

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 23

The Cappadocian Fathers and the Trinity

GOD USES 3 GOOD FRIENDS TO SECURE THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Several lessons back, we posed the question Jesus asked his followers recorded in Matthew 16: “Who is Jesus?” As we looked at the Council of Nicea (325 A..D.), we considered the church’s response to the question. From the Council came the Nicene Creed with its proclamation that “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty...and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father...God from God...begotten not made, of one substance with the Father...”

This proclamation came about in response to the debate raging in the church over who exactly was Jesus Christ. The Nicene Creed attempted to end the debate by two main other groups, the Arians and the Sabellians.

The Arians took their name from Arius, the principal teacher of their viewpoint. This view taught that Jesus was the Logos. As the Logos, Jesus was created by God and was in no way equal to God. Arius supported his position with the “logic” that God was unchangeable. As such, there is no way Jesus could be God, for Jesus was incarnated or made as a man. If Jesus was in fact God, then that would be a change in God, which is impossible. Therefore, Jesus must have been God’s greatest creation, his Logos that is read about in the Bible in Proverbs 8 as well as other places (John 1). For Arius, to teach otherwise was to impugn the very character of God. It was also tantamount to denying salvation. Arius did not believe that God could “change” and take on flesh. As such, if Jesus was God, then he could not truly be human and could not truly provide for our salvation.

If Arius was an extreme of Jesus as creature rather than God, then there was another extreme at work even before Arius. The other extreme is called Sabellianism, after Sabellius, its progenitor.¹ Sabellius taught that the Trinity was not “three” different persons, but rather was One God who took on three different roles, each of which we affix to a “person” – either Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. To a Sabellian, Jesus was the same as God the Father, and was the same God doing his redemptive role. Likewise, the Holy Spirit was the form that God took in his work within the church.

Both Arians and Sabellians tried to reduce the mystery of the Trinity into something easy to understand for the human mind. They did so in opposite ways:

¹ This view is also called “modalism.” One of its earliest proponents, even before Sabellius, was Praxeas.

Arians, by stripping Jesus of his true deity; Sabellians, by denying Jesus a distinct identity.

The Nicene Council attempted to put this controversy to rest by adopting the Nicene Creed. Unfortunately, the controversy continued. Constantine got his “unity” from the Council, but the deep-seeded opposing views were not really abandoned by their adherents. Instead, the language of the Creed was “reinterpreted” by many to justify their positions.

Over the next 60 years, the church would see the issue rage in many places and in many ways. Athanasius, who we studied last lesson, spent his life living in and out of exile as he fought for the Nicene Creed against those who would reinterpret it as supportive of Arianism.

This fight was not limited to a few ivory towered clergy who were nit picking over some philosophical point. Apparently, many church members (the laity) were intensely involved in the dispute as well. Gregory of Nyssa wrote at the time that if you were to ask a Christian on the street whether he might have change, the answer might include a lecture on whether Jesus was begotten or unbegotten. Or, “if you ask for the price of bread, you are told, ‘The Father is Greater and the Son inferior.’ If you ask, ‘Is the bath ready?’ someone answers, ‘The Son was created from nothing.’”²

By 373 when Athanasius died, there was an Arian emperor, many Arian Bishops, and at least 12 creeds that, to some degree or another, supported the Arian heresy.³ These core issues of faith were the subjects of the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Council of Constantinople put the final edits onto the Nicene Creed, leaving it in the form we know today.⁴ As Olson puts it,

From the Council (of Constantinople) onward, denial of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity as spelled out in the Nicene Creed has been considered by all major branches of Christianity (including most Protestants) as heresy and possibly even apostasy (loss of status as a Christian, if not loss of a state of Grace).⁵

² Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. One might fairly lament the many of sermons and approaches of many believers today where theology and meaty issues are avoided. Instead, a social and easy message often holds sway that seems almost more of a pep rally than an up building of faith and understanding.

³ Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, p. 175.

⁴ We will see another minor issue that arises in the Creed later, but it found its basic form at the time.

⁵ Olson at 172.

How did the church get to the Council of Constantinople? How was the controversy basically resolved between 373 and 381? Where was God working here and what did he do?

These questions have many layers of answers, not all of which are known. While we cannot give full answers, we are not without some important information that illuminates God's work in a way that is informative as well as inspiring. God secured the doctrine of the Trinity through the work of three good friends, scholars we have come to call the Cappadocian Fathers.⁶ These three are Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. We should look at each.

BASIL OF CAESAREA

Basil of Caesarea, also known as Basil the Great or Saint Basil, was born around 330 (just 5 years after the Council of Nicea) in Cappadocia.⁷ Two things marked his family: its strong Christian faith, and its wealth/standing in society.

Basil received an excellent education in Greek culture and thought. He attended the top Greek university of his day in Athens. There, he met and became a lifelong friend of Gregory of Nazianzus, whom we will discuss in a moment.⁸

Basil was baptized around the age of 27. Soon after his baptism, Basil started frequenting the hermits and nuns living in caves and monasteries around Cappadocia (see previous Church History lesson on rise of this movement and the life of St. Antony). Basil was impressed with the spiritual focus of these ascetics and renounced his family wealth, choosing to start a monastery. Basil lived the rest of his life in personal poverty, giving his wealth in furtherance of the church and his ministry.

Several lessons ago, we looked at the life of the early church's major historian, Eusebius of Caesarea. Eusebius was the Bishop of the church in Caesarea (which was the major church in the region of Cappadocia). In 370, Eusebius died. Basil was appointed as the next Bishop. The Catholic encyclopedia points out that the two principal focuses of the life and ministry of Basil was the defense of the Trinity and the social work of Christian charity. While this lesson will more closely look at Basil's work on the Trinity, we are remiss if we fail to point out his

⁶ This title comes from the fact that the three leaders on this issue came from Cappadocia in what is now modern Turkey.

⁷ Cappadocia was just North of Tarsus. It was an inland region in what is now Southeast Turkey.

⁸ He was also in school at Athens with Julian, who would later become Roman emperor briefly between 361-363. History has crowned Julian with the title "Julian the Apostate." Julian earned this title by his efforts to strip Christianity as the religion of the empire and return paganism to the forefront. Julian's efforts were not fruitful. Christianity was too entrenched and the pagan religion of bygone days too weak. Julian was reared as a Christian, and his apostate thoughts were by and large kept to himself until after his reign began.

tireless efforts to help the poor and needy. For Basil, faith was never merely an intellectual exercise. Faith also was the mind's awareness of the reasons for the body's actions. In other words, because Jesus was God, Jesus showed the face of God. In Jesus, we saw God truly. So in the actions of Jesus, his care for the poor and downtrodden, we see the very heart of God and the very actions of God. This meant that we were to seek to emulate Jesus/God in our actions as well.

As to Jesus, the Son, Basil taught and wrote that Jesus was God, plain and simple, and yet not so plain and simple! Simple in that Jesus was not created or lesser than the Father, as taught by Arians. Neither was Jesus a second God, as taught by Sabellians. Not so plain and simple in that Basil chose to use two Greek words in describing this concept. The way Basil used these words is very difficult for us to understand. He used them in the context of Plato's theory of forms, which itself is not an idea easily understood by most educated people today!

Basil taught that God was three "persons"⁹ (*hypostases*) and yet one essence or substance (*ousia*). For Basil, there was a general idea which we know as God. It was a singular essence that was one substance. From a more specific perspective (as apart from the general one), there were three special persons that were this general substance. We know them as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Basil used several illustrations to try and illuminate his reasoning. One illustration, which Basil borrowed from earlier church fathers, was that of the sun and its rays. The sun is the source of the rays; in a sense the rays are "begotten" of the sun. Yet, there can be no sun without the rays and the rays have always existed with the sun. A second illustration Basil used was the rainbow. The rainbow is one essence. One could never separate out the rainbow and claim it is actually many rainbows of specific colors. But similarly, one could never deny that there are distinctions within that rainbow of separate hues.

Basil's stand on the nature of the Son and the Trinity had another focus missing in the analysis of many before his time: the Holy Spirit. For Basil, many in the church saw the Holy Spirit in a lesser role, assuming that God created the Spirit, or merely a name given the force that God or Jesus used in working in the world. Basil wrote an entire work on the Holy Spirit as God (probably the first Christian work focusing solely on the Holy Spirit).

Basil would explain that the Holy Spirit is the worker in the hearts of men that brings about salvation. Because only God can save, the Holy Spirit must be God. The Holy Spirit, however, is then involved fully in the same Trinity issue of Jesus the Son. The Holy Spirit is one of three "persons" and yet the same substance.

⁹ Here already we are doing a slight injustice to the Trinity and the thought of Basil if we think of persons in the Western sense of "individual separate beings who are self actualized as against other individuals." That separated distinction was not fully present in his thought. "Person" in the thought of Basil was in some sense individual but always a community word as well – a tough concept for modern man to understand without considerable time studying Plato.

This was certainly a mystery set forth by Basil. Basil never believed that any man could easily grasp the truth of the Trinity. In fact, anyone who reduced the Trinity to something so easily understood and “formula-ized” was in danger of the great sin of Pride. For how could man easily grasp the essence of God when God’s ways are not ours, and God’s thoughts are not ours? For Basil, the Trinity was a subject for man to dwell and reflect on, not a meal to fully digest once and for all before moving on to the next theological meal.

GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

Gregory of Nazianzus was born at roughly the same time as Basil in another part of Cappadocia. Also like Basil, he was born into a wealthy family. His father was a bishop in the church and his mother a multigenerational Christian. While Gregory probably met Basil while both studied in Cappadocia, they became fast friends while studying in Athens. Their friendship, though tested at times, was for life. They worked closely together and encouraged each other in thought and deed.

Gregory was trained as a rhetorician. That meant his “job” was to expound, give speeches, orate, and explain! If you needed someone to teach or expound on a matter, if there was a presentation to be made, your favorite rhetorician was called!

Gregory had always devoted himself to God, but after a near death experience at sea, Gregory dedicated his life to God with very clear vows. His friend, Basil, tried on many occasions to get Gregory to join him in the monastic life with the monastic vows, but Gregory never would. Gregory did some work at the monastery with Basil, but never as a monk.

After Basil became Bishop of Caesarea, he imposed on Gregory to accept a post as a bishop as well. Gregory never liked the position, did not consider it his calling, and the whole affair seemed to have negatively affected the childhood friendship of the two.

In the Eastern Church, Gregory is known as “Gregory the Theologian.” He comes by this title because of the great orations/sermons he delivered on the subject of the Trinity. Most likely after the death of Basil (377 or 379), Gregory delivered a series of sermons in Constantinople prior to the Council that convened in 381. In these sermons, Gregory brilliantly explained the concepts of the Trinity.

Not surprisingly, Gregory’s theology strongly echoed that of his best friend, Basil. Gregory was intent that Jesus could not be anything less than God and still be our salvation. For how could Jesus join us to God, if Jesus himself was not God? For Gregory, there was no in between. Jesus was eternal and God, or Jesus was

merely a creature such as we are, maybe made at a different time and in a different way, but a creature nonetheless.

Gregory used the term “relation” to describe the Trinity’s diversity. The explanation was that the Trinity are not three different “beings,” but merely three different “relations,” analogous to three family members (This analogy caused many subsequent theologians to grimace because it might suggest three different people, a thought that was certainly not the purpose of Gregory). Ultimately Gregory, like Basil, was big on pointing out that the ultimate reality is a mystery not fully within the grasp of the human mind. Still, even though we can’t fully understand what God is, in the Trinity, we can be certain of what he is not! We can be certain God is not three distinct beings. We can also be certain Christ and the Holy Spirit are not lesser creatures made by God.

Gregory ultimately presided over the Council of Constantinople that put the finishing touches on the orthodoxy of the Trinity, basically ending the influence of Arianism on the church. Although Gregory was given the highly influential seat of church leadership at Constantinople, he resigned that position choosing instead a simple life of less prominence until his death.

GREGORY OF NYSSA

Gregory of Nyssa was the third of the “Cappadocian Fathers.” He was also Basil’s younger brother. Most authorities believe Gregory was about 10 years younger than Basil. Unlike Basil, this Gregory did not receive his education from the best schools. Basil, the older brother, taught Gregory of Nyssa. That being said, this Gregory actually exceeded his brother (and his brother’s best friend, Gregory of Nizianzus) in both his skill at rhetoric and his philosophical understanding.

Gregory joined his brother Basil in the monastic life. He was strongly mystical and had a number of remarkable dreams and visions that sculpted his life.

It was the year 372 when Basil installed his younger brother as the Bishop of Nyssa (hence the label, “Gregory of Nyssa”).

Gregory represented his family well at the Council of Constantinople, his brother Basil having died a few years earlier. While the older Gregory (Basil’s best friend) presided over the Council, the younger Gregory delivered the Council’s inaugural address.

Olson writes that Gregory of Nyssa managed, better than Basil or Gregory of Nizianzus, “to provide a solid foundation and intelligible explanation of the mystery of the Trinity that would completely shatter the objections of its enemies and retain the mystery at its heart.”¹⁰

Gregory contributed the “negative approach” to teaching about God’s essence. The Trinity and the essence of God was so far beyond human comprehension, that the best at times we can do is teach what it is not! We teach that God is NOT three different beings. We teach that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are NOT lesser than God or created by God. We teach these things this way because God’s essence is infinite, not something a finite mind can grasp. Similarly, God is incomprehensible, not something we can readily define with human terms and language. Scholars would later use the term “negative theology” to label the teaching of Gregory.

Gregory would explain that the work of God is one work. If God is creating, then the work of creation is not the work only of the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit. If God is saving mankind, then the salvation is not the work of one as opposed to another. Any work of God is the work of the entire Godhead. Now, there may be separate modes of working, but the purpose and conclusion is the same. In this sense, the three persons of the Godhead are different, but still one essence, one God.

POINTS FOR HOME

Does this matter? Why? What level of knowledge about the Trinity is “needed” to have a saving faith? Paul teaches in Colossians 1 that our beliefs, our “spiritual wisdom and understanding,” our “knowledge of God” affect the way we live. Paul prays that the Colossians will be filled with this wisdom and understanding from God “in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every good work.” As we are “growing in the knowledge of God,” we are “being strengthened with all power.” This will give us “great endurance and patience” as well as joy (Col. 1:9-14).

How is this? There is great comfort in knowing that God himself gave his life for us, not merely that of a creature made for the purpose of the sacrifice. We look with wonder and awe at a God we cannot fully understand. We probe the depths of his mysteries without an easy answer that readily sates our thirst.

Yet, the other side of the mystery is equally moving and compelling. God himself understands our difficulties and life because God himself became man. The incarnate Christ identifies with our weaknesses and suffering.

¹⁰ Olson at 180.

So we proudly proclaim, with humility in understanding,

1. Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16).
2. “In Christ, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col. 2:9).
3. This is the “mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2-3).

This is the beauty of the Christian hymn:

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Who was, and is, and evermore shall be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee,
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see;
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee,
Perfect in pow’r, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All Thy works shall praise Thy Name, in earth, and sky, and sea;
Holy, holy, holy; merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!