

# Defending the Holy Spirit's Deity: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>

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It is curious to note that while the first book devoted to the subject of baptism was one written by the North African theologian Tertullian (fl.190-215) at the end of the second century, it was not until the middle of the ninth century that a book on the Lord's Supper appeared. Similarly, while there are a number of books on the person and work of Christ in the early centuries of the Church, it was not until Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379) wrote his *On the Holy Spirit* in 375 that there was a book specifically devoted to the person of the Spirit of God.

We know more about Basil than any other Christian of the ancient Church apart from Augustine of Hippo (354-430).<sup>2</sup> Central to our knowledge of his life is a marvelous collection of some 350 letters. Basil was born around 330 in the Roman province of Cappadocia (now central Turkey). His family was fairly well-to-do, his father, also called Basil, being a teacher of rhetoric (i.e., the art of public speaking), and his mother, Emmelia, coming from landed aristocracy. The family's Christianity can be traced back to Basil's paternal grandmother, Macrina, who was converted under the preaching of Gregory Thaumaturgus (c.213-270). Of Basil's eight siblings we know the names of four: Macrina (c.327-380), Naucratius, Peter, later the bishop of Sebaste in Armenia, and Gregory of Nyssa (died c.395), one of the leading theologians

of the fourth century.

Basil went to school in Caesarea, as well as in Constantinople. In 350 or so, he went to study in Athens, where he became a close friend of Gregory of Nazianzus (c.329-389), who, along with Basil, and his brother Gregory of Nyssa, are known as the Cappadocian Fathers. In 356 Basil returned to Caesarea, hoping to open a school of rhetoric. His older sister Macrina, however, challenged him to give his life unreservedly to Christ. Thus it was that Basil was converted. In his own words,

I wasted nearly all of my youth in the vain labor which occupied me in the acquisition of the teachings of that wisdom which God has made foolish. Then at last, as if roused from a deep sleep, I looked at the wonderful light of the truth of the gospel, and I perceived the worthlessness of the wisdom of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to destruction. After I had mourned deeply for my miserable life I prayed that guidance be given to me for my introduction to the precepts of piety.<sup>3</sup>

Basil's conversion to Christ was also a conversion to a monastic lifestyle. Basil never had the conviction, though, that the monastic lifestyle was for every believer. Yet, he did believe that in fourth-century Graeco-Roman society—where, since the toleration of Christianity by Constantine (d.337), many were now flocking into the

Church from base motives—monasticism was a needed force for Church renewal. In time, during the 360s, Basil became a leading figure in the establishment of monastic communities, which he sought to model after the experience of the Jerusalem church as it is depicted in the early chapters of Acts.

After founding a number of monasteries, he was ordained an elder in the church at Caesarea, Cappadocia, in the mid-360s. He became bishop of Caesarea in 370. As bishop Basil fought simony, established hospitals (the first hospitals in the ancient world not attached to the Roman army), aided the victims of drought and famine, insisted on ministers living holy lives, fearlessly denounced evil wherever he detected it, and excommunicated those involved in the prostitution trade in Cappadocia.

Basil was not only a Christian activist, he was also a clear-headed theologian. When Athanasius (c.299–373), the great defender of Trinitarian Christianity, died, Basil inherited his mantle. Arianism, which Athanasius combated, was still widespread in the eastern Mediterranean. There is little doubt that Basil played a key role in this region of the Roman Empire in the victory of orthodox Trinitarianism over Arianism, which denied the deity of both the Son and the Holy Spirit. For instance, in one of his earliest books, written around 363 or 364, Basil attacked the views of a radical Arian theologian by the name of Eunomius (c.335–393/395) and defended the full deity of the Son and the Spirit.

### **Eustathius of Sebaste and the Pneumatomachian Controversy**

In the early 370s, though, Basil found himself locked in combat with professing Christians, who, though they confessed the

full deity of Christ, denied that the Spirit was fully God. Leading these “fighters against the Spirit” (Pneumatomachi), as they came to be called, was one of his former friends, indeed the man who had been his mentor when he first became a Christian in 356, Eustathius of Sebaste (c.300–377). The dispute between Basil and Eustathius, from one perspective a part of the larger Arian Controversy, has become known as the Pneumatomachian Controversy.

Eustathius’s interest in the Spirit seems to have been focused on the Spirit’s work, not his person. For him, the Holy Spirit was primarily a divine gift who produced holiness within the Spirit-filled person.<sup>4</sup> When, on one occasion at a synod in 364, he was pressed to say what he thought of the Spirit’s nature, he replied: “I neither chose to name the Holy Spirit God nor dare to call him a creature”!<sup>5</sup>

For a number of years, Basil sought to win Eustathius over to the orthodox position. Finally, in the summer of 373 he met with him for an important two-day colloquy, in which, after much discussion and prayer, Eustathius finally acquiesced to an orthodox view of the Spirit’s nature. At a second meeting Eustathius signed a statement of faith which stated that

[We] must anathematize those who call the Holy Spirit a creature, those who think so, and those who do not confess that he is holy by nature, as the Father and Son are holy by nature, but who regard him as alien to the divine and blessed nature. A proof of orthodox doctrine is the refusal to separate him from the Father and Son (for we must be baptized as we have received the words, and we must believe as we are baptized, and we must give honor as we have believed, to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), and to withdraw from the communion of

those who call the Spirit a creature since they are clearly blasphemers. It is agreed (this comment is necessary because of the slanderers) that we do not say that the Holy Spirit is either unbegotten for we know one unbegotten and one source of what exists, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, or begotten, for we have been taught by the tradition of the faith that there is one Only-Begotten. But since we have been taught that the Spirit of truth proceeds from the Father we confess that he is from God without being created.<sup>6</sup>

In Basil's thinking, since the Spirit is holy without qualification, he cannot be a creature and must be indivisibly one with the divine nature. The confession of this unity is both the criterion of orthodoxy and the basis upon which communion can be terminated with those who affirm that the Spirit is a creature. This pneumatological position thus defines the precise limits beyond which Basil was not prepared to venture, even for a friend such as Eustathius.

Another meeting was arranged for the autumn of 373, at which Eustathius would sign this declaration in the presence of a number of Christian leaders. But on the way home from his meeting with Basil, Eustathius was convinced by some of his friends that Basil was theologically in error. For the next two years Eustathius criss-crossed what is now modern Turkey denouncing Basil, and claiming that the bishop of Caesarea was a Modalist, one who believed in absolutely no distinctions between the persons of the Godhead.

Basil was so stunned by what had transpired that he kept his peace for close to two years. As he wrote later in 376, he was "astounded at so unexpected and sudden a change" in Eustathius that he was unable to respond. As he went on to say,

For my heart was crushed, my tongue was paralyzed, my hand benumbed, and I experienced the suffering of an ignoble soul ... and I almost fell into misanthropy.... [So] I was not silent through disdain ... but through dismay and perplexity and the inability to say anything proportionate to my grief.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, he simply felt that he had to speak. The result was one of the most important books of the entire patristic period, *On the Holy Spirit*, published in 375.

### **Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit***

After showing why Christians believe in the deity of Christ (chapters 1-8), Basil devotes the heart of the treatise to demonstrating from Scripture why the Spirit is to be glorified together with the Father and the Son (chapters 9-27) and thus implicitly recognized as God. The baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 is vital to his argument, for it reveals that the Spirit is inseparable from the divine being of the Father and the Son.<sup>8</sup> The baptismal formula does not run this way: "in the names of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." Mention is made only of the singular *name* of the three, which is a distinct indication of their unity. There is only one God who has revealed himself as "the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The Spirit, moreover, ranked alongside, not below, the Father and the Son, participates with the Father and the Son in the entirety of divine activity, from the creation of the angelic beings to the last judgement. For instance, the Spirit gives insight into divine mysteries, since he plumbs the depths of God (1 Cor 2:10), something only one who is fully divine could do.<sup>9</sup> He enables men and women to confess the true identity of Christ and worship him (1 Cor

12:3).<sup>10</sup> These two texts clarified for Basil how salvation was imparted: through the power of the Spirit men and women come to a saving knowledge about God's redemptive work in the crucified Christ and are enabled to call him "Lord." If the Spirit, therefore, is not fully divine, the work of salvation is short-circuited, for creatures simply cannot give such saving knowledge. Moreover, he is omnipresent (Ps 139:7), an attribute possessed only by God.<sup>11</sup> And he is implicitly called "God" by Peter (Acts 5:3-4).<sup>12</sup>

In chapter 9, which introduces Basil's study of the Spirit's person and work in Scripture, Basil anticipates what he will seek to show in the work as a whole:

[The Holy Spirit] perfects all other beings, but he himself lacks nothing.... He does not grow or increase, but is immediate fulness, firmly established in himself, and omnipresent.... From him comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, comprehension of hidden realities, distribution of spiritual gifts, the heavenly citizenship, ... everlasting joy, abiding in God.... Such then, to mention only a few of many, are the conceptions about the Spirit which we have been taught by the oracles of the Spirit themselves [i.e., the Scriptures] to hold about his greatness, his dignity and his activities.<sup>13</sup>

Basil died on January 1, 379, worn out by hard work and illness, the latter probably associated with his liver. He never witnessed the triumph of the Trinitarianism for which he had fought for most of the 370s, though, as Rowan Greer puts it, "one hopes that like Moses he saw the promised land from afar."<sup>14</sup>

His final recorded statement on the question of the Trinity was given in a letter written in 376 or 377 to Epiphanius of Salamis (c.315-403). The latter had asked

Basil to intervene in a doctrinal dissension over the question of the Spirit at a monastic community on the Mount of Olives. With regard to Epiphanius's request, Basil replied: "We are unable to add anything to the Nicene Creed, not even the smallest addition, except the glorification of the Holy Spirit, because our fathers made mention of this part [of the faith] cursorily, since at that time no controversial question concerning it had yet arisen."<sup>15</sup> This passage is important for two reasons. First, it provides, in summary form, the position that was reached in *On the Holy Spirit*: the Holy Spirit is to be glorified together with the Father and the Son. Second, this explanation entails an expansion of the third article of the original Nicene Creed written in 325.

### The Witness of Gregory of Nyssa

A few years later, in 381, the Council of Constantinople acted upon Basil's convictions and incorporated Basil's defense of the Spirit's essential deity into the credal statement issued by this council, namely, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, or, as it is more commonly known, the Nicene Creed. The article on the Spirit is deeply indebted to Basil's *On the Holy Spirit*. There is, in fact, good evidence that Basil's younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa, who was present at the council and who had drunk deeply at the well of his brother's Trinitarianism, played a central role in the drawing up of the statement on the Spirit.<sup>16</sup> It is a landmark statement in the history of the Church and runs thus: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son, who spoke through the prophets." The confession of the Spirit as Lord, a divine title in the Scriptures, and his being worshiped and glorified with the

Father and the Son clearly speak of the Spirit's deity.

Like his older brother, Nyssa wrote widely on the subject of the Trinity. One of his most intriguing and more dramatic statements about the Trinity occurs in a document that has been titled, *On the Difference between ousia [being] and hypostasis [person]*.<sup>17</sup>

You have before now, in springtime, beheld the brilliance of the bow in the clouds—I mean the bow which is commonly called the “rainbow.” ... Now, the brightness [of the rainbow] is both continuous with itself and divided. It has many diverse colors; and yet the various bright tints of its dye are imperceptibly intermingled, hiding from our eyes the point of contact of the different colors with each other. As a result, between the blue and the flame-color, or the flame-color and the purple, or the purple and the amber, the space which both mingles and separates the two colors cannot be discerned. For when the rays of all the colors are seen they are seen to be distinct, and yet at the same time ... it is impossible to find out how far the red or the green color of the radiance extends, and at what point it begins to be no longer perceived as it is when it is distinct.

Just as in this example we both clearly distinguish the different colors and yet cannot detect by observation the separation of one from the other, so, please consider that it is also possible to draw [similar] inferences with regard to the divine doctrines. In particular, one can both conclude that the specific characteristics of [each of] the Persons [of the Godhead], like any one of the brilliant colors which appear in the rainbow, reflect their brightness in each of the [other] Persons we believe to be in the Holy Trinity, but that no difference can be observed in the ... nature of the one as compared with the others.... Reason also teaches us through the created object [that is, the rainbow], not to feel distressed in doctrinal discussions whenever

we encounter something hard to understand and our brains reel at the thought of accepting what is proposed to us. For, just as experience appears to be better than a scientific theory in the case of what is seen by our eyes, so also faith is better than the apprehension which comes from [logical] reasoning with regard to those doctrines which transcend our comprehension. For faith teaches us about what is separated in person and about what is united in being.<sup>18</sup>

Here Gregory is grappling with a perennial issue in the history of Trinitarian thought, namely, the difficulty that the human mind encounters in reconciling the oneness and threeness of God. He has thus resorted to an illustration from the created realm, the rainbow. When a rainbow is seen clearly in the sky, the various colors of the spectrum can be easily distinguished, but they pass so gradually into each other without any abrupt transition that it is well-nigh impossible to say where one color begins and another ends. Similarly, the individual members of the Godhead can be distinguished in their operations and activities, but this should never be done in such a way as to destroy their unity in being.

It is also noteworthy that Gregory, who did have definite philosophical inclinations, far more than most of the orthodox theologians of the fourth century, is quite prepared to say that in the final analysis the doctrine of the Trinity surpasses human comprehension. In the face of this mystery, logic and human reason can only go so far. It is only through faith that the believer can affirm what logic ultimately cannot: the threeness and the oneness of God. A later Christian author, Isaac Watts (1674-1748), put this truth well in a way that Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa would have deeply appreciated:

Almighty God! to thee

Be endless honors done,  
The undivided Three,  
And the mysterious One:  
Where reason fails  
With all her powers,  
There faith prevails  
And love adores.<sup>19</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Most of this article will be published in a book by the author on early Christian apologetics entitled, *The Defence of the Truth: Contending for the Faith Yesterday and Today* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, forthcoming). For further reading on the Pneumatomachian controversy, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Spirit of God: The Exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994). For two recent studies of Basil's *On the Holy Spirit*, see Howard Griffith, "The Churchly Theology of Basil's *De Spiritu Sancto*," *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review*, 25 (1999) 91-108; and Mark J. Larson, "A Re-examination of *De Spiritu Sancto*: Saint Basil's Bold Defence of the Spirit's Deity," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 19 (Spring 2001) 65-84.

<sup>2</sup>On Basil's life, see especially Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>*Letter* 223:2. All translations are by the author.

<sup>4</sup>Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, "Eustathius von Sebaste," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982) 10:548-549. On Eustathius and his theological position, see Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 24-49.

<sup>5</sup>Socrates, *Church History* 2:45.

<sup>6</sup>Basil, *Letter* 125:3.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 244:4.

<sup>8</sup>Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 10:24; 10:26; 12:28; 13:30; 17:43; 18:44.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 16:40; 24:56.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 18:47.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 23:54.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 16:37.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 9:22-23.

<sup>14</sup>*Broken Lights and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church* (University Park/London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986) 46.

<sup>15</sup>Basil, *Letter* 258:2.

<sup>16</sup>See Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 193-201.

<sup>17</sup>This work has been preserved among the letters of Basil as *Letter* 38. Scholarship, though, has clearly shown that the work is from the pen of Gregory. See Reinhard Hübner, "Gregor von Nyssa, als Verfasser der sog. *Ep.* 38 des Basiliius. Zum unterschiedlichen Verständnis der *ousia* bei den kappadozischen Brüdern" in Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser, eds., *EPEKTASIS. Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal Jean Daniélou* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972) 463-490.

<sup>18</sup>Basil, *Letter* 38:5.

<sup>19</sup>Isaac Watts, "We give immortal praise," stanza 4.