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Not ‘just forgiven’: how Athanasius overcomes the under-realised eschatology of evangelicalism

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During a sermon series on the New Testament book of Hebrews, one of the members in my church expressed frustration with our pastor’s repeated emphasis on the necessity of fruit-producing faith. Curious, I thought. Given the priority of perseverance in the book of Hebrews, our pastor’s emphasis seemed quite reasonable. But the congregant was having none of it. ‘Why can’t he realise Christians are no different than anybody else’, she said. ‘We’re just forgiven, that’s all. He’s looking for too much’.

‘Just forgiven’ – an appropriate catch-phrase for contemporary evangelicalism’s under-realised eschatology. Obedience is viewed as admirable, but unnecessary. Life change is great when it occurs, but we must be reasonable in our expectations. Perfection awaits us in paradise, but for now we’re ‘just forgiven’. Though by no means universal, such thinking is pervasive among evangelical laity. Where does this truncated soteriology come from? Why, despite the vigorous efforts of our best theologians, has it gained such a foothold in our churches? Increasingly, I have become convinced the roots of the ‘just forgiven’ gospel can be traced to evangelicalism’s failure to embrace a biblically informed understanding of sin, as well as its overly optimistic anthropology. In short, we think too narrowly about sin, and too broadly about our own ontological independence.

Athanasius, I believe, shows us a better way forward.

This essay, therefore, intends to do two things. The first is to highlight Athanasius’ basic soteriological paradigm. Toward this end, we will explore Athanasius’ treatise, *On the Incarnation*.¹ Central to our analysis will be a close examination

1 Of course, Athanasius has more to say about the resurrection than what is found in this document, and a number of his other treatises will be referenced as well. All citations from *Incarnation* will be taken from Edward R. Hardy, *The Christology of the Later Fathers* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press). All other citations from the Athanasius will be taken from Volume Four of *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Second Series* (eds., Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004).

of Athanasius' understanding of human nature, as well as his understanding of the corrupting effects of sin. For Athanasius, human nature occupies a place of inherent 'ontological poverty'.² Given its creation *ex-nihilo*, humanity – along with the rest of creation – has an innate tendency to return to its original state of non-being. This tendency toward non-being has been actualised as a result of sin; humanity – apart from divine intervention – is on a collision course with non-being. Significantly, within this anthropological framework the chief soteriological dilemma revolves around human ontology; man is in jeopardy not simply because of what he has *done*, but even more fundamentally, because of what he is *becoming*. Indeed, for Athanasius, the eschatological sentence of final judgment – i.e., irreversible death and corruption of Hell – is merely the consummation of the curse already begun in the Garden of Eden. Thus for Athanasius, salvation is primarily about reversing the corrupting effects of sin, and freeing humanity from its inherent propensity toward non-being. This framework moves Athanasius' soteriology in an overtly ontological direction.

Secondly, and most significantly, this essay will deploy Athanasius' basic soteriological insight against the 'just forgiven' gospel. While the Reformed tradition (of which I count myself an heir) has bequeathed to evangelicalism a wealth of theological and soteriological resources, its failure to adequately address *within its doctrine of justification* both the corruption of sin, as well as the frailty of human ontology, has, I believe, contributed significantly to evangelicalism's under-realised eschatology. Athanasius, I intend to show, defeats the 'just forgiven' gospel at a root level, something that Calvin's synthesis is not able to achieve.

We turn now to Athanasius' paradigm.

I. The Soteriology of Athanasius

Athanasius (296-373 AD) was the Bishop of Alexandria, and one of the truly remarkable figures of church history. The great champion of Nicene Christology, he was exiled four times from his see for his anti-Arian stance, and almost single-handedly secured the triumph of Nicea's *homousia* ('one substance') formula in the East.³ It is difficult to overstate the importance of this one man when it comes to the establishment of Trinitarian orthodoxy.⁴ And while Athanasius is best known for his Trinitarian/Christological contributions, his pro-Nicene

2 I'm indebted to Khaled Anatolios for this apt expression. *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 58.

3 For an exhaustive (and perhaps exhausting) treatment of Athanasius' involvement in the Arian controversy – his exiles, ecclesial intrigue, and political maneuverings – see Archibald Robertson's introduction in *Athanasius* (NPNF²). Additionally, see Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 1-38.

4 Robertson remarks, 'The Nicene formula found in Athanasius a mind predisposed to enter into its spirit...its victory in the East is due under God to him alone' *Athanasius* (NPNF² 4: lxix).

writings are deeply soteriological. In fact, it is Athanasius' soteriology that drives his Christology – the Word cannot fully redeem unless the Word is fully God. The following paragraphs provide a brief summary of Athanasius' soteriology, with a view to highlighting the manner in which his anthropology and hamartology influence his overall system.⁵

1. Athanasius and the nature of humanity

To appreciate fully the soteriological contribution of Athanasius, it is important to begin with his anthropology.⁶ And central to Athanasius' anthropology is his emphasis on the mutability of finite beings, which are, in fact, mutable by the very nature of their finitude.⁷ Inasmuch as humanity is created ex-nihilo, a severe limitation attends the very nature of man.⁸ Even the pre-fallen Adam cannot escape this limitation. Created beings drawn forth from nothing have a natural tendency to return to nothing. The universe, by the 'very tempest in the course of its own nature... runs the risk of once more dropping out of existence'.⁹ In other words, the 'default' position for all created things is movement toward non-being. Just as the human body tends toward physical decay, all contingent beings are mutable and prone to return to their original state of non-being; this is Athanasius' own second law of spiritual dynamics. Only God as self-existent and immutable possesses 'true existence' and thus is free from the threat of dis-

5 For fuller treatments of Athanasius's soteriology, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), and Kaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) as well as his *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998). My treatment of Athanasius here intends to be consistent with that of Weinandy and Anatolios.

6 Athanasius writes, 'For in speaking of the appearance of the Savior amongst us, we must needs speak also of the origin of men...' *Incarnation*, ch. 4.

7 Athanasius, in keeping with the Fathers, is clearly indebted to platonic and neo-platonic notions of ontology. Contemporary metaphysics, however, have generally moved away from the Greek categories of 'mutable' and 'immutable' as they relate to humanity and divinity, respectively. So Robert Jenson, who criticises the intrusion of Greek ontology into Christian theology and argues (quite fascinatingly) that God, as a personal God, is better understood as an event. See his *Systematic Theology: The Triune God, Vol. 1* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 222. While we need not canonise platonic thought as the metaphysic of Christian theology, we do well to remember that such philosophical categories formed the basis of the great Christological and Trinitarian creeds; any tinkering at this point must be done carefully. Regardless, Athanasius's primary point, along with the Fathers, is that God's existence as creator is independent of, and altogether superior, to ours as creature. Surely Athanasius is right in this.

8 So Anatolios, '...it is [for Athanasius] intrinsic to the definition of created nature to relapse into the nothingness whence it came...' *Coherence*, 164.

9 Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, ch. 41. For a nice discussion regarding Athanasius' understanding of human mutability, see Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 40-43.

solution.¹⁰ Most significantly, Athanasius' anthropology places humanity in a predicament quite independent of sin. Adam – while perfect in a finite sense – nonetheless remains limited, mutable, and prone to failure. Mutable human perfection does not – indeed cannot – obtain to the immutable divine perfection.

In a telling passage Athanasius notes that even sinless perfection cannot overcome humanity's inherent ontological deficiency. Men such as Jeremiah and John, he writes, had been 'hallowed from the womb' and were thus 'holy and clean from all sin... nevertheless "death reigned from Adam to Moses even over those that had not sinned after the similitude of Adams' transgression;" and thus man remained mortal and corruptible as before, liable to the affection proper to their nature'.¹¹ Thus for Athanasius it is humanity's *mutable* nature as a finite creature – not just the *sinful* human nature – that threatens the acquisition of eternal felicity.

This innate deficiency of mankind as a mutable being is offset by humanity's initial creation in the image of the God. Man is not a mere beast. God, knowing the inherent inability of mutable beings to stay the threat of dissolution, blessed mankind with the unique grace of having been fashioned according to the image of the immutable Word, who is himself the very image of the immutable Father.¹² (Athanasius speaks interchangeably of man existing in the image of the Word and the image of God. His meaning seems the same in both cases).

This great gift is tied to another fundamental axiom of Athanasius' soteriology: the contemplation of the immutable renders the mutable immutable. In short, we become what we worship. Humanity's creation in the image of God was meant to fix the gaze of the creature on the Creator, thereby securing a means by which the innate ontological deficiency of humanity could be overcome. He writes, '[God] gives them a share in His own image, our Lord Jesus Christ, and makes them after his own image and after his likeness: so that by such grace perceiving the image, that is, the Word of the Father, they may be able through him to get an idea of the Father, and, knowing their maker, live

10 Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, ch. 41. Athanasius is not the only church Father to emphasise human mutability as an innate ontological deficiency. Gregory of Nyssa writes, 'For it was not possible for [man] who owed his very existence to change [i.e., the change from non-being to being] to be exempt from the process of change...It is precisely at this point that the difference between the archetype and the copy is evident, the former is naturally immutable and the other not so but comes to exist through change'. *Oratio Catechetica*, ch. 21.

11 Athanasius, *Third Arian Discourse*, ch. 33. In the passage from which this quote is drawn, Athanasius seems to conflate the ontological deficiency due to sin and the ontological deficiency due to mutability. Regardless, it is clear that for Athanasius humanity's problem runs deeper than mere volitional sin. Behaving properly – even perfectly – isn't enough.

12 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 3. 'That humanity might 'continue in one stay, [God] gave them a further gift... a portion even of the power of his own Word; so that... they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise'.

the happy and truly blessed life'.¹³ In other words, humanity's existence in the image of God was meant to point humanity toward God himself. And indeed all of creation – the heavens, the mountains, the oceans, etc. – was meant in varying degrees to direct a mutable humanity toward the contemplation of the divine. But alas, it was not to be. The latent *potential* for a fall – due to humanity's necessary mutability as creature – became *actualised* in the Garden. Humanity turned its gaze away from the divine light and became fixated on the temporal and mutable.¹⁴ The result was the steady dissolution of the image of God within humanity, and thus the inevitable slide of humanity toward non-being. Thus man's willful turning from God actualised humanity's innate tendency toward ontological corruption. Thus we arrive at Athanasius' understanding of sin.

2. Athanasius and sin

Among the Greek Fathers, Athanasius is somewhat unique in his articulation of sin. In many ways, he is the Augustine of the East, paralleling the great Latin Father's emphasis on sin as a condition, rather than an event.¹⁵ While the Augustinian emphasis on sin post-dates Athanasius by over a hundred years, Athanasius, like Augustine, views the effects of sin in primarily ontological terms. Sin results in a 'natural corruption' (ἡ κατὰ φύσιν φθορά), a decay of the soul that stands as a barrier between God and humanity.¹⁶ For as long as Adam fixed his gaze on the divine immutability – particularly the pre-incarnate Word through whom the divine life is mediated – he was preserved from returning to a state of non-being. But when he turned his gaze away from God, the corruption of humanity was the inevitable result.

This conception of the Fall, tied as it is to Athanasius' emphasis on the inherent ontological poverty of humanity as *finite* creature – and compounded by humanity's condition as *fallen* creature – moves Athanasius' understanding of sin in a decisively ontological direction. The chief difficulty humanity has in approaching God is, at its core, a problem of nature – the finite, while it remains finite, cannot ascend to the infinite. Sin has further complicated the

13 Ibid., ch. 11.

14 Ibid., ch. 11, and *Against the Heathen*, ch. 3

15 Augustine viewed sin primarily as corruption and decay. See his *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, 2.57. For more on Augustine's notion of sin, see Eugene Portalie, *The Thought of Saint Augustine* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1960), 204-13, as well as Gerald Hiestand, 'Augustine and the Justification Debates: Appropriating Augustine's Doctrine of Culpability', *Trinity Journal* 28NS (2007), 115-139. The Athanasian/Augustinian emphasis on sin as ontological corruption is in contrast to Anselm and some of the later Western tradition, which tended to view sin primarily as an event—an act of the will.

16 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 5, Anatolios, *Coherence*, 240. The East has generally not appreciated Augustine's emphasis on sin as ontological corruption, and has been more optimistic than the West about fallen humanity's capacity to move toward God. Athanasius, while sharing Augustine's emphasis on ontological corruption, does not seem to share Augustine's pessimism about the inability of the fallen freewill to turn toward God. Fatalism, not Pelagianism, was the concern of the Eastern Fathers.

situation, rendering the mutable now incapable of becoming immutable. Three general observations can be made regarding Athanasius' understanding of sin, all of which highlight the ontological emphasis that Athanasius gives to his hamartology.

Sin as misdirected worship

As noted above, sin for Athanasius is a turning away from the contemplation of the divine. At this point, Athanasius frames the narrative of culpability in much the same manner as Paul in the opening chapters of Romans. Sin is the choosing of the finite over the infinite; the treasuring of the temporal and physical above that which is eternal and spiritual. In short, it is a very real form of idolatry in which the creation is worshiped over the Creator. Athanasius writes, 'But men once more in their perversity having set at naught, in spite of all this, the grace given them, so wholly rejected God, and so darkened their soul, as not merely to forget their idea of God, but also to fashion for themselves one invention after another. For not only did they grave idols for themselves, instead of the truth, and honor things that were not before the living God, "and serve the creature rather than the Creator", but, worst of all, they transferred the honor of God even to stocks and stones and to every material object and to men, and went even further than this, as we have said in the former treatise'.¹⁷

Fundamentally then, sin for Athanasius is a matter of misdirected worship. Humanity was created to know and love God, to dwell in perpetual union and relation with him through the contemplation of the Word. Yet humanity, with eyes blind to faith, chose to value that which is seen over that which is unseen; and in doing so, men 'loaded themselves the more with evils and sins, so as no longer to seem rational... having thus become brutalised'.¹⁸ Tragically, humanity has become like that which it worshiped.

Sin as legal curse

The choice of humanity to value the creature over the Creator relates to Athanasius' second major understanding of sin: sin as curse. For Athanasius, the ontological corruption due to sin is the forewarned expression of wrath for failure to adhere to the divine prohibition. The consequences were clearly detailed by God at the outset: eat from the tree and 'dying ye shall die'. Had our first parents remained good, they would have kept 'the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care, besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven'.¹⁹ But humanity chose poorly, 'incurring the corruption in death which was theirs by nature'.²⁰ Because of sin, humanity forfeited the opportunity to be freed from the limitations of mutability and corruptibility. In choosing to turn away from the contemplation of the divine, men were punitively 'released' to that which was 'theirs by nature'. God would no longer stand in the way of humanity's on-

17 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 11. See also ch. 5.

18 *Ibid.*, ch. 13.

19 *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

20 *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

tological proclivity toward corruption and non-being. As a result, death, 'gained from that time forth a legal hold over us, and it was impossible to evade the law, since it had been laid down by God because of the transgression'.²¹

A word must be said here about Athanasius' understanding of sin having a 'legal hold' over humanity. For Athanasius, the divine curse on sin (i.e., death) does not flow of necessity from the nature of God as judge; God's nature as 'just' does not require him to punish humanity for its act(s) of disobedience.²² Instead, the necessity of the curse flows out of God's inability to lie. God said death would follow sin, and so it must come to pass.²³ This is the 'law' of which Athanasius speaks. For Athanasius, sin has a legal hold over humanity only inasmuch as God has chosen to deal with humanity in this way. Had God not invoked the curse prior to Adam's disobedience, there would have been no absolute legal necessity that Adam be given over to his inherent mutability (i.e., die).

Athanasius' logic at this point is readily seen in his response to the question of why God, wishing to save humanity, did not do so by mere fiat. 'For it were monstrous, firstly, that God, having spoken, should prove false – that, when once he had ordained that man, if he transgressed the commandment, should die the death, after the transgression man should not die, but God's word should be broken'.²⁴ Nothing is said here (or elsewhere) about Christ's death satisfying the holiness and justice of God as the ultimate reason for Christ's sacrifice. Rather the issue at stake is God's incapacity to lie; he had promised death as the divine punishment for sin, and could not repent without being untrue to his word.

Nor does Athanasius follow Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, *et al.* in their view that God must honor the 'just' claims of the Devil (Athanasius virtually ignores the ransom theory). Rather for Athanasius Christ's death is seen primarily as the solution to the pervasive ontological corruption of fallen humanity. Christ, in meeting death 'head on' as it were, revokes the curse and destroys death, releasing humanity from ontological decay.²⁵

21 *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

22 Contra Anselm and the Reformed tradition. So Anselm, 'It is not fitting for God to forgive a sin without punishing it...it does not belong to [God's] freedom or benevolence or will to release unpunished a sinner who has not repaid to God what he has taken away from him'. *Why God Became Man*, 1.12. See also 1.13-15. Retribution as the necessary divine response to sin was picked up by Calvin and the Reformed tradition. John Murray articulates the Reformed emphasis well, 'Sin is the contradiction of God and he must react against it with holy indignation. It is the inviolable sanctity of God's law, the immutable dictate of holiness and the unflinching demand of justice, that makes mandatory the conclusion that salvation from sin without expiation and propitiation is inconceivable'. *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955) 18. Athanasius would agree with Murray that salvation from sin without expiation and propitiation is not possible, yet he would not find the necessity for such in the 'immutable dictates of holiness', but rather more modestly in the fact that God had determined that it be so.

23 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 6.

24 *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

25 *Ibid.*, ch. 44

In some respects, then, Athanasius' lack of emphasis on the absolute moral necessity of forensic atonement anticipates the later medieval distinction – seen in Aquinas, Scotus, and others – between the 'two powers' of God.²⁶ For medieval theologians such as Aquinas, God in the most absolute sense is not bound to punish sin, nor is punishment of sin a necessary prerequisite for granting forgiveness.²⁷ To be sure, Athanasius does not make any explicit argument for a distinction between the two powers; this will have to wait until the high scholastic days of medieval theology. But it is evident Athanasius is in harmony with – even if not explicitly – later Thomistic/medieval assumptions regarding the necessity (or lack thereof) of forensic/judicial atonement. More will be said on this below but the salient point to be made here is that Athanasius' understanding

26 Medieval theologians such as Aquinas and John Duns Scotus drew a distinction between the *potentia dei absoluta* (God's absolute power) and the *potentia dei ordinata* (God's ordained power). According to the *potentia dei absoluta*, God has the utter freedom to choose whatever he will (bound only by his own nature and the law of non-contradiction). Most significantly, God cannot be bound by human justice, and there is nothing within humanity – even the perfect humanity of Christ – that can of necessity compel God to act graciously or punitively. Inasmuch as true justice does not obtain between infinite Creator and finite creature, God can send a saint to hell and a sinner to heaven. Within the framework of the *potentia dei absoluta*, the need for forensic atonement is largely sidestepped. Rather, the atoning death of Christ is a part of the *potentia dei ordinata* – and is the method God has freely ordained to serve as the basis of our redemption – but it is not necessary in an absolute sense. The later theologians of the *via moderna* such as William Occam and Gregory Biel pushed this distinction even farther, spending a great deal of time debating which of God's activities belonged to which power (Occam's 'asinus-Christology' is particularly memorable – could God, by his absolute power, have sent the Son to incarnate as a donkey?). The Reformers generally deplored what they considered the excessive speculation of the *via moderna*. The two powers, Calvin writes, is 'a diabolical blasphemy which has been invented in hell', *Sermons on Job*, 23:1-7 as quoted in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press), 214. Calvin's rejection of the two powers distinction is seen clearly in his insistence on the necessity of Christ's death as the sole basis for satisfying the legal debt of humanity. Arguably, Calvin's strong reaction against the two powers distinction is more aroused by the excess of the *via moderna* than by the Thomistic emphasis. At certain places in his writing, Calvin seems to follow a two powers dichotomy (though without the label). For a helpful discussion of the 'two powers' distinction, see Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 119-28. For its use in the *via moderna*, see Heiko A. Oberman, *Medieval Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 34-38, 96-102.

27 See Thomas, who responds negatively to the assertion that it was necessary for Christ to die in order to satisfy the divine justice. 'Even this justice depends on the Divine will, requiring satisfaction for sin from the human race. But if He had willed to free man from sin without any satisfaction, He would not have acted against justice... for He is the sovereign and common good of the whole universe. Consequently, if He forgives sin, which has the formality of fault in that it is committed against Himself, He wrongs no one: just as anyone else, overlooking a personal trespass, without satisfaction, acts mercifully and not unjustly' *Summa*, 46.2.

of Christ's death – and the atonement at large – is more centered on overcoming corruption than on balancing the scales of divine justice. This leads us to the third and most significant aspect of Athanasius' understanding of sin – sin as ontological corruption.

Sin as ontological corruption

As has been noted above, Athanasius understands sin in primarily ontological terms. Here the parallel with Augustine is evident. The fall of humanity has resulted in the corruption of human nature.²⁸ Cut off from immortality, humanity is on a collision course with non-being – a return to its original state. 'For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so that just as they 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'.²⁹ For Athanasius, the corruption due to sin is the corruption of the image of the Word within humanity, and more precisely, the movement toward non-being.³⁰

Like a flower that has been cut from its root, decay and corruption are the inevitable result of a life lived outside the orbit of God's presence. Because of sin, the image of God within humanity became distorted. Humanity, no longer bearing a clear image of the Word, became corrupt and was moving toward dissolution. 'For this cause, then, death having gained upon men, and corruption abiding upon them, the race of man was perishing; the handiwork of God was in process of dissolution'.³¹

Athanasius' emphasis here on 'sin as a condition' over and against 'sin as an act', can be seen in his comments regarding the futility of repentance. Repentance, Athanasius argues, is not sufficient for salvation, for repentance does not address the more fundamental problem of corruption and mutability. He writes,

Repentance [does not] call men back from what is their nature – it merely

28 Athanasius' point here is not that human nature as such is inherently corrupt, but that human nature has been corrupted by sin. His position here differs at no point from Calvin, who writes, 'Therefore we declare that man is corrupted through natural vitiation, but a vitiation that did not flow from nature. We deny that it has flowed from nature in order to indicate that it is an adventitious quality which comes upon man rather than a substantial property which has been implanted from the beginning' *Institutes*, II.1.

29 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 4.

30 Athanasius' anthropology has obvious implications for the conditionalist debates. Edward Hardy writes, 'As to what happens to those who do not enter the realm of redemption, Athanasius sees no need to be explicit. Sin and corruption is the loss of true being, and there seems to be a hint that its final terminus will be the loss of being, but the end of evil like its origin is not discussed in detail', *Later Fathers*, 48. While many of Athanasius' thoughts tend toward conditionalism, he nonetheless seems to explicitly affirm a traditional doctrine of Hell. 'And when dead they shall be tormented...for bitter is the worm, and grievous the darkness, which wicked men inherit'. *Festal Letter*, 7.2. While such comments can be interpreted in harmony with a conditionalist conclusion, it's doubtful Athanasius intends his readers to land there.

31 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 6.

stays them from acts of sin. Now if there were merely a misdemeanor in question, and not a consequent corruption, repentance were well enough. But if, when transgression had once gained a start, men became involved in that corruption which was their nature, and were deprived of the grace which they had, being in the image of God, what further step was needed?³²

For Athanasius, humanity's chief shortcoming is not merely behavioral. The problem is much deeper. Man is finite, and what's worse, has now become sinful. Corruption toward non-being is the destiny of humanity cut off from the divine life.

Ultimately, Athanasius views the corruption of sin as a curse that, in turn, invites the irrevocable eschatological curse. Apart from divine intervention, whereby the immutable divine life is granted to humanity, eternal decay must necessarily be the inevitable outcome. Eternal judgment then, upon sinful individuals is the complete giving over of sinners to their inherent mutability – a final and irrevocable severing from the divine light. It is this ontological corruption that Athanasius' soteriology most fundamentally addresses.

3. *Incarnation, cross and resurrection*

Given the preceding, it should not surprise us that Athanasius' soteriology is strongly ontological. While not lacking a forensic element, Athanasius' concern for ontological renewal is central to his wider soteriology. For Athanasius, the mutability and subsequent corruption of humanity due to sin resulted in the steady and inevitable dissolution of the image of the Word contained within humanity. Like a water-damaged painting, the image of God within humanity was dissolving. Yet God was not content to see his self-portrait ruined. Given that humanity functions as a living, visible representation of God's image, it would have been 'unfitting' for God to leave humanity in a state of corruption; divine neglect would have been a breach of God's honor. 'It were unseemly', Athanasius writes, 'that creatures once made rational, and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin, and turn again toward nonexistence by the way of corruption....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'.³³ Athanasius addresses this 'corruption toward nonexistence' through the three major elements of his soteriology: the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection. Each of these three elements – whether directly or indirectly – addresses the fundamental issue of ontological corruption.

The incarnation

Athanasius' soteriology leans heavily on the incarnation. If the contemplation of the divine renders the mutable immutable, it is incumbent that God communicate himself in such a way that he be readily accessible for contemplation.

³² Ibid., ch. 7.

³³ Ibid., ch. 6. So also Anselm, 'It is necessary, therefore, that, with regard to the nature of mankind, God should finish what he begun', *Why God Became Man*, 2.4.

While God manifests himself in many and varied ways (works of creation, laws, the prophets) men have proven themselves willfully incapable of making use of such lights. Something more was needed. 'What was to be done save the renewing of that which was in God's image, so that by it men might once more be able to know him? But how could this have come to pass save by the presence of the very image of God, our Lord Jesus Christ?'³⁴

The Word took upon himself true humanity, thus infusing it with divine life and light. Through Christ, fallen human nature is once again introduced to the impassibility of the divine nature; mortal gaze is turned from transient objects to the eternal, uncreated Word of God made flesh. The result of such contemplation is the divinisation of the Christian, such that the divine immutability is passed on to the Christian through a spiritual participation in the Word. The Son became as us – human – so that we could become as him – divine. 'For he was made man that we might be made God'.³⁵

The cross

Yet Athanasius' soteriology does not stop with the incarnation. 'It was in order to the sacrifice for bodies such as his own that the Word himself also assumed a body'.³⁶ For Athanasius, the incarnation was ordained with a view toward Christ's sacrifice, apart from which, the soteriological effects of the incarnation would have been void.

Athanasius' understanding of the cross is in harmony with the later Anselmic and then Reformation emphasis on penal substitution. Athanasius views Christ's death as a vicarious sacrifice whereby the legal debt of sin is satisfied. This concept of penal substitution is woven throughout Athanasius' *Incarnation*. 'He is the Life of all, and he it is that as a sheep yielded his body to death as a substitute, for the salvation of all'.³⁷ Throughout his corpus Athanasius frequently speaks of Christ dying 'in our stead', 'on our behalf', and of Christ 'satisfying our debt'.³⁸

For Athanasius, Christ's death is necessary inasmuch as God, having promised that death would be the result of sin, could not go back on his word.³⁹ The divine prohibition and subsequent curse, once spoken, could not be revoked. Being incapable of rescinding the curse without making himself a liar, God took upon himself true humanity through the incarnation of the Word and died in our stead. 'For by the sacrifice of his own body, he both put an end to the law which was against us'.⁴⁰ And again, Christ died in order that 'the law involving the ruin of men might be undone, (as much as its power was fully spent in the

34 *Ibid.*, ch. 13.

35 *Ibid.*, ch. 54.

36 *Ibid.*, ch. 10. Many of the Fathers, Augustine in particular, grounded their soteriology too narrowly in the incarnation, neglecting the cross. Not so Athanasius. See the helpful comments of Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 40-42.

37 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 37. See also chs. 8-10, 20-22.

38 *Ibid.*, chs. 9, 10. *Festal Letter X*, ch.10. *Second Arian Discourse*, ch. 66.

39 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 6.

40 *Ibid.*, ch. 10.

Lord's body, and had no longer holding ground against men, his peers)' .⁴¹ In the death of Christ, the legal hold over humanity is broken; the curse is defeated. Christ, through his sacrifice, has banished 'death from [humanity] like straw from the fire' .⁴²

Yet more needs to be said. Athanasius' view of the cross includes, but moves beyond, legal satisfaction and is ultimately concerned with ontological renewal.⁴³ What is important to observe here is that Athanasius' understanding of the cross is centered on resolving the fundamental issue of man's condition – his deficient ontology. While Christ dies to satisfy humanity's legal debt, the satisfaction of the debt is seen chiefly as a necessary first step in addressing the deeper issue of ontological corruption/finitude.

For the Word, perceiving that not 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 was 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.⁴⁴

This passage captures well the essence of Athanasius' understanding of the cross. For Athanasius, Christ's death has a primarily ontological – rather than simply legal – benefit. To be sure, Athanasius understands the need for the legal debt to be satisfied; but the satisfaction of the legal debt is only significant in that it clears the way for the resolution of humanity's more fundamental problem. For Athanasius, the 'fruit of [Christ's]... cross... is [our] resurrection'.⁴⁵ In fact, Athanasius makes virtually no reference to the forgiveness/remission of sins throughout the vast majority of his writings. And tellingly, at the single point in

41 Ibid., ch. 8.

42 Ibid., ch. 8.

43 Wolfhart Pannenberg rightly observes that movement away from Anselm's satisfaction theory (as seen in Schleiermacher, A. Ritschl, *et al.*) marginalised the centrality of the cross in Protestant soteriology. *Systematic Theology, vol. 2*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 407-12. Athanasius' ability to maintain the soteriological centrality of the cross, while yet not granting the later Anselmic assumptions regarding the moral necessity of Christ's death, is significant.

44 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 9.

45 Ibid., ch. 56.

Incarnation where Athanasius does mention the 'remission' of sins, he equates/ conflates it with spiritual regeneration.⁴⁶ Athanasius' soteriological paradigm is not focused on legal concerns as an end in and of itself, but only inasmuch as it serves the higher purpose of ontological renewal – a renewal typified by bodily and spiritual resurrection. It is this facet of Athanasius' paradigm (which we will pick up again later) that, more than any other, addresses the under-realised eschatology of evangelicalism.

Athanasius' proto two-powers distinction likewise adds to the ontological emphasis in his soteriology. For Athanasius, Christ's death as a legal substitute is only required inasmuch as God freely chose to connect disobedience with corruption and death. Thus the legal barrier between God and humanity is contingent. In contrast, the ontological barrier between God and humanity flows of necessity from the very being of God and humanity. God is infinite and immutable; man is finite and mutable (and now fallen). It is this ontological barrier, not primarily the contingent legal barrier, that represents the greatest soteriological challenge in Athanasius' soteriology. For Athanasius, the curse is broken through Christ's death most fundamentally in that the effect of the curse – ontological corruption toward non-being – has been abrogated by the cross. It is the removal of the corruption of sin itself – not just its legal debt – that drives Athanasius' understanding of the cross.

4. *The resurrection in the soteriology of Athanasius*

We move finally to Athanasius' understanding of resurrection. For Athanasius ontological renewal (i.e., the believer's resurrection) is the great telos toward which the cross of Christ points. It is the eschatological consummation of Christ's redemptive work. Indeed, the resurrection of Christ is the 'first fruits of the resurrection of all', and indicative of the believer's ultimate hope.⁴⁷ For Athanasius, bodily and spiritual resurrection is not merely a benefit of salvation, but is itself salvation.

All of this is driven by Athanasius' fundamental – and I believe correct – insight that the primary barrier between God and humanity is ontological. The cross-work of Christ, while remaining central to Athanasius' soteriology, points us toward the resurrection and ontological renewal as the chief end for which Christ's death occurred. For Athanasius, the 'fruit' of the cross is ultimately bodily and spiritual resurrection (i.e., ontological renewal), not simply legal cleansing.

II. Assessing and appropriating Athanasius' soteriology

I find Athanasius' soteriological paradigm compelling, both pastorally and theologically. First, and most significantly, his emphasis on ontological corruption

46 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 14. The conflation of spiritual regeneration and the remission of sins is indicative of Augustine as well. See Augustine, *Forgiveness of Sins*, 1.62, and 2.44.

47 Athanasius, *Incarnation*, ch. 20.

and renewal is in harmony with the broad sweep of biblical soteriology. And second, Athanasius' emphasis on ontological renewal pushes life change and spiritual transformation into the heart of gospel proclamation – something dearly needed in our day.

In this final section of the essay, we will look briefly at these two strengths, concluding with an assessment of the ways in which Athanasius' emphasis on ontological corruption and human mutability defeats the 'just forgiven' gospel in ways not possible for Calvin and the Reformed tradition.

1. Consistent with Scripture

Most significantly, Athanasius' soteriological paradigm is consistent with the scriptural emphasis on ontological corruption as *the* fundamental soteriological dilemma. One thinks quickly of Paul's concise statement of the gospel in Eph. 2:1-10. Here and elsewhere, Paul moves from ontological corruption (i.e., 'dead in sins' and 'by nature objects of wrath') to ontological renewal (i.e., 'made alive', 'risen with Christ', 'created in Christ Jesus'). And of course, Athanasius' emphasis on the necessity of ontological renewal is in harmony with Paul's eschatological vision of the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15. 'The perishable must become imperishable', and 'the mortal must put on immortality', etc. Beyond these key passages, one thinks also of the New Covenant/circumcision of heart theme of the Jewish prophets (Deut. 30:1-6; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-27), Paul's 'union with Christ', 'new creation' and 'circumcision of the heart' themes (Rom. 6; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:1-10; Titus. 3:4-7), and the 'born again/of God' themes in John and Peter (John 3:1-21; 1 John 3-5; 1 Pet. 1:1-4; 2 Pet. 1:1-4). In each instance, ontological renewal is either explicitly affirmed, or assumed as central to the gospel.

But a robust biblical defense of Athanasius' basic insight is a longer story than we can tell here. And indeed, perhaps the burden of proof lies with those who would contend against this aspect of Athanasius' thought. Certainly in the West – beginning in earnest with Augustine and then on into the present day – the major churchmen have virtually all recognised the inherent ontological liability of sinful humanity (even if a meaningful incorporation of this truth into their soteriology has not always followed suit.) Once we acknowledge the reality of ontological corruption as the chief soteriological dilemma, it becomes clear that ontological renewal – including both spiritual and bodily resurrection – must ascend to a central place in our gospel proclamation. Gospel proclamations that limit themselves to the forgiveness of sins, while true as far as they go, are insufficient.

2. Highlights ontological renewal as a primary emphasis in gospel proclamation

Second, as has been stated above, Athanasius' soteriology moves the themes of ontological renewal and resurrection to the fore of gospel proclamation. This is something evangelicals have largely been unable to achieve. In as much as a significant bulk of contemporary evangelical soteriology traces its roots back

to Calvin's doctrine of justification, a brief look at Calvin's soteriology will be helpful here.⁴⁸

Calvin – while recognising ontological corruption⁴⁹ – emphasises *legal culpability* as the primary barrier between God and humanity. Mankind has transgressed the divine Law; such misdeeds require a punitive response. He writes,

First, God lays down for us through the law what we should do; if we fail in any part of it, that dreadful sentence of eternal death which it pronounces will rest upon us. Secondly, it is not only hard, but above our strength and beyond our abilities, to fulfill the law to the letter; thus, if we look to ourselves only... we shall die under eternal death.⁵⁰

Calvin's soteriological narrative is familiar: Humanity has transgressed the divine Law. God, being holy, must punish humanity accordingly. Enter Christ, who acts as our substitute, taking upon himself our judicial penalty. God imputes our sins to Christ and to us Christ's status of 'righteous' in relation to the Law, thereby securing our justification (i.e., the legal remission of sins/the imputation of a righteous legal status). The way to Heaven is now opened and humanity is accepted back into proper relation with God.⁵¹

48 My critique here of Calvin is in keeping with the traditional interpretation of his soteriology, namely that his doctrine of justification – his self-professed 'hinge upon which religion turns' – forms for him the bedrock, even if not the limits, of his soteriology. Contra the traditional reading of Calvin, a number of Calvin scholars are calling for a reinterpretation of Calvin's thought, arguing that Calvin's notion of union with Christ should be seen as central to his soteriology. This reinterpretation of Calvin seems driven by a desire to offset the strong forensic emphasis found explicitly in his doctrine of justification. Calvin scholars opposed to this recent interpretation view this new direction as an inaccurate minimisation of Calvin's forensic emphasis. Whatever the specialists may conclude about Calvin's emphasis, both sides agree that his doctrine of justification remains decidedly forensic. For a helpful look at this debate, see the competing articles by Marcus Johnson, 'Nuanced Perspectives on Calvin: A Reply to Thomas Wenger', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 51/3 (September 2008), 543-58, and Thomas Wenger, 'Theological Spectacles and a Paradigm of Centrality: A Reply to Marcus Johnson', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 51/3 (September 2008), 559-72. While sympathetic with the theological agenda of Johnson and other revisionists, it appears to me that the traditional read of Calvin is more in line with his actual synthesis.

49 '[Adam] infected all his posterity with that corruption in to which he had fallen'. *Institutes*, 2.1.6. See all of II.1 for Calvin's comments about 'natural' corruption (i.e., the corruption of nature).

50 *Ibid.*, 3.2.1. See also 2.8.3. The notion of legal culpability found here is basic to Calvin's soteriology.

51 Of course, Calvin's soteriology is broader than this, particularly when viewed against the backdrop of his notion of the believer's union with Christ. But a careful reading of his doctrine of justification as seen in his *Institutes*, 3. 11-17 (most especially his rejection of Osiander in 3.11. 5-12), and commentaries (particularly *Romans* and *Galatians*), makes it evident Calvin grounds the formal merit and demerit of eternal life in strictly forensic categories. Regardless of the extent to which one will agree with my assessment of Calvin, it should be evident to observers of evangelical

Most significantly for Calvin, it is humanity's legal culpability in relation to the Law that drives his doctrine of justification – the center of his soteriology. For Calvin, this legal culpability is not merely contingent, as in Athanasius, but rather flows by necessity from the very nature of God; God *must* punish sin. Thus the divine necessity to punish sin constitutes for Calvin the greatest soteriological hurdle.⁵²

It makes sense, then, that Calvin's soteriology tends to focus on judicial cleansing and acceptance as the chief benefit of redemption. So Calvin's comments on John 1:29,

The principal office of Christ is explained briefly but clearly. By taking away the sins of the world through the sacrifice of his death, he reconciles men to God. Christ certainly bestows other blessing on us, *but the chief one, on which all others depend*, is that by appeasing the wrath of God he brings it about that we are reckoned righteous and pure. From this source flow all the streams of blessing; by not imputing our sins, God receives us into favor" (emphasis added).⁵³

To be sure, it is not either/or for Calvin; his wider soteriology is strongly ontological. Given that Calvin's soteriology is often unfairly caricatured as antinomian, let me be explicit about what I'm not saying here. I am not suggesting that Calvin's soteriology is exclusively (or even primarily!) forensic, or that his doctrine of justification constitutes the sum of his soteriology. Calvin is aware of the danger of a mere forenecism, and is quick to point out that justification and regeneration cannot be separated. As the light of the sun cannot be separated from its heat, so too justification cannot be separated from regeneration.⁵⁴ Even a cursory reading of Calvin shows that he recognises the ontological benefits of Christ's death. Calvin's mortification/vivification theology, as well as his doctrine of union with Christ, is robustly ontological.⁵⁵

My point here is simply to observe that while Calvin's wider soteriology is overtly ontological, his doctrine of justification – the center of his soteriology – is purposely limited to the question of judicial cleansing. Repeatedly in his refutation of Osiander (who maintains that justification includes both remission of sins *and* ontological renewal), Calvin insists justification is limited to judicial forgiveness alone. Appealing to Paul's comments in Romans 4:6-8, Calvin writes,

theology that the synthesis I've attributed to Calvin is indeed the primary synthesis of contemporary evangelicalism. Thus let the reader note that the primary objective of this essay is not to show how Athanasius corrects Calvin, but rather how Athanasius corrects evangelicalism.

52 From what I can tell, the Anselmic insistence that God is morally bound to punish sin is assumed throughout Calvin's soteriology, rather than explicitly stated.

53 Calvin, *John: The Crossway Classic Commentaries*, eds. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 36-37.

54 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.6.

55 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.8-9.

First I conclude that they are accounted righteous who are reconciled to God. Included is the means: that *God justifies by pardoning...* Where Paul says that righteousness without works is described by David in these words, 'Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven', let Osiander answer me whether this be a full or half definition. Surely Paul does not make the prophet bear witness to the doctrine that pardon of sins is part of righteousness, or merely a concomitant toward the justifying of man; on the contrary, *he includes the whole of righteousness in free remission*, declaring that man blessed whose sins are covered, whose iniquities God has forgiven, and whose transgressions God does not charge to his account (emphasis added).⁵⁶

These are not isolated statements in Calvin. Calvin's doctrine of justification is exclusively forensic, regardless the extent to which his wider soteriology is overtly ontological. Simply put, ontological renewal is consciously *not* a part of Calvin's doctrine of justification.⁵⁷ Or to state it again, the problem of ontological corruption is not resolved in the center of Calvin's soteriology.

I'm convinced the failure of Calvin to adequately address *within his doctrine of justification* the twin issues of ontological corruption and human mutability has contributed to the marginalisation of ontological renewal in contemporary evangelical gospel proclamation. Again, the problem is not that Calvin fails to address ontological corruption; *it's that he fails to address it in the core of his soteriology* – his doctrine of justification. For Calvin, in as much as forensic culpability serves as the most significant barrier to eternal felicity, ontological renewal necessarily becomes a second order element of his soteriology (and thus has become a second order element of ours!). Though regeneration happens at con-

⁵⁶ Ibid., 739. See also 729.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1-4. The absence of an ontological element in Calvin's doctrine of justification has led to the minimisation of the resurrection of Christ as a central element of the gospel in the Reformed tradition. That neither Calvin nor later Reformed theologians such as Charles Hodge, when formally discussing the doctrine of justification, feel any need to significantly mention the resurrection is worth noting (however it might be explained). Similarly, contemporary Reformed and Reformed Baptist theologians such as John Piper, James White, R. C. Sproul and Robert L. Reymond also find little need (if any) to mention the resurrection in their extended discussions on justification. See R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 739-56; John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002); James R. White, *The God Who Justifies, The Doctrine of Justification* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2001); and Sproul, *Faith Alone, The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002). Indeed, the word 'resurrection' does not appear in the indexes of White's, Piper's, or Sproul's books. It should give us pause when we can discuss the center of our soteriology and yet not meaningfully mention the resurrection of Christ. A notable exception within the Reformed tradition is the work of Richard Gaffin, who views the resurrection of Christ as the embodiment of Christ's justification, and the resurrection of the believer as the embodiment of the believer's justification. I resonate strongly with Gaffin on this point. See his *Centrality of the Resurrection*.

version (and cannot be separated from it), ontological renewal is not the center of Calvin's conversion theology.

If we fail to properly identify ontological corruption as *the* chief soteriological dilemma, we should not be surprised when popular-level articulations of the gospel neglect to meaningfully note ontological renewal. Calvin's doctrine of regeneration – and more broadly, his doctrine of union with Christ – act as a protective hedge around his doctrine of justification, thus preventing his overall soteriology from becoming merely forensic. But Calvin's antinomian defense at this point requires a second move beyond his doctrine of justification proper. And this second move is one that most evangelicals have shown themselves unable to consistently make. Perhaps we have trouble making this second move precisely because it shouldn't be necessary to make it in the first place.

Athanasius' paradigm avoids the need for this second move, locating the resurrection motif at center stage as the natural response to his doctrine of sin. For Athanasius, the real soteriological dilemma between God and humanity is ontological corruption, thus the center of his soteriology focuses on ontological renewal. One simply can't preach the heart of Athanasius' soteriology without talking about ontological renewal. To be sure, the 'just forgiven' gospel is not a fair representation of Calvin's paradigm. But it is certainly easier to get there from Geneva than it is from Alexandria. Once the human predicament is framed in ontological terms, the 'just forgiven' gospel becomes nearly impossible to maintain. Athanasius reminds us that judicial cleansing, regardless how important, is insufficient for final salvation.⁵⁸

In sum, both Calvin and Athanasius recognise the need for both ontological renewal and legal restitution. But Calvin prioritises the legal dimensions of sin over the ontological dimensions of sin, and thus Calvin's soteriology emphasises judicial acceptance and forgiveness. Athanasius, on the other hand, emphasises the ontological dimensions of sin over its legal dimensions; the result for Athanasius is an emphasis on resurrection and ontological renewal.

III. Conclusion

More needs to be said.⁵⁹ Admittedly Athanasius' emphasis on deliverance from

58 Yet for all of Athanasius' emphasis on ontological renewal, his paradigm suffers from its own version of under-realised eschatology. Athanasius pushes his soteriology almost entirely into the future. It is at this point that Calvin's emphasis on present renewing grace, seen most explicitly in his mortification/vivification theology, becomes particularly helpful. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 552. Were more space available, it would be useful to show how a merger of Athanasius's emphasis on ontological corruption and renewal, combined with Calvin's notion of dying and rising with Christ, provides a more robust soteriology than either pastor is able to achieve independently.

59 The extent to which God has an absolute judicial necessity to punish sin is the fulcrum upon which the primary issue of this essay turns. And we must not, at this point, reduce truth to pragmatism. The fact that Athanasius' synthesis more naturally

ontological corruption and mortality is not exactly equivalent to an emphasis on moral/ethical transformation. But certainly these two concepts run closely together. For Athanasius, ontological corruption is the result of sin, and in turn, is the cause of subsequent sin. Thus redemption from sin and ontological corruption necessarily go together. For Athanasius, to be ontologically restored is to become the sort of person who is not only free from mortality, but free from the corrupting influence of sin.

Most basically, Athanasius' logic reminds us that flesh and blood (i.e., mutable humanity – even perfected humanity) cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:50), and that man's culpability runs deeper than mere behavior. We are *by nature* objects of wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). Milton, in his *Paradise Lost*, captures well this understanding of sin. Describing Satan's flight from Hell (cf. Rev. 20) Milton writes about how Hell has become a part of Satan,

Now rolling boils in his tumultuous breast,
And like a devilish engine back recoils
Upon himself; Horror and doubt distract
His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stir
The Hell within him; for within him Hell
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell
One step no more than from himself can fly.⁶⁰

Finally in despair Satan cries,

Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;⁶¹

Milton has a correct insight here about the pervasive corrupting influence of Hell and sin. The corruption of Hell is not simply 'out there'; no. The smoke of that barren waste has drifted into this world and filled our lungs, our pores. It has wrecked and is wrecking humanity.

The reality of God's judgment upon us due to our sinful condition is the great *scandalon* – the great offense – of the gospel. The acknowledgement that we occasionally – even frequently – commit sins requires no great contrition. Indeed, nearly every religion acknowledges this. But how much more devastating to human pride is the Christian insistence that we ourselves are fundamentally bro-

emphasises ontological renewal is, of course, only helpful if Athanasius is right. In the end, such conclusions must be judged against the backdrop of Scripture, most especially Paul's comments in Romans 3:23-26. Here I suspect recent gains in our understanding of the biblical meaning of 'righteousness' as including a redemptive element (rather than being strictly legal and punitive) confirm Athanasius' basic paradigm. Indeed, for Athanasius there is a real barrier between God and humanity; Christ's death was absolutely necessary. But I'm inclined to conclude with Athanasius that the barrier is ultimately an ontological one, and only contingently a legal one.

60 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.15-22.

61 Ibid., 4.73-75.

ken, and that this brokenness is itself sufficient to warrant the just wrath of God; that quite apart from anything we do, we already stand condemned. The great, damnable problem of sin is not simply wrongs committed, but even more fundamentally the Hell within. Fly whatever way we will, there is no escape; *I myself am Hell*. Thus the most basic question of repentance is not whether we will repent of our sins, but rather will we repent of *ourselves*. It's one thing to admit we've screwed up. It's quite another to admit we are a screw-up.

To be sure, our legal debt must be cleared. Yet more is needed; the perishable must become imperishable, the mortal immortal (1 Cor. 15:53-54). The first Adam must be refashioned according to the life giving image of the Second Adam (1 Cor. 15:47-49). Apart from such transformation – secured fully and finally at the resurrection, but laid hold of even now through our spiritual participation in Christ's death and resurrection – the eternal felicity of humanity is not possible.

If Athanasius is correct – and I believe he is – there is a need for evangelicals (particularly those of us in the Reformed tradition) to rethink our gospel presentations in light of ontological corruption. Too often our compact gospel narratives focus exclusively on sin as an illegal behavior, rather than sin as a condition. Our soteriology, as a result, becomes narrowly forensic. In as much as the Reformed doctrine of justification (the soteriological 'ground zero' for many evangelicals) does not – in and of itself – address the need for ontological renewal, ontological renewal has been pushed to the margins in evangelical gospel preaching. The 'just forgiven' gospel has been the result. Humanity may be in a legal bind, but our greater problem is ontological. Athanasius properly reminds us that a qualification for inheriting eternal life is that one actually be alive. As our Lord himself said, 'Unless one is born again, he shall not see the kingdom of God'. The manner in which we communicate the gospel needs to reflect this reality.

Abstract

This paper suggests that Athanasius' soteriology is an antidote to the under-realised eschatology of contemporary evangelicalism (i.e., the 'just forgiven' gospel). Contemporary evangelicalism – influenced as it is by Anselm, Calvin and the Reformed tradition – views sin from within a primarily behaviorist and forensic framework, thus marginalising the need for ontological renewal as a key component of gospel proclamation. Athanasius, on the other hand, emphasises the ontological dimensions of sin over its legal dimensions; the result is an emphasis on resurrection and ontological renewal as central elements of gospel witness. In short, the truncated soteriology of contemporary evangelicalism is the result of a truncated hamartology. Athanasius properly reminds us that sin – at its deepest level – constitutes an ontological dilemma, and that salvation – at its deepest level – must offer a corresponding ontological solution.