

Essay about Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*

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Introduction

One of the seminal thinkers that has directed understanding foundational doctrines of Latin and Coptic theology was Athanasius of Alexandria (c.297-373). One of his early works was *Against the Heathen and The Incarnation of the Word of God*, probably written before the Arian heresy became prevalent.

This essay will superficially examine theological and Christological themes emphasised and prioritised in *On the Incarnation* (from chapters between 'The Divine Dilemma regarding Life and Death' and 'The Death of Christ and the Resurrection of the Body').

Chapter 2 - *The Divine Dilemma and It's Solution in the Incarnation*

Chapter two commences with a summary continuing from chapter one, regarding hamartiology and the need for a Redeemer. It recapitulates some of the first chapter regarding the *Word of the Father* (explained as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus the Christ) and His immediate role in creation.

Athanasius then considers the *Divine Dilemma*, questioning what purpose would God's creation serve if it was to fail (sin and corruption doesn't *seem* to glorify the Creator), and how can He remain just to His Word (the judgement of death) if He restores it without consequences? He then analyses this dilemma by presenting a supralapsarian¹ process of redemption, in accordance with His eternal decree.

It discusses the obfuscation if God delivered mankind even after repentance (which wouldn't address the guilt of original and actual sin) and the futility of man in his fallen nature to be able to initially repent². As a consequence, the Word is the only means of redemption, "For He alone, being Word of the Father and above all, was in consequence both able to recreate all, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be Ambassador for all with the Father." (Athanasius, 2016). So the initial iteration was for the Word to become a man, the hypostatic union. This enabled Christ to sacrifice Himself for the jurisprudence (satisfying the Law by His death) and restoration (through His resurrection). This Athanasius describes as the first cause of *God with us*³. This is the basis for *Justification*. Prior to the sacrifice, He needed to live the perfect (sinless) life, so as to be an acceptable (unblemished) sacrifice required under the Law. He therefore needed to be a man, but this is covered

¹ Clarke, F. S. (1976). *Lost and Found: Athanasius' Doctrine of Predestination*. Scottish Journal of Theology, 29(5), 437.

² Athanasius of Alexandria (2016). *On the Incarnation*. New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House. 21.

³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 25.

in a later chapter.

Chapter 3 - The Divine Dilemma and It's Solution in the Incarnation (continued)

Athanasius now examines the attributes of God expressed in man communicated via the *Imago Dei*. It is explained that this was to enable mankind to better know God, for a relationship to enjoy and to glorify Him⁴. Because this likeness was tarnished at the fall, they not only turned from God, but worse, committed all forms of idolatry⁵.

It is explained that mankind was not left with an excuse, regarding the knowledge of God. Athanasius presents the philosophical *apologia* of nature's *Cosmological* and *Teleological* arguments⁶. Cosmology dictates that there must be a *first cause*, from which all matter must be generated⁷. Teleology emphasises the existence of God demonstrated by the order and anthropocentric arrangement of creation⁸. Also, the fact that man (alone in creation) can reason and rationalise these concepts, is indicative of the concept of God's *Ontological* existence (based on man's rationality and ability to reason) - a feature looking back at the first paragraph of this chapter, pertaining to *Imago Dei*. Of course, all of these arguments are theologically based from Scripture⁹.

Athanasius also refers to special revelation of God by the *Law and the Prophets*, thus further leaving mankind without excuse. But man's nature was displayed such that it seemed mankind was lost, despite all God's effort¹⁰. These features standing on their own are unable to save mankind (due to the fallen nature), so only the Word (Jesus Christ) could restore the image of God. This first required removing the obstacles of death and corruption, which Athanasius uses an allegory. He compares a soiled painting with man's veiled likeness of God. It is not discarded (due to it's hidden value), it is cleaned and restored¹¹. He continues to describe the process of enabling sanctification, the second major cause for Christ: To physically provide an example to follow and expound the *Tanakh*. That is, "He teaches those who would not learn by other means to know Himself, the Word of God, and through Him the Father."¹²

The chapter continues to examine the nature of the God-man. Athanasius describes the essence of Christ as:

⁴ *Westminster Shorter Catechism* refers to this as the chief purpose of mankind.

⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 28, 29.

⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 29.

⁷ Kumar, S., & Sarfati, J. D. (2012). *Christianity for skeptics*. Atlanta, Ga. Creation Book Publishers. 17-22.

⁸ Kumar, S., & Sarfati, J. D. *Christianity for skeptics*. 22-33.

⁹ Cosmological = Gen.1:1, Rom.1:19,20; Teleological = Gen.1:1, Ps.94:9, Heb.3:4; Ontological = Gen.1:1, Heb.3:4, Rom.2:15

¹⁰ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 30.

¹¹ Compare a sermon by the author: Duffy, J. (2020, January 20). *The Image of God* [Genesis 1:27]. from <http://johnduffy.net.au/sermons/The%20Image%20of%20God.mp3>

¹² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 32.

“two complete, perfect and distinct natures, the divine and the human, were inseparably joined together in the person of the Lord Jesus without being changed, mixed or confused. So the Son of God is now both true God and true man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.” (Ward, 2000)¹³.

Of particular note, it refutes the docetic heresy of Christ being non-corporeal in the incarnation, as he continues to explain. But His divinity, although veiled, was revealed in signs and wonders (miracles and healings)¹⁴, and ultimately in Jesus’ Transfiguration and Ascension [author’s observation].

Chapter 4 - *The Death of Christ*

The works of Christ are next attributed to the purpose of regaining the knowledge of God. Athanasius has covered the deity of Jesus the Christ in the previous chapters, he reiterates that the Saviour Himself, created all things *ex nihilo*¹⁵. Now, “the second reason why the Word dwelt amongst us ..., He might offer the sacrifice on behalf of all, to settle man’s account with death and free him from the primal transgression.” (Athanasius, 2016).

He expounds the vicarious substitutionary atonement by propitiation outlining the necessity of a public crucifixion. He demonstrates Christ had to actively *give up the ghost* as a sign that it was not passive natural weakness¹⁶. He had to surrender to the fatal machinations of men to demonstrate (upon His resurrection) His sovereignty over death no matter what man contrived¹⁷. The ultimate purpose of Jesus’ incarnation is revealed as the resurrection of mankind. Another reason for a public execution, was to provide evidence of the resurrection with witnesses after His death (both benevolent and hostile)¹⁸.

The nature of the crucifixion was fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, some of which Athanasius lists¹⁹.

Chapter 5 - *The Resurrection*

The final chapter to be examined considers the Resurrection. The culmination of Christ’s humiliation, obedience and atoning sacrifice is replaced by the victory over death and corruption.

Athanasius discusses why Christ remained dead until the third day. He posits that any longer and the locals would forget the events of that particular person

¹³ Ward, R. S. (2000). *The Westminster Confession and Catechisms in Modern English : a Modernised Text Commemorating the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-49*. 24.

¹⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 36,37.

¹⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 40.

¹⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 42.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 43,45.

¹⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 44.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 46; Accursed on tree Dt 21:23, Gal 3:13; raised and draw all men Num:21:9 Jn 12:32, Opens Heaven Ps24:7; etc.

of Christ. Any less and the witnesses may assume Christ didn't physically die (but experienced some biological stasis or coma). It involved not only protagonist witnesses (ie. disciples, family, friends), but antagonists (eg. Pharisees, temple guards, Roman guards, general Jewish population)²⁰.

The resurrection, as Athanasius explains, becomes a formidable example of Christ's divinity as an apologetic and edifying phenomenon. It changes cowardly and timid disciples into (eventually) Apostles gladly willing to be martyred for the gospel. This is because now they know "full well that when they die, they do not perish but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection." (Athanasius, 2016). Under Diocletian (284 to 305AD) and earlier periods of Roman persecution, many Christians had been murdered²¹. Yet, Athanasius maintains that men, women and children are disciplined to encounter persecution under torture and death. This and the examples in church history testify to death's impotence as accomplished by Christ's resurrection, according to Athanasius.

Having established Christ's victory over death, he summarises that Christ directs the regeneration of men (but doesn't directly explain the relationship in this with Holy Spirit)²². As a consequence, after justification is applied to men, Christ enables sanctification²³, which produces Spiritual fruits²⁴ in the believer.

²⁰ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 50.

²¹ Eusebius of Caesarea (2007). *Eusebius - the Church History*. 256,257; John Foxe (2003). *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. 1-35.

²² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 54.

²³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 54.

²⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. 55.

Summary

Important theological and Christological concepts noted in this portion of *On the Incarnation* from a Reformed perspective are predominantly focused on the *Covenant of Redemption* (Pactum Salutis) or *Divine Covenant*²⁵ and the *Covenant of Grace* (Ordo Salutis).

The aspects of *Pactum Salutis* the Father covenants by the Son are to be a surety and representative for humanity, make restitution for the sins of Adam and the elect²⁶, and fulfill the law to secure eternal life for the elect²⁷.

The *Covenant of Redemption* is the eternal prototype of the temporal *Covenant of Grace* (which is why many theologies combine the two under the latter)²⁸. It is an expression of *God's Eternal Decree*, which Berkoff (1971) defined as "the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given Him."²⁹

In this book, the *Covenant of Grace* is historically addressed by Athanasius regarding sin, Christ as Mediator of the covenant to man, by means of justification, adoption, sanctification, faith (spiritual gifts of trust and obedience), repentance to life, man's good works, perseverance and assurance of grace and ultimately, glorification.

²⁵ Williams, J. R. (2007). *Renewal Theology : Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective*. 276.

²⁶ It should be noted that in this work, Athanasius considered Christ died to potentially save all men, but only effects it in the elect. Calvinists believe in *Limited Atonement*, where Christ died only for the elect.

²⁷ Berkhof, L. (1971). *Systematic Theology*. 270.

²⁸ Beeke, J. R., & Jones, M. (2012). *A Puritan Theology : Doctrine for Life*. 237-239.

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Grudem, W. (2007). *Systematic Theology : an Introduction to Biblical doctrine*. 518, 519.

²⁹ Berkhof, L. (1971). *Systematic Theology*. 271.

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Soli Deo gloria. Amen.