



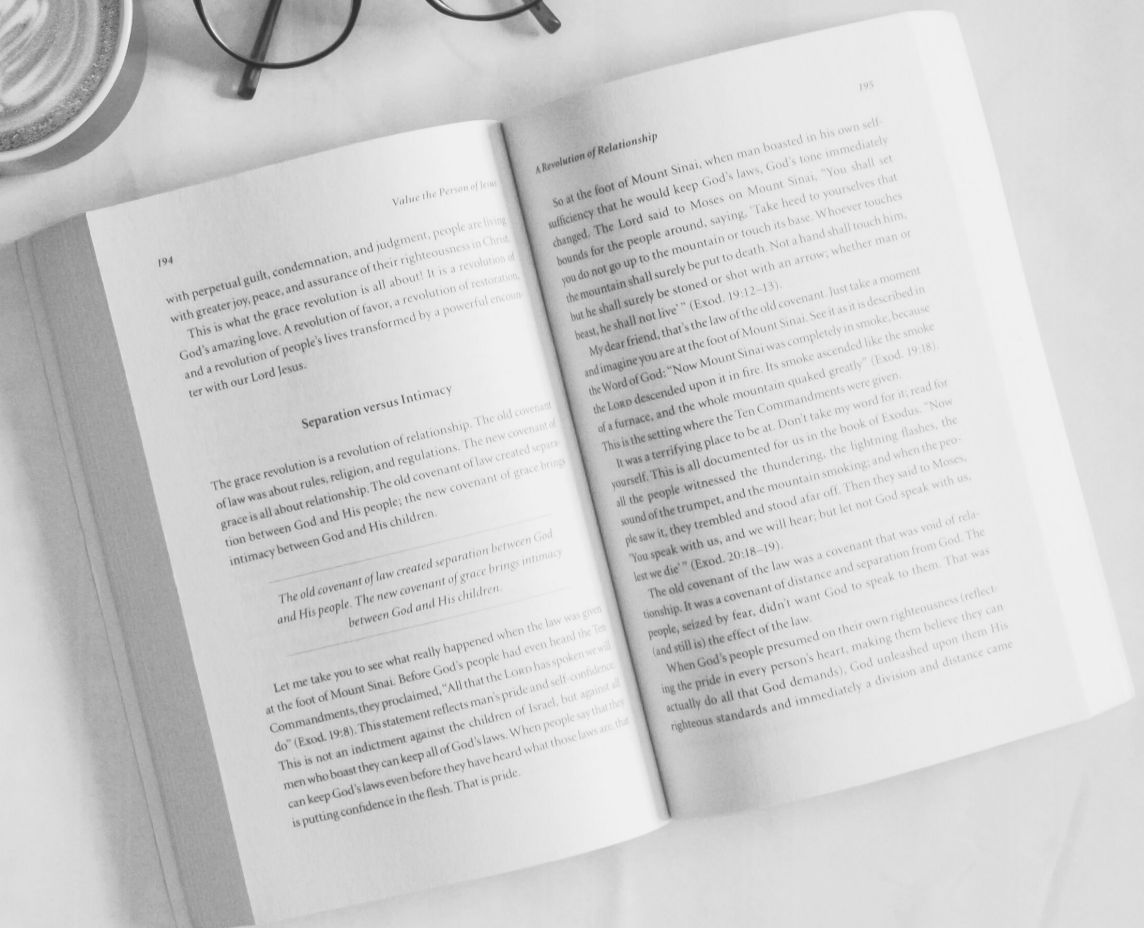
# The Paideia Center

FOR WHOLE LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

## DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE



### ATHANASIUS, ON THE INCARNATION



# DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE

ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA  
*On the Incarnation*



## INTRODUCTION

Before there was “Athanasius *contra mundum*” there was the Athanasius who wrote the Christian classic *On the Incarnation*. Athanasius was a larger-than-life figure living in a momentous century. During his time Constantine came to power and legalized Christianity, rapidly changing the fortunes of the Church within the Roman Empire. Constantine was also responsible for convoking the first Council of Nicaea in AD 325, which has become known to history as the First Ecumenical Council. If granting Christianity *licit* status sparked the public institutional growth of the Church within the fourth century, the Nicene Creed sparked a flood of theological discourse that soon engulfed the century. Athanasius was present at the Council of Nicaea as secretary to the the bishop of Alexandria’s. Three year later he was elected as bishop himself, becoming one of the most important – *and controversial* – ecclesiastical and theological leaders of the fourth century.

Ecclesiastically, Athanasius was famously exiled five times from his episcopal see. Theologically, he sharpened his rhetorical swords against Arians (see especially his *Orations against the Arians* written between AD 339 – 343), and later Pneumatomachians (“Spirit fighters”; see his *Letters to Serapion* written ca. 357). Put simply, “Arians” denied the full equality of the Son with the Father, “Pneumatomachians” denied the fully equality of the Spirit with the Son and the Father. Athanasius’ thick ecclesiastical skin, as well as his unrelenting courage in opposing theology that did not properly honor the Son or the Spirit as God, earned him the moniker “Athanasius *contra mundum*.”

But before there was forty years of Athanasius *contra mundum*, there was the Athanasius who wrote *On the Incarnation*. *On the Incarnation* was a part of his first known writing (ca. 328 – 335), likely penned soon after he became bishop. It does not possess the polemical tone of his later works, nor the obvious theological targets (Arius is not mentioned, for example). It is, rather, a straightforward yet elegant theological meditation on the divine Word made flesh. Toward the end of the work, Athanasius made his purpose clear: to provide “an elementary instruction and an outline of the faith in Christ and his divine manifestation to us” (56).

One of the noteworthy features of *On the Incarnation* is it sets into place the foundational pillars of Athanasius’ theological vision—pillars that remain remarkably steady throughout his

career. Thus, readers who grasp what Athanasius had to say in *On the Incarnation* will be able to anticipate many lines of thought he carried into subsequent writings.

**Note: parenthetical references refer to sections, not pages, within the text.**

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

For other *primary sources*, see especially:

Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius*. New York: Routledge, 2004. \*In addition to an overview of Athanasius's life and writings, this volume provides fresh translations of key primary texts such as *On the Creed* and important sections of *Against the Arians*.

Robertson, Archibald, ed. and trans. *Athanasius: Selects Works and Letters*. NPNF 4. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. \*This contains all of *Against the Arians*.

DelCogliano, Mark, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz and Lewis Ayres, trans. *Works on the Spirit: Athanasius' Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit and Didymus's On the Holy Spirit*. Popular Patristics Series 43. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011. \*This volume contains a very helpful introduction along with Athanasius's important later work on the Holy Spirit.

### *Important Secondary Sources:*

Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1998. \*If you want to go a deeper than the overview found in Anatolios's 2004 volume listed above, this is a very illuminative systematic study of Athanasius's theology.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. \*This has a probing chapter on Athanasius.

Ayres, Lewis. *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. \*This has helpful material on Athanasius that sets him within the larger arguments of the fourth century.

Behr, John. *The Nicene Faith, Part 1*. Formation of Christian Theology. Vol. 2. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004. \*Behr provides close readings of Athanasius.

### *Other helpful monographs on Athanasius:*

Gwynn, David M. *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*. Christian Theology in Context. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Leithart, Peter J. *Athanasius*. Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Spirituality. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.

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## PART OF A PAIR: SUMMARIZING AGAINST THE HEATHEN

*On the Incarnation* was a *part* of Athanasius's first known writing because it actually has a companion piece that preceded it entitled *Against the Heathen*. From the start of the twofold work, it is clear Athanasius's intention was to place the redemptive work of Christ in the broad sweep of God's work in creation and history. This was in order to, on the one hand, face the objections of pagans head on, and, on the other hand, to establish the reasonableness of orthodox faith. Since *Against the Heathen* in some sense forms the background of *On the Incarnation*, in this section I will provide a brief overview of its arguments. The numbers in parentheses refer to the various sections of this work.

Fundamental to Athanasius's vision in *Against the Heathen* is that God is the creator of the world and he created it *ex nihilo*. As Athanasius makes his way through his arguments, he shows how all things, in one way or another, go back to the importance of God being creator. **First of all, God is good and so his creation is essentially good since its origin is alone.** If evil were in the nature of things, then it could be traced back to an ultimate source or creator, therefore making two Gods. But by maintaining God as the ultimate creator and his creation as good (since coming from a good God), then the source of humanity's ills is not in the creator or the way he set things up. And, if God created all things *ex nihilo*, he did it out of his own will and power, without any compulsion or assistance from the outside. In his articulation of creation, Athanasius is setting up the logic of redemption and why Jesus Christ is fit as a redeemer. Central to this logic is the power it takes to create *ex nihilo*.

The status of evil is clear: it does not belong to the essence of the created order– it has no “substantive and independent existence” (6). The fact of evil in the world is a result of human beings lowering their eyes of the soul from contemplation of the good to its “contraries” (4). Furthermore, the soul directs the body to partake in bodily pleasures and lusts that further its path away from God. Involved in this direction away from God is a loss of the proper goal of knowledge of God, so that humanity wanders increasingly away from what is right and true and the soul is darkened. **As the soul is darkened, it cannot get beyond what is seen, therefore cut off from the knowledge of the God who is unseen.** In Athanasius's explanation of idolatry, he sees its origin in a progression downward from what the soul “ought to behold” down to glorifying only what can be seen (8).

The bulk of *Against the Heathen* details this idolatry and the absurdity of it. In categorizing the varieties of idolatry, Athanasius continually points out the human being's role in anything referred to as a god. For example, if a physical idol were truly a god, wouldn't the maker of it be superior to it? And if so, then why do the makers die? Furthermore, in paganism there are a variety of gods who are not of one mind but divide people and nations. These turn out to be, according to Athanasius, nothing more than varieties of human passions, with nothing ultimate holding them together. The worship of nature, which Athanasius considers a higher form of idolatry, is condemned because nature is shown to be interdependent, held in a delicate balance where one particular part cannot be singled out. The whole, too, cannot be worshipped because then one would be worshipping a combination of parts. God is simple and, if made up of parts, he is destined to be divided again according to the “natural tendency of the parts to separation” (28). As much as Athanasius demonstrates how nature itself cannot be worshipped, he does believe there is a lot to be said for nature directing us to the worship of God.

The entire work of *Against the Heathen*, along with *On the Incarnation*, is to provide an apology for the cross of Christ. In the midst of that larger apology, he spends a great deal of energy defending the rationality of worshipping God based on the structure of creation. The order, proportion, and arrangement of the universe points clearly to someone who ordered incompatible things and continually holds them together. According to Athanasius, only one God could do this—just as one is led from a painting to the artists, so should we be led by the order and beauty of the universe to its maker. Some knowledge of God, then, can be obtained through his works.

But knowledge of God is also obtained through the Scriptures. At the end of *Against the Greeks*, Athanasius shows from the Scriptures the Word as the one who ordered all things through creation—the word, or reason, of God is what gives coherence to the creation and sustains creation. In his exegesis of Gen. 1 where God the Father is speaking using the imperative mood, Athanasius asserts that this is the Father speaking to another, clearly seen in his use of “Let us” in Gen. 1:27. This is the Word to whom the Father is speaking.

As an agent in creation and as the Father’s “interpreter and messenger,” the Word shares with the Father power and glory (45). But he does not possess these just by way of “participation”, nor were these given to him from outside of himself. In fact, according to Athanasius, Jesus Christ possess all that he is because he is all that he possesses:

“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, as they are to those who partake of him and are made wise by him, and receive power and reason in him; but he is the very Wisdom, very Word, and very own Power of the Father, very Light, very Truth, very Righteousness, very Virtue, and in truth his express Image, and Brightness, and Resemblance” (46).

The equality and unity of the Father and Son ensures their unity of purpose and work. But the Word has the peculiar role of revealing him who begat him.

This is a public revelation that is shown day by day “by means of the organization and life of all things, which is his work” (47). The Son, then, is the one who dispenses knowledge of God, which brings humans out of the darkness and into fellowship with God. But how is this received in human beings? The role of image of God in Athanasius’s program is what makes the knowledge of God possible and ties together the creation and creator. As much as God stands outside his creation and is separate from it, with his Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, he created human beings in his image. The image is found in the soul where humans can know God. The soul is able to know God in proportion to its purity and the more unfocused it is on bodily lusts. The knowledge of God is lost as the soul attaches itself to bodily things and forgets its true nature. If humans are to return to knowledge and be saved from the darkness of the soul, they must return to the Word.

The bulk of *Against the Heathen* detailed the idolatry of glorifying only what the eyes can see instead of glorifying the one true God. Athanasius was keen to point out the absurdity of this: human beings have the power and ingenuity to make idols yet pretend that idols have the greater power. *Against the Greeks* set the irrationality of worshipping what is created in contrast to the cogency of letting what is created point to the Creator and his unmatched power.

If one were to finish reading *Against the Heathen* without proceeding on to *On the Incarnation*, there would be an understanding of the large theological vision involving creation, movement away from God, and the role of the knowledge of God through the Word and the image of God, but one would not have much detail on the work of Christ in redemption. This is reserved for *On the Incarnation* after the important theological framework has been established in the first half of the work.



## 1ST MONTH

Pages 49-60

### ON THE INCARNATION

Below is an overview of the text of *On the Incarnation*. **Note again that parenthetical references refer to sections within the text, not to page numbers.** You can follow this link to something I (Blair Smith) wrote that attempts to summarize Athanasius's argument in this work through four "pairs": <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/on-the-incarnation>.

### INTRODUCTION - DIVINE DILEMMA REGARDING LIFE AND DEATH

*On the Incarnation* begins by reasserting the all-important role of creation in the economy of God's work of redemption. The fact that the Word carries out redemption is because of his initial relation to the creature through creation. When the Word becomes incarnate for the salvation of human beings, it is not out of necessity or from his nature. But because the Word fashioned the world, it is not "inconsonant" for God to bring salvation to the world through same one with whom he fashioned it (1).

With Athanasius' reaffirmation of creation, he addresses opposing views that were available of creation and stresses again the need for creation *ex nihilo*. Other theories "invest God with weakness" and do not hold up his power. Athanasius uses Scripture, particularly Genesis and Hebrews, to support his view. He also uses the Shepherd of Hermas. As in *Against the Heathens*, the Word is the agent by which God creates. Athanasius moves on to assert that humanity has been made in his image and for relationship with him. A very biblical picture is painted, then, as to the move from blessedness in relation to God to the corruption of death. Whereas *Against the Heathens*, focused more on its explanation of evil terms of humanity lowering their eyes from contemplating God to lusting after what was near, *On the Incarnation* starts out speaking in the biblical frame of a people who have entered the corruption of death as a result of disobeying God's law in the Garden.

But this corruption of death is not inconsistent with humanity's nature. **What appears to initially hold he immortality of human beings for Athanasius is the clarity of the image of God in them.** This is abandoned when contemplation of the divine is lost, then human beings are left to the natural result of their created nature. Athanasius, in line with *Against the Heathens*, then shows the progression of wickedness that results from losing the clarity of the image of God. It is in fact disappearing and death gains a "legal" hold over humanity. As Athanasius gets to this point, however, he turns to the goodness of God. The goodness of God, according to Athanasius, makes it seem unseemly that he would let rational humanity spiral into nothingness through sin.

God's power and goodness compel him not to leave humanity in ruin—power because to do

nothing to his good creation shows weakness, goodness because it is unseemly to leave humanity wallowing in ruin when he has the power to do something about it. But how will God do something about humanity's plight in line with his justice? Repentance for humanity is thrown out as an option by Athanasius, but is shown to be insufficient as it merely stays them from acts of sin and does not "call men back from what is their nature" (7). The gravity of the situation calls for the creator, the Word of God, to be the "re-creator" and sufficient to suffer on behalf of all since he made all.

Thus, Jesus Christ takes on our nature as an "instrument" in order to turn humanity from its incorruption back to God through "the appropriation of his body and by the grace of the resurrection" (8). Through the taking on a body with the incorruptible Word, corruption can be reversed in humanity. But a debt must also be repaid, and this can only be done by the death of Jesus Christ and the "grace of the resurrection" (9). By this work of Christ taking of flesh and suffering on humanity's behalf, all of humanity gains a dignity and the possibility of incorruption. There is a reasonableness to this work of Jesus Christ because of his prior relationship to humanity through creation and Athanasius bolsters this with various appeals to biblical texts as well (10).

## ***DISCUSSION PROMPTS***

- Discuss the 'logic' Athanasius establishes between creation and redemption. What are the dangers of not having a theology grounded in creation?
- What three opinions about "the making of the universe and the creation of all things" does Athanasius discuss in section 2? What do you make of his critique of these three views?
- Do contemporary accounts of redemption and incarnation (written or preached) provide sufficient grounding in creation? If not, how does this affect those accounts?
- Would the Word of God become incarnate if humanity had not sinned? Why or why not? What do you think Athanasius would have said to this question?
- What is the "divine dilemma" Athanasius introduces in section 6? Why is mere repentance inadequate but the incarnation is adequate? Does this argument have weight today? Why or why not?

## 2ND MONTH

Pages 60-83



### DIVINE DILEMMA REGARDING KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE - THE DEATH OF CHRIST AND THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

Athanasius shifts from a focus of Christ reversing the corruptibility of humanity to his reversal of the loss of the image of God. Knowledge of God was gained through the special rational capacities given to humanity, but these were increasingly darkened and the happiness of communion with God lost as humanity invented evil and roamed away from God. Humanity did this even while there were certain natural clues to the rule of God present in creation, and also there were holy people, prophets and the law given through the Jews. All these presented avenues for the knowledge of God. Nevertheless, man was drawn by more immediate things and turned away from these. Thus, they turned away from reason and the knowledge of God. Was God to leave humanity in this state?

By sending the actual image in which human beings are created, God renews the part of human beings by which they can know God. This comes in natural sequence after first dealing with death and corruption, these things needing to be dealt with first in order for human beings to be renewed through the knowledge of God. Seeing that humanity lowered their eyes and wallowed in their senses, Christ took on flesh in order to “center their senses on himself” (16). By this he brings the knowledge of God into all things, making more clear the invisible God by means of his visible works.

Jesus does this while incarnate, but by being incarnate he does not forfeit his power over all creation. That is to say, he is not circumscribed by the body—he still upholds the universe in his providence, being fully with the Father alone. However, he uses his body for the particular purpose of redemption and through his works to show his state as the Son of God and gives humanity something clear to see in order to recover their sight. By observing the particular acts of Jesus Christ while on earth, they may then be directed to his rule over all. After showing the necessity of the incarnation for the healing of death and corruption and for opening up the knowledge of God by revealing the true image of God, Athanasius turns to the role of the cross in the incarnate Christ’s work.

The death and resurrection of Christ are held together by Athanasius, the one paying the debt for the death deserved by all and releasing humanity from its curse, the other showing victory over death and a witness to the incorruptibility available to all. A good part of heart of the *On the Incarnation* works out the details of this. Death, for Jesus Christ, came not from his nature by “hostile counsels” who were his enemies (24). Any inherent sickness or orientation to death would have made him unfit to heal and bring life, so these must come upon him from the outside. He had to enter this curse so that humanity may be released from the curse. Athanasius

demonstrates why he believes crucifixion was especially suited for showing this curse. But so as not to stay in the curse of death, he quickly rose again and showed his victory over death. Thus, the followers of him will also show strength and courage in the face of death, as he demonstrates from the history of the church. This is against our bodily nature, which naturally fears death. But through faith in the one who conquered death, humans gain the same incorruptibility and life. His disciples then become signs of the cross and victory over death. The resurrection power of Christ is shown in what results from his work, and this should not be surprising, according to Athanasius, because it is in God's nature to have life and even while Christ died according to the flesh, he even remained God and confounded death through this power.

## **DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

- Does Athanasius give a sufficient account of Jesus Christ's humanity? Discuss in the context of his argument.
- Does Athanasius use the *imago Dei* differently than you are used to in theology? What do you find helpful or unhelpful about Athanasius's approach?
- Can you identify the different reasons why Jesus died a public rather than a private death (sections 21-25)?
- Define paradox. How does paradox help illumine the truths of the incarnation?
- How does Athanasius's famous line "He was incarnate that we might become god" function within the course of his argument about the cross and resurrection? Do you think the contemporary church needs to attend to this message more earnestly? Why or why not?



## 3RD MONTH

Pages 84-110

### REFUTATION OF THE JEWS - CONCLUSION

Athanasius goes on to address “Jewish” and “Greek” objections to the incarnation. In refuting the Jews, he gives a scriptural defense in addressing the prophecies of the Messiah. In addressing the Greeks, he first approaches their objections from the standpoint of their philosophies. Then, he shows the effects of Christ’s work in the dissolution of paganism since Christ, and the positive influence effected on humanity compared to the words of the pagans. Christ’s power is shown to truly influence and effect change, and this is a proof of its truthfulness.

Before closing his treatise, Athanasius affirms that the idolatry which was so prevalent as detailed in *Against the Heathen* is in his time steadily decreasing due to the appearance of the true Son of God. This is proof, for Athanasius, that Christ is truly is “God the Word,” and the “Power of God” (55). Athanasius then points his readers to the Scriptures to learn the details of the sketch which he has drawn, but he also warns that one must have a pure soul and that “virtue which is according to Christ” in order understand more fully the nature of the Word of God.

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- What are the four objections to Christ’s manner of death and how does Athanasius answer them?
- What atonement theories to you see in Athanasius’s argument? How do they ‘fit together’ in explaining the cross? Do you think one or more of these could use more emphasis in today’s church? Why or why not?
- What do you make of Athanasius’s argument for the dissolution of paganism? Does it still hold up? Even if it doesn’t to some extent, is there something to learn from it?
- Athanasius, like most Church Fathers, stresses the importance of the purity and virtue of the reader in understanding the Word of God. What do you think of this, and what might it say about the relationship between sanctification and the interpretation of Scripture?