

Abstract

DEIFICATION AS AN ARGUMENT FOR THE CONSUBSTANTIALITY OF THE
SON WITH THE FATHER IN THE WRITINGS OF ATHANASIUS OF
ALEXANDRIA

JONATHAN LEON STEPP

Thesis under the direction of Professor Benjamin King

Athanasius of Alexandria defended the innovative “homoousion” language in the Nicene Creed by means of his understanding of deification as God’s telos for humanity and twenty-first century theology in the United States should follow Athanasius’ approach and give greater emphasis to deification.

There are three background issues to the thesis: Alexandrian theology as exemplified by Origen (Origen and Athanasius both emphasized the importance of God as Father, but disagreed about the use of the words “homoousios” and “hypostasis”), the influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius, and Athanasius’ exegetical technique.

Deification is both central and assumed for Athanasius. Athanasius argued for the Son’s status as Son and God “by nature” in part by using the idea of our adoption and deification as God’s soteriological goal in the Son. His argument can be summarized as follows: adoption and deification was God’s teleology for humanity and since that is true it must follow that, for this goal to be achieved, the Son must be Son and God “by nature.” His argument for the Son’s consubstantiality is an exegetical project driven by the theology of deification.

The best way to define the gospel message and better appreciate the significance and value of the language of the Nicene Creed is by following the pattern established by Athanasius and using deification as an assumption for the construction of our own

Deification as an Argument for the Consubstantiality of the Son with the Father
in the Writings of Athanasius of Alexandria

by

Jonathan Leon Stepp

Submitted to the Faculty of the
School of Theology of the University of the South
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Masters of Sacred Theology

May, 2018

Sewanee, Tennessee

Approved _____ Date _____
Adviser

Second Adviser Date _____

Contents

Chapter 1: Origen, Irenaeus, and Exegesis	1
Chapter 2: Deification in the Writings of Athanasius	23
Chapter 3: Deification and Homoousios	51
Chapter 4: Constructive Theology	66
Bibliography	86

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to the people of St. James Episcopal Church, Hendersonville, NC, for giving me the resources to complete this degree.

It has been a privilege to know and learn from the faculty of the School of Theology, especially my advisor, Dr. Benjamin King. Thank you for helping me to refine this thesis, for reading and rereading my revisions, and for keeping me mindful of why I had undertaken this project. A special thanks to Dr. Romulus Stefanut for his timely and invaluable assistance in my research.

I could never have made it without my wife, Beth. Thank you.

Chapter 1: Origen, Irenaeus, and Exegesis

This paper will argue that Athanasius of Alexandria defended the innovative “homoousion” language in the Nicene Creed by means of his understanding of deification as God’s telos for humanity. It will then be argued that twenty-first century theology in the United States should follow Athanasius’ approach and give greater emphasis to deification because doing so will enable us to better integrate our modern theology with the homoousion language in the Nicene Creed.

This argument will involve two movements. First there will be a historical study of the theology of Athanasius to establish that he used deification in his writings as an argument for the Son’s consubstantiality. Then will come the constructive theology seeking to imagine what key Christian doctrines might look like if deification were the framework for expressing them.

This first chapter addresses three background issues to the thesis: Alexandrian theology as exemplified by Origen, the influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius, and a note on Athanasius’ exegetical technique. First, three points of connection between Origen and Athanasius will be discussed: the importance of God as Father, the use of the word “homoousios,” and the use of the word “hypostasis.” In each case we will examine the ways in which Athanasius continues Origen’s thought and the ways in which he moves beyond Origen to a new theological perspective. Second, a general overview of selected passages from Irenaeus will verify Khaled Anatolios’ argument that Athanasius was aware of and influenced by the works of Irenaeus¹ and it will be shown that when

¹ Khaled Anatolios, “The influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius,” in M.F. Wiles and E.J. Yarnold (eds.) *Studia Patristica, Vol. XXXVI* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 463-476.

Athanasius used deification to make the innovative argument that the Son was “of one being with” the Father he was drawing, at least in part, on a stream of tradition that prioritized deification as God’s intended telos for humanity. Finally, in a note on exegesis, we will examine three key characteristics of Athanasius’ approach to reading and interpreting the Bible: God as the author of the scriptures, grammatical analysis rooted in inter-textuality, and the assumptions about the meaning of texts within the faith community.

The Alexandrian Context as Exemplified by Origen

In many ways the theological debates of the fourth century about the person of Christ were not merely debates over whether he specifically is divine, but over what it means to speak about “divine” persons. Lewis Ayres argues that those debates should be understood to relate specifically to the grammar about divinity. “Part of the solution to the fourth-century controversies consists in an increased clarity about the grammar of divinity, in particular, an insistence that all speech about Father, Son, and Spirit is governed by the same assumptions about the divine.”² As we will see in the course of this paper, Athanasius believed that the Son’s consubstantiality with the Father was a vital part of the grammar of divinity because only consubstantiality preserved the important place of human deification in the Church’s understanding of God’s telos for humanity. Athanasius was not working in a vacuum, of course, and it is helpful to take note of several points about the contextual background of his thinking before analyzing his work.

² Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 15.

The background of this grammatical controversy regarding divinity is to be found in the theology of Alexandria that preceded Athanasius, especially in the writings of Origen. Beginning with Marcellus of Ancyra (d. 374) and continuing until the modern scholarship of recent decades, there had been an assumption that Origen was the source of many of Arius' ideas.³ The truth, as one might expect, is far more complicated. "Origen was not the direct source of Arius, or even Arius and his opponents. Origen's influence was piecemeal."⁴ All sides in the debates of the fourth century were, to one extent or another, building on, responding to, and working from Origen's exegetical theology. With regard to Athanasius, three aspects of Origen's theology that are of particular interest will be examined in turn: the importance of God as Father, the use of the word "homoousios," and the use of the word "hypostasis."

The importance of God as Father. As Peter Widdicombe points out, "the Fatherhood of God is integral to the overall pattern of Origen's theological vision. The title Father describes the divine being . . ." ⁵ even though Origen "does not make God's fatherhood a topic of systematic analysis."⁶ Understanding God's fatherhood was central to Origen's theology but his description of the relation of the Father and Son was ambiguous because it was not a topic of systematic analysis for him. He saw the Son as dependent on the Father for his existence, which could lead us to conclude that he embraced a straightforwardly subordinationist view. But Ayres argues that Origen's insistence that

³ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 131.

⁴ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 28.

⁵ Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

the Son is “intrinsic to the being of God”⁷ means that he is not the sort of subordinationist who would say that God is God with or without the Son.

One way that Origen explained the Son’s intrinsic place in God was to argue that for the Father to be the Father he must have a Son. Moreover, for him to be Father eternally required the Son also to be eternal – otherwise, if there was a time when the Son was not then there was time when God was not Father. Undergirding this argument is the assumption that the Father’s fatherhood must be eternal – it cannot be a property of the divine life which came into being at some point in time. This assumption is rooted in what Rowan Williams calls the “divine changelessness”⁸ that Origen, and all ancient theologians, took for granted as a property of God. The logic could be summarized as follows: God does not change. Therefore, if God is a Father then God must have always been a Father. Since God has always been a Father there has always been a Son. The Son is therefore intrinsic to the Father’s fatherhood and that means the Son is co-eternal with the Father. (Here and throughout this paper only passing reference will be made to the Holy Spirit. This is purely for the sake of narrowing the focus of the discussion to look at the Father/Son relationship within God in order to analyze Athanasius’ use of deification to argue for the Son’s consubstantiality with the Father. It does not reflect what Origen, Athanasius, or any other theologian thought about the Holy Spirit.)

For Origen, then, “the affirmation that God is Father lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It is fundamental to his conception of the divine nature . . .”⁹ As we will see,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 138.

⁹ Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 63.

Athanasius shares these assumptions. For Athanasius, as for Origen, the fatherhood of God is intrinsic to God's nature but Athanasius goes beyond his Alexandrian predecessor by analyzing God's fatherhood in the context of trying to clarify the grammar of the Son's divinity. Athanasius argues that preserving the meaning and message implied in God's fatherhood is essential to maintaining the integrity of the Christian faith as he understands it, especially with regard to deification. The idea of the eternal Father adopting humanity into his life through the eternal Son is, for Athanasius, at the heart of the gospel message entrusted to the Church and God's intrinsic being as eternal Father and co-eternal Son is a central tenet of this doctrine.

The use of the word "homoousios." Though Origen viewed the Son as intrinsic to God's being his frame of reference prevented him from using a word like "homoousios" to describe the Son's relationship with the Father. Origen perceived the Son to be both dependent on the Father for his existence and also co-eternal with the Father and therefore his language to describe this relationship sounds similar to the language used by later theologians to defend the use of the word "homoousios." Origen says, for example, that the Son as "breath" or "power" of God derives his being from the Father and yet is "never at any time non-existent."¹⁰ For Origen the Son as the "breath of God's power always existed, having no beginning save God Himself."¹¹ Therefore, Origen's reluctance to use the word "homoousios" probably does not indicate a theological difference between him and his successors (although there is some difference) so much as a reluctance to use certain terms or ideas (e.g. homoousios) that carry unacceptable

¹⁰ *De Principiis*, 1.2.9. (ANF, vol. 4, p. 473.)

¹¹ *Ibid.*

meanings and/or connotations for him. As Williams points out, “there should be no doubt that Origen, to all intents and purposes, taught the consubstantiality of Father and Son, since he was perfectly happy to use such imagery” [as “power of God”].¹²

The problem for Origen, as Ayres¹³ and Williams both argue, is that he “understood homoousios to designate co-ordinate members of a single class, beings sharing the same properties. . .” and therefore “it would be impossible for Origen to regard the Son as another member of a class including the Father, and so it is difficult to imagine him using the term of the Son.”¹⁴ For Origen, homoousios was a philosophical term that he may have associated with Gnosticism¹⁵ and certainly saw as implying that the Son was a second “first principle” along with the Father (i.e., a co-ordinate member of a single class that included the Father) instead of one who is intrinsic to the one God’s being.

As we will see, Athanasius shares Origen’s assumptions about the Son’s co-eternity with the Father but he goes beyond Origen by embracing the homoousion language used at Nicaea. Athanasius adopts a different definition of the word than the definition held by Origen. He takes it to be a way of summarizing God’s intrinsic nature as Father and Son and a way of describing the Son’s co-eternity with the Father and not a term indicating co-ordinate members of a single class. Athanasius argues that words such as “homoousios” are useful even if they are not found “in so many words in the Scriptures, yet, as was said before, they contain the sense of the Scriptures, and expressing it they

¹² Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition, Rev. Ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 137.

¹³ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 24.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition, Rev. Ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 134-135.

¹⁵ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 24.

convey it to those who have their hearing unimpaired for religious doctrine.”¹⁶

Athanasius believes that a word such as “homoousios” conveys the true sense of what he believes the scriptures are saying – that the Son is intrinsic to God’s being, co-eternal with the Father, and not a second god – and therefore serves a useful function in protecting what Athanasius perceives to be the correct understanding of the Son and the Son’s divinely appointed mission.

The use of the word “hypostasis.” In speaking of the Son Origen was concerned to preserve the distinctiveness of the Son in relation to the Father. He did not want the two to be seen as only different manifestations of one being but rather as two distinct persons who were both intrinsic to God’s one being. Ayres writes “Origen is searching for a way to argue that Father and Son and Spirit each have a distinct existence. He seeks a term that asserts the true existence of each . . .”¹⁷ Or, in the words of Williams, he was looking for a word that would mean “‘real individual subsistence’ as opposed to existence as a mental construct only.”¹⁸ He chose the term “hypostasis” to make this argument and sought to distinguish the three hypostases of God from descriptions of God in which the three persons were merely ideas about God which did not, in and of themselves, have an actual existence as divine persons. However, this raises the question of how the three can be one and according to Ayres Origen never fully answers that question.¹⁹ In his analysis

¹⁶ *Defense of the Nicene Definition*, 5.20. (NPNF, Vol. 4, p. 518).

¹⁷ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 25.

¹⁸ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 132.

¹⁹ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 25.

of Origen's understanding of ousia and hypostasis, Ayres concludes that for Origen "the Son may not share the *ousia* of the Father, but the Son is constantly *in* the Father."²⁰

This summary of Origen's understanding of ousia and hypostasis is relevant to reading Athanasius. Once again we can see that Athanasius is building on Origen, in this case to argue for the Son's distinct existence from the Father and the Son's being intrinsic to the Father's existence. But Origen had "no interest in offering a dense account of what Father or Son is"²¹ and it is here that Athanasius builds upon Origen, seeking to more carefully define the grammar of divinity in order to more fully explain how the two distinct hypostases relate to each other within the one God. Where Origen argued for the Father and Son as distinct hypostases, each co-eternally related to the other, without trying to explain how they (together with the Spirit) were one God, Athanasius saw the need, in light of the Arian controversies and the subsequent theological debates, to go beyond Origen and to clarify both what the Father and Son are in relation to each other and to offer an argument for their oneness without loss of distinction. It is here that Athanasius will find both the idea signified by homoousios and the signifier itself useful. By arguing that the Son is homoousios with the Father he was able to more clearly argue that they are two distinct hypostases that are co-eternal. What this paper will specifically show is the importance of deification in Athanasius' argument for the consubstantiality of the Son and the Father.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius

Although Athanasius was moving beyond Alexandrian theology, especially as exemplified by Origen, in arguing for the Son's consubstantiality using the word "homoousios," his appeal to deification to argue for the Son's full divinity was not novel or innovative. One source for this argument was Irenaeus of Lyon. In his article, "The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius" (and elsewhere²²) Khaled Anatolios argues that there are ". . . strong grounds for considering Athanasius as continuing a distinctly Irenaean tradition."²³ He points out that Athanasian scholarship has long seen the connection between Athanasius' thought and that of Irenaeus, even if it is sometimes only recognized in more general characteristics.²⁴ Though Athanasius never references Irenaeus by name, Anatolios argues that "starting with the *Orationes Contra Arianos* . . . there are signs that Athanasius interpreted Arian doctrine as containing elements akin to Valentinian teaching and he thus looks directly to Irenaeus with the conviction that some of the logic wielded by the Lyonian against the Valentinians will be equally potent in arguing for the consubstantiality of the Son."²⁵

Three points of parallelism between Athanasius and Irenaeus are notable for this discussion of deification: the way in which they address the question of the immediacy of God's relationship to the creation, the way in which they address the issue of the security

²² Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), 23-24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴ Khaled Anatolios, "The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius" in *Studia Patristica*, Vol. XXXVI. (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 463. See also: A. Robertson, NPNF, Series II, Volume 4, 43; Thomas F. Torrance. *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 198; John D. Zizioulas. *Being as Communion* (Crest Grove, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 464.

of salvation, and the way in which they address the concept of deification itself. We will take each point in turn.

The immediacy of God's relationship to the creation: Anatolios²⁶ identifies five arguments that both writers use to work against the idea of a created mediator between God and the creation. In fact, Anatolios argues that Athanasius' use of these arguments “. . . has such close parallels in Irenaeus's second book *Against the Heresies* as to settle the question of textual dependence decidedly in the affirmative.”²⁷ Of the five parallel arguments that Anatolios identifies, the three most compelling are:

1. Irenaeus had argued that the idea of a created mediator between God and the creation meant that one would be forced into the untenable position of suggesting an infinite regression of mediators because one will have to conceive of “others which are above and below, [which] will have their beginnings at certain other points, and so on to infinity . . .”²⁸ Athanasius expressed this same idea by saying “. . . if some being as a medium be found for Him, then again a fresh mediator is needed for that second, and thus tracing back and following out, we shall invent a vast crowd of accumulating mediators.”²⁹

2. Both writers also argued that the introduction of a created mediator meant that the creation bears witness to that mediator, not to God, and thus the true God “has no witness”³⁰ in such a theology because those who insist upon a created mediator end up

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 471.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Against Heresies*, II.1.3. (ANF, Vol. 1, p. 940).

²⁹ *Second Oration Against the Arians*, 2.26. (NPNF, Series II. Vol. 4, p. 935).

³⁰ *Against Heresies*, II.9.2. (ANF, Vol. 1, p. 961).

only describing someone other than the creator and therefore do not describe the creator to whom the creation, scriptures, and tradition bear witness.³¹

3. Irenaeus had argued that “God did not stand in need of these [other, created beings], in order to accomplish what He had Himself determined with Himself beforehand should be done, as if He did not possess His own hands. For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit . . .”³² Athanasius used the exact same imagery, referencing Isaiah 66:2, and saying that God “uses his proper Word as a Hand, and in him does all things,”³³ including bringing the creation into existence.

The security of salvation: Both theologians were concerned to demonstrate that only God was capable of securely establishing salvation for humanity. They argued that if Christ was a created being, and not God, that humanity would be forever pulled between two creatures – the devil and Jesus – without any definitive action on the part of God to rescue humanity from the devil’s clutches. Irenaeus had said, “unless it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it securely”³⁴ and Athanasius made the same argument, saying “therefore the union was of this kind, that He might unite what is man by nature to Him who is in the nature of the Godhead, and his salvation and deification might be secure.”³⁵ Anatolios points out³⁶ that the word

³¹ *Second Oration Against the Arians*, 2.39. (NPNF, Series II, vol. 4, p. 950).

³² *Against Heresies*, 20.1. (ANF, Vol. 1, p. 1216).

³³ *De Decretis*, 3.7. (NPNF, Series II, vol. 4, p. 497).

³⁴ *Against Heresies*, III.18.7. (ANF, Vol. 1, p. 1128).

³⁵ *Second Oration Against the Arians*, 2.70. (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 986).

³⁶ Khaled Anatolios, “The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius” in *Studia Patristica*, Vol. XXXVI. (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 473.

translated “secure” and used by each writer is the same verb – βεβαίωω – which, again, suggests that Athanasius has a textual dependence on Irenaeus.

The concept of deification: closely connected to the way in which the two thinkers discuss the security of our salvation is the way they each talk about deification. Both authors show a concern throughout their writings to establish that God’s intention to make humanity divine depends upon the savior, Christ, being fully divine, which is also to say that the security of humanity’s deification depends on the full divinity of Christ. Both are clear in saying that only the divine can impart divinity – if Christ is anything less than divine (e.g., if he is the first being created by God) then he cannot fulfill God’s plan to share the divine nature with humanity. Three parallels between the two writers will show this common theme. The following quotes from Athanasius will be presented only to show how they echo Irenaeus and in each case a thorough discussion of the passage quoted will be postponed until chapter 2 when Athanasius’ approach to deification as a rationale for the Son’s consubstantiality with the Father is addressed in detail.

The first parallel to notice is between Irenaeus’ third book *Against the Heresies* and Athanasius’ *First Oration Against the Arians*. Irenaeus asked the rhetorical question, “in what way could we be partaken of the adoption of sons, unless we had received from Him through the Son that fellowship which refers to Himself, unless His Word, having been made flesh, had entered into communion with us?”³⁷ Athanasius asks the same rhetorical question, “He was God, and then became man, and that to deify us . . . how . . . can any at all know God as their Father? for adoption there could not be apart from the

³⁷ *Against Heresies*, III.18.7. (ANF, Vol. 1, p. 1128).

real Son . . .”³⁸ Each theologian is posing the question, “how could we be adopted as sons of God, and therefore call God ‘Father’, unless there is already a divine Son?” The use of this rhetorical question about adoption, like Anatolios’ point about the use of the imagery of the “Word as hand” and the use of the word “secure”, is a strong indicator of both Irenaeus’ influence on Athanasius and the possibility of a textual dependence.

A second parallel to take note of is the way in which both theologians connect the renewal of human nature to the deification of human nature. They connect both concepts to the idea that renewal and deification can only be accomplished by God; therefore, since Christ accomplished both, Christ must be fully God. Irenaeus said:

Who else is there who can reign uninterruptedly over the house of Jacob forever, except Jesus Christ our Lord . . . who promised that . . . He would become the Son of man for this purpose, that man also might become the son of God? . . . For all things had entered upon a new phase, the Word arranging after a new manner the advent in the flesh, that He might win back to God that human nature which had departed from God . . .³⁹

In this context he connects the idea of “deification as sons of God” with the renewal of human nature or the “winning back” of it to God, as he expresses it. Athanasius was thinking in the same vein when he said “He assume[d] the body originate and human, that having renewed it as its Framer, He might deify it in Himself, and thus might introduce us all into the kingdom of heaven after His likeness.”⁴⁰ There is a connection here between how the two are thinking about the issue and how they are setting up the

³⁸ *First Oration Against the Arians*, 11.38-39. (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 867).

³⁹ *Against Heresies*, III.10.2. (ANF, Vol. 1, p. 1080).

⁴⁰ *Second Oration Against the Arians*, 2.70. (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 985).

argument: Athanasius, like Irenaeus, speaks of “the Framer” renewing human nature in close connection to the idea of human nature being deified.

A final parallel to be noticed is the way in which both authors connect the incarnation of a fully divine Son to humanity’s participation in the incorruptibility and immortality of God. Irenaeus said “unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility.”⁴¹ And, as in the previous cases, Athanasius echoed Irenaeus when he wrote “He, having come in our body, was conformed to our condition, so we, receiving Him, partake of the immortality that is from Him.”⁴² For both thinkers immortality is not something that creatures by definition possess inherently. Only God is inherently incorruptible and immortal. Therefore, Christ can only impart immortality to human nature if Christ is, himself, fully immortal God and not a mortal, corruptible creature.

The argument that Athanasius was aware of and influenced by the works of Irenaeus seems to be verified by this brief survey of the two writers. In fact, in some cases, the connection may even be a textual dependence. What this tells us is that when Athanasius moved beyond the theology of the Alexandrian tradition and made the innovative argument for the Son being homoousios with the Father he was drawing, at least in part, on a stream of tradition that prioritized deification as God’s intended telos for humanity. Athanasius was not being innovative when he appealed to deification as an argument for the Son’s divinity, he was echoing a tradition that dated to at least the time of Irenaeus.

⁴¹ *Against Heresies*, III.18.7. (ANF, Vol. 1, p. 1128).

⁴² *Third Oration Against the Arians*, 29.57 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 1067).

It is also worth taking time to think about what we can and cannot say about the connection between Irenaeus and Athanasius. This survey has verified the idea that there is a close – perhaps even direct – connection between the two (direct in the sense that Athanasius may be textually dependent on Irenaeus). Since Athanasius does not refer to Irenaeus by name or directly quote him, the exact nature of the connection remains elusive. Perhaps Athanasius had studied Irenaeus’ writings earlier in his life and been shaped by them. Or perhaps the ideas of Irenaeus were coming to him through intermediaries, such as previous generations who had been influenced by Irenaeus and who had shaped the theology of those who came after them as a result of their exposure to Irenaeus. Given the relative stability of the Roman Empire, the presence and proliferation of book collections (including the existence of libraries), and the clear lines of communication and relationship between churches and bishops during those centuries, it is not unreasonable to think that Athanasius had direct access to Irenaeus’ writing as he worked.

A Note on Exegesis

The scriptural texts were a vital and essential source of theology for Athanasius, as they were for all fourth-century theologians regardless of which side they took in any particular debate. The way in which writers such as Athanasius interpreted scripture and employed it to bolster their arguments may often seem strange to modern readers and can, at times, ring hollow and unconvincing. This is primarily because of the revolution in biblical criticism that has taken place in the last century and a half. We approach the text with a different set of assumptions than Athanasius did – assumptions rooted in our convictions about the value of historical-critical approaches. As Ayres points out

however, understanding the way in which a fourth-century theologian such as Athanasius interpreted the scripture requires that we move beyond attempts to compare his exegetical technique with modern techniques and make an effort to understand the approaches which the patristic writer perceived himself to be using.⁴³ These approaches are not spelled out in an explicit system by Athanasius, but his way of reading the texts can be, to some extent, described and systematized by a careful reading of his exegetical work and comparison to the way in which other writers in his context carried out exegesis. We can identify three key characteristics of Athanasius' approach and for each characteristic we can briefly note how it applies to his interpretation of Proverbs 8:22-25 in order to illustrate its use. A more detailed examination of Athanasius' exegesis of the Proverbs text will then follow in chapter 2.

1. *Authorial intent in any given biblical text is the intent of God as author.* Although Athanasius is certainly aware of the existence of the human authors and of traditions regarding who they were and in what context they wrote, this awareness has little impact on his exegesis. What he is most concerned to discover is not what the original human author was attempting to communicate but rather what Frances Young calls “the over-arching ‘mind’ of Scripture.”⁴⁴ For Athanasius this over-arching mind was the mind of God. The “author *meant* what the exegete discerned in the text; or if maybe the author was unconscious of it, the Holy Spirit meant it.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 31-32.

⁴⁴ Frances Young, “Proverbs 8 in Interpretation (2): Wisdom Personified. Fourth-century Christian Readings: Assumptions and Debates” in *Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), XII: 111.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, XII: 112.

This perception of God as the author whose intent must be discerned allowed Athanasius to look throughout the scriptures for references that he used to interpret difficult texts. When debate arose about the meaning of a word or the correct interpretation of a text, Athanasius and other fourth-century writers were quick to look to other places in the Bible, without regard to genre or historical context, to find other uses of the word, or even texts that they perceived to be related to the subject of the text being exegeted, in order to clarify the issue. They had no qualms about using a text in John or the Corinthian letters to interpret a text in Proverbs because the ultimate author of all the texts was perceived to be the Spirit who was inspiring the scriptures with a unified message.

When we get to Athanasius' study of Proverbs 8 we will see this characteristic of his exegetical approach in full swing as he brings many texts from throughout the Bible to bear on the text at hand. For example, because he assumes God to be the author of both Proverbs and Ephesians, he does not hesitate to use Ephesians 1:3-5 to argue that Proverbs 8 is pointing to the Son's predestined incarnation as the one through whom the adoption of humanity as God's children would take place.⁴⁶ So, also, the modern question of the authorship of Ephesians is irrelevant to Athanasius' exegesis.

2. The authorial intent of God led to a particular style of grammatical analysis rooted in inter-textuality. Ancient theologians were educated in the typical Roman fashion, proceeding from learning to read (the Ludus), to a grammatical education, to an education in rhetoric, and – in some cases – on from there to philosophy.⁴⁷ Ayres and

⁴⁶ *Second Oration Against the Arians*, II.21.67. (NPNF, Series II. Vol. 4, p. 992-993).

⁴⁷ Frances Young, "Exegetical Method and Scriptural Proof: the Bible in Doctrinal Debate" in *Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), XI: 303.

Young both argue that it is the grammatical schooling that is most relevant for our understanding of patristic exegesis because it was in that context that the ancients learned the rules of interpreting a text – rules such as genre, syntax, and context.⁴⁸ On one hand the grammatical analysis employed by Athanasius and the other patristic writers employed all the techniques they had learned in the *Grammaticus* but on the other they used a technique of inter-textuality among scriptural texts (whose author they perceived to be the same being, i.e. God) in order to understand and interpret the text at hand.

What is important to note about this grammatical approach is that it does follow the rules of the *Grammaticus*. As Ayers points out, the patristic writers were concerned to establish the “plain sense of the text of Scripture”⁴⁹ using the basic rules of grammar which they had learned and which we also recognize today. Though it sometimes seems to us that their approach led to a situation in which any text could mean anything that the exegete wanted it to mean, this is not actually what is going on. What is happening is that the basic rules of grammatical interpretation are being supplemented by an additional source of information: other scriptural texts. In the same way that a modern interpreter might look to see how Paul used a particular word throughout the book of Romans, or elsewhere in his other writings, in order to understand the Pauline text at hand, so Athanasius looked to the Bible as a whole to see how its author (God) used a particular word or deployed a particular idea in other places. This inter-textuality provided him with

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* and Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 35.

⁴⁹ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 32.

a kind of “dictionary” of theological terms which he then used in a grammatical analysis to argue for particular meanings in particular texts that were under debate.

An example from his exegesis of Proverbs 8:22-25 illustrates this characteristic of his approach. Athanasius accuses the Arians of saying that “offspring” (γεννώι) in verse 25 and “created work” (ἐκτίσεν) in verse 22 are synonyms and that “offspring” should be interpreted to mean “something created by God.”⁵⁰ This is, of course, a grammatical problem. Does the plain sense, based on the grammar of the passage, indicate that an “offspring” is a “created work” or does it indicate that an “offspring” is something different from something created? Athanasius argues that they are not synonyms and that we must understand “offspring” to mean the generation of the Son from the Father and “created work” to mean something else (i.e., the flesh that the Son would assume in the incarnation.) In order to establish the grammatical difference between the two words Athanasius then cites texts from the Psalms, Ezra, John, and Proverbs. We might still argue that he was trying to read in the meaning that he wanted to see but we must also acknowledge that this was not the only thing he was doing. He is also using his understanding of the rules learned in the *Grammaticus* and supplementing them with information about how the author (God) has used these words and ideas in other places in his work (the Bible).

3. *Certain assumptions about the meaning of texts were given to Athanasius by the faith community in which he lived and worshiped.* David Brakke has pointed out that the history of early Christianity is a history of how “multiple Christian identities and

⁵⁰ *Second Oration Against the Arians*, II.16.20. (NPNF, Series II. Vol. 4, p. 927-928).

communities were continually created and transformed.”⁵¹ He argues that these multiple communities were both created and transformed by, among other factors, the rhetoric they developed around orthodoxy and heresy – a rhetoric that both flowed from their identity and shaped that identity. Athanasius, like other fourth century theologians, including the Arians, uses inherited assumptions about the meaning of texts to shape his rhetoric about orthodoxy, which in turn helps to shape the community that gave birth to it. In this same vein, Ayres defines the patristic understanding of the “plain sense” of the scriptures to be “‘the way the words run’ for a community in the light of that community’s techniques for following the argument of texts.”⁵² Whenever we read Athanasius’ exegesis we have to bear in mind that he is part of a community with continuity into the past that is shaping his rhetoric while also recognizing that he is developing his rhetoric to shape the future of that same community in ways that are both in continuity and discontinuity with that past.

The fact that certain assumptions about meaning were inherited from the community can also be illustrated by the Proverbs 8 text. As Young has commented, we should take note of the fact that both sides of the debate – Athanasius and the Arians – assumed that the “Wisdom” referred to in the Proverbs 8 passage is the pre-incarnate Christ.⁵³ This assumption that the “Wisdom” of Proverbs 8 and the “Logos” of John 1 are the same being is something that Athanasius and the Arians have inherited from their communities of faith and Young traces the idea back to at least the time of Athenagoras in the second

⁵¹ David Brakke, *The Gnostics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2010), 15.

⁵² Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 32.

⁵³ Frances Young, “Exegetical Method and Scriptural Proof: the Bible in Doctrinal Debate” in *Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), XI: 300.

century.⁵⁴ Their disagreement, therefore, is not over whether the one who is called “Wisdom” in this text is the same as the one who is elsewhere called “Logos” and “Son” – their common inherited tradition tells them that he is the same – but over whether this Wisdom/Logos/Son is co-eternally begotten of the Father or the first being created by God.

In this context, then, Athanasius uses his understanding of God’s authorial intent, coupled with the technique of a grammatical analysis rooted in inter-textuality, to develop a rhetoric of orthodoxy that both flows from the understandings of the text he has inherited from his community and seeks to shape that community’s understanding of orthodoxy in new and transformative ways. Young poses the question that naturally flows from this: can we, as modern readers, view this as an acceptable way of reading the scriptures? Young concludes that a responsible reading of scripture does require that we establish some distance between ourselves and the text using historical-critical methodologies but that we must also be aware of our responsibility to ourselves as readers and recognize that historical-critical methods by themselves can result in a merely “archaeological approach to the text.”⁵⁵ In light of that danger she argues, correctly, that:

a Christian reading of the Bible has to wrestle with issues of its unity and the ways in which it points to a reality beyond itself. For the Fathers, the Rule of Faith [inherited from their communities] provided the crucial criteria and the creeds were regarded as a summary of the truth of the Bible. A Christian ethical reading has to do justice to ‘ourselves’, and that includes the tradition of reading in which we stand.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Frances Young, “Proverbs 8 in Interpretation (2): Wisdom Personified. Fourth-century Christian Readings: Assumptions and Debates” in *Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), XII: 104.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, XII: 114.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, XII: 115. Note: Young’s inclusion of the creeds with the Rule of Faith makes sense in the context to which she is referring (the wider patristic environment, including the centuries after Athanasius) but it is a bit anachronistic to speak of the creeds in this way when talking about Athanasius. It was his life’s work

Using Young's perspective we can therefore conclude that while Athanasius' method of exegesis is different from our own in many ways it nevertheless has merit. Like him we also use the rules of grammar to analyze characteristics such as syntax and genre and, like him, we read from within our communities seeking meaning that is given to us by them and seeking to give meaning that we find back to the communities which have nurtured us. Despite our differences with Athanasius, our similarities with him – not least of which is our life together with him in this diverse community called “Christianity” – call us to listen to and take seriously his exegesis while receiving it with critical appreciation for what it can and cannot accomplish.

that contributed to making a creed into The Creed. However, the point about the Rule of Faith – the inherited sense of a unified Biblical message with a specific content – does apply to his context.

Chapter 2: Deification in the Writings of Athanasius

Having examined some background issues with regard to Athanasius' understanding of deification and demonstrated Athanasius' place with the "Irenaeus" tradition, we now turn to the examination of significant passages from Athanasius' writings, especially in his *Orations Against the Arians*, where he shows that deification demonstrates the necessity of the Son being homoousion with the Father. Peter Widdicombe has pointed out that "The idea of sonship is central to Athanasius' soteriology. As Son of God by nature who becomes Son of Man, and bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, the Son enables us to become sons of the Father by adoption."⁵⁷ At the same time, Athanasius does not always offer what might be called "an ordered account of his soteriology" but, rather, "his theological anthropology is assumed."⁵⁸

Therefore, this paper will take as its starting point the idea that deification is both central and assumed for Athanasius. We will see that Athanasius argued for the Son's status as Son and God "by nature" in part by using the idea of our adoption and deification as God's soteriological goal in the Son. His argument can be summarized as follows: the adoption and deification of humanity in the Son was God's plan and for this goal to be achieved, the Son must be Son and God "by nature". His argument for the Son's consubstantiality is an exegetical project driven by the theology of deification. Since deification is essential for Athanasius it is important that we as modern readers use it as

⁵⁷ Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 223.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

an underlying framework for our own understanding of how he used it to defend and explain the homoousion language of the Creed.

Deification in Athanasius' Early Thought

A survey of Athanasius' writings shows that the importance to his theology of the doctrine of deification grew over time. In his earliest writings – beginning with *Against the Nations* (*Contra Gentes*) and *On the Incarnation* (*De Incarnatione*) – deification is present but it does not have nearly the importance that it would come to have in his later works, especially his *Orations Against the Arians* (*Orationes Contra Arianos*).

In *Against the Nations* Athanasius is primarily laying the groundwork for *On the Incarnation* by defending the reasonableness of the Christian faith and arguing against idolatry. In that context he does speak of deification, but it has a negative connotation – it is the pagan idea of the apotheosis of heroes such as Dionysus. In arguing against the worthiness of the Greek gods he says:

not only did he [Zeus] commit adultery, but he deified and raised to heaven those born of his adulteries, contriving the deification as a veil for his lawlessness: such as Dionysus, Heracles, the Dioscuri, Hermes, Perseus, and Soteira. Who, that sees the so-called gods at unreconciled strife among themselves at Troy on account of the Greeks and Trojans, will fail to recognize their feebleness, in that because of their mutual jealousies they egged on even mortals to strife?⁵⁹

In this context, then, deification is not about the adoption of humanity into God but about the idolatry of the wider cultural tradition in which Athanasius is working. This may be part of the reason that he does not use the word later on in *On the Incarnation*.

Athanasius does strike on at least two themes that relate to the subject and hint at the direction he will take in his later writings. The first of these themes is his argument that

⁵⁹ *Against the Nations*, 12.1 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 205).

humanity's salvation depended on God effecting an "internal" cure that worked from within corrupted human nature. His primary argument in this book with regard to the reason for the incarnation is the necessity of restoring humanity's nature to the image of God and restoring humanity's knowledge of God to a true knowledge, uncorrupted by paganism and idolatry. After having made this argument he goes on to answer objections, one of which is the question as to why God did not simply pronounce humanity forgiven – why did God's intention to deal with sin and death require so drastic an action as incarnation? His answer is that the corruption of death brought about by sin is "internal" to the body and to human nature and thus the cure for it must be worked out from within human nature:

if death were external to the body, it would be proper for life also to have been engendered externally to it. But if death was wound closely to the body and was ruling over it as though united to it, it was required that life also should be wound closely to the body, that so the body, by putting on life in its stead, should cast off corruption. Besides, even supposing that the Word had come outside the body, and not in it, death would indeed have been defeated by Him, in perfect accordance with nature, inasmuch as death has no power against the Life; but the corruption attached to the body would have remained in it none the less.⁶⁰

This is not deification but it is related and, in a sense, is the same idea expressed in a different way because human nature is in need of an ontological change in order for God's soteriological purpose to be achieved. In contrast to views of sin which make sin primarily about an affront to God's majesty or the breaking of God's law (i.e., where death comes from "outside the body"), Athanasius takes a view of sin that sees it in terms more akin to a disease – an internal corruption within human nature (i.e. death comes from "inside the body"). As a disease bringing death within human nature, sin therefore

⁶⁰ *On the Incarnation*, 44 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 319).

threatens to undo God's plan to be in relationship with human beings made in God's image. Forgiveness, eternal life, and the fulfillment of God's purpose, therefore, require that God's own nature – as borne by the Word who is God – become incarnate in human nature and effect a cure from within that nature. Such a change to human nature transforms human nature into something that is ontologically related to the nature of God, which is another way of saying that human nature takes on the nature of the deity – i.e., is deified. Khaled Anatolios points to the connection between the transformation of human nature and deification in his comments on the *Oration Against the Arians*:

The hominization of God is to be understood in terms of the divinization of humanity. God does not become human in such a way as to arrive at a destination that is merely 'external' to him, but in such a way that he immediately acts to transform what he is putting on and thus 'appropriates' it precisely by transforming it. His act of taking on our humanity is thus simultaneous with the act whereby He transforms humanity.⁶¹

Although not using the word deification in *On the Incarnation*, or exploring the idea as fully as he will in later works, nevertheless a framework in which deification is assumed – that of a necessary change to the ontology of human nature – is being formulated.

The second theme related to deification is in a statement that Athanasius makes in passing. In *On the Incarnation*, 54, he says that God has revealed God's self to humanity and given us immortality: "For He was made man that we might be made God."⁶² This statement is striking in several ways. First of all it seems to introduce a very large idea (deification) toward the end of the book that does not seem to have been clearly elaborated earlier in the work and receives no elaboration after being raised. That is true

⁶¹ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*. (London: Routledge, 1998), 151.

⁶² *On the Incarnation*, 54 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 332).

unless one considers that the idea of the necessary ontological change to human nature that is elaborated throughout the book is, for Athanasius, deification by another name. The ontological change of human nature from “corrupted” to “restored into the image of the divine” is another way of talking about deification and therefore this seemingly orphaned sentence actually has a clear parentage in all that has gone before.

The statement is also striking because it represents a formulation that will become central to Athanasius’ thought and argument in his later writings, especially in his *Orations Against the Arians* (as we shall see below). It is the first time he deploys this argument in this way but it will not be the last. Finally, it is striking because it is an almost a direct quote from Irenaeus, who said “He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God.”⁶³ This lends further credence to the argument put forward in Chapter 1 that Athanasius was working in an Irenaeian tradition and, coming so early as it does in Athanasius’ writings, it suggests that the works of Irenaeus may have formed a central part of Athanasius’ theological education.

Deification in the *Orations Against the Arians* and Later Works

If, as Anatolios argues Athanasius wrote *On the Incarnation* shortly after Nicaea (ca. 328) and *Orations Against the Arians* over the course of 339-343,⁶⁴ during his second exile, then *Orations Against the Arians* represents a more mature Athanasian theology, developed after at least ten years of episcopal experience and, of course, in the midst of

⁶³ *Against Heresies*, IV.19.1 (ANF, Vol. 1, p. 1130).

⁶⁴ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004), 19, 246 n. 75.

the Arian controversy.⁶⁵ Before our survey of the Orations and later works begins there are three items to take note of:

1. The vast majority of passages in Athanasius' writings in which he speaks of deification, using that word (θεοποίησις) and its cognates, are to be found in the Orations. Indeed he uses it much less frequently in his writings after the Orations. Although in the case of both the earlier and later works he does reference many related concepts and vocabulary. It takes on a special significance – and he specifically uses the word itself – primarily in his argument for the Son's consubstantiality in the Orations.

It is an interesting question as to why Athanasius spoke at length about deification in the Orations and – comparatively speaking – used the term so much less frequently in his earlier and later works. One intriguing possibility is suggested by Anatolios' argument that the Orations were written while Athanasius was in Rome.⁶⁶ Perhaps Athanasius was only vaguely familiar with Irenaeus' work during his time in Egypt before and after Nicaea (thus accounting for the one clear connection between *On the Incarnation* and Irenaeus cited in chapter 1) but gained access to Irenaeus' writings while he was in Rome and there made extensive use of them in constructing the Orations. Since Irenaeus' ministry and work had been in the West, at Lyon, it seems reasonable to imagine his writing being preserved in Rome and being highly regarded there. Perhaps Athanasius was impressed by Irenaeus' theology of deification, and incorporated it into his own thinking from that time forward, while also wanting to develop closer ties with Christianity in the West by incorporating “one of their own” into his work.

⁶⁵ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), 87.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

2. Athanasius only uses the word “homoousios” one time in the Orations and it is early in the First Oration.⁶⁷ Even though the word was used in the Creed of 325, because it is not found in Scripture it was not until the mid-350s that Athanasius became comfortable using it on a consistent basis in his defense of the Son’s consubstantiality.⁶⁸ In his *Defense of the Nicene Definition (De Decretis)* he offers this explanation for why such non-scriptural, theological terms are useful: “even if the expressions are not in so many words in the Scriptures, yet, as was said before, they contain the sense of the Scriptures, and expressing it they convey it to those who have their hearing unimpaired for religious doctrine.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the idea of consubstantiality is present throughout the Orations even if the word in Greek is never used and he conveys it with other ideas and phrases, such as “natural Son,” “very God from very God,” “by nature,” and “according to essence.”

3. Since Athanasius’ direct references to deification are found primarily in the Orations, the bulk of this survey will be spent looking at how deification fits into Athanasius’ argument for the Son’s consubstantiality in that work. Places where he references the idea in later works will be considered thematically within this study of the Orations. So, the quotations from later works will be included at the points in the Orations where those fit with a similar theme in them.

Athanasius employs the argument from deification to support the Son’s consubstantiality with the Father very early in the First Oration. The opening three

⁶⁷ *Against the Arians*, I.3.9 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 827, n. 1865).

⁶⁸ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004, p. 92-95, 140-144) and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004), 19, 246 n. 75.

⁶⁹ *Defense of the Nicene Definition*, 5.20 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 518).

chapters of the Oration are an exposition of what he calls the “Arian” position, liberally interspersed with polemic against that position. It is beyond the scope of this paper to parse out the nuances between the various positions that Athanasius labels “Arian,” but a simple description would be that he called anyone “Arian” whose theology he believed could be read to mean that the Son is a creature. Unfortunately, for those who would delve deeply into the theological history of the fourth century, this leaves us with a situation in which Athanasius’ polemic is directed indiscriminately towards those in the homoiousian, homoian, and heterousian camps alike – without regard to the fact that many of those taking these positions would have rejected Arius as strongly as Athanasius did and would have tried (perhaps not successfully) to argue that their position did not necessarily result in a claim that the Son was a creature.⁷⁰ For Athanasius they are all “Arian” because he sees the logical outcome of their various theologies as being the same: the Son is on the creation side of the divide between God and creation. For the sake of simplicity, therefore, this paper will adopt Athanasius’ language and refer to all those with whom he is in disagreement as “Arians” while acknowledging here, at the beginning, that this term is a misnomer.

Having offered a polemical definition of his opponents’ theology, Athanasius then turns in Chapter 4 towards arguing his own position. An early appeal to deification is then found in Chapter 5 where he puts forth the argument based on 2 Peter 1:4, saying:

What is from the essence of the Father, and proper to Him, is entirely the Son, for it is all one to say that God is wholly participated . . . and thus of the Son Himself, all things partake . . . this shews that the Son Himself partakes of nothing, but what is partaken from the Father, is the Son; for, as partaking of the Son Himself, we are

⁷⁰ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 133-157.

said to partake of God; and this is what Peter said ‘that ye may be partakers in a divine nature.’⁷¹

Though the word “deification” is not used here, the Petrine phrase “partaking in a divine nature” was seen (since Origen) as synonymous with, or a definition of, deification. The argument may be summarized as follows: the substance of the Son participates in the divine substance of the Father, it does not participate in anything on the created side of the divine/creation divide – instead, everything on the creation side participates in the Son (each “according to the grace of the Spirit coming from him,”⁷² he says – that is, each according to the nature of its own being, rocks in their way, plants in their way, humans in their way, etc.). But how do we know that the substance of the Son is participating in the divine nature? In part because 2 Peter tells us that by partaking in the Son we are partaking in the divine nature. If the substance of the Son were partaking in the creation then our partaking of him would not be a partaking in the divine but simply a partaking in another part of the creation. Therefore, since 2 Peter tells us that our partaking of the Son is a partaking in the divine, then the Son must be divine.

Athanasius also deploys this argument in his *First Letter to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*, written about a decade after the Orations were completed – or perhaps a bit later (ca. 356-360)⁷³. There he uses very similar language to argue that both the Holy Spirit and the Word must be fully divine, not part of the creation, because Peter says that we are sharers in the divine nature of the Word in the Spirit:

⁷¹ *Against the Arians*, I.5.16 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 839).

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ “Fourth Century.com”, ed. Glen L. Thompson. <http://www.fourthcentury.com/athanasius-chart/> Accessed 1/8/18.

. . . [the Holy Spirit], therefore, who is not sanctified by another, nor a partaker of sanctification, but who is himself partaken, and in whom all the creatures are sanctified, how can he be one from among all things or pertain to those who partake of him? For those who say this must say that the Son, through whom all things came to be, is one from among all things. . . Being thus sealed, we are duly made, as Peter put it, 'sharers in the divine nature'; and thus all creation partakes of the Word in the Spirit.⁷⁴

This passage shows how Athanasius took the same argument used exclusively to argue for the Son's consubstantiality in the Orations and applied it to both the Son and the Spirit in his letter to Serapion. Later fourth-century theologians would move away from the language of the Son or the Spirit's essences "participating" or "partaking" in the Father in order to clarify that "the divine persons have the fullness of the Godhead in themselves."⁷⁵

This argument from deification for the Son's consubstantiality is one that Athanasius would continue to deploy throughout in his argumentation. Writing about a decade after the Orations were completed, in his treatise *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia (De Synodis)*, he uses it again:

while all things originated have by participation the grace of God, He is the Father's Wisdom and Word of which all things partake, it follows that He, being the deifying and enlightening power of the Father, in which all things are deified and quickened, is not alien in essence from the Father, but coessential. For by partaking of Him, we partake of the Father [an allusion to 2 Peter]; because that Word is the Father's own. Whence, if He was Himself too from participation, and not from the Father His essential Godhead and Image, He would not deify, being deified Himself. For it is not possible that He, who merely possesses from participation, should impart of that partaking to others, since what He has is not His own, but the Giver's; and what He has received, is barely the grace sufficient for Himself.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Athanasius, *First Letter to Serapion* I.23 in *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, ed. C.R.B. Shapland (London: Epworth Press, 1951), 123-124.

⁷⁵ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 322.

⁷⁶ *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*, 3.51 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 1178.)

The argumentative structure that Athanasius uses in these passages is one that we will encounter repeatedly throughout his writings. He begins by asserting the Son's consubstantiality with the Father and then offers multiple arguments for it – and among those arguments will often be the argument from deification. This structure will remain fairly consistent throughout, especially in the sense that Athanasius will not seem to see any need to prove deification or to justify his interpretation of passages such as the one from 2 Peter. As we see in all three of the passages above, for Athanasius partaking of Christ is partaking in the divine nature and for him this is clearly what the 2 Peter text means. He sees it as so obviously clear and known to his readers that it can suffice as evidence in favor of the homoousion understanding of Son's relation to the Father.

In chapter 11 of the First Oration Athanasius offers an extended reflection on deification, its implications, and the way in which it supports his argument in favor of consubstantiality. Among the texts he exegetes is Philippians 2:5-11. He begins this exegesis by summarizing the Arian position, which asserts that since the text says Christ was exalted and given the name above all others because of his humility and suffering, it must mean that “He is altogether of an alterable nature”⁷⁷ and therefore the essence of his being is, at best, something “like” God or, at worst, something “other than” God and thus not fully God. Athanasius does not launch immediately into deification as an argument but first references other ideas in passing. Among these is a theme common throughout his writing, that the word “Son” must, by definition, mean having the same nature as the “Father” because “what is from another by nature is a real offspring, as Isaac was to

⁷⁷ *Against the Arians*, I.11.37 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 865).

Abraham.”⁷⁸ The Son is the “Father’s own” in this line of thinking and as Andrew Louth has pointed out, “what is ἴδιος to the Father is from his substance and is to be distinguished utterly from the created order . . .”⁷⁹ In this context Athanasius also cites a very common fourth-century image, with roots in the preceding centuries and incorporated into the Creed, by pointing to “the radiance of the sun”⁸⁰ as an example to show that what is from another by nature is a real offspring.⁸¹

It is also interesting to note that he begins by asserting the implications of a point of common ground between him and the Arians. He points out that “if the Lord be God, Son, Word, yet was not all these before He became man . . . and afterwards became partaker of them for His virtue’s sake . . . they [the Arians] must adopt the alternative . . . that He was not before that time [i.e. of his human birth] . . . But this is no sentiment of the Church, but of the Samosatene⁸² and of the present Jews.”⁸³ So Athanasius assumes that they are all in agreement that Philippians 2 means that the one who became Jesus was preexistent and, in some sense, God, Son, and Word. What they are disagreeing about is the meaning of words such as “Son” and whether such words, and their soteriological implications, logically demand, as Athanasius believes they do, that this preexistent one must be consubstantial with the Father and have an uncreated existence

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Andrew Louth, “The Use of the Term ἴδιος in Alexandrian Theology from Alexander to Cyril”. *Studia Patristica* 19 (1989), 198-202.

⁸⁰ *Against the Arians*, I.11.37 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 865).

⁸¹ e.g. see, Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 48-49, where Ayres discusses Athanasius’ references to Theognostus.

⁸² See *Ibid.*, 76 regarding the question of what we can really know about the teachings of Paul of Samosata from whom the word “Samosatene” is derived.

⁸³ *Against the Arians*, I.11.38 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, p. 866).

on the divine side of the divine/creation divide. He does not classify the idea of Christ having no preexistence as “Arian” but rather as “Samosatene” (adoptionist) and “Jewish” (a human Messiah).

He then turns towards his deification argument and begins by citing several examples from the Hebrew Scriptures (such as the visitation at Mamre) in which he believes the preexistent Christ was shown to be the glory of God. These citations further demonstrate that Athanasius believed the Arians accepted the preexistence of Christ and attributed certain theophanies in the Hebrew Scriptures to him. Having cited these examples he then says:

If . . . the Son had that glory and was Lord of glory . . . it follows that He had not promotion from his descent but rather Himself promoted the things which needed promotion; and if He descended to effect their promotion, therefore He did not receive in reward the name of the Son and God, but rather He himself has made us sons of the Father, and deified men by becoming Himself man. Therefore He was not man and then became God, but he was God and then became man, and that to deify us.⁸⁴

Here, in the context of arguing that the incarnate Word exalted human nature by his resurrection and ascension, he asserts that the purpose of the incarnation was the deification of humanity.

It is in the following section that he uses this idea to argue for consubstantiality. After pointing to several examples in the Hebrew Scriptures where people are referred to as “sons of God” he asks how they could have sonship if Christ the Son did not receive his sonship until after them – upon his promotion at his resurrection.

How is that those first partakers do not partake of the Word? This opinion is not true . . . For how in that case can any at all know God as their Father? For adoption there could not be apart from the real Son, who says, ‘No one knoweth the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.’ And how can there be deifying

⁸⁴ *Against the Arians*, I.11.38-39, p. 867.

apart from the Word and before him? . . . if all that are called sons and gods, whether in earth or in heaven, were adopted and deified through the Word, and the Son Himself is the Word, it is plain that through Him are they all, and He Himself before all, or rather He Himself only is very Son, and He alone is very God from very God, not receiving these prerogatives as a reward for His virtue . . . but being all these by nature and according to essence.⁸⁵

Athanasius' argument may be summarized as follows: some people in the Hebrew Scriptures are called "sons of God." However, we know that "sonship" means to share in the nature of another (as established two sections earlier, "what is from another by nature is a real offspring"⁸⁶). Since these humans were created, and not in their essential nature divine, their sonship must come from participating through adoption in the sonship of the Word who is "very Son". So, if some had sonship and deification by adoption before the Word became flesh then it must mean that the Word was always "very Son" and "very God from very God" and did not become a divine Son through his resurrection and because of his humility and servanthood.

Notice the three assumptions that he makes in this argument. No created being can know God as Father or be adopted as God's Son by its own nature – adoption as a child of God must take place through a natural or true Son – and deification cannot take place apart from the Word who is "very God from very God." And finally, and most importantly for our purposes, deification is God's purpose for humanity and has been from the beginning – going all the way back to those whose stories are told in the Hebrew Scriptures. Again we see this structure: he asserts the consubstantiality of the Son and supports that using the argument from deification. Because the Father's plan is to adopt

⁸⁵ *Against the Arians*, I.11.39, pp. 867-868.

⁸⁶ *Against the Arians*, I.11.37, p. 865.

humanity as his children and deify them it follows that the one through whom this deification will take place must, himself, be fully divine.

Having asserted the idea that deified sonship was God's plan for humanity and that this could only be achieved if Christ is the "very Son" of God, Athanasius then turns his attention to a more detailed exegesis of the Philippians text. He clarifies the ambiguity that we noted in chapter 1 of this paper around the phrase "form of God" by asserting that the Word "existing as God, took the form of a servant."⁸⁷ For Athanasius "form of God" means to be existing as God, to be fully God, and therefore to be of one substance with God. He clarifies the question of what it means that Christ was exalted by saying,

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. . . and if because of His taking flesh 'humbled' is written, it is clear that 'highly exalted' is also said because of it. For of this was man's nature in want, because of the humble estate of the flesh and of death. . . therefore . . . as man He is said because of us and for us to be highly exalted, that by his death we all died in Christ, so again in the Christ himself we might be highly exalted, being raised from the dead and ascending into heaven . . .⁸⁸

This passage helps us better understand what Athanasius believed the implications of deification were. In his theology the eternal Word, who is very Son, consubstantial with the Father and very God from very God, humbled himself to take on human nature in the incarnation. As a result, human nature was exalted in deification and humanity adopted as God's children. In Christ's death the old humanity died, in Christ's resurrection a new humanity was born, and in Christ's ascension this new humanity was exalted in deification and taken into heaven – into the very nature of God. In the next section he

⁸⁷ *Against the Arians*, I.11.40, p. 868.

⁸⁸ *Against the Arians*, I.11.41, 869.

further emphasizes the way in which the incarnation of the “very Son” deifies humanity by saying “. . . the Word was not impaired in receiving a body . . . but rather He deified that which He put on, and more than that, gave it graciously to the race of man.”⁸⁹ He also paints an image of what it means for humanity to be deified and ascend into heaven: “the heavenly powers will not be astonished at seeing all of us, who are of one body with Him, introduced into their realms.”⁹⁰

A primary concern for Athanasius in the Orations is to explain what might be called “difficult scriptures.” As we saw in Chapter 1 this exegetical work has its roots in assumptions about God as the author of the text and in the techniques of grammatical analysis that were common in the ancient world. He begins this task in the First Oration, as we have seen, with the Philippians 2 passage, and continues working his way through various texts in both the Second and Third Oration. The bulk of the Second Oration – seven chapters – is spent addressing just one verse: Proverbs 8:22. Since the passage has Wisdom saying “the Lord created me at the beginning of his work,” and since Wisdom was seen as another name for the Word of God that became flesh, this passage became a source of tremendous contention for Athanasius. The Arians appealed to it as an authority for the idea that Christ, while preexistent to all else in the creation, was a part of the creation and not consubstantial with the Father. Athanasius was anxious to push back on this interpretation.

Early in his discussion of the text he argues that the created thing referred to is not the Word but rather the body which the Word would inhabit in the incarnation, “as if to

⁸⁹ *Against the Arians*, I.11.42, p. 870.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 871.

say, ‘My Father hath prepared for Me a body, and has created Me for men in behalf of their salvation.’⁹¹ His argument is that from the beginning of creation God intended for the Word to become incarnate so that, in the sense of planning or envisioning, the first thing created in God’s plan was flesh assumed by the Word. Such a view of creation, in which the God-Man Jesus is the beginning of the creative process, points towards the importance that deification held in Athanasius’ theology. If the deification of humanity through the incarnation of the consubstantial Son is God’s telos for humanity then it makes sense that the incarnate Son’s humanity would be the first of God’s works to be envisioned, even before the creation of the cosmos or humanity itself. It is in this context that Athanasius references deification again, not exactly as an argument for consubstantiality but rather in a way that further emphasizes how he viewed deification as self-evident part of God’s plan for humanity. He says “God created Him for our sakes, preparing for Him the created body, as it is written, for us, than in Him we might be capable of being renewed and deified.”⁹²

Over the subsequent chapters, as he continues his exegesis of the Proverbs text, he returns to a theme that is common to the Orations: created human beings cannot become sons of God because of their own nature, but must participate in the nature of the true and only Son, Christ. He says:

And these are they who, having received the Word, gained power from Him to become sons of God; for they could not become sons, being by nature creatures, otherwise than by receiving the Spirit of the natural and true Son. Wherefore, that this might be, ‘The Word became flesh,’ that He might make man capable of

⁹¹ *Against the Arians*, II.19.47, p. 960.

⁹² *Ibid.*

Godhead [θεότητος]. . . God is not our Father by nature, but of that Word in us, in whom and because of whom we ‘cry, Abba, Father.’⁹³

This idea is important to Athanasius’ argument for consubstantiality based on the Son’s deifying work. If God is humanity’s ‘Father’ by virtue of the fact that God created them then sonship and its corollary, deification, would not necessarily depend upon the Son being consubstantial with the Father. On the contrary, deification supports consubstantiality if deification can only be achieved through the incarnation of the consubstantial Son.

The exegesis of the Proverbs text also presents Athanasius the opportunity to briefly set deification in the context of renewal and restoration. Though he does not expound on what he envisions he offers this statement:

Mankind is perfected in Him and restored, as it was made at the beginning, nay, with greater grace. For, on the rising from the dead, we shall no longer fear death, but shall ever reign with Christ in the heavens. And this has been done, since the own Word of God Himself, who is from the Father, has put on the flesh, and become man. 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?⁹⁴

Like many early Christian theologians, Athanasius does not perceive Christ’s work as merely a restoration of humanity to its prelapsarian state of grace. Instead, God’s telos for humanity is a “greater grace” that includes rising from the dead, no longer fearing death, reigning with Christ in the heavens, and being joined to God. To reign with Christ can be understood as another way of understanding deification – it represents an imagery that indicates a state of being included in the divine nature, not by virtue of human nature but by virtue of adoption into the divine nature of Christ (i.e. *with Christ* in the heavens, where the emphasis is on being in and with Christ). Likewise, “being joined to God” is

⁹³ *Against the Arians*, II.19.59, pp. 973-974.

⁹⁴ *Against the Arians*, II.21.67, p. 982-983.

another way of speaking about deification since it points to a union between human and divine nature.

He continues this theme of the renewal and deification brought about by the Son's incarnation in the subsequent sections and continues to make his point that God's telos for humanity in this regard can only be accomplished if the Son is fully God. Later in this same section he writes:

For therefore did He assume the body originate and human, that having renewed it as its Framer, He might deify it in Himself and thus might introduce us all into the kingdom of heaven after His likeness. For man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God; nor had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless He had been His natural and true Word who had put on the body. . . For therefore the union was of this kind, that He might unite what is man by nature to Him who is in the nature of the Godhead, and his salvation and deification might be secure.⁹⁵

In addition to the familiar point that the Son must be consubstantial with the Father in order for deification to take place, this passage also highlights the senses in which deification can be expressed as being brought into the kingdom of heaven, being brought into the Father's presence, and being united to the nature of the Godhead. Because of the Son's status as one who is consubstantial with the Father this deification is secure.

Interestingly, the Proverbs text also affords Athanasius the chance to discuss predestination. In keeping with the interpretation described above, in which he understands Proverbs 8:22 to mean that the flesh assumed by the Word was the first of God's works to be envisioned, even before the creation of the cosmos or humanity itself, Athanasius says that "this grace had been prepared even before we came into being, nay, before the foundation of the world. . . The God of all . . . foreseeing that, being made

⁹⁵ *Against the Arians*, II.21.70, p. 985-986.

good we should in the event be transgressors . . . and be thrust out of paradise . . . prepared beforehand in His own Word, by Whom he also created us, the Economy of our salvation.”⁹⁶ For Athanasius predestination is about Christ – Christ is the predestined one because the incarnation of the Word was the beginning of God’s creative process. In addition to expressing the predestined role of Christ in terms of salvation, Athanasius also cites Ephesians 1:3-5 and identifies the adoption of humanity as God’s children as another predestined role for the incarnate Word. Athanasius then asks how it can be that we were predestined for this adoption when we were not yet in existence. “In whom was it prepared before we came to be, save in the Lord,” he asks rhetorically “who ‘before the world’ was founded for this purpose. . . thus we shall be capable of a life not temporary, but ever afterwards abide and live in Christ since even before this our life had been founded and prepared in Christ Jesus.”⁹⁷

These three concepts – salvation, adoption, and deification – are closely intertwined in Athanasius’ thinking. They are, in effect, three aspects of God’s one telos for humanity. Since humanity was predestined for adoption in Christ our salvation from sin and death was also predestined for the purpose of achieving this goal of deification through adoption. So, even though Athanasius does not expressly use the word “deification” in this passage, because of its central role throughout the Orations in his argument for the Son’s consubstantiality it makes sense to understand it as a part of what he believes Christ was predestined to do.

⁹⁶ *Against the Arians*, II.22.75, p. 991.

⁹⁷ *Against the Arians*, II.22.75, pp. 992-993.

Moving on to the Third Oration we see that, in order to safeguard the Son's consubstantiality, Athanasius takes time to discuss the distinction between the Son's impassibility as God and his passibility in the flesh as Christ. This point is significant for Athanasius' understanding of deification. He sees the Arians using passages in the gospels about Jesus being hungry or weeping as an argument in favor of the Son not being fully God. He makes the counter-argument that these verses show that the Word took "a body not in appearance, but in truth. . . in nature the Word Himself is impassible, and yet because of that flesh which He put on, these [sufferings] are ascribed to Him, since they are proper to the flesh . . ."98

In his divinity, then, the Word remains impassible, but in his humanity he suffers, hungers, and weeps. Athanasius makes the connection to deification by saying that "if the works of the Word's Godhead had not taken place through the body, man had not been deified . . . as the Lord, putting on the body, became man, so we men are deified by the Word as being taken to Him through His flesh, and henceforward inherit life everlasting."99 We see again here the familiar pattern: Athanasius wants to argue for the consubstantiality of the Son in the face of questions about Jesus' passibility and the impassibility of God. An opponent would ask: how can the Son be consubstantial if he is passible? He uses several arguments to respond, including the argument from deification: Christ's passibility must relate to his human nature, not his divine nature, because if the impassible divine had not taken on passible human nature then human nature would not have been deified and God's plan to deify humanity would not have been accomplished.

⁹⁸ *Against the Arians*, III.26.32, pp. 1038, 1041.

⁹⁹ *Against the Arians*, III.26.33, 34, pp. 1039, 1041.

Deification as God's telos is assumed and the idea is used to argue for preserving the impassibility of the divine Christ incarnate in passible flesh.

In the Third Oration Athanasius further develops his view of the interaction between the divine and the human in the person of Christ and his conclusions bear on his understanding of exactly what deification is (a subject that will be addressed in chapter 3). Seeking to address the question of why the omniscient Word, incarnate as Christ, would say in the gospels that he does not know the day and the hour of the coming of the Son of Man, Athanasius asserts that he did know “. . . when the Day and when the Hour, and yet though knowing, He says, ‘No, not the Son knoweth.’”¹⁰⁰ The argument he develops here is that in his divine nature he did know but in his human nature he chose not to tell the disciples in order to spare them pain (presumably the pain of learning that it would not be in their lifetimes).¹⁰¹ He contrasts Christ's statement in the Gospels that he “does not know” with his statement in Acts 1:7 that it is “not for the disciples to know”. Athanasius argues that “now the flesh had risen and put off its mortality and been deified, and no longer did it become Him to answer after the flesh when He was going into the heavens, but henceforth to teach after a divine manner.”¹⁰² Though he does not expound on it, this statement helps us see that Athanasius views deification as having to do with the transformation of the flesh in the resurrection. For the body in which the Word had become incarnate was deified in the resurrection. It may also be worth noting here that Athanasius perceives Christ's body to be deified and still present in glorified form after

¹⁰⁰ *Against the Arians*, III.28.48, pp. 1056-1057.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 1057.

the resurrection. For Athanasius the Word remains forever incarnate as Christ with his body of flesh now resurrected and deified.

Athanasius also speaks of this deification of Christ's human nature in the context of verses such as Luke 2:52, where it says that Jesus grew in wisdom. "This advance that is spoken of," he says, is "the deifying and grace imparted from Wisdom to men . . . Therefore . . . not Wisdom, as Wisdom, advanced in respect of Itself, but the manhood advanced in Wisdom, transcending by degrees human nature, and being deified, and becoming and appearing to all as the organ of Wisdom . . ." ¹⁰³ In this context deification is about a transformation in which the incarnate Wisdom of God deifies the human nature in which it has become incarnate and that nature grows in its participation in and reflection of the divine Wisdom which is deifying it. This is another point we shall return to in chapter 3.

This idea, that Christ's body was deified by the incarnation of the consubstantial Son, would become part of Athanasius' defense of the Creed and continue to be a theme he returned to late in life. Many of the arguments we see in the Third Oration are neatly summarized in the way he describes this theology in *Defense of the Nicene Definition (De Decretis)*:

The Word was made flesh in order to offer up this body for all, and that we partaking of His Spirit, might be deified (θεοποιηθῶμεν), a gift which we could not otherwise have gained than by His clothing Himself in our created body, for hence we derive our name of "men of God" and "men in Christ." But as we, by receiving the Spirit, do not lose our own proper substance, so the Lord, when made man for us, and bearing a body, was no less God; for He was not lessened by the envelopment of the body, but rather deified it and rendered it immortal. ¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 1061.

¹⁰⁴ *Defense of the Nicene Definition*, 3.14, p. 506.

Late in his life we see him continuing with this theme in his *Letter to Adelphius*, written just one or two years before his death. Here he places the controversy over the Son's assuming a body in terms of something that might be "shameful" (given common Greek notions regarding the material world) and – just as he had decades before in his Orations – he continues to cite the verse from 2 Peter as a key text for deification and its support of the Son's consubstantiality:

If God sent His Son brought forth from a woman, the fact causes us no shame but contrariwise glory and great grace. For He has become Man, that He might deify us in Himself, and He has been born of a woman, and begotten of a Virgin, in order to transfer to Himself our erring generation, and that we may become henceforth a holy race, and 'partakers of the Divine Nature,' as blessed Peter wrote.¹⁰⁵

Before finishing this survey we should note the importance Athanasius placed on establishing the distinction between being a child of God by adoption and being the Son by nature. This emphasis makes sense when we consider the fact that he was arguing for the Son's consubstantiality from the Son's mission to deify us. In order to safeguard the Son's identity his relationship with God had to be carefully and precisely distinguished from the creation's relationship with God – and the distinction needed to be defined in regard to both the Son's relationship to God and the Son's relationship with humanity. In the very beginning of the First Oration he makes this distinction in the midst of his polemic against the Arians: "[Christ] is very God, existing one in essence [ὁμοούσιος¹⁰⁶] with the very Father; while other beings, to whom He said, 'I said ye are gods,' had this grace from the Father, only by participation of the Word, through the Spirit."¹⁰⁷ In the

¹⁰⁵ Letter LX.4 (NPNF, Series II, Vol. 4, pp. 1401-1402).

¹⁰⁶ Here is the only use of ὁμοούσιος in the Orations.

¹⁰⁷ *Against the Arians*, I.3.9, pp. 827-828.

Second Oration he offers a similar thought, as an aside to his main argument, to clarify what he means: “He is a Vine and we knit to Him as branches – not according to the essence of the Godhead; for this surely is impossible; but according to His manhood, for the branches must be like the vine, since we are like Him according to the flesh.”¹⁰⁸

In the Third Oration he addresses several verses from the Gospel of John to make clear the distinction between our sonship by adoption and the Son’s sonship by consubstantiality. He begins by discussing the Scripture’s use of metaphorical language and offers numerous examples, including such statements as when Jesus “to expose Herod said, ‘Tell that fox.’”¹⁰⁹ Herod, obviously, is not a fox but is like a fox. According to Athanasius, the Scripture uses this metaphorical language so that “from these physical objects the moral impulses of man may be explained and thus their conduct shown to be either bad or righteous.”¹¹⁰ On this basis he begins to draw the distinction between the Son’s natural sonship and ours:

For as, although there be one Son by nature, True and Only-begotten, we too become sons, not as He in nature and truth, but according to the grace of Him that calleth, and though we are men from the earth, are yet called gods, not as the True God or His Word, but as has pleased God who has given us that grace . . . and we are made sons through Him by adoption and grace, as partaking of His Spirit . . .¹¹¹

We are “sons” and “gods” Athanasius goes on to say but not “as the Son Himself” and not “as the Father.” How could we be? “The Word is unlike us and like the Father.”¹¹² He

¹⁰⁸ *Against the Arians*, II.22.74, pp. 990-991.

¹⁰⁹ *Against the Arians*, III.25.18, p. 1023.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1024.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1025.

makes the same point in almost the same language in his *Second Letter to Serapion* when he says, “If some have been called gods, they are not so by nature, but by participation in the Son.”¹¹³ Thus deification means that we take on characteristics of the divine life by our participation in it – characteristics such as holiness and immortality – but we do not become God as God is God, so, for example, we will never be uncreated or exist outside of time.

It also needs to be noted, however, that when Athanasius speaks of us becoming “sons” and “gods”, he does speak of it as more than *just* metaphor. It is a metaphor, but it is also something more – something relational and ontological. Returning to his earlier illustration about Jesus calling Herod a fox: in that metaphorical language Herod is like a fox because he displays certain behaviors that are like the behaviors of a fox. Athanasius does have this sort of metaphor in mind when he speaks of us becoming imitators of God¹¹⁴ but he also means something more than that. Jesus’ comment about Herod does not in any way mean that an actual fox is in Herod or that Herod has undergone an ontological change in which the essence of his being has been knit together with a fox’s. But Athanasius does speak of our deification in this way and he locates it specifically in the work of the Holy Spirit. Referencing I John 4:13, he describes in greater detail how deification works:

Because of the grace of the Spirit which has been given to us, in Him we come to be, and He in us; and since it is the Spirit of God, therefore through His becoming in us . . . are we . . . considered to be in God and thus God in us. Not then as the Son in the Father, so also we become in the Father; for the Son does not merely partake the Spirit, that therefore He too may be in the Father; nor does He receive the Spirit, but rather He supplies It Himself to all . . . And the Son is in the Father, as His own

¹¹³ Athanasius, *Second Letter to Serapion*, 2.4 in *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 157.

¹¹⁴ *Against the Arians*, III.25.19, p. 1024.

Word and Radiance; but . . . by the participation of the Spirit are [we] knit into the Godhead.¹¹⁵

There is no “fox spirit” which can cause the fox to be in Herod and Herod in the fox, nor is there a spirit which can knit Herod together with the fox. Yet that is what has become possible for humanity because of the incarnation of the “true Son.” Because the consubstantial Son incarnate it is now possible for him to share the Spirit with us and possible for us to be in God and God to be in us as we are knit together with the Godhead. Athanasius sounds a similar note in his *First Letter to Serapion*, using there the language of “partaking” to describe the way in which the consubstantial Spirit unites us to the consubstantial Son:

But the Spirit is always the same; he does not belong to those who partake, but all things partake of him. But if he is always the same and always partaken; and if the creatures partake of him, the Holy Spirit can neither be an angel nor a creature of any kind, but proper to the Word. And being given by the Word, he is partaken by the creatures.¹¹⁶

In conclusion, when Athanasius speaks of deification in order to bolster his argument for the Son’s consubstantiality he sees the importance of protecting the argument from both sides: the Son must be consubstantial with the Father in order for our participation in God through the Spirit (our deification) to be real, yet our participation must not be viewed as one which makes us fully God as the Son is fully God – otherwise the Son’s unique status as the one on the divine side of the divine/creation divide, who bridges the gap between the divine and the created, will be compromised. He concludes this section of the Third Oration by saying, “For what the Word has by nature . . . in the Father, that

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III.25.24, pp. 1028-1029.

¹¹⁶ Athanasius, *First Letter to Serapion*, I.27, in *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 132.

He wishes to be given to us through the Spirit. . . as we are sons and gods because of the Word in us, so we shall be in the Son and in the Father . . . because that Spirit is in us which is in the Word which is in the Father.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ *Against the Arians*, III.25.24, pp. 1029-1030.

Chapter 3: Deification and Homoousios

This chapter will seek to integrate the conclusions of the first two chapters. Having examined the background and context of Athanasius' understanding of deification, including his drawing on a tradition represented by Irenaeus, and having shown that he engaged in an argument for consubstantiality that was driven in part by deification, it will be argued that deification is integral to understanding why Athanasius became comfortable with and then insistent upon the innovative use of the word "homoousios" in the Nicene Creed. Finally, in order to lay the groundwork for the constructive theology of chapter four, we need to establish that the best way to define the gospel message and better appreciate the significance and value of the language of the Nicene Creed is by following the pattern established by Athanasius and using deification as an assumption for the construction of our own theology.

A Summary of Athanasius' Understanding of Deification

It will be helpful to summarize what we have learned about Athanasius' understanding of deification before moving on to demonstrate that deification is integral to understanding why he became comfortable with the homoousios language in the Nicene Creed and begin turning toward constructive theology. This summary will begin by attempting to define what deification meant in Athanasius' thought and then identify key points in how he made the argument for consubstantiality from deification.

What did Athanasius mean when he used the word "deification"? Our survey in chapter 2 touched on this question at a couple of points and summarizing what we learned from his use of the word will help us define it. For him, deification has seven main characteristics.

1. Deification is more than *just* a metaphor – it is relational and ontological.

Deification does not mean that humanity only becomes like God or simply imitates the character or actions of God. While imitation of God is a part of deification and an outcome of it, it is not the full meaning of the idea. The fuller meaning is to be found in the fact that deification requires that we partake of God’s nature and we are “knit into the Godhead.”¹¹⁸ God is in us and we are in God.

It is in this sense, then, of God being in us and us being in God – that deification is relational. It happens because the divine Son – who has a Father-Son relationship with the divine Father – establishes a relationship with humanity through the incarnation. Humanity is knit together with the Godhead through this relationship established in the incarnation and as a result of it we discover that we are in God and is in us. This mutual indwelling, of God in us and us in God, takes place in the Holy Spirit – a fact which further reinforces the relational nature of deification. Humanity is deified in the Holy Spirit through the Son’s incarnation. And it is only within this relationship between the Son and humanity, established in the incarnation, that this deification takes place. There is no such thing as a non-relational deification that results purely from the act of being created in the image of the divine. “God is not our Father by nature, but of that Word in us.”¹¹⁹ We are not by nature deified. We are deified because of the Son’s relationship with us, a relationship established by the fact that the Son has taken on human nature in the incarnation and thus caused human nature to be transformed into something that partakes of the divine.

¹¹⁸ *Against the Arians*, III.25.18, p. 1029.

¹¹⁹ *Against the Arians*, II.19.47, p. 960.

It is this transformation that points us to the sense in which deification is ontological. For Athanasius the incarnation of the consubstantial Son results in an ontological change to human nature. Humanity goes from being merely a created work to being deified by participation in God's nature, from suffering the results of the defaced image of God within us to experiencing the blessings of having that image restored, and from being alienated by sin from the nature of God to being raised to that nature. Deification must be ontological in his theology because sin is ontological – sin and death are “wound closely to the body” and therefore God can only transform humanity from within human nature, by winding life “closely to the body” and making an ontological change to the nature of what it means to be human.¹²⁰

2. Deification means the adoption of humanity as God's children. Athanasius often uses the words “adoption” and “deification” interchangeably or in parallel to each other, as he does in the First Oration,¹²¹ and he assumes that it was always God's telos for humanity that we be adopted as God's children. This adoption cannot take place without a corresponding ontological change through deification. Without the deification of our nature we would have remained creatures and not have been adopted as children, but once the Son deified human nature in the incarnation we were adopted and, sharing in the sonship of the Son, became children of God.

3. Deification logically precedes salvation. Since the deification and adoption of humanity into the divine life was God's telos for humanity from the beginning, it follows that salvation from sin and death is a necessary aspect of the plan to deify – but salvation

¹²⁰ *On the Incarnation*, 44, p. 319.

¹²¹ *Against the Arians*, I.11.39, p. 867.

is not the plan itself. This why the ideas of deification, adoption, and salvation are so closely intertwined in Athanasius' writing. In his theology God had a plan to adopt humanity by deifying us but that plan was placed in jeopardy by sin and death. God, being good,¹²² would not allow this plan to be thwarted and so the incarnation takes place to both deify humanity and save us from sin and death.

4. Deification means humanity's growth to be more like God. Though Athanasius often speaks of deification as something accomplished in the incarnation, almost as though it were a finished work of God, he also speaks about deification as a process of growth into the likeness of God and growth in our ability to imitate God's goodness. Such growth in our deification is possible because human nature has been deified in the Son's incarnation. This is reflected even in how he views the life of Jesus. He perceives Jesus as growing in Wisdom as regards his "manhood"¹²³ even though he is the very Wisdom of God incarnate. For Athanasius deification means that we, like Jesus in his human nature, must grow into the fullness of the divine nature of which we partake.

5. The fullness of deification comes at the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Deification means that we, like Christ, will someday put on immortality and incorruptibility, be raised from the dead, and ascend to heaven where "the heavenly powers will not be astonished at seeing all of us . . . introduced into their realms."¹²⁴ This makes sense in the context of adoption and deification as God's telos for humanity.

Unless we, like the only-begotten Son, have an eternal and incorruptible relationship with

¹²² *On the Incarnation*, 7, p. 267.

¹²³ *Against the Arians*, III.28.48, p. 1061.

¹²⁴ *Against the Arians*, I.11.42, pp. 870-871.

God then we are not really partaking in the divine nature and sharing in the sonship of the Son. The full meaning of sharing God's life through deification becomes clear when we, like Christ, begin to fully share in immortality and an unending life of relationship with God.

6. Deification has universalist implications. In Athanasius' theology deification is the result of the Son's incarnation. It is not a state of being in which we were created and it is also not a state of being which we can appropriate for ourselves through our own decisions or actions. He also consistently speaks of all things being deified through the Son¹²⁵ and of all creatures being sanctified in the Holy Spirit.¹²⁶ In *On the Incarnation*, he phrases it this way: "the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all."¹²⁷

These two ideas – that Christ alone is the agent of deification and that he has acted on behalf of all humanity – give deification universalist implications in Athanasius' theology. He is not, however, a universalist. As we have already seen, deification is something already accomplished in the incarnation but it is also something that we grow into as we cooperate with the divine within us and are molded into God's image. For Athanasius the incarnation means the adoption of all of humanity into the life of God, the deification of human nature, and the restoration of the image of God in everyone. Therefore all people now have the opportunity through Christ, in the Spirit, to fully

¹²⁵ *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*, 3.51, p. 1178.

¹²⁶ Athanasius, *First Letter to Serapion*, 1.23 in *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 123.

¹²⁷ *On the Incarnation*, 2.9, p. 8.

become what God always intended them to be. If some, however – like the Arians! – refuse to cooperate and participate in what God is doing then they will suffer the consequences of fighting against their true nature given to them in Christ.

7. These universalist implications also result in a particular understanding of predestination. For Athanasius, predestination is not about God's divine choice regarding which portion of humanity to save from sin and death. As discussed above, God's purpose for humanity is deification in Christ and sin and death are barriers to be overcome in working towards that goal. From that perspective it would be nonsensical to speak of God planning out in advance who will be saved and who will be damned. God did not create humanity in order to set up such a choice, God created humanity for the purpose of including us in God's life through adoption and deification. Therefore, predestination is a statement about Christ being predestined to be the one through whom this plan was achieved and through whom the barriers to the plan's accomplishment (sin and death) were overcome. "God created him for our sakes, preparing for Him the created body, as it is written, for us, that in Him we might be capable of being renewed and deified."¹²⁸

For Athanasius, then, deification may be defined as follows: the process by which God accomplishes God's plan to adopt humanity as God's children through the only-begotten Son of God. It is relational because it takes place in the relationship between the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and humanity, and it is ontological because it changes the very essence of human nature. Sin and death were barriers to adoption through deification that Christ overcame in order to accomplish God's plan. Deification has already been

¹²⁸ *Against the Arians*, II.19.47, p. 960.

accomplished in Christ and is effective for all of humanity, yet we must grow into the fullness of what it means, becoming more and more like God until we, like Christ, put on immortality in the resurrection and enter into the eternal life of the world to come.

Debating Deification and Homoousios

Having more clearly defined what deification means, we can now see how it is integral to understanding why Athanasius became comfortable with and then insistent upon the innovative use of the word “homoousios” in the Nicene Creed.

For Athanasius, adoption through deification was self-evident. Whenever he spoke of deification and humanity’s adoption into God’s life he never saw the need to explain it or argue for its truth. This is especially striking because we see that Athanasius never shies away from an argument. If he believes there is any doubt about what he is saying, be it the meaning of a word or the truth of a doctrinal point, he does not hesitate to offer an extended and exhaustive argument for his position. In his mind deification needs no such defense. Athanasius appears to have assumed that his opponents, while disagreeing with him about the nature of the Father-Son relationship within God, did not disagree with him about what the Son came to accomplish in the incarnation.

Since adoption through deification was self-evident, Athanasius could then use it to argue for the Son’s consubstantiality. By his reasoning humanity could only be deified in Christ if Christ was fully divine and of one substance with the Father. He consistently argues that if Christ is a created being then what he shares with us is not the authentic life of God but something less than that – something like the life we already have, a life that is a reflection of the divine life but not an actual participation in or adoption into the divine life.

Athanasius believed that adoption through deification in the fully divine Son was the ancient faith of the Church. Athanasius does not perceive himself to be working in an innovative or creative way when he argues for the Son's consubstantiality using deification. He does show a slow acceptance over time of the word "homoousios" but he was not reluctant about his belief in what the word means and the necessity of the idea to preserve a gospel of deification. From the outset he believes the Christian message is one of participation in God through the Son and that the Son's status as one who is homoousios with the Father marks a vital part of that message.

Athanasius sought to include the whole witness of scripture in his reasoning while also looking back to the Christian tradition which compiled those scriptures – back to people such as Irenaeus. As he viewed Christ through the lens of the wider witness of scripture and the tradition of the Church Athanasius concluded that God's goal in Christ – God's telos for humanity – is adoption through deification. In fact, from looking at the way he assembles his arguments, it seems likely that Athanasius believed his opponents would substantially agree with him on this point.

As the debates of the fourth century unfolded over the course of the decades after 325, Athanasius faced a dilemma. He believed deification to be self-evident as the only ancient and logical understanding of what the scriptures and traditions of the Church said about the purpose of Christ's life. He also believed that deification could only make sense if Christ were fully divine. But the word "homoousios" was not in the scriptures even though it perfectly described the kind of full divinity required of Christ in order for him to accomplish the deification of humanity to which the scriptures bore witness. As we saw in chapter 2, he used the word only once in the Orations but he slowly warmed to it

as the years went by, eventually arguing that even a non-scriptural word was useful if it contained the “sense of the Scriptures”¹²⁹ and conveyed to those who heard it the correct meaning of what the scriptures were trying to say.

Athanasius had always believed that the Son was homoousios with the Father, even when he was reluctant to use the word. The longer he fought to protect the doctrine of deification against a Christology that would sap it of its strength and logic, the more he came to believe in the importance and necessity of a Creed that used the word homoousios to safeguard against ideas about the person of Christ that would undo the gospel of humanity’s participation in God.

Groundwork for Constructive Theology

What is the gospel message entrusted to us by God? This seemingly simple question offers the chance to better understand Athanasius in the light of alternative theologies and the chance to begin making a turn toward constructive theology. Since we continue to declare the word of God and make use of the Nicene Creed, we, like the Church of Athanasius’ time, must wrestle with our understanding of what the gospel is and the use of the word “homoousios” (translated “of one Being” in *The Book of Common Prayer*). Clearly, Athanasius did not believe that one way of understanding the gospel was as valid as another and he believed that the Son being homoousios with the Father was an essential component of the faith. He believed that the gospel message entrusted to the Church by God was the good news of humanity’s adoption and deification in the life of God and that deification can only take place if the Son who brings it about is, himself, divine.

¹²⁹ *Defense of the Nicene Definition*, 5.20, p. 518.

The relevance of defining what we believe the gospel to be can be illustrated by offering two alternative definitions of the gospel and comparing them to Athanasius' definition. Of course, this approach to theology assumes that one believes – as Athanasius did – that the Church has been entrusted with a word from God (a gospel message) and that this word has a specific and definable content. It would certainly be possible for someone to envision the life of the Church as a life centered around a God who does not speak to us, or a God who speaks but whom humanity cannot hear, but interaction with a theology of that nature is beyond the scope of this paper.

The first alternative theology we will consider is one that places its primary emphasis on the gospel as a message of salvation from sin and death. In this theology the primary reason for the Son's incarnation is to provide a suitable atoning sacrifice to pay a penalty to God for humanity's sin, or to provide a ransom to the forces of evil to redeem humanity from sin. This theology – which is, admittedly, being defined here in a very broad and simplistic way – might summarize the gospel as “Jesus died for your sins.” This theology would not necessarily preclude deification as a part of its thinking and message, but deification would be subordinate to atonement. The message would be “Jesus died for your sins” and then the fine print, to be thought about later, would be “and you can also come to participate in God's life”.

Athanasius would not exactly disagree with this theology, although it can be argued that he might want to refine many points of it. He certainly spoke at length, as we have seen, of Christ's mission to deliver humanity from sin and death and renew human nature. But he would want to be sure that sin and death were seen as ontological conditions of human nature that needed to be changed from within human nature, through

the incarnation, and be sure that they were not seen as merely external penalties imposed on humanity from the outside. In other words, he would want sin and death defined more in terms of a disease and less in terms of sanctions imposed for the breaking of laws. The difference between him and this theology is more a difference of emphasis – for Athanasius the deliverance from sin and death is a necessary step along the way towards the ultimate goal of deification. The message, the gospel, is one about deification and that message includes, as an important component, the idea of forgiveness for sins and salvation from death because there can be no deification without those two preparatory actions.

The difference in emphasis also extends to the reasoning for the Son's consubstantiality. In this alternative theology, with its emphasis on atonement, the gospel message must include the Son's consubstantiality – and the homoousion language must be preserved – because only a fully divine Son can provide an adequate sacrifice or ransom for humanity's sin. In Athanasius' theology that might be true, in as far as it goes, but there is a more important and relevant reason that the Son must be consubstantial: God's goal to make humanity participants in God's nature cannot be achieved unless the Son is consubstantial.

We should probably imagine Athanasius ultimately turning away from this particular theological construct – not because he would necessarily disagree with any one point that it makes, but because he would not like the possible directions in which it goes. For Athanasius, God's intentions are relational and ontological. God's plan for humanity was to open the Father-Son relationship to include humanity in that relationship and bring about an ontological change in human nature that would take us from mere creatures by

nature to participants in the divine nature by adoption. From Athanasius' view this alternate theology runs the risk of reducing the Son to mere instrumentality. Instead of the Son's interaction with humanity being relational and ontological, the Son could become merely the instrument in God's hand to solve a legal problem or repair damage done to the creation. If the theology goes in that direction it becomes much less relational and fails to deal directly with the ontological problem of the gap between human nature and the divine nature. For Athanasius, relationality and ontological change are best preserved when we maintain deification as the ultimate goal and make atonement a subordinate component of it.

The second alternative theology we will consider is one that places its primary emphasis on the gospel as a message about God's love. In this theology the primary reason for the Son's incarnation is to tell people about God's love and to reveal that love through his actions. This theology – which is also being defined here in a very broad and simplistic way – might summarize the gospel as “God loves you.” This theology would not necessarily preclude deification as a part of its thinking and message, but deification would be subordinate to the message of the loving God. The message would be “God loves you” and then the fine print, to be thought about later, would be “and you can also come to participate in God's life”.

Athanasius would not exactly disagree with this theology, either, but it can be argued that this theology might be of greater concern to him – especially depending on the form it took. He certainly spoke at length, as we have seen, of God's passionate love for humanity and, because of that love, God's desire to make humanity participants in God's life and to rescue humanity from sin and death. But he would be concerned about whether

this theology places an appropriate emphasis on God's ultimate purpose for humanity (deification) and whether it takes seriously enough the gap between God and humanity which the Son needed to bridge (the gap resulting from the difference in the divine and human nature as well as from sin and death). The difference between him and this theology is a difference of starting point – for Athanasius the starting point must be the God who, though ultimately transcendent and beyond us, has bridged the gap between us and God's self through the incarnation of the Son. For Athanasius the Son's mission has to be primarily defined in terms of the way the Son builds an ontological connection between the divine and human. Giving us knowledge of God's love, and other aspects of God's being, is a major component of that connection but it is not the starting point for understanding that connection.

The difference in starting point also extends to the reasoning for the Son's consubstantiality. In this alternative theology, with its emphasis on awareness of God's love, the gospel message does not necessarily need to include the Son's consubstantiality and the homoousion language does not necessarily have to be preserved. The Son could be consubstantial with the Father, but the Son could also be the first thing God created, or even simply a normal human being, who has been anointed (made "Christ") by the Holy Spirit in a way that no other created being as ever been anointed and thus given a special insight into God's love that no one else has. Or, to go a step further, the Son could be simply one of many prophets who speak of God's love and his insight into the love of God might be true but not necessarily unique.

Athanasius spent his career fighting the Arian version of this theology. The Son's mission is to adopt humanity into God, deify us, and destroy the sin and death that would

stop that from happening. One aspect of our deification is our growing in knowledge and experience of God's love but that is an outcome of God's larger plan to deify us, it is not the plan itself. It is also important to note that Athanasius found it impossible to imagine us being able to have knowledge of God's love unless the gap between our nature and God's nature has been bridged by the consubstantial Son. One can imagine Athanasius asking, "How can we ever be sure that Jesus' message about God's love is true if Jesus is not, himself, consubstantial with the God about whom he claims to speak?" For Athanasius, true knowledge of God was only possible by participation in God's own being. The Son, by his own nature, is a consubstantial participant in God's own being and thus has true knowledge of God. Our nature, however, is created, not divine, and we only have accurate knowledge of God as we participate by adoption in the Son, through the Holy Spirit, in God's own being.

So, although Athanasius would certainly agree that the Son came to reveal God's love, he would almost certainly reject this theology as one which opens itself to dangerous directions. For Athanasius the word of God to humanity (the gospel) is larger than just a message about God's love. It is a word to humanity about the reason for which we were created, our destiny in the predestined Christ, and God's plan to include us within the divine Father-Son relationship. Athanasius would see this theology as a dangerous truncation of the gospel that was particularly susceptible to losing the importance of deification and the consubstantiality of the Son that deification requires.

Comparing these two alternative theologies with Athanasius' thought helps us see the relevance of asking "what is the gospel message entrusted to us by God?" Depending on how we define the gospel we may take very different approaches to determining the

importance of the Son being homoousios with the Father. If it is important, then, to define the gospel, why might our modern theology choose to embrace an Athanasian definition?

Three reasons suggest themselves:

1. Like Athanasius, we realize that deification takes account of the both the broader scriptural witness to God's intention for humanity and the ancient tradition of the Church's theology as exemplified by writers such as Irenaeus and Athanasius.
2. Doing so allows those who are interested in such a project to better integrate our theology with the language of the Nicene Creed. Just as Athanasius came to favor the use of the term "homoousios" over the years that he sought to define his understanding of the gospel against the Arian position so we also, by adopting his understanding of the gospel, realize the value of the homoousion language as we seek to define our theology. As our theology becomes more appreciative of, and therefore more fully integrated with, the language of the Creed, the Creed becomes more than just one possible, and possibly dispensable, statement of faith. The Creed takes on the central place in our theology that it has also occupied in the theology of the mainstream, historic Christian faith throughout the centuries.
3. This understanding of the gospel allows us to move beyond what I consider to be theological dead ends that we have discovered in the centuries since the Reformation while at the same time rooting us firmly in the fullness of the Christian tradition of the last two millennia. The first two points have been demonstrated by the evidence presented so far in this paper, as we have studied Athanasius' approach. This third reason for taking an Athanasian approach to the gospel will be demonstrated by the arguments put forward in the final chapter of this paper.

Chapter 4: Constructive Theology

This chapter will seek to do some preliminary constructive theology by exploring the possible results of a better integration with the language of the Nicene Creed using the framework of deification as God's telos for humanity. It will be demonstrated that this Athanasian understanding of the gospel allows us to move beyond theological dead ends, as I see them, while at the same time rooting us firmly in the fullness of the Christian tradition of the last two millennia.

Three general fields will be examined: the incarnation, the atonement, and the resurrection. With regards to the incarnation it will be argued that deification implies that the incarnation would have taken place even if humanity had not sinned and that this has significant implications for Christology. With regards to the atonement it will be argued that deification implies that the atonement is about the transformation of human nature and this raises significant questions for the continuing value of penal substitutionary theories of atonement. With regards to the resurrection it will be argued that deification implies the necessity of a bodily resurrection and this has significant implications for eschatology, both personal and cosmic.

Throughout this chapter I will be arguing against the popular theology of much North American Protestantism. I recognize that I might be open to the criticism that scholars make of Athanasius for lumping his opponents together without differentiation. Nevertheless, unlike for Athanasius perhaps, I think the features of this popular theology would be recognized by many who hold it.

The Incarnation

Why did God become human? The Creed tells us that the Son became human “for us and for our salvation” but it does not elaborate on what our salvation, exactly, means. In the clause just prior to this is the famous homoousion language, asserting that the Son is “of one Being with the Father.” As we have seen throughout Athanasius’ writings, these two ideas are intimately connected to each other and our understanding of the gospel will inform how we integrate our theology with these two ideas. It could be argued that salvation means deliverance from death, the deserved penalty for our sin, and that the Son of God became human in order to accomplish that deliverance.¹³⁰ This answer is informed by an understanding that the gospel is the word of God to us telling us that Jesus died for our sins. If this is the gospel then this answer to why God became human makes sense and is a good integration with the language of the Creed. This answer defines “salvation” in the Creed as deliverance from sin and death and sees the importance of the Son being “of one Being with the Father” in the fact that a perfect, divine sacrifice was needed in order to accomplish this deliverance.

God’s purpose for humanity, however, should be seen in much broader terms than simply making sure that we do not perish because of our sin. In a sense, the answer given above is a bit of dead end. It seems incomplete. For example, it fails to really address the question of why we were created to begin with. It does not make sense that God would create humanity simply to have some creatures to save from sin and death. In some theologies this approach sometimes also reaches a dead end because it often degenerates

¹³⁰ See Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, as excerpted by Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 182-183.

into a concern with only the personal salvation of individuals and takes no account of wider human society or the place of those who are not able to access this salvation (e.g. those who never hear the gospel message).

Taking an Athanasian approach would mean making deification the foundational concept and allowing that to tell us what “salvation” means, why it matters that the Son should be consubstantial with the Father in order to accomplish that salvation, and why God became human as the man Jesus. Taking this approach will also offer us a way out of some of the dead ends presented by other approaches. Each of these four points will be taken in turn below.

1. What does “salvation” mean? If the gospel is the good news that God has deified humanity and adopted human nature into the divine nature through the Son, then salvation is more than just the forgiveness of sin and the removal of sin’s penalty. Salvation is about the accomplishment of God’s plan to make us God’s children and give us immortality as participants within God’s own relational life. Certainly, sin must be forgiven and death must be defeated in order for this goal to be accomplished, but sin and death are not the reason for the incarnation, they are obstacles to be overcome in achieving the incarnation’s goal.¹³¹ When we construct our theology from this starting point then we are able to integrate our approach with the language of the Creed because we take notice of the fact that the Creed says that he “came down from heaven *for us* and *for our salvation*.” In fact, two distinct but interconnected actions are suggested by the construction of this phrase: he came for us *and* he also came for our salvation. The words “for us” could be understood to refer to the Son’s coming to make us children of God

¹³¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 82.

(deification through adoption) and the words “for our salvation” could be understood to refer to the Son’s coming to overcome the sin and death that might have stopped that adoption from taking place.

2. Why does the Son’s consubstantiality matter? As we have seen throughout Athanasius’ writing, the Son’s consubstantiality is of vital importance in this understanding of the gospel. We can only experience deification as God’s adopted children if the one through whom we are adopted, the Son, is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.” When we construct our theology from the starting point of deification we are better able to integrate our approach with the language of the Creed because our approach emphasizes and shows the importance of the homoousion clause that precedes the clause about salvation. In this approach that clause is absolutely essential to the story the Creed is telling and the theology that we construct from it.

3. Why did God become human? In this theology God the Son became incarnate to make us divine children of God. This means that the incarnation would have taken place even if sin and death had not entered into the human experience. Why? Because human nature is a created work of God and therefore inherently unlike God’s uncreated nature. We could never be participants in the uncreated, divine nature, or be adopted into the Father-Son relationship, unless the Son made an ontological change to our nature that deified us and brought us into the relational life of God. The incarnation was therefore not a backup plan devised by God to deal with the presence of sin and death. The predestined incarnation of the Son as Christ was the plan of God from the beginning by which God intended to accomplish God’s plan to deify us and make us children of God.

4. This approach also helps us find our way out of the three dead ends identified above. First of all, in this theology we are placing God's purpose for creating humanity at the forefront and it does not become lost in discussions about sin, punishment, and death. Once we understand that God's goal is the deification of humanity¹³², and that the incarnation was God's predestined plan to accomplish that goal, we are also better able to avoid the hyper-individualism¹³³ that can sometimes result from a fixation on the gospel as a message about individual salvation from death. Since God created humanity for deification, and accomplished humanity's deification in Christ, it follows that all of humanity is already participating in God's life even if they do not know it. The wider society, beyond just ourselves or our fellow believers, is therefore of concern to us because all of humanity is included in the work of Christ and we are called to seek him and serve him in all persons. Likewise, it impacts our understanding of the nature of the challenge facing those who have not heard the gospel. It is not a challenge to get themselves into Christ or deify themselves by their right actions. The challenge they face is the challenge that we all face: to believe the good news that we have been brought into the relational life of God through the Son's incarnation.

Finally, we should briefly consider the Christological implications of the idea that the incarnation deified humanity and would have taken place even apart from sin and death. We can illustrate these implications by reference to Baptism. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, but what is the inward grace of which it is a visible sign?

¹³² Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 2nd ed.. (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 138-139.

¹³³ Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Morehouse, 2002), 23.

Baptism is the outward sign of the inward grace brought to humanity by Christ's incarnation. As the water is an outward washing of the body, Christ's indwelling of human nature is an inward washing of our nature that cleanses humanity from sin¹³⁴, delivers us from death, and accomplishes God's plan to deify us. As the visible act of baptism brings us into the communion of the Church so the invisible act of Christ entering human nature brings humanity into the communion of the life of God. Baptism is therefore not the moment when our nature is changed, but is the outward and visible sign of the change that took place when the Son became human and humanity was adopted into God.¹³⁵ It is the moment when we, in a visible, outward way, profess our faith in and take ownership of the invisible, inward reality of our deification accomplished by God through Christ.

The Christology implicit in this view of baptism is one in which deification and salvation are purely the gracious act of God in Christ. It is Christ alone who makes us God's children, not any works of our own, and it is Christ alone who delivers us from sin. Baptism is the outward and visible sign that this gracious work of God has taken place, not only for the baptized but for all people. This is why we are justified in baptizing infants. The inclusion of an infant in the communion of the Church through baptism, without any action or decision on the part of the infant, is an outward sign to all of us of God's gracious inclusion of humanity in the communion of God's life through Christ, without any action or decision on the part of humanity.

¹³⁴ John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments*. (London: SCM Press, 1997), 68.

¹³⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer*. (NY: Church Publishing, Inc., 1979), 850.

The Atonement

Why did Jesus have to die? This question has been central to the Church's understanding and proclamation of the gospel from the beginning. The Biblical writers used a variety of images, metaphors, and explanations to answer the question and each of those Biblical approaches has formed the basis of different theologies throughout the centuries¹³⁶. Athanasius generally followed an atonement theory which emphasized Christ's death as a sharing of our condition so that we could then share in Christ's condition – a kind of exchange where Christ takes humanity's death upon himself and in exchange gives humanity his resurrection life. This exchange takes place within and because of the incarnation. Throughout the medieval period, especially in the West, the atonement came to be increasingly seen in terms of an offense against God's honor that needed to be redressed or a debt that needed to be paid.¹³⁷ This was the origin of a general group of atonement theories that have been popular in Western Christianity, and the United States, for some centuries now and may be generally grouped under the heading of "penal substitutionary theory". In a sense Athanasius believed in substitutionary atonement since he believed in an exchange in which Christ substituted himself for humanity in death, but the penal aspect – in which God's honor or a debt to God must be satisfied – was largely absent from his language.

¹³⁶ Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Morehouse, 2002), 181-182.

¹³⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 391-393.

Penal substitutionary atonement has the potential to lead to several dead ends, all of which have become issues in North American theology.¹³⁸ A brief reflection on the nature of sin leads most people to quickly conclude that sin is far more than simply breaking rules and thereby offending God or incurring a debt. Sin is integrally connected to our very nature – it is “wound closely to the body”¹³⁹ as Athanasius said – and any act of God which intends to deal with sin must deal not only with sinful acts and their deserved penalties but also must deal with the aspect of human nature that desires to be selfish, to hurt others, and to protect the self by damage to the creation. Without an ontological change to human nature the problem of how we can be set free from the propensity to sin remains, regardless of the number of penalties paid by humanity or a substitute. This approach to the atonement also raises questions about the nature of God. If God were offended or some debt was owed, why not simply pronounce forgiveness? What need was there for someone to die in order “persuade” God to forgive? Or, to phrase this dead end in another way, whom does the atonement change, God or humanity? Finally, this approach suggests a theological dead end with regard to God’s nature: what type of loving God has to torture someone to death in order to forgive?

Taking an Athanasian approach would mean making deification the defining rubric and allowing that to tell us what sin is, why an atonement beyond God’s mere pronouncement of forgiveness is necessary, and why Jesus had to die. Taking this approach will also offer us a way out of some of the dead ends presented by penal

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 412-417.

¹³⁹ *On the Incarnation*, 44, p. 319.

substitutionary atonement and in doing so will raise significant questions for its continuing value. Each of these four points will be taken in turn below.

1. What is sin? If God's purpose in creating humanity was to deify us by adopting us into the divine Father-Son relationship as God's children then sin has a much deeper definition than the mere violation of God's commands. Sin is any thought or action which is in opposition to the nature of the divine life. Imagining the divine life as a kind of dance of the Father, Son, and Spirit could be a useful image in this regard.¹⁴⁰ Deification through the Son means that humanity is now included in the dance. Through the Son we are participants in the rhythm, flow, and pattern of the divine life. Sin, therefore, is any attitude or action which moves against the rhythm, flow, or pattern of that dance. God's righteousness is the pattern of that dance and the commands of God, whatever they may be, are expressions of the pattern. But the pattern itself is much larger than just those commands. Conceiving of righteousness and sin in this way provides a foundation for our ethical reflection in situations not envisioned by the commands of God enshrined in scripture and tradition (such as how to deal with new technology). It also gives us a definition of sin that moves beyond simplistic notions of God's honor or debts owed to God. The problem of sin is not what it does to God (e.g. offend) but rather the way in which it inhibits and ultimately threatens to destroy our ability to participate in the divine life as the children of God that we are in Christ.

2. Why is an atonement necessary? If sin were only an offense against God's honor then God could simply forgive that offense or if sin were only a debt we owed to God then God could forgive that debt. An atonement is necessary because sin relates to the

¹⁴⁰ C. Baxter Kruger, *The Great Dance: The Christian Vision Revisited* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 5.

condition of human nature. By our nature – both its essence as something created and its state as something fallen – we are incapable of participating correctly in the pattern and rhythm of the divine dance. Through deification in the Son we have been included in the divine life but because of the fact that we are human and not divine we will end up moving against the flow of that life. The incarnation shows us that our only hope for participating correctly in the divine life was for one who is a full participant in that life – the consubstantial Son – to share that life with us, enabling us to truly be “at one” with the rhythm of God’s life. When we construct our theology of atonement from the starting point of deification we are able to better integrate our approach with the language of the Creed because our approach emphasizes and shows the importance of the homoousion clause. In this approach that clause is absolutely essential because only the consubstantial Son can share the true rhythm, flow, and pattern of the divine life with us and thus enable us to be “at one” with God’s righteousness. This understanding of atonement also enables us to see the difference between deification and sanctification. Deification is God’s gracious act in Christ to make us participants in the divine nature. It is the accomplished work of Christ to which we contribute nothing – we can only either believe or not believe that it has taken place. Sanctification is the process by which we grow in our ability to participate in that life as we are conformed more and more closely to the image of the Son and the manner of his participation in God. It is Christ’s work in us with which we cooperate and the potential exists for us to do well in our cooperation or to do poorly.

3. Why did Jesus have to die? If sin is movement against the flow of the divine life in which we are participants and atonement is the work of the consubstantial Son to enable us to move correctly within the flow of that life, then Jesus’ death is not about God’s

need – it is about our need. God did not need Jesus to die in order to change God’s nature from offended to forgiving.¹⁴¹ Likewise, the Son did not need to become incarnate in order to provide a sacrificial death to appease God. The Son became incarnate to deify us and, as discussed above, the incarnation would have taken place regardless of human sin. Our need was for someone to break us free from the death in which sin traps us. Since sin is a failure to participate correctly in the life of God, and there is no fullness of life apart from or in violation of God’s life, it stands to reason that if we keep on sinning forever then we will not have life. We will be dead. “Dead” in this context may or may not mean nonexistence but whatever kind of existence we might have in which we are captive to sin, that existence would not be worthy of being called “life.” By entering into our fallen human nature the Son deified our nature and made us participants in the divine nature who are now capable of participating correctly in that divine nature (we became “at one” with it). Entering into our nature also meant entering into our death, since that is part of what our nature is, and in doing so the Son set us free from the natural consequence that flows from our failure to participate correctly in the divine nature and made it possible for us to be the immortal children of God we were created to be. Jesus died to set us free from captivity to death.

4. This approach also helps us find our way out of the three dead ends identified above. This theology deals with the aspect of human nature that wants to sin and is often uninhibited by either commands or penalties. Instead of atonement being external to our nature – related to offenses and debts – this theory of atonement, rooted as it is in deification, conceives of atonement as internal to our nature and envisions God’s action

¹⁴¹ C. Baxter Kruger, *Jesus and the Undoing of Adam* (Perichoresis, Inc., 2007), 23.

as a work to bring about an ontological change to that nature. Because Christ has changed our nature by bringing us into participation in the divine nature we have hope that our sanctification is possible and that we will experience the freedom from sin and death revealed in Christ. It also makes clear that God was not changed by the atonement of Christ but humanity was changed. God did not need a sacrifice to pay a penalty but humanity needed a participant in the divine nature to change our nature and set us free from death. Finally, this theology rejects any notion of a God who needs to torture someone to exact a penalty for sin. Jesus' death, and its cruciform nature, is the result of the human condition. Did Jesus' death need to be a bloody, violent death in order to be effective? This theology would say "no." Hypothetically we could imagine that humanity was unfallen and untainted by sin. Death would still have existed, not because of sin but because we are created beings whose existence is finite by definition. Without sin death would not have been terrifying or violent, it would have been the peaceful and natural end of life. In such a context the Son's incarnation would still have taken place in order to deify human nature and give us immortality and the Son would have shared in our death in order to free us from it. Without sin, however, the Son's incarnation would have been the high point of human history and the Son's death would have been as peaceful as that of all people. Sin caused the Son's incarnation to become a crucifixion experience and made the violence of his death an inevitability because our sin makes us violent people who torture goodness to death when given the opportunity.

Before moving on we should briefly consider the Christological implications of the idea that the atonement changed human nature as part of God's action to deify us. We can illustrate these implications by reference to the Eucharist. It is an outward and visible

sign of an inward and invisible grace, but what is the inward grace of which it is a visible sign?

The Eucharist is the outward sign of the inward grace of communion with God that Christ has established for humanity.¹⁴² The inward reality of the bread and wine is Christ's body and blood because it is the Son's incarnation in body and blood that established human communion with the divine and deifies us as God's children. The inward reality of our participation in the Eucharist is the inward reality that by his incarnation Christ has given us communion with the divine life in which he, the consubstantial Son, has communion. The communion he has by nature he has shared with us by adoption and the Eucharist is the outward and visible sign to us of the inward and invisible grace that we are now adopted into the communion of that divine life. Christ's death still plays a role in our understanding of the Eucharist but his death is subordinate to deification in that understanding. The Eucharist points to our deification by communion with God through Christ and to the fact that Christ's death, the sacrifice of his body and blood, has removed the two barriers to that communion: sin and death. Therefore, we approach the altar with joy and excitement to receive the outward signs of the inward grace of communion and not with fear and self-reproach because of doubt about our forgiveness or guilt over what humanity did to Jesus.

The Christology implicit in this view of the Eucharist is one in which deification and atonement are purely the gracious act of God in Christ. It is Christ alone who has given us communion with God, not any works of our own, and it is Christ alone who has made us at one with God. The Eucharist is the outward and visible sign that this gracious work

¹⁴² *The Book of Common Prayer* (NY: Church Publishing, Inc., 1979), 859.

of God has taken place, not only for the baptized but for all people. However, only the baptized whose lives demonstrate cooperation with Christ's sanctifying work (see: the disciplinary rubrics) are admitted to communion because they represent a faithful outward reflection of the inward grace of which the Eucharist is a sign.

The Resurrection

What is the significance of Christ's resurrection? In scripture and the tradition of the Church Jesus' resurrection has generally been viewed as a vindication of his ministry and claims to be the Son of God, a reversal of the death and corruption to which the creation has been subjected, and the means by which humanity comes to participate in a general resurrection of the dead.¹⁴³ A tension has developed over the centuries, however, between the resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul. Popular piety often diminishes the significance of the bodily resurrection of all people in favor of an emphasis on "going to heaven" when one dies.¹⁴⁴ Popular piety also often ignores the distinction between the idea of a soul that is given inherent immortality at its creation (the traditional view of Greek philosophy) and a soul that has immortality because of God's gracious act in Christ (a more Biblical approach to the question). The result of these confusions in popular piety can often be a diminishment of the importance of, and failure to understand the nature of, Christ's resurrection.

At least three theological dead ends can be identified as a result of these contradictions between theology and piety. When the immortality of the soul and the

¹⁴³ Colin E. Gunton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 237.

¹⁴⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 561.

soul's ascent to heaven take precedence over the resurrection it can result in a misunderstanding of the what the Biblical witness, and the tradition of the Church, believe was actually happening in Christ's resurrection. Christ's resurrection can sometimes be mistaken as the departure of Christ's immortal soul from this world, no longer incarnate and, having left his body behind, now gone to heaven. This confusion can then lead Christians to assume a certain indifference towards, or even distaste for, the body and the material world, leading to a focus on purifying the soul in preparation to leave the body behind. Finally, the fixation on going to heaven after death can also lead to a shocking disregard for the present world and the creation. In this piety the world is seen to be of little value because the goal of the Christian life is to prepare the soul to leave this world behind and go to heaven. In the most tragic forms of this piety human suffering – including famine, war, and disease – is seen to be of little consequence in the grand scheme of existence since the eternal destiny of the souls of those who are suffering is deemed the more important concern.

Taking an Athanasian approach to resurrection would mean making deification the defining rubric and allowing that to tell us what resurrection is, why resurrection needs to take place, and what the significance is of Christ's resurrection. Taking this approach will also offer us a way out of some of the dead ends presented by the contradictions between theology and popular piety. Each of these four points will be taken in turn below.

1. What is resurrection? This question has proved challenging to Christians from the beginning,¹⁴⁵ occupying, for example, a relatively long discourse by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. Traditionally, Christianity has viewed resurrection as a transformation

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

of mortal bodies into immortal bodies. The immortal body is still a body but it does not age, decay, or die, and based on the resurrection stories of Christ possesses certain abilities: to appear or disappear at will, to retain recognizable features of its pre-resurrected existence (e.g. the wounds in his hands), and to remain capable of bodily actions such as eating, walking, and talking.¹⁴⁶ This general description of resurrection has significance for deification. It signifies that God's plan to deify humanity was not a plan to extract the human soul from the body and deify just the soul and discard the body. Deification means the adoption of all that humanity is – body, soul, and mind – into the divine life with the result that the body is transformed from mortal to immortal. This transformation extends not only to humanity but to the whole cosmos, as envisioned in the image of a “new heaven and a new earth” in the Revelation to John.¹⁴⁷ The whole body of the universe is transformed from a mortal body to an immortal one. This deifying resurrection of humanity, and the resurrection of the cosmos, is the result of the incarnation and subsequent resurrection of the consubstantial Son. The immortality which the Son possesses by nature, as one who is of one being with the Father, humanity and the whole creation come to possess by adoption into the divine life through the Son.

2. Why does resurrection need to take place? Beginning with deification makes this clear. Deification shows us that God's intention for humanity was to make humanity capable of an authentic and meaningful participation in God's divine life. Since the divine life is a life of immortality – without age, decay, or death – it follows that authentic participation in that life must take on those properties of immortality. In

¹⁴⁶ Reginald H. Fuller, “The Resurrection of Christ” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 647-649.

¹⁴⁷ Revelation 21:1-8

contrast to the immortality of the uncreated life of the Father, Son, and Spirit, human nature is created and mortal. Therefore a transformation of humanity's bodily existence must take place if that bodily existence is to take on the properties of the immortal. Resurrection is the moment of that transformation and it is the result of the immortal Son indwelling mortal flesh. When the one who is consubstantial with the immortal Father enters into mortal flesh and blood that mortality is transformed into immortality through the process of resurrection. When we construct our theology of the resurrection from the starting point of deification we are better able to integrate our approach with the language of the Creed because our approach shows the importance of the homoousion clause and clarifies the meaning of the clause regarding the resurrection. The homoousion clause is seen to be of vital importance because only one who is of one being with the immortal Father can give that immortality to mortal bodies. If the Son is not one with the immortal divine nature then human nature has not been made immortal by the Son's indwelling. This approach also causes us to take notice of the fact that the Creed says (in its final form as revised in 381) that we look for "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come" it does not say we look for "the ascent of immortal souls to heaven and the destruction of this world and our bodies."

3. What is the significance of Christ's resurrection? Christ's resurrection is therefore as important as his death. By his death as the Son incarnate he set humanity free from death by taking our death upon himself and in his resurrection he opened the way to the resurrection of our bodies into immortality. Into this reflection we should also place our understanding of the ascension.¹⁴⁸ As Christ descended to enter into communion with our

¹⁴⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 209.

nature and our death so he also ascended in order to bring our nature into communion with God. Christ's descent, death, resurrection, and ascension can all be labelled as discrete actions within the one overarching action labelled "incarnation." Without Christ's resurrection and ascension the deifying intention of the incarnation remains incomplete. The incarnation without the resurrection and ascension is only half-done and will ultimately fail to achieve its objective. The Creed says that he came "for us" – he came to embrace us, die our death with us, and finish the work of coming for us by taking us into the life of God through his resurrection and ascension.

4. This approach also helps us find our way out of the three dead ends identified above. Once we see clearly that Christ's incarnation was meant to accomplish the resurrection of the mortal creation we understand that the risen Christ is not a disembodied soul, he is a resurrected human being. The Son does not cease to be incarnate at the resurrection, rather he remains incarnate forever and therefore forever remains the one in whom humanity and divinity are joined together.¹⁴⁹ On this basis, then, the body and the material world are not distasteful – they are good and part of God's intention for our existence. We do not look forward to an eschaton in which the material world no longer exists, instead we look forward to the culmination of God's plan in which our bodies and the entire cosmos are made new and eternal. Finally, we are able to see God's purpose for the whole creation and all of humanity in its universality. There is potentially nothing, and no one, who is outside of God's redeeming and resurrecting grace in Christ. Therefore we understand our calling to be a calling to love and care for

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

all people and the whole creation, not only in this present life but forever, continuing on eternally into the life of the world to come.

Before finishing we should briefly consider the Christological implications of the idea that the resurrection is an essential part of God's action to deify us. We can illustrate these implications by reference to both Baptism and the Eucharist. They are both outward and visible signs of inward and invisible graces, but what are the inward graces of which they are a visible sign, especially with regard to resurrection?

Baptism is an outward sign to us that we are participants in Christ's resurrection.¹⁵⁰ We died with him and we have been raised with him and the descent into the baptismal waters and the rising from them are an outward sign that this has taken place. Baptism does not reveal to us the inward grace of the transformation of our souls in preparation for their departure from our bodies. It reveals to us that we will, like Christ, be resurrected. The Eucharist is an outward sign to us that we are in communion with Christ's immortality. The ancient Christians sometimes called communion the "medicine of immortality" or the "antepast of heaven." In the gospels Jesus compared the eternal life of the kingdom to a banquet and in the Eucharistic meal we have an outward sign that points us to that inward grace: we will be raised with Christ, bodily and still able to eat, and we will share in this communion with the immortality of the divine nature forever.

The Christology implicit in this view of Baptism and the Eucharist is one in which resurrection and the life of the world to come are purely the gracious gift of God in Christ. It is Christ alone who shares in God's immortality and shares it with us; we have not obtained it by any work of our own nor do we inherently possess it by virtue of our

¹⁵⁰ *The Book of Common Prayer* (NY: Church Publishing, Inc., 1979), 306.

own nature. God created us in order to deify us in the incarnation of the Son and God has done what God set out to do. Because of the incarnation of the consubstantial Son, including his death, resurrection, and ascension, we have been adopted as God's children and deified as participants in the immortal nature of God.

Bibliography

- Allchin, A.M. *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in the Anglican Tradition*. Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988.
- Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Anatolios, Khaled. *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine*. Baker Academic, 2011.
- Anatolios, Khaled. (2001) "The influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius," in M.F. Wiles and E.J. Yarnold (eds.) *Studia Patristica, Vol. 38*, (Leuven: Peeters), 463-476.
- Athanasius. *Against the Nations*. NPNF, Series II, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1996.
- Athanasius. *Defense Against the Arians*. NPNF, Series II, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1996.
- Athanasius. *Defense of the Nicene Definition*. NPNF, Series II, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1996.
- Athanasius. *To Adelphius, Bishop and Confessor: Against the Arians*. NPNF, Series II, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1996.
- Athanasius. *Letter to Epictetus*. NPNF, Series II, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1996.
- Athanasius and Shapland, C.R.B. *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*. London: Epworth Press, 1951.
- Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*. NPNF, Series II, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1996.
- Ayres, Lewis. *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.
- Barnes, Timothy D. *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Brakke, David. *The Gnostics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

- Coogan, Michael D. and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Gregg, Robert C. and Dennis E. Groh. *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982.
- Gunton, Colin E, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Gwynn, David M. *The Eusebians: The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the "Arian Controversy"*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.
- "Fourth Century.com" ed. Glen L. Thompson. <http://www.fourthcentury.com/athanasius-chart>
- Hanson, R. P. C. *The search for the Christian doctrine of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Louth, Andrew. "The Use of the Term ἴδιος in Alexandrian Theology from Alexander to Cyril". *Studia Patristica* 19 (1989): 198-202.
- Macquarrie, John. *A Guide to the Sacraments*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1997.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: an Introduction*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997.
- McGrath, Alister E. *The Christian Theology Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995.
- Origen. *De Principiis*. ANF, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2006
- Thomas, Owen C. and Ellen K. Wondra. *Introduction to Theology*, 3rd ed. New York: Morehouse, 2002.
- Torrance, Thomas F. *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*. Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2008.
- Torrance, Thomas F. *The Trinitarian Faith*, . London: T&T Clark, 1997.
- Widdicombe, Peter. *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- Williams, Rowan. *Arius: Heresy and Tradition, Rev. Ed.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

Young, Frances. "Proverbs 8 in Interpretation (2): Wisdom Personified. Fourth-century Christian Readings: Assumptions and Debates" in *Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012.

Young, Frances. "Exegetical Method and Scriptural Proof: the Bible in Doctrinal Debate" in *Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012.

Zizioulas, John D. *Being as Communion*. Crest Grove, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002.

