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## More on the Death of Jesus and Its Meaning

For Paul, Christ did not merely die but died *for sins*. His death determines the value of his life and, in turn, determines our relationship to God. Christ's death comes under the topic of atonement; its benefits come under the topic of justification. Since the apostolic period both doctrines have been interpreted differently. One understanding of Christ's death as atonement has been more prominent than others at different times in history. By concentrating on one understanding and not giving sufficient attention to others, the church falls into error. The same is also true for justification. In this issue, we continue the discussion on the atonement that began in the July 2008 issue (CTQ 72:3) and expand it to include justification. William C. Weinrich shows that Adam's transgression was not just another sin among others: the fall corrupted our human nature and thus immortality was replaced with death. According to Athanasius this could only be resolved by the divine Word assuming human nature and dying to offer atonement. Naomichi Masaki shows that many contemporary views fit under "Christ died for sins." Some develop previously undeveloped aspects. Other understandings are so false that the totality of Christianity is corrupted. Prominent in Luther studies is Tuomo Mannermaa, who holds that for the Reformer justification takes place by the indwelling of the deity in the believer. Timo Laato correlates the doctrine of justification as held by Mannermaa and his Finnish Luther School with the views of the Reformation-era theologian Andreas Osiander and traditional Roman Catholicism. Jonathan Edwards brings to mind an early colonial American theologian who outdid John Calvin in his sermon on sinners in the hands of an angry God. Lawrence R. Rast Jr. traces how Edwards, in attempting to ameliorate a severe doctrine of predestination by allowing faith to be the individual's voluntary response, introduced Arminianism into the core of his theology. We hope these articles enrich your understanding of Jesus' death and its benefits.

For those who enjoy early Missouri Synod history, a contribution in the Theological Observer section discusses an event among our spiritual ancestors that has been often passed over, maybe with good reason.

David P. Scaer  
Editor

## God Did Not Create Death: Athanasius on the Atonement<sup>1</sup>

William C. Weinrich

According to the Nicene Creed, the one Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of God the Father, was he through whom all things were made and "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man." In this way the Creed places in closest connection the creation of all things through the Word and the redemption of man worked by him through his incarnation, that is, pre-eminently through his death and resurrection. Typical of the Scriptures and of early Christian thinking generally, the Nicene Creed is completely void of speculative interests and is rather specifically focused on the story of the salvation of the human race, which is nothing other than the story of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of the Father. At the center of the drama of redemption is man himself, for it was through man that sin came into the world and, with sin, the corruption of death. Until this situation is righted, the whole world groans, as Paul says, until the revelation of the sons of God (Rom 8:18-25).

Man was not, however, merely the instrument through whom sin came into the world. Man was from the dust of the earth and therefore so bound and connected with the earth that the creation itself suffered corruption when man chose corruption in his disobedience. In the reality of man lies the fate and destiny of all things. In the sin of man's disobedience *things change*. This does not simply mean that the external circumstances in which man lives change; it means that man himself is changed so that in him and through him the devil finds an ally, and man is and chooses to be a vessel of corruption and death. Man sinned and in sinning man became sinner. But also in sinning man allowed himself to become the agent of sin. Sin itself now has an image, sinful man, and, through the life and work of this sinful man, sin exerts its power and effects its own kingdom, namely, the kingdom of corruption and death. Sin

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<sup>1</sup> The title, "God Did Not Create Death," is from Wisdom of Solomon 1:13, as discussed in Part I below. Wisdom of Solomon (hereafter "Wisdom") is a Jewish writing from Alexandria that probably originated in the first century BC and circulated with many Greek translations of the Old Testament (Septuagint).

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is a power, precisely because it is work of a will, with intent and purpose, and the form and shape that sin takes is corruption and death. Corruption and death take their own concrete form in the sinful life of man. Sin and death go together, not simply as cause and effect, but as matter and form. Sin is a power but not without the form it takes, and death and corruption are that form.

Death and corruption are not punishments meted out only by way of a judgment that is externally imposed upon a transgressor. They are, to be sure, punishments and judgments, but they lie within the reality of sin and, as we noted, are the form of sin. Sin, we might say, assumes bodily form. This bodily form is the life of disobedience that man has chosen for himself. Sin is not only transgression; it is also, so to speak, a creative power that brings forth that which is proper to it, namely, the life of the sinner that is encompassed by death, bound to death, and destined to death.

It is important to keep in mind this bodily character of the power of sin when considering the thought of Athanasius concerning the passion of the Lord. For when he considers the death of the Word through the cross, Athanasius does so by considering the necessity of the incarnation of the Word. Not a mere verbal declaration of forgiveness for transgression would suffice for the salvation of man. The consequences of the fall are more dire than that. Fallen man is not external to his acts of sin, as though man remains what he is even as he commits acts of sin. Man himself, created for life and blessedness, has become a vessel of death. Man himself must be reconstructed by him through whom man was made. This reconstruction is the work of the cross.

As subtle and sophisticated as Athanasius is, he is not the originator of such ideas. He had predecessors. In *De Incarnatione* (*On the Incarnation*) 5,<sup>2</sup> Athanasius quotes both Wisdom 2:23–24 and Romans 1:26–27 to provide a kind of conceptual template for the creation of man and the consequences of the fall. A brief consideration of these two texts may serve as an introduction to the thought of Athanasius on the atonement of man by the Word crucified.

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<sup>2</sup> The edition used for references and quotations of *De Incarnatione* is that of R. W. Thomson, ed. and trans., *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

## I. Creation and the Fall in Wisdom of Solomon, Ephesians, and Romans

### *Wisdom*

Wisdom 2:23-24 states: "God created man for incorruptibility and he made [man] to be the image of his own eternity. But by the envy of the devil death entered into the world, and those who are of his party experience [death]." This is a remarkable passage, and the thought—if not the text itself—lies at the foundation of much of the New Testament. In itself it is an intertestamental commentary on Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man according to our image and likeness." Man is not a mere thing that is brought into existence as an independent and autonomous reality. Man is defined by the destiny for which God made man, and this destiny is vouchsafed to man by the fact that man is the image of God's own eternity. Man was created to live, and man is man only in his imaging the life of God. Man is the one created to live as God lives.

Through the envy of the devil, however, man determined upon another destiny, namely, death. This destiny finds its expression in a life of deception and corruption that is actualized in hate, envy, murder, and idolatry. Wisdom 2:23-24 is to be read in the light of Wisdom 1:12-15:

Do not desire death in the deceit of your life, nor seek out destruction by the works of your hands. For God did not create death nor does he delight in the destruction of the living. For he created all things that they might exist, and that of the world that is brought forth is in itself secure, and there is in them no medicine of corruption nor is the rule of death upon the earth. For righteousness is immortal.

Here death is quite explicitly said to be located in "the deceit of your life" and in "the works of your hands." Death takes its form in the life according to the devil, namely, that life characterized by deceit, idolatry, and all forms of wickedness. God did not create man for such a life. Rather, God created man to live that life that is according to God, and the human life lived according to the life of God is the life of Christ. As the Gospel of John might have it, the Word became flesh, and the Word enfleshed is the Way, the Truth, the Life.

### *Ephesians*

This conceptual paradigm of Wisdom occurs in various passages of the New Testament, but perhaps nowhere more definitely than in Paul's Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Romans. A brief summary of these texts must suffice here. First, let us look at Ephesians 1:3-2:10. Keep in mind the language and thought of Wisdom as we read the following passages: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . who chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy

and without blame before him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph 1:3-5). According to this passage, before the world began man is elected to be holy and without blame in love, and this was in Christ. The life given to man to live was holiness and blamelessness; such a life was the life of sonship and so the life lived in Christ. Yet, man was "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1); this death was manifested in "the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind," for men had become "by nature children of wrath" (Eph 2:3). Although dead in sins, God made us alive with Christ and in this brought man again to that for which man was created and elected. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10). Paul has given a christological interpretation to the thought of Wisdom. Man was created to be "the image of God's eternity." That is the language of Wisdom. In Ephesians the apostle speaks of the life of holiness and blamelessness in Christ Jesus, "through whom and unto whom all things were created," as Paul states in Colossians 1:15.

### ***Romans***

Paul also follows the conceptual path of Wisdom in Romans. In Romans, Paul describes the fall of the human race in the following terms: "Although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God . . . but changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things" (Rom 1:21-23). "The glory of the incorruptible God" is probably what Wisdom calls "the image of God's eternity," that is, man himself. The wrath of God, therefore, is revealed upon man when God "gives man up" to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, and the dishonoring of their bodies (Rom 1:24). The wrath of God takes, as it were, bodily form, namely, the life of corrupted man that he lives in and through his body. "God gave them up to vile passions," to a "debased mind," so that men received "in themselves the penalty of their error which was due" (Rom 1:26-27). This penalty lay not only in the future but was also already meted out in the perversion of life to which God gave them over. Paul lists the various forms of such lives: unrighteousness, sexual immorality, covetousness, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness, pride, haters of God, lack of mercy, unforgiving, to mention only some that Paul indicates (Rom 1:29-32). Paul is following the description of the descent of men into increasing wickedness such as it is given scriptural articulation in Genesis and commentary in the book of Wisdom.

In the concrete reality of man, not only in his soul but also in the body of man, God had made his own image. When man forsook his maker in sin, the consequence was death and corruption, namely, man became death-ridden and corrupted, and this consequence was revealed and visible in the perverse sinfulness of humankind. The narrative of Scripture is intensely concrete. Like it or not, biblical faith focuses on the individual and concrete reality of man as in fact he lives in the world. The body of man, not only his soul or spirit, is the form of God's image in the world and, under the consequences of human sin, man's body and the life lived through it is the form of divine punishment. Man, as Paul puts it, is "dead in trespasses and sins."

We must remember this concentration on the bodily nature of man, image of God but also sinner, when we read in Romans 8:1 that there is "now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." That there is no condemnation is to say that there is a restored righteousness, a judgment actualized in the gift of life for which man was first made. What, however, is the specific reality in which that righteousness exists? Paul speaks of it like this: "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin, and he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:3-4). In Christ the "law of sin and death," that is, that pattern of sinful behavior to which man is bound and enslaved, has received a condemnation of its own and is replaced by the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus," that is, the new life of Christ lived according to the works of the Spirit.

Crucial for the understanding of this passage is the phrase "condemned sin in the flesh," namely, the flesh of Christ. The atonement wrought by Christ demanded his incarnation precisely because man was not merely a sinner in the fact that he did sins. Man is transgressor but not merely transgressor. Man does not, so to speak, lie outside of his actions. Sinning does not leave man unaffected. When the primal man sinned, man became dead in sins and trespasses. The history of sin that Wisdom and Paul describe as the lack of knowledge of God, idolatry, and manifold wickedness is but the actualization of man as one who is death-ridden and corrupted. The fateful and tragic degradation of man exists, therefore, not only in works of sin but especially in the reality of man himself. Man is known by what he does, and the destiny of his death is the lot of all humankind. On account of sin, God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. Apart from the incarnation there is not, nor could there be, atonement and redemption.

## II. Does the Incarnation Trump the Atonement in Athanasius?

I have introduced the topic of atonement in Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* in this way because Athanasius himself is guided by the narrative structure of the Scriptures, especially Genesis, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Epistles of Paul. There remains in much scholarly literature, however, a wholly misguided and misleading reading of Athanasius that overlooks his biblical foundations and renders him as a Platonizing Greek who thinks of the body of Christ merely as an external instrument by which the divine Word made known his deity. Moreover, there is an interpretation of Athanasius that misinterprets the function of the incarnation in the soteriological thought of Athanasius. This misinterpretation is classically voiced by R. P. C. Hanson. According to Hanson, the incarnation in the thought of Athanasius mediates life from the divine Word to the flesh assumed from the Virgin Mary so that "one of the curious results of this theology of the Incarnation is that it almost does away with a doctrine of the Atonement."<sup>3</sup> What is implied in such an assessment is that the doctrine of the incarnation peripheralizes the importance, even the necessity, of the suffering of Christ. Incarnation trumps the cross.

In view of such criticism, it is important to note that *On the Incarnation* is explicitly an explanation of the necessity of the cross.<sup>4</sup> At the very beginning of the treatise Athanasius writes: "Let us next with pious faith tell of the incarnation of the Word, . . . so that from the apparent degradation of the Word you may have ever greater and stronger piety towards him. For the more he is mocked by unbelievers, the greater witness he provides of his divinity."<sup>5</sup> The deity of the Son is manifested and effected for the salvation of the human race by, through, and in the sufferings of the incarnate Word. This "degradation of the Word" is explicitly said by Athanasius to be the "degradation through the cross."<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere in the treatise the work of the cross is said to be "the primary cause of the incarnation"<sup>7</sup> and the cross is "the chief article of our faith."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 450.

<sup>4</sup> Much modern scholarship neglects the significance of the cross for Athanasius. All the more welcome, therefore, is the important corrective given by Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 28, 67-84, and John Behr, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, *The Nicene Faith, Part 1, True God of True God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 170-207.

<sup>5</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 1; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 135.

<sup>6</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 1; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 135.

<sup>7</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 10; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 159.



What, however, must be noted is that the work of atonement in the cross of the Word directly corresponds to the reality of man in the specific and concrete circumstance of man's own degradation. The Word vicariously assumed the position of man who in the state of his own death and corruption is wholly incapable of paying the debt owed by sin and assuming again the destiny intended for man from the beginning, namely, participation in the eternality and incorruptibility of God. But the degradation of man itself is to be comprehended in view of what man is and is to be by way of the creative intent of the God. Man was created, to use the language of Wisdom, as the "image of God's eternality." Therefore Athanasius begins his exposition of the cross with an exposition concerning the creation of man.

### III. Athanasius on Creation and the Fall

First of all, Athanasius rejects pagan and heretical notions of creation, specifically that of the Epicureans (who denied divine providence), that of Plato (who posited creation from pre-existent matter), and that of Marcion (for whom creation was the work of a lesser deity). The Scriptures rather teach, says Athanasius, a creation from nothing, and therefore the power of God to bring into existence that which had no existence is revealed to be an expression of God's goodness. The deity of God is revealed in that God gives life to that which in itself does not possess life: "For God is good . . . and the good has no envy for anything. Thus, because he envies nothing its existence, he made everything from nothing through his own Word, our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>9</sup> However, Athanasius is aware of Wisdom's assertion that God created man for immortality and incorruptibility and therefore notes that God had a "special mercy" upon the human race. For "by way of nature of their own beginning" (that is, from nothing) man in his bodily nature had no capacity to remain forever. God, therefore, "graciously grants to man something more."<sup>10</sup> This "something more" is that man is created "according to God's own image" and this is further defined as a "share in the power of God's own Word" so that human persons as it were possess "shadows of the Word" and "becoming *logikoi* possess the power to remain in blessedness."<sup>11</sup> We must not interpret Athanasius after the manner of late medieval theology. This is not the structure of grace added to and upon nature, a *gratia superaddita*. Considered solely in terms of his bodily nature, man is similar to all other living things. But man is not

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<sup>8</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 19; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 181.

<sup>9</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 3; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 141.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 3; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 141.

<sup>11</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 3; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 141.

merely similar to other living creatures. Constitutive of the reality of man is the gift of the Word, for only as man participates in the power of the Word is man destined for life with God, that is, unto incorruptibility and immortality. Man is "image of God's eternality" only in the fact that man participates in the power of the Word through whom all things were made and who is, therefore, the fully divine instrument by whom and in whom life is bestowed. Again, man is man in that he is oriented toward life with God. This teleological directedness of man is determinative of the very definition of man.

As Athanasius says elsewhere, this grace of the Word that constitutes the reality of man entails "the life that is according to God,"<sup>12</sup> or "the happy and truly blessed life."<sup>13</sup> As image of God, possessing the power of the Word, man is created to live according to the life of God, or as Athanasius puts it, to remain in blessedness and incorruptibility. Possessed of the Word, however, man lives freely as man was created to live. But this very freedom possessed also the possibility that man could determine against God. For this reason, to secure the grace that mankind had been given, God imposed "a law and a set place."<sup>14</sup> God brought man into paradise, namely, there where the life of the saints is lived, and he gave to man a law. He promised that if man continued in the grace given and remained "good" (καλός), that is, within the purpose of God for man, man would remain in the life of paradise without sorrow or pain and would arrive at that incorruptibility promised to him and intended for him. Were man to transgress the law of eating of the fruit of the tree of good and evil, however, he in fact would have chosen to turn away from the Word and thus not to live that life which is according to God. Thus man would become wicked and, void of the Word, destitute of his proper destiny and vocation, namely, that of life and immortality. Transgression would bring death. This death would not only be the event of death as punishment. Rather, the death which is brought on by transgression is "to remain in the corruption of death." Sin and death bring forth a life that is wicked, and this lived wickedness is the corruption of death whose own destiny is eternal death.

If we are to understand Athanasius' discussion of the incarnation and of the cross of the Word, we must keep this inner connection between sin and death in mind. The life of man as man is not distinguishable from the life of man as in the image of God; nor is the life now to be lived by man

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<sup>12</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 5; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 145.

<sup>13</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 11; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 3; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 141.

“in the power of the Logos” distinguishable from the life of immortality and incorruption to which man is destined. Were man “to remain” in blessedness, living the authentic life “in paradise,” he would attain to that incorruptibility for which God created him. Were man, however, to transgress the commandment of God, man would fall into that corruption and death that is the natural tendency of the body apart from the presence of the Word. The presence of the Word is constitutive of the reality of man, of his life, and of the destiny for which he was created.

The work of the Savior must be commensurate to the reality of man in his debt and corruption. Therefore Athanasius first speaks “of the beginning of mankind,” in order that we might know “that our own cause was the reason of his coming [καθόδου, condescension]. . . . We were the cause of his incarnation, and for our salvation he had compassion to the extent of being born and revealed in a body.”<sup>15</sup> The incarnation of the Word, therefore, is not an event discreet from the necessity of the cross, nor is it, so to speak, the required basis and preliminary assumption for the work of the cross. The necessity of the incarnation lies within the necessity of the cross and is to be interpreted only in view of the necessity of the cross. The relation between the reality of man, transgression, death, and corruption is not mechanical, but organic. Life is that living of man that is marked by obedience; death is that living of man that is marked by disobedience. For the Word to take to himself the body was for him to take to himself death.

“God, then, had so created man and willed that he should remain in incorruptibility.”<sup>16</sup> But men turned away from God and “invented for themselves wickedness” and so “received the condemnation of death” and “no longer remained as they had been created, but as they devised, were ruined.”<sup>17</sup> Death brings on death, and corruption corrupts. Holiness becomes wickedness, and blessedness becomes accursedness. This is to say, death is a power, and Athanasius frequently speaks of death as a power that governs and rules, and as a power creates its own form. “Death overcame [men] and reigned over them”;<sup>18</sup> through the envy of the devil “men died, and corruption took a strong hold on them, and was more powerful than the force of nature over the whole race.”<sup>19</sup> And what does the power of death and corruption empower men to do? What are the

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<sup>15</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 4; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 143.

<sup>16</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 4; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 143.

<sup>17</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 4; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 143.

<sup>18</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 4; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 143.

<sup>19</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 5; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 145.

forms that death takes? “[Men] turned to vice and exceeded all iniquity, and not stopping at one wickedness but inventing ever more new things, they became insatiable in sinning”:<sup>20</sup> adulteries, thefts, murders, violence, seditions, and acts against nature. To summarize the reality of the fall Athanasius quotes Romans 1:26–27.

The fall of man, therefore, is not merely comprehended in an act of disobedience. Man not only disobeys; *man falls*. The fall entails a radical corruption of the reality of man, a total disruption of his being as possessed of the Word, and a total disorientation away from man’s proper end. What then, Athanasius asks his readers, should God, who is good, have done? Should God simply have allowed man to remain in death? That, however, would have negated the very purpose for God’s creating of man. Having created man, “it was not right that he should permit men to be destroyed by corruption, because this was neither proper nor fitting for the goodness of God.”<sup>21</sup> Nor could God simply have ignored the transgression of men. The threat of God that death follows upon sin must also stand, for God is truthful and not a liar. As Athanasius notes, however, the salvation of man could not be accomplished simply by an act of repentance. Were the fall nothing other than an act of sin, then an act of repentance might well suffice. As it is, however, death and corruption is the form of sin; sin begets wickedness because death takes the form of sin. Moreover, man was under the “law of death,” that determination and threat of God that should man transgress, death would come upon him. Man is, by his own devising, oriented toward wickedness and death. “Repentance gives no exemption from the consequences of nature, but merely looses sins,” writes Athanasius.<sup>22</sup> Had there been sin and not also death and corruption as the consequence of sin, repentance would suffice. But men were “now prisoners to natural corruption” and were “deprived of the grace of being in the image.”<sup>23</sup>

#### IV. Athanasius on the Atonement

For this dilemma the Word’s incarnation so that he might in the body pay the debt and destroy the consequence of sin was necessary and alone the answer:

For it was his task both to bring what was corruptible back again to incorruption, and to save what was above all fitting for the Father. For

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<sup>20</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 5; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 147.

<sup>21</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 6; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 149.

<sup>22</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 7; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 151.

<sup>23</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 7; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 151.

since he is the Word of the Father and above everyone, consequently he alone was both able to recreate the universe and be worthy to suffer for all and to be an advocate on behalf of all before the Father.<sup>24</sup>

Or again:

No one else could bring what was corrupted to incorruptibility, except the Saviour himself, who also created the universe in the beginning from nothing; nor could any other recreate men in the image, save the image of the Father; nor could another raise up what was mortal as immortal, save our Lord Jesus Christ, who is life itself; nor could another teach about the Father and overthrow the cult of idols, save the Word who orders the universe, and who alone is the true only-begotten Son of the Father.<sup>25</sup>

"No one else could bring what was corrupted to incorruptibility." Such a comment expresses the vicarious character of the work of Christ. Athanasius expresses the vicarious manner of Christ's work in various ways: "The death of all was fulfilled in the Lord's body";<sup>26</sup> Christ is "the common Saviour of all";<sup>27</sup> moreover, Athanasius frequently says that Christ suffered and died "for all" (ὑπὲρ πάντων)<sup>28</sup> or "in the stead of all" (ἀντὶ πάντων).<sup>29</sup> However, that Christ's work of atonement was a vicarious work is not due simply to a verdict that has universal application. Nor was his work one of perfect and absolute merit that could be understood in terms of payment. For Athanasius he who became man for the salvation of men is the Word through whom man was created and in whom man possesses his true being and destiny. In relation to man the Word is always the Creator who made man "for incorruptibility." This relation is not altered in the realization of man's redemption. Christ could die for all because he is the Word through whom all were made. But the Word was not merely the instrument of creation in the sense of an external instrument that stands outside of man and works externally upon man. The Word was that "special grace" in which man is made to be in the image of God and which allows man to live the life of blessedness and to attain to the life of immortality and the eternality of God. As we have noted before, the corruption of man is not a passive state with its own intrinsic reality. It is the effect of the deceit of the devil and of the devising of man. Death and corruption are effected by a will and by a work. Therefore, the effects of man's sinful willfulness through the deceit of the

<sup>24</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 7; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 151.

<sup>25</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 20; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 183.

<sup>26</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 20; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 185.

<sup>27</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 21; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 185.

<sup>28</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 7, 20, 21, 25; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 151, 183, 189, 197.

<sup>29</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 8, 20, 21; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 153, 183, 187.

devil demand and require another and opposite will and work, namely, that of the Word through whom that which was created in the beginning is created anew, that which was consigned to remain in death is raised up to the newness of eternal life, and that which gives itself over to the worship of idols is brought again to the knowledge of God and piety toward the Father.

If we keep this point in mind, we will understand Athanasius' insistence that when the Word "submitted to our corruption," he did not merely exist in a body nor did he wish merely to appear. Rather, the Word "fashioned for himself in the virgin a body" similar to ours "as a temple, and appropriated it for his own as an instrument."<sup>30</sup> This language of appropriation, or of making the body his own body, is Athanasius' way of insisting that the body of the Word was not external to the Word but was the "instrument" of the Word as subject and agent of human redemption.<sup>31</sup> By the language of appropriation the language of instrument likewise loses every implication of an external means by which the Word was working. The body was "instrument" in the sense that the body was the manner of existence that the Word assumed. The body became "the Word's own body," so that the Word as creating and atoning subject does the work of redemption as man and therefore on behalf of man. The Christology of the Incarnate Word as single subject is internally related to the work of atonement and the life that it brings, for it allows Athanasius to predicate to the Word the requirements of man's own redemption, namely, to suffer the debt of sin which is death and to conquer death so that life might again be given to man. Note, for example, the following statements:

When the theologians say that he ate and drank and was born, they understand that the body was born as a body and was nourished on suitable food. . . . But these things are said of him, because the body which ate and was born and suffered was no one else's but the Lord's; and since he became human, it was right for these things to be said of him as a man, that he might be shown to have a true, not an unreal body.<sup>32</sup>

The activities that pertain to the body likewise pertain to the body of the Word and not, Athanasius emphasizes, to the Word himself. However, by the incarnation human attributions do not detract from the integrity of the divine subject that is the Word. Athanasius does not understand the incarnation as redemptive in itself and therefore in some manner competing with the death of Christ. Athanasius discourses on the

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<sup>30</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 8; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 153.

<sup>31</sup> See Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 80–82.

<sup>32</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 18; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 177.

incarnation in order to affirm that he who died is none other than he who created man, so that the death of the Word in his body is an act of creation that both satisfies the commandment of God and destroys the consequence of sin, which is death and corruption. Consider this summary of the Word's atoning work:

Thus taking a body like ours, since all were liable to the corruption of death, and surrendering it to death on behalf of all, he offered it to the Father. And this he did in his loving kindness in order that, as all die in him, the law concerning corruption in men might be abolished—since its power was concluded in the Lord's body and it would never again have influence over men who are like him—and in order that, as men had turned to corruption, he might turn them back again to incorruption and might give them life for death, in that he had made the body his own, and by the grace of the resurrection had rid them of death as straw is destroyed by fire.<sup>33</sup>

### V. Conclusion

The one who died in the body was none other than the Word who was given to man as that "special grace" that directed man toward his proper destiny, namely, immortality and incorruptibility and eternal life with God. By the "sacrifice of his own body He put an end to the law which lay over us, and renewed for us the origin of life by giving hope of the resurrection."<sup>34</sup> As we noted above, by participation in the Word man was given a life to live. The life man lives is not external to the reality of man; it is rather the very form that the reality of man takes. Man lives as he is. Similarly, the fall of man entailed death and corruption and this was evinced in the wickedness that both marred and characterized the life of man who was remaining in death. The atoning work of Christ also entails within itself the renewed life of man that again is the "image of the divine eternity."

By the incarnation of God the Word were effected the overthrow of death and the resurrection of life. For the man who put on Christ says: "Since by man came death, also by man came the resurrection of the dead; for as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor 15:21-22). For now no longer as condemned do we die, but as those who will rise again we await the general resurrection of all.<sup>35</sup>

The condemnation of death is sacrificed, and the corruption of death is itself put to death. In *On the Incarnation* 28, Athanasius can speak of those

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<sup>33</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 8; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 153.

<sup>34</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 10; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 159.

<sup>35</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 10; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 159.

who "put on the faith of the cross."<sup>36</sup> That, in fact, is an apt way of expressing the life of man won by Christ in his cross. In such a faith the Christian "scorns the things of nature, and is not afraid of death because of Christ."<sup>37</sup> Although Athanasius mentions the miracles reported in the Gospels as demonstrations of the deity of Christ Jesus, more typical in this discussion is his mention of the life now lived by the Christians as demonstrations that the death of Christ is none other than that of the divine Word. Paradigmatic for Athanasius is the Christian martyr. "By nature man is afraid of death and of the dissolution of the body."<sup>38</sup> But many who first disbelieved and mocked the cross later believed and "despised death so that they even became Christian martyrs."<sup>39</sup> No more visible is the incorruption of human destiny than in the death of the martyr, for here as perhaps nowhere else the defeat of death is noted and in the faith of the cross death itself is scorned as impotent. The death of death, that is, the resurrection to the newness of life, takes itself the form of the cross.

But if it is by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ that death is crushed, then it is clear, if truth is the judge, that it is none other than Christ himself who has shown triumphs and victories over death and who has rendered it powerless. And if death was formerly powerful and therefore to be feared, but is now despised after the coming of the Saviour and after the death and resurrection of his body, clearly it is by Christ himself who ascended the cross that death has been destroyed and overcome.<sup>40</sup>

That Christ is alive and divine is made evident in the lives of his saints, who, having put on the faith of the cross, are themselves living the life of Christ. As the life of Christ himself was the human form of the life of God the Word, so also in those who participate in the resurrection of the Christ is revealed the life made manifest in the cross. Christ did not live unto himself, nor was his death accomplished as an isolated event. It was for us and for our salvation, as the Nicene Creed affirms. The cross and the life that it brings is given to us who are of his body, the Church. That we are of his body, one with him and his cross, is now to be manifested in the shape of faith, which is nothing other than what Paul says in Galatians 2:20: "It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

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<sup>36</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 28; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 203.

<sup>37</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 28; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 203.

<sup>38</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 28; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 201.

<sup>39</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 28; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 203.

<sup>40</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 29; Thomson, *Athanasius*, 203–205.