

St. Athanasius of Alexandria

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296-373) is, by almost all accounts, the most important theologian of the Fourth Century. Athanasius is best known for his articulation and defense of the theology behind the Creed of the Council of Nicaea, 325.

I Brief biography

Born c. 299, d. 373.

Attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 as a presbyter, assisting his bishop, Bp. Alexander of Alexandria. He was consecrated Bp. In 328, the minimum age for a bishop, and maybe even a bit below it.

His election as bishop was immediately contested.

Strong opposition from those opposed to the Creed of Nicaea.

He died in 373, having been bishop for 46 years, and exiled five times for a total of 17 years, mainly because of agitation against him by Arians at the imperial court.

II Features of his life and writings

His comprehensive vision of the saving plan of God: *Against the Pagans* and *On the Incarnation of The Word of God*

The work functions almost like a catechism, offering a primer in Nicene theology in a form that could inspire people of faith to live and proclaim the gospel.

At the same time, it constitutes a response to those who object to the scandal of the cross, showing that “the cross was not the ruin but the salvation of creation,” and that “he who ascended the cross is the Word of God and the Saviour of the universe.”

“It is necessary first to speak about the creation of the universe and its maker, God.”

Creation as a work of God’s goodness, especially his *philanthropia*.

God is satisfied in Himself as Father and Son and Holy Spirit. If the Son is not divine, God’s being is dependent on the world.

“Knowing that the free choice of human beings could turn either way, he secured beforehand, by a law and a set place, the grace given. For bringing them into his own paradise, he gave them a law, so that if they guarded the grace, and remained good, they might have the life of paradise—without sorrow, pain or care—besides having the promise of their incorruptibility in heaven; but if they were to transgress and turning away become wicked, they would know themselves enduring the corruption of death according to nature, and no longer live in paradise, but thereafter dying outside of it, would remain in death and in corruption.”

“It was absurd, on the one hand, that having spoken God should prove to be lying; that is, having legislated that the human being would die by death, if he were to transgress the commandment, yet after the transgression he were not to die but rather this sentence dissolved. For God would not be true if, after saying that we would die, the human being did not die. On the other hand, it was improper that what had once been made rational and partakers of the Word should perish, and once again return to non-being through corruption. It was not worthy of the goodness of God that those created by him should be corrupted through the deceit wrought by the devil upon human beings. And it was supremely improper that the workmanship of God in human beings should disappear either through their own negligence or through the deceit of demons.”

“Having mercy upon our race. . . . He takes for himself a body and that not foreign to our own. For he did not wish simply to be in a body, nor did he wish merely to appear. . . . But he takes that which is ours. . . . Although being himself powerful and the creator of the universe, he prepared for himself in the Virgin a body as a temple, and made it his own, as an instrument, making himself known and dwelling in it. And thus taking from ours that which is like, since all were liable to the corruption of death, delivering it over to death on behalf of all, he offered it to the Father, doing this in his love for human beings, so that, on the one hand, with all dying in him

the law concerning corruption in human beings might be undone (its power being fully expended in the lordly body and no longer having any ground against similar human beings), and on the other hand, that as human beings had turned towards corruption he might turn them again to incorruptibility and give them life from death, by making the body his own and by the grace of the resurrection banishing death from them as straw from the fire.”

The primacy of Scripture in his theology

Athanasius says *consubstantial* is not the preferred term for the relation in the Creed: the better terms are Father and Son; *consubstantial* protects the meaning of those terms.

The Letter to Marcellinus – a brief letter to his friend recounting what he had learned “from a certain old man” about understanding and praying the psalms.

One makes the words of the psalms one’s own; one is given the words, but those words then enter into the one praying them and thereby become his own prayers. They are “like a mirror to those singing them.”

The psalms change us as we pray them. Even the Messianic psalms portray to us the Savior for our imitation in a way that shapes even our emotions and dispositions.

Different psalms are fruitful for different occasions – repentance, experience of oppression, celebration and thanksgiving.

Promotion of the ascetic (and charismatic) life

Athanasius’ life of Antony of the desert was perhaps the most important book in the early church.

Athanasius himself was drawn to this life, and forged strong links with Antony, who at one point actually came to Alexandria to support Athanasius.

Antony in Athanasius’ work is the great portrait of the renewed man, through whom Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit works wonders of healing, deliverance, prophecy. Indeed, the main proof of the truth of the gospel is the contemporary acts of Christ in the Church: conversions, spiritual power, martyrdom.

Yet at the same time, this is not irrational life; Reason rule in Antony, an illiterate wise man.

III Athanasius and Our Times

The importance of the Incarnation

Athanasius upholds for us the absolute, non-negotiable character of the Creed.

The belief in the Incarnation holds the gospel together as a coherent story that makes sense of our world and our experience of it.

Our gospel is unflinchingly supernatural and theocentric, and so the best news for humanity.

The charismatic vitality of the Christian life

As indicated in the life of Antony, the gospel’s power has to be evident in the lives of believers, above all in the life of virtue, wisdom, internal harmony.

Spiritual life is a ongoing, constant combat, lived in the power and working of the Holy Spirit or the human being will simply fail. It requires strenuous effort, but not natural effort alone.

Putting First Things First: Athanasius the Ecumenist

In his strenuous efforts over the course of 45 years, Athanasius was uncompromising on the central truths of the gospel. But he was flexible and ready to dialogue with those who may have differed in vocabulary or emphasis.

His efforts to unite East and West in support of Nicaea were decisive.