necessary Belief
 B Worship of the Triune God
C Distinct Persons, Godhead Equal and Eternal
 D
 E
 E'
 D'
C' Distinct Persons, Trinity Eternal and Equal
 B' Worship of the Triune God
 A' Necessary Belief

Both the third and third-to-last statements conclude with affirmations of the *equality* and *eternality* of the members of the Godhead. This unique combination of phrases appears nowhere other than in these parallel statements. Consider these third and third-to-last statements side by side (again, matching phrases italicized):

Third Statement (C)	Third-to-Last Statement (C')
For there is <i>one</i> Person of the <i>Father</i> , another of the <i>Son</i> , and another of the <i>Holy Spirit</i> . <i>But</i> the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one: the Glory <i>equal</i> , the Majesty <i>co-eternal</i> .	So there is <i>one</i> <i>Father</i> , not three Fathers; one <i>Son</i> , not three Sons; one <i>Holy Spirit</i> , not three Holy Spirits. <i>And</i> in this Trinity none is afore or after other, none is greater or less than another, but the whole three persons are <i>co-eternal</i> together and <i>co-equal</i> .

The third statement (C) distinguishes the persons from one another before affirming the oneness, equality in glory, and co-eternality of the majesty of the Godhead. The third-to-last statement (C') clarifies what it means for the persons to be distinct by saying, for instance, that there is one Father, not three Fathers, which

goes as well for the Son and Spirit. It likewise clarifies the oneness of the Godhead by saying that no person in the Trinity is before or after another, none greater or lesser, and then concluding like its twin: affirming the co-eternality and co-equality of the three. Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance indeed, with beauteous words worthy of memorization and meditation.

Before we continue let us summarize what we have seen to this point. In the first part of the Creed, the first and last statements (A and A') form a "necessary belief bracket" around the Trinity section. The second and second-to-last statements (B and B') speak of the worship of the one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity, with the first of these asserting that as Christians worship the Triune God they are "neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance." The third and third-to-last statements (C and C') exposit that idea by elaborating on the singularity of the distinct persons and their eternal equality in the shared divine nature.

The fourth and fourth-to-last thought units (D and D') frame the two central sections (E and E') in the chiasmic structure of part one. The fourth section (D) speaks to the undivided substance as it affirms that each member of the Godhead is what the others are, and the fourth-to-last (D') addresses the unconfounded persons by celebrating the eternal relations of origin. The bold-font statements in the chiasmic structure show that we are almost to the heart of the first part of the Creed:

A Necessary Belief
 B Worship of the Triune God
 C Distinct Persons, Godhead Equal and Eternal
D Undivided Substance
 E
 E'
D' Eternal Relations of Origin
 C Distinct Persons, Trinity Eternal and Equal
 B' Worship of the Triune God
 A' Necessary Belief

These congruent components can be set side by side as we have done with corresponding sections to this point:

Fourth Statement: Undivided Substance	Fourth-to-Last Statement: Unconfounded Persons
Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.	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 Spirit is of the Father and of the Son: neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

The logic here works as follows: if each member of the Godhead is what the others are, as affirmed by the fourth statement (D) of part one, how are the three to be distinguished from one another? The answer to that question is provided by the fourth-to-last statement (D'), and the answer is sourced from what the Scriptures teach regarding Father, Son, and Spirit. The members of the Godhead are distinguished from one another by the eternal relations of origin: the Father neither created nor begotten, the Son begotten of the Father alone,¹³ the Spirit proceeding from Father and Son. Here is high mystery and biblical truth, fodder for a lifetime of reflection, everlasting worship, and the bedrock for all communion with God.

At the center of the chiasmic structure of part 1 of the Athanasian Creed we find two sections that match one another (E and E'). Each consists of three statements about Father, Son, and Spirit, followed by a fourth statement that summarizes and responds to the first three.

The central statements in chiasms are often where the most important points are made, and in these centered sentiments we often find ideas that reach back to the beginning and forward to the end. We put the E and E' in bold to show once again where we are in the flow of thought:

A Necessary Belief
 B Worship of the Triune God
 C Distinct Persons, Godhead Equal and Eternal
 D Undivided Substance
 **E Father, Son, and Spirit are Uncreated, Infinite,
 Eternal
 Not Three Divine Natures but One
 E' Father, Son, and Spirit are Almighty, Divine,
 Lord
 Not Three Lord Gods but One**
 D' Eternal Relations of Origin
 C' Distinct Persons, Trinity Eternal and Equal
 B' Worship of the Triune God
 A' Necessary Belief

These two four-statement sections (E and E') serve, in turn, as explanations of the fourth (D) and fourth-to-last (D') and the third (C) and third-to-last (C') statements. In these two central sections, what is said of one person of the Godhead is said of each, even as their undivided Godhead is affirmed. In the first four-part statement (E), three aspects of God's nature are affirmed about each member

¹³ My study of the Letters and Gospel of John led me to the conclusion that the Greek term *μονογενής* should be rendered "only begotten" (cf. esp. 1 John 4:9 and 5:18, along with John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18). For the texts in John's Gospel, see the discussion in James M. Hamilton Jr., "John," in *John—Acts, ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 19–308. See also Charles Lee Irons, "A Lexical Defense of the Johannine 'Only Begotten,'" in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 98–116.

of the Godhead separately (each is uncreated, boundless, and eternal in nature), and then the fourth statement asserts the singularity of God.

The pattern is slightly altered in theme-and-variation style in the second four-part statement (E'). Once again, the first three statements affirm that each member of the Godhead shares an aspect of the divine nature (Almighty, God, Lord), but then the oneness is asserted at the conclusion of each of these three statements, allowing room for the fourth statement to say what Christian truth compels and forbids. Here again we can usefully consider the two central four-part statements side by side:

Central Four-Part Statement 1 (E): Uncreated, Boundless, Eternal	Central Four-Part Statement 2 (E'): Almighty, God, Lord
The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated.	So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Spirit Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties: but one Almighty.
The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.	So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.
The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal.	So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord.
As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.	For just 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 true Christian faith to say there be three Gods, or three Lords.

These two four-part statements parallel one another not only in grammatical and syntactical ways but also in the theological import of their affirmations. It is noteworthy, too, that the second four-part (E') statement begins with "So likewise," as if to alert the reader that the four statements that follow stand in direct relationship with the four that preceded (E).

In view of some recent controversies related to whether each member of the Godhead exercises the same authority, note that the third affirmation of the second of these four-part central sections (E') asserts that "the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord." That is to say, the Athanasian Creed holds that the Son and Spirit exercise the same lordship as the Father.

As noted above, the full text of the Creed, indented to show the relationships between the sections of the chiasm, with corresponding sections designated, can be found in the appendix to this essay. We can also present summary statements of the sections of the chiasm in relationship to one another as follows:

The Chiastic Structure of Part One

- (A) Necessary Belief
 - (B) Worship of the Triune God
 - (C) Distinct Persons, Godhead Equal and Eternal
 - (D) Undivided Substance
 - (E) Father, Son, and Spirit are Uncreated, Infinite, Eternal
 - Not Three Divine Natures but One
 - (E') Father, Son, and Spirit are Almighty, Divine, Lord
 - Not Three Lord Gods but One
 - (D') Eternal Relations of Origin
 - (C') Distinct Persons, Trinity Eternal and Equal
 - (B') Worship of the Triune God
 - (A') Necessary Belief

Chiastic structures are an extension of parallelism that provide structure and boundaries, aid memory, create synergy and a sense of completion, and serve as a vehicle for the message, even as they also provide an architectural superstructure that authors can creatively beautify.¹⁴ Once we have grasped the chiastic structure of the work, we can often summarize the whole in a single sentence, as I will attempt to do for part one of the Athanasian Creed:

Salvation requires right belief in and thought about the Trinity, for Christians worship the Triune God, "neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance," as each person is distinct from the others yet shares one divine nature, the undivided substance of the divine being distinguished as Father, Son, and Spirit through the eternal relations of origin, even as Father, Son, and Spirit are uncreated, infinite, eternal, almighty, Divine, and Lord, there not being three gods but one God in three persons: the unity in Trinity and the Trinity in unity.

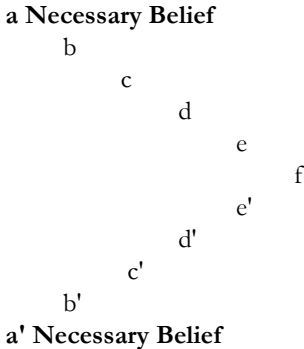
¹⁴ For discussion, see the section titled "What Chiasms Are and Do" in James M. Hamilton Jr., *Typology—Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations Are Fulfilled in Christ* (Zondervan, 2022), 332–36.

This sentence has simply started with the outer rings and moved down through the inner rings to the center. What a beautiful piece of theological and literary art part one of the Athanasian Creed proves to be. Its complement on the incarnation, to which we now turn our attention, stands as a worthy counterpart.

III. THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF PART TWO: THE INCARNATION

To move from part one of the Athanasian Creed to part two is like reading from Revelation 4 into Revelation 5. Whereas in Revelation 4 John sees the one seated on the throne, with the seven spirits of God before him, being worshiped by the host of heaven, in Revelation 5 he sees the lamb standing as though slain, and the eyes of heaven turn to the risen Christ to praise him for who he is and what he has done. The analogy is not perfect, but the point is that whereas the first part of the Creed rhythmically intones Trinitarian truth, the second tunes its musical syntax to sing the glory of the Son.¹⁵

The chiasmic structure of part one consisted of five rings of ten units, creating a two-part center. The chiasmic structure of part two, by contrast, consists of eleven units, so that the five rings have a single center. Whereas uppercase letters were used for the chiasm in part one, I will use lowercase letters for part two, placing the units under discussion in bold:



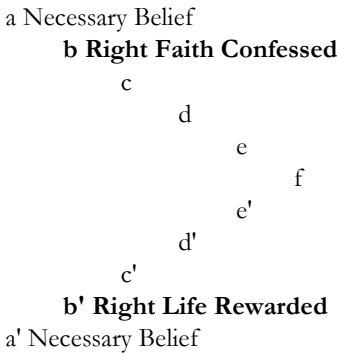
As with part one, where statements of necessary belief and orthodox thought bracket the teaching on the Trinity, so in part two the opening and closing statements affirm that salvation hinges on true and faithful belief in Christ as he is presented in the Scriptures. Here again the uniqueness of these statements stands out when they are placed side by side:

¹⁵ For discussion of the rhythm of the Creed's Latin syllables, see Kelly, *Athanasian Creed*, 60–65.

| Part Two Opening (a) | Part Two Closing (a') |
|--|---|
| Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that one also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. | This is the true Christian faith. Anyone who does not believe faithfully cannot be saved. |

The careful brilliance of the unknown author of the Athanasian Creed can be seen in the way that he has forged statements that bookend the whole of the work (A and a'), even as that large outer ring also corresponds with middle statements to form the two inner rings (A and A' on the one hand, a and a' on the other). Only in these four statements does the Creed speak of salvation, of right thought and true belief, and of the content of the faith held by the whole church (the meaning of "catholic," from the Greek *καθολικός*, "according to the whole").

When we move to the second and second-to-last statements of part two (b and b'), we find that as in part one, where the second statement (B) held part one's thesis statement on the Trinity, so here in part two the second statement (b) asserts the incarnation section's thesis statement, which is "that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man." In the first of these (b), the right faith is confessed, and in the second (b') the reward of right faith is asserted (with its contrary).



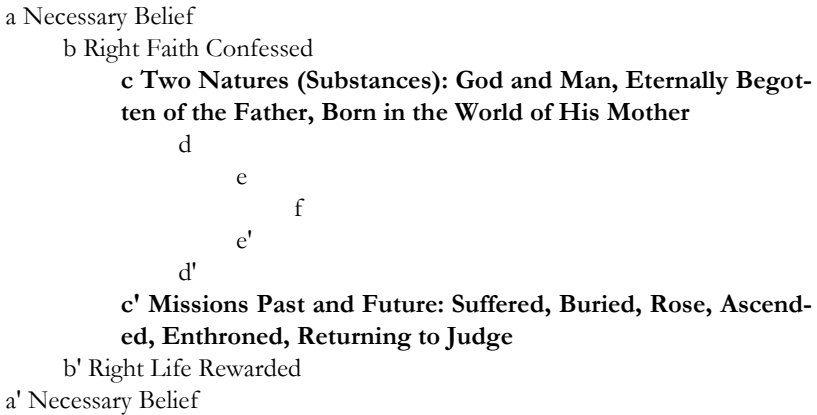
We can see the relationship between the statements when we place them side by side:

| Second Statement (b) | Second-to-Last Statement (b') |
|--|--|
| For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; | And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. |

The New Testament clearly teaches that judgment will be based on works (2 Cor 5:10), that deeds done are the fruit of the heart's belief (Matt 7:15–20), so that doing good is evidence of the new birth and salvation by grace through faith (Eph 2:8–10). Still, those who do not recognize the Athanasian Creed's chiasmic structure

might be tempted to wonder if that second-to-last statement (b') reflects the beginnings of a medieval Roman Catholic view of works that the Protestant Reformers would reject.¹⁶ We can see from the Creed's structure, however, that as it is in the New Testament, so it is in the Athanasian Creed: right faith results in right living. The confession of the truth about Jesus in the second statement (b) stands in balance with the doing of good that will be rewarded in the second-to-last statement (b'). Understanding the intended literary relationship between these statements vindicates the Creed as thoroughly biblical.

Just as the idea that the persons are not confounded and the substance is not divided was the thesis statement expounded in part one of the Creed, so also the idea "that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man" will be expounded by the inner rings of part two. This begins with the third and third-to-last statements (c and c').



These two statements treat the heavenly and earthly careers of the Lord Jesus. The first (c) begins by affirming the two natures of Christ, using the terminology of part one (substance). The last line of this first statement transitions from the almost theoretical statement of the divine and human natures of Christ into the mission of the Son, "born in the world." The Son's earthly career is then summarized in the third-to-last statement (c'). When placed side by side, they flow naturally together from one to the other, whereas in the context of the Creed they are interrupted by the two inner rings and the Creed's big idea in central position:

¹⁶ Fairbairn and Reeves have stumbled at just this point, writing, "To protestant ears, the focus on behavior ... may be unnerving. If we are on the lookout for anything that smacks of 'works righteousness' and a denial of justification by faith, we seem to have found the smoking gun here.... Protestant fears that this document is sliding into medieval works righteousness are probably somewhat justified." Fairbairn and Reeves, *Creds and Confessions*, 126. Another potential misinterpretation is the one Fairbairn and Reeves seem to fall into when they write that with the Athanasian Creed, "the Western church opened up the possibility that systematic theology might become divorced from the actual living of a life dedicated to God, his Son, and his Spirit." Fairbairn and Reeves, 122. The Athanasian Creed, rightly understood, speaks against the divorce Fairbairn and Reeves describe.

| Third Statement (c) | Third-to-Last Statement (c') |
|---|--|
| God, of the substance of the Father,
begotten before the worlds:
and man, of the substance of his mother,
born in the world; | Who suffered for our salvation,
descended to the dead,
rose again on the third day from the dead.
He ascended into heaven:
he sits on the right hand of the Father,
God Almighty,
from whence he shall come to judge the
quick and the dead.
At whose coming all men shall rise again
with their bodies
and shall give account for their own
works. |

The theological profundity of these parallel sections cannot be overstated. The second is only possible because of the first. What the Creed affirms is in keeping with the biblical teaching that Jesus and the Father are one (John 10:30), enabling him to save the world (3:17), while at the same time he partook of flesh and blood (Heb 2:14), because “he had to be made like his brothers in every respect” (2:17). Because he was eternally begotten of the Father as God (“begotten before all worlds,” cf. John 5:26; Phil 2:6), once he is “born of woman, born under law” (Gal 4:4, cf. “born in the world”), he can accomplish every aspect of salvation, standing in our place as a man, satisfying the Father’s justice as God.

Whereas with the Trinity the three persons share one nature, with the incarnation Christ the one person has two natures. When we move to the fourth (d) and fourth-to-last (d') statements,

- a Necessary Belief
 - b Right Faith Confessed
 - c Two Natures (Substances): God and Man, Eternally Begotten of the Father, Born in the World of His Mother
 - d Reasonable Soul and Human Flesh**
 - e
 - f
 - e'
 - d' Reasonable Soul and Human Flesh**
 - c' Missions Past and Future: Suffered, Buried, Rose, Ascended, Enthroned, Returning to Judge
 - b' Right Life Rewarded
 - a' Necessary Belief

our author presents mirror image affirmations that reject and repudiate early attempts to explain Christ that failed to account for all the fullness of the Bible’s

teaching. We will first consider the beautifully parallel statements before exploring how they represent right teaching (orthodoxy) exposing the failure of heresy. In the first of these (d), phrase one affirms Christ as God and man, and phrase two speaks of his reasonable soul and human flesh. In the second (d') the order is reversed, with phrase one speaking of the reasonable soul and human flesh, phrase two affirming Christ as God and man. Consider these two side by side (matching statements underlined and italicized):

| Fourth Statement (d) | Fourth-to-Last Statement (d') |
|--|---|
| perfect <i>God</i> , and perfect <i>man</i> :
of a <u>reasonable soul and</u> human <u>flesh</u>
subsisting; | For as the <u>reasonable soul and flesh</u> is
one man,
so <i>God</i> and <i>man</i> is one Christ. |

Apollinarius (c. 310–390) rejected the idea that the incarnate Christ possessed a human, rational mind. His view seems to have been that Christ had a human body, a sensitive human soul, but a divine mind.¹⁷ The Athanasian Creed’s confession of a *reasonable* soul affirms the teaching of Luke 2:52, that the Lord Jesus, as a man, “increased in wisdom and stature,” and denies the Apollinarian failure to attribute full humanity to Jesus of Nazareth. With the phrases “perfect God, and perfect man,” the Creed affirms that Jesus was *completely* man and *completely* God, with a rational soul and a human body (“a reasonable soul and human flesh”).

Eutyches (c. 380–c. 456), on the other hand, taught that Christ was *of* but not *in* two natures, that he had separate human and divine natures, and that these were blended, so that Jesus was *homoousion* (of the same essence/substance) with the Father but not with man. The Athanasian Creed, by contrast, confesses the full deity and humanity of Christ: “perfect God and perfect man,” the two natures, divine and human, conjoined in the one person: “so God and man is one Christ.”

The main concern of this essay is the Creed’s literary structure, and the congruence of these components—so obviously not randomly placed but matching one another to encircle the central affirmations—is evident for all to see. When we come to the fifth and fifth-to-last statements (e and e’), we are at the inner ring around the central affirmation of part two of the Athanasian Creed:

¹⁷ See Kelly, *Athanasian Creed*, 92. See also Joseph Sollier, “Apollinarianism,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1907), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01615b.htm>.

- a Necessary Belief
 b Right Faith Confessed
 c Two Natures (Substances): God and Man, Eternally Begotten of the Father, Born in the World of His Mother
 d Reasonable Soul and Human Flesh
e Godhead and Manhood (Equal and Inferior)
 f
e' Godhead and Manhood (Not Converted but Added, Distinct in Nature, Unified in Person)
 d' Reasonable Soul and Human Flesh
 c' Missions Past and Future: Suffered, Buried, Rose, Ascended, Enthroned, Returning to Judge
 b' Right Life Rewarded
 a' Necessary Belief

In all the statements in this Creed, only in these two do we find the terms “Godhead” (*divinitas*) and “manhood” (*humanitas*). Each of these terms occurs exactly twice in the Creed, once in the fifth statement of part two, a second time in the fifth-to-last. Consider them side by side:

| Fifth Statement (e) | Fifth-to-Last Statement (e') |
|---|---|
| equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead:
and inferior to the Father, as touching his manhood. | one, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh,
but by taking of the manhood into God;
one altogether, not by confusion of substance
but by unity of person. |

Just as the language of “equal to ... as touching” and “inferior to ... as touching” binds the fifth statement together, so also the “one, not by ... but by” and “one altogether, not by ... but by” joins the affirmations in the fifth-to-last statement to one another. The first of these again affirms the two natures and boldly advances a theological explanation for *both* the Son repeatedly affirming his ascent and descent in the Gospel of John (“equal to the Father”; see John 3:13; 6:62; 7:28–29, 33–36) *and* the Son not knowing the day or the hour (Mark 13:32) and confessing “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28, “inferior to the Father”). Equal to the Father in his divinity, thus he came from God and returns to God. Inferior to the Father in his humanity, and thus he knows not the day or hour. The second of these matching thought units explains that the divinity has not been converted into humanity, nor has the humanity merely been subsumed in the divinity. Rather, the two natures have been united in the one person. Here again biblical truth is upheld against failures to articulate it correctly.

Nestorius (d. c. 450) taught that Christ had distinct human and divine persons, but the Athanasian Creed maintains, against that mistake, that he is “one altogether, not by confusion of substance but by unity of person.”¹⁸

The central statement of part two of the Athanasian Creed is the one to which all the others have led, as though they point at it or build to it like a capstone:

- a Necessary Belief
 - b Right Faith Confessed
 - c Two Natures (Substances): God and Man, Eternally Begotten of the Father, Born in the World of His Mother
 - d Reasonable Soul and Human Flesh
 - e Godhead and Manhood (Equal and Inferior)
 - f Two Natures One Person**
 - e' Godhead and Manhood (Not Converted but Added, Distinct in Nature, Unified in Person)
 - d' Reasonable Soul and Human Flesh
 - c' Missions Past and Future: Suffered, Buried, Rose, Ascended, Enthroned, Returning to Judge
 - b' Right Life Rewarded
- a' Necessary Belief

Here we find the straightforward, concise affirmation of the two natures in the one person of Christ, standing as the great mystery of godliness that it is (1 Tim 3:16), giving life to the church, the pillar and buttress of the truth, the bride and body of her head, the Lord Christ, of whom the Creed makes the good confession:

Who although he be God and man,
yet he is not two, but one Christ;

As with part one, so with part two: we can present summary statements that allow us to depict the chiasmic structure in a short span as follows.

¹⁸ Kelly, *Athanasian Creed*, 105.

The Chiastic Structure of Part Two

- (a) Necessary Belief
 - (b) Right Faith Confessed
 - (c) Two Natures (Substances): God and Man, Eternally Begotten of the Father, Born in the World of His Mother
 - (d) Reasonable Soul and Human Flesh
 - (e) Godhead and Manhood (Equal and Inferior)
 - (f) Two Natures One Person
 - (e') Godhead and Manhood (Not Converted but Added, Distinct in Nature, Unified in Person)
 - (d') Reasonable Soul and Human Flesh
 - (c') Missions Past and Future: Suffered, Buried, Rose, Ascended, Enthroned, Returning to Judge
 - (b') Right Life Rewarded
 - (a') Necessary Belief

And also as with part one, understanding this chiastic structure enables us to summarize the teaching of part two of the Athanasian Creed in a single sentence. *Salvation requires genuine and steadfast belief in the Lord Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Scripture, fully God, fully man, who took on flesh and died on the cross, rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, from whence he shall come to judge, and he was incomplete neither in humanity nor deity, nor was there any loss of divinity or confusion of the natures, but rather a perfect and complete subsisting of the two natures in his one person.*

IV. CONCLUSION

The Athanasian Creed consists of two chiastic structures. Understanding the literary structure enables us to begin to grasp the message of the confession, a message of three Persons with one divine nature, and one Person with two natures, a message that we must believe to be saved, a message that will draw us into the divine life to worship and know the living and true God. Knowing the Creed will keep us from heretical failures to articulate the truth about the Triune God and the God-man Christ. The division of the Creed into two or three parts provides units that are not too long to be regularly confessed by congregations gathered for worship. Christians who have memorized the Creed will be able to meditate on God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and their internalization of these truths will enable them to stand against the attempts of pagan cultures to indoctrinate and re-educate. "Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD" (Hos 6:3).

APPENDIX: THE ATHANASIAN CREED IN CHIASTIC FORMAT

Whoever desires **to be saved** must above all hold to **the true Christian faith**.
 Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.
 And **the true Christian faith 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 Spirit.

But the Godhead of the Father,
 of the Son,
 and of the Holy Spirit,
 is all one: the Glory **equal**, the Majesty **co-eternal**.

Such as the Father is,
 such is the Son,
 and such is the Holy Spirit.

The Father uncreated,
 the Son uncreated,
 and the Holy Spirit uncreated.
 The Father incomprehensible,
 the Son incomprehensible,
 and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.
 The Father eternal,
 the Son eternal,
 and the Holy Spirit eternal.
 And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal.
 As also there are not three incomprehensibles,
 nor three uncreated,
 but one uncreated,
 and one incomprehensible.

So likewise the Father is Almighty,
 the Son Almighty,
 and the Holy Spirit Almighty.
 And yet they are not three Almightyies: but one Almighty.

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

And yet not three Lords, but one Lord.
 For just 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 true Christian faith
 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 Spirit is of the Father and of the Son:
 neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

So there is one Father, not three Fathers;
 one Son, not three Sons;
 one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.
And in this Trinity none is afore or after other,
 none is greater or less than another,
 but the whole three persons are **co-eternal** together and **co-equal**.

So that in all things, as is aforesaid:
 the **unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity** is to be worshipped.

Any therefore that will **be saved** must thus **think** of the Trinity
 Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting **salvation**
 that one also **believe** rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the right faith is that we **believe and confess**
 that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is **God and Man**;

God, of the **substance** of the Father,
 begotten before the worlds:
 and **man**, of the **substance** of his mother,
 born in the world;

perfect **God**, and perfect **man**:
 of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting;
 equal to the Father, as touching his GODHEAD:
 and inferior to the Father, as touching his MANHOOD.

Who although he be **God and man**,
 yet he is not two, but **one Christ**;
 one, not by conversion of the GODHEAD into flesh,
 but by taking of the MANHOOD into God;
 one altogether, not by confusion of **substance**
 but by unity of **person**.

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man,
 so **God and man** is one Christ.

Who suffered for our salvation,
 descended to the dead,
 rose again on the third day from the dead.

He ascended into heaven:
he sits on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty,
from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies
and shall give account for their own works.

And they that have **done good** shall go into life everlasting,
and they that have **done evil** into everlasting fire.

This is the true Christian faith.

Anyone who does not believe faithfully cannot be saved.