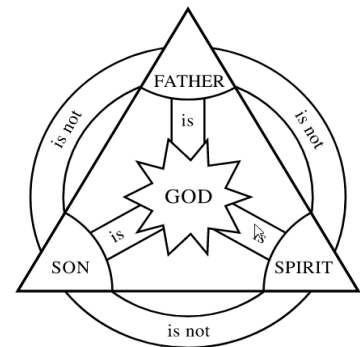


Athanasius¹ (c. 296-373)

Athanasius was a Christian leader long ago. He got into trouble with the government. He believed in something the Bible teaches. The government said that this teaching was wrong. That sometimes happens today doesn't it? What teaching was it that Athanasius got into trouble for believing? It was the teaching about the **Trinity**. Do you know what **Trinity** means? It is hard to understand. It is such a wonderful teaching that our poor fallen human minds cannot get to the bottom of it. The word **Trinity** is not in the Bible. The teaching about the Trinity *is* in the Bible.



What does it mean that God is a Trinity? It means: the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God—but there is only one God.

You can find that teaching in many places in the Bible. 1 John 5:7 says:

For there are **three** that bear record in heaven,
the Father,
the Word [the Son],
and the Holy Ghost [Spirit]:
and these three are **one**.

This is what the Bible teaches. This is what Athanasius believed. Because of this, he was punished. What was his punishment? On 7th November 335AD he was sent far away from his home to a distant place to live. This was the first time he was sent away. It happened again. And again. How did such a thing happen?

The Emperor Constantine I called a council in 325AD. All the church leaders were there. It was at a place called Nicaea in Bithynia. The council was called to talk about the teaching of a man called Arius. Arius was telling people that the Son of God, Jesus Christ was a created being, not God. “He is the first created being,” said Arius, “so he is important. But he is not equal to God.” Look at the diagram of Bible teaching at the beginning of this lesson. Arius was not right was he?

¹ We have no picture of Athanasius from his own time. I have found the oldest one I can for you and that dates from hundreds of years after he lived.

Over 300 church leaders came to Nicaea. They brought their helpers. They came from all over the Roman Empire. It was not long ago that Christians had been cruelly treated. Some of the men who came could show the scars where they had suffered for Christ's sake in those days.

The head of the government, the Emperor Constantine I, made a great opening ceremony. Then they talked about Arius's idea. Out of all those leaders only two agreed with Arius. They all talked about the Trinity. Then they wrote down some words. They chose the words very carefully. The words said that Jesus Christ, God's Son was eternal and equal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. The words that they wrote down are called the Nicene Creed. The Emperor decreed that everyone must believe the Nicene Creed. It was the right answer wasn't it?

Yes, it was the right answer. But they got the right answer in the wrong way. What do I mean? It was not the Emperor's job to call a council of the Church. The government does not decide what people should believe! Persecuting the followers of Arius would not make them change their mind. Trouble came from it in the end.

Two years after the Council of Nicaea Constantine I changed his mind. He called Arius back from banishment. When Constantine I died, his son Constantius became emperor. In his reign the church leaders chosen were all Arius's followers.



And now the government persecuted those who believed in the Trinity like Athanasius. He had taken part in the Council of Nicaea. He was a young man then. Now he was the leader of the church in Alexandria. The next fifty years of his life were hard. Again and again he was sent away into exile for his belief. He did not give up. People told untruths about him. They took him to court. He kept saying that Jesus Christ is God. Athanasius never lived to see Arius's teachings thrown out of the church. He carried on. It did not matter what everyone else thought. He felt as if he was standing against the whole world. It was only after he died that a church council of 381AD confirmed the Nicene Creed. Even then, for the next 300 years, in many countries that made up the old Roman Empire, the government punished those who did not follow

Arius's teaching.

Athanasius was unfashionable. The clever people thought he was wrong. The people with political power thought he was wrong. This did not influence Athanasius. Athanasius was on his own but God helped him. He stuck to what he believed. It was right and he would not let it go. We must be like Athanasius. We must always remember that truth is not just what most people think. How can we find out the truth? The Bible says, "Thy Word is truth" (John 17:17). Athanasius knew that. We need to know it too.