

ON THE INCARNATION, Chapter 3

READING 1A (p. 37). Athanasius speaks of how God did not leave us “destitute of knowledge of himself,” for “they would be no better than the beasts, had they no knowledge save of earthly things.” And he explains that God gave us “a share in his own image... simply in order that through this gift of God-likeness in themselves they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word himself, and through him to apprehend the Father; which knowledge of their Maker is for men the only really happy and blessed life.” **READING 1B** (p. 38). Athanasius now tracks the descent of man, spiraling into greater and greater depravity and folly, worshipping idols and false gods, and “bringing themselves more and more under their insane control.” Yet, he notes, God “had not hidden himself from the sight of men now given the knowledge of himself in one way only; but rather he had unfolded it in many forms and in many ways.”

In the next section, Athanasius explains how, “though the grace of being made in his image was sufficient to give them knowledge of the Word and through him of the Father, as a safeguard against their neglect of his grace,” he provided three other means by which we might know him:

READING 2A (p. 39). By Looking (i.e., looking up at his work in creation).

READING 2B (p. 39). By Listening (i.e., listening to the words of his prophets).

READING 2C (p. 39). By Law-keeping (i.e., keeping his law, the pattern of life he approves for us).

And yet... **READING 2D** (p. 40). “So burdened were they with their wickednesses that they seemed rather to be brute beasts than reasonable men, reflecting the very likeness of the Word.”

READING 3A (p. 40). Athanasius sets forth the problem of “this dehumanizing of mankind,” and puts the question: What was God to do in light of such a disaster? [Keep in mind the structure of the book so far: in chapter 1, he set the foundation for the entire discussion by linking the Word’s work in redemption with his work in creation, reminding us that redemption is nothing less than new creation; in chapter 2, he set forth the first problem – that is, the *disappearing* of God’s image in the world, as mankind in its fall and folly hastened toward death, disorder, and nonbeing – and its resolution by means of the Incarnation, (a) to remove the corruption of our sin as the necessary first step of our redemption; and now, in chapter 3, he expands this by presenting the second problem – that is, the *dehumanizing* of mankind, as we operate in ignorance of who God is and who and what he created us to be – and its resolution in the same Incarnation, (b) to restore the creation by restoring his image born in creation (and us as conforming to that restored image) and (c) to renew us in the knowledge of him, teaching us concerning him.]

READINGS 3B and 3C (p. 41). Athanasius explains, first, how this removal, restoration, and renewal could only be accomplished by God, the Word, who created the world, and second, how it was necessary to remove sin and corruption from the tainted image before the image could be (positively) restored.

READING 4A (p. 41). Athanasius gives us an illustration of restoring a marred image.

READING 4B (p. 42). Now he turns to the problem of how the knowledge of God is to be renewed in us, given the fundamental problem with human beings, which dooms the notion that this can be accomplished by means of human education, i.e.: “You cannot put straight on others what is warped in yourself.” He then shows how looking to creation can’t be the answer, since it was proven insufficient in that “men had neglected to consider the heavens before, and now they were looking in the opposite direction.”

READING 4C (p. 42). Thus, in a body he comes to us, teaching us “who would not learn by any other means to know himself, the Word of God, and through him the Father.”

READING 5A (p. 43). Athanasius shows how God deals with us as a good teacher with his pupils, “coming down to their level and using simple means.” Specifically, the Word “became himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might apprehend the Father through the works which he, the Word of God, did in the body.” Wow! **READING 5B** (p. 43).

READING 6A (p. 44). In this section, Athanasius brings all this profundity together, explaining how, “when then the minds of men had fallen finally to the level of sensible things, the Word submitted himself to appear in a body, in order that he, as Man, might center their senses on himself, and convince them through his human acts that he himself is not man only but also God, the Word and Wisdom of the true God.” And he goes on to explain why, therefore, he came not simply to die, but also to live – not simply (negatively, as it were) to remove the corruption of sin, but (positively) to restore the image of God in creation and to renew that knowledge of God in us. In short, he came precisely to be visible! **READING 6B** (p. 44).

READING 7 (p. 45). Athanasius now enters into the deepest territory yet, concerning the paradox in all this that “when he moved in his body he did not cease also to direct the universe by his mind and thought.” He explores the relationship of his human-ness (working his unlimited power through the limited instrument of the body) with his continuing divinity, and shows how the divinity was not desecrated by being in the body, but how the body was consecrated by the presence of divinity in it. This is a marvelous, and powerful, conception that protects us from the opposed, but equally wrong, doctrines of both the Gnostics and the Arians (being both heretical reactions against the biblical teaching that the Word (God) became flesh (man) – in the former, the Word was God not not truly man, and in the latter, the Word was man but not truly God).

Finally, **READING 8** (p. 46)! Amen.