

Athanasius: On the Incarnation of the Word

by

Ernest W. Durbin II

The Life and Thought of the Christian Church: Beginnings to about 1500 A.D.

HCUS 5010

Walter Froese, Ph.D.

November 1, 2004

ON THE INCARNATION OF THE WORD

The theological exposition “On the Incarnation” is the second part of two works composed by Athanasius in the early fourth century. Following the first work “Against the Gentiles,” this second treatise is regarded by many as the most definitive work of Athanasius, addressing his quintessential posture for the divinity of Christ. Addressed to Marcarius, unknown historically and possibly not a particular person, the essay “On the Incarnation” methodically explains why the Word would have to become Incarnate, the way in which this event occurred, and the implications of this celebrated action. Arguments formed inside this document proved foundational to Athanasius and were repeatedly employed in his lifelong struggle against Arianism.

Arianism originated in Alexandria Egypt when its founder Arius came into contention with Bishop Alexander over the nature of Christ; Arius purported Christ was a created being, formed by the Father. Athanasius declared this subordination of Christ as heresy, seeing its result as thwarting salvation thru the lesser sacrifice of a “created” Christ. As archdeacon, he accompanied Bishop Alexander to the Council of Nicaea, actively refuting Arian heterodoxy. Within a few years of this first ecumenical council, Athanasius succeeded Alexander as Bishop, continuing both in that office and the Arian struggle the remainder of his life. It was during his tumultuous early years as champion of the orthodox that Athanasius composed “On the Incarnation.”¹ Athanasius would be

¹ Some historians place composition as early as 318, which would precede the Arian controversy and the first ecumenical council. Others date the document around 335. In either case, the essay is foundational for Athanasius and his eventual conquest of Arianism.

exiled five times during the remainder of his life, never relenting from his strong opposition to the Arian heresy. It was his ideology, demarcated in “On the Incarnation,” that provided the ballast Athanasius required during his tempestuous experiences as defender of the orthodox.

The central assertion within “On the Incarnation” is that the Word (Christ) was with God and was the agent of creation in the beginning. Humankind was created out of nothing in the beginning, but having fallen was returning to nothingness, in essence undoing creation. The Word entered the created realm to renew creation; the same agent affected both works of creation and salvation. Athanasius systematically sustains this assertion in discernible subsections:² creation and the fall (1-5), the Divine dilemma and the Incarnation solution (6-18), the death of Christ (19-25), the resurrection of Christ (26-32), refutation of both the Jews (33-40) and the Gentiles (41-55), and finally a short conclusion (56-57).

Athanasius begins his argument affirming the presence of the Word as the agent of creation. Humankind as well as all creation was made out of nothing, no pre-existent matter was used; God was not a craftsman bound by raw material, but a true creator in every sense. Above other creatures, humans were made in the image of God, placed in the garden and given a single prohibition. Exercising free will, humans broke the single prohibition resulting in the fall and returning to nonexistence again. Humankind having lost the knowledge of God, lost existence with it. Evil becomes equated with non-being, the negation and antithesis of good. Humans created in the image of God to be

² The document in translation has been divided into a total of 57 chapters which do not necessarily denote specific changes in thought. Notations in parentheses are chapter references.

incorruptible had by their own actions been corrupted. And God's good work begins to disappear, to be undone.

This undoing of creation Athanasius considered as a quandary for God. It is unthinkable that humankind created in God's own image, and sharing the nature of the Word, would perish and return to nonexistence. God's noble works were on the road to ruin. It is impossible for God to leave humankind to be carried off into nothingness by their own corruption; it would be unfitting and unworthy of God Himself. What was God to do? The solution to the dilemma is re-creation through the Word. The Word of the Father alone is sufficient to be the ambassador of re-creation. Perceiving that corruption could only be eliminated through death, the immortal Word transcended to be mortal, offering Himself as a substitute for the life of all. The incorporeal, incorruptible and immaterial Word of God stooped to the level of the created and took on a body. A body designed expressly for the purpose of being sacrificed for other like kind bodies; putting an end to the law of death and creating a new beginning with a hope of resurrection.

Taking on a mortal body, the Word did so in order that as Man He might be experienced in the senses and convince humankind that He Himself was not only human but also God. He displayed miracles with His body to demonstrate His divinity. His body was to be understood as a real one, not merely by appearance. Through ordinary acts such as being born³ and eating, He was recognized as actually being present in the body. The Word incarnate was not limited by His body for He was both in it and also in all things.

³ Athanasius repeatedly makes note of the virgin birth as an indication of the divinity of Christ although in chapter 18 he discusses being born to demonstrate that the Word is "to have a body in truth."

From the incarnation as the solution to the dilemma of God, Athanasius proceeds to discuss the necessity of the death of Christ, describing it as “the sum of our faith.” Only the Savior Himself, who created us out of nothing, was capable of recreating us in the image of God. However, because of man’s sin, there was a debt owed which had to be paid. The price to be paid was death. The reason the Word came to dwell among us was to offer Himself as a sacrifice on our behalf, surrendering His own body to death in place of all, making us free from transgression by settling our account. In a marvelous way, the death of all was consummated through death of the Lord’s body, yet because the Word was in His body, death itself was also completely destroyed. By the grace of the Savior, death is now brought to nonexistence, the same nonexistence we were doomed to before re-creation. Athanasius closes the section on the death of Christ with a detailed discussion of the necessity of the public crucifixion of Christ, stating the importance of a publicly witnessed death to the proclamation of His bodily resurrection.

Athanasius begins his section on the resurrection of Christ conferring the logistics of why the Savior waited three days to rise from the dead. In the same concrete manner in which he closed his section on the death of Christ, Athanasius points to the importance of people truly knowing that Christ had died. (i.e. entombed three days). Athanasius quickly transitions from these empirical issues to the authenticity and the implications of the resurrection. His primary argument for the legitimacy of the resurrection stems from the evident transformation which takes place in the lives of believers in Christ. Those who were once gripped by the fear of death now mocked it. Martyrs were provided as examples of people who because of their faith in Christ, no longer shrank from torture but in fact regarded death as impotent. Their fearlessness of death is but one byproduct of the

resurrection, prior to death believers in Christ lived virtuous lives. Adultery, profanity, murder, idolatry and other deeds of the flesh found their destruction in the resurrection. This moral change in people's lives "is not the work of one dead, but of one that lives," being proof of the power and implication of the resurrection of Christ.

After this potent explanation of the resurrection, Athanasius commits a substantial portion of his work to refuting the unbelief of both the Jews and the Gentiles. In response to the Jews, Athanasius masterfully argues on behalf of the Christ from their Scriptures, demonstrating how they predict both in general and in detail the coming of Jesus Christ. Turning to the Gentiles, Athanasius confronts their cynicism utilizing philosophical arguments, discussing whether God is a part of everything and subsequently whether he could be a human. He continues his argument noting that since the coming of Christ, paganism and "the wisdom of the Greeks" have been discredited and are in decline. Contrasting the impact of paganism and Christian faith on people's lives, Athanasius marks the positive and virtuous effects of the latter. He closes his dissertation to the Gentiles reminding them that all human things are temporary and will cease, but Christ will remain, the true Son of God, the only-begotten Word.

Athanasius concludes his treatise reminding Marcarius that these words are only a beginning and he should study Scripture to prove their truth. Scripture will show Marcarius that Christ will come again, this time not in lowliness but in His proper glory, no longer in humility but in majesty. Christ will no longer suffer, but will bestow on us all the fruits of His cross, the resurrection and incorruptibility. Before his final doxology, Athanasius encourages Marcarius to imitate the saints by copying their virtuous deeds.

“On the Incarnation” both begins and ends with a reference to one Marcarius. Whether Marcarius was a historic individual or simply a pseudonym for any intended reader, the document implies by address instruction for the believer. Yet from the onset to the close this essay it is a mixture of both apology and theological treatise, yielding very little practical instruction for the everyday life of the believer. Rather this writing has the literary flavor of a legal brief, as if to prepare the reader to engage in argumentative discourse. While it may be lacking in practical instruction, it is theologically persuasive, intellectually steeling the believer’s faith. Within the context of the Christological controversies prevalent during Athanasius’ day, benefits to the reader move beyond the practical to the critical. How one follows Christ is not important if one does not know who Christ is.

The contribution of this document to the history of the church is immeasurable. Athanasius is regularly associated with helping define the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Notably absent inside the essay “On the Incarnation” is any reference to the Holy Spirit. Yet this piece of work is regarded as essential to the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity. As the early church struggled to understand the Godhead, it first had to come to terms with the nature and person of Jesus Christ. Only after the foundational issues of Christology were grappled with could the Church proceed to characterize the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit. This work is a groundbreaking and fundamental discourse in Christology. The legacy of Athanasius, both in terms of his contribution to Trinitarian doctrine and defense against the Arian heresy, began with and was sustained by, this early monumental writing.