

THE IMPLICATIONS OF 'THE WORD BECAME FLESH' IN THE WORKS OF ATHANASIUS

Introduction

In John's gospel, we read that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us' (John 1:14). In this paper I will critically assess, in the works of Athanasius, the implications of Christ's humanity for our understanding of who he is and what he achieved. My prime focus will be on his two-volume *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, in which he laid down the theological foundation for his later polemical writings,¹ setting out what he believed was the 'true faith'.² At stake was our understanding of Christ's divinity and how his fully sharing our humanity was necessary to achieve our salvation.³ This was a struggle that would define his life.

Why it was necessary for God to act?

Our Problem

While we can learn about God through the world he created, such knowledge is limited and can lead us into idolatry (Rom 1:20). This was the sin of Adam and Eve, who 'turned their minds away from intelligible reality [God] and began to consider themselves'.⁴ As rational creatures they had a choice, to move toward or away from God. Evil does not have a separate existence,⁵ (he describes it as 'non-being'⁶) but human beings 'rejecting the notion of the good, began to think for themselves and

¹ David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 55.

² Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction*, Great Theologians Series (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 3.

³ Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria*, 62; Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 139.

⁴ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, ed. Robert W. Thomson, trans. Robert W. Thomson, Oxford Early Christian Texts (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 9. *Contra Gentes*, 3.

⁵ Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 244.

⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr, Popular Patristics Series 44B (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 53. *Inc.* 4.

invent objects that did not exist as the fancy struck them'.⁷ By turning from the source of life and immortality to idols, death and corruption entered the world. A modern metaphor would be addiction (the result of our wrong choices and illegitimate desires) that leads us into bondage, and ultimately destroys the individual.

God's Solution

This was not how it was meant to be. In the beginning creation was good and human beings, made in the image of God, were intended to live in an intimate relationship with their Creator⁸ (Gen 1:27, 31). Following the Fall that relationship was broken,⁹ and humanity's image became distorted and tarnished by sin, although it was never completely lost (1 Cor 13:12).

Only the creator can recreate the original perfection,¹⁰ but it was impossible for a transcendent and impassible God to enter our world, without becoming in some way less than God. The radical solution was for God himself, in the person of Jesus, to restore the ruined image by becoming one of us and overcoming corruption and death on our behalf.

Who is Jesus?

Fully God

As Christianity expanded into Hellenistic culture it adapted to Greek modes of thinking with the result, as Bauckham suggests, that they began to focus on '*what*' rather than '*who... God is*'.¹¹ This led to many (often contradictory) speculations about how Jesus related to God and the form in which he came among us.

⁷ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, 19. *Contra Gentes*, 7.

⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 52. *Inc.* 3.

⁹ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, Routledge Early Church Monographs (London: Routledge, 1998), 65.

¹⁰ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 63–64. *Inc.* 14.

¹¹ Richard Bauckham, "Paul's Christology of Divine Identity," in *Jesus and the God of Israel: "God Crucified" and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 183. My italics.

It was in this context that Arius and his supporters maintained that Jesus was God's 'first born Son', fully involved in creation but a created being subordinate to the Father and therefore less than God. The consequence was that God became 'forever inaccessible to us'.¹² The Arian view was rejected at the Council of Nicea (325), which agreed that the Son ('Word', Greek *Logos*) was *homoousion*, 'of the same essence or substance' as God the Father, maintaining his full divinity and effectively blocking Arian interpretations.¹³

Fully Human

Supporting the Nicene position, Athanasius argued that only the pre-existing Creator could recreate the original image in fallen human beings¹⁴ and that to achieve this it was necessary for him to become one of us. Through the incarnation, God enters our world, crossing the great distance¹⁵ that separates us from him. What we could not do for ourselves, God did for us out of love.¹⁶ For Athanasius anything less than the incarnation would have called into question the purpose of the original creation and been 'unworthy of God'.¹⁷

He writes, 'the body which ate and was born and suffered, was no one else's but the Lord's, and... he became human... [that] he might be shown possessing a real and not illusory body'.¹⁸ This was not the appearance of being human while remaining God (Docetism¹⁹). Although he never stopped being God, Jesus experienced the full range of human emotions²⁰ but without sin.

¹² Benedict XVI, "Athanasius," in *Church Fathers: From Clement of Rome to Augustine*, trans. L'Osservatore Romano (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2008), 59.

¹³ Alan Spence, *Christology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 35.

¹⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 70. *Inc.* 20.

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 177 cited in Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 95.

¹⁶ Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria*, 66–67.; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 57. *Inc.* 8.

¹⁷ Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 43; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 55–56. *Inc.* 6.

¹⁸ *Contra Arianos*, 3.53 cited in Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 89; See also Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 68. *Inc.* 18.

¹⁹ Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 64.

²⁰ *Contra Arianos*, 3.32 cited in Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 92.

Athanasius noted that Jesus' knowledge was limited,²¹ which would be impossible unless Christ became fully human since God is immutable (a view that has been challenged recently²²) and is unaffected by the world (Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17).

Lacking the Chalcedonian understanding of the hypostatic union of two natures in one person,²³ he struggled at times to express with precision the unity of Jesus as both fully God and fully human.²⁴ However, by holding together God's transcendence and immanence, Athanasius avoided the dangers of focussing on one nature to the exclusion of the other.²⁵ It was possible for the Son to suffer and experience want without it affecting his eternal being (Heb 5:8).

Seeking to define too closely the ontological connection between Christ in his humanity and as God, it is easy to slip into unorthodox conceptions. We must maintain the tension within the Nicene principles, acknowledging that our understanding of God is limited (there will always be more) and that truth is as much relational as intellectual.

God is like Jesus?

Athanasius consistently affirmed that God wants to be known by us.²⁶ It is often said that God is like Jesus²⁷ and I would agree (John 14:9). The character of God must be fully consistent with what we see revealed in Jesus and we should question alternative portrayals. However, by assuming flesh the Word chose to be 'ignorant',²⁸ accepting human limitations (Phil 2:6–8). He did not become less than God but, as Barth suggests, 'in revealing Himself... He also conceals Himself... When there is

²¹ *Contra Arianos*, 3.43 cited in Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 93.

²² See Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

²³ Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria*, 103 & 171.

²⁴ Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 87.

²⁵ Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 209.

²⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 60–61 *Inc.* 11.

²⁷ Brian Zahnd, "God Is Like Jesus," Blog, *Brian Zahnd*, August 11, 2011, <<http://brianzahnd.com/2011/08/god-is-like-jesus-2>> (28 January 2017); See also Nicky Gumbel, *Why and How Should I Read the Bible?*, DVD, Alpha Film Series: Begin the Greatest Adventure (London: Alpha, 2016).

²⁸ Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 93 where he cites *Contra Arianos*, 3.43.

unveiling there is also veiling'.²⁹ Christ's splendour was 'veiled'³⁰ because he came in a form which we could relate to because it matched our own (cf. Exod 34:29–35; 2 Cor 3:13).

The Cross

Atonement

On the cross Jesus went as low as it was possible for a human being to go. His identification with us is complete. Athanasius wrote, 'the one who ascended the cross is the Word of God and the Saviour of the universe'.³¹ Jesus 'ransomed' humanity through his human body,³² 'so that... from his apparent degradation, you might have an even greater and fuller piety towards him'.³³

Because of his participation with us, we can know security. There is now a connection through which the Spirit can flow giving us the 'freedom' to obey God and turn away from sinful behaviour.³⁴ Grace, from this perspective, is not so much undeserved favour as God enabling us to do what we would otherwise be powerless to achieve. It begins and ends in God's initiative and love.

Did Jesus have to die?

Sometimes it is asked, did Jesus have to die? Athanasius' answer is a resounding yes. It was for that purpose that he 'sojourned amongst us'.³⁵ Only by overcoming death could the divine Word, who created us, redeem humanity and yet, it was

²⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al., vol. II/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 55; See also Jason Micheli, "God Is(n't) Like Jesus," *Tamed Cynic*, April 5, 2016, <<http://tamedcynic.org/god-isnt-like-jesus>> (18 January 2017).

³⁰ Alvyn Pettersen, *Athanasius*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2007), 50.

³¹ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, 5. *Contra Gentes*, 1.

³² Athanasius, "Letter to Epictetus," in *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters.*, ed. Philip Scaff and Henry Wace, trans. Archibald Robertson, vol. IV, The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers Series II (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1891), 1396, <<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.pdf>> (21 December 2016). *Epictetus*, 9.

³³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 49. *Inc.* 1.

³⁴ Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 159–60 where he cites *Contra Arianos*, 1.51.

³⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 70. *Inc.* 20.

inconceivable that God could die. The solution to this dilemma was for the Word to become a human being and, by remaining ‘incorruptible’, through his death and resurrection, remove the curse of death and restore us to a right relationship with God³⁶ (1 Cor 15:21–22; Heb 2:9–10).

There is now no place in creation that the love of God cannot reach and rescue us from.³⁷ The power of death is ‘fully expended’ in his physical body³⁸ and we are no longer subject to it, experiencing in its place a ‘resurrection of life’³⁹ flowing from the cross.

Does Jesus have a human soul?

Did Jesus’ coming in the flesh mean that he only had a human body or does he also have a human soul? Athanasius wrote,

the Saviour having in very truth become Man, the salvation of the whole man was brought about... our salvation is not merely apparent, nor does it extend to the body only, but the whole man, body and soul alike...⁴⁰

Although some scholars disagree,⁴¹ I would concur with Weinandy that Athanasius’ understanding of ‘flesh’ includes the whole person, body and a created soul that is immortal.⁴² Christ’s having a human soul would have supported his argument against Arius by avoiding any suggestion of Apollinarianism (that Christ had a human body and emotions but a divine soul⁴³). The reason, perhaps, he did not highlight this may have been a concern that it would move the discussion away from Christ’s physical human body onto his divine nature, opening the door to what later became known as

³⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 58. Inc. 9.

³⁷ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 56–57. Inc. 8.

³⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 57. Inc. 8.

³⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 60. Inc. 10.

⁴⁰ Athanasius, “Letter to Epictetus,” IV:1395.

⁴¹ See Footnote 47 in Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 95.

⁴² Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 28. See also *Contra Gentes*, 32–33.

⁴³ Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 22.

Nestorianism, and potentially undermining the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures.⁴⁴

Why does this matter? I am reminded of Gregory of Nazianzen's, 'that which He has not assumed [is...] not healed'.⁴⁵ When Christ embraced our humanity he became like us in every way, including that part of us which is eternal.

The Holy Spirit

Athanasius' focus was on defending the dual nature of the Son against those who sought to undermine it. However, he understood that the Holy Spirit, as the third person of the Trinity, was also fully divine and essential in enabling our participation in the Son. In his *Letters to Serapion* Athanasius wrote, 'The Father is fountain and the Son is called river, we are said to drink of the Spirit'.⁴⁶ There is an intimacy of relationship here. As the Father 'begets' the Son in his image, so 'the Spirit reflects the Son's perfect image'.⁴⁷

Weinandy suggests that by saying the Son gives to the Spirit all that he 'has received from the Father', Athanasius came very close to Augustine's understanding of the *filioque*.⁴⁸ We participate in the Son because he gives us the Spirit and it is the Spirit that unites us to the Son and through him the Father.⁴⁹

Although the Spirit was at work in the world from the beginning, it is only through Christ's incarnation that human beings are 'enabled to receive' the Holy Spirit and

⁴⁴ Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 91–92; See also Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 146.

⁴⁵ Gregory Nazianzen, "To Cledonius the Priest Against Apollinarius," in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, Second series VII (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1894), 861, <<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.pdf>> (7 March 2017).

⁴⁶ Athanasius, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, trans. C. R. B. Shapland (London: The Epworth Press, 1951), 111–12, <[https://ia800306.us.archive.org/29/items/TheLettersOfSaintAthanasiusConcerningTheHolySpirit/Athanasius Letters to Serapion Shapland.pdf](https://ia800306.us.archive.org/29/items/TheLettersOfSaintAthanasiusConcerningTheHolySpirit/Athanasius%20Letters%20to%20Serapion/Shapland.pdf)> (14 January 2017). *Serapion* I, 19.

⁴⁷ Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 111–12.

⁴⁸ Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 107 where he cites *Contra Arianos* 3.24 and 25.

⁴⁹ Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 106–7.

participate in his 'fullness'.⁵⁰ It is the 'Word bec[oming] flesh' that makes Pentecost possible⁵¹ (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17).

Future Hope

Building on Origen and Irenaeus⁵² Athanasius wrote, 'He was incarnate that we might be made God'.⁵³ We do not *become* God, but through the incarnation we are enabled to participate in the life of God. As Augustine later noted, 'If we have been made sons of God, we have been made gods; but this is by grace of adoption and not of the nature of our begetter'.⁵⁴

Apokatastasis, 'the restoration of all things', is the goal (*telos*) of salvation (Acts 3:21). We benefit from Christ's work in the present, but our true home is now with God. Yet, while death has been conquered, in this present age people still die. There will come a day, however, when both heaven and earth will submit to God and the last enemy to be defeated will be the 'spiritual death' that keeps us from being with God for eternity⁵⁵ (Phil 2:10; Rev 20:14). Jesus is the true image of God and then we will be like him, not as identical clones, but as the unique individuals we were always intended to be.

This is not a gnostic escape from the body into a spiritual realm. Like the Arians, the Gnostics believed that the world was created by a secondary 'god' who was distinct from the Father of Jesus. Therefore, the world of matter was separated from God and ultimate 'goodness'.⁵⁶ However, for Athanasius, 'the cross... was [also] the

⁵⁰ Athanasius, "Orationes Contra Arianos," in *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Scaff and Henry Wace, trans. Archibald Robertson, vol. IV, The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers Series II (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1891), 882., <<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.pdf>> (15 January 2017). *Contra Arianos*, 1.50.

⁵¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Way: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity*, Third Edition. (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 223.

⁵² Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 245.

⁵³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 107. *Inc.* 54.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalm 49* cited in Alan D. Fitzgerald et al., eds., "Deification, Divinization," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999), 266.

⁵⁵ Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 249.

⁵⁶ Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 21.

salvation of creation'.⁵⁷ God, in Christ, taking on human flesh and joining with creation has profound implications. The world now has a sacramental dimension that deserves our respect and care. It too is being restored, although we should never forget that Jesus, as God, also exists outside of time and space. We worship him, not created things.

Was Athanasius an universalist? Ramelli gives examples, noting the influence of Origen, where he refers to the results of the incarnation as benefitting 'all', that could be understood in that way.⁵⁸ If so, it would still be necessary to eradicate human sin and bring each person to repentance. While I would hesitate to go quite so far, I do believe that Athanasius' understanding of the incarnation gives us cause to hope for a wider inclusion.

Conclusion

Athanasius responded to the questions and challenges of his time. Who was Jesus? Was he a created being or God? How could he be human and divine at the same time? Why did he have to die and be resurrected to achieve our salvation? For anyone engaged in contemporary evangelism or apologetics these remain the key questions and objections they will encounter.

His understanding of the incarnation is beautiful in its simplicity and yet, as I have shown, has wide-ranging implications. By becoming human and overcoming death, God entered his creation and restored our damaged relationship by bridging the distance between us. The incarnation is God's initiative, an act of self-giving love that reaches down to raise us up to be with him.⁵⁹ It is not an escape from the world, instead God chooses to engage with his creation to renew and transform it.

Athanasius' theological challenge was to maintain the distinction of the Father and Son without losing the unity of the Godhead,⁶⁰ but the fact that 'the Word became flesh' was essential to his understanding of redemption. It was necessary for the Son

⁵⁷ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, 5. *Contra Gentes*, 1.

⁵⁸ Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 245.

⁵⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 50. *Inc.* 1.

⁶⁰ Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius, Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality* (Kindle Edition; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), Loc. 171, 1.2.10.

to be both God and fully human to achieve our salvation.⁶¹ Nothing less would meet our need.

⁶¹ Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 138.

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