

ATHANASISUS' S USE OF PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11
IN *CONTRA ARIANOS*

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Introduction

The Arian heresy was an early doctrinal challenge that threatened to divide the church internally. The Arians postulated their insidious heresy in the most extreme terms. Their famous slogan was aimed directly at the deity of Jesus Christ: *There was a time when the Son was not.*

This catch phrase revealed the deviant theology of the Arians. They denied the Trinity by denying the eternality of the Second Person of the Trinity—the Son. The Arians never tired of using this catch phrase in the public square and then asking a series of questions to prove their point.

The Arian controversy was the catalyst that prompted Athanasius to write *Contra Arianos*. In this work, he addressed the Arians with a polemic that stressed the eternal existence of the Son, which is the basis of the Christian faith. This massive theological work, *Contra Arianos*, was a direct response to the Arian tenet: "There was a time when the Son was not."¹

¹ Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians, Book I," in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, trans. and ed. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 67.

Although he does not attempt to clarify the Nicene formula, Athanasius does give insight into the nature of the Arian heresy and the doctrinal issues surrounding the fourth century Trinitarian-Christological-Ecclesiological debate concerning Arianism. He utilizes the ecclesiastical conclusion of the Council of Nicea that stressed the Son is the eternal *Logos*.

In *Contra Arianos*, Athanasius reviews the four proof questions² (CA 1.22b-36) of the Arians in order to reveal the deviant hermeneutical and subsequent theological position of the Arians. Athanasius analyzes the questions from the vantage point of the Council of Nicea having already discredited the central Arian thesis. Athanasius reviews the same questions the Arians were asking but he knows the answers to these questions are considered from a discredited ecclesiastical position. He simply asks them for the sake of clarity so that he can discredit Arianism by using their own methodology.

The idea of clarification will be utilized to further disparage the Arian tenet that *there was a time when the son was not*. Athanasius intends to demonstrate the

² The Arians utilized the strategy of proof questions as they asked these questions in the open market place to propagate their own position. These questions were designed to *prove* the Arian theological position.

eternal status of the Son by using these Arian proof questions to elucidate the utter failure of the Arian position and thereby communicate that the orthodoxy of Christianity is not found with the Arian teachings.

Athanasius identifies these questions with Arius. He writes:

Arius and his supporters, placing the Son among the originated ones—a view in accord with the teaching of Eusebius—and thinking that he is of a kind that such things have come into existence through him, turned away from the truth and heaped up for themselves pet words of villainy. They went around when they had just made up this heresy—and they continue even now—meeting young children in the market.³

Athanasius believes that Arius not only asked these questions but his followers did the same. It seems possible that these questions may have been recorded in the *Thalia* but no such proof exists.

Whether or not this is accurate, Athanasius does offer a question-and-answer methodology that is reflective in scope and critical in analysis. This particular methodology allows for a proper assessment of the theological dialogue of the orthodox party and the Arians. The design of the approach is to review the Arian proof questions and then demonstrate that the expected answers of the Arians are not accurate simply because the questions

³ Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians, Book I," 85.

are misleading. They are not proper and accurate because the theology of the Arians attributes human characteristics to the nature of deity.

The Fourth Proof Question
CA 1.35-6⁴

This question serves to prepare the reader for a change in approach of *Contra Arianos*. The Arians presented several Scriptures for their position that the Son changed in his nature. This question gives Athanasius the platform to address the Arian hermeneutic and their interpretation of the Scriptures.

The basic question the Arians asked in the public square concerns the mutability of the Son:

Here the nonsensical questions they utter: Has he free will or has he not? By choice, according to free will, is he good? And is he able, if he wishes, to be mutated, being of a mutable nature? Or, as stone and wood, has he not the free will choice of being moved or inclining in each of two ways?⁵

The question is designed by the Arians to prove that the Son, by grace, and not by his ousia (essence) with the Father, changed for the better so that the Father exalted him (in fact, the Arians utilized Philippians 2:5-11 as a

⁴For the sake of time and space this paper is limited to working with the Fourth Proof Question. The rationale for this position is that the Fourth Proof Question is reviews Philippians 2:5-11.

⁵ Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians, Book I," 97.

proof text for their deviant theology). The Arians were asking such a question to demonstrate that there is no eternality to the nature of the Son.

Once again, Athanasius reviews the Arian understanding of the Son as described in the specific Scripture of John 14:9-10, and comes to the conclusion that the Arians are deficient in their knowledge of the Father and Son. The rationale is that the Arian Son cannot lead to the Father because they are so unlike one another. The Arians know that the Father's ousia (essence) is unchangeable, whereas the Son is progressing in His nature. Athanasius writes:

But if according to their opinion the Son is mutable and not always the same, but is of an always changing nature, how is such a one able to be the image of the Father, without the similarity of his immutability . . . But perhaps being mutable and daily making progress, he is not yet perfect.⁶

The Arians embraced the created nature of the Son. If this were the case, then of course the will and even nature of the son could change for the better. For that matter, the possibility existed that the Son could change for the worse.⁷

⁶-Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians, Book I," 98.

⁷ Arius never makes this claim. However, the conclusion is based upon the fact that change does not have to be for the better. The logic is that change of will and nature can be neutral, and thus any

This question of mutability reveals the demarcation line that so permeated the crisis.

At an early state of the controversy, then the battle lines were drawn between orthodox and Arian in terms of whether the Son was conceived to have a creaturely nature—and that meant a mutable nature and will—or whether he was thought to be divine by nature and so unchangeable in essence and inclination. This way of formulating the question was guaranteed to raise the most far-reaching controversy in the churches since the Gnostic crisis.⁸

Athanasius understands that the Son's immutability is taught in the Scriptures. Thus, any formulation of a mutable Son is not orthodox. He cites Hebrews 13:8; Psalm 102:26-28; Malachi 3:6; and Deuteronomy 32:39, as examples of teaching the immutability of the Son.

For Athanasius the unchangeableness of the Son is an argument for the eternal nature of the Son. In Athanasian thought, should the Son change then you have a movement within the Trinity. The status of the Son would also be unchangeable in that the relationships of the Trinity are expressed in the function of the members of the Trinity. "But the Son being from the Father and peculiar to his substance is unchangeable and immutable as the Father

positive or negative influence might produce a change either for the good or for the bad.

⁸ Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 162.

himself.”⁹ The rationale of Athanasius is that the Son exists eternally in the Trinity as unchangeable.

The answer to this question is that the Son is immutable. However, Athanasius delineates his answer simply when he reviews the Arian hermeneutic. He also critiques their interpretation of the biblical text.

Evaluating the Arian Exposition CA 1.37-64

The Problem of the Arian Interpretation

In CA 1.36, Athanasius reveals that the Arians use the incarnation of the Son to espouse their doctrine that the Son is changeable. He addresses the Arian interpretation on the basis that it is a theological and epistemological problem. Athanasius writes:

It is not right to say that from the substance of the Immutable was begotten a mutable Word and a changeable Wisdom. How is he still the Word if mutable? Or how is Wisdom a changeable thing, unless as an accident in substance?¹⁰

The idea is that there is a dichotomy between the one essence that is immutable and the other essence, which is mutable. They cannot be of the same ousia (essence).

⁹ Athanasius, “Orations Against the Arians, Book I,” 99.

¹⁰ Ibid., 99.

This presents a theological issue which progresses into an epistemological problem. Again Athanasius writes:

If, therefore, the Lord himself says this and discloses his immutability, and the saints, having learned this, bear witness to it, and our thought about God acknowledge this as pious, from where did the impious contrive these things?¹¹

The epistemological issue does not concern the revelation of the Father to the Son but is directed towards the Arians. Athanasius questions the source of such teachings, as they do not come from the revelation of the Son or the Father. The only place these false teachings could originate is "from their heart, as from corruption, they vomited them forth."¹²

Response to the Arian Interpretation CA 1.37-9

In CA 1.37, Athanasius declares that Arius forced an interpretation upon the text that is misleading. In order to correct the fallacy, Athanasius interacts with the same text that Arius has misinterpreted: Philippians 2:9-10.

Athanasius begins his interaction with the Philippian passage with an apparent understanding that the argument of Arius is centered on the interpretation and meaning of the Son's exaltation. Arius portrays the Son's

¹¹ Ibid., 99-100.

¹² Ibid., 100.

exaltation as the time in which Christ actually became the Son. The Arians interpret the giving of an *ecaristato* (new name) as a gift of grace. In other words, at the time of the Lord's exaltation is when Jesus became full deity simply because the Father declared Him to be a son. The new position and new name, the name "Son," is based upon an act of grace from the Father to the Son, and it functions as a reward for the Son's obedience. According to Arius, this act of grace, originating from the Father, denounces any concept of *homoousia* between the Father and the Son.

Rebecca Lyman notes:

if the Son were not of the unchanging divine essence of the Father, his relationship would be an exterior one of adoption or mere participation, like the rest of creation. . . . To be the Son, he had to be the natural, hence eternal, offspring of the Father.¹³

Athanasius vehemently argues against this position by distinguishing between Sonship by nature and Sonship by grace. Arius proposed that the Sonship of the Lord was Sonship by grace. Athanasius denies the Arian proposition. In other words, Jesus Christ, by His nature, held the position of Sonship and was granted the title that accompanied his status. Peter Widdicombe articulates the Athanasian thought very well as he writes, "The Father is

¹³ J. Rebecca Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 147-8.

able to rejoice in the Son only if the Son is perfect and does not need to be promoted to divine status."¹⁴

Athanasius does follow the logic of the Arian interpretation as he writes, "If on account of this he was exalted, and received grace and on account of this he was anointed, he received a reward of his purpose. He, having acted by purpose, is entirely of a mutable nature."¹⁵ However, he does ask a critical and pivotal question: What was the Son before he became a son? There seem to be only two answers for his question: 1) the Son was a created being, or 2) he had no existence and was not incarnated but only a man who earned such titles as *Son of God*.¹⁶ If this scenario is true then the fleshly body improved the status of the Son. "Obviously he himself in no way improved the flesh, rather, he himself through it was improved—if accordingly to their malice then he was exalted and called Son when he became man."¹⁷

Athanasius seems to be willing to grant the Arian premise if it can stand the test of validation. He is certain, though, the Arian argument cannot pass this test.

¹⁴ Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 207

¹⁵ Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians, Book I," 100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

The barrage of questions simply is used to demonstrate the fallacy of the Arian heresy. It seems that Athanasius interprets the Arian heresy as another version of Paul of Samosata's heresy¹⁸ even though Athanasius also calls it a current Jewish fabrication.¹⁹ Thus, he views the Arian heresy as one that can be combated with the same logical approach and the utilization of appropriate hermeneutics as they were employed in earlier arguments.

In the latter portion of CA 1.38, Athanasius begins to quote scriptural references that depict the eternal nature of the Son. He utilizes John 17:5 and Psalm 18:9-13. The idea is that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son, the

¹⁸ Harold O. J. Brown states, "Paul (of Samosata) who also served as Queen Zenobia's treasurer, taught that Jesus was born of a virgin and that the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon him at his baptism. He did call Jesus God . . . but by this Paul only meant that through his moral perfection and the miraculous powers granted him at his baptism Jesus was able to remain in constant union with God" (*Heresies* [Garden City, NY: Double Day Press, 1984], 98). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of The Christian Church*, 1990 ed., s.v. "Paul of Samosata," states the following: "He taught a form of Dynamic Monarchianism, in which the Godhead was a closely knit Trinity of Father, Wisdom, and Word, and until creation formed a single hypostasis. From the incarnation, he held, the Word rested upon the human Jesus as one person upon another, and the Incarnate Christ differed only in degree from the Prophets." The theology of Paul of Samosata is that the Son was God because of moral perfection. This would simply mean that the Son was not the same substance as the Father but shared in the Godhead because of his moral attainments. This is known as the *adoption* (particularly Dynamic Monarchianism) heresy. Arius' version is slightly different in that the Son was a creation of the Father prior to the creation of humanity.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note the systematic approach of the work, *Contra Arianos*. In CA 1.1, Athanasius states that the Arian heresy is akin to earlier heresies but pictures the Arian heresy as the final (or current) one.

highest Lord ever worshipped, and whatever is advanced is because he advances it. The consequence is that the Son descended in order to promote and improve. Thus, the Son's exaltation is not because of a reward, it is because of his nature. Again, Athanasius argues for the concept of Eternal Sonship as part of the divine ousia (essence).

The main thrust of Athanasius' argument is soteriological. The *improvement* he speaks of is the improvement of humanity. The fact is every Christian is a son by grace and not by nature. This grace comes through the giver of grace, the Son. In CA 1.39, Athanasius writes, "Then, not being man, He later became God; but being God, He later became man, that instead He might deify us."²⁰

In his work, *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius stresses the need for the Incarnation as a solution to the plight of humanity. Athanasius states:

You are wondering perhaps, for what possible reason, having proposed to speak of the Incarnation of the Word, we are at present treating of the origin of mankind. But this, too, properly belongs to the aim of our treatise. For in speaking of the appearance of the Saviour amongst us, we must needs speak also of the origin of men, that you may know the reason of **His coming down** [emphasis added] was because of us, and that our transgression called for the loving-kindness

²⁰ Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians, Book I," 102.

of the Word, that the Lord should both make haste to help us and appear among men.²¹

Athanasius reveals the rationale of the Incarnation as the solution to the plight of fallen humanity. The thought flow of Athanasius seems to be that the Son's work for humanity is predicated upon the goodness of God to redeem fallen humanity.

The Athanasian concept of the fall of humanity seems to be directed by the ontological category of humans: since humans were created out of nothing then logic demands that humans return to the nothingness which is inherent of their nature. This concept is in direct opposition to that of the Arians, where the Son is exalted because of obedience. Frances Young states, "If that law was broken, man would be turned out of paradise and left to inevitable submergence under the forces of death and corruption; he would return to the nothingness from which he came."²²

The fall of humanity put God in a dilemma: humanity must die and forfeit the life given by the *Logos* simply because God cannot break his command to punish sin. Therefore, God cannot grant pardon to the offender unless

²¹ Athanasius, "On the Incarnation," in *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, eds. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub. 1994), 38.

²² Francis Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 71.

restitution is made. The incarnation of the *Logos* is the solution to the dilemma of humanity's restoration to God. Athanasius demonstrates that humanity must pay for restitution, but does not have the means to do so. The Incarnation means the *Logos* takes bodily form and dies, which then pays the sin debt of humanity. At the same time, the issue of knowing God²³ is certainly possible through the incarnation of the Word. Khaled Anatolis, commenting on Athanasius' work, *On the Incarnation*, states, "God, who is invisible and unknowable by nature, became visible and knowable and preeminently accessible through the humanity of Christ."²⁴ Apparently, Athanasius views humanity's salvation possible only when the incarnation of the *Logos* takes place. "Full divinity and true humanity are central to Athanasius' understanding of secure salvation. So, too, is the *Logos* 'drawing near' in assuming a mortal body, the realm where mortal corruption then held sway. Thereby there is the transference of human mortal corruptibility to God."²⁵

²³ Athanasius, "On the Incarnation," 39.

²⁴ Khaled Anatolis, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (London: Routledge Publication, 1998), 37

²⁵ Alwyn Pettersen, *Athanasius* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 93.

The Incarnation is only possible if God the Son existed with the Father throughout eternity. In CA 1.39, the fact that Athanasius reviews is the eternal nature of the Son—he existed as God the Son. The Son has the same title as other men, yet by employing John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16-17, Athanasius demonstrates that God the Son existed before these earthly men. They came into existence because of Him and, consequently, the Son is placed before them because of his eternal ousia (essence). The eternal status of the Son is further demonstrated by the use of Matthew 11:27—only the Son knows and is known by the Father. Couple this with the fact that the concepts of adoption and deification also reveal the eternal nature of the Son. The idea is that the Son became man in order to solidify the salvation offer to humanity and could only do so because he is the true, eternal God the Son. Athanasius states:

And if all—as many as were called sons and gods, either on earth or in heaven—were adopted and deified through the Word, and the Son himself is the Word, it is clear through him that they all are, and he himself before all, or rather that he himself only is true Son and he alone is true God from true God, not receiving these things as a reward for virtue or being another in addition to them, but being these things by nature according to substance.²⁶

²⁶ Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians, Book I," 102-103.

The argument of CA 1.37-39 solidifies the eternal status of the Son in biblical language. The rationale for such a review forces the Arians to either concede the point or retreat to their heresy. Athanasius reveals that the issue of soteriology is a product of the eternal nature of the Son. Athanasius does not stress that soteriology is a reason for establishing the product or work of the Son before the establishment of the person of Christ as God the Son.

The major point of the argument is to distinguish between Sonship by nature and Sonship by grace. At this point, Athanasius states that the Son can only offer salvation since He is true God. This issue awaits further development, and Athanasius explains this concept later in *Contra Arianos*.

The interesting issue that Athanasius details is the idea of substitutionary atonement.²⁷ He explains that God

²⁷ *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983) s.v. "Substitution" gives the definition as follows: "The penal suffering of Christ in the place of his people, by virtue of which they are saved . . . Christ's substitution for sinners is the highest exhibition of God's mercy." Nowhere does Athanasius develop this concept. For that matter, the term 'substitutionary atonement' was not a theological concept in the Athanasian era. This writer acknowledges reading a theological method back into an era where the term is unknown. However, the concept of "substitutionary atonement" seems appropriate since the meaning of the first sentence of CA 1.39 illustrates this doctrine.

must become a man in order to deify²⁸ fallen humanity.

Humanity is saved from the deterioration and ultimate death of the body and from the irrationality of the *εἰρηνοεὖν* (invention).

The fall of humanity directed man away from God. In the Incarnation, the Son becomes a man so that the soteriological result is a restoration of humanity back to God. This does not mean a change in *ousia* (essence); there is no ontological change in the *Logos*. In fact, the opposite is true: God the Son added humanity to His deity without ceasing to exist as God the Son.

²⁸ G. W. H. Lampe, (*A Patristic Greek Lexicon* [Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1961], 630-1). A word for deification is "Θεωσις," which means "deification or divination but with the idea of a work of grace." Another word used is "Θεοποίησις." This word has the meaning of "making divine." The better definition seems to be that of "Θεοποιεῖω." The definition is from page 630 and it is as follows: "B. Christological, 1) Christ deified by his father, 2) his humanity deified by union with the Logos." The concept of deification is directly linked to the Athanasian concept of soteriology. The issue of deification takes place in the sphere of humanity's union with Jesus Christ. This union of humanity to Jesus lifted or exalted humans to a better state of existence than even the original state of humanity's creation. Human beings are in union with the humanity of Jesus and, as such, are resolved to a more pure relationship with God. Alvyn Pettersen states, "Deification is rather our being brought into a holy communion, with one another and with God, through the grace made secure in and through Christ's assumption of humanity. It is that process in which people, creatures of the Creator and fellow creatures of all creation, are transformed" (106). Athanasius suggests that humanity's deification is predicated upon the humanity of Christ as the humanity is enjoined to the Logos. Keith Edward North states, "Which such a deification is not 'earned by merit' in the Arian sense, it is the joint work of God, whose grace makes it possible, and the individual believer, who follows in the path that the Savior has opened up" ("Deification: The Content of Athanasian Soteriology," [Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1980], 130).

The salvation of humanity is a restoration of the body and the proper renewal of the mind.²⁹ This is the basis of *knowing God* as Athanasius stresses by using Matthew 11:27.

As one reads this section, CA 1.39, one gains a sense that Athanasius communicates that the only proper way to think about God is on the basis of humanity's restoration back to God. Accepting grace from the Son is required before any proper theological methodology about God can be devised and utilized. Therefore, the Arians are considered to be heretical on the basis of their defective concept of the Son and their lack of an adequate soteriology.

**Interpretation of Philippians 2:5-11
(CA 1.40-5)**

Athanasius reviews the entire text in question to demonstrate that the context does not allow for the Arian interpretation. The Arians used this text to propagate the mutability and subsequent exaltation of the human Jesus on the basis of his obedience and not on the basis of his deity. The Arians utilized this text to reveal that the Son was a son by nature and not by grace.

²⁹ Romans 12:1-2.

Athanasius does not only review the text and apply systematic theology, but he does solid exegesis of the Philippian text in question. Athanasius treats the Philippians 2:5-11 text as one that demonstrates that Jesus was still God even when He humbled Himself. He makes the point that the context will show that the Arian interpretation to be false.

In order to support his exegesis, Athanasius applies the text through a series of questions directed to the thought of the Arian heresy. The basic question is simple: What reward, what progress could He attain, through His humiliation, when he was already God? Arius states that a man became God and thus received a reward. Athanasius demonstrates that a clear reading of the text underscores the fact that Jesus Christ was always divine.

The proper understanding, according to Athanasius, of the Philippian text is that the human flesh of Jesus is exalted, but not the divine nature. The rationale of Athanasius is very clear: you cannot exalt that which is already exalted, however, that which is not exalted, the human body, can be exalted. Athanasius understands this text as the exaltation of the human nature of Jesus Christ. Again, the principle behind this is a clear reading of the text itself. For example, when Jesus was humbled even to

the point of death, God rewarded the faithfulness of His Son by exalting the very part of Him that died, which is His humanity. Athanasius states:

The statement "He will be highly exalted." He was always and is "equal to God" (Phil. 2:6), but the exaltation is of the humanity. These things were not said before, only when the Word became flesh, that it might become clear that "he was humbled" and "he will be exalted" are said about the human nature.³⁰

It is interesting that Athanasius quotes John 1:14 as a complementary passage to Philippians 2:5-11. Apparently he understands these two passages to demonstrate the life of the Son/Logos. The idea of these two passages presents the life of the Logos in different stages: He was God and He became God/Man. By citing these two passages of Scripture, Athanasius is able to present his case for interpreting Philippians 2:5-11.

The logic of Athanasius is that he seeks to demonstrate the Arian methodology or hermeneutic is severely lacking in its basic understanding of Jesus Christ. Arius believes the Incarnation is the evidence of the Son, who being greater than all other aspects of creation has the capacity to mutate and become divine. It seems as if Arius has another epistemological concept of God the Father.

³⁰ Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians, Book I," 104.

Not only does Athanasius ask the Arians about the impossibility of the Son attaining a reward that He already has by His very nature, but Athanasius confronts the Arians with the task of explaining how the immutable Father can produce an offspring that is mutable. Athanasius states:

And if as David sings in the Psalter, in Psalm 71, "His grace remains before the sun and before the moon into generations and generations" (Ps. 71:71, 5), how did he receive that which he always had, even before receiving it now? Or how is he exalted, being most highly exalted before his exaltation?³¹

Athanasius' point is that the Word became lesser by becoming man than what He actually was before His incarnation. This is in contrast to the Arians who claim that the Son was given the status of Son because of merit. Athanasius, on the other hand, presents the case for the Word's divinity as not existing in a diminished state by the addition of humanity: the *Logos* is divine and eternal. What actually took place, according to Athanasius, is not that the Word was exalted but that the human body of our Lord was exalted in accordance with the existing exalted state of His *Logos*. Athanasius states:

Where there is "the humble condition," there may also be exaltation. If on account of the assumption of flesh "he was humbled" was written, it is clear that "he will be exalted" was written for same reason.³²

³¹ Ibid., 104.

³² Ibid., 104.

Athanasius addresses the very reason for the exaltation. In CA 1.37, Athanasius claims that Arius states that the exaltation was proof that Jesus attained deity. Athanasius argues that the *Logos* does not change and, therefore, did not attain deity because He already was deity. Athanasius demonstrates this by his interpretation of the Lord's death. He depicts the Lord's death as the final act of obedience of the Son to God the Father. The death of Christ focuses upon the purpose of the Incarnation that very purpose is humanity's salvation. In Athanasian thought, salvation is directly related to the Incarnation. Charles Kannengiesser states:

the fundamental intuition of Athanasius over which no doubt could be entertained and which motivates his entire refutation of Arianism is essentially Christological. . . . Athanasius insists that the Arians are mistaken in their concept of theology, because they believe they are able to form a Christian idea of God by first developing in isolation the theory of the divinity of the Father and Son, without taking into consideration right from the start the mystery of the incarnation of the Son.³³

The Incarnation derives its purpose in the salvation of humanity. The accomplishment of humanity's salvation was by means of the incarnated Jesus dying in obedience to the requirement of God the Father. Therefore, the exaltation of

³³ Charles Kannengiesser, "Athanasius and Traditional Christology," *Theological Studies* 34 (1973): 112.

the Lord's body was not only for His flesh to be deified but it was for humanity's deification. Athanasius states:

And as he himself, hallowing all, says again to the Father, "On our behalf he hallows himself" (John 17:19)—not that the word may become holy, but that he himself in himself might hallow all of us—thus the present statement "he will highly exalt him" is to be taken, not in order that he himself might be exalted, for he is the highest, but in order that he himself on our behalf "might become righteousness" (I Cor. 1:30) and that we might be exalted in him and enter into the gates of heaven, which he himself has again opened on our behalf.³⁴

The interesting issue concerning the Incarnation is that Athanasius reveals that Jesus Christ is still Lord even though He condescended to become human. The exaltation is not a reward but is an acknowledgement of His faithful work: securing humanity's salvation. The means by which humanity's salvation is secured occurred when grace was transferred from the *Logos* through the Incarnation to humanity. Athanasius states:

But on account of us and on our behalf, this too was written about him. For just as man Christ died and was exalted, so as man he is said "to receive" that which as God he always had, in order that such a grace given might come even to us. Having received a body, the Word was not diminished so that he should seek "to receive" grace; rather, he deified that which he put on, and more, he offered this to the human race.³⁵

³⁴ Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians, Book I," 105.

³⁵ Ibid., 105.

The salvation of humanity is predicated upon the bodily sacrifice of the Son. Humanity's identification with the Lord's body is the means of soteriology. Athanasius writes:

If the Lord had not become man, we would not, having been redeemed from sins, rise from the dead, but we would remain dead beneath the earth. We would not be exalted in heaven, but we would lie in Hades, Then the statements "he has highly exalted" and "he offered" are on our account.³⁶

Athanasius closes his exegesis of Philippians 2:5-11 by a reference to the Trinity. This reference strikes at the very heart of the Arian heresy. Athanasius distinguishes between "who" became incarnated and "how" grace was transferred. He appeals to the teachings of the Scriptures by use of the phrases, "to be exalted," and "God offered Him."³⁷ These phrases refer to the fact that two persons of the Godhead are actively procuring humanity's salvation. Grace, which brings salvation to humanity, is transferred by the power of the Holy Spirit. It must be understood that Athanasius does not actively address the Trinity as he closes his exegesis of Philippians 2:5-11. He does, however, quote 1 John 3:24 in support of the Holy

³⁶ Ibid., 107.

³⁷ Ibid., 108.

Spirit giving grace to humanity. Thus, Athanasius is thoroughly Trinitarian in His approach to theology.

Conclusion

Athanasius depicts the entire Arian controversy not only as a Christological problem but more as a Trinitarian issue: to question the divinity of Jesus Christ is to openly attack the Godhead itself. Thus, Athanasius strikes at the heart of Arianism with the hermeneutical approach that recognizes the Trinity of the Godhead and at the same time preserves the unity of the Godhead. The interesting aspect of this approach is that Athanasius understands the eternality of the Son and the Holy Spirit as essential members of the Trinity.

The implication is that if either of the members of the Trinity should be deemed non-members because of mutability, then the whole structure of the Godhead is dismantled, not to mention the demise of the soteriological plan for humanity. Thus, a proper understanding of Philippians 2:5-11 is essential to the orthodox position of eternal Sonship.

Another element of thought for Athanasius is the consideration of the dual natures of Jesus Christ. This is vividly portrayed in his exposition of the Philippians

passage. It is interesting to note that the crux of the Arian argument misses this point entirely. The Arians build their argument (Sonship by grace) on the presupposition that the Scriptures teach that Jesus was created. The Arians confuse the two natures of Jesus and never develop the distinctiveness of his humanity or his deity.

Finally, it must be noted that the work, *Contra Arianos*, was not written for the conversion of the Arian party to the orthodox position. The focus of the work is directed to the protection of the Church. The soteriology, Christology, and theology of the Christian Church were the primary concern of Athanasius. He reviews Philippians 2:5-11 in order to reinforce the Nicene position as fully orthodox, and thus seeks to eradicate the Arian heresy so that the Christian Church would not be compromised with doctrinal impurity. He writes with the passion of a pastor who is protecting and shepherding the Church, the flock of God.

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