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Athanasius Against the World  
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Introduction – October 31 is important for more than Halloween. It is the date which began the Protestant Reformation. A key day in church history. So I think it would be wise if we acknowledge Reformation Day by taking a look a central figure in the history of the church. Today’s sermon is a biographical sketch rather than an exposition of a Bible passage. As the church in 2022, we need to know the heroes who gave so much and tirelessly and sacrificially fought to preserve biblical truth. We stand on their shoulders, so let’s honor their legacy to the faith.

One of the giants of our faith is Athanasius. Athanasius is one of our African early church fathers. He lived from 296 to 373. He served as bishop, or pastor, of the church in Alexandria from 328-373. The battle of his life was against Arianism. Arianism was a wide-spread, wildly popular heresy that denied the full deity of Christ. Arianism taught that Jesus was not equal with the Father but was created by the Father. The phrase “there was a time when he was not” was coined by Arius, the proponent of Arianism.

Athanasius was the central opponent of Arianism, and due to his relentless effort, Arianism was first condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325 and finally defeated at the Council of Constantinople in 381 – 8 years after his death. In other words, he didn’t live to see victory over this heretical teaching, but apart from his stance and influence, it would never have been achieved.

Athanasius contra mundum, Athanasius against the world, was a phrase that arose because during his life it appeared that the whole church had abandoned orthodoxy concerning the person of Christ. For over 40 years, the eastern church was Arian in their Christology. Athanasius literally spent his life fighting to preserve the true, biblical teaching of Christ. One man stood against the tide of false teaching, and because of him, truth prevailed so that today you and I rightly understand that Jesus was not only 100% man, He was also 100% God.

- I. His Life
  - a. Not much is known of his childhood other than he was extremely poor.

- b. Alexander, who was then the Bishop of Alexandria, saw potential in this young poor boy, took him under his care, mentored him, and provided him with an excellent education. By the age of 20, he had become an astute theological writer.
- c. As secretary to Alexander, they both attended the Council of Nicea in 325. Their rigorous, biblical argument garnered the overwhelming support of the Council and resulted in a blow to the rising teaching of Arianism. They defined the Son of God as “one substance with the Father.”
- d. Arius, a lively, big personality, had the gift of gab and could charm and convince others with great ease. He was not going away quietly. Instead, he continued to win bishops to his theology and set about to gather support of civil officials. Arianism, though condemned, continued to grow. Arius knew his main opponent was Athanasius, so he made him his main target.
- e. In 328, 3 years after the Council, Alexander died and Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria at the age of 30. He was bishop for 46 years, and for the most part his entire bishopric was spent in turmoil pushing back against heresy.
- f. The rise of Arius’ influence resulted in banishing Athanasius from his office. He endured 5 exiles. Fellow bishops joined with Arius to silence Athanasius. If they couldn’t out argue him from Scripture, they would get rid of him, and then the path to solidifying the church around Arianism would be achieved. Athanasius was hated by most pastors of his day because he was so passionate and had the audacity to label them as heretics if they did not affirm the full deity of Christ.
- g. We’ll return to his exiles in a moment. In 362, Athanasius not only worked to clarify the doctrine of Christ, but also made a monumental contribution to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity, which was also under attack. Athanasius is the one who gave us our orthodox statement on the Trinity by using the words hypostasis, person, and ousia, essence. One essence in three persons.
- h. Athanasius worked feverously to formulate and defend these doctrines both during and after his exiles. For 45 years these doctrines were up for grabs and it was Athanasius who fought and defended them, often all by himself. After the Council of

Constantinople in 381, these doctrines have never been questioned by the true, orthodox, evangelical church again.

- i. Side note – he was such a precise and caring pastor that his church never acknowledged the other bishops sent to replace him during his exiles. When it seemed that all had left him, his church remained by his side.
- II. His Exiles
- a. In 336 emperor Constantine exiled Athanasius on the false charge that he had prevented wheat shipments from arriving in Alexandria in order to starve Constantinople. Constantine died in 337, and he returned. (emperors are not above God)
  - b. In 339, prompted by the Arian leader Eusebius, he was exiled to Rome for 7 years, the longest period of exile away from his flock. However, while in Rome, he made friends with leaders in the Western church and the West supported him the rest of his life. (God was working for good even in exile) As in Genesis with Joseph, what Eusebius meant for evil, God used for good.
  - c. In 356 emperor Constantius drove him into hiding until Julian became emperor in 361. 5 years.
    - i. The W. emperor was murdered, so the E. emperor appointed his military commander Syrianus to capture Athanasius and demolish any Nicene supporters.
    - ii. On a Thursday night, Feb 8, 356, Athanasius was presiding over a church service and Syrianus and his soldiers stormed the church. Athanasius was quickly escorted into hiding by the monks.
    - iii. On Thursday, June 13 and orchestrated effort was conducted to stamp out any of Athanasius' supporters under the guise that a search was being made for Athanasius. Many were killed or exiled and their homes and churches destroyed.
    - iv. This volatile period of exile proved to be most fruitful. Athanasius produced a series of treatises that so carefully explained the deity of Christ, it was only a matter of time before Arianism would fall.
    - v. In fact, these works had such an impact upon the church that truth prevailed even under the Arian emperor Valens.

- d. In 362 – just 1 year after his return from the 3<sup>rd</sup> exile – Julian exiled him until Julian's death in 364. 2 years. Julian was a pagan emperor believing in many gods and would not tolerate Athanasius' monotheism.
- e. 365-366, Arian emperor Valens exiled him but he returned when Valens was distracted by a revolt in the empire.
- f. 17 of his 46 years as bishop were spent in exile.

### III. His Contribution

- a. Against the Gentiles – meaning a defense of monotheism against the polytheism of the day. He argued from general revelation since the pagan world rejected Scripture. He argued from the nature of the soul, it is invisible and immortal, so made in God's image tells us something about the God who made every one of us. He argued from creation, if there were more than one god you would not have the order and unity that you find in nature.
- b. On the Incarnation – looking at Genesis and Colossians, he argued that it was necessary for God to become man in order to redeem man. The Fall in Genesis 3 marred the image of God in man. So the image of God Himself, the Son, by His union with man, would restore the image of God in man by removing sin's corruption through his death and resurrection.
- c. By taking biblical truth and defining it in precise terms, he clarified and solidified the deity of Christ and the Triune God. How crucial is that? If Christ is not also God, we are not saved. If God is not triune as the Scripture reveals Him to be, then the Scripture cannot be trusted.
- d. Historically, God used one man's unwavering tenacity to hold to truth to hold back the crashing wave of heresy and preserve biblical truth for his generation until this very day!

### IV. His Legacy

- a. He was a pastor at heart. But his church knew the truth he was teaching them must be taught to the world because the world at that time was turning from truth!
- b. He was thoroughly exegetical. He formulated his arguments from sound interpretation of specific biblical texts. The Word was his only

weapon, and even though it looked bleak at times, it proved to be sufficient in the end. Build your life and make your stand on God's Word!

- c. He persevered in truth when all and everyone seemed against him. Don't give up and don't give in to any central doctrine of Scripture. Truth will prevail.
- d. He was willing to give all to guard the truth of his Savior! During his 3<sup>rd</sup> exile, Athanasius wrote a letter to the bishops of Egypt. In it he referred to those who had been martyred for affirming the deity of Christ. He wrote these words – we are contending for our all!

Conclusion – Athanasius made his stand and rescued the church. We are being challenged today by false teaching. The deity of Christ is not the target. The target today is biblical morality and ethics. You see church, if we lose what means to live as a believer, then we lose what it means to believe. We too are contending for our all!