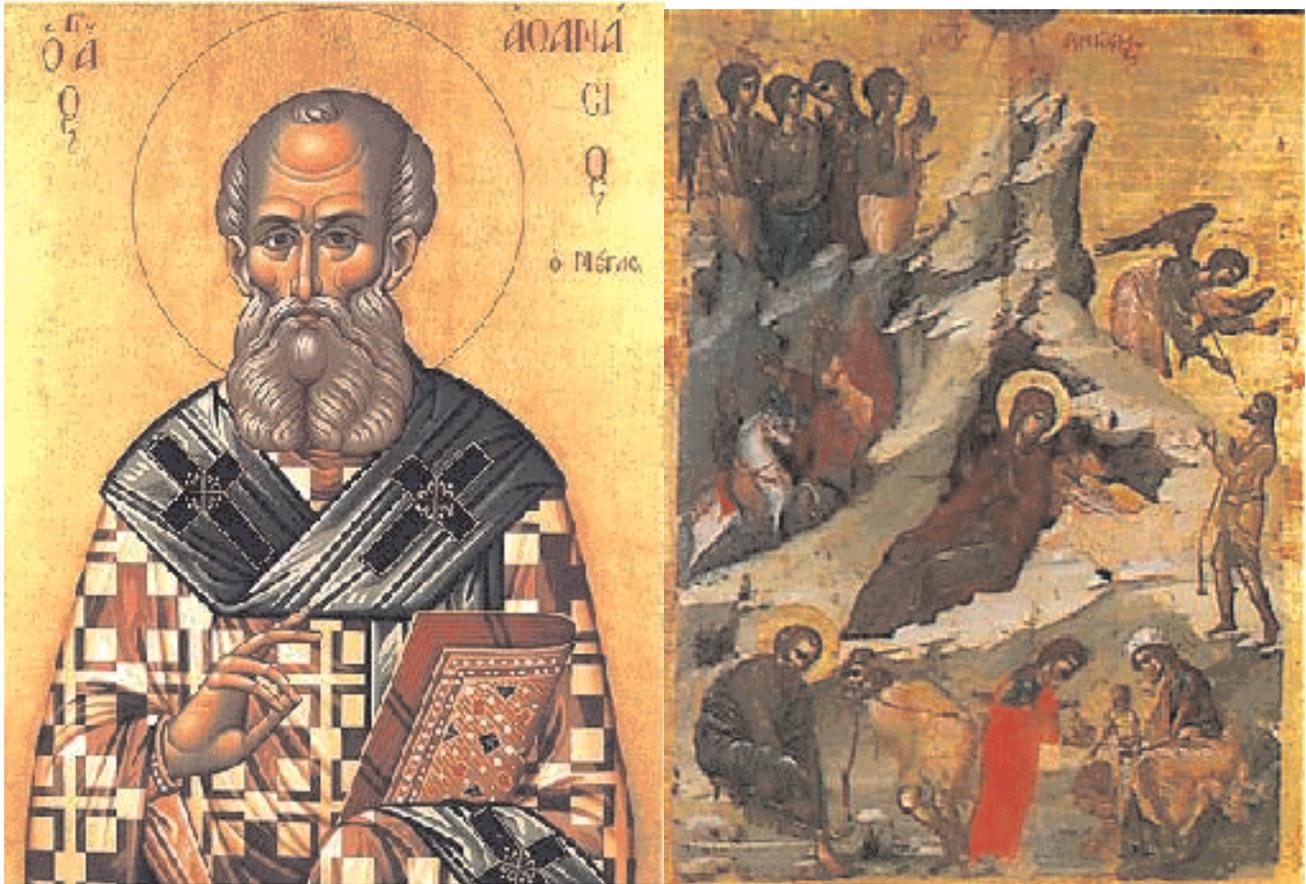


Saint Athanasius the Great

The Redemptive Plan in *On the Incarnation*



"Saint Athanasius of Alexandria" and the "Nativity of Christ"

Images courtesy of the *Icon Gallery of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America*

Presented by: Brian Ephrem Fitzgerald, Ph.D.

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Saint Athanasius the Great - His Life

A staunch defender of Christian Orthodoxy, Saint Athanasius of Alexandria is known as the "Father of Orthodoxy" in the Christian East. His defense of the Council of Nicaea (325) and the ὁμοούσιος (homoousios) for nearly five decades, in spite of being in the minority and suffering religious and political persecution, is one of the most heroic chapters in Christian history. The Orthodox Church celebrates his memory on 2 May.

Born about 295 (estimates of his birth date vary) in Alexandria, he was Egyptian by birth but Greek by culture and education. In Alexandria, one of the great centers of Hellenistic and Christian education, he received both his classical and theological education. Since the Great Persecution lasted in the Roman East until Spring 313, and was particularly severe in Alexandria, St. Athanasius would have had vivid youthful memories of these events and of the many Christian martyrs. This would account for his idealization of the martyrs in *On the Incarnation*, and probably set for him a motivating example during his own periods of persecution and exile. The great city was not his only source of upbringing. In his youth he apparently had made contact with the monastics of the Thebaïis. His love and respect for Egyptian monastics would only grow during his life as he encountered them, whether during his ecclesiastical routine or exile. One sees the pinnacle of his love for Egyptian monasticism in his classic hagiography, *The Life of Anthony*. Greek and Christian education, the examples of martyrs and monks; these would be mighty pillars for this saint during his long ecclesiastical career.

St. Athanasius' public ecclesiastical career began in 319 when Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, elevated him to the diaconate. Soon he would be the bishop's secretary, even accompanying the bishop to the Council of Nicaea (325) where Arian dogma was condemned. Not long afterward (328), he would succeed Alexander to the episcopal throne of Alexandria. Trying times would follow for the new bishop. Arian heresy, as well as more general opposition to the Council of Nicaea would flourish for decades to come, both in Alexandria and throughout the Christian East. In Alexandria, the Meletian party opposed the new bishop. He had not long to wait before false accusations and slander would vex him. These woes would only increase when he would not readmit Arius to communion as ordered by the emperor Constantine. His enemies gathered at the Synod of Tyre (335) and deposed him. Soon afterward, Constantine ordered his exile to Treves in the Roman West (modern Trier, in Germany). The emperor died in 337, however, an event which ended St. Athanasius' first exile. On 23 November 337, he would return to his see.

This first exile was only a foretaste of what would come as he fought for Nicene Orthodoxy for the next thirty-six years. For brevity's sake, below is a chart summarizing St. Athanasius' five periods of exile:

- 335 - Deposition at the Council of Tyre and exile to Treves by Constantine. Return on 23 November 337 after Constantine's death
- 339 - Deposition at the Council of Antioch at the instigation of Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, followed later by St. Athanasius' flight to Rome. Return only on 21 October 346 after the death of the usurper, Gregory of Cappadocian (345), though the Western Councils of Rome (341) and Serdica (343) exonerated St. Athanasius, the latter naming him the sole legal bishop of Alexandria
- 355 - Deposition and condemnation at the Council of Milan, instigated by the emperor Constantius, followed by flight to the monks of the Egyptian desert. Return in 361 after the death of Constantius
- 362 - Exile by the pagan emperor Julian. Return in 363 after Julian's death
- 365 - Exile by the emperor Valens for four months

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After the fifth exile, St. Athanasius was restored to office on 1 February 366. St. Athanasius spent his remaining years in peace. He died in the peace of the Church on 2 May 373.¹

About *On the Incarnation* (Λόγος περὶ τῆς ἐνανθρωπήσεως)

Of all the works of St. Athanasius the Great, excepting *The Life of Anthony*, *On the Incarnation* is the only work where the author writes outside an immediate context of theological controversy. This is perhaps the only major theological work where the saint expresses himself on his own terms rather than responding to issues or accusations raised by others. If one finds thus the "true" Athanasius here, one also finds the young Athanasius speaking; this work being composed around 318 and thus before the Arian controversy. *On the Incarnation* is in fact the second part of a larger work which Jerome calls *Adversum gentes duo libri*, or *Two Books against the Heathen*. The first and longer part is an apologetical work, rebutting pagan mythology, cults, and beliefs, opposing nature worship and pantheism, and presenting monotheism as the only rational view.

The second part, the focus of our study, continues where the first left off. Explaining the nature of human origins, St. Athanasius proceeds to show the rational necessity of the Incarnation for the redemption of mankind. Only through the true Image of God Himself, could the Image of God in man be restored. Only through the death of the human body assumed by the Word Himself could the penalty of death be lifted from mankind without compromising the veracity of God, the Father of Truth. Only through the Incarnation of the Divine Agent, through Whom the universe and man were created, could humanity be saved from corruption and death, and be revitalized through communion with the life-giving Word. These are, in summary, the primary soteriological points propounded by St. Athanasius in this work. These arguments form the part of a larger apologetical work, demonstrating the rational superiority of the Christian faith over Judaism and pagan beliefs.

Who is St. Athanasius' audience? The author addresses a certain Macarius, who seems to be a young, educated prospective convert from paganism, perhaps even a catechumen. In any case, this Macarius seems to be very favorably disposed toward the Christian Faith. Since the name Macarius (Μακάριος) is also an adjective meaning "blessed," "happy," or "fortunate," it is possible that Macarius is the rhetorical "any man" who reads this work, rather than a specific person. To whomever this work is directly addressed, the general audience is an educated Hellenistic one highly interested in the Christian Faith. *On the Incarnation* stands on the borderline of apologetical evangelism and Christian education. In this work, the worlds of the early Christian Apologists and of the later conciliar Church Fathers meet. This work seems thus to have in mind an introductory and apologetical Christian education of a sophisticated, but interested audience.²

¹This summary biography depends on the following four studies: Religious of the C.S.M.V., "The Life of St. Athanasius," *St. Athanasius: On the Incarnation* (trans. Religious of the C.S.M.V.; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973) 17-24; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology III* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1983) 20-22; Edward R. Hardy, "Introduction to Athanasius," *Christology of the Later Fathers* (ed. Edward R. Hardy and Cyril C. Richardson; Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1956) 43-49; and *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone; Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 1985) 101-102.

²This summary biography depends on the following three studies: Religious of C.S.M.V., "Life of Athanasius" 19; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology III* 24-26; Edward R. Hardy, "Introduction," 44-48. Since St. Athanasius addresses Macarius in such terms as "true lover of Christ" and the work's content is very apologetical while such mysteries as the Eucharist are not addressed dogmatically, the presenter believes this work to be addressed to an educated catechumen as supplemental reading to his catechetical course work. See Athanasius of Alexandria, *St. Athanasius: On the Incarnation* (trans. Religious of the

The Divine Dilemma

What was God to do? When St. Athanasius poses this question, he sets the tone for his discussion of mankind's fall and redemption. This topic is the central focus of this study. God actually had a dilemma. Gracing human beings with free will allowed for the possibility of rejecting God, life, and the good. An effective divine resolution, however, required two things: **a)** that the needs of the fallen human condition be met, and **b)** that God, the Father of Truth, not be made out to be a liar. The divine plan of redemption therefore needed both to save humans and be consistent with God's truthful and just character. To understand this dilemma clearly, it is best to begin with the origins of the problem.

God created man, and all creation *out of nothing* (ex nihilo) through the agency of the Word (Λόγος), namely His Son, Jesus Christ. God is good and therefore begrudged nothing of the blessing of existence thus bringing everything which is into being.³ Hence all creation by nature was both mortal and impermanent. Being formed from nothing, creation by nature tended to revert to nothingness. Upon impermanent man, however, God bestowed a special grace, the impress of His own Image. Human beings thereby shared in the rational nature of the creative Word Himself. This would allow mankind, naturally unreasoning and mortal, to be rational and express in a limited way the mind of God and thus live forever the blessed life of sainthood in Paradise.

For God is good - or rather, of all goodness He is Fountainhead, and it is impossible for one who is good to be mean or grudging about anything. Grudging existence to none therefore, He made all things out of nothing through His own Word, our Lord Jesus Christ and of all these His earthly creatures He reserved especial mercy for the race of men. Upon them, therefore, upon men who, as animals, were essentially impermanent, He bestowed a grace which other creatures lacked - namely the impress of His own Image, a share in the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him and themselves becoming reasonable and expressing the Mind of God even as He does, though in limited degree they might continue for ever in the blessed and only true life of the saints in paradise.⁴

Reason necessitates freedom. The will of man was changeable and thus could turn either way. As a result, God made man's state contingent upon two things: **a)** setting man in Paradise, and **b)** putting in force the prohibition regarding the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Human freedom required that man be able to choose his own course, yet God provided humans with the best possible conditions so that they may choose the good without hindrance. If man obeyed, eternal life and blessedness in Paradise would follow. If man disobeyed, the divinely stated consequences were exile from Paradise, as well as death and corruption - man's natural reversion to nothingness.

But since the will of man could turn either way, God secured this grace that He had given by making it conditional from the first upon two things - namely, a law and a place. He set them in His own paradise, and laid upon them a single prohibition. If they guarded the grace and retained the loveliness of their original innocence, then the life of paradise should be theirs, without sorrow, pain or care, and after it the assurance of immortality in heaven. But if they went astray and became vile, throwing away their birthright of beauty, then they would come

C.S.M.V.; intro. C. S. Lewis; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973) 25, 95-96. Note that the phrase, "by the appropriation of His body," seems to be a reference, albeit inexplicit, to the Holy Eucharist. Eucharistic dogmas are not addressed in this work, however. See Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 34.

³Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 27-28.

⁴Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 28.

under the natural law of death and live no longer in paradise, but, dying outside of it, continue in death and in corruption. This is what Holy Scripture tells us, proclaiming the command of God, "Of every tree that is in the garden thou shalt surely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ye shall not eat, but in the day that ye do eat, ye shall surely die." "Ye shall surely die" - not just die only, but remain in the state of death and of corruption.⁵

The blessings and responsibilities of human freedom! With the correct choice comes eternal life and blessedness. Death, exile and corruption accompany the wrong one. Man's fate lay in his own hands and he chose to disobey. Man thus fell totally under the sway of his own mortal nature and began reverting to nothingness, the true meaning of death and corruption. He also fell under the divine penalty of death which was consequent upon disobedience. Exile from Paradise, his own mortal nature, and the divinely decreed punishment were all arrayed now against mankind.⁶

God desired that man live forever in divine communion, but man rejected the contemplation of God and turned toward evil. The Love of God called man into being. Through continued contemplation and communion with God, naturally mortal man could overcome his natural debility and enjoy life immortal. God is the source of all goodness. Contemplation of God preserves man from non-being, i.e., evil. Obedience to the divine command ensures a share in the divine nature, namely immortality. But man rejected this wise course. He lost the knowledge of God, his Creator, and with it his very existence. He thus fell totally under the power of death, corruption, and sin.

The presence and love of the Word had called them into being; inevitably, therefore when they lost the knowledge of God, they lost existence with it; for it is God alone Who exists, evil is non-being, the negation and antithesis of good. By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing; but he bears also the Likeness of Him Who is, and if he preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt. So is it armed in Wisdom: "The keeping of His laws is the assurance of incorruption." And being incorrupt, he would be henceforth as God, as Holy Scripture says, "I have said, Ye are gods and sons of the Highest all of you: but ye die as men and fall as one of the princes."⁷

Humanity was now in a race headlong toward oblivion. Man, whom God had created to be rational and immortal, was now dying since the Divine Image in him had been defaced. The race created after the very Image of God was now vanishing. How monstrous! Not to help perishing mankind would betray God as weak and limited. God would be seen to be powerless and without goodness! For God not to act was both *unfitting and unworthy of His character*. To let man who shared in the Divine Image perish was unworthy of God's goodness. It would have been better never to have created mankind than let rational man perish after being created. Yet God is the Father of Truth. He therefore could not renounce the divine penalty without also contradicting His own character. *What was God to do?*⁸

God saw the universal hiding of the knowledge of God from mankind by evil spirits. Instead of worshipping the true God Who created them, humans worshipped false gods; nothings who did not exist, or evil spirits disguising themselves as gods. God did not create mankind only to see its loyalties transferred elsewhere. God also could not remain silent in face of the universal dehumanization of man. It would

⁵Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 28-29.

⁶Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 29-30. For the divine command, see Genesis 2:16-17.

⁷Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 30.

⁸Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 32.

have been better had humans always been brutes than to be created after the Divine Image only to revert once again to irrational beastliness. It was not right that beings created after the immortal Image should perish. *What was God to do?*⁹

If God was good and loving, He was obliged to save the race created after His own Image. To do otherwise was anything but good. But simply to repeal the divinely decreed penalty of death would make God, the Father of Truth, into a liar. The necessary redemption also had to apply to man's true needs, namely to be delivered from death, corruption and sin unto life immortal, and to have the Divine Image in man fully restored. What course of action did God have which was adequate to meet all these conditions?

A call for human repentance would seem worthy of God. Unfortunately this avenue fails all the criteria above. If death did not hold sway over mankind, God's commandment would be void. God the Father of Truth would be the author of untruth. Hence this would not be consistent with God's character. Repentance alone is also of limited use for mankind since, although it may prevent future sins, it does not call man back from his nature. If transgressions alone were the human problem, repentance would suffice. But man was perishing in corruption due to his natural propensity to return to his source, nothingness. Repentance cannot help here since it cannot bring man from corruption to incorruption.¹⁰

God is all-powerful. Could He not have resolved the problem in the same way He brought all things into being, through the signification of His will? But creation and man's current plight, St. Athanasius argues, are not the same situation. In the beginning nothing existed. Hence all that was necessary for them to be was that God's will should so signify. But once man existed, and things that were, rather than things that were not, demanded healing, it followed naturally that God should align Himself with what existed and heal the existing evil. Things which were not, for which mere signification of the Divine will sufficed, stood in no need of healing. Mankind created after the Divine Image, which did exist and was perishing, needed healing. Here the mere signification of God's will was insufficient.¹¹

For that reason, therefore, He was made man, and used the body as His human instrument. If this were not the fitting way, and He willed to use an instrument at all, how otherwise was the Word to come? And whence could He take His instrument, save from among those already in existence and needing His Godhead through One like themselves? It was not things non-existent that needed salvation, for which a bare creative word might have succeed, but man - man already in existence and already in process of corruption and ruin. It was natural and right, therefore, for the Word to use a human instrument and by that means unfold Himself to all.¹²

The Incarnation of the Word of God was the only fitting solution. How else would the knowledge of God be restored in man? The Image of God in man needed renewal. Being created only according to the Divine Image, man could not do it himself. Only the Divine Image Himself incarnate could renew the Image of God in man, end mankind's dehumanization, and bring a truly happy life.

What, then, was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this

⁹Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 40-41.

¹⁰Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 33.

¹¹Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 80.

¹²Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 80.

be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father Who could recreate man made after the Image.¹³

But for this to be possible the tyranny of death and corruption over mankind had to be broken. For this reason Jesus Christ, the Image of the Father, took a human body as an instrument that in it death might be overthrown, man freed and renewed after the Divine Image.¹⁴ This required two steps: **a)** fulfilling the divinely instituted penalty for sin, and **b)** the revivification of human nature.

The Word incarnate accomplished the first step by taking a human body liable to death and dying on mankind's behalf. This fulfilled the divine sanction and thereby freed man from death as a penalty for sin. This measure also upheld the integrity of God since the divine penalty was fulfilled rather than abrogated. The God of all Truth was therefore still truthful regarding the paradisiacal penalty of death. The issue is not God being an angry legalist demanding His juridical pound of flesh. Instead God is both loving and truthful, saving mankind in a way consistent with His own loving and good nature.

Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, having fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men. This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.¹⁵

More was accomplished, however, than the removal of a penalty which hindered us. Through the promise of the resurrection, the union of divinity and humanity in Christ revived human nature itself calling us back from the finality of death natural to beings created from nothing. The solidarity of mankind is such that when the Divine Word dwelt in a single human body, the corruption which accompanies death lost its power over all mankind.

The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of

¹³Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 41.

¹⁴Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 41.

¹⁵Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 34. As stated in note 2, the phrase, "by the appropriation of His body," seems to be an inexplicit reference to the Holy Eucharist.

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*mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all.*¹⁶

As a result, the self-same Word Who made all creation in the beginning renewed all creation through His Incarnation in these latter days.¹⁷ Only Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father was equal to the task of human redemption. Only the Divine Image of the Father could renew the Divine Image in man. Only the Word of the Father incarnate was sufficient to die on man's behalf. Only Christ the Life Himself could call fallen man back from the corruption inherent in his nature unto immortality through the resurrection.

*What - or rather Who was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing? His part it was, and His alone, both to bring again the corruptible to incorruption and to maintain for the Father His consistency of character with all. 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 an ambassador for all with the Father. For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world.*¹⁸

This three-tiered redemptive activity lies at the heart of St. Athanasius' soteriology, namely **a)** restoring the Image and knowledge of God in man, **b)** redeeming man through dying on his behalf, and **c)** the re-vivification and divinization of man through reunion with the divine. This threefold salvific plan will be the focus of the remainder of this study.

¹⁶Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 35.

¹⁷Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 25.

¹⁸Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 33.

Christ the Incarnate Teacher

Due to Adam's rebellion, the Image of God in mankind was defaced, i.e., mankind's knowledge of God was lost. But it was this very contemplation of God which allowed man to be rational, sharing the mind of God in a limited way. This contemplation also allowed man to stay in existence since only such contact with the immortal God allowed man to overcome his natural mortality and thus enjoy the immortal and blessed life of sainthood in Paradise. By losing this precious knowledge, mankind lost both its rationality and its very existence. Humanity was now enthralled with corruption and perishing from the face of the earth. Man now, in fact, seemed to resemble brute beasts more than rational men reflecting the Image of God.

So great, indeed, were the goodness and the love of God. Yet men, bowed down by the pleasures of the moment and by the frauds and illusions of the evil spirits, did not lift up their heads towards the truth. So burdened were they with their wickednesses that they seemed rather to be brute beasts than reasonable men, reflecting the very Likeness of the Word.¹⁹

God did not neglect his creation, however. Being aware of human limitations and the human tendency toward neglectfulness, the Lord supplemented the Divine Image in man with three things: **a)** the works of creation which proclaim the glory of God their maker, **b)** the sending of prophets, men whom they knew, and **c)** the giving of the Law. These additional buttresses were to fortify mankind against its spiritual neglectfulness since being made in the Divine Image in itself had not prevented mankind's fall.

By looking up and beholding the orderliness of creation and the rationality underpinning it, man might learn about God, its creator. The Λόγος, the supreme rationality of the universe was, after all, the agent through Whom God the Father created all things. Rationally ordered creation should therefore be a powerful witness to mankind proclaiming the existence of its ruler, the Word of the Father.²⁰

Since men were often too earthly bound and thus unable to lift their eyes up to the heavens, God condescended to human need and sent the prophets. Men no longer need look upward to find God since He had sent holy men on their own level. By conversing with these holy men, people might receive knowledge of God closer at hand. Humans now could learn about God through fellow humans whom they could easily understand and thereby reject idolatry as impious folly and against all truth.²¹

In addition to all this, God sent the Divine Law. Through obeying the Law, man might cease from lukewarmness and begin leading a good life. The Law, it must be remembered, was given not only for the Jews. Nor were the prophets sent only for the Jews, although they were sent to the Jews and persecuted by them. Together the Law and the prophets were a sacred school of the knowledge of God for the enlightenment of all mankind. Through them the entire world might learn how to conduct the spiritual life.²²

God knew the limitation of mankind, you see; and though the grace of being made in His Image was sufficient to give them knowledge of the Word and through Him of the Father, as a safeguard against their neglect of this grace, He provided the works of creation also as

¹⁹Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 40.

²⁰Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 39, 78-79.

²¹Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 39.

²²Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 40.

means by which the Maker might be known. Nor was this all. Man's neglect of the indwelling grace tends ever to increase; and against this further frailty also God made provision by giving them a law, and by sending prophets, men whom they knew. Thus, if they were tardy in looking up to heaven, they might still gain knowledge of their Maker from those close at hand; for men can learn directly about higher things from other men. Three ways thus lay open to them, by which they might obtain the knowledge of God. They could look up into the immensity of heaven, and by pondering the harmony of creation come to know its Ruler, the Word of the Father, Whose all-ruling providence makes known the Father to all. Or, if this was beyond them, they could converse with holy men, and through them learn to know God, the Artificer of all things, the Father of Christ, and to recognize the worship of idols as the negation of the truth and full of all impiety. Or else, in the third place, they could cease from lukewarmness and lead a good life merely by knowing the law. For the law was not given only for the Jews, nor was it solely for their sake that God sent the prophets, though it was to the Jews that they were sent and by the Jews that they were persecuted. The law and the prophets were a sacred school of the knowledge of God and the conduct of the spiritual life for the whole world.²³

God was solicitous of man's need, making ample provision to teach man of Himself. God is patient and painstaking with His creatures so that they may not be led astray from Him and transfer their allegiance to those who are not. God has been doubly diligent about this since such an errant allegiance leads to man's utter ruin and since it is not right that man, who once shared His Image, should perish. Yet man was still perishing, in spite of all the provisions above. God could not allow the dehumanization of mankind to continue. *What was God to do?* What else could He do but renew the Divine Image in man? And by Whom could this be done, except by the very Divine Image Himself, the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Men were incapable of this feat since they were only made according to this Image, they were not the Image Himself. Angels are not images of God so they too could not help in this regard. The very Word of God came in His own Person among men since He alone is the Divine Image and thus could renew mankind after His own Image.²⁴

Just as an artist does not discard a panel whose image has been obliterated through external stains, God did not discard His creation, the human race. The artist, for example, has the subject sit once again for the portrait and redraws the likeness on the panel. Likewise the Son of God, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt among men so that the Divine Image might be redrawn in fallen man. This is the true meaning of the second birth (John 3:3), not the physical birth of man, rather the spiritual rebirth of the soul in the Image of God.

You know what happens when a portrait that has been painted on a panel becomes obliterated through external stains. The artist does not throw away the panel, but the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material. Even so was it with the All-holy Son of God. He, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst, in order that He might renew mankind made after Himself, and seek out His lost sheep, even as He says in the Gospel: "I came to seek and to save that which was lost. This also explains His saying to the Jews: "Except a man be born anew" He was not referring to a man's natural birth from his mother, as they thought, but to the re-birth and re-creation of the soul in the Image of God.²⁵

²³Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 39-40.

²⁴Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 41-42.

²⁵Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 41-42.

God the Word dealt with ignorant humanity as does a good teacher with his students. He comes down to their level and uses simple means. Men had turned from the contemplation of God above and were looking for divine things in the opposite direction, i.e., among created things of sense. God thus met mankind halfway. He took on a human body, an object for the senses, and moved among humans as a man. He became an object for human sensation so that men, who sought the divine in the world of sensation, might sense Him. Then, beholding the works done in His body, they could ascertain that He was not merely man but also truly God. Earthly minded men therefore were surrounded with abundant media of divine education.²⁶

Human and human minded as men were, therefore, to whichever side they looked in the sensible world they found themselves taught the truth. Were they awe-stricken by creation? They beheld it confessing Christ as Lord. Did their minds tend to regard men as Gods? The uniqueness of the Savior's works marked Him, alone of men, as Son of God. Were they drawn to evil spirits? They saw them driven out by the Lord and learned that the Word of God alone was God and that the evil spirits were not gods at all. Were they inclined to hero-worship and the cult of the dead? Then the fact that the Savior had risen from the dead showed them how false these other deities were, and that the Word of the Father is the one true Lord, the Lord even of death. For this reason was He both born and manifested as Man, for this He died and rose, in order that, eclipsing by His works all other human deeds, He might recall men from all the paths of error to know the Father. As He says Himself, "I came to seek and to save that which was lost."²⁷

In all directions, errant humans were surrounded with lessons of the self-revealing Word. All places abounded with divine lessons: above, in the heavens; on the level of human sensation, in the Incarnation; in the depth, in Hades; and in the breadth, throughout the world. For the education of man, therefore, Christ did not choose to die and rise from the dead straightway since thereby He would cease too soon from being an object of human sensation. Instead Christ the Word chose to tarry among men, staying in His body and letting men behold Him in it. By beholding Christ, errant men might see works, although performed through man, of which only God is capable. Through the works and words of the very Image of God among men, earthly minded humans could see and learn about the true God.²⁸

God therefore has not neglected the errant creatures made in His Image. He made the orderliness of creation manifest so that men could extrapolate from it the Divine Reason Who rules and orders it. He sent the prophets so that men who were neglectful of the heavens might learn about God from other men whom they could easily understand. God gave the Law as well so that the entire world might learn the proper way of conduct for a blessed and happy life. And finally, the Word of the Father became incarnate to redraw the Divine Image in fallen humanity. As an effective teacher, God chose simple means which fallen humans could behold and understand. He dwelt among men as a man while performing the works of God so that men, who looked for God below, might ascertain Him here on earth.

Christ the Incarnate Redeemer

²⁶Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 43-44.

²⁷Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 43-44. See Luke 19:10 which is cited here.

²⁸Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 44.

Through neglectfulness mankind lost the knowledge of God and disrupted that communion which held back the mortality inherent in man's nature. Having laid aside the contemplation of God, man laid aside his very existence as well. Man was in a race toward oblivion, tyrannized by the power of death. Death held sway over all men in a twofold manner in that: **a)** man was reverting to the nothingness out of which he was created, i.e., he fell under the tyranny of his own mortal nature, and **b)** man was condemned to death for violating the law concerning the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2:16-17). As a result, death was not only natural for man, but also a divine punishment for disobedience, making death doubly burdensome for mankind. God could not let His once rational creation perish without impugning His own goodness. Yet God could not simply revoke the divine commandment without impugning His truthfulness. The problem was this: since God is truthful and all-knowing, when He issued the command He would have known whether or not He would abrogate it later. If He would, He would not have been telling the truth when He first issued the command since He would have known that, in the end, men would not die as a result of disobedience. This later revocation would thus make God's command untrue.

What was God to do? God must find a way to lift the burden of the divine penalty off of perishing humanity without abrogating it. He would fulfill the law through the death of a surrogate, a redeemer who would die on fallen humanity's behalf. But who was sufficient for so great a task as dying on behalf of all mankind? Only one was sufficient, the Word of the Father through Whom all creation was made and Whose Image had been impressed on man.²⁹

Death could only be removed from mankind by death, yet the Divine Word was immortal. God the Son therefore took to Himself a human body as an instrument and dwelt in it. This body would be capable of death. Since it belonged to the Word Who is above all, its death would provide a sufficient proxy for all mankind. The human body made redemptive death possible, but the Divinity indwelling it made it a sufficient exchange for all. This would be a sacrifice free from every sin and stain which would fulfil the divine command and lift the death penalty for perishing mankind. Death would lose its power and man could look forward once again to immortal life through the promise of the resurrection. God therefore redeemed humanity in a way consistent with both His goodness and truthfulness.

The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required.³⁰

Such a work was one supremely worthy of the goodness of God. It also effectively helped the fallen race of men in one of its greatest needs, to have the death penalty, albeit justly imposed, removed. God was not unmindful of the race He had created after His own Image. Instead, He offered His assumed body thereby abolishing the death men had incurred. He also corrected their neglect by His teaching. Thus by

²⁹Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 32-33.

³⁰Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 35.

His own power He restored the perishing nature of man. He corrected man's depleted knowledge by His teaching and works. He ended the law which barred humanity's way. He initiated a new life for mankind through the promise of the resurrection. As a result, man need no longer die as criminals condemned, but might live in the hope inspired by the promised resurrection. This is the first cause of the Savior becoming man.³¹

For by the sacrifice of His own body He did two things: He put an end to the law of death which barred our way; and He made a new beginning of life for us, by giving us the hope of resurrection. By man death has gained its power over men; by the Word made Man death has been destroyed and life raised up anew. That is what Paul says, that true servant of Christ: "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. Just as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive," and so forth. Now, therefore, when we die we no longer do so as men condemned to death, but as those who are even now in process of rising we await the general resurrection of all, "which in its own times He shall show," even God Who wrought it and bestowed it on us.³²

Humans need no longer fear death since the common Savior of all has died on our behalf. Believers in Christ no longer die as did men of old, in fulfillment of the law. The old condemnation has passed away and by the grace of the resurrection corruption has been done away. Men are loosed from their mortal bodies for a while so that in God's good time they might attain a better resurrection. Like seeds cast into the earth people do not perish with their dissolution. But like the seeds sown they rise again unto new life.

Have no fears then. Now that the common Savior of all has died on our behalf, we who believe in Christ no longer die, as men died aforetime, in fulfillment of the threat of the law. That condemnation has come to an end; and now that, by the grace of the resurrection, corruption has been banished and done away, we are loosed from our mortal bodies in God's good time for each, so that we may obtain thereby a better resurrection. Like seeds cast into the earth, we do not perish in our dissolution, but like them shall rise again, death having been brought to naught by the grace of the Savior. That is why blessed Paul, through whom we all have surety of the resurrection, says: "This corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality; but when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?'"³³

In everything above lay powerful reasons for God to become man. To deliver man from corruption to incorruption was a work proper only for the Savior of all. The agent through Whom all creation was formed and Whose Image was stamped in all men was the very same agent Who would reform human nature once again, abolishing death and renewing the Divine Image in man. This agent, the Lord Jesus Christ was the only one Who could restore life and the true knowledge of God in men. Only He could pay completely the debt which otherwise all men must pay, namely the divinely imposed penalty of death due to human transgression. In this redemptive act, He also showed Himself to be mightier than death by displaying His body incorruptible as the first fruits of the resurrection. Upon this solid basis

³¹Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 36-37.

³²Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 37. See 1 Corinthians 15:21f. and 1 Timothy 6:15 which St. Athanasius cites here.

³³Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 50. See 1 Corinthians 15:53f. which St. Athanasius cites here.

Adult Patristics Study - The Redemptive Plan in "On the Incarnation"

Christians need no longer fear death and may expectantly hope for the resurrection of all. To let St. Athanasius summarize it:

We have dealt as far as circumstances and our own understanding permit with the reason for His bodily manifestation. We have seen that to change the corruptible to incorruption was proper to none other than the Savior Himself, Who in the beginning made all things out of nothing; that only the Image of the Father could re-create the likeness of the Image in men, that none save our Lord Jesus Christ could give to mortals immortality, and that only the Word Who orders all things and is alone the Father's true and sole-begotten Son could teach men about Him and abolish the worship of idols. But beyond all this, there was a debt owing which must needs be paid; for, as I said before, all men were due to die. Here, then, is the second reason why the Word dwelt among us, namely that having proved His Godhead by His works, He might offer the sacrifice on behalf of all, surrendering His own temple to death in place of all, to settle man's account with death and free him from the primal transgression. In the same act also He showed Himself mightier than death, displaying His own body incorruptible as the first fruits of the resurrection.³⁴

³⁴Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 48-49.

Christ the Incarnate Life-Giver

As a result of disobedience, humanity, once created in the Divine Image, was perishing under the tyranny of death. This tyranny was twofold in that, **a)** due to Adam's disobedience, humanity suffered death as a divinely instituted penalty, and **b)** since the contemplation of God was discarded, human nature lost communion with God, the only source of immortal life, and was therefore reverting to nothing since it was created from nothing. As humanity's redeemer, Christ assumed a mortal body so that He could die on man's behalf, lifting the penalty from mankind by fulfilling it. This resolved the first issue which hindered human salvation. But how was man to be called back from the mortality of his own nature? Sin and its penalty were not man's sole problem. Natural corruption was killing all men from within. Death needed to be conquered. How would God resolve this problem?

Christ's redemptive death not only freed humanity from the divine penalty, simultaneously it also showed the Savior as mightier than death. When He displayed His body to be incorruptible as the first fruits of the resurrection, He gave proof that He had conquered death. The manifestation of His once dead body as risen and incorrupt proved that He died neither from human weakness nor from illness. Instead He made clear to all that He came in a human body precisely to conquer death. Although He died as a ransom for all, His body did not see corruption. It rose in perfect soundness since it was the body of none other than the Life Himself. In one act, therefore, Christ lifted the penalty and abolished both corruption and death utterly. Christ was not only man's redeemer but also mankind's revitalizer.³⁵

How was this possible? Although born of a virgin, His body was a truly human and therefore mortal body like those of other human beings. Like their bodies, His body was liable to death. What held Christ's body back from its natural corruption? Since the immortal Word of the Father dwelt in it, it was loosed from this natural liability. Hence two opposite marvels took place simultaneously: **a)** He consummated the death of all in His own body, and **b)** He abolished death and corruption by dwelling in this human body.

You must not be surprised if we repeat ourselves in dealing with this subject. We are speaking of the good pleasure of God and of the things which He in His loving wisdom thought to do, and it is better to put the same thing in several ways than to run the risk of leaving something out. The body of the Word, then, being a real human body, in spite of its having been uniquely formed from a virgin, was of itself mortal and, like other bodies, liable to death. But the indwelling of the Word loosed it from this natural liability, so that corruption could not touch it. Thus it happened that two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all was consummated in the Lord's body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished. Death there had to be, and death for all, so that the due of all might be paid. Wherefore, the Word, as I said, being Himself incapable of death, assumed a mortal body, that He might offer it as His own in place of all, and suffering for the sake of all through His union with it, " might bring to naught Him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might deliver them who all their lifetime were enslaved by the fear of death."³⁶

Just how did this source of life flow out to all men? In the incarnate Christ a union of natures took place. Christ, Who is truly God, dwelt in a body which was truly human. The union of the immortal nature of

³⁵Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 49, 51, 57.

³⁶Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 49. See also Hebrews 2:14f. which he cites here.

Christ God with mortal human nature called the latter back from its own mortality. For this reason was Christ's risen body shown to be incorrupt. Furthermore, the solidarity of mankind is such that since the deathless One dwelt in a single human body, death lost its power over all. To illustrate this point, St. Athanasius points out that when a king visits a city he honors the entire city with his presence even though he dwells in only one of its many houses. The indwelling of one suffices to honor and revive all. This indwelling was timely too. Had not the Word dwelt among humans and done away with death, the human race would have perished utterly.

For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.³⁷

The Incarnation was necessary if Christ God was to defeat death in a way which was efficacious for human healing. Had Christ come outside a human body He would have defeated death since death cannot withstand the Life. This would have done humanity no good, however, since death was a problem from within. Death was not external to human nature but was intrinsic to it. Mankind was made from nothing and would naturally return to nothing, unless something revitalized it. Human nature was woven through with death. Hence death dominated mankind as though one with it. To counteract this effect, life must be woven into human nature just as death had been. Therefore the Savior of all assumed a human body interwoven with death so that He might endue it with immortality, weaving life into it in place of death. Thereby the body would remain no longer a mortal thing but would be rendered immortal. For this reason Christ dwelt in a human body, found death therein and blotted it out. This very act proved Christ truly to be the Life of all.

You must know, moreover, that the corruption which had set in was not external to the body but established within it. The need, therefore, was that life should cleave to it in corruption's place, so that, just as death was brought into being in the body, life also might be engendered in it. If death had been exterior to the body, life might fittingly have been the same. But if death was within the body, woven into its very substance and dominating it as though completely one with it, the need was for Life to be woven into it instead, so that the body by thus enduing itself with life might cast corruption off. Suppose the Word had come outside the body instead of in it, He would, of course, have defeated death, because death is powerless against the Life. But the corruption inherent in the body would have remained in it none the less. Naturally, therefore, the Savior assumed a body for Himself, in order that the body, being interwoven as it were with life, should no longer remain a mortal thing, in thrall to death, but as endued with immortality and risen from death, should thenceforth remain immortal.

³⁷Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 35.

For once having put on corruption, it could not rise, unless it put on life instead; and besides this, death of its very nature could not appear otherwise than in a body. Therefore He put on a body, so that in the body He might find death and blot it out. And, indeed, how could the Lord have been proved to be the Life at all, had He not endued with life that which was subject to death?³⁸

To illustrate further that an internal, rather than an external, solution was necessary to deliver mankind from death, he draws on the analogy of straw and asbestos.

Take an illustration. Stubble is a substance naturally destructible by fire; and it still remains stubble, fearing the menace of fire which has the natural property of consuming it, even if fire is kept away from it, so that it is not actually burnt. But suppose that, instead of merely keeping the fire from it somebody soaks the stubble with a quantity of asbestos, the substance which is said to be the antidote to fire. Then the stubble no longer fears the fire, because it has put on that which fire cannot touch, and therefore it is safe. It is just the same with regard to the body and death. Had death been kept from it by a mere command, it would still have remained mortal and corruptible, according to its nature. To prevent this, it put on the incorporeal Word of God, and therefore fears neither death nor corruption any more, for it is clad with Life as with a garment and in it corruption is clean done away.³⁹

Just as removing fire from straw would leave straw as combustible as it was before, removing death from mankind by mere command would leave human nature as corrupt and mortal as it had been before. *A union of natures was necessary.* Stubble must unite with asbestos to become inflammable. Mortal humanity must unite with immortal divinity if it would overcome its natural mortality. Only through such unions are both perishable substances free from what might devour them. Only through the union of divinity and humanity in Christ, therefore, could human nature be called back from its own mortality.

Christ the Incarnate Divinizer

The union of divinity and humanity in Christ not only revitalized mankind, it also sanctified and divinized it. St. Athanasius sees a paradox in the Incarnation. Being the Word, Christ was both present in His body and in the whole universe. Christ is true God and as the Word, or Λόγος, He directed the universe by His mind and might. Animating His human body in no way curtailed His oversight of the universe. Being the Word, or Λόγος, nothing could contain Him, instead He contained all things. He is present everywhere in the universe yet distinct from everything. So while existing in a single human body and giving it life, He is still the Life of the entire universe. His human body, therefore, was no hindrance for Him, rather an instrument for human salvation. He was both in it and in all the universe, as well as outside of all things and resting in the Father. Simultaneously he was maintaining a human life, sustaining all creation, and communing with the Father. Not even His human birth from a virgin, i.e., being in a body changed Him. In fact, His virgin birth was one proof that He was truly God. Hence His body did not defile Him. On the contrary, His presence in a human body sanctified it. As the sun is hardly defiled by touching earthly things through its rays, but rather enlightens and purifies them, so also the sun's maker was not defiled by revealing Himself in a human body. Instead He cleansed and quickened it.⁴⁰

³⁸Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 80-81.

³⁹Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 81.

⁴⁰Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 45-47.

With the Word of God in His human nature, however, it was otherwise. His body was for Him not a limitation, but an instrument, so that He was both in it and in all things, and outside all things, resting in the Father alone. At one and the same time - this is the wonder - as Man He was living a human life, and as Word He was sustaining the life of the universe, and as Son He was in constant union with the Father. Not even His birth from a virgin, therefore, changed Him in any way, nor was He defiled by being in the body. Rather, He sanctified the body by being in it. For His being in everything does not mean that He shares the nature of everything, only that He gives all things their being and sustains them in it. Just as the sun is not defiled by the contact of its rays with earthly objects, but rather enlightens and purifies them, so He Who made the sun is not defiled by being made known in a body, but rather the body is cleansed and quickened by His indwelling, "Who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth."⁴¹

Christ the Word came to restore fallen man's knowledge of God, also to ransom and revitalize fallen man. To do this He assumed a human body as an instrument. Although He took this instrument, He did not share in its nature, i.e., His divinity was not compromised. *Merely being in creation does not mean that God shares in its nature. On the contrary, all things partake in His power.* Rather than degrading divinity, contact between creation and divinity sanctifies creation. Thus by dwelling in a human body, Christ the Word shared none of its defect, i.e., He was no less God although He did truly unite with humanity. Far from sharing the His body's defect, He sanctified His body.⁴²

If one would know God, he might learn of God through His works. Let him examine Christ's bodily works to test if they be of God or not. If not of God, let him mock. If so, let him not mock matters unfit for scorn. Indeed, let him rejoice that such marvelous things were done through such humble means. Through death, deathlessness came to mankind. Through the Incarnation the creative mind of God has been revealed. *In fact, creation's maker, agent, and ordainer, the Word of God Himself, assumed humanity that we might become God.*

As, then, he who desires to see God Who by nature is invisible and not to be beheld, may yet perceive and know Him through His works, so too let him who does not see Christ with his understanding at least consider Him in His bodily works and test whether they be of man or God. If they be of man, then let him scorn; but if they be of God, let him not mock at things which are no fit subject for scorn, but rather let him recognize the fact and marvel that things divine have been revealed to us by such humble means, that through death deathlessness has been made known to us, and through the Incarnation of the Word the Mind whence all things proceed has been declared, and its Agent and Ordainer, the Word of God Himself. He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.⁴³

Being as God, or being divinized, has indeed always been man's hope and potential. Being created in the Image of God, man could overcome his natural mortality through constant contemplation, depriving his nature of its power and keeping it incorrupt. Preserving the Divine Image thus preserves human nature. Being incorrupt, humanity would be as God. This has been man's potential and purpose from the very beginning. This would have been fully realized already had it not been for human rebellion. Nonetheless, this has always been God's goal for humanity and it has been restored through the Incarnation.

⁴¹Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 45-46. See also 1 Peter 2:22 which is cited here.

⁴²Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 79.

⁴³Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 92-93.

For God had made man thus (that is, as an embodied spirit), and had willed that he should remain in incorruption. But men, having turned from the contemplation of God to evil of their own devising, had come inevitably under the law of death. Instead of remaining in the state in which God had created them, they were in process of becoming corrupted entirely, and death had them completely under its dominion. For the transgression of the commandment was making them turn back again according to their nature; and as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again. The presence and love of the Word had called them into being; inevitably, therefore when they lost the knowledge of God, they lost existence with it; for it is God alone Who exists, evil is non-being, the negation and antithesis of good. By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing; but he bears also the Likeness of Him Who is, and if he preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt. So is it affirmed in Wisdom: "The keeping of His laws is the assurance of incorruption." And being incorrupt, he would be henceforth as God, as Holy Scripture says, "I have said, Ye are gods and sons of the Highest all of you: but ye die as men and fall as one of the princes."⁴⁴

Conclusion

The Incarnation of Christ the Word resolved the divine dilemma so that humanity might be saved and both God's goodness and truthfulness preserved. Although man had defaced the Image of God within, God did not forsake fallen humanity, allowing His once rational creatures to become as beasts and perish. God sent the Law and the prophets so that man might learn of God and of the truly blessed life easily. He made the orderliness of creation manifest so that man should behold it and extrapolate therefrom the Word, or Λόγος, its ruler and sustainer. In the end, the very same Word of God, Who made and ordered creation, came to renew His creation. The agent of creation is therefore also the agent of salvation and renewal. The coming of God in the Incarnation healed perishing humanity in three ways: **a)** He restored the knowledge of God in man, i.e., renewed the Image of God in humanity, **b)** He assumed humanity so that He might die on man's behalf, lifting the penalty pronounced in Genesis 2:16-17 from mankind by fulfilling it, and **c)** by uniting divinity and humanity in the Incarnation, He both revitalized and divinized human nature. Through this loving threefold act of salvation Christ has restored fallen humanity to its original purpose and goal through the hope of the resurrection. This is St. Athanasius' understanding of the redemptive plan in his work, *On the Incarnation*.

What is the significance of all this? This theology of human salvation, or soteriology, has become in many ways the foundation of later Alexandrian and Orthodox Christian teachings concerning human redemption and restoration. Not every point here was fully developed. For example, the concept of divinization or deification, although explicit here, would see much further development in later writers such as St. Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, and so forth.

Corresponding to this soteriology, especially the concept of divinization, is the need to have the union of true humanity and true divinity in the Incarnate Christ. This is christology, or the Christian theology concerning the interrelation between humanity and divinity in Christ. One finds in the Incarnate Christ true humanity and true divinity united with the eternal Word as His one subject, or "I." St. Athanasius' terminology is still immature since he preceded the christological controversies by several decades. His

⁴⁴Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 30. See also Wisdom 6:18 and Psalm 132:6f. which are cited here.

frequent references to the Word indwelling the *body* (σῶμα) as an instrument could be exaggerated, as it was later by Apollinarius, in such a way as to deny that the Incarnate Christ had a human soul. This certainly is not St. Athanasius' intention as seen from his many references to Christ *becoming man* in *On the Incarnation*.⁴⁵ Christ seems here to be assuming more than a soulless body, although this point is not specifically spelled out. Indeed, such a phrase taken literally might indicate change or confusion in the two natures, but this was hardly St. Athanasius' intention. In the Incarnate Christ, true God and true man met, but St. Athanasius' terminology is undeveloped and immature. His later work, *Tomus ad Antiochenos* (362), seems more clearly to indicate a human soul in Christ, although this point is not developed in any detail. Fuller development of christological theology would have to wait for later theologians as St. Cyril of Alexandria, Leontius of Jerusalem, and St. Maximus the Confessor. The notion of Christ's complete and divinized human nature in total agreement and united with the Word of God in the hypostasis (ὑπόστασις - subsistence or instance) of the latter would take about two more centuries to develop.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the basic concept of the union of humanity and divinity in Christ Whose subject was that of the Divine Word is here and becomes the basic impulse for later Alexandrian and Eastern Orthodox christologies.

In a way, St. Athanasius' theology of salvation becomes the foundation of later Alexandrian and Eastern Orthodox theologies of salvation and Christ. Indeed, the theological endeavors of such men as the Cappadocian Fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Maximus the Confessor, and so forth are much easier to grasp if one understands the soteriology presented in *On the Incarnation*. An easy book to read, this book sets the bounds for many later Church Fathers and makes them easier to understand since this work is in many ways the foundation upon which they built their later edifices.

⁴⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation* 25, 29, 37, 44, 47, 64.

⁴⁶ For two good studies of Athanasian, fourth and early fifth-century christologies see, Aloys Grillmeyer, S. J., *Christ in the Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)* (trans. J. S. Bowden; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965) 193-237, and John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987) 9-28. Both studies were very helpful for the presenter of the current study.

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