

## Medical Substitutionary Atonement in Athanasius of Alexandria

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### Introduction: Who is the Heir of the Ancients?

‘When we ask what the precise nature of this vicarious activity of Christ was, we find Nicene theologians regularly falling back upon familiar biblical and liturgical terms like ransom, sacrifice, propitiation, expiation, reconciliation to describe it, but always with a deep sense of awe before the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the blood of Christ. They used these terms, however...to refer, to not any external transaction between God and mankind carried out by Christ, but to what took place *within the union of divine and human natures in the incarnate Son of God*.’<sup>2</sup>

‘Atonement thus occurs for the Fathers through the dynamic of the incarnation itself, not by way of some extrinsic theory, i.e., satisfaction, penal substitution, and so on. Why, one wonders, did theology subsequently fail to reflect this? I am not sure. Part of the reason, I suspect, lies in how the incarnation came to be largely understood. With focus on the miracle of God becoming flesh in the birth of Jesus, the saving significance of the rest of Jesus’ life was overshadowed. With focus returned, so to speak, on the Cross, the climactic end of Jesus’ life, the impression *de facto* was that the real meaning of God’s identification lay at the beginning and at the end, not in the entire range of Jesus’ life.’<sup>3</sup>

Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, the authors of the recent book *Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*, claim that penal substitutionary theory stretches back to the earliest fathers of the church.<sup>4</sup> Of these early theologians, they impressively cite Justin Martyr (c.100 – 165), Eusebius of Caesarea (275 – 339), Hilary of Poitiers (c.300 – 368), Athanasius (c.297 – 373), Gregory ‘the Theologian’ of Nazianzus (c.330 – 390), Ambrose of Milan (339 – 397), John Chrysostom (c.350 – 407), Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), Cyril of Alexandria (375 – 444), Gelasius of Cyzicus (fifth century), Gregory the Great (c.540 – 604). They then proceed to quote Thomas Aquinas (c.1225 – 1274), John Calvin (1509 – 64), and then others from the Reformed tradition. My focus here involves correcting their misunderstanding about the early theologians. They express some nervousness about whether penal substitution is historically attested in early church history, and their reason for hoping it can be vindicated:

‘The question of historical pedigree has acquired a further significance in recent years, for increasing numbers of people are suggesting penal substitution is a novel doctrine, invented around the time of the Reformation by a church that was (it is alleged) drifting ever further from the biblical faith of the early church Fathers. This is a serious challenge. To put the matter bluntly, we ought to be worried if what we believe to be a foundational biblical truth remained entirely undiscovered from the days of the apostles right up until the middle of the sixteenth century. At the very least, such a discovery would undermine the idea that penal substitution is clearly taught in the Bible. On the other hand, it would be immensely reassuring to find that our understanding of the Bible has indeed been the consensus of Christian orthodoxy for almost two millennia.’<sup>5</sup>

But scholarly opinion weighs against these authors. Most theologians and historians of the early church believe that the early church was united in upholding the broad Christus Victor theory for over a millennium. The varied language of Jesus as a healer, ransom, deliverer, and conqueror was used to denote Jesus being victorious over

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally, and still is, part of my lengthier paper exploring patristic atonement teaching, *Penal Substitution vs. Medical-Ontological Substitution: A Historical Comparison*. That paper can be found online on the website of The Anástasis Center for Christian Education and Ministry, on this page: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-patristic>.

<sup>2</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 1983), p.168. I am indebted to this work, especially p.161 – 168, and Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), for the citations in this section.

<sup>3</sup> Father Henry Charles, *The Eucharist as Sacrifice*, November 19, 2006; [http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch\\_sacrifice191106.htm](http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch_sacrifice191106.htm); Father Charles is a Roman Catholic parish priest in Trinidad and Tobago

<sup>4</sup> Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.14

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.162

human sinfulness, death, and the devil.<sup>6</sup> Substitution, but not penal substitution, was clearly taught, for Jesus was victorious on our behalf and for our salvation. I am calling this view ‘ontological substitution,’ or ‘medical substitution,’ although Eastern Orthodox theologian Stephen Freeman prefers ‘therapeutic substitution,’ and Reformed theologian T.F. Torrance calls it ‘total substitution.’ It was only Anselm of Canterbury who first articulated an atonement theory that positioned Jesus as a ‘satisfaction’ of ‘an attribute’ of God. In Anselm’s theory, Jesus satisfied God’s *honor*, which contributed to the idea that Jesus stored up a ‘treasury of merit’ others could access. Anselm could therefore leave the question of the scope of the atonement open, and genuinely open to human free will to choose Jesus. However, Anselm paved the way for John Calvin and others to position Jesus as satisfying God’s *retributive justice*, which became a broader category that was extended across people and across time, and which was understood in such a way that Jesus exhausted God’s wrath at one time, upholding God’s retributive justice on their behalf. Unlike Anselm’s theology where Jesus satisfied God’s honor in a personal way, giving others access, person by person, to his achievement, Calvin’s theology positioned Jesus against God’s justice in a categorical way, on behalf of the elect, all at once. This left no logical place for genuine human free will.

In this essay, I will shed light on why I believe these three authors misunderstand the theological thought of the earliest Christian theologians, especially those at the Council of Nicaea. They were not advocates of the penal substitutionary atonement theory. Instead, they held what I am calling ‘medical substitution,’ which is an aspect – and in my opinion, the *foundation* – of the christus victor understanding. This position is the view that Jesus had to physically assume fallen human nature, unite it to his divine nature, overcome temptation throughout his life in the power of the Holy Spirit, and defeat the corruption within his human nature at his death, in order to raise his human nature new, cleansed, and healed, so he could ascend to the Father as humanity’s representative and share the Spirit of his new humanity with all who believe. That rather long-winded sentence can be boiled down to the saying that was popular with Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and others: ‘That which is not assumed is not healed.’ God must assume to Himself what He intends to heal. Hence if God intends to heal the entire human being, He must assume the entire human being in Christ. My comparison of the two theological doctrines and their significance can be found in separate essays. This particular essay focuses on the atonement theology of the early church fathers.

### **Athanasius of Alexandria (298 – 373 AD)**

#### *Historical Context and Significance*

I turn to examine another very important voice in the early church who Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach misinterpret. These three writers assert that Athanasius holds to penal substitution. However, Peter J. Leithart, an author, a frequent contributor to the journal *First Things*, and also a Reformed theologian in the Presbyterian Church of America, denies it. Leithart says, ‘He does not express this in terms of Jesus vicariously receiving the punishment we deserve.’<sup>7</sup> Who is correct here?

Some context is important to understand Athanasius and his times. The famous heretic Arius (c.250 – 336 AD), who provided his name for Athanasius’ epithet ‘Arian,’ was an elder who had been theologically trained under Lucian of Antioch, and ordained a presbyter by him. The teaching of Lucian seemed to stress fighting the heresy of Sabellius. Sabellius argued that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were merely masks that God wore at different times in sequence. His position was influenced by the fact that the word ‘person’ (Greek *prosopon*, Latin *persona*) was the word ‘mask’ or ‘face’ from the Greco-Roman theater, where actors had to put on and off different masks to play their roles. Moreover, the world of Greek Neo-Platonic philosophy held that the ideal, spiritual Forms behind the physical world were not accessible. Sabellius’ position imitated the structure of reality proposed by those frameworks: the true God remained hidden behind His three masks.

We must note that this was an unavoidable struggle over words and the meanings to which they referred. The apostle Paul had already deployed the word *prosopon* when he spoke of seeing God ‘face to face’ (1 Cor.13:12) and God in one another with ‘unveiled faces’ (2 Cor.3:18). He used the term *prosopon* in a markedly different way than did his Greco-Roman cultural and philosophical surroundings. Thus the apostle was already engaged in the task of re-contextualization of pagan words to convey meaning in a distinctly Christian register. That is, he was engaged in

<sup>6</sup> Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998, originally published 1930), chs.1 – 5

<sup>7</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.154

theological hermeneutics. Paul provided more impetus for Christian theologians' continuation on that journey, of necessity.<sup>8</sup>

Arius returned to Alexandria, Egypt when Alexander was bishop. Arius was determined to fight anything that looked to him like the teaching of Sabellius. To his ears, Alexander's claim that the Son was one with the Father did not safeguard against Sabellianism, because it could be heard as placing the divine oneness behind the Son and Father in a mysterious substance not disclosed to us. Arius' approach was to stress the ontological difference between the Father and the Son, even going so far as to say that the Son was created by the Father at a certain point in time. He used the idea that the 'Wisdom' of God in Proverbs 8:22 – 36 – which was interpreted as also being the Son – spoke of herself as 'created' prior to everything else in creation. In Arius' scheme, the Father remained on the other side of an unbridgeable chasm. This effectively meant that the Son did not give us real union with the Father, nor real knowledge of him. The Son was only a created being. He was not God.

Bishop Alexander took his young deacon Athanasius with him to the Council of Nicaea, convened in 325 AD to discuss the teaching of Arius and other administrative matters. 'Some 22 of the bishops at the council, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia, came as supporters of Arius. But when some of the more shocking passages from his writings were read, they were almost universally seen as blasphemous.'<sup>9</sup> Of the 318 bishops assembled there, all but 3 signed their agreement to the use of the word *homoousios* ('same substance or essence') to describe the relation between the Father and the Son. The word guarded against Arian teaching by saying that Father shared everything he is and has with the Son, eternally. The Council thus confessed that there was never an interval of time when God was not a Father, prior to the Son. The Father always had his Son. This was despite the fact that in human experience, a man exists prior to begetting a son at a certain point in time and thus becoming a father; the connotation of temporality connected to 'father-son' and 'begotten, not made' language was identified as baggage from our creaturely existence which needed to be pruned away when 'father-son' language was used for God and 'begotten' language was used for the Son.

When Alexander died in 328, Athanasius followed his mentor into the bishop's seat at approximately the young age of 30. But the tide quickly turned against him. Opinion turned against the use of *homoousios* because of concerns held by other bishops that the word *ousia* carried a history, in an earlier theological controversy, of being used to denote a material or semi-material substance. Was God a semi-material substance, then? By contrast, Athanasius was sure the word could be, and must be, redefined in the context of Christian theology, much like the 'father-son' and 'begotten' language was. The main supporters of Arius himself were the bishops Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia, who had been a fellow student of Lucian of Antioch with Arius and enjoyed great influence with Emperor Constantine, enough to persuade Constantine to exile Athanasius from his bishop's seat. In the interest of historical fairness, the controversy might be more aptly named the 'Eusebian' heresy.

Over the course of the next few decades, all the way to his death, Athanasius became the church's leading spokesman of the view that the Son was equal to the Father, and then the Creed of Nicaea for its use of the term *homoousios*. Athanasius saw the importance of this Nicene formula as it guarded the teaching around genuine salvation and revelation. If the Son was *homoousios* with the Father, then Jesus brought us real union with God, and thus God's salvation of human nature. The Son also brought us real knowledge of God, and thus the Father revealed himself in and through the Son. These themes would occupy Athanasius' attention.

Scholarly discussion has acknowledged that Athanasius used the term 'Arian' with deliberate polemical intent to lump his opponents into one category.<sup>10</sup> Arius was never a bishop, merely an elder. Those whom Athanasius opposed for being 'Arian' did not call themselves by that name or label. 'Arian' is the victor's term. This was surely part of Athanasius' rhetorical strategy, to name the heresy for someone of lower rank than a bishop. And while Athanasius saw them as sharing a common flaw, the diversity of thought within that Athanasian category is significant. Nevertheless, these discussions, while interesting, do not have bearing on what my goal here, which is

<sup>8</sup> See especially the excellent work by C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), ch.8 – 9 on how semantic similarities between rival traditions do not lead anywhere near conceptual agreement

<sup>9</sup> Warren Carroll, *The Building of Christendom, 324 – 1100: A History of Christendom* volume 2 (West Chester, PA: Christendom Press, 1987), p.11; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch.2; John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology Volume 1: The Way to Nicaea* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001) gives helpful background to the development of technical theological terminology

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

to examine Athanasius' teaching on the atonement, and to test whether penal substitution advocates can rightly claim Athanasius as a predecessor.

The nineteenth century church historian Archibald Robinson writes in his thorough review of Athanasius' work, 'Before 319 he had written his first books 'against the Gentiles,' the latter of which, *On the Incarnation*, implies a full maturity of power in the writer, while the former is full of philosophical and mythological knowledge such as argues advanced education.'<sup>11</sup> However, the more dominant view of scholars today concerning the dating of *Against the Gentiles* and *On the Incarnation* is that Athanasius wrote these two volumes shortly after the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, for reasons I find compelling. Greek Catholic scholar Khaled Anatolios and Eastern Orthodox scholar Matthew Craig Steenberg view these theological treatises as typical of a bishop's early career, and even expected from a Christian bishop.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Athanasius was a leading opponent of the Arian heresy; he was the main architect of the Nicene Creed; and he gave us the final form of the New Testament as consisting of the twenty-seven books we now recognize. C.S. Lewis was very well acquainted with Athanasius and admired him deeply, as shown by the introduction he wrote to *On the Incarnation*.<sup>13</sup>

### *God and Creation*

First, I wish to explore Athanasius' understanding of creation, because this area of thought highlights how the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity was understood by the early Christians, and how all the theological puzzle pieces fit together. In his introduction to his first work, *Against the Heathen*, Athanasius directs Macarius his reader to view Jesus and his crucifixion not as a shameful defeat, but as 'the healing of creation.'<sup>14</sup> And by 'creation,' Athanasius demonstrably means *all creation*, in such a way that involves all human beings without reservation, although human free choice will impact our experience of that healing. Christian faith, to Athanasius, does not set forward the question of 'how might God resolve a conflict of attributes between love/mercy and retributive justice/wrath' or 'how can sinners be justified before a holy God.' It solves the problem of human evil, both in its intellectual coherence and practical application. God in Christ solves *the problem of evil, especially human evil*, first by explaining why God's good creation *never required it in the first place* and then by explaining what a good God is doing to defeat evil and heal humanity, all the while not becoming evil Himself.

After introducing his subject, Athanasius immediately says:

'In the beginning wickedness did not exist. Nor indeed does it exist even now in those who are holy, nor does it in any way belong to their nature. But men later on began to contrive it and to elaborate it to their own hurt.'<sup>15</sup>

In chapter 2, Athanasius then defends God from any accusation of evil or caprice on account of humanity's wickedness. He does this by explaining God's intention for the creation. After defending God as 'good and exceeding[ly] noble,' he defends God's creation of the world and humanity as originally unstained and called into deeper knowledge of and communion with God. Human beings were made in the image of the Word of the Father

<sup>11</sup> Archibald Robinson, 'Athanasius' in Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 2, Volume 4* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), p.16

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.161 in footnote 11 says that these documents were 'the type of doctrinal text relevant to and expected of an early episcopal career.' Also, on p.161 – 162: 'Here, more explicitly than anywhere else, Athanasius is able to present the core of this theological exposition in his own terms, mindful of the issues at stake at the Nicene council that had been held a few years before, but not yet wholly bound up in the disputes that would demand a polemical and often highly contextual shape to his later texts. The CG-DI is Athanasius at his least case-specific. He argues against the general practice of idolatry, but is not yet in disputes with single persons, perceived camps, or over specific terminologies; and this text, more than any of his others, articulates doctrinal theology through an anthropological perspective.' See also Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.27 – 31.

<sup>13</sup> In his introduction to Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, C.S. Lewis writes with deep appreciation, 'This is a good translation of a very great book...He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, 'whole and undefiled,' when it looked as if all the civilised world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius – into one of those 'sensible' synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times... When I first opened his *De Incarnatione* I soon discovered by a very simple test that I was reading a masterpiece. I knew very little Christian Greek except that of the New Testament and I had expected difficulties. To my astonishment I found it almost as easy as Xenophon; and only a master mind could, in the fourth century, have written so deeply on such a subject with such classical simplicity. Every page I read confirmed this impression.' I have written a paper on Lewis' debt to Irenaeus and Athanasius on atonement theology, which includes some of this material: *C.S. Lewis' Theology of Atonement*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-cslewis-paper-atonement.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 1.4

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 2.1

to have power in ourselves to freely ascend in love for God, receiving joy and pleasure and renewal by desiring Him.<sup>16</sup> In chapter 3, Athanasius accounts for human sin as a ‘holding back’ from that which God intended. Instead, human beings began to prioritize themselves and their own bodies higher than the knowledge of God which was accessible through the mind and the soul. Sin, therefore, is fundamentally a disordering of loves. Nothing is evil in itself, appreciated in the correct order. But we human beings betrayed our own vocation:

‘They wholly forgot the power they originally had from God... For having departed from the consideration of the one and the true, namely, God, and from desire of Him, they had thenceforward embarked in diverse lusts and in those of the several bodily senses... They began to be habituated to these desires, so that they were even afraid to leave them: whence the soul became subject to cowardice and alarms, and pleasures and thoughts of mortality.’<sup>17</sup>

In chapter 4, Athanasius describes the addictive quality of sin, from the vantage point of the human soul. The soul, which is ‘mobile,’ has ‘power over herself,’<sup>18</sup> and in fact comes from God, abuses that power. The soul can still discern what is good, that is, God. Yet the soul, because of the pleasure it finds in lusts, pursues what is evil. In chapter 5, Athanasius explains evils such as murder, adultery, and slander as the result of ‘disorder’<sup>19</sup> in the human soul. He uses the illustration of a charioteer driving a fine chariot in a race, not towards the goal, but simply for the experience of racing at high speeds, even recklessly:

‘All of which things are a vice and sin of the soul: neither is there any cause of them at all, but only the rejection of better things.’<sup>20</sup>

From this point, having briefly summarized the biblical account of creation and fall, and explained God’s goodness, humanity, free will, and the fall in such a way so as to defend the character of God from the accusation of being evil, Athanasius steps back. He has explained why evil is not part of the character of God. Now in chapter 6, he criticizes as illogical and impossible the Greek view that evil is a concrete *thing* apart from God:

‘Now certain of the Greeks, having erred from the right way, and not having known Christ, have ascribed to evil a substantive and independent existence. In this they make a double mistake: either in denying the Creator to be maker of all things, if evil had an independent subsistence and being of its own; or again, if they mean that He is maker of all things, they will of necessity admit Him to be maker of evil also. For evil, according to them, is included among existing things. But this must appear paradoxical and impossible. For evil does not come from good, nor is it in, or the result of, good, since in that case it would not be good, being mixed in its nature or a cause of evil.’<sup>21</sup>

In chapter 7, he refutes the dualistic view that there are two gods: one good and one evil. Then in chapter 8, he rejoins the biblical narrative and continues to explain the descent of humanity into error, idol-worship, and evil. From that point, he criticizes idolatry from various standpoints, concluding *Against the Heathen* with the only logical conclusion: that human beings must return to the Word of the Father in whose image we were made. This sets Athanasius up for his companion volume: *On the Incarnation of the Word*.

It should be clear from this very brief treatment that Athanasius wants to defend the Christian God from every possible accusation of acting in an evil way, or being evil. Athanasius is absolutely against any view which would make God into the ‘maker of evil also.’ For the bishop of Alexandria, God is only good. Therefore all God’s creative works are good. And all God’s intentions towards humanity are by definition good. Athanasius would eschew any attempt to say, like Calvin did, that God needed, willed, or caused the fall.

### *The Fall into Corruption*

*Second*, what is Athanasius’ understanding of the fall? What is the problem which Jesus, in his atonement, solved? Athanasius negates one possibility. He says, in words that are quite provocative today:

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 2.3

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 3.4

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 4.2

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 7.4, ‘what she is is evidently the product of her own disorder’

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 5.2

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 6.1 – 2



‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?’<sup>22</sup>

This passage is very significant because Athanasius does two things. First, Athanasius asks us to imagine Adam and Eve making a small mistake or committing a small offense against God, each other, or their future children – a raised voice, an inappropriate gesture, an unthankful or wasteful attitude, a fearful self-defense, etc. And he says that if they had done this, ‘repentance would have been well enough,’ because God would have easily forgiven them that. In a day and age where Anselm’s satisfaction theory and Calvin’s penal substitution theory have so colored our view of God that we view any small offense against God as calling forth infinite, unlimited anger from Him, it is startling to find Athanasius casually dismissing it as beneath God. Many have simply not known what to do about this statement other than say that Athanasius must have been wrong. American patristics scholar Donald Fairbairn is an example of many Protestants who are simply shocked at Athanasius’ casual declaration.<sup>23</sup> Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach sidestep this passage in Athanasius altogether. One suspects that they do so because it would completely ruin their attempt to enlist Athanasius into the penal substitution camp.

Unlike Fairbairn, I believe Athanasius was correct. But how do we explain his statement? Why did Athanasius say this? How could so great a theologian – an inspiration for twentieth century theologians Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance, no less – make this statement? Nowhere in his writings does Athanasius explain why God would simply accept repentance for ‘ordinary’ and, presumably, relatively minor trespasses – that is, trespasses not including eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. What was his understanding of the character of God? Can we reproduce his logic?

Athanasius asserted that God being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit conditioned all His actions, and our understanding of all His actions. Typically, scholars of Athanasius position this conviction against the Arian controversy which lowered the status of the Son to be ontologically less than God, and fundamentally different than the Father. In this regard, we understand Athanasius argued for the identity of the Son as being fully God, and fully one with the Father. Athanasius’ reasoning was explicitly soteriological, rooted in biblical and classical definitions of *salvation* and *revelation*. (1) *Salvation* was defined as salvation from our own alienation from God which resulted in corruption and death. God’s solution to this was uniting Himself with human nature in Jesus, that in and through Jesus, human nature might recover by being joined to the life of God, so that we might be partakers of the divine nature (life) by the Spirit (2 Pet.1:4). If the Son were not one with the Father and therefore fully God, then Jesus would not be able to bring about our salvation in that sense. (2) So too *revelation* was biblically and classically defined by Christians as God’s personal self-revelation to us. In Jesus and by the Spirit we have real knowledge of God, and a revelation of the Father (Mt.11:25 – 27; Lk.10:21 – 24; Jn.14:8 – 21; Heb.1:1 – 4). If Jesus were *not* fully divine, however, and merely some super-angelic being, then he would only be revealing himself and not God. God would still rest on the other side of an impenetrable curtain, unknown and unknowable by us, imprisoned by His own transcendence. This is why Athanasius, in his *On the Incarnation*, stresses the reality of God’s salvation of us in chapters 1 – 10, and God’s revelation to us in chapters 11 – 19, all hinged on Christ Jesus being the divine Son of God who took human nature to himself. If God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the Father participates in the presence and work of the Son, by the Spirit. That is, the trinitarian nature of God is a prior condition for how we understand how the divine persons work together and imply each other.

So far so good. I would like to take a step further. The trinitarian nature of God also conditions how we understand God’s attributes. The step Athanasius is making when he says, ‘Had it been a case of a trespass only... repentance would have been well enough,’ is almost certainly a logical deduction made by Athanasius’ organized mind. Athanasius said numerous things about God’s fundamental character. For example, Athanasius names God as being

<sup>22</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 2.8

<sup>23</sup> Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.163.

‘incorporeal and incorruptible, and immortal, needing nothing for any purpose.’<sup>24</sup> He invokes the doctrine of divine simplicity: ‘God is a whole and not a number of parts.’<sup>25</sup> Then, as he considers God’s act of creation and the relationship God has with it, Athanasius says: ‘God is good, or rather is essentially the source of goodness;’<sup>26</sup> ‘God [is] the fountain of wisdom and life.’<sup>27</sup> Most importantly, Athanasius taught that it is more true, accurate, and faithful to name the Father from the Son than to call God ‘Creator’ after the creation:

‘He who names God Maker and Framer and Unoriginate, regards and apprehends things created and made; and he who calls God Father, thereby conceives and contemplates the Son... If they had any concern at all for reverent speaking and the honour due to the Father, it became them rather, and this were better and higher, to acknowledge and call God Father, than to give Him this name. For, in calling God unoriginate, they are, as I said before, calling Him from His works, and as Maker only and Framer, supposing that hence they may signify that the Word is a work after their own pleasure. But that he who calls God Father, signifies Him from the Son being well aware that if there be a Son, of necessity through that Son all things originate were created. And they, when they call Him Unoriginate, name Him only from His works, and know not the Son any more than the Greeks; but he who calls God Father, names Him from the Word; and knowing the Word, he acknowledges Him to be Framer of all, and understands that through Him all things have been made.’<sup>28</sup>

Athanasius recognized that God is eternally and intrinsically Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is Creator as well, but only became Creator at the moment He created the creation. He was not eternally Creator, since it is logically impossible to name God ‘Creator’ before the creation. Thus, it is more functional to name God ‘Creator.’ It is, of course, a true statement. However, it is more personal, perceptive, reverent, and honoring to name God ‘Father’ after the Son. Calling God thus, for Athanasius, means that we are perceiving and loving God for who He truly and eternally is, as He has revealed Himself to us.

I am fairly confident, then, that Athanasius considered how God’s trinitarian nature impacted what we call *attributes* of God versus *activities* of God playing out in the creation, and how we can identify them. In his criticism of the Greek pagan gods, Athanasius insists that activities flow out of attributes. In his words, ‘their deeds must correspond to their natures.’ That is why Zeus and the other Greek gods are both good and evil. That is, they have the character of ordinary men, and not sober ones at that:

‘For their deeds must correspond to their natures, so that at once the actor may be made known by his act, and the action may be ascertainable from his nature. So that just as a man discussing about water and fire, and declaring their action, would not say that water burned and fire cooled, nor, if a man were discoursing about the sun and the earth, would he say the earth gave light, while the sun was sown with herbs and fruits, but if he were to say so would exceed the utmost height of madness, so neither would their writers, and especially the most eminent poet of all, if they really knew that Zeus and the others were gods, invest them with such actions as show them to be not gods, but rather men, and not sober men.’<sup>29</sup>

Another thought experiment can proceed as follows: Even before God created anything else, God was a loving, personal, relational, and other-centered being. Why? How is that possible if no one else existed? Because God is a fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the short phrase ‘God is love’ from 1 John 4:8 takes on the status of declaring God’s essential, eternal, and intrinsic attribute and character, which is arguably what the apostle John perceived and intended to say. Athanasius did not quote 1 John 4:8 in his surviving writings,<sup>30</sup> and seemed reluctant to put to writing many elaborations about the relations between the divine persons. But he was nevertheless accustomed to identifying the Son by calling him the ‘beloved of the Father,’ for example, near the climactic conclusion of *On the Incarnation*.<sup>31</sup> He is comfortable quoting Scriptures

<sup>24</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 22.3; 29:1

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 28.3; elsewhere he asserts, ‘For the Triad, praised, revered, and adored, is one and indivisible and without degrees’ (*On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27*, 6)

<sup>26</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 3.3

<sup>27</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.19

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 1.33

<sup>29</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 16.4

<sup>30</sup> James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) does not find 1 John 4:8 in the corpus of Athanasius

<sup>31</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 52.1

that identify Jesus as ‘the beloved’ or the equivalent.<sup>32</sup>

Hence, Athanasius is attesting to ‘love’ for humanity and ‘goodness’ towards humanity as fundamental to the Triune God because it is fundamental to God’s character and nature *independently of humanity*. In *Against the Heathen*, Athanasius piles up a long string of statements where he says that God is *intrinsically* good. Sometimes he notes how God shows His goodness through the creation.

‘God is *good* and exceeding noble’ (2.2), ‘For God, being *good* and loving to mankind, and caring for the souls made by Him’ (35.1), ‘His Word...proceeds in His *goodness* from the Father as from a *good* Fountain’ (41.1), ‘But the God of all is *good* and exceeding noble by nature, and therefore is kind; for one that is *good* can grudge nothing: for which reason he does not even grudge existence, but desires all to exist, as objects for his loving-kindness’ (41.2), ‘Because He is *good* He guides and settles the whole Creation by His Word’ (41.3), ‘Seeing the power of the Word, we receive a knowledge also of a *good* Father’ (45.2), ‘Being the *good* Offspring of Him that is *good*, and true Son, He is the Father’s Power and Wisdom and Word, not being so by participation, nor as if these qualities were imparted to Him from without... but He is the very Wisdom, very Word, and very own Power of the Father’ (46.8).

His tendency in *On the Incarnation* is to observe how God’s intrinsic goodness is manifested in both creation and redemption, but especially in redemption. The mission of the Son of God to save all humanity from corruption and death reveals God’s goodness.

‘The *good* Father through Him orders all things’ (1.1), ‘what men deride as unseemly, this by His own goodness He clothes with seemliness’ (1.2), ‘He has yet of the loving-kindness and *goodness* of His own Father been manifested to us in a human body for our salvation’ (1.3), ‘For God is *good*, or rather is essentially the source of *goodness*: nor could one that is *good* be niggardly of anything’ (3.3), ‘for what is evil is not, but what is *good* is... [and] they derive their being from God who is’ (4.5), ‘For it were not worthy of God’s *goodness* that the things He had made should waste away... what was God in His *goodness* to do? ... For neglect reveals weakness, and not *goodness* on God’s part... It was, then, out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God’s *goodness*’ (6.5 – 10), ‘this great work was peculiarly suited to God’s *goodness*... much more did God the Word of the all-*good* Father not neglect the race of men’ (10.1), ‘inasmuch as He is *good*, He did not leave them destitute of the knowledge of Himself’ (11.1), ‘being *good*, He gives them a share in His own Image’ (11.3), ‘God’s *goodness* then and loving-kindness being so great’ (12.6), ‘since it were unworthy of the Divine *Goodness* to overlook so grave a matter’ (43.4), ‘by His guidance and *goodness*’ (43.7).

Athanasius says that because God is ‘good,’ that God must be ‘good’ to humanity and ‘the lover of humanity.’<sup>33</sup> Khaled Anatolios concurs:

‘Thus, in Athanasius, God’s goodness and love constitute as much of an ontological statement about God and a description of God’s nature (*physis*) as the apophatic statements that appear to indicate divine inaccessibility to the created realm: God is “good and exceedingly noble by nature. Therefore he is the lover of humanity. The fact that God is *philanthropos* by nature means that his actions are always characterized by that quality, since it is one of Athanasius’s principal maxims that actions must correspond to natures.”<sup>34</sup>

By comparison, we can consider ‘holiness’ or ‘wrath’ to examine if these are fundamental *attributes* of God, or derivative *activities* of God. In *Against the Heathen* and *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius never attributes these particular qualities to God’s very nature or character. Here I rely on Athanasius’ clarity in distinguishing from God as He is eternally in contrast to God as Creator, and his maxim that deeds must correspond to natures. Prior to bringing creation into being, God cannot be considered to be ‘holy’ or ‘wrathful.’ Holiness means ‘set apart from.’ Before God brought other things into existence, from what was God setting Himself apart? Nothing. So, holiness is

<sup>32</sup> For example, in quoting John 3:35, ‘The Father loves the Son’ in *On Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 35.1; *On the Incarnation* 6.5 – 10; 12.6; 43.4

<sup>34</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.41; and on p.47, ‘God’s love and goodness thus constitute the basis within God of all the divine initiatives, from the structure of creation to the event of the incarnation...’



logically impossible and irrelevant prior to creation. By saying that, we are not implying a defect in God. Rather, it is because holiness is a *secondary* quality of God, an *activity* of God towards the creation which flows from God's love. Holiness actually reflects God's loving will to make 'space' for beings other than Himself.

The same logic pertains to God's wrath. Prior to creation, towards what was God 'wrathful?' Nothing. For was there something about which the Father was angry at the Son? Certainly not. So, wrath cannot be considered a fundamental, intrinsic attribute of God. Rather, wrath is not even a secondary order activity directed at the pristine creation, but a *third order* activity of God, for it is directed at the disordered corruption of sin within fallen humanity (and fallen angels). Even given the corruption into sin, God does not direct His wrath at creation per se, and that is why I would understand 'wrath' not as a secondary order activity, but tertiary. It is astonishing that Athanasius never uses the terms 'wrath' and 'anger' in his two-volume magnum opus *Against the Heathen* and *On the Incarnation*. Athanasius was quite capable of telling the biblical story and communicating what he believed to be the essential gospel message without referring to those attributes, qualities, or emotions in God. To a Protestant evangelical mind nurtured on penal substitutionary atonement, that is impossible.

Significantly, Athanasius did not believe that God required the fall of humanity to eventually draw human beings into eternal life:

'For He brought them into His own garden, and gave them a law: so that, if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven; but that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death which was theirs by nature: no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and in corruption.'<sup>35</sup>

For Athanasius, it was actually possible that Adam and Eve and all human beings might not have fallen into corruption. As with Irenaeus, he believed that God was somehow present in the tree of life, and that all human beings prior to the fall were invited to partake of this life of God. Athanasius' emphasis in this passage fell on God's desire for them that they 'kept the grace and remained good... [that] they might still keep the life in paradise...' Put differently, if God empowered His precious image-bearing human beings with freedom to perfect their freedom in love for Him, then God did not logically need the fall. This consistent patristic theme stands in stark contrast with John Calvin's view that God actively willed the fall, and then brought it about:

'God *not only foresaw* the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also *at his own pleasure arranged it*.'<sup>36</sup>

This is because Calvin believed that God's retributive justice was an eternal and intrinsic attribute in God, equal and opposite to His love. If God has two fundamental characteristics, then He must arrange all creation and history and humanity in such a way that He can assuredly demonstrate both of those characteristics. Hence, Calvin believed that God had to cause the fall of humanity, so that some human beings could be damned. The Westminster Confession says that God's glory is the revealing of both His mercy and His justice:

'[Judgment] day is for the manifestation of the glory of *His mercy*, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of *His justice*, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient... the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.'<sup>37</sup>

John Piper also makes this position quite clear. When asked why God required a world in which He sent some

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<sup>35</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 3.4

<sup>36</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, ch.23, section 7. I am aware of attempts to 'nuance' or 'balance' these statements, of course. At the very least, however, the question is whether Christians should feel the need to defend these statements in any sense. See also *Institutes*, book 1, ch.16, section 3; book 1, ch.17, section 5

<sup>37</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 33, paragraph 2. Although Calvin had studied the patristic emphasis on God's empowerment of human free will and their exposition of the biblical texts, he nevertheless decided that God's sovereignty was mutually incompatible with human free will. In *Institutes*, book 2, chapter 2, section 4, Calvin writes, 'Moreover although the Greek Fathers, above others, and especially Chrysostom, have exceeded due bounds in extolling the powers of the human will, yet all ancient theologians, with the exception of Augustine, are so confused, vacillating, and contradictory on this subject, that no certainty can be obtained from their writings.'

people to hell, Piper answers:

‘His goal is that the full range of His perfections be known. I think this is the ultimate goal of the universe. God created the universe so that the full range of His perfections – including wrath and power and judgment and justice – will be displayed.’<sup>38</sup>

For Calvin and his heirs, God required the fall. For Athanasius, God did not. In fact, Athanasius would say that anyone who thought in that way was actually denying that God was a Trinity. For there is simply no logical way the Triune God could have two faces like this. Retributive justice cannot possibly be an equal and opposite attribute of God as His love is. For prior to creation, God could not express retributive justice on anything or anyone, so retributive justice cannot be an eternal divine attribute. More importantly, if God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then He has only one face: that of love – a love which purifies and cleanses, to be sure, but love nonetheless. Since justice must therefore be an activity of God – not an attribute – towards the creation, God’s justice must be an *activity of His love*, and thus God’s justice must be a restorative justice, not a retributive justice. If I am correct, then penal substitution actually negates the doctrine of the Trinity, turning God into a two-faced Janus, and erroneously redefining God’s justice from being restorative to retributive. And, to my knowledge, the early theologians of the first millennium would agree. God’s wrath can only be an *activity* of His love, directed at that which opposes and resists Him. God’s love and God’s wrath cannot be aimed at the same object. God only expresses wrath towards the corruption of sin which His creatures (human and angelic) acquired of their own free will. Therefore, Athanasius serves as a correction to John Calvin, the Westminster divines, and John Piper. The doctrine of penal substitution and its companions – the doctrines of double predestination, divine retributive justice, and limited atonement – *cannot co-exist with the doctrine of the Trinity*.

To substantiate that assertion, I will show how Athanasius understood *what* the fall entailed, and why God decreed that death was the consequence for it. Was not God acting retributively towards Adam and Eve? Not at all. Athanasius recognized that God preferred human death over immortalized sinfulness.

‘For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition...’<sup>39</sup>

In other words, once the corruption of sin had set in to human beings, death was the only way to rid it from us. Athanasius shares this view explicitly with several other patristic writers. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (130 – 202 AD) interpreted death as an act of mercy. Death was better than Adam and Eve eating from the tree of life in a corrupted state and making their own human evil immortal:

‘Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.’<sup>40</sup>

In other words, according to Irenaeus, God was not acting retributively, but restoratively. Nor was Irenaeus alone in this opinion. Methodius, bishop of Olympus (died circa 311 AD), said the same:

‘In order, then, that man might not be an undying or ever-living evil, as would have been the case if sin were dominant within him, as it had sprung up in an immortal body, and was provided with immortal sustenance, God for this cause pronounced him mortal, and clothed him with mortality... For while the body still lives, before it has passed through death, sin must also live with it, as it has its roots concealed within us even though it be externally checked by the wounds inflicted by corrections and warnings... For the present we restrain its sprouts, such as evil imaginations, test any root of bitterness springing up trouble

<sup>38</sup> John Piper, *How Does it Glorify God to Predestine People to Hell?*, March 21, 2013; <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/how-does-it-glorify-god-to-predestine-people-to-hell>

<sup>39</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1

<sup>40</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6

us, not suffering its leaves to unclothe and open into shoots; while the Word, like an axe, cuts at its roots which grow below. But hereafter the very thought of evil will disappear.’<sup>41</sup>

Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 390 AD), a bishop in modern day Turkey, also repeated the idea that God was not retributively punishing Adam and Eve, but already looking to restore them:

‘Yet here too he makes a gain, namely death and the cutting off of sin, in order that evil may not be immortal. Thus, his punishment is changed into a mercy, for it is in mercy, I am persuaded, that God inflicts punishment.’<sup>42</sup>

What is so significant about these early theologians? Irenaeus was led to faith by Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who was himself mentored by the apostle John. This occurred at a time when Asia Minor, including Smyrna, was the intellectual and missionary center of the Christian faith, not least because Paul, Peter, and John all invested enormous time and effort there. Irenaeus was the first to explicitly quote from all four Gospels, and was the first biblical theologian – outside of the apostles – to write extensively. So the likelihood is high that Irenaeus acquired his understanding of Genesis fully intact from the apostle John, and behind John, Jesus himself. Methodius, bishop of Olympus, was a contemporary of the great Origen of Alexandria. Methodius was one of the only church leaders who raised concerns about worrying trends in Origen’s thought. And Gregory, bishop of Nazianzus, was one of the most significant Christians *ever*. The Orthodox church calls him ‘the Theologian’ in appreciation for his thoughtful and precise work in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 AD and the intense fourth century debates with heretics. The Orthodox bestow that title only on two others: the apostle John ‘the Theologian’ and Simeon ‘the New Theologian.’ For these great Christian leaders to corroborate one another explicitly on this issue is weighty.

How were they – including Athanasius – reading Genesis 3? Biblically, they read Adam and Eve as *forcing* God to curtain off the garden and withdraw His presence to some degree. That is a very reasonable interpretation. The fall was more like Adam and Eve trying to lock God out of the house, and trying to go about life on their own, as rebellious young children in a great house. God had made Adam and Eve to bring forth life – both human life and garden life. God would mercifully ensure that they would be able to carry out their original calling, albeit in a limited form. After all, God’s promise of a messianic ‘seed of the woman’ who would redeem human nature and defeat the serpent (Gen.3:14 – 15) depended on their ability to have children. But the sorrows in childbirth and gardening, along with physical death, took hold of humanity because Adam and Eve pushed God, the life-giver, aside. As Adam and Eve tried to bring forth of life, they would therefore have a harder time. So the early Christians read the sorrows of childbirth and gardening in Genesis 3:16 – 19 as *already anticipating* the closing off of the garden in Genesis 3:22 – 24. The sorrows were not a retributive punishment. It was not God playing tit for tat. Rather, the sorrows in life-bearing were God as the life-source being forced by His love to withdraw from His life-bearers. He would not have Adam and Eve suffer a fate worse than death. Anything was better than immortalized sinfulness. Death was a severe mercy, but a mercy nonetheless. It played a positive role in God’s larger plan of restoration.

Many Protestant evangelicals, by contrast, influenced by the penal substitution view, assert that God *retaliated* against Adam and Eve by inflicting death upon them. But was God’s imposition of death a retributive punishment? Was God saying, in effect, ‘You caused me pain, so I will cause you pain’? The earliest Christians did not see it that way because they were firmly rooted in a medical and restorative view of God’s character. The early Christians rejected the view that God’s highest justice was retributive. According to a study by systematic theologian Adonis Vidu, they had retributive models of justice available to them in the Greco-Roman world, and deliberately rejected them.<sup>43</sup> To the early Christians, God’s justice was restorative.

<sup>41</sup> Methodius of Olympus, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5

<sup>42</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 45*

<sup>43</sup> Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014). Vidu states up front that he is sympathetic to penal substitutionary atonement (p.xiii). Unfortunately, Vidu does not engage with Irenaeus and Athanasius (see footnote 6 on p.xvii), and reduces the patristic theory of atonement to the ‘ransom’ theory: Jesus ransomed us from the devil, or perhaps from death. He does not engage with what Jesus was doing to his very own humanity, in the ontological-medical theory. Sadly, Vidu does not seem to engage the full sweep of T.F. Torrance’s work on patristic theology, noting only one comment from Torrance on ‘propitiation’ on p.263. In his final chapter, he absolutizes ‘law’ as the essence of God from the standpoint of a carefully constructed doctrine of the simplicity (indissolubility) of God’s nature. ‘Condemnation of sin,’ too, Adonis reads as part of God’s *simple essence*, which he interprets as happening in the death of Christ. But if Adonis grounds both law, legal condemnation of sin, forensic satisfaction of retribution, and judicial mercy all in the simplicity of God, and none of these actions can be divided from the others, then none of these actions can be partial. The mercy must be the

### *Jesus' Atonement as a Medical Substitution*

Third, I will examine texts that show Athanasius expounding on a medical-ontological understanding of atonement. Having identified 'a subsequent corruption' as the fundamental problem of the fall, Athanasius then goes onto to explain why Jesus is 'the healing of the creation.'<sup>44</sup> Whereas Irenaeus argued to preserve the full humanity of Jesus, Athanasius argued in *On the Incarnation of the Word* to preserve Jesus' full deity. Notably, Athanasius reproduces Irenaeus' ontological-medical substitution atonement theory, even though he was approaching it from the opposite direction, because Christ had to be both fully divine and fully human so that God could unite Himself with humanity in the person of Jesus and overcome the onto-relational problem of corruption and alienation within human nature. Athanasius writes:

'Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.'<sup>45</sup>

This passage is very significant because Athanasius does two things. First, as I discussed earlier, Athanasius distinguishes between lesser 'trespasses' and the 'corruption' of human nature. Athanasius briefly considers God's responses to both human actions. In Athanasius' mind, God's attitude towards the former is not that of a nitpicky moralist who takes infinite offense at every slight. According to Adonis Vidu,<sup>46</sup> Athanasius and his predecessors would have been well aware of Greek and Roman conceptions of authority and justice, so he seems to be intentionally dismissing the view that God's justice is retributive, and by extension the idea that the atonement consists of a satisfaction of divine retributive justice.

Second, Athanasius says that the deep tragedy of the fall lies in the 'subsequent corruption' of humanity, not in God's offended honor or justice. In Athanasius' usage, 'corruption' means more than simply our mortality and eventual death. In his previous chapter, Athanasius also refers to moral, spiritual, and relational corruption as well:

'When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment. Indeed, they had in their sinning surpassed all limits; for, having invented wickedness in the beginning and so involved themselves in death and corruption, they had gone on gradually from bad to worse, not stopping at any one kind of evil, but continually, as with insatiable appetite, devising new kinds of sins. Adulteries and thefts were everywhere, murder and rapine filled the earth, law was disregarded in corruption and injustice, all kinds of iniquities were perpetrated by all, both singly and in common. Cities were warring with cities, nations were rising against nations, and the whole earth was rent with factions and battles, while each strove to outdo the other in wickedness. Even crimes contrary to nature were not unknown, but as the martyr-apostle of Christ says: 'Their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature; and the men also, leaving the natural use of the woman, flamed out in lust towards each other, perpetrating shameless acts with their own sex, and receiving in their own persons the due recompense of their pervertedness.'<sup>47</sup>

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whole, undivided Godhead, as the retribution involves the whole, undivided God. This would lead Adonis logically into universalism. From a biblical studies perspective, the key question remains: Did the original Hebraic context teach any version of penal substitution? To which I would argue it does not.

<sup>44</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 1.4

<sup>45</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 2:8 – 9

<sup>46</sup> Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014) explains the Greek conceptions of justice which Christianity rejected; Vidu, in his case study approach, notes that Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo, one to two generations after Athanasius, argue that God's justice is restorative.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid 1.5

Corruption is an ontological and relational category for Athanasius, reflecting the ontological change and relational opposition to God that humanity acquired from Adam and Eve internalizing rebellion into their very selves, their spiritual *and* physical beings. Notice that corruption for Athanasius is not identical with death – as he separates the two when he says, ‘so involved themselves in death *and* corruption’ – although they are certainly connected. This is important because Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not adequately grasp this distinction; I will comment on that mistake below.

The divine dilemma in the penal substitution theory postulates a conflict between God’s attributes (love and wrath). But in Athanasius, and in the medical substitution theory, the divine dilemma was not internal to *God*, but external to Him and internal to *humanity*. Athanasius says that it was ‘monstrous and unfitting’ for human beings to degenerate spiritually, morally, and physically like this.

‘It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits... It was impossible, therefore, that God should leave man to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself.’<sup>48</sup>

Whereas some aggressive exponents of the penal substitution theory say, perhaps out of sincere theological conviction, and perhaps for dramatic effect to play up God’s act of mercy in Jesus, that God could have let the whole humanity-creation project go to ruin and ultimately to hell (since they also conceive of hell as an eternal prison system), Athanasius would have found that view repulsive. It denigrates God’s love for humanity and goodness to say that God could have sat back and done nothing to save humanity in our fallen state. In Athanasius’ mind, God’s Word *had* to become incarnate in Jesus to bring us the salvation of human nature; He had no choice, given His nature as ‘good’ and ‘lover of humanity.’ God had a choice to create us and rest of creation; He could have chosen not to do that. But once He did, He was committed. He could not have chosen to ignore our fall into sin; that was not a choice open to His loving character.

Penal substitution theory also postulates that the object of God’s love and the object of God’s wrath are identical: our personhood. This is because the primary cultural context for Catholics and Protestants to draw up a model of God is the Latin judicial system of merit and penance, in which punishment must fall on *a person* for his disobedience to the law. I will highlight the significance of this misunderstanding below. The critical distinction Athanasius makes is that the object of God’s love is our personhood and the object of God’s wrath is the corruption in our nature. God’s love and God’s wrath *do not have the same object*. That is why the corruption in Jesus’ own body needed to be got rid of through his death as the very expression of God’s love for us. God’s wrath served God’s love by purging away in Christ all that opposed intimate relationship with God.

‘The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father’s Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For 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. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid 2.6



power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.’<sup>49</sup>

Like Irenaeus (and Paul and John) before him, Athanasius says that God’s resolution to this problem was first to have the Word-Son of God take on human flesh, resist the corruption inherent in human nature since the fall, and overcome it through death and resurrection. Athanasius affirms along with Irenaeus that Jesus lived a sinless life as ‘an offering and sacrifice free from every stain,’ even though he had taken on the same sin-ridden humanity we all have.

Given that the fall entailed human corruption and death, the bishop of Alexandria viewed the resurrection as an essential part of God’s act of salvation, because it was a salvation of human nature by ridding it of its sinful corruption and antagonism.

‘The supreme object of His coming was to bring about the resurrection of the body. This was to be the monument to His victory over death, the assurance to all that He had Himself conquered corruption and that their own bodies also would eventually be incorrupt; and it was in token of that and as a pledge of the future resurrection that He kept His body incorrupt.’<sup>50</sup>

Here is where Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach flatly contradict Athanasius himself and place a heavy emphasis where Athanasius would not. They say:

‘For Athanasius, then, Jesus’ death was the purpose of the incarnation; the immortal Son of God needed to become man to die.’<sup>51</sup>

Failing to grasp Athanasius’ central theological concern that Jesus brought forth a purified, Spirit-imbued, resurrected humanity in his own person, free of the stain of sin’s corruption, they also ignore the corruption of human nature as the central problem God was trying to resolve. Instead, they say that Jesus’ death was God’s way of inverting His own punishment so that, by punishing Jesus with death, death would now serve as the gateway to resurrection:

‘God became man in order to save sinful humanity from the divine curse on creation that is God’s punishment for sin, and Christ accomplished this by enduring and exhausting this curse in our place, as our substitute.’<sup>52</sup>

But Athanasius does not understand the ‘curse’ as an extra punishment Jesus took at his death, as I will show below, but rather his taking on fallen humanity in his incarnation and bearing it all the way until his death, to bear it away through death.<sup>53</sup> Athanasius’ point is not that God wanted to simply bring Jesus under death to satisfy divine retributive justice. Death is not identical with the definition of ‘corruption’ for Athanasius. Corruption, as Athanasius defined it, is not simply our physical mortality. Corruption, for Athanasius, as I have shown above, is a weakening of human nature’s spiritual compass, a twisting and distorting of our original inclination towards God, and a genetic infection within us that leads to moral degeneracy and spiritual resistance to God. Corruption is distinct from simply ‘death’ or ‘mortality.’ Thus, for Jesus to die in our place is an act of joining us in death, of sharing in our whole condition, not an act of diverting an invisible torment from us to him.

Notice that Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach must imply that Jesus’ death was somehow filled with more torment than our death, because of something God was doing to him that He did not do to everyone else. ‘Death’ for Jesus means something other than ‘death’ for us, they would say. Perhaps he descended to hell while on the cross, or after his

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid 2.9

<sup>50</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 4.22

<sup>51</sup> Jeffery, Ovey, Sach, p.172; while it is true that Athanasius says that the cross is the ‘sum of our faith’ (*On the Incarnation* 19.3), and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.77 translates this phrase as the ‘primary reason for the incarnation,’ the significance which Athanasius sees in the cross is the defeat and destruction of the corruption: ‘to turn the corruption to incorruption’ (*On the Incarnation* 20.1). Hence, Athanasius sees the death of Christ as one side of the coin of God’s salvation of human nature, of which the other is his bodily resurrection; mention of one implies and requires the other. Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not see the matter this way.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.173

<sup>53</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #59 to Epictetus of Corinth* 8

last breath? Jeffery, et al, do not specify what it is. But notice that Scripture says nothing of the sort. Peter says that Jesus, after being ‘made alive in the Spirit,’ went to ‘hades’ to visit those who were dead and preach to them (1 Pet.3:19; 4:6). But this certainly does not seem like an additional torment Jesus undertook; it was ministry! Jesus seems to have experienced death in a different way than the rest of us because of his nature as divine-human, but that is different than saying that God did something to Jesus in his death that He does not do to the rest of us. Death is death for each person. Even the scourging of the crucifixion process is minimized by the apostolic writers, because it was not his physical pain that was providing the atonement. For them, as for Athanasius, it was Jesus’ death and resurrection.

By dying, Jesus killed the corruption in his human nature, and by his resurrection and ascension, brought human nature to its full union with God. This is why Athanasius says what Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach simply do not understand: ‘The supreme object of His coming was to bring about *the resurrection of the body*. This was to be the monument to His victory over death, the assurance to all that He had Himself conquered corruption and that their own bodies also would eventually be incorrupt; and it was in token of that and as a pledge of the future resurrection that He kept His body incorrupt.’ God will, therefore, by virtue of Jesus’ resurrection, resurrect all human beings from the dead. All will bow the knee to Jesus whether they like it or not.

Athanasius’ explanation of the atonement, like Irenaeus’, might be called ‘total substitution’ as T.F. Torrance understands it, or ‘ontological substitution’ or ‘medical substitution’ as I prefer, but not ‘penal substitution.’<sup>54</sup> Unquestionably, the Son of God substituted himself totally in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection as ‘a sufficient exchange’ (in Athanasius’ own words) for all human beings, solving the problem internal to humanity: our self-inflicted corruption to sin and death. The exchange was not simply penal, and not simply at the cross. Jesus’ ultimate solution to sin was not to remove the *consequences* of sin (with a strictly retributive conception of the wrath of God) but to deal with the *source*. Jesus offers his renewed, resurrected humanity which has been perfectly realigned with the Father in the Spirit – an ontological and relational solution physically embodied in him. Athanasius clearly did not think in penal terms.

Following Athanasius’ lead, we must not see the atonement as a ‘satisfaction’ of one or more attributes of God. God’s love is not ‘satisfied.’ In the medical-ontological framework, God continues to oppose human sin and pierce with laser sharp focus the corruption within people by His Spirit, so God’s wrath was not ‘satisfied’ in a broad sense pertaining to all humanity or to Christians. In fact, God’s wrath continued to fall on Christians when He took their lives! Ananias and Sapphira lied, and God took their lives (Acts 5:1 – 11). The Corinthian Christians ate communion with an unworthy attitude, and apparently God visited death and sickness upon them (1 Cor.11:29 – 30). Is there divine wrath for which Jesus did not penally atone? Arminians may be able to resort to the explanation that they ‘lost their salvation.’ Some Calvinists insist that these people were never truly Christians to begin with. I am persuaded that although this was not God’s wrath to some sort of ultimate condemnation for these people, it was undeniably God’s wrath nevertheless. Perhaps God was acting in a way similar to a coach pulling underperforming players out of a game. But in any case, because we do not have to throw God’s displeasure and wrath onto another side of a categorical divide on one side of a penal atonement model, this does not cause any deep consternation to anyone who holds to medical substitution. I may be imputing more theological weight behind their words, but I suspect that George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis are commenting on satisfaction theory when Lewis quotes MacDonald saying, ‘God is easy to please, but not easy to satisfy.’<sup>55</sup>

### *The Fire of Hell and Human Becoming*

This brings me to explore a *fourth* area of Athanasius’ theological thought: his understanding of hell. My exploration focuses on whether Athanasius’ understanding of hell corresponds with penal substitutionary atonement theology. Penal substitution requires that hell be understood as the expression of divine retributive justice on those who reject Christ. If Christ died to absorb the retributive justice of God for some, then hell must be understood as the expression of retributive justice of God for the others. This is decidedly not how Athanasius explained hell.

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<sup>54</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.72 says, ‘The New Testament speaks of the penal-substitutionary aspect of the atonement, *not* in the detached forensic categories that have developed in the Latin west, Roman or Protestant, but in terms of the intimacy of the Father-Son relation, in which the Son submits himself to the Father’s judgement and is answered through the Father’s good pleasure – see here the supreme importance of John McLeod Campbell and his great book *The Nature of the Atonement*, in which he rightly warned us against thinking of atonement in *purely penal terms*, for we *cannot* think of Christ being punished by the Father in our place and the New Testament *nowhere* uses the word *kolazo*, punish, of the relation between the Father and the Son.’ (emphasis mine)

<sup>55</sup> George MacDonald, quoted by C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.158

One document I examine is known to scholars as *Letter #3*, also called Athanasius' *Easter Festal Letter of 331 AD*. This was a letter from Athanasius as bishop, sent to all of his presbyters, monks, and congregations in the area of Alexandria. This was the third such letter that he sent since coming into his seat as bishop in 328 AD. Here we find Athanasius in the midst of his pastoral responsibilities.

Consistent with medical substitution atonement theology where Jesus purifies human nature, Athanasius conceives of hell as the purifying love of God, who meets those who eternally resist Him with His implacable purifying love nevertheless. Athanasius does this through a literary and thematic approach to the motif of fire in the biblical narrative. Protestants have traditionally not approached the motif of fire in a literary way. They have instead approached exegesis in a piecemeal fashion. As a result, Protestants tend to make conclusions about hell by taking a text like Revelation 20 – the lake of fire as destroying – separately from Revelation 1, where Jesus is portrayed as the fiery, purifying one, or Revelation 2 – 3, where Jesus offers the church gold purified in fire. Similarly, Protestants tend to take texts in Matthew which speak of hell as a destroying fire (Mt.5:22; 13:40 – 42, 50; 18:8 – 9; 25:41) separately from the texts in Matthew which speak of the Holy Spirit having a ministry of purifying fire (Mt.3:11), or the believer being indwelt by fire, like a lamp (Mt.5:15 – 16; 25:1 – 12).

The significance of one's methodological approach is as follows. In Acts, God frees the apostles from prison three times (Acts 5:19 – 20; 12:6; 16:25 – 26). Should a Christian read Acts and conclude that she should go to Saudi Arabia and preach the Christian message, because God will break her out of prison like He did the apostles in Acts? That would obviously not be a correct interpretation of Acts. And the most straightforward reason is because there are three times in Acts where God did *not* free the apostles or other Christians from prison (Acts 8:3; 12:1 – 2; 23:11 – 28:31)! One must correctly perceive a literary theme in a unit of biblical literature like Acts. And in this case, a reader must take into account both sides of the theme of imprisonment.

The same is true for the literary theme of fire *in every biblical book in which it appears*. As far as I can tell, the Pentateuch,<sup>56</sup> Isaiah,<sup>57</sup> Matthew,<sup>58</sup> Luke-Acts,<sup>59</sup> Hebrews,<sup>60</sup> 2 Peter,<sup>61</sup> and Revelation<sup>62</sup> all use the motif of divine fire to first indicate God's purifying love, and then, only in a secondary sense, as destroying, towards those who resist their own purification. Malachi, the Psalms, and the apostle Paul assume that the language of divine fire should be understood this way (e.g. Mal.1:7 – 12; 3:1 – 6; Ps.12:6; 1 Cor.3:10 – 15; 2 Th.1:9<sup>63</sup>). John in his Gospel works mainly with the motif of light, but that is connected to the theme of fire both logically and literarily through the 'I am' / 'Jesus as burning bush' / 'Jesus as Temple' motif that runs through the Gospel of John; thus John's usage of 'light' in the Gospel anticipates his usage of 'fire' in Revelation. My own perception of fire as a dual-edged literary theme was formed prior to my reading patristic literature. It was shaped by Jewish and Christian literary scholars like Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, James Kugel, John Sailhamer, Paul Borgman, Robert Tannehill, and others. Many of these scholars took up a literary approach to Scripture to make the case for literary cohesion in response the Documentary Hypothesis and the quest for supposed 'sources' which made the final text appear to be a patchwork quilt of disparate pieces of literature. There is far more unity in the texts than we had hitherto understood. So when I encountered the likes of Athanasius and other early Christians saying the following, I was surprised that I was encountering something that could not be considered 'allegory,' which is what the patristic writers are often dismissed for doing. I was also impressed by their ability to perceive the literary quality of Scripture, and how they knew that had profound implications for the discipline of theology proper.

<sup>56</sup> Mako A. Nagasawa, *Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew's Gospel*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness-as-hell.pdf> is an essay exploring fire as a literary theme throughout the canon; for shorter explanations, see Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in the Pentateuch*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/pentateuch-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire and Purification in Isaiah*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/isaiah-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Matthew's Gospel: What is Divine Fire?* <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness.sg.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Luke – Acts*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/luke-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

<sup>60</sup> Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire, Offering, and Cleansing in the Epistle to the Hebrews*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/hebrews-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in Second Peter*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/peter2-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Theme of Fire in the Book of Revelation*; <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/john-revelation-theme-fire.sg.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> The KJV, ASV, YLT, CLNT, Douay-Rheims, and Ronald Knox translations of this verse indicate that fire comes 'in the presence of the Lord,' or 'from' his face, in agreement with all other indications of divine fire in Scripture. Other translations (ESV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NASB) read separation from Jesus into the meaning.

Here is an extended quotation from Athanasius' *Easter Festal Letter of 331 AD*:

'For when a man despises the grace given him; and immediately falls into the cares of the world, he delivers himself over to his lusts; and thus in the time of persecution he is offended, and becomes altogether unfruitful. Now the prophet points out the end of such negligence, saying, 'Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord carelessly [Jeremiah 48:10].' For a servant of the Lord should be diligent and careful, yea, moreover, *burning like a flame*, so that when, by an ardent spirit, he has destroyed all carnal sin, he may be able to draw near to God who, according to the expression of the saints, is called '*a consuming fire* [Exodus 24:17; Deuteronomy 4:26; Hebrews 12:29]'

'Therefore, the God of all, 'Who makes His angels [spirits], is a spirit, 'and His ministers *a flame of fire* [Psalm 104:4; Hebrews 1:7]. Wherefore, in the departure from Egypt, He forbade the multitude to touch the mountain, where God was appointing them the law, because they were not of this character. But He called blessed Moses to it, as being fervent in spirit, and possessing unquenchable grace, saying, 'Let Moses alone draw near [Exodus 24:2].' He entered into the cloud also, and when the mountain was smoking, he was not injured; but rather, through 'the words of the Lord, which are choice silver purified in the earth [Psalm 12:6], *he descended purified*. Therefore the blessed Paul, when desirous that the grace of the Spirit given to us should not grow cold, exhorts, saying, 'Quench not the Spirit [1 Thessalonians 5:19]. For so shall we remain partakers of Christ, if we hold fast to the end the Spirit given at the beginning. For he said, 'Quench not;' not because the Spirit is placed in the power of men, and is able to suffer anything from them; but because bad and unthankful men are such as manifestly wish to quench it, since they, like the impure, persecute the Spirit with unholy deeds. 'For the holy Spirit of discipline will flee deceit, nor dwell in a body that is subject unto sin; but will remove from thoughts that are without understanding [Wisdom 1:5]. Now they being without understanding, and deceitful, and lovers of sin, walk still as in darkness, not having that 'Light which lights every man that comes into the world [John 1:9]. Now a *fire* such as this laid hold of Jeremiah the prophet, when the word was in him *as a fire*, and he said, 'I pass away from every place, and am not able to endure it [Jeremiah 20:9]. And our Lord Jesus Christ, being good and a lover of men, came that He might cast this upon earth, and said, 'And what? Would that it were already kindled [Luke 12:49]!' For He desired, as He testified in Ezekiel, the repentance of a man rather than his death [Ezekiel 18:32]; so that *evil should be entirely consumed in all men, that the soul, being purified, might be able to bring forth fruit*; for the word which is sown by Him will be productive, some thirty, some sixty, some an hundred. [Mark 4:20] Thus, for instance, those who were with Cleopas, although infirm at first from lack of knowledge, yet afterwards were *inflamed* with the words of the Savior, and brought forth the fruits of the knowledge of Him [Luke 24:13 – 34]. The blessed Paul also, when seized by this *fire*, revealed it not to flesh and blood, but having experienced the grace, he became a preacher of the Word [Acts 9]. But not such were those nine lepers who were cleansed from their leprosy, and yet were unthankful to the Lord who healed them [Luke 17:11 – 17]; nor Judas, who obtained the lot of an apostle, and was named a disciple of the Lord, but at last, 'while eating bread with the Savior, lifted up his heel against Him, and became a traitor.' But such men have the due reward of their folly, since their expectation will be vain through their ingratitude; for there is no hope for the ungrateful, *the last fire*, prepared for the devil and his angels, awaits those who have neglected divine light. Such then is the end of the unthankful.'<sup>64</sup>

Athanasius sees God as 'a consuming fire,' as a derivative effect of God being 'light.' Once again Athanasius is organizing who God is in Himself prior to creation, and how God relates with respect to creation, and specifically fallen creation. Light is God's intrinsic nature. Fire is the activity of God, who is light, in the midst of a fallen creation. This corresponds tightly with Athanasius' use of the motif of fire to describe Jesus' purification of his own humanity.<sup>65</sup>

Athanasius then shows that the primary purpose of God showing Himself as a fire is to purify His people, as Moses was purified in his encounter with God on Mount Sinai. God's interaction with people and their willing reception of His word results in a certain type of human experience: the experience of internalizing this divine fire as a passion for God, for preaching, for proclamation as Jeremiah experienced it. Jesus came to cast this purifying fire upon the

<sup>64</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #3: Third Easter Festal Letter* 3 – 4, emphasis mine

<sup>65</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.4; 44.6 – 7

earth, for the purpose of bringing about repentance, and, very notably, ‘that evil should be entirely consumed in all men,’ for the purification of their souls. Purifying the corruption of sin away from people ‘clears the ground’ as it were for the word of God to bring forth fruit. Paul was ‘seized by this fire’ on the Damascus Road – for Jesus appeared in divine light – and became a preacher.

In a secondary sense, for Athanasius, God is also ‘the last fire’ towards ‘such men’ as Judas who are ‘ungrateful’ and ‘unthankful.’ The bishop of Alexandria integrates the motif of fire towards the resistant with the motif of fire towards the repentant. They are indeed two sides of the same coin. For God by His very nature cannot help but to shine – light can do no other – even upon those who do not want the light, and call for the surrender of everyone who has not yet voluntarily participated in their own purification. For those who somehow fix their resistance in place for all eternity, refusing to be thankful for Jesus’ action on their behalf, their ‘end’ will be ‘the last fire’ shared by the devil and his angels.<sup>66</sup>

Athanasius’ younger contemporary on the northern side of the Mediterranean, Ambrose (337 – 394 AD), bishop of Milan, the courageous excommunicator of Emperor Theodosius, wrote and preached on the theme of fire in the same way:

‘And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire [Isaiah 10:17]. So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said [Deuteronomy 4:24]. For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob [Exodus 3:6]. The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin [Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16]. So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention... What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: ‘A fire shall burn in His sight.’ For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints.’<sup>67</sup>

Ambrose’s writings show that very important representatives of the Greek and Latin churches were preaching this way. It attests to the widespread, if not universal, view of the church about hell among its learned. For the church prior to Luther and Calvin, hell was not understood as the retributive justice of God. The entire Eastern Orthodox communion maintains that position. Hell was not an experience of some attribute of God equal and opposite to His love. For there is no such attribute of God called ‘retributive justice.’ Hell is simply the purifying love of God, experienced by those who eternally resist that purification. It is an activity of God’s love, as God in His love continues to call for those who have turned their capacity for love selfward, so that God’s command to that person to love others more than the self becomes utter torment.

One aspect of Athanasius’ thought which I believe needs clarification is his discussion of ‘nothingness’ or ‘non-being.’ In his explanation of creation and fall in *On the Incarnation* chapter 4, Athanasius asserts that since God called humanity out of nothingness, therefore ‘nothingness’ was a ‘natural state’ of humanity:

‘For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to *their natural state*, so that just as they

<sup>66</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Antony* 24 goes even further to explain why the devil and his angels are already experiencing something of that last fire. In his biography of the famous Egyptian monk Antony of the Desert, Athanasius records Antony saying this: ‘For that which appears in them is no true light, but they are rather the preludes and likenesses of the fire prepared for the demons who attempt to terrify men with those flames in which they themselves will be burned. Doubtless they appear; but in a moment disappear again, hurting none of the faithful, but bringing with them the likeness of that fire which is about to receive themselves. Wherefore it is unfitting that we should fear them on account of these things; for through the grace of Christ all their practices are in vain.’

<sup>67</sup> Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170



have had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into *nothing* in the course of time. For if, out of a former normal state of non-existence, they were called into being by the Presence and loving-kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the knowledge of God and were turned back to what was not (for what is evil is not, but what is good is), they should, since they derive their being from God who IS, be everlastingly bereft even of being; in other words, that they should be disintegrated and abide in death and corruption. For man is by nature mortal, inasmuch as he is made out of what is not; but by reason of his likeness to Him that is (and if he still preserved this likeness by keeping Him in his knowledge) he would stay his natural corruption, and remain incorrupt; as Wisdom says: ‘The taking heed to His laws is the assurance of immortality [Wisdom 6:18],’ but being incorrupt, he would live henceforth as God, to which I suppose the divine Scripture refers, when it says: ‘I have said you are gods, and you are all sons of the most Highest; but you die like men, and fall as one of the princes [Psalm 82:6 – 7].’<sup>68</sup>

My discomfort with this statement comes about because I think the language and concept of ‘nothingness’ is a dangerous and inconsistent term for Athanasius to use. In this passage, he speaks of ‘nothingness’ as if it were a real possibility. But in the chapters that follow, Athanasius hastily adds that it is not. Letting humanity sink backwards towards corruption, death, and nothingness was against God’s love, design, and most importantly, goodness. For God to allow this to happen was ‘out of the question’:

‘Again, it were unseemly that creatures once made rational, and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin, and turn again toward non-existence by the way of corruption. For it were not worthy of God’s goodness that the things He had made should waste away, because of the deceit practiced on men by the devil... So, as the rational creatures were wasting and such works in course of ruin, what was God in His goodness to do? Suffer corruption to prevail against them and death to hold them fast? And where were the profit of their having been made, to begin with? For better were they not made, than once made, left to neglect and ruin. For neglect reveals weakness, and not goodness on God’s part— if, that is, He allows His own work to be ruined when once He had made it— more so than if He had never made man at all. For if He had not made them, none could impute weakness; but once He had made them, and created them out of nothing, it were most monstrous for the work to be ruined, and that before the eyes of the Maker. It was, then, *out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God’s goodness.*’<sup>69</sup>

In other words, Athanasius is simultaneously saying that humanity came *from God*, and because we came from God, who is committed to our existence, returning to nothingness was not even logically possible, based on God’s goodness. Returning to ‘nothingness’ as in non-existence is only a hypothetical, and a rhetorical device Athanasius is employing.

Moreover, suggesting that nothingness was a natural state to which humanity had a conscious interest in returning not only reads a strange motivation into Adam and Eve’s stated desire to be like God, it also runs the danger of turning ‘nothingness’ into a ‘thing’ which exerts a pull on all of God’s creation. It would become another kind of dualism, not a substance-oriented dualism which Athanasius vigorously denies in *Against the Heathen* chapter 6, but a privation-oriented dualism.

‘Now certain of the Greeks, having erred from the right way, and not having known Christ, have ascribed to evil a substantive and independent existence. In this they make a double mistake: either in denying the Creator to be maker of all things, if evil had an independent subsistence and being of its own; or again, if they mean that He is maker of all things, they will of necessity admit Him to be maker of evil also. For evil, according to them, is included among existing things. But this must appear paradoxical and impossible. For evil does not come from good, nor is it in, or the result of, good, since in that case it would not be good, being mixed in its nature or a cause of evil.’<sup>70</sup>

In fact, Athanasius views himself as defending a truth he has received. This strict separation of evil from the

<sup>68</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 4.4 – 6

<sup>69</sup> Ibid 6.4 – 5; cf. *Against the Heathen* 41.2 – 4

<sup>70</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 6.1 – 2

character of God was long taught by the church:

‘The truth of the Church’s theology must be manifest: that evil has not from the beginning been with God or in God, nor has any substantive existence; but that men, in default of the vision of good, began to devise and imagine for themselves what was not, after their own pleasure.’<sup>71</sup>

Since Athanasius says that good must not be ‘mixed in its nature’ with evil, categorically, he must also say that human beings, who are created good, must not be ‘mixed in their human nature’ with evil. That also translates into saying that human nature must be created good and not ‘mixed in its nature’ with nothingness. Therefore, Athanasius’ statement in *On the Incarnation* 4 about human beings returning to their ‘natural state’ or ‘normal state’ needs to be understood as a rhetorical slip, or otherwise modified. Athanasius will shortly declare on the basis of the goodness of God that death is *not* ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ for human beings. So Athanasius is confusing categories and falling into a logical conundrum when he says that *non-existence* is ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ for humanity. How can non-existence be the natural state of something that exists?

Khaled Anatolios interprets Athanasius as intending to say, ‘The essential principle is that there is no neutral mid-point in which humanity can “remain.” The two fundamental ontological polarities are either God-ward or toward non-being.’<sup>72</sup> I agree with the basic premise that humanity was not called to rest in a neutral state but rather ascend towards God and deepen in God. That is consistent with Athanasius’ theological anthropology which seems identical with Irenaeus, which Anatolios is at pains to prove, and which I deeply appreciate. To the extent that we understand ‘nothingness’ to be a state to which human beings can never actually return, but only approximate in our resistance to God (*toward* non-being), I can agree with Anatolios’ statement as it is.

However, in order to be absolutely clear that we are not taking Athanasius’ rhetoric and giving ‘nothingness’ ontological status, I would recommend replacing the word and concept of ‘non-being’ with the word and concept of ‘disorder.’ For ‘disorder’ is what is implied by Athanasius’ use of the term ‘corruption.’ He makes that explicit very early on in *Against the Heathen* by describing the impact sinning has on the human soul: ‘what she is is evidently the product of her own *disorder*.’<sup>73</sup> The word ‘disorder’ fits both the narrative of Genesis and the technical theological terminology as the Nicene theologians developed it. Biblically, God commissioned human beings to bring forth *order* in the creation, by spreading the *ordered* garden over the wild creation through the four rivers which flowed out from Eden. This external work mirrored the internal work of *ordering* our understanding of God’s goodness, *ordering* one’s loves in accordance with the relational vision God had from creation (e.g. the one flesh marriage union of male and female taking priority over family of origin; etc.), *ordering* one’s own emotional life according to God’s counsel and guidance, and ultimately *ordering* one’s human nature and fundamental love for God into an eternal union with God via eating from the tree of life. God, the one who *orders* creation towards life and beauty, made human beings as partners with Him in the work of *ordering* creation towards life and beauty.

Using the technical Nicene terminology of the fourth century, we can say this: Since we are *created beings* destined for an eternal existence with God, yet also *co-creators* since we are made in the image of a God who creates, we participate in the final *ordering* of our own created human nature (*physis*), in a divine-human partnership of co-creation. Thus, our ordering of ourselves can become a *disorder*. To *disorder* our capacity for love by prioritizing self-love first and foremost, to *disorder* our understanding of good and evil out of conformity with God’s own definitions of good and evil, and to become so *disordered* that God’s love becomes fiery torment – that is the awesome and awful choice that human beings are called to reject as co-creators with God of our own human nature. If we call that unwanted condition ‘*reaching* towards, while never actually arriving at ‘nothingness,’ understood as an attempt to be free from God while never being able to,’ that is acceptable to me. But *disorder* seems the most appropriate word to correlate with ‘corruption,’ with which to indicate the negative ontological pole to which Athanasius refers. Having a ‘disordered human nature’ by one’s own choice seems to be the best – and only – explanation which avoids both a substance-dualism and also a privation-dualism. And that rounds out my understanding of how to best articulate the medical substitutionary view of atonement and all its ramifications for how we approach the topics of good and evil, human nature, and the goodness of God.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid 7.3

<sup>72</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.37

<sup>73</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 7.4

### *Objection 1: Penal Substitution in Athanasius?*

I want to consider specific objections to this understanding of Athanasius. What do penal substitution supporters say about him? Reformed theologian Peter J. Leithart notes that Athanasius speaks of a ‘debt’ which needed to be paid. In his discussion on the nature of salvation, in the first section of *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius says:

‘For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all *satisfied the debt by His death*.’<sup>74</sup>

Penal substitution advocates like Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach enlist this language of ‘satisfaction’ from Athanasius. By inflicting death on human beings, is not God satisfying His own need to punish sin? And by sending Jesus to die on the cross, is not God exhausting that punishment, at least for some? The three authors say:

‘At one point, while alluding to the apostle John’s explanation of why Christ came into the world in John 3:17, he states that Christ (‘the Word’) accomplished our salvation by suffering the judgment due to the guilty world: ‘Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all’ [quoting from Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1, chapter 8, paragraph 60]. This is a straightforward statement of the doctrine of penal substitution. According to Athanasius, the whole world is guilty of failing to keep God’s law, but Christ took upon himself the judgment due to us, and suffered in our place for our salvation.’<sup>75</sup>

These three authors believe that Athanasius held up human ‘guilt’ was the problem as God saw it, that the Sinai Law both measured and called down penal judgment for that guilt, that Jesus took the divine penal judgment that would have otherwise been placed by God on human beings, and that this deflection of punishment constitutes ‘salvation.’ But if this is true, then why do human beings still die? For if Jesus absorbed all the punishment which God meted out on account of human lawbreaking, then followers of Jesus should no longer physically die.

Notice that in penal substitution, the penalty and the underlying ‘debt owed’ must be transferred from human beings *over to Jesus*, so that we as human beings no longer have to pay the debt ourselves. Athanasius does not speak that way. The full context of what he says involves every human being owing to God *their own death*. Each human being *including Jesus as a human being* owes God their own death, because death is the necessary prerequisite for us to be rid of the corruption. Death is not sufficient in itself, says Athanasius, because we must choose to participate in the work of the Son of God on our behalf. But death is nevertheless required:

‘For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition, while it was impossible for the Word to suffer death, being immortal, and Son of the Father; to this end He takes to Himself a body capable of death, that it, by partaking of the Word Who is above all, might be worthy to die in the stead of all, and might, because of the Word which had come to dwell in it, remain incorruptible, and that thenceforth corruption might be stayed from all by the Grace of the Resurrection. Whence, by offering unto death the body He Himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all His peers by the offering of an equivalent. For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all *satisfied the debt by His death*. And thus He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the promise of the resurrection. For the actual corruption in death has no longer holding-ground against men, by reason of the Word, which by His one body has come to dwell among them. And like as when a great king has entered into some large city and taken up his abode in one of the houses there, such city is at all events held worthy of high honour, nor does any enemy or bandit any longer descend upon it and subject it; but, on the contrary, it is thought entitled to all care, because of the king’s having taken up his residence in a single house there: so, too, has it been with the Monarch of all. For now that He has come to our realm, and taken up his abode in one body among His peers, henceforth the whole conspiracy of the enemy against mankind is checked, and the corruption of death which before was prevailing against them is done away. For the race of men had gone to ruin, had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to meet the

<sup>74</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1 – 2

<sup>75</sup> Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, p.169

end of death.’<sup>76</sup>

Jesus’ human body was the ‘body capable of death.’ What is the debt that Jesus satisfied? To die, and to do so *as a dying being*. Previously in *On the Incarnation*, when he first brought up the topic of the fall in Genesis 3, Athanasius spoke of God saying, ‘dying you will die.’ Interestingly enough, Athanasius shows that he understands the Hebrew construction of the phrase, even though he admits elsewhere to not knowing the Hebrew language *per se*. Regardless, Athanasius shows his awareness that the formal Hebrew grammatical construction of God’s warning in Genesis 2:17 is the ongoing progressive tense plus the future tense: ‘dying you will die.’<sup>77</sup> This understanding serves Athanasius through his book when he notes that Jesus, too, was ‘mortal.’<sup>78</sup> Jesus had to take on a *dying* human nature, and die in it. If ‘dying you will die’ is the condition of every human being, then Jesus had to live under that condition, too: dying, he would die.

Later in *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius says that Jesus ‘could not *but* die’:

‘For if He took a body to Himself at all, and—in reasonable consistency, as our argument showed—appropriated it as His own, what was the Lord to do with it? Or what should be the end of the body when the Word had once descended upon it? For it could not *but* die, inasmuch as *it was mortal*, and to be offered unto death on behalf of all: for which purpose it was that the Savior fashioned it for Himself.’<sup>79</sup>

Only in this way would God’s pronouncement in the garden about the consequences of the fall be strictly true. Can God lie? No, Athanasius avers in the chapter just prior to the quotation above. It cannot be:

‘But just as this consequence must needs hold, so, too, on the other side the just claims of God lie against it: that God should appear true to the law He had laid down concerning death. For it were monstrous for God, the Father of truth, to appear a liar for our profit and preservation.’<sup>80</sup>

The same reality which held true for humanity also held true for Jesus, as a matter of the truthfulness and consistency of God. For the Word of God to come into human flesh, He had to take on dying, mortal, fallen humanity which owed a debt to God – ‘to maintain intact the just claim of the Father upon all’<sup>81</sup> – and so to die.

This is even more apparent in *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.66 – 67, where Athanasius says that, to correct the ‘imperfection’ which has set into human nature from the fall,

‘The perfect Word of God puts around Him an imperfect body, and is said to be created ‘for the works;’ that, paying the debt in our stead, he might, by Himself, perfect what was wanting to man.’<sup>82</sup>

The bishop does not say ‘suffer what was due man,’ as if some amount of pain constituted the ‘debt.’ Rather, he says, ‘perfect what was wanting’ constituting the healing of human nature including death in a godly way which only He could live out. Therefore Athanasius says that the one who spoke Genesis 3:19 is also the one to live under it and pass through it to the other side:

‘The proper Word and Image of the Father’s Essence, who at the beginning sentenced, and alone remits sins. For since it is said in the Word, ‘Dust you are, and unto dust you shall return,’ suitably through the Word Himself and in Him the freedom and the undoing of the condemnation has come to pass.’<sup>83</sup>

With that understanding in place, we are in a better position to read the full context of Athanasius’ statement from which Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach believe they have found, in their words, ‘a straightforward statement of the doctrine of penal substitution’:

<sup>76</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8

<sup>77</sup> Ibid 3.5

<sup>78</sup> Ibid 13.9; 17.7; 20:1, 4 (‘yet being mortal, was to die also, conformably to its peers’); 23.2; 31.4; 44:6, 8

<sup>79</sup> Ibid 31.4

<sup>80</sup> Ibid 7.1

<sup>81</sup> Ibid 7.5

<sup>82</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.66

<sup>83</sup> Ibid 2.67

‘Moreover the words ‘He is become surety’ denote the pledge in our behalf which He has provided. For as, being the ‘Word,’ He ‘became flesh [John 1:14]’ and ‘become’ we ascribe to the flesh, for it is originated and created, so do we here the expression ‘He is become,’ expounding it according to a second sense, viz. because He has become man. And let these contentious men know, that they fail in this their perverse purpose; let them know that Paul does not signify that His essence has become, knowing, as he did, that He is Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father; but here too he refers the word ‘become’ to the ministry of that covenant, in which death which once ruled is abolished. Since here also the ministry through Him has become better, in that ‘what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh [Romans 8:3],’ ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind. And having rendered the flesh capable of the Word, He made us walk, no longer according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit, and say again and again, ‘But we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit [Romans 8:9],’ and, ‘For the Son of God came into the world, not to judge the world, but to redeem all men, and that the world might be saved through Him [John 3:17].’ Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all. With a view to this has John exclaimed, ‘The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ [John 1:17].’ Better is grace than the Law, and truth than the shadow.’<sup>84</sup>

In this passage, Athanasius actually provides the substance of the medical, not penal, substitutionary atonement. He distinguishes between who the Word of God ‘is’ as ‘Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father,’ and who the Word ‘became’ in ‘a second sense’ as ‘man’ and even ‘flesh.’ Athanasius prepares his audience to understand Paul’s pivotal statement in Romans 8:3, where Paul says that God’s own Son came in the likeness of sinful flesh. The implication of Athanasius’ prefatory remarks is that Jesus ‘is’ the Word of God who ‘became’ sinful flesh at his conception without changing who he ‘is.’

In fact, who ‘he is’ changed what ‘he became.’ Jesus condemned sin in the flesh, not simply at his death, but by his lifelong obedience which was inseparable from his death. We can be confident Athanasius had the lifelong obedience of Jesus in view because he refers to ‘the ministry through him’ and because he deploys the quotation of Romans 8:3 about the *positive*, guiding, and helping role of the Sinai Law. If the first purpose of the Sinai Law was simply to condemn Israel for its disobedience, then Paul and Athanasius really should have said, ‘What the Law *did* in that it was *strong against* the flesh of Israel...’ But Paul and Athanasius are reading the role of the Sinai Law positively, not negatively. Their reading of the Law is that God gave it to Israel to assist them in condemning sin in themselves. In other words, the Sinai Law served a medical purpose, something more like a health regimen given by a caring doctor to a sick patient. The doctor intends the regimen to help the patient *over a long stretch of time*. Only in a secondary sense, given the sick condition of the patient who is unable to fully live within the regimen, does the Sinai Law further expose the sickness in the patient.

Thus, Jesus’ lifelong obedience *as an Israelite* was necessarily guided by and measured against ‘the Law’ of the Sinai covenant, for he substituted himself in for Israel. Jesus ‘is’ the doctor who ‘became’ one of his sick patients in order to live fully within his own health regimen, heal the sick human nature he had taken to himself, and become the source of salvation. ‘Salvation’ here is defined fundamentally as his healed new humanity fully united with his own divine nature in the power of the Spirit.

Jesus’ goal – which he achieved – for his ‘sinful flesh’ was ‘ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind.’ In Athanasius’ usage, ‘the trespass’ presented not a forensic problem but an ontological one, embedded as it was in human nature. It was the corruption of human nature which was inherited by every human being from Adam and Eve. The word ‘trespass’ is not a shorthand way of referring to whatever long list of ‘trespasses’ committed by every single person, kept on a ledger in the mind of God. Rather, Athanasius is referring to the primal ‘trespass’: the original defacing and corruption of our pristine human nature as God created it. Athanasius indicates this by referring to the fact that human nature was ‘continually held captive’ to the trespass. The sinful condition even reached into our minds, in that we ‘admitted not the Divine mind.’ We bear a relational resistance to God which affects the qualities of human existence, showing forth in both our moral inconsistency and our alienation to a life dynamically led by the Spirit. Significantly, as Athanasius describes how

<sup>84</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.60



Jesus undid this in his own humanity, he says that Jesus' ministry as a human being acting upon his own human nature 'rendered the flesh capable of the Word' and 'made us walk...according to the Spirit.'

By speaking this way, Athanasius shows that he regards 'the trespass' as an intrusion upon human nature. We laid claim to something upon which God Himself laid claim: ourselves. And that is where the damage occurred. That is also the problem which God, as the loving creator, had to resolve. Often, in penal substitution, one gets the distinct impression that God cares more about His commandments than He cares about human beings. I regard this as not accidental: It is part of the necessary rhetoric inherent in a penal substitution framework which requires its advocates to prioritize God's commandments above God's creation. Penal substitution requires that God look upon our breaking of His commandments as damaging Himself and detracting from Himself, rather than as damaging ourselves and detracting from ourselves as God's beloved creation. But to the bishop of Alexandria, suggesting that God cares about His commandments more than He cares about humanity would be an utterly foreign thought.

In the idiom of the Hebrew Scriptures, God gives His commandments *for the sake of His creation*, and *for the sake of human development*. In the Jewish wisdom tradition, in particular, God's commandments are perfectly appropriate to God's creation, especially human beings.<sup>85</sup> This is perhaps clearest in Proverbs 8:22 – 36. God's 'Wisdom' participated in God's creative acts and wove herself throughout the creation. Therefore, 'Wisdom' personified, who is present in God's commandments towards Israel can say, 'He who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD. But he who sins against me injures himself; all those who hate me love death' (Pr.8:35 – 36). In other words, God cares about His commandments *because* He cares for His creation, especially us. And the deep tragedy of all sin, but especially the original corruption, is that we deface ourselves. And, perhaps most importantly, the apostle Paul described his experience as a pre-Christian Jew 'under the Law' as conceptually separating his fundamental 'self,' which wanted to honor God and the Law, from 'the sin which indwelt' him, which he called 'the flesh,' which had taken him captive as a prisoner in his own body (Romans 7:14 – 25). Notice this is the language of captivity Athanasius uses in the passage above. It shows that Athanasius' mind reposes on Romans 7:14 – 8:11 as a whole unit when he quotes Romans 8:3 and 8:9 explicitly, and explains why Jesus himself had to come in sinful flesh.

So when Athanasius says, 'Formerly the world, as guilty, was under judgment from the Law; but now the Word has taken on Himself the judgment, and having suffered in the body for all, has bestowed salvation to all,' we cannot read him as supporting the penal substitution view as Jeffery, Owen, and Sach propose. In context, everything Athanasius is saying points to the medical activity of Jesus in his own person, which he had to undertake to solve an ontological problem which had set in to human nature. Human beings were 'guilty' of obstructing God's *love*, by damaging our own human nature and God's intention for humanity to be voluntary conduits of God's love, not for damaging God's sense of honor, holiness, and/or retributive justice. Israel was 'under judgment from the Law' in the sense of failing to return their human nature back to God 'circumcised' (Dt.10:16), which is precisely what the Sinai Law was intended to assist the Israelites to do. But it was not that God gave the Sinai Law to Israel so that the Law (and God) would be Israel's adversary. 'The Word has taken on Himself the judgment' in the sense that the judgment of God was contained and implied in the positive carrying out of the Law, in its judgment upon sin. That is why Athanasius follows the apostle Paul in saying that Jesus condemned sin in his own flesh when he followed the Law (Rom.8:3). Jesus 'suffered in the body for all [and] has bestowed salvation to all' not in the sense of turning aside some kind of retributive justice of God which loomed over our heads, but in the sense of medically carrying out upon his own human nature, and within his own human nature, the good will of our divine healer. And finally, 'salvation' must be defined as God's healing and recovery of human nature from death, by the divine Son in his own person. It is as much a claim upon 'all' as it is 'bestowed' as a gift 'to all,' and not simply 'the elect,' which is what penal substitution logically requires. In this passage's context, and in its every detail, Athanasius does not support Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach's project of advocating penal substitution. Instead, he gives us a straightforward statement of medical substitution.

Fellow penal substitution supporter Peter Leithart confesses his inability to find penal substitution in Athanasius:

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<sup>85</sup> Even in our sinful fallenness, the image of God in which we are created is not entirely eradicated. This is why, prior to the arrival of Christ, the Psalmists can say that, while our hearts are certainly corrupt and need remaking (e.g. Ps.51:9 – 10), nevertheless our hearts still rejoice in the law of the Lord (e.g. Ps.19:8). The poetic Psalmists also deploy images where the Israelite who meditates on the law of the Lord is like a tree nourished by life-giving waters (e.g. Ps.1:2 – 3).

'How does the cross achieve this [i.e. our liberation from sin, death, and the devil]? Athanasius' answer to that question does not easily fit into the traditional categories of atonement theology. He certainly sees Jesus as a representative of the human race and as a substitute for Adamic humanity. Yet he does not express this in terms of Jesus vicariously receiving the punishment we deserve. Instead, he tends to think in liturgical categories. Seeing that humanity was under the dominion of death, the Son was full of pity and compassion and so took on a body. His body was like all human bodies mortal and so he too "surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered to the Father" (*On the Incarnation* 8). Like a king who comes to the rescue of a city that has been attacked by robbers, the Son "by the offering of His own body...abolished the death which they had incurred, and corrected their neglect by His own teaching" (*On the Incarnation* 10)... The Son, we might say, seizes humanity in the incarnation and in the cross entices it towards the heavenly sanctuary to worship the Father.<sup>86</sup>

Leithart's statement that Athanasius' atonement theology does not fit into traditional categories comes from a Protestant evangelical perspective. Evangelicals tend to be familiar with only three main 'atonement theories': penal substitution, moral exemplar, and *christus victor*. One might include Anselm's satisfaction of divine honor theory, Grotius' governmental theory, and others, I suppose. But Leithart seems unfamiliar with the patristic doctrine of atonement. Thus, he continues by sharing his perplexity that Athanasius does not deploy the language of 'debt' in a penal substitution sense:

At times Athanasius explains the cross in terms of debt. The Son "assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all" (*On the Incarnation* 9). All men owe a debt of death: "All men were due to die," and the Word came in mortal flesh in order to "settle man's account with death and free him from the primal transgression." Because the Word's body was capable of death, he offered it in death, but because it was the body of the incorruptible *Word*, it could not remain in corruption. Thus "it happened that two opposite marvels took place at one: the death of all was consummated in the Lord's body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished." Death was unavoidable "that the due of all might be paid" (*On the Incarnation* 20).<sup>87</sup>

In the penal substitution theory, God cannot categorically 'pay out' the punishment for sin twice, because that would amount to a double accounting problem. That is, if God poured out His retributive justice upon Jesus at the cross, and then poured it out again in hell upon those who resist Jesus, that gives rise to the double accounting problem. That is why physical 'death' is a logical problem for penal substitution supporters, because all human beings obviously still die. The problem might be conceptually avoided by saying that physical death only prefigures eternal death, and that Jesus absorbed the punishment of *eternal* death. But when we read Athanasius' statements, he clearly intends his audience to consider the significance of physical death.

Leithart's difficulty in interpreting this language of 'debt' in Athanasius appears related to his assumption that 'death' serves God as a strictly punitive measure. What Leithart does not perceive is that Athanasius and the patristic theologians use the word 'death' as a shorthand for the undoing of sin's corruption, a positive responsibility shared by every human being by God's design. Based on the literary evidence, this tradition among Christian appears to be unanimous. As I showed above, it is attested to by Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century, Methodius of Olympus in the third, Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth.<sup>88</sup> Despite being an enemy and a tyrant, physical 'death' to these bishop-theologians serves at least one positive, constructive purpose: fulfilling our 'debt' to put to death the corruption of sin in our own bodies. Death prevents human beings from immortalizing evil in themselves. That is why God exiled Adam and Eve from the tree of life. It was, in fact, an imposition Adam and Eve placed *on God* because of God's love for them. Based on the literary evidence from those patristic writers who comment on Genesis 3, this tradition among Christian also appears to be unanimous. Therefore, contrary to what Leithart seems to assume, God did not invent death as an additional retributive punishment for the fall, which under penal substitutionary logic would have to be deflected from us by Christ, but rather named it as a reality inherent to Adam and Eve's choice to corrupt their own human nature, with the

<sup>86</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.154 – 155

<sup>87</sup> Ibid p.155

<sup>88</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6; Methodius of Olympus (died circa 311 AD), *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, Part 1.4 – 5; Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 8.1 – 2; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 45

constructive purpose being a check on the corruption of human sin.

Keeping that interpretation before us, I will briefly reexamine one of the passages Leithart cites, chapter 8 of *On the Incarnation*, placing explanatory comments in brackets. I believe the comments show how readily the medical substitutionary atonement model fits not only the semantics of Athanasius' language, but the larger and deeper structure of Athanasius' thought.

'But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again: for, as I have already said, it was owing that all should die [*because each person still needs to put to death the corruption of sin in his or her own body, so that sin would not be immortalized*], for which especial cause, indeed, he came among us [*vicariously for us and on our behalf*]: to this intent, after the proofs of his Godhead from his works, he next offered up his sacrifice also on behalf of all, yielding his temple [*that is, his body*] to death in the stead of all, in order firstly to make men quit and free of their old trespass [*which is not the inherited guilt but the inherited corruption from Adam and Eve*], and further to show himself more powerful even than death, displaying his own body incorruptible, as first-fruits of the resurrection of all... And so it was that two marvels came to pass at one, that the death of all was accomplished in the Lord's body, and that death and corruption were wholly done away by reason of the Word that was united with it. For there was need of death, and death must needs be suffered on behalf of all [*rather than deflected from all*], that the debt owing from all [*to return our human nature back to God healed and intact*] might be paid.'<sup>89</sup>

#### *Objection 2: The Unfallenness View of the Incarnation*

Having considered the arguments of penal substitution supporters over the theology of Athanasius, let me now come at his body of thought from another angle. I now return in more depth to the argument of Eastern Orthodox priest Emmanuel Hatzidakis, who I examined in regards to Irenaeus, above. Hatzidakis argues that Jesus assumed a pre-fallen Adamic humanity, because he must have cleansed his humanity of the corruption of sin at conception rather than throughout his lifelong obedience including his death on the cross. He argues that this view was the 'consensus patrum,' the consensus of the fathers.<sup>90</sup> Hatzidakis says that the Alexandrian, in particular,

'is clear that what is mortal, upon its assumption by the divine Word was deified and rendered immortal. There was no time during which Christ was subject to death. So if He dies in His humanity, He does not die by necessity, but by embracing mortality voluntarily.'<sup>91</sup>

As evidence, Hatzidakis quotes passages in Athanasius which refer to the effect of the resurrection upon Jesus' human nature, and assigns them instead to his conception. So Hatzidakis holds that Jesus' humanity was deified, rendered immortal, not held under death, and so on, from the first point of Jesus' incarnation.<sup>92</sup> How can we be confident that Athanasius believed Jesus took a fallen human nature at his conception?

Hatzidakis appears to be reading all the patristic fathers through the lens of John of Damascus (c.675 – 749 AD), who is considered by some to have written a summary of unanimous church teaching up to that point.<sup>93</sup> That is precisely the subject I and others debate. By the time of John of Damascus, Hatzidakis' particular view of Jesus' humanity had become standard among the writing theologians – that much is true. That trend was evidenced most strongly in Roman North Africa with Tertullian and Augustine, and seemed somewhat more appealing to the Latin tradition rather than the Greek, as Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian espouse it, although Ambrose of Milan and the Ambrosiaster attest to the older view. Nevertheless the shift happened in the Greek East as well. I suspect that this shift about *how* exactly Jesus cleansed the corruption of sin out of his human nature was tolerated because it did not denigrate Jesus' humanity or his divinity. It was still a variation on the medical substitutionary atonement. The shift seems driven by various factors: a concern to protect Jesus' sinlessness in his divine person from the very

<sup>89</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 20

<sup>90</sup> Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *Jesus: Fallen? The Human Nature of Christ Examined from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Clearwater, FL: Orthodox Witness, 2013), p.215

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p.214

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, p.218 – 221 citing Athanasius, Discourse Against the Arians 1.11; On the Incarnation 21.4; 22.3; 31.4; Against Apollinaris 10.18

<sup>93</sup> John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Christian Faith* 3.27 said, 'Since our Lord Jesus Christ as without sin...He was not subject to death, since death came into the world through sin. He dies, therefore, because He took on Himself death on our behalf, and He makes Himself an offering to the Father for our sakes.' John uses the language of the sacrificial 'offering' while taking away its substance; the sacrifice at the sanctuary was designed to be the vehicle by which the expiation of sin occurs, which is taught in Leviticus and Hebrews.

negative view of human sexuality which became common; a concern to protect the unchanging nature of God ('impassibility') from the apparent instability of Jesus' human emotion, suffering, and 'passion' (*pathos* was difficult to define in Greek usage), and linguistic ambiguities about when 'sin' in the biblical text and the pre-Nicene fathers referred to the corrupt condition of one's human nature or actions which incurred guilt in one's person.

But the shift introduced confusion, for example, about the significance of the 'become cursed' language of Galatians 3:13 or 'became sin' language of 2 Corinthians 5:21. For what could possibly be 'cursed' or 'sin-soaked' about pre-fallen Adamic humanity? Those passages had to be reassigned to Jesus' death. Christians then imagined Jesus undergoing at his death some kind of punitive experience extrinsic and external to his person. In addition, it diminished the pastoral significance of Jesus' humanity and temptation experience as a point of encouragement and counsel to other human beings. That is, the emotional significance of the doctrine of the mediation of Christ was dampened. Ordinary Christians in the pew, who were told that Jesus did not share in the experience of being a fallen human being, could only look to saints and priests to fill the emotional vacuum.

So what is the evidence I adduce from Athanasius in favor of Jesus' humanity being progressively, rather than instantaneously, cleansed? My exploration above of our 'debt' as 'a debt owed to God to die' shared by all humanity after the fall – including Jesus as a human being – is one data point in support of this view. Another data point would be Athanasius' insistence on using the biblical term 'flesh' (*sarx*) in its Pauline and Johannine sense as indicating the disordered corruption of sin throughout both soul and body (Rom.7:14, 21; Jn.1:14), rather than only the terms 'body' (*soma*) or 'humanity' (*anthropos*) as was more common, but that undertaking would be too massive for this essay. Instead, I cite five more passages in Athanasius' corpus, significant for their language and logic.

The first piece of evidence that Athanasius believed the Word assumed a fallen human nature is found in one of his letters to another bishop. In a letter to Epictetus, bishop of Corinth, whose congregation was mired in questions about the nature of Jesus' humanity, Athanasius argues this time not for Jesus' divinity as he was customarily called upon to do, but for his full humanity. This letter is now known as Athanasius' *Letter #59 to Epictetus of Corinth*. In it, quite remarkably, Athanasius ties Paul's statement of Jesus 'becoming a curse for us' from Galatians 3:13, not to Jesus' crucifixion or death, but to his 'becoming flesh' in the incarnation according to John 1:14:

'For what John said, 'The Word was made flesh [John 1:14],' has this meaning, as we may see by a similar passage; for it is written in Paul: 'Christ has become a curse for us [Galatians 3:13].' And just as He has not Himself become a curse, but is said to have done so because He took upon Him the curse on our behalf, so also He has become flesh not by being changed into flesh, but because He assumed on our behalf living flesh, and has become Man.'<sup>94</sup>

Athanasius demonstrates continuity with the patristic writers before him, that Jesus took on fallen – and therefore, cursed – humanity. Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, as part of an argument that Jesus and Christ were not two separate beings but one, also quoted Galatians 3:13 in connection with Jesus taking human nature,<sup>95</sup> but Athanasius' use of language narrows to make a tighter and stronger identification with the incarnation. Like Justin Martyr, Athanasius reads Paul's use of 'curse' language as describing humanity's current sinful existence *identified and diagnosed* by the cross because of its connection to the tree of Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23, not an extra punishment occurring at Jesus' death.<sup>96</sup>

Athanasius' *Letter* played a significant role in further theological developments in Christology. Critiquing Apollinarianism (the view that the Word assumed a human body but took the place of a human soul, thereby displacing it and leaving it unsaved), Epiphanius of Salamis (d.403 AD) quotes this *Letter* in his work *Panarion*, later titled *Against Heresies* (77:3 – 13), and attaches it in its entirety. Cyril of Alexandria (376 – 444 AD) read this *Letter* at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD in his debates with Nestorius over Christology, despite the fact that the

<sup>94</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter #59 to Epictetus of Corinth* 8, which seems to be an expansion upon e.g. *On the Incarnation* 25.2, where he says, 'For if he came himself to bear the curse laid upon us, how else could he have 'become a curse,' unless he received the death set for a curse? And that is the cross.' In other words, Jesus' death on the cross was not itself the curse, but rather the visible outcome of carrying cursed human flesh.

<sup>95</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.18.3

<sup>96</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 94 – 95; see above for discussion

Nestorians had in their possession altered versions of this letter, and circulated copies.<sup>97</sup> It was canonized by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD as the proper interpretation of the Nicene faith.<sup>98</sup>

Second, in his *First Discourse Against the Arians*, Athanasius spars with his Arian opponents about the nature of Jesus' identity and incarnation. Athanasius seems to have written these *Discourses* between 356 – 360 AD while in his third exile from his bishop's seat in Alexandria.<sup>99</sup> He discusses many relevant passages in chapters 40 – 45, especially expounding on John 1:14 and Philippians 2:5 – 11 as key texts under debate. In this section, he says:

‘...the Lord who supplies the grace has become a man like us, He on the other hand, the Savior, humbled Himself in taking ‘our body of humiliation’ [Philippians 3:21], and took a servant’s form, putting on that flesh *which was enslaved to sin*. And He indeed has gained nothing from us for His own promotion...’<sup>100</sup>

Athanasius makes a connection between our body and Jesus’ body, identifying ‘our body of humiliation’ as identical with Jesus’ body, which was composed of ‘that flesh which was enslaved to sin.’ The only way this enslavement to sin could be broken, and human nature liberated and saved, was from within. The later Cappadocian language distinguishing nature and personhood was yet to be developed, but Athanasius anticipates it through his logic. He shows that that which defined or affected Jesus’ human nature did not necessarily transfer ‘up’ to his personhood. Hence, Jesus could bear a fallen human nature, and yet not be personally guilty of committing any sin. For fallenness pertains to human nature; guilt pertains to personhood. Jesus as a person was not victim to this enslavement because he was the eternal Son of God who was the power and wisdom of his Father.

Athanasius had made this critical distinction early in his career, in *On the Incarnation*: ‘For not even by being in the universe does He share in its nature...’<sup>101</sup> For Athanasius, the Word could be ‘in’ something without ‘sharing in its nature.’ Whether the object under consideration was the universe – when he was stressing the transcendence of the Word – or the human body of Jesus – when he was stressing the imminence of the Word in the incarnation – the principle is the same. Athanasius finds this principle of supreme importance when he explains how Jesus could be ‘in’ the ‘flesh which was enslaved to sin’ without ‘sharing in its nature’ in its corrupted form, and thence becoming enslaved to sin himself. For immediately after stating this principle, Athanasius makes a helpful comparison: just as the sun is not ‘defiled’ by touching the earth with its light, so also the Word of God is not ‘defiled’ by touching the body,<sup>102</sup> and even sharing it.

The third piece of evidence that Athanasius believed Jesus assumed a fallen human nature comes from a passage in his *Second Discourse Against the Arians*. In this lengthy passage, he links several passages of Scripture to describe the significance of Jesus taking ‘sinful’ and ‘cursed’ human flesh. When we find Athanasius quoting Romans 8:3 – 4, and interpreting it in a medical substitutionary sense, we must pay special attention to it, as we did with Irenaeus. Note the link he draws between the language of Hebrews 2:14 – 15 and Romans 8:3 – 4 to the compacted references to Isaiah 53, 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13. Athanasius moves from speaking of Jesus’ body as ‘mortal’ for the sake of sharing in our death (Heb.2:14 – 15) to emerge in his resurrection as the victor over death (1 Cor.15:21), to explaining that Jesus’ mortal body was composed of ‘sinful flesh’ so he could condemn the sin in his flesh (Rom.8:3 – 4). Mention of the word ‘condemn’ in Romans 8:3 appears to make Athanasius immediately think of John 3:17, where the apostle John explains that the focal target of God’s condemnation in and through Christ was not ‘the world.’ Rather, the whole point of the incarnation of the Word was so that ‘the world through him might be saved.’ This corroborate Athanasius’ previous quotation of Romans 8:3 – 4. God’s condemnation fell on the sinful flesh, or rather the sin in the flesh, of Jesus. Here is the passage:

<sup>97</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Ad Acacium Melitenum* 21; *Ad Succensum* 1.11; *Epistle* 39.11

<sup>98</sup> Matthew R. Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria’s Trinitarian Theology of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.138

<sup>99</sup> Philip Schaff, ‘Introduction to Four Discourses Against the Arians,’ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, p.663 judges that Athanasius wrote this material to ‘conciliate and win over the semi-Arians’ on the basis of conceptual, though not terminological, agreement, and isolate the true ‘Arians’ like Valens and Eudoxius.

<sup>100</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.43, emphasis mine

<sup>101</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 17.6

<sup>102</sup> Ibid 17.7: ‘For if the sun too, which was made by Him, and which we see, as it revolves in the heaven, is not defiled by touching the bodies upon earth, nor is it put out by darkness, but on the contrary itself illuminates and cleanses them also, much less was the all-holy Word of God, Maker and Lord also of the sun, defiled by being made known in the body; on the contrary, being incorruptible, He quickened and cleansed the body also, which was in itself mortal: who did, for so it says [in 1 Peter 2:22], no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.’ See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.80 notes that Athanasius’ mind included ‘a certain conception of the unity of Christ by way of a unified dynamic by which the divinity acts upon the humanity.’



‘To give a witness then, and for our sakes to undergo death, to raise man up and destroy the works of the devil, the Savior came, and this is the reason of His incarnate presence. For otherwise a resurrection had not been, unless there had been death; and how had death been, unless He had had a mortal body? This the Apostle, learning from Him, thus sets forth, ‘Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage [Hebrews 2:14 – 15].’ And, ‘Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead [1 Corinthians 15:21].’ And again, ‘For what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit [Romans 8:3 – 4].’ And John says, ‘For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved [John 3:17].’ ... For as by receiving our infirmities, He is said to be infirm Himself, though not Himself infirm, for He is the Power of God, and He became sin for us and a curse, though not having sinned Himself, but because He Himself bare our sins and our curse, so, by creating us in Him, let Him say, ‘He created me for the works,’ though not Himself a creature.’<sup>103</sup>

The dense references to the infirmity language of Isaiah 53:4/Matthew 8:17, the sin language of 2 Corinthians 5:21, and curse language of Galatians 3:13 at the end of this paragraph are extremely important. All of them are biblical categories of human fallen experience. Athanasius coordinates all of them not to Jesus’ death but to his *incarnation*. In his third *Discourse*, he quotes Isaiah explicitly, as well as attributes the term ‘infirmity’ to *sinfulness*:

‘And the Word bore the *infirmities of the flesh*, as His own, for His was the flesh; and the flesh ministered to the works of the Godhead, because the Godhead was in it, for the body was God’s. And well has the Prophet said ‘carried [Isaiah 53:4];’ and has not said, ‘He remedied our infirmities,’ lest, as being external to the body, and only healing it, as He has always done, He should leave men subject still to death; but He carries our *infirmities*, and He Himself bears our *sins*, that it might be shown that He has become man for us, and that the body which in Him bore them, was His own body; and, while He received no hurt Himself by ‘bearing our sins in His body on the tree,’ as Peter speaks, we men were redeemed from our own affections, and were filled with the righteousness of the Word.’<sup>104</sup>

Considering that Athanasius was writing to persuade Eastern Greek-speaking bishops to take an anti-Arian stance, it makes sense that he would appeal to a broad tradition they shared of calling Jesus ‘infirm’: ‘He is said to be infirm Himself...’ This attestation is fascinating and important. Athanasius appears to mean this: The early church bore witness to Jesus’ infirmity, because Jesus bore ‘sinful flesh,’ as suggested by the quotation of Romans 8:3 – 4 before it. The bishop of Alexandria was simply repeating the tradition he inherited which he presumably shares with his audience. Probably due to the Greek philosophical bias against attributing change to any being considered divine, the early Christians were drawn to the passages in the New Testament which said of the Son, ‘he became’ something which he was not before. The Son became: flesh (Jn.1:14), sin (2 Cor.5:21), poor (2 Cor.8:9), a curse (Gal.3:13), a slave, human, obedient to the point of death (Phil.2:7 – 8). To the Greek mind, that was certainly unexpected. Opponents of Christianity demanded explanations, and heretics sought to evade those passages. As a result, these passages were frequently the most debated passages between the advocates of various forms of ‘gnosticism’ and ‘Arianism’ who sought to separate true divinity from becoming true humanity, and the orthodox who sought to preserve it.

As the technical terminological distinction between ‘nature’ (*ousia*) and ‘person’ (*prosopon* or *hypostasis*) had not yet developed and stabilized in the church by the late fourth century, Athanasius finds this statement struggling to express in what sense Jesus was infirm: ‘He is said to be infirm Himself, though not Himself infirm.’ The subtlety which Athanasius perceives in this statement relates to what we consider to be the fundamental ‘self’ or ‘essence’ of Jesus. For in another passage from the first *Discourse Against the Arians*, Athanasius forcefully and clearly delineates between who ‘He is’ as ‘Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father’ and what ‘He is become’ in ‘a second sense’ as ‘flesh’ and ‘man’:

<sup>103</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.55

<sup>104</sup> Ibid 3.31 emphasis mine

‘Moreover the words ‘*He is become* surety’ denote the pledge in our behalf which He has provided. For as, being the ‘Word,’ He ‘*became* flesh [John 1:14]’ and ‘*become*’ we ascribe to the flesh, for it is originated and created, so do we here the expression ‘*He is become*,’ expounding it according to a *second sense*, viz. because *He has become man*. And let these contentious men know, that they fail in this their perverse purpose; let them know that Paul does not signify that *His essence* has become, knowing, as he did, that *He is* Son and Wisdom and Radiance and Image of the Father...’<sup>105</sup>

Judging from the first *Discourse*, Athanasius is clearly capable of deploying more precise language to reflect his full intent. And, as I said above, Athanasius goes on to quote Paul’s very important statement in Romans 8:3 that the Son came in the likeness of sinful flesh. The reason why Athanasius delineates who Jesus ‘is’ in ‘his essence’ in comparison with who he ‘has become’ seems to help his audience understand in what sense Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh. ‘In the likeness of’ for Athanasius did not mean a superficial resemblance, but the real substance. Jesus ‘is’ the Son of God who ‘became’ sinful flesh.

This is very important because Hatzidakis argues his position from a concern about the ‘communication of attributes’ (*communicatio idiomatum*).<sup>106</sup> This phrase is used by theologians to denote how attributes of Jesus’ human *nature* may be applied to his divine *nature* and vice versa, and from his divine *person* to his human *nature* and vice versa.<sup>107</sup> A common image deployed by the early church to help themselves appreciate the union of Jesus’ divinity with his humanity was the union of fire with iron: As an iron starts to glow white hot by being placed in a fire, the iron takes on the properties of fire. So in what sense did that happen with Jesus? In this sense, because the Son of God is life-giving, Athanasius’ successor Cyril of Alexandria could say, ‘We confess that the flesh of the Lord is life-giving flesh...because it is that of the Word who gives life to all.’<sup>108</sup> Because Jesus’ human nature was finite as a body, we can say that Jesus himself was and is finite as a body, considered from the standpoint of his humanity. From the standpoint of his divinity, of course, the eternal Son of God remains who he has always been, and is therefore infinite.

Theologians have wrestled with how to apply the principle of *communicatio idiomatum*. Hatzidakis aptly observes that some Protestant traditions struggle to organize their thoughts along these lines.

‘Calvinism ascribes to Christ one person in two natures, with each nature communicating its attributes to the person, never to the other nature.’<sup>109</sup>

This is done to avoid logical puzzles like the following: If the infinite divine nature of Jesus transfers its infiniteness to his finite human nature, would the finite human nature cease to be finite? The more serious conundrum would involve asking whether Jesus’ human nature ceases to be human nature because of the possibility that the divine nature would overwhelm it. However, is the Calvinist not limited in trying to explain how we express the nature of Jesus’ bodily resurrection? Is not Jesus’ human nature somehow impacted by his divine nature? Has not Jesus applied his immortality to his mortality?

Hatzidakis continues:

‘The Lutherans, on the other hand, believe in a real communication of divine properties and participation of the human nature in the divine glory. But what do they say about the fact that Christ, despite being endowed with divine attributes, displays many common human weaknesses and dies as a mortal man? They are at an impasse, not being able to reconcile their differences. The key rests with the Orthodox doctrine of the voluntary assumption by Christ of the blameless passions in His deified and deifying human nature.’<sup>110</sup>

In order to maintain clarity, and to avoid puzzles which plague Calvinists and Lutherans alike, Hatzidakis says, ‘The exchange of properties takes place because the properties are always expressed through the person, not by

<sup>105</sup> Ibid 1.60, emphasis mine; cf. *Discourses* 2.47

<sup>106</sup> Hatzidakis, p.242 – 257

<sup>107</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.81 – 85 very helpfully analyzes Athanasius’ deployment of the *communicatio idiomatum*

<sup>108</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Anathema 11 Against Nestorius*, cited by Hatzidakis, p.248

<sup>109</sup> Hatzidakis, p.242

<sup>110</sup> Ibid p.242 – 243

themselves.<sup>111</sup> To Hatzidakis, therefore, logic requires us to say that if Jesus took to himself a fallen human nature, that we must also say that he was a fallen human person.<sup>112</sup> For, as he assumes, the attributes must be communicated upward from the nature to the person at all times.

However, Hatzidakis admits that his is not the only Orthodox position, for in his book, he critiques those of his fellow Orthodox like Kallistos Ware and John Meyendorff, among others, who return to the confession of Jesus' assumed fallen humanity. And while I would agree with Hatzidakis' basic formulation about the two natures of Christ being expressed *through* the person of Christ, I would argue, further, that the key rests in the earlier Athanasian formulation exemplified here and elsewhere, whereby the 'infirm' human nature of Christ *did not* transfer its property of being infirm 'upwards' to his person in a straightforward or causal manner. Athanasius says that *communicatio idiomatum* simply does not work that way. The attributes of Christ's human nature which were *temporary* – infirm, corrupted by sin, mortal, cursed – can only be said to describe his person in a derivative sense: i.e. in the sense that the Word 'became' these things in his incarnation. Instead, the person of Christ, empowered by his divine nature and in the power of the Holy Spirit, acted 'downward' upon, and yet also within, his 'infirm' human nature through his life, death, and resurrection, to deify it and make it deifying to other human beings. Those particular fallen, but temporary, attributes of his human nature were *healed* by him as a person as he 'grew in stature,' as Luke says (Lk.2:52), using the term *proekopten* from the domain of metalworking where a smith hammers a metal forward with blows. In effect, Athanasius curtails the *communicatio idiomatum* and says it *does not apply in this way because Jesus had not yet brought his human nature to its full resting place*. The properties are not passive qualities of static natures. Thus, within the person of Jesus, Jesus' divine nature was strengthening his human nature to carry out its human vocation of presenting itself cleansed and purified to God, circumcised of heart (Dt.10:16; 30:6).

This fits the unbroken pattern of divine-human partnership in the Hebrew Scriptures and Israel's experience of covenant relationship with God. God always worked in concert and cooperation with human partners, which is arguably what is required from Genesis 1, when God made human beings in His image to represent Him on the earth. And, not insignificantly, the patristic authors perceived the theophanies in the Hebrew Bible to be appearances, not of the Father or the undifferentiated Godhead, but of the *Logos*, or the pre-incarnate Christ.<sup>113</sup> When they read in Scripture, 'The word of the Lord came to...' (e.g. Gen.15:1, 4; 1 Sam.15:10; 2 Sam.7:4; 24:11; 1 Ki.16:1; Isa.38:4; Jer.1:2; Ezk.1:3; Hos.1:1; Jon.1:1), they believed it was the Word of God that appeared or spoke. Thus, in their view, God the Son appeared to Abraham and Sarah (Gen.15, 18), calling for their faith-filled partnership in the supernatural birth of Isaac. God the Son called to Moses from the burning bush (Ex.3), calling for Moses' partnership in the deliverance of Israel. And so on. This was the widespread understanding in the early church. So if God the Son acted in this pattern of divine-human partnership before his incarnation, to 'profit' people, as Athanasius puts it when he cites these examples,<sup>114</sup> would that pattern extend even into the divine-human partnership in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? Why would it not? For human nature is not a static quantity, but dynamic and developmental, and dependent upon the Spirit of God and Word of God. The prior definitions of 'human nature' and its relation to 'divine nature' require that even in the hypostatic union of the two natures, the pattern of partnership undertaken by the Logos was maintained with respect to his own human nature when he first inhabited it.

As Irenaeus of Lyons saw, the very definition of human nature involves a developmental process in the divine-human partnership: 'For as God is always the same, humanity, rooted in God, always progresses toward God.'<sup>115</sup> In terms of the biblical narrative, God made human beings to be guided by His word and presence (by the Spirit), and thus internalize His word and presence (by the Spirit) more deeply into themselves by growing in stature, bringing

<sup>111</sup> Ibid p.249 and note on p.248 the significant difference between Hatzidakis' interpretation of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* 9, 20, and 21, and mine, above

<sup>112</sup> Ibid p.253 – 257

<sup>113</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 62 – 63; *Dialogue with Trypho* 61, 126; Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.14.2; 4.20.1 – 4.22.2; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 45, 46; *Fragment* 53; Tertullian of Carthage, *Against Praxeas* 14 – 16; Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover* 60, 69, 96; etc.

<sup>114</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.68 comments on these incidents briefly, and in *Discourses* 3.12 sees the pre-incarnate Son as the angel who wrestled Jacob

<sup>115</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.8.3; 4.11.2; notably, Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009) and Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.4 ('my position is that Athanasius' vision is markedly Irenaean in this regard') and p.20 – 25 demonstrate that Athanasius' theological anthropology is either dependent on, or otherwise identical with, that of Irenaeus.

forth life, deepening in trust, and receiving into themselves the deeper divine life God offered in the tree of life. Put in the terms of the technical theological vocabulary of the Nicene period, what else is human nature except that which must be progressively filled by, and work in partnership with, God's divine nature? And what is *fallen* human nature but human nature which additionally has to overcome the corruption of sin in partnership with God's divine nature? If God designed us to not simply be human *beings*, but human *becomings*, then the same must have been true for Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, we cannot fully employ the *communicatio idiomatum* at just any point in the earthly life of Jesus – if only for the fact that Jesus's human nature could not be both 'developing' and yet also 'fully developed' merely by virtue of being connected to his divine nature or located within his divine personhood as the eternal Son. In fact, God's divine nature itself must be defined as that which, in relation to us, *patiently respects the development of human nature in every human person*. The principle of *communicatio idiomatum* cannot simply refer to human nature as if it were a static quality. It must be employed in the context of Jesus' human development, where Jesus resisted the corruption of sin throughout, brought his human nature to its full resting place as a conduit of ever-brightening transfigured glory by the Holy Spirit at the right hand of the Father. This is the logic Athanasius retained from Irenaeus' view of a developmental humanity, which the later Latin theologians Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian misunderstood.<sup>116</sup>

Protestant theologian Kathryn Tanner proposes a different solution that is worth mentioning here. She suggests that the divine nature of Jesus be thought of as radically transcendent from his human nature. In fact, her project in systematic theology stresses 'firstly, a non-competitive relation between creatures and God, and secondly, a radical interpretation of divine transcendence.'<sup>117</sup> The two points she puts forward are intertwined and mutual. Tanner suggests that we view the divinity of Jesus as being on a different ontological plane as his humanity: The divinity of the Son participates in the human nature in a real way, but in such a way that the *communicatio idiomatum* cannot fully operate in the same way Hatzidakis proposes. Hence Athanasius utilizes the analogy of the sun which touches the earth with its rays, and that analogy might be understood in the way Tanner suggests.<sup>118</sup> I suspect, however, that in Athanasius' writings, what prevented Jesus from actually succumbing to sin, and what prevents us from calling Jesus a sinner as regards his personhood while on earth, is not so much that divinity and humanity are positioned on different axes, but because (1) the difference between 'natures' and 'persons' requires that we use different adjectives for them, so that human nature can be 'corrupt' while a human person may or may not be 'guilty' of any particular act; and also (2) a developmental view of human nature requires that God, because of His intrinsic love and goodness, works with the partnership of the person to bring that person's human nature into a full union with Himself.

Returning to the second *Discourse*, then, Athanasius is protecting that 'self' or 'essence' of Jesus from being 'infirm' even as he says that Jesus had taken it on in his saving mission and human experience. The statement as it stands seems to pre-date Athanasius. It may or may not be considered fully adequate in a technical sense to convey what it intends. My impression is that the statement is reaching for language not yet available to it. But I do think it is fair to simply 'update' this statement (anachronistically, I admit) to the following terms which became settled after the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD: 'He is said to be infirm according to his human nature, though not infirm in his person.' In which case, Athanasius is a witness to a tradition shared by him and others that Jesus' human nature was called 'infirm' in the sense of 'sinful,' even while Jesus as a person was not.

The fourth piece of evidence that Athanasius believed Jesus assumed a fallen human nature comes from a passage in his *Second Discourse Against the Arians* where Athanasius considers a hypothetical possibility. Could God have simply spoken and healed human nature instantly, and without human voluntary participation? Apparently this was an objection raised by some in the broad 'Arian' camp. I expected Athanasius to make an argument from God's loving nature and His commitment to human agency. That may very well be faithful to Athanasius' mind also, but his actual reply proceeds in the following manner:

<sup>116</sup> Hatzidakis, p.254 – 255; my treatment of Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian follows below in chronological order

<sup>117</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p.2; cf. Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), chs.2 – 3

<sup>118</sup> Ibid 17.7: 'For if the sun too, which was made by Him, and which we see, as it revolves in the heaven, is not defiled by touching the bodies upon earth, nor is it put out by darkness, but on the contrary itself illuminates and cleanses them also, much less was the all-holy Word of God, Maker and Lord also of the sun, defiled by being made known in the body; on the contrary, being incorruptible, He quickened and cleansed the body also, which was in itself mortal: who did, for so it says [in 1 Peter 2:22], no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.' See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, p.80 notes that Athanasius' mind included 'a certain conception of the unity of Christ by way of a unified dynamic by which the divinity acts upon the humanity.'

‘Moreover, the good reason of what He did may be seen thus; if God had but spoken, because it was in His power, and so the curse had been undone, the power had been shown of Him who gave the word, but man had become such as Adam was before the transgression, having received grace from without, and not having it united to the body; (for he was such when he was placed in Paradise) nay, perhaps had become worse, because he had learned to transgress. Such then being his condition, had he been seduced by the serpent, there had been fresh need for God to give command and undo the curse; and thus the need had become interminable, and men had remained under guilt not less than before, as being enslaved to sin; and, ever sinning, would have ever needed one to pardon them, and had never become free, being in themselves flesh, and ever worsted by the Law because of the infirmity of the flesh.’<sup>119</sup>

This is a difficult passage to fully understand. Athanasius denies that God could have simply spoken and healed human nature instantly because by doing so, God would set up the conditions for human beings to eat over and over from the tree of knowledge of good and evil without ever developing a personal conviction that doing so is sinful. One reason for this, in his mind, is that if God had acted in such a way, humanity by definition would have ‘received grace from without, and not having it united to the body.’ Athanasius seems to be saying that human beings would never learn from that fundamental mistake. The phrase ‘grace from without’ seems to indicate the opposite of ‘grace from within.’ Presumably, ‘grace from within’ our human life and experience would mean us sharing with God a conviction about the awfulness of the corruption of sin and its effects, cognitive agreement with God that healing is necessary, and willing commitment to being renewed. The puzzling phrase, ‘not having [grace] united to the body’ probably presupposes an awareness of the then-standard patristic explanation of the soul’s impact upon the body. Athanasius provided that explanation in *Against the Heathen* chapters 1 – 6, and Matthew Craig Steenberg very helpfully explores Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Tertullian, and Cyril of Jerusalem to show that they shared this common theological anthropology.<sup>120</sup> The human soul – with its capacity to know God, to desire God, and to remember, to feel, to judge – must receive grace from God and mediate that grace into the human body.

Then, in contrast to this hypothetical scenario which he regards as impossible, Athanasius explains why Jesus’ infirm, fallen humanity has theological importance: Jesus had to progressively rid his flesh of ‘every bite of the serpent.’ He says:

‘For the Word being clothed in the flesh, as has many times been explained, every bite of the serpent began to be utterly staunched from out it; and whatever evil sprung from the motions of the flesh, to be cut away, and with these death also was abolished, the companion of sin, as the Lord Himself says, ‘The prince of this world comes, and finds nothing in Me [John 14:30];’ and ‘For this end was He manifested,’ as John has written, ‘that He might destroy the works of the devil [1 John 3:8].’<sup>121</sup>

Protestants often view the role of Satan as external to humanity, which leads Protestants to view as crude and primitive various patristic passages which speak of Jesus ransoming us from Satan. Satan is seen as the accuser, based on the meaning of the word ‘satan,’ as somehow connected to our guilt before God. Satan is also seen as having a legal claim upon fallen humanity, shown when the devil offered Jesus the nations in the wilderness (Mt.4:8 – 9), counteracted by Jesus when he claimed for himself all authority on heaven and earth (Mt.28:18). But this is only half the truth.

By contrast, the imagery of ‘venom’ is what the church fathers recognized to be the main import of Scripture’s literary portrayal of the enemy as a serpent, from Genesis 3. That focus is demonstrated by Athanasius in this passage. By following the lead of the serpent and participating in his rebellion against God, we have internalized a ‘venom.’ So that ‘venom’ must be removed. Jesus is the only human being who has completely drained and healed his own human nature of that ‘venom,’ not forgetting also ‘the motions of the flesh, to be cut away’ – which I suspect to be the desires and affections of the flesh. I also suspect that Athanasius, by using the phrase ‘cut away,’ was hearkening back to the ‘circumcision of the heart’ language of Moses (Dt.10:16; 30:6), Jeremiah (Jer.4:4), and Paul (Rom.2:28 – 29; 6:6; 8:3; 10:4; Col.2:12). Each of us is called to participate in Jesus’ spiritual surgery in himself, in partnership with his Spirit and empowered by him, to resist these diseased and disordered things that are

<sup>119</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.68

<sup>120</sup> Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), p.16

<sup>121</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.69



foreign to our human nature, fundamentally. Jesus is the only one who has done so, on our behalf; he is a medical substitute for us. And this healing is also liberating, for it brings us out from under the influence of the serpent of old, the devil.

What is important to me in this passage is the progressive nature of the cleansing. Athanasius demonstrates an understanding that ‘every bite of the serpent’ was not instantly ‘stunched.’ Rather, every bite ‘*began* to be utterly stunched from out of it.’ This indicates that, in Athanasius’ mind, Jesus cleansed his human nature through his lifelong, faithful obedience. It was not an instantaneous reversal from conception to pre-fallen Adamic humanity. Rather, it was a cleansing and healing from within, throughout the course of Jesus’ life, as Jesus took his human nature from the depths of human fallenness to the heights of resurrected new humanity seated at the right hand of the Father. In Athanasius we have a very clear statement about how medical substitution serves as the foundational stone of the overall christus victor edifice.

Athanasius seems to view Israel’s experience of the Sinai Law and Jesus’ assumption of fallen human nature and progressive healing of the primordial wound as the appropriate answer to the hypothetical possibility he entertained just before. He argues that God could not instantly heal human corruption by fiat because human beings had to personally learn how terrible the wound is. Part of that education process would surely include reflecting on one’s own life. It probably also included seeing in Scripture how disastrous sin’s effects are, how deeply Israel struggled under the Law, how deeply Jesus struggled to overcome temptation. That is the type of devotional reflection that would nurture godly and Godward convictions, and shape one’s own desire for healing.

While considering this excerpt, it seems appropriate to acknowledge that Athanasius has been criticized for leaving too unclear his view of whether Jesus had a human soul. Colin Gunton, for example, critiques Athanasius for saying too ‘incautiously’ that the Word ‘wielded the human body like an instrument,’<sup>122</sup> because that phraseology diminishes the proper qualities – such as the role of the human soul and human will – which are important to Jesus’ humanity within the definition of salvation as God’s recovery of true humanity. However, Khaled Anatolios’ defense of Athanasius on this point is persuasive.<sup>123</sup> The constituent and conjoined parts of the human being – soul and body – must be joined with God in the person of Jesus if they are to be saved. Moreover, Athanasius’ lack of attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in his early two volume work *Against the Gentiles – On the Incarnation* was rectified in his *Discourses Against the Arians*, and supported further in his three *Letters to Serapion*.

In the mid to late fourth century, Apollinarius of Laodicea (died 390 AD) taught a heretical view much like the one Athanasius is sometime accused of subtly endorsing. Apollinarius opposed the Arians and wanted to uphold the divine-human unity of Jesus, but in such a way that he denied to Jesus a human mind and soul. Those who followed him, called the Apollinarians, were large in number. Apollinarius, the one time ally of Athanasius and Basil, seems to have suspected that sin somehow resided in the soul, and therefore the Word must have assumed a body but displaced the mind and soul and occupied its place instead. The orthodox critique in reply was that this denied salvation to the human soul for all the rest of humanity. For if Jesus did not also save the human soul in himself, then he has no redeemed human soul to offer. It would be left for Gregory of Nazianzus to deploy against the Apollinarians the logic used by Athanasius against the Arians, ‘The unassumed is the unhealed.’ That is, what God does not assume to Himself in the person of Jesus must, of necessity, remain unhealed.

Athanasius gives evidence that he understood the importance of holding that Jesus had a human soul. In the work *Tome to the Antiochenes*, dated to 362 AD, in which Athanasius and others report on their investigations of a quarrel between two pro-Nicene groups who used Greek terms for theological matters in different ways. In response, Athanasius says he listened for the *underlying structure of their thoughts*, because they gave different meanings to words: ‘Having accepted then these men’s interpretation and defense of their language...’<sup>124</sup> He then expresses his

<sup>122</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), p.69 critiques Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 17, 42

<sup>123</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London, Routledge, 2005), p.71 – 74, ‘His characterization of Christ’s body as an “instrument” is not to be interpreted in light of an analysis of the composition of Christ, but rather within the framework of the Creator-creature distinction, with its attendant dialectic of divine transcendence and immanence. The “instrumentality” of the body is concerned precisely with its being a medium for the immanent revelation of the transcendent God. In other words, the focus is not on the relation of the Logos to the body, so much as on the body as mediating between God and world. Athanasius himself speaks of the “instrument” of Christ’s body not in order to emphasize that it is “directly and physically” moved by the Logos, but rather to characterize it as a privileged locus wherein the invisible God becomes knowable and visible.’

<sup>124</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Tomus ad Antiochenos* 6

approval for one of the groups:

‘For they confessed also that the Savior had not a body without a soul, nor without sense or intelligence; for it was not possible, when the Lord had become man for us, that His body should be without intelligence: nor was the salvation effected in the Word Himself a salvation of body only, but of soul also.’<sup>125</sup>

The postscript by Paulinus and Karterius adds, for good measure:

‘For the Savior had a body neither without soul, nor without sense, nor without intelligence. For it were impossible, the Lord being made Man for us, that His body should be without intelligence.’

What this brief mention of the human soul might mean for our view of Athanasius is at the very least this: The robustness and complexity of his theological thought should not be seen as constrained to the topics of the Arian controversy. Maximally, however, it might mean this: If Athanasius’ understanding of the human soul from the first part of *Against the Heathen* also reflects his basic understanding of what happened in the human soul of Jesus throughout the course of Jesus’ life and ministry, which is reasonably likely, then Athanasius can be seen as anticipating the explicit work of Gregory of Nazianzus. To substantiate my point on this further, we can revisit this critical passage in which Athanasius quotes the important passage Romans 8:3 to assert that Jesus made the flesh fully admit the ‘Divine mind’:

‘...what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh [Romans 8:3],’ ridding it of the trespass, in which, being continually held captive, it admitted not the Divine mind. And having rendered the flesh capable of the Word...’<sup>126</sup>

Since Athanasius uses the term ‘flesh’ to indicate the entire human being, body and soul, considered from the standpoint of being corrupted (as the apostles Paul and John did), and since the mind was held to be the first part of the soul, Athanasius can be understood as asserting that Jesus’ divine mind did not displace his human mind. Rather, by and through his human mind working in partnership with his divine mind, Jesus consciously struggled to align his entire soul and body with his divine nature in the power of the Holy Spirit. He thereby governed his entire humanity in conformity with God’s will, healing and strengthening it from within. Thus, he ‘rendered the flesh capable of the Word.’

If this is the case, then we must read Athanasius’ language in the *Second Discourse* in a fresh light. Where he says, ‘every bite of the serpent began to be utterly staunched from out it; and whatever evil sprung from the motions of the flesh, to be cut away,’ that phrase ‘motions of the flesh’ likely refers in Athanasius’ mind to the sinful inclinations of the soul and body which Jesus cut away at the source, the feat that no one else was able to do. Does this provide us with a genuine and reliable insight into the inner life of Jesus as he battled his fallen human nature? I believe so.

A fifth passage which shows Athanasius witnessing to Jesus having assumed a fallen human nature comes from his *Third Discourse Against the Arians*. Here, Athanasius draws an application from Jesus’ experience of battling the ‘affections’ of the flesh to our experience of battling them. The point is pastoral. The entire argument hangs on the assumption that Jesus assumed a fallen human nature, and cleansed it not at conception but through his faithful obedience to the Father.

‘These things were so done, were so manifested, because He had a body, not in appearance, but in truth; and it became the Lord, in putting on human flesh, to put it on *whole with the affections proper to it*; that, as we say that the body was His own, so also we may say that *the affections of the body were proper to Him alone*, though they did not touch Him according to His Godhead.’<sup>127</sup>

Athanasius means that we are freed from cowardice, fear, anxiety, and other emotions which would cause us to shrink back from a robust declaration of faith in Christ. Why? Because Jesus shook himself free of those

<sup>125</sup> Ibid 7

<sup>126</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.8, paragraph 60

<sup>127</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.32; cf. 3.33 – 34, emphasis mine

‘affections.’ In this context, ‘affections’ relate to human sinfulness, especially human shortcomings in the face of persecution against Christians. Athanasius argues that we are freed from the ‘affections’ of the flesh because Jesus shared in our flesh and its affections, and conquered them. This logically requires that Jesus assumed a fallen human nature, and cleansed it through his faithful obedience to the Father.

Once again, we find Athanasius taking a complementary step to erect a conceptual barrier between Jesus’ fallen human nature and any accusation that he actually personally sinned: ‘though they did not touch Him according to His Godhead.’ Although Athanasius does not explicitly quote from Hebrews 4:15 or 5:6 – 10 in his surviving writings,<sup>128</sup> likely because those he called ‘Arians’ were not contesting Jesus’ authentic humanity, probably his mind was not too far off from the encouragement that in Jesus, God did experience temptation in all things like we do, yet successfully resisted those temptations and, in the power of the Spirit, turned his humanity back to the Father.

This is a very helpful pastoral connection point to Christ. To hold out to other people a Jesus who has experienced our struggle as a fallen human being can minister comfort to people, especially under persecution and duress. And the fact that Jesus *was successful* at resisting every temptation to actually sin is important in ministering appropriate Christ-centered challenges, as well. So one can see that Athanasius was appealing to his fellow bishops and priests in their shared capacity as preachers and teachers.

#### *A Glance at Cyril of Alexandria*

Athanasius’ heir Cyril of Alexandria (c.376 – 444 AD), who served as a long stint as bishop of Alexandria from 412 to his death, and a renowned theologian in his own right, continued down this line of thought a bit more explicitly with regards to a wider range of human emotions. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, for example, Cyril writes:

‘Moreover, just as death was brought to naught in no other way than by the Death of the Savior, so also with regard to each of the sufferings of the flesh: for unless He had felt dread, human nature could not have become free from dread; unless He had experienced grief, there could never have been any deliverance from grief; unless He had been troubled and alarmed, no escape from these feelings could have been found. And with regard to every one of the affections to which human nature is liable, thou wilt find exactly the corresponding thing in Christ. The affections of His flesh were aroused, not that they might have the upper hand as they do indeed in us, but in order that when aroused they might be thoroughly subdued by the power of the Word dwelling in the flesh, the nature of man thus undergoing a change for the better.’<sup>129</sup>

In this passage, Cyril assumes that Jesus took to himself a fallen human nature. For how else were ‘the affections of his flesh’ first ‘aroused’ and then ‘thoroughly subdued’?

However, my hesitation with Athanasius’ statement, and Cyril’s development of this trajectory, is that all of Jesus’ human emotions appear to be considered as if they were only reactive. Was Jesus only reacting to his surroundings? Was the true source of Jesus’ emotions his external environment? There was a tendency among Jews and Christians alike, starting from the Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint translation, to feel discomfort with anything which can be considered divine ‘emotions.’<sup>130</sup> The source of this discomfort is most decidedly not the Hebrew Bible, which attributes many anthropomorphic human emotions to God. Rather, the source over the discomfort with emotions is Greek. The Greek assumption that emotions meant personal change, and personal change meant imperfection, seemed to affect their assessment of Jesus, especially how he suffered at his trial and crucifixion. Perhaps this corresponds with Christian art tending to portray Christ as unflappably serene even on the cross, and Mary as calm and composed as she held the dead body of Jesus in the Pieta.

Hatzidakis, for instance, considers Jesus’ human emotion, but in my view unevenly.<sup>131</sup> I stand with him when he says that Jesus ‘was not under the sway of uncontrolled passions.’ He also grants to Jesus, ‘Behind His humanity lies the inexhaustible ocean of divinity,’ and, ‘Christ’s personality was formed, as that of every human being, by His genetic makeup that carried the divine imprint and be His environs, His home upbringing and all the other factors

<sup>128</sup> James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), p.416

<sup>129</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John’s Gospel* 12.27, 28

<sup>130</sup> Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impossible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.37 – 46

<sup>131</sup> Hatzidakis, p.232 – 234

that shape a human character.’ Beautiful is the sentiment, ‘His human thoughts, emotions, feelings, and actions were never purely or merely human thoughts, emotions, feelings, and actions. They swelled in Him by the intruding of the divinity into His human experience in an unfathomable way...’ But I am not sure why he immediately adds the modifier, ‘beyond and above human capacity.’ With that phrase I would take issue: If Jesus came to share and participate in our humanity that we might do so in his, what is it that lies beyond human capacity? Moreover, saying that Jesus ‘did not laugh, because He was not startled or surprised’ goes a step too far, making assumptions about the sources of human laughter and taking the absence of evidence as evidence of absence categorically, which is a logical mistake in how one handles the New Testament material. When Hatzidakis asserts, ‘He was neither happy nor sad,’ he offers no interpretation of those occasions when Jesus is said to be. On the one hand, Jesus ‘rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit’ (Lk.10:21) or referred to his own joy at the return of the lost (Lk.15:1 – 32). On the other hand, Jesus wept angrily over Lazarus’ condition (Jn.11:44) and wept over Jerusalem’s rejection and its consequences (Lk.19:41). Jesus told his disciples he ‘lusted’ to eat the Passover with them before he suffered (Lk.22:15). Hatzidakis applies to Jesus adjectives such as ‘serene,’ ‘balanced,’ ‘peaceful,’ ‘resolute,’ and other descriptors that indicate steadiness and constancy. But was Jesus’ emotional life as absolute and constant as Hatzidakis suggests, as if Jesus’ divine nature served him first as a wall beyond which no emotion entered, and second as a short anchor from which his human nature did not wander? Might Hatzidakis also be influenced by a certain commitment to the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible, which struggles with anthropomorphic emotional language attributed to God, and so translates them into something else?<sup>132</sup>

What if Jesus’ human emotions can be considered to have their true source in his divinity? What if they are not reactionary, but *revelatory, even in his responsiveness*? For example, what happens when we try to make sense of Jesus’ suffering in a text like John 11, the incident where Jesus weeps by the tomb of Lazarus? Is the thought of his impending suffering and death affecting Jesus from the outside in? Or is the direction of the emotion rather inside out? What if Jesus weeping in anger and sorrow over Lazarus’ death because that is the inner anger and sorrow of God now being manifested in the physical body of Jesus? Similarly, the suffering felt by Jesus on the cross is not primarily a ‘problem’ of how something outside Jesus could press into his inner reality as the unchanging, divine Son of God. Rather, the grief long felt by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit since the fall – and we know God can feel grief because the apostle Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit can be ‘grieved’ (Eph.4:30) – is now revealed and made manifest by Jesus on the cross.

Cyril and the tradition that followed him had some tendencies to see ‘suffering’ and ‘emotions’ as threats to divine impassibility from outside Jesus. But if God’s impassibility is defined as God’s love, based on His unchanging and eternal nature as a Trinity, then the threat vanishes.<sup>133</sup> If God is love because He is Triune, and if God cannot change His Triune being then His love is what is impassible and steady about Him, so then it also stands to reason that He will have the divine equivalent of human emotions towards us. If the apostle Paul can command Christians to ‘rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep’ (Rom.12:15), then emotionally mature responsiveness varies according to the person to whom one is relating. And if that is true for human beings, then it must logically also be true for God. But there is no need to fear that we are proposing a fundamental ‘changeability’ or ‘instability’ in God, or in us. For if a *character of love* is what is constant and unchanging in the divine Trinity, and what is hoped-for in us, then a certain healthy variability in human emotion and in divine emotion is *expected* and *necessary*. To suggest that God’s divine emotions, or our human emotions, should be unchanging suggests either stoicism, narcissism, or autism. God is both impassible and passible, understood properly. He is *impassible* in His love, for that is His nature, but He is *passible* in His divine emotions for us. He is *unmoving* from His loving

<sup>132</sup> Emotionality itself was called into question. In some Christian accounts, emotions were thought to fall away at some point. For example, Lewis Ayres, ‘Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa,’ *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 49 4 (2005), p.378, notices that in Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and Resurrection*, Gregory asks his sister and spiritual mentor Macrina about how ‘passions’ can be redirected or refocused on God. ‘If the passions stimulate the life of virtue but are extinguished when the soul is purified, then, he asks, will desire for God also be extinguished? In a famous passage Macrina reiterates her position that it is only the faculty of contemplation that is the godlike part of the soul and that the passions do indeed fall away. Nevertheless, the soul that passes beyond desire, hope and memory remains in the activity of love, thus imitating the divine life.’ Others, however, maintain that the term ‘*ta pathe*’ (*the passions*) in Byzantine theology refers not to all emotionality per se, but emotionality energized by sinfulness and operating outside the governance of the rational-moral faculty, as in *pathology*, or vice.

<sup>133</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p.155 – 167, esp. p.167, ‘Here I can at least offer a definition of divine apatheia as trinitarian love: God’s impassibility is the utter fullness of an infinite dynamism, the absolutely complete and replete generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit from the Father, the infinite ‘drama’ of God’s joyous act of self-outpouring – which is his being as God... Nor is this some kind of original unresponsiveness in the divine nature; it is divine beauty, that perfect joy in the other by which God is God: the Father’s *delectatio* in the beauty of his eternal Image, the Spirit as the light and joy and sweetness of that knowledge.’

commitment towards us, which results from His nature, and *most moved* on our behalf because of that unshakeable love.

So if we consider Jesus' human emotions to be *revelatory*, then Athanasius' twin emphases in *On the Incarnation* – redemption and revelation – are cemented together in this aspect of Jesus' incarnate life. Jesus refused to fall into the temptation of feeling jealous, lustful, greedy, anxious, competitive, etc. For those feelings and emotions are but manifestations of 'covetousness,' and Jesus condemned the sin of covetousness in his own sinful flesh (Rom.8:3), by never coveting anything. Paul's exposition in Romans illustrates the fact that the quality of Jesus' emotional life is indeed *redemptive* for us as he shares himself with us by his Spirit. Since Jesus also *reveals* a normative humanity, his demonstrated emotions reflect a normative kind of emotional health for human beings: compassion for the lost and the marginalized (e.g. Mt.9:36), joy at the conversion of a lost one (Lk.15:6 – 7, 9 – 10, 22 – 24), humor even including amusing innuendo about sexual matters (e.g. Lk.14:18 – 20; Jn.4:1 – 18), angry sorrow at human death and the condition of sin that led up to it (Jn.11:44; Lk.13:35), etc. We can retain all the strength and resolve that Athanasius and Cyril perceived in Jesus as he faced persecution. But rather than label Jesus' resolution a 'lack of passion' or a 'lack of emotion,' we can see the determination of the Father to perfect the *emotional* quality of human nature despite the obstacles, and thereby reveal God's own self emotionally, in some sense. The full range of the emotions Jesus showed can be seen to reflect the 'divine emotions' of the Father, by the Spirit.

Not only that, but this account of Jesus' emotional life can be squared with what we now understand from neuroscience and even epigenetics about the relationship between our emotional health, physical health, and even brain development. Greek philosophical thought, especially Neo-Platonic and Stoic, emphasized a firm functional, and even ontological, order of soul over body. As Christians inherited this view, they developed some helpful insights about how the human soul was to mediate the knowledge of God and even the life of God into the body. But this prioritization of the soul over the body in all cases came with a high price. Some, including Athanasius, began to speak of the soul itself as being the image of God in a way that was distinct from the body,<sup>134</sup> which is a departure from Irenaeus and a more Judaic understanding of the human person; I believe this move to be erroneous. Christians began to frown upon sexual pleasure in marriage, which was an obvious example of a bodily experience that flowed 'backward' or 'upstream' into the soul and our emotional experience. This view that childraising was the only legitimate reason for a married couple to have sex came from Stoicism,<sup>135</sup> but not biblical Judaism, which celebrated married sexuality for the couple, not just for childbearing (Pr.5:19; Song 3:6 – 5:1; 1 Cor.7:1 – 5). Any experiences in that general category were increasingly seen as problematic.

By contrast, neuroscience now tells us that sexual intercourse produces oxytocin, a chemical that influences our brain development and produces in us emotions about bonding with a partner. A mother, while breastfeeding her infant, experiences an increase in oxytocin as well, to help her emotionally bond with her baby. We also know that emotional bonding, especially with our parents, through physical affection and even laughter, is essential for our neurological and emotional development, whereas relational separation leads to stress and anxiety which registers in the body. Realizations like this reinforce what Christians have long called the indissoluble union of soul and body, and even the way the Eastern Orthodox have called human beings the personalization (hypostasis) of nature. But they require us to drop the 'one-way street' view of the soul ideally taking priority over the body in every sense. In fact, we now know that physical affection and good nutrition facilitate healthy brain development, and by contrast, the presence of toxins like lead and plastic cause mental, emotional, and even sexual dysfunction. Moreover, the relatively new field of epigenetics tells us that our traumatic experiences can impact the genes of our children. These understandings of the human body and our interior life require us to deeply revise the Christian appropriation of the Neo-Platonic and Stoic views of our emotions, and our understanding of body and soul. They require us to fall back upon the Hebrew Scriptures, which tells us that God wanted us to grow up in the healthy physical environment of a garden, and have a strong but appropriate emotional life as part of our earthy and image-of-God nature. The body must be developed and/or redeveloped to know in its own way what the soul wants it to know about the goodness of God. Once again, if Jesus' human emotions mirrored God's divine emotions in such a way that they impacted his own neurological and bodily development, then his human emotions were *redemptive* of human nature and *revelatory* of divine nature, simultaneously. In fact, if Jesus' utter human dependence on Mary his mother and Israel his cultural environment impacted his humanity in such a way that helped prepare him to hear and obey his heavenly Father, then we must properly account for the role of Israel in whatever story of redemption

<sup>134</sup> E.g. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Heathen* 32.3

<sup>135</sup> David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* retitled from *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.186



we tell.

I believe *orthopathy*, right feeling, is both redemptive and revelatory. It is a relational state Jesus himself perfected and shares with us by his Spirit. For he *redeemed* human emotion back to the ‘divine emotion’ of the Godhead, and in so doing *revealed* how God feels, and how God’s true humanity feels, in dynamic relationship with others and God. What to do about the direction started by Athanasius and taken further by Cyril of Alexandria (and others) about how to interpret Jesus’ suffering in the face of persecution, and emotion more broadly? I would gently and, hopefully with good humor, criticize it for being insufficiently *Athanasian*.

These passages do not exhaust the places in Athanasius’ extant writings where he discusses Jesus’ assumption of a fallen human nature and progressive cleansing of it. But they do demonstrate the various pastoral and theological uses Athanasius made of the idea. If Athanasius believed that Jesus cleansed his human nature from conception and lived in a pre-fall Adamic humanity, I suspect that he would not have been able to make the particular points he did. In some cases, he simply would have found no need to explore and defend the Scriptures in the way he did, or develop the terminological distinctions he did. I believe this exploration is sufficient to establish my point that Athanasius believed Jesus assumed a fallen human nature and cleansed it through his faithful, lifelong obedience, climaxing in his death and resurrection. Therefore, I maintain that Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, are quite wrong about Athanasius. He did not believe in penal substitutionary atonement.

### *The Trinity and Atonement*

One final point can be made on top of all this evidence. Athanasius’ understanding of the Trinity makes penal substitution flatly impossible. Why is this? Athanasius was a zealous defender against anything he considered to be ‘Arian.’ The theologies of the various camps Athanasius considered to be ‘Arian’ had in common an aversion to naming the Son as fully divine and equal to the Father.

Athanasius consistently makes use of Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 1:24 that ‘Christ is the wisdom and power of God.’ He takes what he observes about Christ in the outworking of salvation (the economy) to be what is true about God prior to creation (the ontology). For Athanasius, that is an important point because if we are given knowledge of God proper, then who God is in the economy of salvation must be who God truly is as He knows Himself to be. Hence, Athanasius says repeatedly that the Son *is* the Wisdom and Word and Power of the Father. Athanasius even ventures to say that the Father’s *fullness* is the Son, and that the Father’s *essence* is the Son:

And this is what is said, ‘Who being in the form of God [Philippians 2:6],’ and ‘the Father in Me [John 10:38; 14:10 – 11].’ Nor is this Form of the Godhead partial merely, but the fullness of the Father’s Godhead is the *Being* of the Son, and the Son is whole God. Therefore also, being equal to God, He ‘thought it not a prize to be equal to God [Philippians 2:6];’ and again since the Godhead and the Form of the Son is none other’s than the Father’s, this is what He says, ‘I in the Father.’ Thus ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself [2 Corinthians 5:19];’ for the propriety of the Father’s *Essence* is that Son, in whom the creation was then reconciled with God.<sup>136</sup>

This is markedly distinct from saying that the Son *shares* in the Father’s Wisdom, Power, fullness, essence, etc. as if there were some qualities or substances that the persons of the Trinity share in common. Athanasius’ statements bind the Father and Son closer together. Whether or not we can fathom all Athanasius’ reasons for phrasing matters this way, we can see that it certainly is a formidable position from which to defend the faith against any denigration of the Son. It is also a way to understand the ‘Father-Son’ language around the idea of bestowing an inheritance: the Father gives all of who he is to the Son.

Athanasius even denies that Jesus uttered his cry, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ for his own sake. Instead, he said it for ours, since we often feel forsaken by God, to identify with us and so lighten our sufferings.

‘And that the words ‘Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ are His, according to the foregoing explanations (though He suffered nothing, for the Word was impassible), is notwithstanding declared by the Evangelists; since the Lord became man, and these things are done and said as from a man, that He might Himself lighten these very sufferings of the flesh, and free it from them. Whence neither can the Lord be forsaken

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<sup>136</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 3.6

by the Father, who is ever in the Father, both before He spoke, and when He uttered this cry. Nor is it lawful to say that the Lord was in terror, at whom the keepers of hell's gates shuddered and set open hell, and the graves did gape, and many bodies of the saints arose and appeared to their own people.'<sup>137</sup>

Whether Athanasius' exegesis of this text is persuasive is a separate, worthwhile question. I believe he would have been more accurate to first see this as an intertextual reference: Jesus was invoking King David's journey of exile before enthronement for the sake of the criminals being crucified beside him who thought that the Messiah should not face death at Gentile hands. Jesus' point is that if King David suffered at the hands of the Gentiles (Ps.22), how much more would the heir of David? I do agree with Athanasius, however, in his assessment that Jesus was not forsaken by the Father in a way that their conscious communion was broken, as even David did not feel that (Ps.22:9 – 10, 19, 24); rather, Jesus was forsaken by the Father *to the Gentiles* in the sense of losing his physical protection (e.g. Ps.34:6 – 7). But regardless, my only point here is to highlight the bishop of Alexandria's understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son. To Athanasius, there can be no 'gap' in the Son's awareness of the Father. To suggest that the Son has a different self-consciousness from the Father would be inconceivable for him. To suggest that the Father has his own personal power from which to punish the Son, while we still call the Son the Father's own power, would have been contradictory, and equally inconceivable.

Peter Leithart notes with considerable sensitivity and skill that Augustine's understanding of the Trinity is different than Athanasius'. And since Augustine is often credited with being the foremost influence in Western, Latin Christianity, from which Roman Catholicism and Protestantism flow, it is worth noting here that Augustine's conception of the Trinity is one of the many building blocks that made penal substitution possible. Augustine did not himself believe in penal substitution,<sup>138</sup> which will be the topic of another exploration. But Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, as Protestants in the Reformed tradition, almost certainly inherit Augustine's view of the Trinity. By contrast, Athanasius' view of the Trinity, and that of the Cappadocians and the Eastern Greek church, *prevent any doctrine of penal substitution*.

To explain why, Leithart explains that Augustine imagined that the Father had his own wisdom, the Son had his own wisdom, and the Spirit had his own wisdom. The Father had his own power, the Son had his own power, and the Spirit had his own power. And so on. Augustine therefore suggests that the term *ousia* be understood as a divine substance, or collection of divine characteristics, which each person of the Trinity possessed in some measure, exhaustively. Leithart notes of Augustine,

'...But the way Augustine finally interprets 1 Corinthians 1:24 suggests that the Father has attributes that are more proper than the Son, more intrinsic to the being of the Father than his being Father. Perhaps this is where the criticisms leveled against Augustine hit home, particularly the criticism that he privileges the one essence over the persons. Saying that the Father has 'his own' wisdom is not exactly 'privileging' unity over plurality, but Augustine leaves open the possibility that the Father has some surplus goodness left over that is not exhaustively poured out in the Son, that is not wholly expressed in his being Father...

Athanasius points, I think, in another direction, a path towards cognitive rest, if not 'resolution.' He insists that the Father's wisdom simply *is* the Son, as is his power. This might be taken in two ways. On one view, the Father truly is nothing without the Son. Of course, since the Son is begotten of the Father, the Son is nothing without the Father either. Of course, too, the Father never has been without the Son, who is his own Word, 'proper' to his essence, so the Father has never been without his power, wisdom, goodness, being. Yet the Father's attributes are utterly dependent on the existence of the Son and are realized in the Son, just as much as the sun is realized and is light because of the radiance that supplements it. On this interpretation, God is radically dependent internally. I *am* before I am a father; I am apart from at least some of my human relations; I am more than my fatherhood. The heavenly Father *is not* before or apart from being Father; the person Paul calls 'God' is not God except as he is Father of the Son. On another interpretation, Athanasius is saying that the Father has 'his own' wisdom, but that wisdom is paternal wisdom, which means wisdom that exists in the Father (*ad se*) only as it is the wisdom poured out for and

<sup>137</sup> Ibid 3.56

<sup>138</sup> Stanley P. Rosenberg, 'Interpreting Atonement in Augustine's Preaching', edited by Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James, *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers' Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p.233 – 238. It is notable that the editors of this book wanted to honor Dr. Roger Nicole, an American evangelical theologian, who upheld the penal substitution view. Rosenberg, however, recognizes that Augustine cannot be pressed into this editorial purpose.

manifest in the Son. The Son too has ‘his own’ wisdom, but has that wisdom only as receptive wisdom, received eternally from the Father. Each of the persons shares all the same attributes, and these attributes are their ‘own,’ but these attributes are ‘inflected’ relationally, ‘held’ by each person distinctly as a person. All the Father’s attributes are inflected paternally, the Son’s filially, the Spirit’s spiritually.

Augustine would agree that there is not the slightest sliver of space between the Father and the Son, just as he would not allow the slightest sliver of space between the Father and his attributes. But for Athanasius, those two statements are identical: there is not the slightest sliver of space between the Father and his attributes because he has all that he has *in the Son*, who is proper to his essence. Augustine believes as strongly as Athanasius in an eternal radiance from the light of the Father. Yet Augustine is still capable of conceiving an unsupplemented origin: the Father ‘in himself’ having attributes ‘in himself,’ the light without radiance, the fountain without the stream. Augustine seems to leave a small crack open for thinking that the Father has something that is ‘his own,’ something that appears more intimate and intrinsic to his being than the Son. Athanasius will have none of this, and so he is more radically trinitarian, because he does not envision any glimmer of life for the Father that is not realized in the Son. In slight but significant contrast to Augustine, he sees that the Scriptures entail the conclusion that ‘*the Son is the Father’s All*’; and nothing was in the Father before the Word (*Discourses* 3.67, emphasis added). For the Father, too, it is all about the Son, all about the eternal Word that became flesh.<sup>139</sup>

If the Son *is* the Power of the Father, then what Power is there from which the Father judges or punishes the Son? If the Son *is* the proper Essence and inheritor of all that the Father *is* except the Father’s divine personhood, then what leverage point is there from which the Father can forsake the Son? Such things are quite impossible. Yet this is precisely what penal substitution requires. God the Father – or, in more careful formulations, God as a whole – must have some ‘power’ of his own / God’s own, which is then applied to the Son in judgment and wrath. One can see why Athanasius’ view of the Trinity could not possibly support that view.

Leithart makes these further remarks about these ‘Western’ Augustinian and ‘Eastern’ Athanasian views of the Trinity by voicing his appreciation of Athanasius:

‘But I believe another Athanasian insight is more fruitful. Above, I suggested that Athanasius’ trinitarian theology is more radically trinitarian than that of Augustine, since the latter appears to leave space to consider the Father ‘in himself,’ not sheerly as Father of the Son. To use Athanasius’ terminology, Augustine does not grasp as clearly as Athanasius that the Son is ‘proper’ to the Father, as intimate and intrinsic to the Father’s being as any wisdom of power the Father could call his ‘own.’ Augustine finds it nonsensical to say that the Father can beget his own wisdom, unless he has some prior wisdom of his own to confer. But that, it seems, is to fall into an Arian paradigm, and to run into Athanasius’ critique of the ‘double wisdom’ of Asterius. If the Father has ‘his own’ wisdom, which is eternally conferred on the Son, which is then also his Wisdom, then we are multiplying Wisdoms. That will not do. God is one, and his Wisdom must be one.’<sup>140</sup>

Whether or not Athanasius’ understanding of the Trinity is the most faithful one is a topic for a much lengthier discussion. Suffice to say here, however, that I believe I have marshalled enough evidence to accomplish a much more specific goal. I believe I have discredited the claim of any penal substitution supporter that the great bishop of Alexandria, the Emperor-defying defender of Nicaea, would have supported it. Very contrary to Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, he would have vehemently disagreed with it, and probably anathematized it. Quoting from Peter Leithart has the additional benefit, for my purpose, of providing my readers with an example of a penal substitution advocate who respects Athanasius enough to be honest. Not only does Athanasius not speak of atonement in the legal-penal paradigm, but instead he employs a medical-ontological paradigm. Athanasius would have rejected any suggestion that a *separation* opened up between the Father and the Son *in any sense*; or that at the cross, the Father suddenly acted *upon* the Son rather than continued to act *in and through* the Son by the Spirit; or that the Son had a separate consciousness from the Father such that Jesus lost his awareness of the Father.<sup>141</sup> Penal substitution did not exist in

<sup>139</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.75 – 77 intriguingly also describes the impact of Augustine’s version of the Trinity on Thomas Aquinas and other western theologians: ‘We can see how the pressure of this argument led Thomas and others to conclude that the persons simply are their relations, top-to-bottom: the Father is Father all the way down, the Son is simply and sheerly Son.’

<sup>140</sup> Ibid p.86

<sup>141</sup> Ibid p.123 – 125, where Leithart explores Athanasius’ attempts to explain Jesus’ apparent and self-professed ignorance of certain matters.

the mind of Athanasius, and *could not have existed*. Everything else in his theological system would have rejected it.

In fact, the development of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds of 325 AD and 381 AD rest on what I am calling medical substitutionary atonement. The bishops in the first two Ecumenical Councils were guided by the larger theological thought structure which is described by the phrase deployed by Gregory of Nazianzus, ‘That which is not assumed is not healed.’ If true divinity did not personally unite with true humanity in the person of Jesus, then there is no salvation. Looking at the theological structure from the standpoint of its ‘atonement theology,’ we can see that the definition operating in the mind of Athanasius is that the eternal Son of God, who is one substance with the Father, shared our fallen human nature in order that we might share his healed human nature, by the Spirit. This is exactly what I am labelling ‘medical substitutionary atonement,’ or ‘ontological substitutionary atonement,’ although it has certainly gone by other names.

Looking towards an examination of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds of 325 and 381 AD, we can begin to ask a related question. Do those earliest and greatest Creeds of the church foreclose the possibility of penal substitution? The word *homoousion*, which means ‘same in being,’ was applied to the relationship between the Father and the Son in a certain way and for a certain purpose. Famously, even the word *homoiousion*, differing by one iota, literally, and meaning ‘similar or like in being,’ was not sufficient for Athanasius, even though he was eager to appeal to those bishops in that camp, to win them over. If the arguments and conceptual understanding of Athanasius can be taken as determinative on this matter, and if the logic behind the word choice of *homoousion* over *homoiousion* operated in such a way so as to preclude the possibility of a separation between the Father and the Son, or the idea that the Son shared ‘attributes equal to the Father’s attributes,’ or had ‘stuff in common’ with the Father, but acted in a way so as to not reveal the Father personally, then penal substitution is excluded on the grounds of the Nicene Creed itself. And that would be quite an obstacle to overcome.

Finally, glancing ahead to the subsequent history of the church, we must acknowledge that it is the structure of theological thought, or ‘systematic theology,’ as it were, that has seemed more important to the church than the literal ‘name of Jesus’ or the word for ‘God.’ Even the English name ‘Jesus’ and the English word ‘God’ can become malleable ciphers with very different underlying definitions to various people. We need only think about what the name ‘Jesus’ means to Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses. One of the many remarkable facts about the growth of the church is that Christians were perfectly happy to contextualize the name of Jesus into whatever language and culture they encountered. And so from the Hebrew *Yeshua*, which carried the meaning ‘YHWH saves’ from the Hebrew verb root for ‘rescue, deliver’ evidenced in the naming of Jesus in Matthew 1:21, we have the Greek *Iesous*, the Latin *Iesus*, the Arabic *Isa*, and so on. Those names lost the conceptual link in their native tongues between the name and its meaning, but maintained a rough sound equivalent to the Hebrew. But it would be just as accurate to translate his name into the English *Joshua*, as some advocate, to remain closer to the Hebrew meaning and bypass the Greek altogether. Similarly, Christians were also eager to translate the word for ‘God’ from the Hebrew *Adonai*, *Elohim*, and *Yahweh* along with the Greek *Theos* into other languages: the Arabic *Allah*, the Korean *Hananim*, etc. But they perceived that the inevitable cultural baggage (e.g. relational distance and apathy, baleful authoritarianism, etc.) people heard in those words, as they carried them from their previous religious or philosophical contexts into a Christian context, could only be pruned off as people learned the biblical story and the story of theology which reached moments of clarity at Nicaea and Constantinople. This was, in fact, what happened as the early theologians realized they had to use the Greek and Latin words available to them, but they had to stretch or change their meaning.<sup>142</sup> So Christians were at least as determined to teach the overall conceptual structure of theology, if not more so, as they were to proclaim the ‘name of Jesus.’

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Athanasius, under the assumption that the divine mind meant omniscience, wants to actually deny Jesus’ human ignorance to bring his human mind into oneness with the divine mind of the Father.

<sup>142</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, p.204 says, ‘When our ordinary terms are applied to God they must be *stretched* beyond their natural sense and reference and must be employed in such a way that they indicate more than the actual terms can naturally specify.’ (emphasis his) Torrance is quoting Athanasius *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.23; 4.27; *De synodis* 42; *De decretis* 12; *Ad Marcellinum* 11 – 13; *Ad Serapionem* 1.8 – 9, 16 – 20. See also *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.3, ‘For terms do not disparage His Nature; rather that Nature draws to Itself those terms and changes them. For terms are not prior to essences, but essences are first, and terms second.’ And 2.6, where Athanasius discusses the meaning of the word ‘faithful’ in such a way that he anticipates the exegetical nuance N.T. Wright sees in the word ‘righteousness’ – that when we are talking about humans being ‘faithful’ or ‘righteous’ the words mean one thing, and when we are talking about God being ‘faithful’ or ‘righteous’ it means something related but different: ‘But when the saints spoke thus, they were not thinking of God in a human way, but they acknowledged two senses of the word ‘faithful’ in Scripture, first ‘believing,’ then ‘trustworthy,’ of which the former belongs to man, the latter to God.’

Athanasius intrigues me as a theologian, therefore, for another reason: He was deeply concerned about evangelism. His opening salvos in *Against the Heathen* are about the nature of good and evil as his pagan contemporaries would have engaged the questions and peered in on Christian faith with questions of their own. Where did human evil come from? How could God not be evil if the creation, especially humanity, has evil in it? How could God be good if the biblical story narrates such and such? What are the metaphysical alternatives for configuring good and evil? Athanasius took time to answer those questions. In that sense, Athanasius' two-volume work seems to be the fourth century precursor to C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, which also opens with the logical options for understanding good and evil, and the roles humanity and God would play in each option. Athanasius desired to present to his pagan world a truly good God who was defeating human evil without Himself ever becoming evil. He clearly believed that this was the only 'god' – as well as the only rendering of the Christian God – who had truly good news for the world.