**Athanasius of Alexandria: An Evangelical Appraisal**

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**Everybody Likes Athanasius**

Of all of the significant ancient Christian writers, Athanasius holds a unique place. While Augustine is considered unimportant except to Roman Catholics and many Protestants, and John Chrysostom is not important to Roman Catholics, Athanasius is treated one of the top ancient writers among the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Copts, Nestorians, and some evangelicals as well. Everyone would like to claim Athanasius as their own, and everyone recites the Nicene Creed, in which he played a pivotal part. An anonymous work, *Life of Antony*, is not considered here as it is not clear if it was by Athanasius or not.

However, Athanasius had at least a few differences with every church today, but he was as much like them as they are like each other.

By the way, there are at least four other famous historical individuals named Athanasius, and even a 7th century pseudo-Athanasius. People liked to ascribe other writings to “Athanasius”, including the Latin Athanasian Creed, written 447/484 A.D., about a century after his death. But this paper is only about the earliest Athanasius, whom they call Athanasius “the Great” from Alexandria. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Coptic churches all have feast days for him.

The nickname “the Great” is not good because it is all too easy for people to idolize saints. But that being said, Athanasius really was a great Christian, who made a great and positive impact on the church. But his teaching also had flaws that we should not follow.

**SOME OF HIS GOOD TEACHING**

**The Trinity and the Nature of Christ**

Athanasius’ emphasis was the nature of Jesus Christ and the Trinity. He wrote extensively on this, in great depth and correctly except for one place.

**Sufficiency of Scripture (*Prima Scriptura*)**

Athanasius said we should meditate on scripture day and night and the quotes Psalm 1:1-2. *Easter Letter 5* (333 A.D.) ch.1 p.517. See also Easter Letter 11 (339 A.D.) ch.6 p.535

“But since the holy scripture is of all things sufficient for us, therefore recommending to those who desire to know more of these matters, to read the Divine word, I now hasten to set before you that which most claims attention, and for the sake of which principally I have written these things.” *To the Bishops of Egypt* (356 A.D.) ch.1.2 p.225

So since Scripture is “sufficient” there is no essential doctrine of Christianity that is missing from Scripture – and that includes venerating pictures of people.

**Not *sola scriptura*:** On the other hand, Athanasius did not teach “*sola scriptura*”: he recognized the authority of bishops too. “Now if you really believe that all Bishops have the same and equal authority, and you do not, as you assert, account of them according to the magnitude of their cities;” *Defense Against the Arians* (after 339 A.D.) ch.2.25 p.115.

“It is this that has thrown the Churches everywhere into such confusion; for pretences have been devised, and Bishops of great authority, and of advanced age, have been banished for holding communion with me.” *Defense before Constantius* ch.13 p.243

Athanasius said that some “contend against an Ecumenical Council.” *On the Councils* (359 A.D.) ch.33 p.468

Athanasius also said that the church could not hold together without Bishops in *Letter 49* (to Dracontius) (354/355 A.D.) ch.4 p.558.

“. . . inventors of unlawful heresies, who indeed refer to the Scriptures, but do not hold such opinions as the saints have handed down, and receiving them as the traditions of men, err, because they do not rightly know them nor their power.” *Easter Letter* *2* (330 A.D.) ch.6 p.511

Athanasius appeals to “apostolic tradition” in Letter 51 p.561-562.

Athanasius’s views on not just the benefit of Scripture, nor just the authority of scripture, but rather the sufficient authority of scripture, sound like what an evangelical says. On the other hand, “Pope Athanasius” was strong on the authority of bishops and the Nicene Council, sort of like what an Eastern Orthodox person says. How would we reconcile these two kinds of teaching? Let’s let Athanasius explain for himself how both parts fit together in his mind.

“For although the sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth,—while there are other works of our blessed teachers compiled for this purpose, if he meet with which a man will gain some knowledge of the interpretation of the Scriptures, and be able to learn what he wishes to know,—still, as we have not at present in our hands the compositions of our teachers, we must communicate in writing to you what we learned from them,—the faith, namely, of Christ the Saviour; lest any should hold cheap the doctrine taught among us, or think faith in Christ unreasonable.” *Athanasius Against the Heathen* part 1ch.1.3 p.4

Evangelicals believe that earlier Christian writers were not infallible. However, their good teachings can be a reminder of scripture and a check on our interpretation of scripture.

**No Pictures of God or Statues**

Athanasius said not to portray Deity in human or animal form. “And generally, if they conceive the Deity to be corporeal, so that they contrive for it and represent belly and hands and feet, and neck also, and breasts and the other organs that go to make man, see to what impiety and godlessness their mind has come down, to have such ideas of the Deity. … But these and like things are not properties of God, but rather of earthly bodies.” *Against the Heathen* (318 A.D.) ch.22 p.15-16.

“For ye carve the figures for the sake of the apprehension of God, as ye say, but invest the actual images with the honor and title of God, thus placing yourselves in a profane position.” *Against the Heathen* (318 A.D.) ch.21.1 p.15

All Eastern Orthodox believe this about statues. Greek Orthodox (but not Russian) have consistently believed this about pictures of God. But they venerate pictures of Jesus and saints though.

**Don’t Persecute Others**

“For if it be a bad thing to flee, it is much worse to persecute; for the one party hides himself to escape death, the other persecutes with a desire to kill;” *In Defense of His Flight* (357-373 A.D.) ch.8 p.257.

“It is the true part of godliness not to compel but to persuade.” *History of the Arians* (358 A.D.) ch.67 p.29. If only the historical Roman Catholic Church had heeded Athanasius.

**His Breadth of Good Teaching**

On around 468 pages (including 56 before Nicea), Athanasius wrote at least 603 teachings that four of more Pre-Nicene Christians taught and none denied. Of course Athanasius hit the big things, like Jesus redeemed us by bearing our sins, and rising from the dead, but even minor things, like the abomination that causes desolation, Naphtali, and Laban. Of all the 1,188+ teachings that four or more Pre-Nicene Christians taught and none denied, Athanasius wrote on more than half of them. These are listed at <https://www.biblequery.org/Doctrine/DoctrinalStatements/AthanasiusTaught.html> (or .doc) and documented at .<https://www.biblequery.org/History/ChurchHistory/WhatNiceaToEphesusChristiansTaughtOnDoctrine.html> (or .doc), .<https://www.biblequery.org/History/ChurchHistory/WhatNiceaToEphesusChristiansTaughtOnExperienceandPractice.html> (or .doc), <https://www.biblequery.org/History/ChurchHistory/WhatEarlyChristiansTaughtOnDoctrine.html> (or .doc), and <https://www.biblequery.org/History/ChurchHistory/WhatEarlyChristiansTaughtOnExperienceAndPractice.html> (or .doc).

One brilliant point Athanasius had, is that “polytheism is atheism”. Monotheists generally believe there is One who eternally existed, is all-powerful, is governor of all; knows all, and can do whatever He wishes. Atheists believe it is “empty up there”. Polytheism typically has a lot of gods and goddesses that act pretty much like people, except with greater powers. But behind the gods, most polytheists also believe it is “empty”. He said, “…for the rule of more than one is the rule of none. For each one would cancel the rule of the other, and none would appear ruler, but there would be anarchy everywhere.” *Against the Heathen* ch.38.3 p.24

**Where Athanasius was Silent**

With all of these teachings, there were only a few important things Athanasius was silent on. Athanasius neither affirmed nor denied that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

**No venerating images:** But in his writings Athanasius never mentioned anything about venerating images, whether of Jesus, other people, or anything else.

However, this lack was “fixed”. The historian Agapius reported in 593 A.D. that a Jewish person rented the house of a Christian in Berytus (Beirut), and upon finding a picture of the Virgin Mary urinated on it. After that was discovered, the Jews were expelled from the city. So far there is nothing here relating to Athanasius, who died in 373 A.D. Some years later an anonymous legend tells of a Jewish person who rented a Christian’s house in Beirut, saw an icon of Christ, re-enacted the crucifixion to the icon, and the icon bled. Then the Jew and those around him converted. This was told by a Bishop Athanasius, who went to the Seventh Ecumenical Council also called Nicea II, in 787 A.D. Note that this Athanasius lived over 400 years after Athanasius of Alexandria. Yet at least one Greek Orthodox person thought this was the same Athanasius at the first Council of Nicea. See <https://phoenicia.org/statueandicon.html> for more info.

John of Damascus was an influential theologian and defender of icons. When he defended images he knew of no quotes from Athanasius supporting venerating images. He certainly would have used Athanasius writing in support of venerating images, - if he had known of any writings of Athanasius supporting images.

**Never prayed to Mary or saints:** The writings of Athanasius are totally silent on praying to Mary or anybody else. However, there is a famous “Prayer of Athanasius” to Mary in later Roman Catholic writings. However, no reference of where Athanasius wrote or said this is ever given. Likewise there is a Homily on the Papyrus of Turin 71, 216; in Gambero, 106 supposed by someone named Athanasius. It does not say which Athanasius, and we do not know who claimed it was by any Athanasius. (I have not found these baseless claims in any orthodox writings though.)

**Where Some Disagree with Athanasius**

The following parts go into great detail about which groups would disagree with various teachings of Athanasius. For a quick tally,

**C** means Copts would disagree,

**O** means Orthodox would disagree,

**R** means Roman Catholics would disagree, and

**E** means evangelicals would disagree.

Lower case means some would disagree and some would agree.

1. (E) **Mary the mother/bearer of God**

“John, while yet in the womb, leapt for joy at the voice of Mary Bearer of God [*theotokou*];” *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (356-360 A.D.) discourse 3 ch.26 (ch.33) p.411 See also ibid ch.33 p.412. See also *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (331 A.D.) discourse 3 ch.14 p.401

“Whence also, whereas the flesh is born of Mary bearer of God (*theotokou*), He Himself [i.e. Jesus] is said to have been born, who furnishes to others an origin of being;” *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (331 A.D.) discourse 3 ch.34 p.412

Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and Roman Catholics all say that Mary was the Bearer or God. The Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) pronounces anathema not only against Nestorius who denied that, but also against all who don’t anathematize those who deny that.

Protestants dislike that term being a test of fellowship, since it is not scriptural. They also object with possible implication of the term, that Mary was the Bearer/Mother of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit too. The other groups would respond that they don’t believe that either, but they still like to use the term to distinguish from Nestorians, who would say Mary was the mother of the human part, will, and mind of Jesus, or not the bearer/mother of the divine part, will and mind of Jesus. Protestants would respond that since they don’t accept the possible implication, then don’t call Mary the mother of God. Nestorianism is wrong, but instead of using a term that can easily be misconstrued, instead you should call the Virgin Mary the Mother of the Son of God.

2. (E) **Mary, ever virgin:** Athanasius (331 A.D.) called Mary “ever-Virgin” in *Four Discourses Against the Arians* discourse 2 ch.70 p.386-387. Prior to him, we only know of two writers who affirmed this: Hippolytus and Peter of Alexandria.

But the Bible says that Joseph had no union with Mary until Jesus was born in Matthew 1:25. If Mary was ever-virgin, shouldn’t the Bible have said “no union until…” but rather “never had union”. However, the Bible refutes this by mentioning Jesus’ brothers in many places: Matthew 12:46-47; 13:55; Mark 3:31-32; Luke 8:19-20; John 2:12; 7:3-10. With all of these places, the idea that they are cousins is not mentioned once in the Bible or Pre-Nicene writers. The word was not unknown: “cousin” is in the New Testament (Colossians 4:10), but not relating to Jesus. When the Bible and later church tradition contradict each other, we should believe the Bible.

3. (CORE) **Athanasius was also Nestorian-leaning**

Athanasius was discussing how no one knew the day or the hour of Christ’s return, not even the Son, only the Father. His answer is “”but why, though He knew, He said, ‘No, not the Son knows,’ this I think none of the faithful is ignorant, viz. that He made this as those other declarations as many by reason of the flesh. For this as before is not the Word’s deficiency, but of that human nature whose property it is to be ignorant. … Certainly when He says in the Gospel concerning Himself in His human character, ‘Father, the hour is come, glorify Thy Son,’ it is plain that He knew also the hour of the end of all things, as the Word, though as man He is ignorant of it, for ignorance is proper to man, and especially ignorance of these things. … for since He was made man, He is not ashamed, because of the flesh which is ignorant to say ‘I know not,’ that He may shew that knowing as God, He is but ignorant according to the flesh.. And therefore He said not ‘no, not the Son of God knows,’ lest the Godhead should seem ignorant, but simply ‘no, not the Son,’ that the ignorance might be the Son’s as born from among men.” *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (331 A.D.) discourse 3 ch.43 p.417

So according to Athanasius did Jesus Christ, the Son, the Son of God, know or not? According to Athanasius the divine Son of God knew, but the human Son did not. Just how many minds did Athanasius think Jesus had? This sounds so much like Nestorianism before Nestorius. One can see why Nestorians admired Athanasius, and this is even despite Athanasius says Mary was the bearer of God.

But the Bible never even hints that Jesus was two beings, or two minds in one body. Colossians 2:19 says the fullness of God dwelled in Him, and Hebrews 1:3 says that the Son is the exact representation of God’s being. Yet Hebrews 2:14 says that He shared in our humanity and Hebrews 2:17 says that Jesus was made like us in every way. The mystery of the incarnation is that Jesus was every bit as human as we are (except without sin), and He is every bit as much God as the Father.

As for the other side of things, I found no trace of Monophysite-specific teaching in the writings of Athanasius.

4. (ORE) **Athanasius admired the heterodox teacher Origen:** “And concerning the everlasting co-existence of the Word with the Father, and that He is not of another essence or subsistence, but proper to the Father’s, as the Bishops in the Council said, you may hear again from the labour-loving Origen also. For what he has written as if inquiring and by way of exercise, that let no one take as expressive of his own sentiments, but of parties who are contending in investigation, but what he definitely declares, that is the sentiment of the labour-loving man.” *In Defense of the Nicene Definition* (346-356 A.D.) ch.27 p.168. This is understandable as at least five pre-Nicene writers were Origenists.

5. (ore) **Collective guilt of the Jews:** Athanasius (339 A.D.) wrote about the desecration of churches in Alexandria: “They [heathen soldiers] were burning the books of Holy Scripture which they found in the church; and the Jews, the murderers of our Lord, and godless heathen entering irreverently (O strange boldness!) the holy Baptistery…” *Circular Letter* ch.3 p.94. While this is regrettable, Athanasius did not say much against Jewish people besides this.

6. (ORE) **Jealousy has no place with God:** Athanasius said we should not ascribe jealousy to God. *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (331 A.D.) discourse 2 ch.29 p.363. But scripture says God has jealousy in Exodus 20:5; 34:14; Deuteronomy 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Joshua 24:19; Nahum 1:2; Zechariah 8:1; and 1 Corinthians 10:22.

7. (e) **Inconsistent on the Apocrypha**

“But since we have made mention of heretics as dead, but of ourselves as possessing the Divine Scriptures for salvation; and since I fear lest, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, some few of the simple should be beguiled from their simplicity and purity, by the subtilty of certain men, and should henceforth read other books—those called apocryphal—led astray by the similarity of their names with the true books; I beseech you to bear patiently, if I also write, by way of remembrance, of matters with which you are acquainted, influenced by the need and advantage of the Church.” *Easter Letter* (367 A.D.) ch.2 p.551. In ch.7 p.554 he says that Wisdom, Sirach, Judith, Tobit, Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd are not included in the canon but still good to read.

Athanasius (367 A.D.) “But for greater exactness I add this also, writing of necessity; that there are other books besides these not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness. The Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Sirach, and Esther, and Judith, and Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd. But the former [Old and New Testament books] are included in the Canon, the latter being [merely] read; nor is there in any place a mention of apocryphal writings. But they are an invention of heretics, who write them when they choose… so using them as ancient writings, they may find occasion to lead astray the simple.” *Easter Letter 39* ch.7 p.552 (367 A.D.)

On the other hand, Athanasius quoted as scripture Baruch, Wisdom, Sirach, and the two additions to Daniel as scripture. He also quoted from Susanna in Daniel.

He quoted Wisdom 6:24 and Sirach 1:8,9 as scripture in *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (356-360 A.D.) discourse 2 ch.79 p.391

He listed the books of the Old Testament, including Baruch. *Easter Letter 367 A.D.* ch.4 p.552.

He quoted as scripture Daniel 14:5 (Bel and the Dragon) in *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (A.D. 356-360) discourse 3 ch.30 p.410

He quoted from the story of Susanna in *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (356-360 A.D.) discourse 1 ch.13 p.314, and also *Athanasius on Psalms*.

Athanasius quoted from Tobit 4:18, right after Matthew 6:6 and Isaiah 32:6 in *Defense before Constantius* (357 A.D.) ch.17 p.244

**8. (e) The Eucharist is the Real Presence of Christ**  
This is in a fragment that some attribute to Athanasius. ”So long as the prayers and invocations have not yet been made, it is mere bread and a mere cup. But when the great and wondrous prayers have been recited, then the bread becomes the body and the cup the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . When the great prayers and holy supplications are sent up, the Word descends on the bread and the cup, and it becomes His body. This is a fragment attributed to Athanasius. *Sermon to the Newly-Baptized*; J.N.D. Kelly, p.442. Evangelical Lutherans and Anglicans also believe in the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.

9. (RE) **Athanasius said that people become God:** “For He [Jesus] became man so that we might be made God.” *Incarnation of the Word* (318 A.D.) ch.54 p.65. See also *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (discourse 1 ch.15 p.316 and discourse 2 ch.70 p.386. “Therefore He [Jesus] was not man, and then became God, but He was God, and then became man, and that to deify us.” *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (331 A.D.) discourse 1 ch.39 p.329. See also discourse 1 ch.5.15 p.316

10. (RE) **Jeremiah and John the Baptist were born with no sinful nature** according to Athanasius. “Many for instance have been made holy and clean from all sin; nay, Jeremiah was hallowed even from the womb, and John, while yet in the womb, leapt for joy at the voice of Mary Bearer of God; nevertheless ‘death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression; …” *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (331 A.D.) discourse 3 ch.33 p.411

11. (e) **Can lose your salvation.** Athanasius also taught that people could lose their salvation. But around eleven pre-Nicene Christian writers also believed they could lose their salvation. Probably more evangelicals (including charismatics and more biblical Lutherans, Anglicans, and Methodists) believe they can lose their salvation than do not.

12. (some Calvinists) **Free choice:** Athanasius said the soul departed from Truth by abuse of freedom of choice. *Athanasius Against the Heathen* ch.1 p.5-6 (318 A.D.)

13. (most Calvinists) **Christ died for all people:** Athanasius said that Christ died for all, and by the suffering of death tasted death for every man. *Incarnation of the Word* (318 A.D.) ch.10.2 p.41. See also ibid ch.7.5 p.40.

He said that Jesus ransomed the sins of all. *The Incarnation* (318 A.D.) ch.40.2 p.57. See also *Incarnation of the Word* ch.25.4 p.50

He said that Christ “died to ransom all” *Incarnation of the Word* (318 A.D.) ch.21.7 p.48

Prior to Nicea none denied that, and four other writers affirmed it.

14. (e) **People can have a worthiness relating to salvation.** “Now he who has been counted worthy of the heavenly calling, and by this calling has been sanctified, if he grow negligent in it, although washed becomes defiled:…” *Easter Letter* 10 (338 A.D.) ch.9 p.526. “We too shall be counted worthy of these things, if at all times we cleave to our Saviour, and if we are pure,…” *Easter Letter* 10 (338 A.D.) ch.10 p.527. “For when we have first meditated properly on these things, we shall attain to be counted worthy of those which are eternal, through Christ Jesus our Lord,…” *Easter Letter 10* (338 A.D.) ch.12 p.523. Fourteen Pre-Nicene Christian writers taught this. Martin Luther, reformed Christians, Baptists and Bible church believers generally never say this.

15. (ORE) **Was called a pope**. Constantine (357 A.D.) wrote a letter to Pope Athanasius [of Alexandria] in *Defense Against the Arians* ch.64 p.133. Alexander of Alexandria (357 A.D.) wrote a letter to Pope Athanasius [of Alexandria] in *Defense Against the Arians* ch.67-68 p.135 and ch.69 p.136. The first to be called a pope was bishop Heraclas of Alexandria in 232-249 A.D. No Roman bishop called a pope until Julius of Rome in 347 A.D. Siricius c.384-399 was the first Roman bishop known to call himself a pope. Roman Catholics only have a pope in Rome, and Eastern Orthodox and evangelicals don’t have a pope. Matthew 23:9 says to call no man on earth father, perhaps prophetically warning against this.

16. (OR) **No other councils.** “This being pointed out, who will accept those who cite the synod of Arminum, or any other, against the Nicene?” *To the Bishops of Africa* (368-372 A.D.) ch.3 p.490.

“Vainly then do they run about with the pretext that they have demanded Councils for the faith’s sake; for divine Scripture is sufficient above all things; but if a Council be needed on the point, there are the proceedings of the Fathers, for the Nicene Bishops did not neglect this matter, but stated the doctrine so exactly, that persons reading their words honestly, cannot but be reminded by them of the religion towards Christ announced in divine Scripture.” *Councils of Arminum and Seleucia* ch.6 p.453.

Athanasius was against the compromise of Arminum, on the basis of it being another council. He saw no need for any other council afterwards. Obviously did not know of councils after his death. While the later Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon affirmed the Nicene Creed and were not against the Nicene Council, they kicked out of the church people who accepted the Nicene Council.

17. (E) **Multiple archangels:** Athanasius (331 A.D.) taught multiple archangels in *Four Discourses Against the Arians* discourse 1 ch.42 p.331 and discourse 2 ch.27 p.362. Multiple archangels are mentioned by eight pre-Nicene writers beginning with Irenaeus, Valentinians, Encratites, and mentioned in the apocryphal book of Tobit.

18. (E) **Bishops have thrones**: Mentioned a bishop still sitting on his throne when soldiers sent by the Arians attacked the church. *History of the Arians* (358 A.D.) ch.81 p.301. The first mention of a bishop on his throne was in *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History* before 340 A.D.)

19. (ore) **Argued only by insults sometimes:** Answered some Arians arguments solely with insults against Arians. For example, in *Four Discourses Against the Arians* discourse 1 ch.53 p.337 Athanasius “answers” the Arian objection on Hebrews 1:4 that the Son became superior to the angels. He says that Arians deceive the thoughtless, sow the poison of their heresy, and “openly adopting Caiaphas’s way, they determined on judaizing, and are ignorant of the text that verily God shall dwell upon the earth [Zech 2:10].” And that is as close as Athanasius came to answering the objection!

20. (ore) **Was too harsh:** Looking again at the previous quote, Arians were not Judaizers (like some Galatians). Also, Athanasius said, “This is a part of what Arius and his fellows vomited from their heretical hearts” *On the Synods* ch.16 p.458. That is a too much.

21. (ORE) **trivial errors**: “King Pharaoh” in *Four Discourses Against the Arians* (356-360 A.D.) discourse 2 ch.27 p.362.

Athanasius said the Phoenicians invented letters. Actually Egyptians and Sumerians were before them. *Athanasius Against the Heathen* (318 A.D.) part 1 ch.9.2 p.9

Athanasius of Alexandria said Theseus was the first to institute worship of the Greek gods. They were likely worshipped before him. *Athanasius Against the Heathen* (318 A.D.) part 1 ch.9.4 p.9

22. (ORE) **Denied that atoms exist:** Democritus and Leucippus were Greek philosophers that taught something could only be cut up so far before it was just indivisible balls they called atoms. Athanasius denied this in *On the Councils* ch.35 p.469. This is understandable; prior to him ten pre-Nicene Christian writers wrote that atoms were wrong or ridiculous: Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus of Portus, Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria, Arnobius, and Lactantius. Not a single writer said that atoms were not wrong, or that God might use atoms. Early church tradition was crystal clear on this, and one thing we can learn is that early church tradition of godly men can speak loudly with one voice on something, and still be totally wrong. While they said many good things on other topics, this shows that we cannot put the weight of Christian tradition on the same level as Holy Scripture.

23. (ORE) **Various other scientific errors:** Here are just three examples. Athanasius said that the winds are caused by the burning heat of the upper air. Actually the upper air is cold. *Athanasius Against the Heathen* (318 A.D.) part 1 ch.27.7 p.18. He discusses “when the sun is under the earth” in *Athanasius Against the Heathen* (318 A.D.) part 2 ch.29.2 p.19. He also said the earth is set on the waters of the world. *Athanasius Against the Heathen* part 1 ch.27.6 p.18

**Who was Athanasius Most Like?**

On the other hand, space here does not permit listing the hundreds of other good teachings of Athanasius, the Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and evangelicals would all agree with. So we can see why everyone likes Athanasius, perhaps at the expense of overlooking some of his teachings that they would strongly object to, such as his acceptance of Origen and his proto-Nestorian-leaning teaching.

Athanasius’ teaching was very similar to most churches except for his high regard for Origen, but he was not 100% consistent with any major church today. But what group was he most like? While his view of scripture was most like an evangelical, he had a strong view of bishop tradition like Roman Catholics. However, Athanasius was not most like either one. He was most like an iconoclastic Eastern Orthodox, or perhaps a Nestorian. Every place a Roman Catholic could point to him as being like a Roman Catholic, an eastern Orthodox could point to him being like an Eastern Orthodox just as much or even more. He would have been like a Copt, except that he had one Nestorian-leaning teaching.

Of course if Athanasius said scripture was sufficient, and scripture says nothing about venerating pictures of people, and he never advocated it either, then it must not have been anything of importance to him.

**Summary of an Evangelical View**

Athanasius’ flaws don’t cause evangelicals much of a problem as some might think – because we don’t follow Athanasius anyway. We do admire him as a great believer however. He was a dedicated, though flawed Christian who accomplished much despite his imperfections. We can emulate his good points, and forget his bad points. So praise God for Athanasius, but don’t follow Athanasius. He is just a godly believer reminding us to follow God.

**References**

All quotes from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Series 2 vol.4 unless otherwise noted.

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Athanasius v.4;Dubia & spuria. <http://books.google.com/books?id=5r0UAAAAQAAJ> page 359 (page 797 in book).

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Some Bible Verses

Isa 44:6-18,21

Acts 2:21; 4:12

Rom 12:1

Isa 46:9

Mt 24:14

Pr 6:14; 11:29

2 Cor 9:8

Gal 2:20

Jn 6:38-40

Jn 10

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