

Why the Cross?

Robert Fantauzzi

Pauline/Patristic Themes

Dr. Brad Jersak

May 19th, 2021

Having completed the Pauline and Patristic Themes course, the time has come to answer the question: ‘Why the cross?’ according to Athanasius and other Patristic teachers. In the first two sections of this paper, I will focus on the thoughts and theology of Athanasius as interpreted by Fr. John Behr in his two ‘On the Incarnation’ lectures, and the two answers he outlines for ‘Why the cross?’ – 1) *to restore life to humanity*, and 2) *to restore knowledge of God to humanity*. In the third section, I will examine Benjamin Myers’ theology of the *Atonement and the Image of God* which includes not only the thoughts of Athanasius, but also other Patristic thinkers such as Gregory of Nazianzus.

Starting with the cross as a method to *restore life to humanity*, Athanasius tells us that the cross is the vehicle through which Jesus – Son of God – came to put an end to death.¹ However, given the level of decay and corruption that had seized the heart of humanity, the Word saw three things: 1) that this corruption could not be washed away except by *everyone* dying; 2) that the Word did not wish for this; 3) that the Word – as immortal Son of God – could not suffer and die unless he took an earthly body.² Thus, the solution for the Word was to take for Himself the flesh of humanity - which could die - so that His death would suffice on behalf of all humanity and wash away the corruption through the grace of resurrection.³ For Athanasius, the cross and Jesus’ crucifixion upon it was the death of death, whilst the resurrection is the promise of the eternal life that Jesus offers.⁴

¹ Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word,” CHURCH FATHERS: On the Incarnation of the Word (Athanasius), 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm>. See Chapter IX.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Behr, “Fr John Behr on St Athanasius’ ‘On the Incarnation’ Talk 2,” Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 30, 2017, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/fr-john-behr-on-the-incarnation-pt-2.html. Timestamp: 52:24

The ultimate result of Jesus' sacrifice for all of us upon the cross is that he brought peace to humanity as, through Jesus, all demons, evil, and idolatry were put to flight.⁵ Further, with Jesus being the saviour of the universe, this meant the cross was *not* the ruin of creation but its healing; thus, for Athanasius, the cross is the crux of humanity's salvation.⁶ If then, *all* idolatry and demonic activity is vanquished *after* the events of the cross, this means that the cross was essential, central, and critical to the restoration of humanity.⁷ Why the cross when it comes to the restoration of life to humanity? Because, simply put, it had to be the cross and Jesus' dying upon it or it would not have been Jesus the Lord and Saviour.⁸ However, it is critical to remember that this is not a theory of debt-substitution, the wages of sin, or Atonement theory; rather, it revolves around humanity becoming one with the body of Christ.⁹

Turning to the second reason to explain 'why the cross?' – *to restore knowledge of God to humanity* - we see that Jesus' sacrifice upon the cross was the key event in which humanity's collective mind and knowledge turned away from idolatry and corruption and was restored the knowledge of God's love and mercy. For Athanasius, we were created in the image of God in a physical sense, but also in the sense of our being rational beings who were created to contemplate God¹⁰ – the trouble was that we turned our heads away from our creator and towards idols of our

⁵ John Behr, "'On the Incarnation' Lecture 1 - Fr. John Behr at Orthodox School of Theology (U of T)," Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 23, 2017, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/on-the-incarnation-lecture-1-fr-john-behr-at-orthodox-school-of-theology-u-of-t.html. Timestamp: 27:04

⁶ Ibid. Timestamp: 29:04.

⁷ Ibid. Timestamp: 31:38.

⁸ John Behr, "Fr John Behr on St Athanasius' 'On the Incarnation' Talk 2," Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 30, 2017, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/fr-john-behr-on-the-incarnation-pt-2.html. Timestamp: 47:21

⁹ Ibid. Timestamp 36:30.

¹⁰ John Behr, "Fr John Behr on St Athanasius' 'On the Incarnation' Talk 2," Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 30, 2017, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/fr-john-behr-on-the-incarnation-pt-2.html. Timestamp: 39:21.

own making. What Athanasius seems to be describing is a view of ‘the fall’ not as a physical expulsion from the Garden of Eden, but more as a figurative fall as humanity turned its gaze from God the creator and towards wallowing in pleasures and decadence.¹¹ At the same time, the cross inverts the disbelief, scorn, or mocking of those who had turned their heads from God into a testament of Jesus’ divinity by showing humanity possibility wherein we had only seen impossibility beforehand.¹² Thus, the cross demonstrated, in unequivocal fashion, that Jesus was the Word of God – something that had been hinted at throughout the gospels but not actually proven until the cross and the resurrection¹³ – and the supposed degradations that Jesus suffered upon the cross actually showcased Jesus’ strength and divinity in His suffering for us.¹⁴

Another way to view Athanasius’ take on ‘why the cross?’ is via a three step process: 1) humanity was created in the image of God and in order to contemplate God; 2) over time, humanity turned its collective gaze away from God and towards human-created evils; 3) Jesus’ passion upon the cross was the singular event which turned the collective eyes of humanity back towards God and its contemplation.¹⁵ Further, Athanasius seemed not to believe in concepts of *future* or *past* but only in the *present*; for Athanasius, there is no past and no future and every moment is the end of time. Thus, it was literally at the end of time when Jesus was on the cross and our collective

¹¹ John Behr, “‘On the Incarnation’ Lecture 1 - Fr. John Behr at Orthodox School of Theology (U of T),” Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 23, 2017, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/on-the-incarnation-lecture-1-fr-john-behr-at-orthodox-school-of-theology-u-of-t.html. Timestamp: 43:00

¹² John Behr, “Fr John Behr on St Athanasius’ ‘On the Incarnation’ Talk 2,” Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 30, 2017, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/fr-john-behr-on-the-incarnation-pt-2.html. Timestamp: 3:44

¹³ Ibid. Timestamp: 6:49.

¹⁴ Ibid. Timestamp: 7:45

¹⁵ John Behr, “‘On the Incarnation’ Lecture 1 - Fr. John Behr at Orthodox School of Theology (U of T),” Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 23, 2017, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/on-the-incarnation-lecture-1-fr-john-behr-at-orthodox-school-of-theology-u-of-t.html. Timestamp: 41:00

gaze was turned back to contemplation of God,¹⁶ it is *not* something that we must continue to wait for. At the same time, Athanasius saw the cross as an apology for his faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour against charges that such faith was irrational with the response that: 1) Jesus is the *word* of God or the *logos* of God; 2) because Jesus is the word or logos of God, the Christian faith is not, and cannot be, *alogos* or without a word and therefore cannot be irrational.¹⁷

Turning to Benjamin Myers' *Atonement & The Image of God*, the major theme that Myers' theological interpretation revolves around when answering the question 'why the cross?' is Jesus' need and sacrifice to *save humanity from death*. In the case of Athanasius, he tells us that Jesus' sacrifice upon the cross was "...on behalf of all, delivering his own temple to death in the place of all, in order to make all not liable to and free from the ancient transgression, and to show himself superior to death."¹⁸ For Cyril of Alexandria, the atonement of the cross involved the salvation of the entire world and, as Jesus was beyond suffering, he chose to wrap himself in the fleshly cloak of humanity so that the suffering he would experience would truly be his own.¹⁹ For Gregory of Nazianzus, we hear similar echoes that, for humanity to live and be freed from chains of our own making, "[w]e needed a God made flesh and made dead that we might live."²⁰ Meanwhile, in his

¹⁶ John Behr, "Fr John Behr on St Athanasius' 'On the Incarnation' Talk 2," Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 30, 2017, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/fr-john-behr-on-the-incarnation-pt-2.html. Timestamp: 24:00 – 26:00

¹⁷ John Behr, "'On the Incarnation' Lecture 1 - Fr. John Behr at Orthodox School of Theology (U of T)," Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 23, 2017, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/on-the-incarnation-lecture-1-fr-john-behr-at-orthodox-school-of-theology-u-of-t.html. Timestamp: 31:07

¹⁸ Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," CHURCH FATHERS: On the Incarnation of the Word (Athanasius), 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm>. See Chapter XX

¹⁹ Benjamin Myers, "Benjamin Myers: Patristic Atonement Models--Solution and Surplus," Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, January 27, 2016, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2016/01/benjamin-myers-patristic-atonement-models-solution-and-surplus.html. Timestamp: 14:35.

²⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 45," CHURCH FATHERS: Oration 45 (Gregory Nazianzus), 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310245.htm>.

Catechetical Oration 26, the cross is seen as the ‘death of death’²¹ with Gregory of Nyssa stating that “...when death came into contact with life, darkness with light, corruption with incorruption, the worst of these things disappeared into a state of non-existence.”²²

When considering these views of ‘why the cross?’ it is important to keep in mind that atonement upon the cross is *not* a struggle between God and Satan, but rather it is the defeat of death with the proof of this (of death’s defeat) being shown in the Church, its continued existence, and within its twin powers of martyrdom and exorcism.²³ Thus, by Jesus offering himself to death upon the cross, with his body as holy offering, Jesus was able to abolish death using his body as a substitute for all of humanity.²⁴ Again, it is vital to remember that this sacrifice for all of us is *not* atonement theory but merely describing what has happened, and that this is an event for everyone – it is *not* about how this occurred.²⁵ Lastly, the cross is not merely a solution to the fallen state of humanity but also acts as something of an escalator, moving humanity ever closer to God and towards a higher state than we were prior to the cross.²⁶

The question this paper sought to explore was ‘why the cross?’ Starting with the theological analysis of Fr. John Behr and his take on Athanasius, we see there are two major

²¹ Benjamin Myers, “Benjamin Myers: Patristic Atonement Models--Solution and Surplus,” Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, January 27, 2016, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2016/01/benjamin-myers-patristic-atonement-models-solution-and-surplus.html. Timestamp: 18:35

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. Timestamp: 22:50.

²⁴ Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word,” CHURCH FATHERS: On the Incarnation of the Word (Athanasius), 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm>. See Chapter IX.

²⁵ Benjamin Myers, “Benjamin Myers: Patristic Atonement Models--Solution and Surplus,” Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, January 27, 2016, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2016/01/benjamin-myers-patristic-atonement-models-solution-and-surplus.html. Timestamp: 41:45.

²⁶ Benjamin Myers, “Benjamin Myers: Patristic Atonement Models--Solution and Surplus,” Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, January 27, 2016, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2016/01/benjamin-myers-patristic-atonement-models-solution-and-surplus.html. Timestamp: 47:00.

reasons offered to answer this. The first is that Jesus' sacrifice upon the cross *restored life to humanity*, whilst the second reason is that Jesus' passion upon the cross *restored knowledge of God to humanity*. For Benjamin Myers and his theological analysis of Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and of Cyril of Alexandria, we see a similar theme in the belief that Jesus' death upon the cross was the means in which the 'death of death' was achieved, and humanity thus moved beyond the grasp of death. Why the Cross? Because, ultimately, to save humanity from the fallen state that we had led ourselves to and to successfully defeat death, it could not have been any other way. Why the cross? Because it had to be.

Bibliography

Athanasius. "On the Incarnation of the Word." CHURCH FATHERS: On the Incarnation of the Word (Athanasius), 2020. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm>.

Behr, John. "'On the Incarnation' Lecture 1 - Fr. John Behr at Orthodox School of Theology (U of T)." Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 23, 2017.

https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/on-the-incarnation-lecture-1-fr-john-behr-at-orthodox-school-of-theology-u-of-t.html.

Gregory of Nazianzus. "Oration 45." CHURCH FATHERS: Oration 45 (Gregory Nazianzus), 2020. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310245.htm>.

Myers, Benjamin. "Benjamin Myers: Patristic Atonement Models--Solution and Surplus." Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, January 27, 2016. https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2016/01/benjamin-myers-patristic-atonement-models-solution-and-surplus.html.

———. "Fr John Behr on St Athanasius' 'On the Incarnation' Talk 2." Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace & Justice, December 30, 2017. https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/12/fr-john-behr-on-the-incarnation-pt-2.html.