ATHANASIUS’ USE OF PAUL IN HIS
DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

BY

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There is nearly universal agreement among scholars of fourth-century christology that Athanasius ignored the human soul of Jesus Christ, an omission that bodes poorly for a sacrificial understanding of his death. I argue here that Athanasian soteriology is a theology of redemption based on the sacrificial death of Jesus and that it is an outgrowth of Paul’s doctrine of reconciliation “in Christ.” This Pauline salvation motif enabled Athanasius to reject the moral exemplarist teaching of Arius, a doctrine that attempted to combine the radical monotheism of Judaism with subordination of the Son to the Father as taught by Justin, Clement and Origen.

By promoting the idea that salvation is God’s own act of “self-reconciliation” 1 Athanasius followed four central tenets of Pauline soteriology: (1) “God in Christ” died for us; (2) reconciliation is an action of the divine Logos; (3) a Christian dies “with Christ” in baptism; and (4) a Christian lives “in Christ” through the combined effect of grace and ascetical struggle.2


2 For a discussion of the importance of an ethic of asceticism in the soteriology of

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Athanasius used these salvation motifs to affirm that the Logos is the acting subject of redemption, through the true humanity of Christ, a soteriological program that presumes the presence of a human soul. I will try to prove this thesis in the following way.

First, we will outline Athanasius' famous dictum concerning the purpose of the Incarnation: the Son became a man to die for the sins of all humanity. That the Messiah performs a divine/human sacrifice was certainly new to Christianity, and Athanasius relies heavily on the theological insights of Paul to explain it. Second, although he does not present a detailed description of Christ's anthropological make-up, by depicting Jesus' death as an expiatory sacrifice Athanasius demonstrates belief in the Lord's human soul. Third, by speaking of different aspects of Jesus' activities, some which are divine and others human, he clearly teaches the communicatio idiomatum doctrine. Finally, Athanasius' identification of two wills in Jesus further evidences a human soul, even though his dyothelitic depiction of Christ is rather simple.

The Word Became Flesh to Die for our Sins

Although Paul does not discuss the idea of "sacrifice" per se, Jesus' passion and death are primary points of reference for him. Indeed, he regarded Jesus' death and resurrection as the principal cause of salvation. The death of "God in Christ" ushered in a "new creation" of humanity, shattering the "dividing wall" separating Jew and Gentile (cf. Eph. 2:14-15) and nullifying "the curse of the law" (cf. Gal. 3:13a). Jesus' death was a sacrificial act signaling the beginning of partially "realized" eschatology, whose inchoate presence in the world resides in the resurrected body of Christ.

There is great interest in reassessing the significance of Christ's sacrifice.