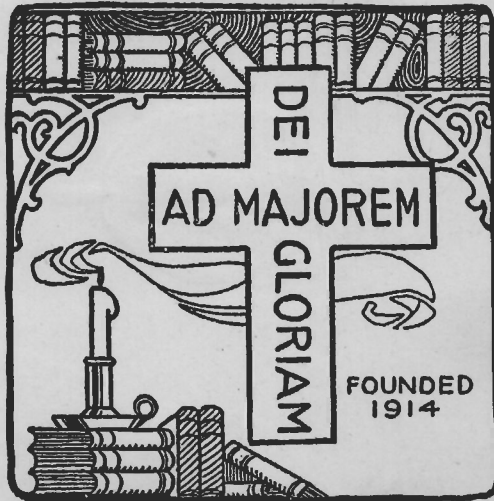


ATHANASIUS' DOCTRINE
OF THE ATONEMENT

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ATHANASIUS' DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT

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A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology

Emory University

By

Lester H. Colloms

Candidate for Degree of

BACHELOR OF DIVINITY

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AUGUST 1931

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Department of Church History

W. T. Watkins, Professor

Emory University, Ga.

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ATKINSON'S DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT

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PREFACE

As might be expected in a work of this sort, frequent recourse has been made to many books from which help could be secured. Special acknowledgment is made for the use of the following volumes:

Franks', History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ;

Harnack's, History of Dogma, Volumes III and IV;

Kilpatrick's, "Soteriology," Hastings' E.R.E.;

Lidgett's, Spiritual Principle of the Atonement;

Richards', Christian Ways of Salvation;

Robertson's, "Athanasius' Select Works;" Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, (Second Series.);

Seeberg's, Textbook of the History of Doctrines.

Grateful acknowledgment is also made to Professor W. T. Watkins for his helpful suggestions and corrections.

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INTRODUCTION

Some time between 296 A.D. and 298 A.D., Athanasius, one of the great men of the Christian church, was born.¹ Very little is known of his early years. Some of the later church history scholars have concluded that his parents belonged to the nobility and were wealthy. Judging from his own statements, however, he had little wealth. Be that as it may, we know from his writings that he had a Greek education. They show an acquaintance with Greek literature and with the latest Greek philosophy. He was an exceptional student of the Greek Bible.²

"But whatever the interest of Athanasius in the learning of his time, his devotion was the Bible. This book was his great university. One finds the peculiar Christian mood in the whole relation of Athanasius to the Bible. Here was his wisdom, and here his great teacher."³

Athanasius was thoroughly trained in the theology of his day in the famous School of Alexandria. This was the school of Clement and Origen and the influence of the latter was still great in the student days of Athanasius. He probably was first taught by Peter, the bishop and martyr of 311. "It was from Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, 312-328,

¹Robertson, Archibald, "Prolegomena," Ch. II, Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV, p. xiv.

²Ibid.

³Hough, L.H., Athanasius, the Hero, p. 38.

himself an Origenist that Athanasius received his moulding at the critical period of his later teens."¹ Though a student of Origen, he did not agree with all of his teacher's theological views. He did not equal Origen in scholarship, yet he had a brilliant mind and dared to think for himself.

Athanasius had both training and native endowment, resulting in a personality rich in culture and spirituality, all of which qualified him for a great service, not only to the church of his day, but to the church of succeeding generations. He had analyzed heathenism, the philosophies of his age, and the faith of Judaism, and rejected them all for the Christian faith. No wonder he had convictions. He knew what he believed and why he believed it.² He was well-equipped for the theological problems that would confront him in future years.

Athanasius grew up in the cultural atmosphere of Alexandria. This city had been founded by Alexander the Great over six hundred years before he was born. Its location on the Mediterranean with Lake Mareotis to the south, which was in turn connected with the Nile, made it a great commercial center. The essential elements of the population were Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish. In the time of

¹Robertson, op. cit.

²Hough, op. cit., p. 43.

Athanasius the city was in slow decay, but still it was a great and powerful city. It was the home of Greek learning and culture. The East and the West met intellectually in Alexandria. It was also the center of Christian learning and Greek theology.

"Such was the home of Athanasius. If any city in the world deserved at that time to be called cosmopolitan, surely it was Alexandria. What a wealth of influences poured upon the life of every man within its pale. To live here was to meet the world. Life was full of movement and stir. The eye, the mind, the sense of beauty, the love of commerce, the passion for pleasure, all were appealed to."

The situation in which the church found itself in the early fourth century called for the services of some such man as Athanasius. Between the reign of Nero and Constantine, the Christians had at times been subjected to horrible persecutions. The edict of Milan in 313 gave them the right to worship their God.² The church had grown in numbers despite the persecutions and now with the edict of toleration, the church appeared to be entering upon an unusual epoch of peace, expansion and development.

But the church enjoyed peace and unity for only a short while before a great doctrinal controversy, which nearly rent the church, arose.

"The fourth century is the great era of doctrinal conflict. The greatest controversy of the times -- greatest when we consider the importance

¹Hough, op. cit., p. 43.

²Walker, Williston, Great Men of the Christian Church, p. 47.

of the subject, the brilliance of the intellects engaged, as well as the results that were finally achieved -- was that which centered in the Deity of Christ, the Trinitarian, or, as it is better known, called after the man who originated it, **The Arian Controversy.**" 1

The origin of that controversy was in the famous city of Alexandria, and the hero of the orthodox party was none other than Athanasius.

Athanasius was a young man when he came to the Council of Nicea in 325, and was practically unknown outside of Alexandria. Bishop Alexander, being convinced of his abilities, had ordained him a deacon. Because of his intellectual ability and religious intuition, he was the logical one to become the leader of the Anti-Arian party. His influence became greater upon his election to the bishopric of Alexandria in 328. He was the leader of the party until his death in 373.²

Athanasius' concern in defending his Lord's deity was primarily soteriological. He was not concerned with theological speculation or philosophy for their own sake.

"His theological greatness lies in his firm grasp of Soteriological principles in his resolute subordination of everything else to the central fact of Redemption, and to what that fact implied. He goes back from the Logos of the philosophers to the Logos of St. John, from the God of the philosophers to the God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." 3

¹Alexander, A.B.D., The Thinkers of the Church, pp. 74,75.

²Walker, op. cit., p. 54.

³Robertson, op. cit., p. lxix.

Athanasius' emphasis on the doctrine of the equality of the Son with the Father grew out of his belief that the Son must be very God, else he could not be our Redeemer. He spent his long life in defense of this doctrine. He says the purpose of his writing the work entitled "De Incarnatione Verbi," was...

"In order that you may never fail to know the cause of the bodily appearing of the Word of the Father, so high and great, nor think it a consequence of His own nature that the Savior has worn a body; but that being incorporeal by nature, and Word from the beginning, He has yet of the loving kindness and goodness of His own Father been manifested to us in a human body for our salvation." ¹

Athanasius wrote this treatise before the Arian controversy. Even in his early years his interest in the deity of the Son was Soteriological. That interest was responsible for his stand at the Council of Nicea and for the many literary works he produced in his later life. Therefore, this thesis is a study of Athanasius' deepest interest. The writer in the following pages proposes to set forth in some detail his doctrine of the atonement, and such other of his doctrines as will be necessary to a fuller understanding of this.

¹Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei.

CHAPTER I

MAN'S NEED OF ATONEMENT

A brief survey of Athanasius' doctrine of man is necessary to an understanding of his doctrine of the Atonement.

God made all things out of nothing through his Son. Man was created as other animals, but God, through his special love and sympathy, gave him, another gift, a portion of his own nature.¹ He made man in his own image. This spark of the Divine which God placed in man longs for fellowship with the Giver. "For God has not only made us out of nothing; but He gave us freely, by the Grace of the Word, a life in correspondence with God."² Thus by a special act of creation man was so created that he could enjoy fellowship with his Creator. It was by this special creative act of God that man was separated from the rest of the created life.

God intended man to remain in that state of purity in which he was created. Before the fall he lived above the instincts of the body that strove for gratification. His abode was in the spirit world and consequently his thoughts were spiritual. In this state of purity and innocence man

¹Athanasius, Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 3.
²Ibid., 5.

knew no embarrassment because he knew no sin.¹ Fellowship with God was possible since he knew not the meaning of sin and so there was no obstacle between him and God. Intimate fellowship with his Creator was a source of continuous and inexpressible joy.

"He (God) constituted man able to see and know realities by means of this assimilation to Himself, giving him also a conception and knowledge even of his own eternity, in order that preserving his nature intact, he might not ever either depart from this idea of God, nor recoil from the communion of the holy ones; but having the grace of Him that gave it, having also God's own power from the Word to the Father, he might rejoice and have fellowship with the deity living the life of immortality unharmed and truly blessed."²

One may see this truth from Adam, the first man created. The Scriptures tell us that in the beginning he knew no embarrassment or shame for he knew no sin. His mind was centered on God. His was the unseen world, the world of purity and holiness.³

It is interesting to note that Athanasius thought man was not created immortal, but that he did have the capacity to become immortal. Immortality was attainable by man's choosing to continue perpetually in fellowship with God.⁴ Man could lose that capacity by committing sin which,

¹Athanasius, Contra Gentes, 2.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 4.

as we shall presently see, he did. The power to reason and choose for himself was one of the special gifts bestowed upon him by his Creator. Through his own choice he could do good and become immortal or do evil and deteriorate into a state of corruption.¹

This is precisely what man did. Selfishness was the cause of his sinning.

"But nearer to themselves were the body and its senses; so that while removing their mind from the things perceived by thought, they began to regard themselves; and so doing, and holding to the body and the other things of sense, and deceived as it were in their own surroundings, they fell into lust of themselves preferring what was their own to the contemplation of what belonged to God."²

Man became accustomed to those things that would gratify his bodily desires. The thought of them was foremost in his mind. By thinking less and less of God, he gradually lost that sense of fellowship with him which he had previously experienced. The pleasures of this life having fastened themselves upon man, he became unwilling to cast them aside. He forgot God and the power he originally had from him.³

The manner of man's fall may be clearly seen from the story of the first man as that story is related in the Scriptures.⁴ So long as Adam kept his mind on God and

¹Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 3.

²Athanasius, Contra Gentes, 3.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

divine things, he gave no attention to his body. But the moment he heeded the counsel of the serpent he ceased to think of God and began to contemplate the satisfaction of his own bodily lusts which soon caused him to sin. His realization that he was naked points to his consciousness of his having lost fellowship with God. "For having departed from the consideration of the one and the true God, and from the desire of Him, they had thenceforward embarked in divers lusts and in those of the several bodily senses."¹ The first man sinned because of his own personal choice.

The results of the fall were disastrous to man. His soul became gradually abased by the abuse of his freedom of choice. He ceased thinking on the things of the spirit world and directed all his activities in satisfying his bodily desires. He conceived those pleasures as being good for his body and the very essence of goodness.²

Man's soul had fallen in love with pleasure and he began to devise various ways for obtaining it. Although he had turned away from the spirit world, his soul did not lose its mobility or power of choice.³

"She moves then, no longer according to virtue or so as to see God, but imagining false things, she makes a novel use of her power, abusing it as a means to the pleasures she has devised, since she is after all made with power over herself."⁴

¹Athanasius, Contra Gentes, 3.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

The soul learns that it has power to do good or to do evil; to direct its body in either direction. It does wrong but is not conscious of it.

"So, instead of beholding the Creator, she turns the eye to lusts showing that she has this power too; and thinking that by the mere fact of moving she is maintaining her own dignity, and is doing no sin in doing as she pleases; not knowing that she is made not merely to move, but to move in the right direction." 1

Man, not conscious of his soul's guilt, committed murder and adultery. His tongue was given to slander, insult, and perjury. He was guilty of drunkenness and stealing. All of these things are a vice and a sin of the soul, and man has no cause at all for doing them.² Thus men, by refusing to think on God and things spiritual, formulated plans for doing evil, and thereby

"received the condemnation of death with which they had been threatened; and from thenceforth no longer remained as they were made, but were being corrupted according to their devices; and death had the mastery³ over them."

All the foregoing discussion of man's becoming habituated in sin, results in his deterioration. Man was created out of nothing and if he becomes corrupt by sin he will deteriorate into that state of nothingness from which he came.

"For if out of a former normal state of non-existence, they were called into being by the presence and loving kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the

¹Athanasius, Contra Gentes, 4.

²Ibid., 5.

³Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 4.

knowledge of God and were turned back to what was not (for what is evil is not; but what is good is), they should, since they derived their being from God, who Is, be everlastingly bereft even of being; in other words, that they should be disintegrated and abide in death and corruption." ¹

Athanasius held that man had brought death and corruption upon himself, and as a result of it the human race was perishing. The rational man, made in the image of God, was disappearing and God's handiwork was being destroyed.² The legal hold which death had on man was due to his transgression and the "result was in truth at once monstrous and unseemly."

Athanasius agrees with the Greek theology in his doctrine of man and sin. This Greek viewpoint was that man had become a slave to his senses, by which act he had incurred mortality and subjection to the power of demons. Its main problem was man's ascent to God.³ Athanasius and the other Greek fathers differ from the teachings of the New Testament on man's original nature, his fall and its results. It is not the same situation as the New Testament, with its roots in the Old Testament, conceived it.

"For a mind trained in Hebraic modes of thought, for a conscience disciplined by the revelation of the divine holiness, the situation is that of man's revolt, in the pride of self-assertion, against the will of a holy, loving, and sovereign

¹Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 4.

²Ibid., 6.

³Kilpatrick, T.B., "Soteriology," Hastings' Encyclopedia Religion & Ethics.

God. Greek theology is singularly lacking in its sense of the righteousness and holiness of God; and its soteriology suffers accordingly. Its captivity to Greek form is conspicuous and disastrous." ¹

The views of Athanasius have been traced on man before the fall, the manner of the fall, and the results of the fall. It is the purpose of the next chapter to discuss the person of Christ as related to the atonement or to the restoration of man.

"But if, when transgression had once gained a start, man became involved in that corruption which was their nature and were deprived of the Grace which they had, being in the image of God, what further step was needed? or what was required for such grace and such grace? but the Word of God which had also at the beginning made everything out of naught."

In other words, Athanasius' Greek theology was redemptive as much a creative act as the original creation. His idea of the restoration of man is the primary motive in his determination of the necessity of the incarnation. Man had entered upon a course of progressive decay toward non-existence or non-being. His moral fall divided and perverted "the sanctified reflex of the Divine likeness." His nature had to be healed, restored, recreated. In this chapter the author will set forth the theology of Athanasius

¹Kilpatrick, op. cit.

Athanasius, De incarnatione Verbi Dei, G. Robertson, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2, pp. 21-24.

CHAPTER II

THE PERSON OF CHRIST AS RELATED TO THE ATONEMENT

It has been shown that man stood in need of reconciliation to God after having sinned. His sins were so great that repentance was not sufficient to atone for them. Something must be done to restore him to his state before the fall. This could be done only by divine power. Repentance would merely keep man from sinning and could not remove the impurity of his nature.

"But if, when transgression had once gained a start, men became involved in that corruption which was their nature and were deprived of the Grace which they had, being in the image of God, what further step was needed? or what was required for such grace and such recall but the Word of God which had also at the beginning made everything out of naught." 1

In other words, Athanasius' Greek theology made redemption as much a creative act as the original creation. His idea of the restoration of man is the primary motive in his determination of the necessity of the Incarnation. Man had entered upon a course of progressive decay toward non-existence or non-being. His moral fall dimmed and perverted "the conscious reflex of the Divine likeness." His nature had to be healed, restored, recreated.² In this chapter the writer will set forth the theology of Athanasius

¹Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 8.

²Robertson, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, pp. 31-34.

on the person of Christ and show how that theology is related to the atonement.

Athanasius elaborated his doctrine of the person of Christ in his orations against the Arians, and the "Incarnation of the Word." A discussion of Arianism will give the student of Athanasius a fuller comprehension of his beliefs concerning the person of Christ.

The Arian dispute began about 318 A.D. in the ancient city of Alexandria. Arius, the originator of the dispute, was a presbyter and had charge of one of the Alexandrian churches. He seems to have discharged the responsibilities of his office with remarkable efficiency and piety. He is said to have been a tall, slender man with ascetic temperament and dress. His chief faults were vanity and ambition.¹ "He was a man of strong and vehement passions. He soon gathered around him a multitude of supporters, and was unwearied in the dissemination of his views."²

Arius was not teaching a wholly new theology. His views were for the most part those of his teacher, Lucian of Antioch. Antioch was the home of the liberal thinkers of the church for the third, fourth, and first half of the fifth centuries.³ It first became popular as an educational

¹Mackintosh, H.R., The Doctrine of the Person of Christ, p. 175.

²Orr, James, The Progress of Dogma, p. 108.

³Srawley, J.H., "Antiochine Theology," Hastings' E.R.E., Vol. I, p. 584.

center in the time of Lucian who founded there an exegetical-theological school,¹ which for some time was not on friendly terms with the local church.² Lucian's Christology is as follows:

"God is One; there is nothing equal to Him; for everything besides Him is created. He has created the Logos or Wisdom.....Christ has made known the Father to us, and by being man and by his death, has given us an example of patience.. . . .The creaturehood of the Son, the denial of his co-eternity with the Father, and the unchangeableness of the Son achieved by constant progress and constancy constitute the main articles in the doctrine of Lucian and his school." ³

From this quotation, the writer concludes that the school of Lucian is the nursery of Arianism, and that Lucian himself was responsible for the Christological views of his pupil Arius.⁴ The discussion of Arius' doctrine will verify this statement.

In the year 313 Alexander became bishop of Alexandria. He was thoroughly orthodox in his theology. In 318, which probably marked the beginning of the controversy, Alexander questioned Arius on a certain passage of Scripture. His reply convinced the bishop of his heresy.⁵ Bishop Alexander excommunicated Arius in 321, but this act failed

¹Srawley, *op. cit.*, p. 584.

²Harnack, Adolph, *History of Dogma*, Vol. IV., p. 3.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 4,5.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 8.

to quiet him. He hastily gathered his friends around him and propounded his doctrine more vehemently than ever. The Council of Nicea held in 325, by no means obliterated the heresy. Although Arius was dead by this time, his followers taught their leader's faith during the greater part of the fourth century.¹

Arius' theology was: there is only one God, and He has created all things. He is unbegotten and eternal. He has not always been Father. He cannot impart the essence of his being to his creation. God created the Son, who is sometimes designated in the Scriptures as Wisdom, Image, and Word. He is not of the same substance or essence as God, and like all other creatures, he has been created out of nothing. There was a time when he did not exist, but he was before all other creatures for he was the agent by which they were created.²

If the Son were of the same nature as the Father, then there would be two Gods.

"On the contrary, like all other creatures, he has a free will and is capable of change. He might consequently have been good or bad; but he made up his mind to follow the good, and to continue in the good without vacillation. Thus he has by means of his own will come to be unchangeable."³

The Son not being truly God, does not have the attributes of God. His knowledge is limited, even his knowledge of God. His knowledge of himself is not perfect.

¹Mackintosh, op. cit., pp. 194-195.

²Harnack, op. cit., pp. 15,16.

³Ibid., p. 17.

However, he is not like other creatures.

"He stands in a special relation to God, but this is wholly conditioned by Grace and adoption; the bestowal of Grace, on the other hand, is based on the steadfast inclination of this free being to the good which was foreseen by God." 1

Christ became God by God's special gift of Grace and by his own spiritual development.

Athanasius vigorously denounced Arianism. To him the problem was momentous. The essence of the atonement centered in the person of Christ, therefore should Arianism win, Christianity would be a failure and a delusion. Perhaps another quotation from an authority will impress more forcibly this thought upon our minds.

"The theology and Christology of Athanasius are rooted in the thought of Redemption, and his views were not influenced by any subordinate considerations. Neither heathenism nor Judaism has brought men into fellowship with God, the point on which everything turns. It is through Christ that we are transported into this fellowship; He has come in order to make us divine..... But Christ would not have been able to bring us this blessing if He Himself had possessed it merely as a gift....., for in this case He only had just as much as He needed Himself, and so could not proceed to give away what was not His own." 2

Athanasius gives convincing refutations of Arianism, the most important of which we shall now consider. According to this doctrine, the Son and the Spirit have come into existence ex nihil, which destroys the eternity of the Godhead. Then there might be a further increase or

¹Harnack, op. cit., p. 17.

²Seeberg, Reinhold, Textbook of the History of Doctrines, Vol. I, pp. 206, 207.

decrease of personalities.

"For probably it will receive some fresh accession, and so on without limit, since at first and at starting, it took its consistence by way of accessions, and so undoubtedly it may decrease on the contrary, for what is added plainly admits of being subtracted." ¹

Arianism imperils the Godhead and leads to polytheism. There was a time when God was not Father. He has experienced some inward change, incorporating in his nature the Word, Light and Wisdom.² For God to be called One, the Son must partake of his nature and substance. The Arians have two different Gods whom they worship. "They must of necessity say there are two Gods, one Creator, the other creature, and must serve two Lords, one Unoriginate, and the other originate and a creature."³

The most serious argument to be advanced against Arianism, says Athanasius, is that it destroys the assurance of our salvation and immortality. The Arians say that the Logos is mutable. How can a changeable Logos reveal God to us and how can we see God in him? "How should he who has seen the alterable, be considered to have seen the Unalterable? At what state must he arrive, for us to be able to behold in him the Father?"⁴ Man could not trust a

¹Athanasius, Oratione I, Contra Arianos 17.

²Ibid., 20, 24, 25.

³Ibid., III, 16.

⁴Ibid., I, 35.

mutable Logos. He would never know for a certainty that the Logos was giving him a full revelation of the Father. Consequently, man could not have the full assurance of the forgiveness of his sins and full fellowship with God.

"For if, being a creature, he had become man, man had remained just what he was, not joined to God; for how had a work been joined to the Creator by a work?and how, were the Word a creature, had he power to undo God's sentence, and to remit sin?"

1

Man's assurance of immortality, is dependent upon the Son being one with the Father in nature and substance. Man must be deified to become immortal, and the Son cannot deify man unless he himself is really God.

"For man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God; or had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless he had been his natural and true Word who had put on the body."

2

The Arian doctrine of median beings between God and the creation was not new. The Gnostics, who originated in the latter half of the first century, first conceived it. The idea that God could not come into contact with matter was responsible for it. Athanasius held that it was absurd. God was not "too proud to come himself as Creator into direct touch with nature," says Athanasius. Furthermore, Matthew in his Gospel, said that Christ was interest-

¹Athanasius, Oratione II, Contra Arianos, 67.

²Ibid., 70.

ed even in the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field, and his interest in human beings was so great that he said the very hairs on their heads were numbered.

"If then it be not unworthy of God to exercise his Providence, even down to things so small as a hair of the head, and a sparrow, and the grass of the field, also it was not unworthy of him to make them." 1

Thus Athanasius intended to convince his opponents that God required no series of agents for the creation of the world, but that he created through His Son.

What is the specific doctrine of Athanasius concerning the Son's divinity?

"And since Christ is God from God, and God's Word, Wisdom, Son, and Power, therefore but one God is declared in the Divine Scriptures. For the Word, being Son of the One God, is referred to him of whom he is; so that Father and Son are two, yet the monad of the Godhead is indivisible and inseparable. And thus too we preserve One Beginning of Godhead and not two Beginnings, whence there is strictly a monarchy." 2

This quotation shows that Athanasius believed the Son divine and that he derives his source and being from the one Godhead. This eliminates the possibility of a "second God." He is unseparated and undivided, yet he manifests himself in more than one way. Athanasius summed up the belief of the church since the days of the apostles, namely, that

¹Athanasius, Oratione II, Contra Arianos, 25.
²Ibid., IV, 1.

God is One and the Son is divine. In other words, there is unity in the Godhead, but a triunity in function.

Athanasius believed that there were two personalities in the Son, the Divine Christ and the human Jesus. He was very God and very man.¹ The purpose of the Son in taking a human body was to redeem and deify man. The human nature was the instrument of the divine nature in the accomplishing of that task.² The object of Athanasius in discussing the humanity of Jesus was to strengthen the doctrine of man's salvation. The Arians held that God could not come in contact with human flesh. Obviously this belief weakened the doctrine of the atonement in the thinking of Athanasius. It behooved him therefore to show the reasonableness and the necessity of God becoming incarnate in order to save man. This thought is discussed at length in his *De Incarnatione* and in the four *Orationes Contra Arianos*.

Thus, through a presentation of Athanasius' vigorous opposition to the Arian heresy, his own conception of the person of Christ is most easily understood. His supreme interest was in the salvation of men. A human

¹Athanasius, *Oratione II, Contra Arianos*, 70.

²Ibid.

Christ could not deify human nature and make atonement for the sins of men. In his refutation of Arianism he gives his doctrine of the person of Christ and his atoning work. The conclusion of this chapter leads us to the consideration of the ultimate source of the atonement as viewed by Athanasius.

The aim of this chapter is to show that he thought God, the Father, the true source of the atonement both from a study of his works, and from the fact that he was largely Greek in his theological views.

To give adequate proof of this thesis we must go back to the beginning of things. Who was the author of creation in the mind of Athanasius? He says:

"For God is good, or rather, is essentially the source of goodness; nor could one that is good be negatively of anything whence, granting existence to none, he has made all things out of nothing by his own Word, Jesus Christ our Lord."

God is good and is the source of goodness. Through his goodness he has created all things with Christ as the agent of creation. As a further development of the same thought Athanasius says, "For it is an admitted truth about God that he stands in need of nothing, but is self-sufficient and self-contained, and that in him all things have their being, and that he ministers to all." God is complete in

Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, *Verbi Dei*, 1.
Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 20.

CHAPTER III

THE SOURCE OF THE ATONEMENT

The question naturally arises when studying Athanasius' doctrine of the atonement, as to Whom he believed to be the ultimate source of that atonement. The aim of this chapter is to show that he thought God, the Father, the final source of the atonement; both from a study of his works, and from the fact that he was largely Greek in his theological views.

To give adequate proof of this thesis we must go back to the beginnings of things. Who was the author of creation in the mind of Athanasius? He says:

"For God is good, or rather, is essentially the source of goodness: nor could one that is good be niggardly of anything: whence, grudging existence to none, he has made all things out of nothing by his own Word, Jesus Christ our Lord." ¹

God is good and is the source of goodness. Through his goodness he has created all things with Christ as the agent of creation. As a further development of the same thought, Athanasius says, "for it is an admitted truth about God that he stands in need of nothing, but is self-sufficient and self-contained, and that in him all things have their being, and that he ministers to all."² God is complete in

¹Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 3.

²Athanasius, Contra Gentes, 28.

his Being and there is inherent within his very nature the power to create. All things owe their existence to his creative power. He, through his Word, the eternal Logos, gave rational order to the universe so as to enable man to know him, the Invisible One, by his Works.¹ The Son is the One through whom the Father holds together all things, and exercises providence over the universe.²

God did not stop with the creation of man, but through the same agent, his Son, bestowed upon him a spiritual gift which made him akin to the Divine. "For God has not only made us out of nothing, but he gave us freely, by the Grace of the Word, a life in correspondence with God."³ After man had sinned and was wasting away his divinity, it was the Son, as God's Ambassador, who rescued him.

"For being Word of the Father, and above all, he alone of natural fitness was both able to recreate everything, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be ambassador for all with the Father." 4

The word 'ambassador' is significant. It means a minister of highest rank who is sent to a foreign court to live there and represent his sovereign or country. Athanasius

¹Athanasius, Contra Gentes, 35.

²Ibid., 4, 7.

³Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 5.

⁴Ibid., 8.

evidently used the word to point out that God had sent his Son into the world to save man. He, God, was the Saviour of men, but he was accomplishing the work through his Son. Christ was the highest representative that could be sent.

We may summarize the message of Athanasius in the clause, "In Christ, God himself entered humanity." That noble man built his faith and life upon the profound thought contained in that statement. This conception of Jesus was necessary, if he would be the real Savior of man.

"It was required by the Greek conception of redemption. For God alone in human nature, can deliver man from the mortal estate into which he has fallen through sin, and transform him into the state of immortality. The Pauline idea was preserved, though under a greatly modified form -- that men are saved by God in Christ -- that salvation is a work of God and not an attainment of man." 1

The controversy between Athanasius and Arius appeared outwardly to be the relation of the incarnate Logos to the "Supreme God." That is, was Christ a mere creature of God or was he very God? This question was an outgrowth of the idea of the atonement. The character of Christianity would be determined by the answer given it. Would Christianity be a religion of salvation or a system of ethical culture?² Athanasius answered it by saying that Christ was in

¹Richards, George W., Christian Ways of Salvation, p. 232.

²Ibid., p. 231.

truth God. His conception of the Triune God was the outcome of his doctrine of the atonement, or his doctrine of the Trinity is an experience of salvation by God in Christ.¹

Richards gives this quotation, from Harnack's "Grundriss der Dogmengeschichte:"

"Athanasius saved the faith of the church from complete secularization by reaffirming the old conviction that men are redeemed by God himself, through the Godman, one in essence with God."²

He also avoided an error common in Latin theology. The Roman Empire is noted for its achievements in government and law. Therefore Roman Christians naturally interpreted Christianity in legalistic terms.

"The Greek idea of sin-corrupting the nature of man and ending in disease and death, did not fit into the Latin conception of God. For the Roman Christian, sin was transgression of law and offense against God. It was rooted in the will, and resulted in a sense of guilt and the wrath of God. Man's guilt had to be satisfied and atoned, before normal relations could be restored between the sinner and God. Accordingly, the controlling principle in Latin Christianity is the sacrifice on Calvary, not the Incarnation by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin. The Sacrificial idea is formative in the Roman Catholic way of salvation."³

¹Richards, op. cit., p. 232.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 151.

There is implied in this quotation the idea that God and Christ are different in their natures. That God is angry with sinful humanity and the loving and compassionate Christ appeases his wrath. To Athanasius the natures of the Father and Son were the same. They were one in love, compassion, and sympathy.

It is plain to all who have read the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle that the Greeks had the idea of a great deity who dwelt in a place of his own, far removed from the world of men. He was not to be approached by prayer or sacrifice, but by the contemplation of his works. He was not to be approached by prayer or sacrifice, but by the contemplation of his works. He was not to be approached by prayer or sacrifice, but by the contemplation of his works.

It is quite different with Christianity. God is not transcendent but immanent. He has revealed himself to humanity through his Son.

Christianity, the Gospel of a divine love historically manifested in a human life and death, the experience of that love in the lives of men, reconciling men to God, forgiving their sins,

Alpharick, F.R., "Cosmology," *Harvard Theological Review*, 1921, p. 107.

CHAPTER IV

THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT

The early church after Paul's day began to delineate doctrines about Jesus and the nature of his atonement for sins. Gradually those doctrines about Jesus were put in place of Jesus. Greek culture and philosophy determined to a great degree the doctrine of the atonement. Especially is this true in the second century. There is a vast difference between the Greek non-Christian philosophy and the Christian religion of redemption. The Greek philosopher believed in a transcendent God, who cannot come in contact with the world directly, but maintains that connection through intermediaries. The Logos is dethroned from his position of Lord of all and becomes the greatest of those intermediaries.¹ It is evident that the Greek philosopher could not find God. His philosophy failed him and he remained defeated in his search for God.²

It is quite different with Christianity. God is not transcendent but imminent. He has revealed himself to humanity through his Son.

"Christianity, the Gospel of a divine love historically manifested in a human life and death, the experience of that love in the lives of men, reconciling them to God, forgiving their sins,

¹Kilpatrick, T.B., "Soteriology," Hastings'
Encyclopedia Religion & Ethics, p. 699.

²Ibid.

binding them together in an organism indissoluble by force of persecution, by tyranny of space, or by the incident of death." 1

The Greek theology conceived man's original nature like that of the divine. His sin resulted in his descent into the world of sense, matter, and mortality. After having sinned the main problem in his salvation was reunion with God. The process of the reunion is known as deification. That is, he is restored to his former place by the Incarnation of the Logos, and he again has the nature of God, having been freed from every taint of sense and become immortal.

"The question for Greek thought is how to get the divine nature so near to man that man can unite himself with it and share its blessedness. There is no question of atonement and reconciliation, of a moral estrangement overcome by love, and a new moral relationship entered upon by faith. Baptized into Christianity, Greek thought proclaims the Incarnation to be the method of salvation. The divine life is in Christ -- not indeed in His flesh; He has no more relation to flesh and blood than will allow the divinity, which is His only real being, to become accessible to man. The ruling thought is transformation of man's being, till he becomes what God is. Greek theology makes everything of the Incarnation." 2

Athanasius was a Greek; he was trained in Greek philosophy and theology. Although he shared with his race in many respects their theological views, yet he goes farther than the other Greek fathers in his doctrine of the

¹Kilpatrick, op. cit., p. 699.

²Ibid.

atonement. But in some respects his views on that subject do not equal those of the New Testament.¹ In the remainder of this chapter the views of Athanasius on the nature or process of the atonement will be discussed. In what way does he think Christ saves men?

Athanasius' ideas of man's fall and his deterioration have been given. God had decreed that man's gaining immortality depended upon his remaining in fellowship with the Logos. Man sinned and was deprived of that fellowship. The debt that he must pay for his sin was death.² "Athanasius conceives death as a debt owing on account of sin, rather than as a penalty inflicted in consequence of it."³ The writer concurs with the thought contained in this quotation. So far as he can discern from the study of Athanasius' writings, there is no trace of man's punishment as the direct infliction of God's will. Death appears as the natural and necessary result of sin. There is a divinely ordained law that selfish indulgence will ultimately result in death.⁴

Athanasius in his view of the atonement approaches the Satisfaction theory. This theory was advanced by Anselm in the eleventh century. It is significant that a man of

¹Kilpatrick, op. cit., p. 705.

²Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 6.

³Lidgett, J. Scott, The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement, p. 450.

⁴Athanasius, Contra Gentes, 3, 4, 5.

the fourth century could approach that theory. The thought of the Satisfaction theory is that Christ died an ignominious death on the cross, which death was a ransom or satisfaction to God for the sins of men. In other words, the debt that man must pay for his sins is death, and Christ's death as a substitute pays that debt.¹ Athanasius says:

"But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again: for as I have already said, it was owing that all should die, for which special cause indeed, he came among us: to this intent, after the proofs of his Godhead from his works, he next offered up his sacrifice also on behalf of all, yielding his Temple to death in the stead of all, in order firstly to make men quit and free of their old trespass, and further to show himself more powerful even more than death, displaying his own body incorruptible, as firstfruits of the resurrection of all." 2

Athanasius says also that Christ's death was strictly representative. It can be truthfully said that all have died in Him.

"God sends his own Son, and he becomes Son of Man, by taking created flesh; that since all were under sentence of death, he being other than them all, might himself for all offer to death his own body; and that henceforth, as if all had died through him, the word of that sentence might be accomplished (for all died in Christ), and all through him might thereupon become free from sin and from the curse which came upon it, and might truly abide forever, risen from the dead and clothed in immortality and incorruption." 3

¹Clarke, W.N., An Outline of Christian Theology, p. 319.

²Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 20; Oratione I, Contra Arianos.

³Athanasius, Oratione II, Contra Arianos.

He gives illustrations to show that Christ's death was an equivalent for all. All men died in him, potentially at least. Athanasius emphasizes the thought by telling of a king who resided in a great city because he lived within a single house within that city.¹ Regardless of how imperfect the illustration may be, it at least shows the effect of the Incarnation to all men.

I think it will further clarify Athanasius' doctrine of the atonement if it is compared with that doctrine as understood by Paul.² Harnack says Origen is the first after Paul to give a lengthy treatise on the sacrifice of Christ. More can be said of Athanasius. He is the first after Paul to perfect a doctrine of Christ's death as a satisfaction to God. He is influenced by Paul in his development of that doctrine. Their chief differences are, first, that Paul sees God's righteousness as the attribute demanding satisfaction,³ while to Athanasius it is God's justice or veracity;⁴ second, with Paul the law of Moses is the law that demands satisfaction,⁵ with Athanasius it is the commandment God gave Adam;⁶ third, Paul only implies

¹Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 9.

²Franks, Robert S., A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ, p. 69.

³Romans, III, 25.

⁴Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 7.

⁵Galatians, III, 13.

⁶Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 6.

the necessity of a satisfaction,¹ whereas with Athanasius it is explicitly stated.² In all other points Athanasius follows Paul closely.

"Christ's death is at once a sacrifice to God and a satisfaction of the divine sentence. It is a death for us, and yet we die in him. In fact, it cannot be said that just here Athanasius has cleared up anything that Paul left undetermined. He hardly does more than reproduce Pauline doctrine without development." 3

Athanasius surpassed other scholars of the fourth century in developing a doctrine of the atonement, of "the work of Christ as the communication to humanity of incorruption and as the revelation of God."⁴ Franks says also that Athanasius was the first one in the Eastern Church to advance a systematic treatise on the Incarnation of Christ and its atoning value.

We shall now consider the defective views of Athanasius on the atonement. To him,

"The redemptive meaning of our Lord's death is conceived in a very limited way. The bond of union between our Lord and mankind is found almost exclusively in the eternal Logos, and not in the divine humanity. Flesh is assumed simply because for the payment of our debt the death of the Logos is necessary, and the incorporeal Logos cannot die." 5

¹Romans, III, 24,25.

²Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 6,7.

³Franks, op. cit., p. 69.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Lidgett, op. cit., p. 450.

The influence of the Greek philosophy can be seen in his theory of the atonement. Man participates in the divine Logos and does not possess divine sonship in Christ.

"Hence the filial relation is not called in to give a clue to the meaning of the atonement. It is death which is owing to God and salvation is expressed in terms of the payment of death and the infusion of life rather than conceived as the restoration to right relations with God, in which eternal life consists." 1

In these respects Athanasius' doctrine of the atonement is defective.

The ransom theory of the atonement was the most influential theory from the time of Irenaeus to that of Anselm. Such great men as Origen, Augustine, Peter Lombard, and St. Bernard supported it.² Its chief thought is that the death of Christ was a ransom paid to Satan in behalf of man. Man had fallen into sin and Satan had become his rightful or actual Lord.³ Athanasius discards the ransom theory for the satisfaction theory. Yet, in his thinking the death of Christ has some relation to the devil. He said it took place in the air, and not on the earth. Thus, the reason for our Lord being lifted up on the Cross. In

¹Lidgett, *op. cit.*, p. 451

²*Ibid.*, pp. 428-448.

³Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

this way he was able to clear the air of the malignity of the devil, (the prince of the power of the air), and of demons of all kinds.¹ He did not free himself of the demon compelling power of sacrifice which is also found in Origen. Let us remember, however, that despite this element of the ransom theory, in the works of Athanasius he approaches most closely the satisfaction theory of the atonement.

¹Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 25, 6.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the foregoing pages I have endeavored to set forth the doctrine of Athanasius on the atonement. I have narrated such other phases of his theology as were necessary to give a complete statement of his views on the atonement. He believed that man was created by the Son and endowed with the powers of becoming divine and immortal. Through his own choice he sinned and became subject to death and corruption. God's divine nature demanded that he restore man to his state before the fall. This work was accomplished by his Son.

The Son, the Incarnate Christ, was one with God the Father in nature and substance. He had existed from all eternity. There never was a time when he was not. Only by being co-equal with the Father could the Son deify the human race and atone for sins. To Athanasius the co-equality of the Son with the Father was the essential doctrine of the Christian religion. If Christ be not very God then is our faith vain.

It has been shown that Athanasius has more than one view of the atonement. In some of his works he states that God is the source of the atonement, (see Chapter III.);

in others there is the satisfaction idea, (see Chapter IV.) These views are seemingly contradictory. If God is the source of man's atonement is there any need for Christ's death as a satisfaction to God for his sins? A quotation will clarify this thought and at the same time show the deepest views of Athanasius on this subject:

"His profoundest concern is salvation, and this requires the full deity of the Redeemer. But, at bottom, the idea of salvation and the means of deliverance are Greek. Man's distress is his mortality. Repentance alone, therefore, cannot deliver him. Life must be brought to him, that he may partake of the very nature of the deity. Athanasius is able to give a real place in redemption to the death and resurrection of Christ, butit is still the question of deliverance from mortality with which he is dealing. In the death of Christ the law of death is abrogated, and in the resurrection of Christ incorruption is guaranteed."

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Thus Athanasius' satisfaction theory of the atonement is subordinate to and included in his doctrine of the atonement by the deification of man. This act is accomplished by God through the agency of his Son.² Since he believed in the deification of man, which is the Greek idea, he also believed God to be the real source of the atonement.³

Athanasius made a real contribution to the thinking on the atonement. He goes beyond Greek thought on the

¹Kilpatrick, T. B., "Soteriology," Hastings' Encyclopedia Religion & Ethics.

²Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 54.

³Richards, George W., Christian Ways of Salvation, p. 232.

subject. Even though he believed in redemption by deification, he brings the church back to the teachings of the New Testament and the Fathers; that God is not only transcendent but imminent; that he actually comes in contact with humanity through his Son, and not through a series of intermediaries;¹ that the Godhead is a unity;² that the Son to deify man and thus impart to him immortality, must be equal to God the Father.

The Apostle Paul in writing to Timothy, said, "I have kept the faith;" the supreme message of Athanasius to men of all times is, "Keep the Faith." The substance of that faith is that only an imminent and triune God can redeem men.

¹Seeberg, S. Reinhold, Textbook of the History of Doctrines, p. 215.

²Harnack, Adolph, History of Dogma, Vol. IV, p. 46.

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