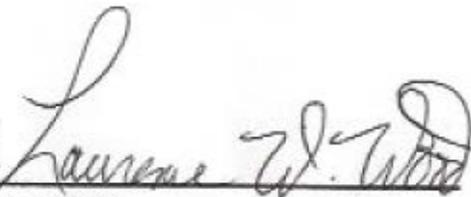


Deification of Body and Soul in Athanasius of Alexandria:  
A Present Foretaste of Resurrection

By  
Peter J. Smith

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the M.A. in Theological Studies  
to the School of Theology and Formation  
Asbury Theological Seminary  
May 2017

X 

Laurence Wood  
Thesis Advisor

X 

Brian Edgar  
Second Reader

# Introduction

It is nearly impossible to miss the assertion, whether a person is Catholic, evangelical, mainline, or even agnostic, that “Jesus Saves.” It’s in song lyrics, on bumper stickers, and on handmade signs along the highway. By faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians are saved from their sins. However, most of those bumper stickers and song lyrics do not say what happens after that. In fact, many sermons and theological treatises spend a large amount of time on the ‘negative’ purpose of salvation, detailing how, and to what extent, we are saved from sin and its consequence of death, but neglect any discussion of what salvation directs Christians toward. In addition to negating sin, there is also a ‘positive’ purpose for our salvation, namely, to be made “divinely adopted sons and daughters of God,” to become co-heirs with Christ.<sup>1</sup> This attainment of divine similitude is interchangeably referred to as deification, divinization, or *theosis*. In the Christian sense, deification is not about transforming a human person into a god-like being but, rather, it is the human person attaining to the fullness of humanity that God intended for his creation by the infusion of divine life.

In recent decades, the concept of deification has experienced a resurgence in scholarly discussion.<sup>2</sup> Historical surveys of deification by Norman Russell and Jules Gross have provided new insights into its theological and linguistic development.<sup>3</sup> While it has been a centerpiece of Orthodox theology since the Byzantine era, ecumenical dialogues between East and West have

---

<sup>1</sup> Scott Hahn, “Foreword,” in David Vincent Meconi and Carl E. Olson, *Called to Be the Children of God : The Catholic Theology of Human Deification* (San Francisco : Ignatius Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>2</sup>David Vincent Meconi, “The Consummation of the Christian Promise: Recent Studies on Deification,” *New Blackfriars* 87, no. 1007 (January 2006): 3–12.

<sup>3</sup>Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford, 2006); Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Onica, Paul A. (Anaheim, CA: A&C Press, 2002).

sparked its reconsideration among many theologians within Christianity's Western traditions.<sup>4</sup> This can be seen in trends within Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Wesleyan communities.<sup>5</sup>

In modern theology, deification is a distinct doctrinal concept whereas, in the patristic period, it is not nearly as well defined. In the third and fourth centuries, deification appears to be a rather broad theological motif that is most often used in conjunction with other issues, such as soteriology, eschatology, and Christology. This can be seen particularly in the writings of Athanasius of Alexandria who consistently incorporates deification into the themes of divine adoption, sanctification, exaltation and perfection in Christ, being united to God, and partaking of divine life.<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Kharlamov suggests that language of deification had become imbedded in fourth-century popular theology, much like the prevalence of "born again" language among evangelicals today.<sup>7</sup> The prevalence of deification among the Christian masses might help illuminate its prominence in the polemical writings of several fourth-century bishops and theologians. In fact, when Athanasius wants to drive home an argument against the 'Arians,' he regularly invokes terminology or motifs of deification.<sup>8</sup> In his critiques of the 'Arian'

---

<sup>4</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, ed., *Theological Dialogue Between Orthodox and Reformed Churches* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985); Thomas F. Torrance, ed., *Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Reformed Churches, Vol 2* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1993); S. T. Kimbrough, ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (Crestwood, N.Y. : St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002); S. T. Kimbrough, ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005); S. T. Kimbrough, ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Crestwood, N.Y. : St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> A. M. Allchin, *Participation in God : A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (Wilton, CT : Morehouse-Barlow, 1988); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God : Salvation as Deification and Justification*, Unitas Books (Collegeville, Minn. : Liturgical Press, c2004., 2004); Daniel A. Keating, *Deification and Grace* (Naples, FL : Sapientia Press, 2007); S. T. Kimbrough, *Partakers of the Life Divine: Participation in the Divine Nature in the Writings of Charles Wesley* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton Hess, "The Place of Divinization in Athanasian Soteriology," in *Studia Patristica* (Louvain: Peeters, 1993), 369–74.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Kharlamov, "Rhetorical Application of Theosis in Greek Patristic Theology," in Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids : Baker Academic, 2008), 115.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

understanding of the Son's divinity, Athanasius asserts that only a Son who inhabits the same divine nature as the Father could transfer divine power to human beings. For Athanasius, there is a radical distinction between Creator and creature, and nothing that participates in divinity, regardless to what degree, can convey that participation to another. Thus, the Word cannot be a perfect creature as the 'Arians' argue but must be the true Word and Son of God in order to be able to deify human beings. In the early patristic period, then, deification is better understood as a rhetorically effective metaphor than as a strictly delineated doctrine. This distinction, however, should not diminish the recognition of the increasing prominence given to it throughout Christianity's first few centuries, particularly in the East.

### Development of Deification in Patristic Theology

The use of deification can be split into three categories: nominal, analogical, and metaphorical. The nominal assumes the attribution of 'god' simply as a "title of honour." The analogical incorporates the concept into certain analogies. Two subcategories can be distinguished within the metaphorical use: the ethical and the realistic. The ethical pertains to exhibiting likeness to God in virtuous living through ascetic and philosophical pursuit. The realistic gives expression to the belief that the human being is in some manner transformed by deification.<sup>9</sup> It is hard to find a church father who keeps to only one. Patristic authors often use different approaches depending on the context to which they are speaking. Another aspect that develops throughout these centuries is the support and interpretation that deification receives through biblical exegesis. In the fourth century, references to deification move beyond passages where human beings are called gods to include statements of being united to God as well as

---

<sup>9</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 1-3.

being brothers and heirs with Christ. As will be seen, these themes are not developed in any linear fashion, but various themes are picked up by different theologians.

In Irenaeus, deification is not the privilege of spiritual elites but an inherent implication for all Christians, because he grounds his understanding of it in the Incarnation and in the sacraments. Christ recapitulates the creation of humanity in the Incarnation and renews the image and likeness of God. For Irenaeus, the divinization of the Christian, soul and body, begins in this life as far as possible but receives its consummation only in the resurrection.<sup>10</sup> Through baptism, individuals are united to Christ by divine adoption and are thus enabled to participate in the divine attributes of incorruptibility and immortality.<sup>11</sup> In the divine likeness, Christ gives divine life and freedom to every Christian. Participation in divine life is granted through baptism and partaking of the Eucharist, while divine freedom is attained through moral growth. Obedience to God develops the fruit of the Spirit and the Eucharist sustains the infusion of divine life bestowed in baptism.<sup>12</sup>

The concept of deification received significant development by the inspired theologians of Alexandria. Clement is the first to use the technical terminology of deification in a Christian sense and Origen is the first writer to exegete 2 Peter 1:4 in this connection. For both Clement and Origen, the attainment of true gnosis through the instruction of the eternal Logos results in the deification of the committed Christian. According to Clement, the Logos is revealed in the Scriptures; therefore, Scripture itself is an instrument of deification. The gift of gnosis received “in accordance with the ecclesiastical rule of faith” through meditating on Scripture is realized by imitating Christ because “Christ, like any teacher, makes his disciples like him.”<sup>13</sup> Clement

---

<sup>10</sup> Gross, *Divinization of the Christian*, 120.

<sup>11</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 106.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 107-10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 125-27.

agrees with Irenaeus that baptism initiates our deification as sons and daughters of God but, due to his overriding Platonism, he limits this divine likeness to the human soul.<sup>14</sup> Origen takes this concept of the divinized Christian as true Gnostic and develops it further. As with Clement, Origen's discussions of deification focus on biblical references to gods. According to Origen's exegesis, the gods are those who live by the Spirit, having crucified the body. The life of prayer is the means by which the intellect, the soul ascends toward perfect conformity to God.<sup>15</sup> The key to Origen's understanding of deification is the concept of participation. Participation operates in the metaphysical, not corporeal, realm. In this way, the Spirit transforms "earthly men" into "spiritual men." Furthermore, there is an intrinsic kinship between that which is participated and the participant, as well as between fellow participants. Thirdly, Origen maintains the Platonic tradition relating particular phenomena to higher universals in the idea of ontological participation, but he adds the principle of dynamic participation wherein the individual Christian responds to the salvific and transformative initiative of the Trinity. Through participation in the Son (filiation) and the Spirit (spiritualization), the Christian attains participation in the Father (deification). Baptism is, again, the initiating event of deification, but the life of prayer sustains the process whereby the *pneuma* becomes the governing power of the spiritual person.<sup>16</sup>

In many respects, Athanasius and the Cappadocians—Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa—are inheritors of Origen's philosophical and theological systems, though they all offer their own corrections. For now, Athanasius will have to wait, but the Cappadocians themselves are integral to the development of deification in the late fourth century. All three Cappadocians de-emphasize the ontological transformation in deification; instead, they focus on

---

<sup>14</sup> Gross, *Divinization of the Christian*, 132, 140-41.

<sup>15</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 142-44.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 147-49.

the soul's attainment of likeness to the character of God and the eschatological realization of the Christian's divinization. The Cappadocians also illuminate the divinizing effect of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. J.A. McGuckin notes that the two Gregories seem to be engaged in a unified project of rhetoric and apologetics. He posits that their theological goal is to offer a "rereading of Origen on how to Christianize Plato" in their endeavor to evangelize the Greek intellectual classes to which they themselves belong.<sup>17</sup> They assert that the ascent of the soul does not lead to assimilation with the divine but, rather, participation in the Triune God, because although like participates in like, the Creator-creature divide can never be bridged. Therefore, likeness to God is achieved through imitation, *mimesis*, which leads to the promotion of ascetic discipline in the Christian life. The term *theōsis* is introduced by Gregory Nazianzen in relation to the ultimate glorification of our humanity in heaven. For Gregory Nyssen, Basil's younger brother, the concept of deification is just as important, but he shies away from the technical terms, preferring, instead, to speak of participation "in the divine attributes" through the soul's contemplation of the divine in prayer.<sup>18</sup> He describes this participation as an infinite progress, the soul's capacity and desire for the divine being ever increased, yet never being able to grasp the infinite in its finitude.<sup>19</sup>

In the sixth and seventh centuries, deification finally becomes defined as a distinct theological topic in its own right. It is defined by Pseudo-Dionysius as the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, through the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius' writings, deification begins to be associated with the monastic tradition of mystical

---

<sup>17</sup> J.A. McGuckin, "The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians," in Christensen and Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 98-99.

<sup>18</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 226-27.

<sup>19</sup> McGuckin, "Adaptation of Deification," 106-07.

<sup>20</sup> Vladimir Kharlamov, "Theosis in Patristic Thought," *Theology Today* 65, no. 2 (July 2008): 161.

ascent through prayer and meditation. This monastic ethical tradition is elaborated in combination with an Alexandrian realist tradition by Maximus the Confessor. In Maximus' theological system, communion with God progressively leads the human person, body and soul, to the attainment of a deified state. Although deification is ultimately an eschatological expectation, those who have been perfected can receive glimpses of this complete communion in their contemplation through the "vision of fire."<sup>21</sup>

One of the constant motifs in the literature of deification, from Irenaeus to Maximus, is the divine-human exchange: divinity for humanity, immortality for mortality, incorruption for corruptibility, *theōsis* for *kenosis*. One of the most famous expressions of this idea comes from Athanasius when he writes that "he became human that we might become divine."<sup>22</sup> Athanasius repeatedly asserts that the Son of God who possesses the full divinity of the Father became fully human so that humanity could again participate in the life of God. The incarnation of the Word includes a real, material body, as well as all the passions and all the limitations of human existence. Now, Athanasius clearly understands the human person to be constituted by a body and a soul.<sup>23</sup> The soul is both immaterial and immortal, but it is nonetheless a created entity. Additionally, the intellect resides within the soul. The body is material and mortal, but it operates as the means by which the soul is able to express itself in the created world. According to Athanasius, the soul has spiritual senses and the body has physical senses. Through the intellect, the soul contemplates her surroundings. Being immaterial/spiritual, she is able to contemplate that which is proper to God. Conversely, being created, she is able to contemplate that which has its origin "from nothing." Whichever the soul chooses to contemplate, this she draws into herself

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 164-65.

<sup>22</sup> Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971), *De Incarnatione* 54; hereafter DI.

<sup>23</sup> Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 3-5, 30-34; hereafter CG.

and funnels into the body, either incorruptibility from the Creator or corruptibility from createdness. God's original intent for humankind was that they would remain in contemplation of God and therefore persist in partaking of divine life.<sup>24</sup> However, Adam and Eve forfeited this participation by their disobedience. The purpose of the Word's incarnation, then, is to renew humanity so that they may again participate fully in divine life, be deified. Therefore, deification in Athanasius can appropriately be defined as participation in divine life resulting from the soul's perpetual contemplation of God the Father which is predicated on the Son's deifying of his own humanity. The divinization of the Christian is further secured by the indwelling of the Spirit. Furthermore, following the anthropology espoused by Athanasius, it is my assertion that this deification applies to the whole person, body and soul, with the result that Christians are enabled to appropriate divine attributes by imitating Christ in lives of virtue.

Before we delve into the intricacies of Athanasius' concept of deification, we must first understand the contexts that form the foundation of his theology and that prompt its further development and expression. The next section will investigate the influence that the structure and history of the Church in Alexandria had on Athanasius and the way he understood and addressed ecclesiastical conflict. Of course, no treatment of Athanasius can be complete without a thorough discussion of his involvement in the 'Arian' controversy that spanned most of the fourth century. Thus, the second element of contextualizing Athanasius revolves around the teachings and ecclesiastical activity of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius and the bishops that Athanasius labels 'Arians'.

---

<sup>24</sup> DI 3.

## Athanasius in Context

### The Church in Alexandria

Although material and literary evidence for the early years of Egyptian Christianity is in meager supply, tradition maintains that the African continent was initially evangelized by the apostle Mark. Alexandria was the long established seat of learning and culture in late antique Egypt. The Christian academy begun by Pantaenus and inherited by Clement, and Origen after him, became a Catechetical School under episcopal governance during the tenure of Demetrius. Interestingly, many bishops after Demetrius were previous heads of the Catechetical School. In the third century, Alexandria also began to rise in ecclesiastical authority. Bishop Dionysius was the first recorded bishop to distribute Festal Letters to announce the date of Easter to Egyptian Christians.<sup>25</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea reports that other bishops in Egypt would refer to the bishop of Alexandria as father.<sup>26</sup> In spite of this development, a persistent conflict arose in the aftermath of the Diocletian persecution similar to the Donatist conflict in North Africa. The chief actors in the Egyptian controversy were Peter of Alexandria and Meletius of Lycopolis. The bishops present at Nicaea attempted to address this particular issue in their canons. However, Athanasius continued to deal with Meletian conflicts well into his episcopacy.

In contrast to the relative primacy of the bishop of Alexandria among other Egyptian bishops, in Alexandria itself the bishop was viewed by his presbyters as the first among peers. Possibly stemming from the division of the city into distinct quarters, the Church grew rather haphazardly in Alexandria. The presbyters of the main churches in each quarter acquired their own teaching authority independent of the city's bishop. The historian Epiphanius names ten

---

<sup>25</sup> David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria : Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2012), 21-22.

<sup>26</sup> Rowan Williams, *Arius : Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 2002), 42.

parish churches in his day which suggests that there were others that remained unspecified.<sup>27</sup>

Going back to the days of Clement and Origen, Alexandria also held a tradition of independent teachers/theologians. Consequently, parish priests in Alexandria enjoyed relative freedom to teach and preach their own interpretations of biblical texts and Christian tradition. This, of course, created a tension between ecclesiastical authority and charismatic authority which is evidenced by the dispute between Bishop Demetrius and Origen.<sup>28</sup> This same tension was a driving force in the dispute between Alexander and Arius.

### Arius and Arianism

Recent scholarship has emphasized that later historical classifications of the tumultuous fourth and fifth centuries as periods of Trinitarian and Christological controversies are anachronistic and inaccurate. In particular, there has been much ink spilled in the effort to re-classify the misnamed ‘Arian’ controversy. However, as assertive as many scholars are that references to “Arians” and “Nicens” are historically inaccurate, there remains an equal consensus that there is no suitable terminology to replace the centuries old tradition of ‘Arian,’ ‘Nicene,’ and ‘semi-Arian’ labels without encountering the same issues.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the polemical labels of the fourth and fifth century sources remain the nomenclature of scholarly discussion, though with a substantial measure of contextual nuance.

Athanasius, the eminent defender of the authority of Nicaea, is both prolific and evocative in his identification and depiction of the ‘Arianism’ he opposes. His output concerning the ‘Arians’ includes polemical treatises and letters, histories of the heresy, and letters of advice

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 41-44.

<sup>28</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 164-65.

<sup>29</sup> John Behr, *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood, N.Y. : St. Vladimir’s seminary Press, 2004), 1-17. Joseph T. Lienhard, “The ‘Arian’ Controversy: Some Categories Reconsidered” in *Theological Studies* 48, no. 3 (September 1987): 415-437.

to particular bishops on how to identify and engage ‘Arians’ in their diocese. Maurice Wiles notes an Athanasian distinction among those he deems ‘Arian.’ The first group are Egyptians who are explicitly aligned with Arius himself. Second are those guilty by association, either by participating in synods led by ‘Arians’ or by espousing theology similar to that of Arius. Indeed, in Athanasius’ polemical rhetoric, Arius, though dead, lives on in the writings and activity of current ‘Arians.’<sup>30</sup> Athanasius’ approach to the conflict is not new. The Apologists employed it against pagans and Gnostics just as earlier Greek society attacked foreign culture and religion. Every new label of heresy includes an attempt to frame a contemporary issue “by its relation to older classifications” which “to an extent control the content of the new label.”<sup>31</sup> Athanasius primarily utilizes two heresiological approaches. He classifies ‘Arianism’ in association with previously anathematized theological positions and develops a succession of error and deception. They do not follow Christ but Arius, after whom they are named. In the battle for truth, Athanasius is the successor of the noble and pious Alexander while his numerous opponents have succeeded a man who was excommunicated at the great Council of Nicaea and whose abrupt death was an act of God to keep him from rejoining the communion of the faithful. While Athanasius chiefly associates the ‘Arians’ with the Manichees, he regularly allies them with Marcionites, Gnostics, Jews, and Samosatenes.<sup>32</sup> Even when they use language from accepted creeds, Athanasius asserts that they are only concealing their heretical views to deceive the faithful and appear orthodox.

---

<sup>30</sup> Maurice Wiles, “Attitudes to Arius in the Arian Controversy,” in Michel R. Barnes and Daniel H. Williams, eds., *Arianism after Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 36-38.

<sup>31</sup> Rebecca Lyman, “A Topography of Heresy: Mapping the Rhetorical Creation of Arianism,” in Barnes and Williams, *Arianism After Arius*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 59-58.

With such accusations from the defender of orthodoxy, historians have, until recently, accepted the picture that Athanasius paints of the motives of the ‘Arians’ and the distinguishing marks of ‘Arianism.’ Perceiving the rhetorical nature of much of Athanasius’ depictions of ‘Arian’ theology, some recent scholars have attempted to completely reimagine the personages of Athanasius and the ‘Arians.’<sup>33</sup> Other scholars have attempted a less radical revision of the ‘Arian’ controversy, being conscious of rhetorical and persuasive construction from all parties involved.<sup>34</sup> The first step in approaching such a revision is to attempt to illuminate the theology that Arius himself actually professed. The texts that can be attributed to Arius’ hand include two confessions of faith, a letter to his foremost defender (Eusebius of Nicomedia), and fragments of the *Thalia*, his theological opus. Several fundamental convictions can be extracted from the three letters. First, God alone is self-subsistent. In addition, he is entirely free and incapable of plurality or division. The first creative act of the will of God is the Son who is “truly distinct” from the Father; this same will of God also ensures that the Son is a “perfect creature,” possessing divine dignity and power but not the same essence as the Father. The letters also affirm the Christian confession of God as “three subsistents.”<sup>35</sup> The *Thalia* is presented by Athanasius in two texts: *Contra Arianos* I.5-6 and *De Synodis* 15. *De Synodis* appears to be an honest, though likely edited, presentation of fragments from the *Thalia*. On the other hand, *CA* is a much more filtered presentation in which Athanasius attributes to Arius many positions which are in fact implications drawn by Athanasius according to his own theological paradigm. From

---

<sup>33</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York : Harper, 1958); Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, trans. J. S. Bowden (New York, NY : Sheed and Ward, 1965); R P C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Stead, “The Scriptures and the Soul of Christ in Athanasius,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, no. 3 (September 1982): 233–50; Andrew Louth, “Athanasius’ Understanding of the Humanity of Christ,” in *Studia Patristica* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1985), 309–18; Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius : The Coherence of His Thought* (New York : Routledge, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 98.

these two sources, Arius' teaching concerning the Son can be elucidated as follows: the Son, in his incarnate and pre-incarnate existence, chose to "love righteousness and hate iniquity" completely and continually; the Son's example prepares us to receive divine grace so far as possible; finally, God willed the Son to be his creative instrument and therefore knew that the Son would always remain worthy of receiving "the highest degree of grace," to be the perfect image of the Father to the cosmos.<sup>36</sup> It is Athanasius' claim that those he is contending with share all these points with Arius and that the same spirit of deceit drives them all.

Notable among those labeled 'Arians' by Athanasius and early church historians are Theodore of Heraclea, Ursacius of Singidunum, Valens of Mursa, Eusebius of Caesarea, Acacius of Caesarea, Asterius the 'Sophist', and, of course, Eusebius of Nicomedia.<sup>37</sup> One of the most difficult aspects of this grouping, especially for any attempt to describe the 'Arians' as a group, is the fact that they differ from one another on numerous doctrinal topics. In addition, many eastern creeds from the mid-fourth century, some strongly influenced by the above mentioned bishops, specifically refute features of 'Arian' theology as well as the notion that bishops could be followers of a presbyter.<sup>38</sup> Of these named sources for 'Arianism,' perhaps the most representative of the 'Arian' caricature would be Eusebius of Nicomedia. Eusebius asserts that since the Son is begotten/created, he must have a beginning and therefore could not co-exist with the eternal, unbegotten God. The Son is neither "created from nothing" as Arius claimed nor derived from the essence of the Father. Eusebius opposes the use of *homoousios* because, to him, it associates materiality to the immaterial God.<sup>39</sup> Along with most of his compatriots, he

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 114-15.

<sup>37</sup> David M. Gwynn, *The Eusebians : The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the "Arian Controversy"* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2007), 108-14.

<sup>38</sup> Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Gwynn, *The Eusebians*, 212-14.

understands *eikōn* such that the image and that which is imaged are distinct natures, wills, and powers, as opposed to Athanasius who insisted that the two share the same *ousia*. Consequently, the Son is rightly considered a creature, though to an ineffably greater degree than all others.<sup>40</sup> As evidenced by the abundance of councils and synods in the eastern provinces, such views found broad acceptance in the eastern churches. One such creedal statement, known as the Dedication Creed, comes from the council of Antioch in 341. This confession stipulates that the Son is “God from God...living Word, living Wisdom, true Light” but only in the sense that the Son is the perfect image of the Father.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, the bishops gathered at the Council of Seleucia in 359, whose orthodoxy Athanasius accepted, professed themselves to be successors of the faith of Antioch, not Nicaea.<sup>42</sup>

The origin and nature of the Son’s divinity is a defining feature of the perceived orthodoxy of any bishop or council from the fourth century. For many bishops from the eastern churches, the conviction that the Son was, from the beginning, a unique and perfect creature was pivotal for his role as the exemplar and goal of humanity’s ultimate *telos*: participation in divine grace that enables obedience and love of God, because humanity’s participation in divine life can only be renewed by that which is fully and naturally God. While it would seem that the ‘Arian’ position held a more widespread acceptance throughout much of the fourth century, it is Athanasius’ portrayal of orthodoxy that ultimately proved to be more consistent and persuasive.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 216-18.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 225.

# Body and Soul

In accordance with the will of the Father, the eternal Son, who is the very Word and express Image of God, creates the universe in its general structure and order as well as in every particularity. Having created the cosmos from nothing, God sustains it by allowing it to participate in divine life through the Word of God. God's kindness falls on humankind in particular. Indeed, he bestows on them the image of God, specifically the image of the Word, raising them above their creaturely peers. In this chapter, I will deal with Athanasius' understanding of God as Creator and the way creation relates back to its Creator. Following that discussion, I will examine his conception of the human being and, in particular, what it means for humanity to be made after the image of God. But first, a brief look at the philosophical and theological paradigms that Athanasius inherited.

## Athanasius' Cosmological and Anthropological Influences

One of the most foundational aspects of Hellenistic culture is the worldview derived from the teachings of the philosopher Plato. The Greek concept of god, *theos*, is not inherently tied to the idea of a divine entity but, rather, to the principle of being. In the Platonic system, the highest principle of being is simply that, true Being, which Plato eventually identifies as the Good. The whole cosmos is thus an intricate hierarchy of "degrees of being."<sup>43</sup> Slightly below the Good in the realm of Being are what Plato calls the "Forms" or "Ideas." Another lesser being is the Demiurge which is responsible for the creation of the universe from pre-existing matter. Furthermore, everything that the Demiurge has made possesses its existence through

---

<sup>43</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 35.

participation in the ultimate reality of the Forms. The human person is an interesting combination. While the body consists of the lowest reality, matter, the soul's "native habitat" is the eternal Forms.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the soul desires to transcend its transient embodiment and return to the realm of Being through moral growth.

Through centuries of development and systematization, the Platonic Good is distanced more and more from the created universe. Middle Platonism firmly distinguishes the transcendent One from the creative Demiurge. This development receives its ultimate revision in the teachings of Plotinus and his followers. The utter transcendence of the One within Neoplatonism is exemplified by the One's depiction as perfect Being that is occupied continually with the contemplation of itself. However, this inner contemplation overflows into the eternal Mind (*nous*). Mind, in turn, overflows into Soul (*psyche*). Through many derivations, this results in the creative World Soul. Each human soul is a part of the World Soul that has descended into the material world. Consequently, every soul wishes to return to the World Soul.<sup>45</sup> Initially, each iteration of Soul shared the same essence and nature. However, following the innovative system of the philosopher Iamblichus, the various hierarchical levels were deemed essentially distinct. Consequently, entities on lower levels now ascend the ladder of being "by participation" without compromising the transcendence" of that which is higher. Earlier in the development of Platonism, the *telos* of humanity had been described as attaining "likeness to God." With the arrival of the concept of participation and distinct levels of soul, it becomes necessary for the divine to descend to the human level in order to grant participation in the characteristics of divinity.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius : The Coherence of His Thought* (New York : Routledge, 1998), 6-8.

<sup>45</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 37-40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 42-43.

According to Khaled Anatolios, the philosophical legacy inherited by the Christian tradition is twofold: 1 God is ineffable and transcendent, 2 willful involvement in the created world is unfitting for the absolutely transcendent One.<sup>47</sup> Many early theologians kept in step with this worldview, often teaching that the Logos/Word of God was the natural Mediator between God and humanity because he was higher than the angels but lower than the Father. One particular exception to this trend in early Christianity is Irenaeus.<sup>48</sup> For Irenaeus, the great divide is not between spiritual and material but between created and uncreated. The pursuit of “likeness to God” is not a contemplative release but the realization of a perfected humanity. And this perfect humanity has been accomplished through the descent of the eternal Word of God into human flesh. Indeed, the Son of God “became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.”<sup>49</sup> Individual human beings may participate in this new humanity by being joined to Christ in the waters of baptism. In this way, they are made sons and daughters of God by grace, by adoption. Irenaeus understands Christ to be the Second Adam, the recapitulation of humankind’s original creation in paradise according to the image and likeness of God. As such, the incarnate Word bestows access to divine life upon those baptized into Christ, empowering them to mature in virtuous likeness to the character of God. Furthermore, the immortality and incorruption of the Son is received not only by the soul but also by the body, the body ultimately receiving this aspect of divine likeness in the promise of resurrection.

In contrast to the anthropological realism of Irenaeus, Origen of Alexandria espouses a spiritualized vision of humanity. For Origen, the human person is an embodied soul, even an

---

<sup>47</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> I am indebted to Norman Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, for the following discussion of Irenaeus’ theology.

<sup>49</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.

entrapped soul. Attaining likeness to God means transcending the flesh and becoming a “spiritual (hu)man,” or more accurately a rational being, through the life of prayer. This anthropology is grounded upon a cosmology that is profoundly indebted to the Platonic tradition. For Origen, God the Father is solely “true God.” The Son/Logos is divine by participation such that “he alone is ceaselessly able to contemplate the Father’s depths.”<sup>50</sup> The Logos is the rational principle that orders all of creation, whereby the more perfect members of the created order participate in the Mind of God; consequently, the most injurious effect of the Fall in Origen’s estimation is the corruption of humankind’s rational capacity. Fittingly, the incarnate Logos redeems humanity by illuminating its ignorance, the operative element being not so much the person of Christ but the revelation, the instruction it affords.<sup>51</sup>

As stated previously, participation is a fundamental aspect of Origen’s theology. Kinship between participant and participated as well as the Origenian distinction between ontological participation and dynamic participation are the most substantive characteristics of this paradigm. The property shared by the Logos and humanity is the rational soul. The Christian ascends to the vision of the eternal Logos through contemplation of the revealed Word in Scripture and through the life of prayer. As the Platonic tradition states that every particularity is a derivation of an absolute Form, Origen teaches that all of creation has its source of being in the Logos, the eternal Son of God. Humanity, however, relates to God in a way that necessitates a response to divine activity; and only the Christian who has received this redirection toward the Father through the illumination of the Logos and the guidance of the Spirit is enabled to respond to the divine initiative and thus participate in divine life and power.

---

<sup>50</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 142.

<sup>51</sup> Gross, *Divinization of the Christian*, 144.

Both Irenaeus and Origen have a profound influence on Athanasius' theology. He owes much of his realist, physical understanding of Christology and deification to Irenaeus, while Origen's concept of dual participation undergirds many of his theological structures. Having come to an appropriate understanding of Athanasius' theological and philosophical foundation, his own understanding of God's relation to creation, and humanity in particular, can now be engaged.

### Creation and its Creator

In the beginning, God chose to create. The universe does not come to be as a result of inner conflict within the Trinity or as a result of some struggle between the gods. God, being the sole self-existent, creates the universe "from nothing." Furthermore, as Athanasius asserts, God desires to bring the cosmos into being "in order to exercise his kindness."<sup>52</sup> God is not the utterly self-absorbed One of the Neoplatonists. Rather, God desires to extend the fullness of divine being by sustaining the existence of this new creative endeavor.

So seeing that all created nature according to its own definition is in a state of flux and dissolution, therefore to prevent this happening and the universe dissolving back into nothing, after making everything by his own eternal Word and bringing creation into existence, he did not abandon it to be carried away and suffer through its own nature, lest it run the risk of returning to nothing. But being good, he governs and establishes the whole world through his Word who is himself God, in order that creation, illuminated by the leadership, providence, and ordering of the Word, may be able to remain firm, since it shares in the Word who is truly from the Father and is aided by him to exist, and lest it suffer what would happen, I mean a relapse into non-existence, if it were not protected by the Word.<sup>53</sup>

God not only orders but creates everything "by his own eternal Word." Furthermore, this creation is not a mere forming of pre-existing matter but the making of matter from nothing.

---

<sup>52</sup>CG 41.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Having been conjured from non-being, however, creation naturally tends to fall back toward non-existence. On the other hand, as stated above, God’s creative activity is propelled by his goodness which will not allow the cosmos to succumb to its own inherent corruptibility. As such, “he governs and establishes the whole world through his Word who is himself God, in order that creation...may be able to remain firm.” That which is inherently unstable receives surety of being through participation in the Word of God which is also the agent of its initial creation. This Word is able to impart life to that which did not previously exist because he is “from the Father” and “is himself God.”

One of Athanasius’ fundamental assertions is that the Son of God shares the same eternal, uncreated nature as the Father. Athanasius leaves no room for uncertainty when it comes to the nature of the Word’s divinity. To be precise, he means “the living and acting God, the very Word of the good God of the universe, who is other than created things and all creation; he is rather the sole and individual Word of the good Father.”<sup>54</sup> The Word is further described as “the one, only-begotten, good God, proceeding from the Father as from a good source, who orders and contains the universe.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed,

His holy disciples teach that everything was created through him and from him, and that being good offspring of a good Father and true Son, he is the power of the Father and his wisdom and Word; not so by participation, nor do these properties accrue to him from outside in the way of those who participate in him and are given wisdom by him, having their power and reason in him; but he is absolute wisdom, very Word, and himself the Father’s own power...In short, he is the supremely perfect issue of the Father, and is alone Son, the express image of the Father.<sup>56</sup>

Notably, Athanasius makes the distinction that the Word is “other than created things.” The ontological dichotomy between uncreated and created existence is the defining dualism in

---

<sup>54</sup> CG 40.

<sup>55</sup> CG 41.

<sup>56</sup> CG 46.

Athanasius' theological system.<sup>57</sup> In contrast to the 'Arianism' that he would soon be engaging for the rest of his episcopal career, he asserts that the Son is internal to the Godhead. Athanasius first describes him as the "Word of the good God of the universe." He subsequently hails the Word as the "good God, proceeding from the Father." Athanasius had previously used "good God" to denote the Triune God or the Father, but in CG 41 he clearly refers to the only-begotten Son himself as the "good God," implying that the Word is divine in his own right. Furthermore, the Son is the "sole Word of the Father." This is in contradiction to 'Arian' teaching which states that the Son is designated as Word in a derivative or participatory sense in relation to the Father's Word in himself. Athanasius repeatedly insists that the Son is "the Father's own power," "absolute wisdom," and "very Word" of the Father. To further substantiate the point, he writes that these titles do not belong to the Son "by participation." Rather, they belong to him naturally by virtue of being co-essential with the Father's nature. Finally, in both CG 41 and 46, Athanasius designates the Word as "the express image of the Father." He is the perfect and unchanging reflection of the Father which is, consequently, the reason the Father employs the Word as his instrument of creation.

As the instrument of creation, the Word makes and orders the material and immaterial cosmos from nothing. Truly, "there is nothing existing or created which did not come into being and subsist in him and through him."<sup>58</sup> Yet, "the nature of created things, having come into being from nothing, is unstable, and is weak and mortal when considered by itself."<sup>59</sup> Thus, following the universe's initial creation through the Word, God grants participation in divine life to every form in the universe through this same Word. "It is thus the omnipotent and perfectly holy Word

---

<sup>57</sup> This is one of Anatolios' main assertions. Cf. *Athanasius*, 30-35.

<sup>58</sup> CG 42.

<sup>59</sup> CG 41.

of the Father himself who is present in all things and extends his power everywhere...; he leaves nothing deprived of his power, but gives life and protection to everything, everywhere, to each individually and to all together.”<sup>60</sup> There is no place or thing that is devoid of the Word’s sustaining power. Indeed, the Word sustains the entire structure of the universe as well as each element, therein. And, as Athanasius never tires of reminding his readers, God does all of this because of his goodness and kindness. God is good; therefore, he creates. God is good; therefore, he enables creation to “remain firm” by sharing in the Word himself. God’s goodness even motivates the creation of humankind in the image of God and its subsequent renewal through the Incarnation.

### Human Beings as Both Soul and Body

For Athanasius, and the interpretive tradition of Alexandria, the definitive attribute of humanity as image bearers of God is rationality.

For God,...since he is good and bountiful, has made mankind in his own image through his own Word, our Saviour Jesus Christ; and he also made man *perceptive and understanding of reality through his similarity to him*,...but retaining the grace of him who bestowed it on him, and also the special power given him by the Father’s Word, he might rejoice and converse with God, living an idyllic and truly blessed and immortal life.<sup>61</sup>

Athanasius understands reality as the good, and all good things have their origin in the good God. Thus, this “understanding of reality” is, in effect, a knowledge of God. As long as humankind remains firm in the pursuit of this knowledge, engaged in the contemplation of the “express image of the Father,” the idyllic life in Paradise could continue unabated. This retention of grace, however, requires the proper functioning of the full human being, body and soul.

---

<sup>60</sup> CG 42.

<sup>61</sup> CG 2; emphasis added.

In this anthropological harmony between body and soul, Athanasius breaks with the long-standing worldview of Hellenic Platonism and Christian Platonism. A generous portrayal of the constitution of human beings from a Platonist would maintain that the soul is the better part of the human person, which implies that there are some redeeming properties within the body. This, however, would be a minority position. Regardless, in the Platonic worldview, the soul alone persists after death in “restful contemplation.”<sup>62</sup> However, as Athanasius firmly asserts, the resurrection proves the value of the body and the essential duality of the human person.<sup>63</sup> The precise nature and function of both body and soul within Athanasius’ anthropological framework, then, must be explicated.

The soul’s fundamental characteristics according to Athanasius are createdness, rationality, immortality, immateriality, and mobility. The soul distinctly images the Son in whose likeness humanity was made; regardless of these similarities, however, the soul is firmly on the created side of the ontological gulf. Even though the soul shares many likenesses with the Word of God, this kinship comes only by participation, not by a natural familiarity with the eternal Son of God. Nonetheless, the soul has been imbued with these powers by the Word himself so that humankind might enjoy knowledge of God and participatory communion with God.

Human beings have been gifted with a supreme intelligence which, according to Athanasius, resides in the soul.<sup>64</sup> Now, in order to attain likeness to God, one must first have an understanding of God. But Athanasius is not discouraged, because he knows that “the way of truth will bring us to the really existent God. For the knowledge and unerring understanding of this road we have need of nothing save ourselves. For the road to God is not as far from us or as

---

<sup>62</sup> Alwyn Petterson, *Athanasius and the Human Body* (Bedminster, Bristol : Bristol Press, 1990), 80.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> CG 30, 31.

extraneous to us as God himself is...but it is within us....And if anyone were to ask what this might be, I mean that it is each one's soul and the mind within it."<sup>65</sup> So it is that the soul possesses a natural ability to contemplate God. Actually, to be accurate, the soul is able to comprehend the Son who is the express image of the Father, "that through him we may come to an understanding of his Father, God."<sup>66</sup> The intellect naturally contemplates divine things because the soul is spiritual and immortal.<sup>67</sup> The soul, "which perceives and considers immortal things, [must] be itself also immortal and live forever. For the thoughts and ideas about immortality never leave the soul but remain in it, becoming as it were tinder for the assurance of immortality."<sup>68</sup> This contemplation of the divine affords the dynamic participation that is distinctive to humanity in consequence of being made after the image of the Son of the Father. However, as will be discussed in a later section, only the pure soul can contemplate God as evidenced by the words of Christ himself, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."<sup>69</sup>

Athanasius further explains that the immortality of the soul is rooted in its natural mobility. Through its contemplation, the soul moves closer to God, thereby gaining a clearer vision of God and a truer knowledge of God which translates to a more intimate communion with God. The independent mobility of the soul "is nothing other than its life," for, in this respect, she is dependent on neither the body nor the Word. Furthermore, since the soul is active while the body is inactive in sleep, it is "clear" that she continues in her activity when the body

---

<sup>65</sup> CG 30.

<sup>66</sup> CG 29.

<sup>67</sup> M. C. Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 171-72.

<sup>68</sup> CG 33.

<sup>69</sup> CG 2.

ceases all movement in death's long slumber.<sup>70</sup> The freedom of the soul, however, also necessitates that the mind's contemplation is not restricted to the good things of God. Rather, it can be inclined toward the good or away from the good.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the soul's mobility relates directly to its relationship with the body.

Athanasius undeniably sees the human person as an interdependent bond between the soul and the body. However, as Steenberg astutely remarks, "the soul's primary function [in relation to the body is] direction or governance."<sup>72</sup> Athanasius repeatedly makes use of the image of a charioteer when describing the soul as director of the body. Indeed, Athanasius firmly asserts that "the body was not made to move itself but to be led and directed by another."<sup>73</sup> Although the senses of the body are its own, the mind acts as a judge determining the best response to sensory perception. "The eye can only see, the ears hear, the mouth taste, the nose smell, and the hands feel; but what is to be seen or heard, and what one must touch or taste or smell, is no longer for the senses but for the soul and its intellect to determine."<sup>74</sup> Thus, as a result of the rational soul's contemplation of the good Word of the Father, the human person engages the world around it in a manner reflective of the character of God. In addition, the body provides the soul with a means of self-expression. As an immaterial substance, the soul is incapable of acting in the physical universe. Therefore, God has provided a body suitable for the soul as an instrument of active obedience to the Father. As Pettersen rightly underscores, the

---

<sup>70</sup> CG 33.

<sup>71</sup> CG 4. This concept will be discussed further in the next section.

<sup>72</sup> Steenberg, *Of God and Man*, 170.

<sup>73</sup> CG 32.

<sup>74</sup> CG 31.

mutually beneficial unity of human being is epitomized in that “the body is animated by the soul and the soul is allowed to express itself through the body.”<sup>75</sup>

In its capacity as instrument of the soul, the senses of the body provide the soul with a secondary means of contemplating the good God, that is, through the recognition of creation as the work of God “since creation through its order and harmony, as it were in writing, indicates and proclaims its master and maker”.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, “the body has eyes in order to view creation and through its harmonious order to recognize the Creator...it also possesses hearing in order to listen to the divine sayings and the laws of God, and has hands too, in order to do necessary actions and to stretch them out to God in prayer.”<sup>77</sup> Moreover, Athanasius repeatedly discusses how the interdependence of creation spurs the rational soul to recognize the necessity of an ordering and sustaining power that is itself self-subsistent and devoid of division.<sup>78</sup>

As interworking elements of the harmonious human person, the soul and the body together define human existence and pursue humanity’s *telos*. As created beings, humankind depend upon the sustaining power of their Creator. However, human beings are uniquely the recipients of an “added grace” whereby they may know God and participate in divine life beyond the capacity of the rest of creation. This added grace originates in God willing that his Word create humankind after his own image and likeness. Humanity as the image of God, *imago dei*, is fundamental to Athanasius’ understanding of Christology and the economy of salvation. As such, it is the proper culmination to this discussion of Athanasius’ theology of the human person.

---

<sup>75</sup> Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 25. Cf. 104.

<sup>76</sup> CG 34. Cf. Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 47.

<sup>77</sup> CG 4.

<sup>78</sup> CG 27-28, 36-38, 44. See the insightful discussions in Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 81-85, and Steenberg, *Of God and Man*, 163-65.

## Humanity as the Image of God

God, who has dominion over all, when he made the race of men through his own Word, saw that the weakness of their nature was not capable by itself of knowing the Creator or of taking any thought of God...and he saw the creatures' complete lack of understanding and knowledge of him who made them....Therefore, lest this should happen, since he is good he bestowed on them of his own image, our Lord Jesus Christ, and he made them according to his own image and likeness, in order that, understanding through such grace the image, I mean the Word of the Father, they might be able through him to gain some notion about the Father, and recognizing the Maker, might live a happy and truly blessed life.<sup>79</sup>

So, God, being gracious toward the human race, amends their created nature in order that they may “gain some notion about the Father” and thereby “live a happy and truly blessed life.” For God willed that humankind should differ from “irrational creatures” and that they should do more than merely exist but, rather, profit from their existence.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, “he gave [them] an added grace...making them in his own image and giving them also a share in the power of his own Word, so that having as it were shadows of the Word and being made rational, they might be able to remain in felicity and live the true life in paradise.”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, Adam and Eve were given a setting in which to exercise and perfect their rational faculties in obedience to one law concerning the garden of paradise. If they “kept the grace and remained good” through obedience to this law they would continue enjoying “the life of paradise,” including the “promise of immortality.” However, should they transgress this law, they would forfeit the “share in the power” of the Word that they had received and again be subject to their natural corruptibility as created beings.<sup>82</sup>

The divine likeness that humanity has received is in fact an image of the Word as perfect Image of the Father. Athanasius differs from many of his predecessors and contemporaries by

---

<sup>79</sup> DI 11.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> DI 3.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

not differentiating between the image and the likeness of God. Being after the image of the Word effects participation in his divinity, and this participation enables the development of likeness to God. The effect of the soul's contemplation of the Word resembles a mirror being polished: as the soul is purified by its contemplative contact with the Word it reflects the Image of the Father ever more clearly.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, when "beholding the Word [the soul] sees in him also the Father of the Word. It rejoices in contemplating him and is renewed by its desire for him, just as the holy scriptures say that the first man to be created, who was called Adam in Hebrew, had his mind fixed on God in unembarrassed frankness."<sup>84</sup> Thus, as has been said, the image of God in humankind is realized by receiving knowledge of God and participation in the life of God through the soul's contemplation of the Word of the Father.

In its initial image bearing state, humanity exchanges its natural proclivity toward decay for the divine attribute of incorruptibility and the promise of immortality. As long as the desire of the soul is to understand the things of God and as long as the body is directed toward creation in light of its revelation of the Creator, then the divine attributes the soul attains through contemplation are transferred to the body as well.<sup>85</sup> The soul's bestowed likeness to God, namely its spirituality and rationality, enables it to apprehend a "conception of God." In this way, it becomes aware of the character of God, and this awareness, then, infuses the soul with those characteristics and virtues. The soul subsequently expresses these attributes, such as goodness and kindness, even immutability and incorruptibility, through the body, its instrument. In this way, the soul functions, as it were, like a funnel; the characteristics of that which the soul contemplates are channeled into the body. "For he brought them into his paradise and gave them

---

<sup>83</sup> Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 19.

<sup>84</sup> CG 2.

<sup>85</sup> Steenberg, *Of God and Man*, 172.

a law, so that if they kept the grace and remained good they would enjoy the life of paradise, without sorrow, pain, or care, in addition to their having the promise of immortality in heaven.”

This passage highlights a critical distinction between humanity and the rest of creation. While most of creation is sustained by the Word through a passive participation, humankind must actively remain in their state of “added grace.”<sup>86</sup> Following Irenaeus, Athanasius teaches that humanity in its original state was not yet perfected but, rather, was in need of divine instruction. Knowing this, God attempted to secure the grace by “imposing a law and a set place,”<sup>87</sup> a peaceful estate where an immature humanity could grow in its likeness to God.

In this way then, as has been said, did the Creator fashion the human race, and such did he wish it to remain. But men, contemptuous of the better things and shrinking from their apprehension, sought rather what was closer to themselves—and what was closer to them was the body and its sensation. So they turned their minds away from intelligible reality and began to consider themselves. And by considering themselves and cleaving to the body and the other senses, deceived as it were in their own interests, they fell into selfish desires and preferred their own good to the contemplation of the divine.<sup>88</sup>

Despite the divine initiative toward humanity in its original creation, the mind of the soul is lured away from contemplation of the divine by the pleasures of bodily sensation. Now, it is important to note that in this turn away from God humankind “sought rather what was closer to themselves.” They “began to consider themselves” and to contemplate the characteristics of their own nature instead of the nature of the eternal Son of God.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, “[a]bandoning the contemplation of intelligible reality and misusing the individual faculties of the body, delighting in the contemplation of the body and regarding pleasure as a thing good in itself, (the soul) mistakenly misused the term ‘good’ and considered pleasure to be the really good thing.”<sup>90</sup> Thus,

---

<sup>86</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 59.

<sup>87</sup> DI 3.

<sup>88</sup> CG 3.

<sup>89</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 64.

<sup>90</sup> CG 4.

in the Fall, the soul mistakes one of the goods of creation that was meant to direct the mind's contemplation back to its Creator for good in itself, namely sensory pleasure, and redirects its contemplative gaze toward itself.

So they put their hands to the opposite use and worked murder, they turned their ears to disobedience and their other members to adultery instead of legitimate procreation...their sense of smell to varieties of erotic perfumes, their feet to haste in shedding blood, and their stomach to drunkenness and insatiable gluttony. All these things are evil and sins of the soul, but they have no other cause save the turning away from better things.<sup>91</sup>

Note that all these things which are technically termed "sins of the flesh" are labelled by Athanasius as "sins of the soul." For the body is not of itself bad but is directed by the soul toward such ends. Sin, then, is not an ontological nature, but is, as Steenberg has observed, a movement away from the divine intent of remaining in the contemplation of, and hence participation in, God.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Athanasius himself states, "I call unreality what is evil because what has no real existence has been invented by the conceits of men."<sup>93</sup> Similarly, one of Athanasius' critiques of pagan religion is the depiction of evil as a substantive reality that is derivative of God or in opposition to God.<sup>94</sup> Sin, then, has been conceived by the soul for the propagation of selfish pleasure through the misuse and abuse of the senses of the body.

By turning the mind's gaze away from the Image of the Father, humankind forfeited its participation in the power of the Word. "Corruption thenceforth took a strong hold on them, and was more powerful than the force of nature over the whole race...For in their trespasses men had not stopped at the set limits, but gradually moving forward, at length had advanced beyond all measure."<sup>95</sup> Humanity, in its pursuit of pleasure and ever-new evils, has advanced beyond its

---

<sup>91</sup> CG 5.

<sup>92</sup> Steenberg, *Of God and Man*, 174.

<sup>93</sup> CG 4.

<sup>94</sup> CG 6-8.

<sup>95</sup> DI 5.

natural corruptibility according to Athanasius. The body now succumbs to death; moreover, if the accounts in Genesis are true, human beings used to live much longer lives than they do now. Even more remarkable, the soul has succumbed to the inevitable pull of corruptibility, for humanity “no longer appeared rational beings, but from their behavior were considered to be irrational.”<sup>96</sup>

Nonetheless, some have claimed that Athanasius posits the ability of the soul to turn back to God of its own effort. For he writes that

just as they turned away from God with their mind and invented gods from non-existent entities, so they can rise towards God with the mind of their soul and again turn back towards him. They can turn back if they cast off the stain of all desire which they have put on, and wash themselves until they have eliminated every addition foreign to the soul and show it unadulterated, as it was made, in order that in this way they may be able to contemplate therewith the Word of the Father, in whose image they were made in the beginning.<sup>97</sup>

It does seem possible, given the natural abilities of the soul, for it to be able to shake off the stain of sin. The soul’s natural mobility would logically lend itself to the accomplishment of such a task. However, Athanasius provides plenty of evidence to contradict such an interpretation of his theology. In depicting the law established for humanity in paradise, Athanasius remarks that “if they kept the grace and remained good they would enjoy the life of paradise...But if they transgressed and turned away (from the law) and became wicked... [they] would remain in death and corruption.”<sup>98</sup> It seems that Anatolios is correct in his assertion that “there is a radical pressure exerted upon humanity to remain in either of these alternative.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, it appears that Athanasius understands there to be an ontological imperative within human beings to remain in a given direction of receptivity: toward created corruptibility or toward uncreated

---

<sup>96</sup> DI 12.

<sup>97</sup> CG 34.

<sup>98</sup> DI 3.

<sup>99</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 36.

incorruptibility. And in its present condition, the soul's contemplation has been turned in on itself for so long that it has forgotten the good that it was intended to reflect. The final chapters in both parts of this double treatise (CG-DI) offer the final refutation of the claim that the soul can reform itself. Athanasius tells his reader to "rejoice and be of good hope, because the fruit of faith in [Christ] and piety is immortality and the kingdom of heaven, but *only if your soul is disposed according to his laws.*"<sup>100</sup> "But in addition to the study and true knowledge of the Scriptures are needed a *good life and pure soul and virtue in Christ.*"<sup>101</sup> Therefore, the broader context of Athanasius' anthropology and soteriology prohibit the notion that humanity can in any way reform itself after having been the agent of its own defilement.

In this way, then, humanity has forfeited the amendment of its created nature. Repentance of sins and reformation of ways are simply inadequate to reverse its submission to corruptibility. "Repentance gives no exemption from the consequences of nature, but merely looses sins. If, therefore, there had been only sin and not its consequence of corruption, repentance would have been very well. But . . . since transgression had overtaken them, men were now prisoners to natural corruption, and they had been deprived of the grace of being in the image."<sup>102</sup> For humankind had been given an exemption from its natural orientation by the bestowal of the *imago dei*. Death and corruption, therefore, are ultimately due to the deficiency of humankind's created nature, though sin still bears incidental responsibility. Humanity's debt to death stems from an ontological deficit.<sup>103</sup> Athanasius thus reiterates the Irenaean assertion that humanity must be given a new beginning, must be re-created. Moreover, as will be discussed in the next

---

<sup>100</sup> CG 47; emphasis added.

<sup>101</sup> DI 57; emphasis added.

<sup>102</sup> DI 7.

<sup>103</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 36-37. Cf. Steenberg, *Of God and Man*, 176-77.

chapter, this ontological deficit can only be overcome, indeed transcended, by the instrument of humanity's original creation, namely the Word of God.

## Deification in Christ

“So then it was suitable that the Word of God took a body and used a human instrument, in order to give life to the body and in order that, just as he is known in creation through his works, so also he might act in a man and reveal himself everywhere, without leaving anything deprived of his divinity and knowledge.”<sup>104</sup> This passage points to several of the fundamental tenets of Athanasius’ Christology and soteriology. It is the Word of God himself who takes human form in Jesus Christ, and this truly human form is the “instrument,” the means of God’s renewal of all humanity. Furthermore, the bodily instrument of the Word accomplishes two distinct but equally necessary objectives: bringing life out of death and providing an accessible revelation of the Father through the incarnate Son.<sup>105</sup> Athanasius reiterates these redemptive principles in the famous passage from DI 54 where he writes that

through death immortality has come to all, and through the incarnation of the Word the universal providence and its leader and creator the Word of God himself have been made known. For he became man that we might become divine; and he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured insults from men that we might inherit incorruption.

Though the body of Christ dies on the cross, Christ’s death is overcome by the power of the immortal Word whose body it is. Moreover, the Son of God accepts death in the body so that all those who join themselves to his body can share in the resurrection promise of immortality. Furthermore, for those united to Christ, the renewal of humanity’s participation in the Image of the Father restores the ability to know and see God. God’s re-creation of humanity after the image of his own Image, as with the original creation, is motivated by his goodness.

---

<sup>104</sup> DI 45.

<sup>105</sup> It has been suggested elsewhere that a more accurate term might be the “hominization” of the Word.

In consequence of humanity's original disobedience to God, "the race of men was being destroyed, and man who was rational and who had been made in the image was being obliterated; and the work created by God was perishing."<sup>106</sup> As stated previously, the corruptibility inherent to humanity's creaturely nature had progressed far beyond its natural limits. So much so that Athanasius makes the audacious claim that humanity is "perishing." This, according to Athanasius, presents quite the conundrum for God, because God cannot allow the breaking of a divinely established law to go unpunished. Yet, the degradation of that which God had been abundantly generous toward, that is, the human race, calls into question God's goodness.

For God would not have been truthful, if after he had said we would die, man had not died. And furthermore, it would have been improper that what had once been created rational and had partaken of his Word, should perish and return again to non-existence through corruption. For it would not have been worthy of the goodness of God that what had been brought into existence by him should be corrupted on account of the deceit which the devil had played on men.<sup>107</sup>

What, then, was God to do? God had to act in such a way that did not make the Creator into a liar, while also affirming his own goodness. It is most fitting, then, that humanity's "renewal was effected by the Word who created it in the beginning. For it will appear in no way contradictory if the Father worked its salvation through the same one by whom he created it."<sup>108</sup> Therefore, "he alone was both able to recreate the universe and be worthy to suffer for all."<sup>109</sup> So it is that the Word "fashioned for himself in the virgin a body as a temple, and appropriated it for his own as an instrument in which to be known and dwell."<sup>110</sup> Thus, the Image after whom humankind were originally created takes a body "like ours" in order to die a death that would

---

<sup>106</sup> DI 6.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> DI 1.

<sup>109</sup> DI 7.

<sup>110</sup> DI 8.

satisfy the consequence of humanity's transgression of the original law in paradise and in order to bring life out of death through the resurrection of the body that the Word took to himself.

And this he did in his loving kindness in order that, as all die in him, the law concerning corruption in men might be abolished—since its power was concluded in the Lord's body and it would never again have influence over men who are like him—and in order that, as men had turned to corruption, he might turn them back again to incorruption and might give them life for death, in that he had made the body his own, and by the grace of the resurrection had rid them of death as straw is destroyed by fire.<sup>111</sup>

### The Incarnation of the Word as an Appropriation of Humanity

Now, humanity's descent into corruption, as stated previously, is properly understood as the soul's turn away from the contemplation of God toward the contemplation of bodily sensation. Athanasius clarifies that in so doing humanity does not advance toward something inherently evil, but rather, that which is "closer to itself," something more creaturely than divine. The incarnation, then, is not only fitting but entirely necessary. In order to secure humanity's participation in divine life, God must now form a relationship with the soul as intimate as the naturally occurring bond between the soul and the body. For the corruption experienced by humanity is no mere external stain but an internal degradation.<sup>112</sup> Andrew Louth posits that in Athanasius "a real interpenetration of the divine and creaturely in Christ is necessary if [corruption] is to be really dealt with."<sup>113</sup> Consequently, whenever Athanasius discusses traits naturally belonging to humanity that pertain to Christ (suffering, ignorance, being created), he insists that they are "properly ascribed" to the Word, for the body is his own.<sup>114</sup> He is adamant

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> DI 44.

<sup>113</sup> Andrew Louth, "Athanasius' Understanding of the Humanity of Christ," in *Studia Patristica* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1985), 314.

<sup>114</sup> CA 2.16, 3.26, 3.56.

throughout his writings that the eternal Son of God, the very Word of God, became human and took to himself a body, the person of Jesus Christ.

The Son of God put on a body like ours in order that by appropriating the characteristics of corrupted humanity in his own body he might overcome and transcend them through his natural incorruptibility.

When man had been made and the necessity arose to heal, not the non-existent, but what had come into being, it followed that the healer and Saviour had to come among those who had already been created to cure what existed. Therefore he became a man and used the body as a *human instrument*. . . . For it was not the non-existent that needed salvation so that a command alone would suffice, but man, who had already been made, was corrupted and perishing. So it was right for the Word to use a *human instrument* and extend himself in all things.<sup>115</sup>

God's creative will alone is not enough, because what has been "corrupted and [is] perishing" had already "come into being." Humanity itself had to be infused with divine power by the establishment of a new archetype for human beings. As the body is the soul's instrument of activity in the material world, so the body of Christ is the Word's individual locus of salvific activity.<sup>116</sup> However, Athanasius is quick to point out that the activity of the Word is not bound to the body like the soul.<sup>117</sup> On the contrary, the Word continues to sustain the whole of creation while also being in the body. In addition, the incarnation serves as God's most explicit revelation of himself, and since the Word is both invisible and immaterial, Christ's body is the instrument of this renewal of the knowledge of God.<sup>118</sup> Consequently, the Son chose "a human body as an instrument for the true revelation and declaration of the Father"<sup>119</sup> because nothing "in creation was in error in its ideas about God, save man only."<sup>120</sup> The Son accomplishes this ontological

---

<sup>115</sup> DI 44; emphasis added.

<sup>116</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Burlington, VT : Ashgate, 2007), 47.

<sup>117</sup> DI 17.

<sup>118</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 72.

<sup>119</sup> DI 42.

<sup>120</sup> DI 43.

and epistemological renewal by exchanging divine attributes for human, and vice versa, in the *perichoretic* embrace of the incarnation.

This raises one of the main contentions between Athanasius and the ‘Arians.’ In the ‘Arian’ system, the Son was from the beginning a creature, and therefore, taking human form was in no way unbecoming of his own nature. Conversely, for Athanasius, the very Son of God must be the one who has taken human form because even a perfect creature cannot transmit its participatory divinity to another creature. The benefits of divine grace can only be transmitted from the uncreated Being to a created being. Consequently, when the Son of God “was known in the body [he] was not polluted, but rather, being incorruptible, vivified and purified the mortal body.”<sup>121</sup> Indeed, it is because of the presence of the Word in the body that death is unable to hold it. “But through the coming of the Word into it, it was no longer corruptible according to its nature, but because of the Word who was dwelling in it, became immune from corruption.... Therefore, as I said above, the Word himself, since he could not die, for he was immortal, took to himself a body which could die in order to offer it as his own on behalf of all.”<sup>122</sup> This passage highlights one of Athanasius’ fundamental theological paradigms. In Christ, the human receptivity toward divine grace is made secure because of the “inalterability of the Word”<sup>123</sup> in terms of giving grace.

As you may recall, all of creation receives its subsistence by participating in the power of the Word. Except, of course, for humanity which, because of the generosity of the Father is made after the image of the Word, must actively receive its added participatory grace through proper

---

<sup>121</sup> DI 17.

<sup>122</sup> DI 20.

<sup>123</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Khaled Anatolios, “The Soteriological Significance of Christ’s Humanity in St. Athanasius,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1996): 265–86. The following discussion is indebted to Anatolios’ insights and language.

relation to the Son, and thereby properly relate to the Father. This receptivity of humanity's added grace is what was forfeited in the Fall. In the incarnation, then, the Word seeks to make secure humanity's reception of the added grace through the rational soul. Therefore, in Christ, the Giver of grace becomes also the receiver of grace. Countering the 'Arian' interpretation of Philippians 2:9-10, Athanasius writes that "the term in question, 'highly exalted,' does not signify that the essence of the Word was exalted, for he was ever and is 'equal to God,' but the exaltation is of the manhood."<sup>124</sup> And when the apostle Paul writes that God gave Christ a name above all names, Athanasius states that "because of us and for us this too is written of Him. For as Christ died and was exalted as man, so, as man, is He said to take what, as God, He ever had, that even such a grant of grace might reach us."<sup>125</sup> Athanasius repeatedly emphasizes that the same eternal Word who gives grace receives it according to the humanity that is his as incarnate Word.<sup>126</sup>

For He who is the Son of God, became Himself the Son of Man; and as Word, He gives from the Father, for all things which the Father does and gives, He does and supplies through Him; and as the Son of Man, He Himself is said after the manner of men to receive what proceeds from Him, because His body is none other than His, and is a natural recipient of grace, as has been said. For He received it as far as His man's nature was exalted; which exaltation was its being deified.<sup>127</sup>

To complete the exchange of properties, the divine Word also appropriates the pathos and limitations of humanity's created nature. Athanasius asserts that human attributes such as grief, hunger, and ignorance are to be ascribed to the impassible Son of God in his becoming human. "As the Apostle says, the Godhead dwelt in the flesh....And on account of this, the properties of the flesh are said to be his, since he was in it, such as to hunger, to thirst, to suffer, to weary, and

---

<sup>124</sup> Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos* 1.41; henceforth CA.

<sup>125</sup> CA 1.42.

<sup>126</sup> Anatolios, "Significance of Christ's Humanity," 281-82.

<sup>127</sup> CA 1.45.

the like of which the flesh is capable.”<sup>128</sup> After forty days in the wilderness, Christ hungered according to the flesh. The Son of Man does not know the day or hour of the coming Day of Judgment according to humanity’s inherent ignorance of such things. Indeed, “it became the Lord, in putting on human flesh, to put it on whole with the affections proper to it; that, as we say that the body was his own, so also we may say the affections of the body were proper to Him alone, though they did not touch him according to His Godhead.” Since Athanasius has already proven in his previous writings (CG-DI) that it is fitting for the Word to put on flesh, it must also be fitting for the affections of human existence to be ascribed to the Word’s humanity. However, Athanasius insists on one caveat, that the affections of the body did not touch the Word as God.

It is in Athanasius’ insistence that the affections of the body are ascribed to the Word “in the flesh/body” that the major critique of his theology arises in modern scholarship. For many decades, historical theologians have categorized Christological statements from the patristic period according to a dichotomy between a perceived Alexandrian *Logos-sarx* framework and an Antiochene *Logos-anthropos* framework. Athanasius, of course, is placed in the Alexandrian camp of *Logos-sarx* adherents. Accordingly, Athanasius is depicted as characterizing the nature of Christ as the union of the *Logos* with a human body, to the exclusion of any human soul. The critique, then, focuses on the implication that the only active agent in Athanasius’ Christology is the divine *Logos*, denying any human agency in Christ, and thereby undermining his own emphasis on the necessity of Christ being truly and fully human. However, as has elsewhere been pointed out, this schema applies a completely foreign anthropological focus to the patristic authors.<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, George Dragas has convincingly shown that Athanasius’ Christological

---

<sup>128</sup> CA 3.31.

<sup>129</sup> George D Dragas, “Ενανθρωπεσις ορ Εγένετο Άνθρωπο: A Neglected Aspect of Athanasius’ Christology,” in *Studia Patristica* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1985), 281–94. Cf. Thomas G. Weinandy, “Athanasius: The Incarnation

vocabulary is not nearly as strict as it has been made to appear. Dragas illuminates Athanasius' use of three anthropological terms: *anthrōpos*, *sarx*, and *sōma*. According to his analysis, *sarx* can denote the same semantics as *anthrōpos*, referring to a "hypostatic becoming," or *sarx* can denote a semantic meaning similar to *sōma*, referring to the "substantial" becoming of the Word in Christ.<sup>130</sup> Thus, when something is attributed to Christ "according to the flesh," it can refer either to the bodily sensations and activities of the Word or to the experience of the Word as truly human, which implies its union of body and soul.

In CG-DI, Athanasius clearly understands the human person to be a union between soul and body. Why, then, does his anthropic Christology ignore the activity of the soul regarding the humanity of Christ? As his critics point out, instances where Christ exhibits truly human emotions and limitations are the perfect opportunity to affirm the human soul of Christ.<sup>131</sup> However, such a critique ignores the crux of Athanasius' theology of the incarnation, which is that the very Son of God has become human in the person of Jesus Christ. Indeed, he marvels at the fact that the uncreated Creator has united himself with something created.<sup>132</sup> He has no interest in shielding the divinity of the Word from human affections by explicitly locating them in the created soul.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, if the Word intends to redeem and redirect the affections of humanity, then he can do so only by taking them to himself and transforming them through contact with the Word's divine power. Athanasius' letters affirm the pronouncement of the Council of Alexandria in 362 that "the Savior had not a body without a soul, nor without sense or

---

and the Soul of Christ," in *Studia Patristica* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 265–69; and his expansion of this argument in his book *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction*.

<sup>130</sup> Dragas, "Ενανθρωπεσις or Εγένετο Ἄνθρωπο," 286.

<sup>131</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*; Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*; Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*.

<sup>132</sup> Louth, "Humanity of Christ," 310–11. Cf. Alan Lee Kolp, "Participation: A Unifying Concept in the Theology of Athanasius" (Dissertation, Harvard University, 1976), 269–70.

<sup>133</sup> Weinandy, "Athanasius," 266–67.

intelligence; for it was not possible when the Lord had become man for us, that his body should be without intelligence: nor was the salvation effected in the Word Himself a salvation of body only, but of soul also.”<sup>134</sup> One must also consider that the purpose of the incarnation is to reveal the invisible God. For example,

when there was need to raise Peter’s wife’s mother, who was sick of a fever, He stretched forth His hand humanly, but He stopped the illness divinely. And in the case of the man blind from the birth, human was the spittle which He gave forth from the flesh, but divinely did He open the eyes through the clay. And in the case of Lazarus, He gave forth a human voice as man; but divinely, as God, did He raise Lazarus from the dead.<sup>135</sup>

While Athanasius’ anthropology asserts that the body is directed by the soul, the soul is not a visible substance. As such, it is unable to assist in “making visible” the invisible God or to reveal the presence of the Word in the body of Christ. This, I think, further explains why Athanasius does not explicate the role of Christ’s human soul within the Incarnation. Understood in this way, Athanasius can be seen to affirm the humanity that the Son took to himself as truly and fully human.

### Deification of Humanity in Christ

The Son of God, then, effects the redemption of humanity by re-creating it after the image of the very Image of God, the Son himself, through the Incarnation. Being made in the image, as stated above, bestows on humanity the added grace of divine knowledge and participation. More importantly, the incarnate Word secures the ability of humanity to remain in the proper relationship of receptivity. “For while mere man receives, he is liable to lose again (as was shewn in the case of Adam, for he received and he lost), but that the grace may be irrevocable, and may be kept secure by men, therefore He Himself appropriates the gift.”<sup>136</sup> In

---

<sup>134</sup> *Tomus ad Antiochenos* 7.

<sup>135</sup> CA 3.32.

<sup>136</sup> CA 3.38.

contrast to the original attempt to secure “the gift” through external means (the setting and law of Paradise), the Incarnation internalizes it through the union of divine and human in Christ, the new archetype of humanity.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, according to Athanasius, the Word “deified that which He put on, and more than that, ‘gave’ it graciously to the race of man.”<sup>138</sup> It can truly be said, then, that while the Word has been enfleshed in Christ, humanity has likewise been en-Worded in Christ.

Humanity’s appropriation of deification is predicated on Christ’s humanity appropriating it first, for his is the precedent, the archetype, and the Way. Recall Athanasius’ classic statement, “He became man that we might become divine; and he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured insults from men that we might inherit incorruption.”<sup>139</sup> Again, our participation in the Word through Christ confers participation in divine life and knowledge of the Son’s relation to the Father. In Christ, humanity’s debt to death is overcome, because “two things occurred simultaneously in a miraculous manner: the death of all was fulfilled in the Lord’s body and also death and corruption were destroyed because of the Word who was in it.” The Word extended his natural incorruptibility to his body and, “since he could not die, for he was immortal, [he] took to himself a body which could die in order to offer it as his own on behalf of all.”<sup>140</sup> His victory over death is proven by the resurrection, for “on the third day he raised it up, bearing as trophies and victory over death the incorruptibility and impassibility of the body.”<sup>141</sup> However, the “trophies” of incorruptibility and impassibility belong to the promise of resurrection, though there may be glimpses of them in the

---

<sup>137</sup> Louth, “Humanity of Christ,” 317.

<sup>138</sup> CA 1.42.

<sup>139</sup> DI 54.

<sup>140</sup> DI 20.

<sup>141</sup> DI 26.

life of the Christian. In addition to the triumph over death and corruption, deification renews the soul's ability to perceive the divine. As God was originally known through the soul's contemplation of creation as the work of God, so Christ is recognized as the incarnate Son of God through his works.

For because men had turned away from the contemplation of God, ...the merciful and universal Saviour, the Word of God, took to himself a body and lived as a man among men, and took the senses of all men, in order that [they]...might understand the truth from the works which the Lord did through the actions of his body, and through him might take cognizance of the Father.<sup>142</sup>

“If they were struck at creation,”<sup>143</sup> Christ showed himself to be Lord of the winds and the waves. “If their minds were preconceived towards men so that they supposed them gods,”<sup>144</sup> whether living or dead, Christ's deeds while alive would be seen to be greater than any mortal and his resurrection from the dead a divine act. “If they were prejudiced for the demons,”<sup>145</sup> Christ's authority over them, whether solitary or legion, would prove his Lordship over the spirits. Thus, through the divine works done through the body, human beings recognize Christ as truly the Son of God. In contemplation of his Sonship, humankind eventually come to knowledge, even a vision, of God the Father. In Christ, therefore, humanity's participation in the life of the Son of God and his relation to the Father has been restored.

The next task, and final concern of this chapter, is to determine how an individual human being can appropriate the benefits of Christ's deified humanity since he has ascended to the Father in heaven. Fortunately, Athanasius is rather clear on this point. He refers to 1 John 4:13

---

<sup>142</sup> DI 15.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

where the apostle writes, “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”<sup>146</sup>

Therefore, because of the grace of the Spirit that has been given to us, in Him we come to be and He in us....And the Son is in the Father, as His own Word and Radiance; but we, apart from the Spirit, are strange and distant from God, and by the participation in the Spirit we are knit into the Godhead; so that our being in the Father is not ours, but is the Spirit’s which is in us and abides in us, while by the true confession we preserve it in us.<sup>147</sup>

Humanity is joined to God through his Spirit by the true confession of faith. Athanasius here continues the tradition of locating the initiation of humanity’s participation in God through Christ in the baptismal font of repentance and regeneration. As with all other aspects of humanity’s salvation, Christ was the first to receive the anointing of the Spirit.

No otherwise should we have partaken the Spirit and been sanctified, but that the Giver of the Spirit, the Word Himself, had spoken of Himself as anointed with the Spirit for us. And therefore have we securely received it, He being said to be anointed in the flesh; for the flesh being first sanctified in Him, and He being said, as man, to have received for its sake, we have the sequel of the Spirit’s grace, receiving ‘out of his fullness.’<sup>148</sup>

Thus, the inalterable Word’s human reception of the anointing of the Spirit renders secure the same Spirit’s indwelling of every baptized Christian through which they are able to remain united to the body of Christ.<sup>149</sup> And it is by the power of the Spirit that the Christian is able to contemplate the depths of the divine in prayer and to grow in virtue in imitation of Christ.

---

<sup>146</sup> English Standard Version.

<sup>147</sup> CA 3.24.

<sup>148</sup> CA 1.50.

<sup>149</sup> Anatolios, “Significance of Christ’s Humanity,” 282-83.

# Deification of the Christian

The incarnation of the Word, indeed his ‘hominization,’ effects the renewal of humanity after the image of God. This renewed image enables human beings to know God and thereby share in the life of God, which is to be deified. To be accurate, though, Christ’s new humanity can be appropriated only by those joined to Christ by the Spirit in baptism. In baptism, the Christian enters into the Church, which is the corporate body of Christ, and receives the anointing of the Spirit, which is the Spirit of unity and of sonship. Furthermore, the power of the indwelling Spirit allows the Christian to put on the form of Christ by virtuous imitation of his life, “that not only should we bear His image, but should receive from Him an example and pattern of heavenly conversation; that as He hath begun, we should go on.”<sup>150</sup> Indeed, every Christian is called and enabled to become as Christ was, according to their own capacity.

To those then who have not yet attained to the perfect way he becomes like a sheep giving milk, and this was administered by Paul: ‘I have fed you with milk, not with meat.’ To those who have advanced beyond the full stature of childhood, but still are weak as regards perfection, he is their food according to their capacity, being again administered by Paul, ‘Let him that is weak eat herbs.’ But as soon as ever a man begins to walk in the perfect way, he is no longer fed with the things before mentioned, but he has the Word from bread, and flesh for food, for it is written, ‘Strong meat is for those who are of full age, for those who by reason of their capacity have their senses exercised.’<sup>151</sup>

It is important to note that Athanasius here differs from his Alexandrian predecessors Clement and Origen. Whereas their conception of deification was of rational enlightenment, Athanasius envisions an ontological transformation. And whereas they established a hierarchy of simple Christians and Christian Gnostics, Athanasius recognizes the simple fact that, although all

---

<sup>150</sup> Athanasius, *Festal Letters*, 2.5.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 10.4.

Christians are engaged in the same pursuit, as with any endeavor, some people progress further than others. Nonetheless, the same Spirit enlivens each quest to “put on Christ.”

As the Son is fully divine, so must the Spirit also be in order to affect the Christian’s deification. Athanasius follows the same logic in defense of the Spirit of God as he does with the Son of God. In response to those who would number the Spirit among the angels he writes, “Where in the Scriptures have they found the Spirit referred to as an angel? I am obliged to repeat what I have said before. He is called Paraclete, Spirit of adoption, Spirit of sanctification, Spirit of God, and Spirit of Christ; but never angel or archangel, or ministering spirit, as are the angels.”<sup>152</sup> Moreover, “why have they not understood that, just as by not dividing the Son from the Father they ensure that God is one, so by dividing the Spirit from the Word they no longer ensure that the Godhead in the Triad is one, for they tear it asunder, and mix with it a nature foreign to it and of a different kind, and put it on a level with the creatures?”<sup>153</sup> Athanasius unflinchingly affirms that the Spirit proceeds from the divinity of the Father, completing the scriptural witness to God as Triad. He also consistently juxtaposes the conviction that the Spirit is from the Son and in the Son alongside the conviction that the works of Christ were done by the power of the Spirit.

Again, as Christ is true Son, so we, when we receive the Spirit, are made sons. ‘For you have not received,’ it says, ‘the spirit of bondage again to fear; but you have received the Spirit of adoption.’ But if by the Spirit we are made sons, it is clear that it is in Christ we are called children of God. For: ‘So many as received him, to them gave he the power to become children of God.’... When the Holy Spirit is given to us (‘Receive the Holy Spirit,’ said the Saviour), God is in us; for John wrote: ‘If we love one another, God abideth in us; hereby know we that we abide in him and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.’ But when God is in us, the Son also is in us. For the Son himself said: ‘The Father and I will come and make our abode with him.’<sup>154</sup>

---

<sup>152</sup> Athanasius, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, trans. C.R.B. Shapland (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 1.19.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 1.2.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 1.19.

Furthermore, the incarnate Son testifies that he only acts and teaches as the Father leads. Likewise, Paul proclaims that the signs and wonders he performed by the power of the Spirit were, in fact, the works of Christ through him. “But if there is such coordination and unity within the holy Triad, who can separate either the Son from the Father, or the Spirit from the Son or from the Father himself?”<sup>155</sup>

Thus, Athanasius proves the full divinity of the Spirit and thereby validates God’s adoption of Christians as sons and daughters. Having already been created, the Christian is ‘begotten’ as a child of God. Again, the appropriation of begotten-ness is predicated on the Only-Begotten having appropriated created-ness.<sup>156</sup> But whereas the Word is Son-by-nature, the Christian is son-by-grace. This means that while Christians participate in divine life, they do not cease to be created human beings. In other words, becoming, as Paul says, a ‘new creature’ is “a kind of assimilation to the divine but never an identification with that *ousia*.”<sup>157</sup> It is a likeness to the character of God and a sharing in God’s power. Having been made sons and daughters of God by grace, Christians must strive to imitate the incarnate Son, the ‘founder and perfecter’ of the new humanity.

The ability to imitate Christ springs from the indwelling Spirit who unites Christians to the Savior, Christ Jesus, and who holds secure the soul’s contemplation in the direction of the Word. As stated previously, the soul expresses the results of its contemplation in and through its body. Thus, it is the Christian person’s participation in the divinity of the Father through the salvific works of the Son in the indwelling Spirit that allows for divine likeness to develop. The Christian, then, responds to the divine initiative with a reciprocal outpouring of virtue, moral

---

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 1.20.

<sup>156</sup> Kolp, “Participation,” 299-300; Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 171. Notice the implicit jab at the ‘Arian’ assertion that the Son’s begotten-ness equates to being created.

<sup>157</sup> Kolp, “Participation,” 312-14.

progress. “Now, my beloved, our will ought to keep pace with the grace of God and not fall short; lest while our will remains idle, the grace given us should depart, and the enemy finding us empty and naked, should enter [into us].... For the departure from virtue gives place for the entrance of the unclean spirit.”<sup>158</sup> Any laxity on the part of the soul toward contemplating the Son evidences an inclination to return to its previous state of corruption. Fortunately, the inalterability of the Son and Spirit enables the Christian to re-engage with the Godhead. Unlike Adam who was unable to return to his previous blessedness, the Christian has received the ability to remain in, or in this instance recommence, contemplation of the Son.

Now he who has been counted worthy of the heavenly calling, and by this calling has been sanctified, if he grow negligent in it, although washed becomes defiled.... [Nonetheless], the Father does not receive him as a hired servant, nor does he look upon him as a stranger, but he kisses him as a son, he brings him back to life as from the dead, and counts him worthy of the divine feast, and gives him his former and precious robe. So that, on this account, there is singing and gladness in the paternal home. For this is the work of the Father’s loving-kindness and goodness, that not only should he make him alive from the dead, but that he should render his grace illustrious through the Spirit. Therefore, instead of corruption, he clothes him with an incorruptible garment...and, what is most wonderful, placed a divine signet-ring upon his hand; whilst by all these things He begot him afresh in the image of the glory of Christ. These are the gracious gifts of the Father, by which the Lord honours and nourishes those who abide with him, and also those who return to him and repent.<sup>159</sup>

However, the Christian cannot take credit for moral growth, and certainly not miraculous deeds, because, according to Athanasius, in all these things it is Christ who is working through them. Indeed, “the Saviour effects so many things every day, leading men to the fear of God, persuading them to virtue, teaching them about immortality, bringing them to the desire for heavenly things, revealing to them knowledge of the Father, instilling in them power against death, revealing himself to each one, and destroying the godless idols.”<sup>160</sup> Concerning the many

---

<sup>158</sup> *Festal Letters*, 3.3.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 7.9-10.

<sup>160</sup> *DI* 31.

great deeds of Athanasius' hero of the faith, Antony, we read that "through him *the Lord healed* many of those present who suffered from bodily ailments; others he purged of demons."<sup>161</sup>

In many instances, Athanasius remarks that Christ was "working with" Antony, whether in his daily discipline or in violent struggles with demons. Anatolios notes that even this co-working (*synergia*) toward the Christian's deification is predicated on the Word bearing flesh for us.<sup>162</sup> It has been averred that such a synergistic relationship must be understood as the working together of two energies *unequal* in power but *equal* in necessity.<sup>163</sup> The greater power in this co-working is obviously the divine Triad, but the Christian person has been created with free will and therefore must choose to take advantage of the grace offered through Christ in the Spirit. If the Christian is the subordinate member of the partnership, what is his role? What is she bringing to the process? According to Anatolios, that role is prayer. Prayer understood, that is, as "the invocation of divine presence and assistance."<sup>164</sup> For example, "Antony did, in fact, heal without issuing commands, but by praying and calling on the name of Christ.... Only the prayer was Antony's and the discipline for which he lived in the mountain."<sup>165</sup> The average Christian prays for daily bread from the hands of God, for patience with family, for wisdom in the situations of life, for the ability to love those who stand against them. Antony, in his ascetic discipline, simply takes these invocations several steps further. The imitation of Christ, then, is possible only to those who have 'become partakers of the divine nature,'<sup>166</sup> which is itself initiated by the

---

<sup>161</sup> Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York : Paulist Press, 1980), 14; emphasis added. Hereafter, *Vita*.

<sup>162</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 182.

<sup>163</sup> David W. Fagerberg, "Liturgy, Signs, and Sacraments" in Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2015), 455-65.

<sup>164</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 186.

<sup>165</sup> *Vita* 84.

<sup>166</sup> 2 Peter 1:4 ESV.

incarnation of the Son of God and appropriated by individuals in the anointing of the Spirit through baptism.

### Taking on the Form of Christ

The Spirit is called unction and he is seal. For John writes: ‘As for you, the unction which ye received of him abideth in you, and you need not that anyone teach you, but his unction’—his Spirit—‘teacheth you concerning all things.’...The seal could not be from among the things that are sealed, nor the unction from among the things that are anointed; it pertains to the Word who anoints and seals. For the unction has the fragrance and odour of him who anoints.... The seal has the form of Christ who seals, and those who are sealed partake of it, being conformed to it.... Being thus sealed, we are duly made, as Peter put it, ‘sharers in the divine nature.’<sup>167</sup>

Further, it is through the Spirit that we are all said to be partakers of God.... [A]s it is, the fact of our being called partakers of Christ and partakers of God shows that the unction and seal that is in us belongs, not to the nature of things originate, but to the nature of the Son who, through the Spirit who is in him, joins us to the Father.... But if, by participation in the Spirit, we are made ‘sharers in the divine nature,’ we should be mad to say that the Spirit has a created nature and not the nature of God. For it is on this account that those in whom he is are made divine.<sup>168</sup>

In connection with the oil or ointment used during the baptismal rite, Athanasius comments that the anointing of the Spirit bathes the Christian in the fragrance of Christ. Secondly, reminiscent of the sealing of a document with wax, the Spirit imprints upon the Christian the image of the Lord, Jesus Christ, for “the seal has the form of Christ who seals.” Thus, as the wax takes the ‘form’ of the stamp, when the Christian receives the Spirit in baptism through faith s/he begins to be conformed to the likeness of Christ. In addition, it should be noted that the Spirit is not the instrument of anointing and sealing, but *is* the seal and *is* the anointing unction. While the image is itself restored, the Christian must grow into maturity. The image of Christ has only lightly been impressed upon the soul, but over time, and with practice, the image

---

<sup>167</sup> Athanasius, *Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 1.23.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 1.24.

will become clearer as it is etched deeper into the heart, realizing the divinization of the Christian person.

Christians imitate Christ, first and foremost, by living a virtuous life which has its source in the contemplation of the converted soul. “For virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part according to nature. It holds fast according to nature when it remains as it was made—and it was made beautiful and perfectly straight.”<sup>169</sup> As before, participation in the Spirit grants the individual security in divine contemplation. And by contemplating the Son through prayer, and through him the Father, the soul reflects the character of God in the body. “For virtues and vices are the food of the soul, and it can eat either of these two meats, and incline to either of the two, according to its will. If it is bent towards virtue, it will be nourished by virtues, by righteousness, by temperance, by meekness, by fortitude, as Paul saith, ‘Being nourished by the word of truth.’”<sup>170</sup>

Having received such a restoration, and being co-workers with Christ, Christians are called to become like Christ in their own lives, showing forth the fruit of the Spirit. “For he desired, as he testified in Ezekiel, the repentance of a man rather than his death; so that evil should be entirely consumed in men, that the soul, being purified, might be able to bring forth fruit; for the word which is sown by him will be productive, some thirty, some sixty, some an hundred.”<sup>171</sup> “For it is not his will that the grace we have received should be unprofitable; but he requires us to take pains to render him his own fruits, as the blessed Paul saith, ‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace.’”<sup>172</sup> The Word of God is necessarily active; therefore, those who receive him must also be productive and fruitful. Undoubtedly, Athanasius gave innumerable

---

<sup>169</sup> *Vita* 20.

<sup>170</sup> *Festal Letters*, 1.5; Cf. 10.7.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, 3.4.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, 6.5.

sermons regarding the fruit of the Spirit and putting on the mind of Christ. In his Festal Letters, he exhorts the Egyptian Christians to be worthy of the Easter feast, which is a figure of the heavenly Banquet, by the purity of their conduct throughout the Lenten fast. He encourages his flock, saying, “Let us vie with each other in observing the purity of the fast, by watchfulness in prayers, by study of the Scripture, by distributing to the poor, and let us be at peace with our enemies. Let us bind up those who are scattered abroad, banish pride, and return to lowliness of mind, being at peace with all men, and urging the brethren unto love.”<sup>173</sup> Ultimately, the Christian walk is a preparation for eternity in heaven.

Being called, then, to the great and heavenly Supper, in that upper room that has been swept, let us ‘cleanse ourselves,’ as the Apostle exhorted, ‘from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God;’ that so, being spotless within and without—without, clothing ourselves with temperance and justice; within, by the Spirit, rightly dividing the word of truth—we may hear, ‘Enter into the joy of thy Lord.’<sup>174</sup>

Therefore, putting on Christ in this life, the Christian proleptically participates in the table fellowship of the kingdom of heaven. Understanding, then, the typical Christian’s experience of being made a son or daughter of God, all that remains is to investigate Athanasius’ vision of the heights to which humanity may soar in the Christian’s participation in divine life, which is exemplified in the life of Antony.

### As Far as Human Nature Is Able

Antony is the originator and reluctant founder of the monastic movement of the Egyptian desert. Throughout the *Vita*, Athanasius heralds him as the ideal figure of the divinized Christian. Likewise, Antony illuminates Athanasius’ understanding of the Christian life as the reception and appropriation of divine grace.<sup>175</sup> There does not seem to have been anything remarkable

---

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, 14.5.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>175</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 166.

about Antony's childhood. His parents were both Christians and they raised him and his younger sister in accordance with the traditions of the Christian faith. When he reached adulthood, however, he was led by the Spirit to pursue a life of ascetic discipline after pondering the sacrifice of the disciples to follow Christ and hearing, on a certain occasion, the Gospel reading concerning the invitation for the rich man to sell his belongings.<sup>176</sup>

While initially remaining on his family estate, he nonetheless pursued a rigid discipline of meditating on Scripture and the lives of the saints and of mortifying the deeds of the body. Being zealous in his endeavor to imitate Christ, he spent several years traveling to learn from any monk whose name reached his ears. From these monks, he learned "graciousness...eagerness for prayers...freedom from anger and the human concern of another...a watchful life...patience...fastings and sleeping on the ground...gentleness...long-suffering.... He marked, likewise, the piety toward Christ and the mutual love of them all."<sup>177</sup> Antony pursued perfection in every virtue, even humility. When, after twenty-plus years, he consented to instructing others who wished to follow his discipline, he focused on the renunciation of material possessions, saying,

Let us not consider, when we look at the world, that we have given things of some greatness, for even the entire earth is itself quite small in relation to all of heaven.... Let none among us have the yearning to possess. For what benefit is there in possessing these things that we do not take with us? Why not rather own those things that we are able to take away with us—such things as prudence, justice, temperance, courage, understanding, love, concern for the poor, faith in Christ, freedom from anger, hospitality?<sup>178</sup>

He also addressed them concerning the practice of watchfulness, saying that "in order that we not become negligent, it is good to carefully consider the Apostle's statement, 'I die daily.' For if we so live as people dying daily, we will not commit sin."<sup>179</sup> "Conducting our lives in this manner,

---

<sup>176</sup> *Vita*, 1-3.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid* 4.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid* 17.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid* 19.

let us carefully keep watch, and as Scripture says, let us ‘keep our heart in watchfulness.’”<sup>180</sup> He continued further:

That this might be preserved in us, it is good to hear and obey the Apostle, for he says, ‘Examine yourselves and test yourselves’ Now daily let each one recount to himself his actions of the day and night, and if he sinned, let him stop. But if he has not sinned, let him avoid boasting; rather, let him persist in the good, and not become careless, nor condemnatory of a neighbor, nor declare himself righteous until, as the blessed apostle Paul said, the Lord comes who searches out the hidden things.... Therefore, yielding the judgment to him, let us treat each other with compassion, and let us bear one another’s burdens. Let us examine ourselves, however, and those things we are lacking let us hurry to complete.<sup>181</sup>

Finally, Antony illuminated for them the prayerful pursuit of virtue and the purification of the soul. Note the similarities to Athanasius’ related discourses in CG-DI.

Having therefore made a beginning, and set out already on the way of virtue, let us press forward to what lies ahead.... But do not be afraid to hear about virtue, and do not be a stranger to the term. For it is not distant from us, nor does it stand external to us, but its realization lies in us, and the task is easy if only we shall will it.... All virtue needs, then, is our willing, since it is in us, and arises from us. For virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part according to nature. It holds fast according to nature when it remains as it was made—and it was made beautiful and perfectly straight.... But when it turns from its course and is twisted away from what it naturally is, then we speak of the vice of the soul.<sup>182</sup>

Athanasius reveals elsewhere that the way to train the soul is by meditating on Scripture and contemplating the lives of the saints, so that the soul will have virtue, and not vice, for food.

The most common activity of Antony appears to be the discernment and exorcism of demonic spirits. Likewise, it receives the most attention within the discourses of the *Vita*. When he begins to make progress in virtue through his discipline, the demons strive against him. In this encounter, Athanasius first reveals the fact that Christ is working with Antony in this spiritual endeavor.<sup>183</sup> When he truly commits himself to his discipline by seeking solitude outside the village, he is engaged in several days of spiritual battle. The Devil himself even makes an

---

<sup>180</sup> Ibid 21.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid 55.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid 20.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid 5.

appearance. And when he perseveres through this mighty struggle, beating back each demonic advance with prayer and hymns, the Lord comes to his aid in a vivifying vision.<sup>184</sup> Athanasius, in his narration and through Antony, continually impresses upon the reader the reality of Christ's victory over the Devil which is appropriated by all who partake of his body. In speaking to his fellow monks, Antony comments that

we need not fear their suggestions, for by prayers and fasting and faith in the Lord they are brought down immediately.... Nevertheless, we need not fear their apparitions, for they are nothing and they disappear quickly—especially if one fortifies himself with faith and the sign of the cross.... So here it is not necessary to fear them, for by the grace of Christ all their pursuits come to nothing.<sup>185</sup>

There is no secret knowledge or power involved in the battle against the demons. In fact, the weapons that Antony describes are available to every Christian: prayer, fasts, faith, and the sign of the cross. However, Antony's prowess in this regard remains impressive.

Another regular occurrence in the *Vita* is Antony's ministry of healing. Athanasius references this activity whenever pilgrims come to Antony's desert community and whenever Antony returns from a period of solitude. After emerging from his training in the deserted fortress, Antony becomes a prolific preacher, healer, and exorcist. "Through him the Lord healed many of those present from bodily ailments."<sup>186</sup> It could be said that Antony effected the healing of physical, psychological, and spiritual disorders. In this regard, the synergy between Christ and Antony was particularly visible. Nonetheless, Antony always counseled those around him that the healing was truly the Lord's doing.

And with those who suffered he sympathized and prayed—and frequently the Lord heard the prayers he offered on behalf of many people. And Antony was neither boastful when he was heeded, nor disgruntled when he was not; rather he gave thanks to the Lord always. He encouraged those who suffered to have patience and to know that healing belonged

---

<sup>184</sup> Ibid 8-10.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid 23-24.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid 14.

neither to him nor to men at all, but only to God who acts whenever he wishes and for whomever he wills.<sup>187</sup>

This passage illustrates that the virtues of the human concern for others, humility, and faith in the Lord were all involved in the exercise of such a ministry of healing. In and through all of these manifestations of Christ working with Antony, that is, the external evidences of his deification, flows the ‘eagerness for prayers’ which invokes the authoritative presence of Christ and the transformative power of the Spirit.

Prayer is the anchor of every monastic rule, and Antony’s discipline is no different. Prayer guides him in his youth; it sustains him through many trials while Christ was training him in the path of ascetic discipline. Prayer is the instrument of the perfecting of the soul. Antony conquers temptations through prayer: “The [demon] hurled foul thoughts and [Antony] overturned them through his prayers; the former resorted to titillation, but the latter, seeming to blush, fortified the body with faith and with prayers and fasting.”<sup>188</sup> Antony often seeks solitude to pray and converse with the Lord. He even becomes accustomed to being personally addressed by a voice coming from God.<sup>189</sup> He often heals physical ailments and casts out demons through prayer alone, without ever speaking to the persons who suffered.

Athanasius attests to many instances where Antony, deep in prayer, is granted a brief vision of the spiritual reality around him. On one occasion, “he was sitting in the mountain, and looking up he saw someone being led up into the air, and great joy emanating from those who met him. Filled with wonder, and blessing such a great chorus, he prayed to learn what this might mean. And immediately a voice came to him, telling him that this was the soul of Amun, the

---

<sup>187</sup> Ibid 56.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid 5.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid 49.

monk in Nitria.”<sup>190</sup> On several occasions, he is blessed with visions of the spiritual battle for the souls of men. In one such vision, he beholds that some souls, those that had submitted to Christ instead of their own desires, are able to escape the clutches of the enemy.<sup>191</sup> “Frequently while sitting or walking with those who visited him, he was struck dumb, as it is written in Daniel. Some time later he would resume what he had been saying with the brothers in his company, and those with him were aware that he was seeing some spectacle.”<sup>192</sup> Antony progresses in the way of divinization to the extent that he begins to see reality with the senses of his soul. “For I believe that when a soul is pure in every way and in its natural state, it is able, having become clear-sighted, to see more and farther than the demons, since it has the Lord who reveals things to it.”<sup>193</sup> Antony here exemplifies the implications of Athanasius’ understanding of anthropology and deification. The purity of the soul begins to affect Antony’s experience of the world around him.

Continuing the theme of divine transference, Antony also exemplifies the divine attribute of immutability by “achieving an immanent harmony or equanimity, an inner order,”<sup>194</sup> particularly in the latter portion of his life. Athanasius describes his emergence from his ascetic training within the abandoned fortress with wonder and amazement. “The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection. Moreover, when he saw the crowd, he was not annoyed any more than he was elated at being embraced by so many people. He maintained *utter equilibrium*, like one guided by reason and *steadfast in that which accords with nature*.”<sup>195</sup> Antony’s own instruction

---

<sup>190</sup> Ibid 60.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid 65-66.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid 82.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid 34.

<sup>194</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 200.

<sup>195</sup> *Vita*, 14; emphasis added.

in prayer and discipline is such that he is guided by the rational soul, through its renewal after the image of the Word. Moreover, the soul's natural contemplation of the Son of God remains secure in Antony, thus ensuring the influx of divine life into Antony's humanity. When he begins to be concerned about the distractions of the desert community, Antony travels to a remote location in the desert known as the inner mountain. Athanasius and the monks who minister to his needs express their amazement at the trials he is still engaged in as an elderly man.

And it was truly amazing that being alone in such a desert he was neither distracted by the demons who confronted him, nor was he frightened of their ferocity when so many four-legged beasts and reptiles were there. But truly he was one who, as Scripture says, having trusted in the Lord, was like Mount Sion, keeping his mind unshaken and unruffled; so instead the demons fled and the wild beasts, as it is written, made peace with him. Then the devil watched Antony closely, and (as David sings) gnashed his teeth against him. But Antony was comforted by the Saviour, remaining unaffected by his treacheries and various ploys.<sup>196</sup>

In this manner, then, Antony appropriates the immutable character of the divine Triad.

Athanasius reports that the purity of Antony's soul often marked him out in a crowd.

It was not his physical dimensions that distinguished him from the rest, but the stability of character and the purity of the soul. His soul being free of confusion, he held his outer senses also undisturbed, so that from the soul's joy his face was cheerful as well, and from the movements of the body it was possible to sense and perceive the stable condition of the soul.<sup>197</sup>

Moreover, his body seems to have been increasingly infused with divine incorruptibility as a foretaste of the resurrection. After a formidable and prolonged struggle against a host of demons in the tombs outside his village, in which Antony claims the victory, the Lord comes to him and promises to be his "helper forever." Upon hearing this, "he stood up and prayed, and he was so strengthened that he felt that his body contained more might than before."<sup>198</sup> After this encounter, he leaves the cemetery and eventually finds the abandoned fortress in which he

---

<sup>196</sup> Ibid 51-52.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid 67.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid 10.

spends nearly twenty years being trained by the Spirit in the discipline of discipleship. When his friends finally tear down the doors to make sure he isn't dead,

Antony came forth as though from some shrine, having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God. This was the first time he appeared from the fortress for those who came out to him. And when they beheld him, they were amazed to see that *his body had maintained its former condition*, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons, but was just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal.<sup>199</sup>

Throughout these many years, his soul is being fed with the prayerful contemplation of Christ and his Father, as well as with virtue. Consequently, his body receives the benefits of such divine sustenance by maintaining its vigor and health. Again, Antony receives this gift as a foretaste of the resurrection body with its liberation from decay.<sup>200</sup>

The reception of and participation in divine life is, for Athanasius, the birthright of all who have been born of God through Christ in the Spirit. While they were naturally born of Adam, Christians are reborn in Christ by grace. As such, they must progress in virtue by the example of Christ and the power of the Spirit, unto perfection. Receiving the seal of Christ which is the Spirit of God, Christians take on the form of Christ. However, they must endeavor to be ever more visibly conformed to the image of Christ by communing with him in prayer and by imitating his virtuous life. While every Christian is engaged in this pursuit, Athanasius promotes the monk Antony as the ideal figure of the perfected, indeed deified, Christian.

---

<sup>199</sup> Ibid 14.

<sup>200</sup> Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 28.

# Conclusion

Throughout this essay, it has been my intent to illuminate the anthropological implications of Athanasius' conception of deification which I have defined as a secure participation in divine life resulting from the soul's perpetual contemplation of God the Father which is predicated on the Son's deification of his own humanity. The divinization of individual Christians is further secured by the indwelling of the Spirit. Furthermore, following the anthropology espoused by Athanasius, it has been my assertion that this deification applies to the whole person, body and soul. I have attempted to do so by highlighting the interrelatedness of his theology of creation and salvation, as well as his Christology. Integral to all three areas are the dichotomy between uncreated and created, the concept of participation, and the concept of appropriation. Central to Athanasian deification is the conviction that humanity is not changed into some higher being but, rather, is empowered to become what God originally intended for humanity.

According to Athanasius, God has created humanity, like all of creation, out of nothing. Knowing that the nature of created things would revert back to its original non-existence, God has chosen to sustain the universe by granting it participation in the power of God through his Word. God's kindness has been especially directed toward humankind by creating them after the image of the Word. As such, humankind receive knowledge of God and participation in divine life. Furthermore, as has been clearly shown, Athanasius highlights the duality of body and soul as ontologically essential. The soul is spiritual and rational but, being immaterial, needs the body as its instrument of expression in a material world. Through its 'kinship' to the Word, the soul is naturally able to contemplate God and thereby receive divine attributes. The soul then funnels

these attributes into the body and expresses them through the body. However, the soul is also naturally mobile. Consequently, the soul can choose to direct its contemplation away from God and toward that which is ‘closer to itself.’ This very choice results in the fall of humanity from their original state in paradise. Following this first sin, humanity has fallen deeper and deeper into its own corruptibility, to the point that repentance alone is not enough to receive redemption. Due to this ontological deficit, humanity requires a complete renewal, a re-creation. According to Athanasius, only the one responsible for their original creation can achieve this recapitulation of humankind, namely the Word of God.

In order to effect this renewal, the Son of God himself becomes human. The wonder of the Incarnation, for Athanasius, is that God overcomes the ontological gulf between uncreated and created natures in order to transcend humanity’s corruptibility by appropriating and then deifying it. Indeed, only the uncreated, natural Image of God could re-establish within humanity its created, participatory image of the Word. As such, Christ is the instrument of both the renewal of human being and the renewal of divine knowledge. In relation to the Christological debates of the fourth century, Athanasius’ understanding of participation mandates that the Son be fully and essentially God, because a created Son, even one ‘ineffably great,’ would be unable to transmit its participation in divinity to another created being. Only a Son who is naturally a member of the divine Triad could share divine attributes with created beings. In addition to remaking humanity after the image of God, the Son also renders this added grace ‘secure’ because of its own ‘inalterability.’ In Christ, the one who gives grace (according to the Godhead) also receives it (according to the humanity). In order to vivify and transform humanity, the Word first had to appropriate it. As Athanasius explains, all of the characteristics and limitations of humanity that Christ is said to have exhibited, including the “affections proper to it,” are

properly ascribed to the divine Son. Thus, the fullness of humanity is transformed, body and soul, because it has been taken on by the incorruptible Son of God. In this way, the Son of God deifies humanity in Christ.

In principle, this new, deified humanity is available to all. In practice, it must be appropriated individually. Christian baptism, wherein persons are joined to the corporate Body of Christ and receive the Holy Spirit's anointing, initiates an individual's participation in divine life. The reception of the Spirit as the agent of the Christian's deification is predicated on Christ himself receiving the Spirit's anointing, according to the body, in his baptism in the Jordan. Being united to Christ by the indwelling Spirit, the soul renews its contemplation of God through prayer. According to Athanasius, the influx of grace necessitates a reciprocal action by imitating the divine attributes through moral growth. Athanasius describes the advance into deification as Christ working with and through those united to him. He recognizes that the various levels of perfection that Christians attain is not indicative of an inherent distinction between simple and enlightened. Rather, he encourages his flock by declaring that God provides spiritual food appropriate to each person's maturation. As motivation for those seeking to be like Christ, Athanasius offers the life of Antony as an example of the transformative grace that is available to Christians, even in this life.

# Bibliography

- Allchin, A. M. *Participation in God : A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition*. Wilton, CT : Morehouse-Barlow, 1988.
- Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius : The Coherence of His Thought*. New York : Routledge, 1998.
- . “The Soteriological Significance of Christ’s Humanity in St. Athanasius.” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1996): 265–86.
- Athanasius. *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*. Translated by Robert W. Thomson. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971.
- . *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*. Translated by C.R.B. Shapland. New York: Philosophical Library, 1951.
- . *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*. Translated by Robert C. Gregg. New York : Paulist Press, 1980.
- Barnes, Michel R., and Daniel H. Williams, eds. *Arianism after Arius : Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts*. Edinburgh : T&T Clark, 1993.
- Behr, John. *The Nicene Faith*. Crestwood, N.Y. : St. Vladimir’s seminary Press, 2004.
- Boersma, Hans, and Matthew Levering, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Christensen, Michael J., and Jeffery A. Wittung, eds. *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*. Grand Rapids : Baker Academic, 2008.
- Dragas, George D. “Ἐνανθρωπεῖς ἢ Ἐγένετο Ἄνθρωπο: A Neglected Aspect of Athanasius’ Christology.” *Studia Patristica* Berlin: Akademie Verlag (1985): 281-94.
- Finlan, Stephen, and Vladimir Kharlamov, eds. *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Pub., 2006.
- Grillmeier, Alois. *Christ in Christian Tradition*. Translated by J. S. Bowden. New York, NY : Sheed and Ward, 1965.
- Gross, Jules. *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*. Translated by Onica, Paul A. Anaheim, CA: A&C Press, 2002.
- Gwynn, David M. *Athanasius of Alexandria : Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . *The Eusebians : The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the “Arian Controversy.”* New York : Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Hanson, R P C. (Richard Patrick Crosland) Bp. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Hess, Hamilton. “The Place of Divinization in Athanasian Soteriology.” *Studia Patristica* Louvain: Peeters (1993): 369-74.
- Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *One with God : Salvation as Deification and Justification*. Unitas Books. Collegeville, Minn. : Liturgical Press, c2004., 2004.
- Keating, Daniel A. *Deification and Grace*. Naples, FL : Sapientia Press, 2007.
- Kelly, J. N. D. *Early Christian Doctrines*. New York : Harper, 1958.
- Kharlamov, Vladimir, ed. *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Pub., 2011.
- . “Theosis in Patristic Thought.” *Theology Today* 65, no. 2 (July 2008): 158–68.

- Kimbrough, S. T., ed. *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology*. Crestwood, N.Y. : St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007.
- , ed. *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice*. Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005.
- , ed. *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*. Crestwood, N.Y. : St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002.
- . *Partakers of the Life Divine: Participation in the Divine Nature in the Writings of Charles Wesley*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016.
- Kolp, Alan Lee. "Participation: A Unifying Concept in the Theology of Athanasius." Dissertation, Harvard University, 1976.
- Lienhard, Joseph T. "The 'Arian' Controversy: Some Categories Reconsidered." *Theological Studies* 48, no. 3 (September 1987): 415.
- Louth, Andrew. "Athanasius' Understanding of the Humanity of Christ." *Studia Patristica* Berlin: Akademie Verlag (1985): 309-18.
- Meconi, David Vincent. "The Consummation of the Christian Promise: Recent Studies on Deification." *New Blackfriars* 87, no. 1007 (January 2006): 3–12.
- Meconi, David Vincent, and Carl E. Olson. *Called to Be the Children of God : The Catholic Theology of Human Deification*. San Francisco : Ignatius Press, 2016.
- Pettersen, Alvyn. *Athanasius and the Human Body*. Bedminster, Bristol : Bristol Press, 1990.
- Russell, Norman. *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford, 2006.
- Schaff, Philip, and Henry Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Peabody, MA : Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.
- Stead, Christopher. "The Scriptures and the Soul of Christ in Athanasius." *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, no. 3 (September 1982): 233–50.
- Steenberg, M. C. *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius*. London: T&T Clark, 2009.
- Torrance, Thomas F., ed. *Theological Dialogue Between Orthodox and Reformed Churches*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985.
- , ed. *Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Reformed Churches, Vol 2*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1993.
- Weinandy, Thomas G. *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction*. Burlington, VT : Ashgate, 2007.
- . "Athanasius: The Incarnation and the Soul of Christ." *Studia Patristica* Leuven: Peeters (2006): 265-69.
- Williams, Rowan. *Arius : Heresy and Tradition*. Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 2002.
- Young, Frances M., and Andrew Teal. *From Nicaea to Chalcedon : A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Academic, 2010.