

# **The Cappadocian Fathers and the Trinitarian Controversy**

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The goal in this paper is to offer a historical analysis of the Cappadocian Fathers and their contributions to our understanding of the theology of the Trinity as it relates to the heresy of Arianism. I will first review the historical backdrop leading to Arius' definition of the Son, the Catholic response to him at the council of Nicea, and Athanasius' refutation of Arian theology. Most of our time though will be spent exploring the lives and work of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. In a time when the "world awoke to find itself Arian" according to St. Jerome, these fathers worked to protect and defend the orthodox faith. They struggled mightily in choosing language that would not compromise the nature of the Son in relation to the Father, such as Basil's conversion to and preference of *homoousios* instead of *homoiousios*.<sup>1</sup> Their work in history would ensure that Arianism would fall into obscurity in Christendom and no significant resurgence of the heretical theology would surface again for some time (though the theology would for a time survive among the Goths and Vandals).<sup>2</sup> I intend to show that their work on the language of the Trinity and their work against Arianism contributed to the proceedings of the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople. They contributed especially to the language that the Church approved in the Nicene-Constantinople creed, the same that Catholics profess today in the Mass.

It is appropriate to start with the sayings of Jesus Christ, for these provide the historical source of Trinitarian doctrine. The Trinity is alluded to in the Old Testament as well, but that is beyond the scope of this work. Christ makes proclamations regarding his divine nature and the nature of the Godhead that have been recorded for us in the New Testament. The foundation is being laid for the development of Trinitarian theology in history as Jesus states, "All authority in

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory of Tours, "History of the Franks Books I – X" *Medieval Source Book*.  
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/gregory-hist.html>. (Accessed December 12, 2008).

heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> Early Christians would have to decide how to understand this claim that Jesus considered himself to be God, and yet the Father and the Spirit are also God.

How would the early Christians reconcile this with the theophany received by their father of old, Moses, in which God declares himself to be the one and only God in *Exodus 3:14*? They would have to deal with scripture again when God reveals the 10 commandments in *Exodus 20:2-3*. It will take the greatest minds in Church history to offer a theology that does not fall into modalist<sup>4</sup> heresies like Monarchianism, Patripassionism, and Sabellianism, or take the other extreme and declare with Arius that “before he [the Son] was begotten or created or defined or established, he was not. For he was not unbegotten...but we speak thus in as much as he is neither part of God nor from any substratum.”<sup>5</sup> For Arius, Jesus is great and exulted, but not truly God, and not proceeding eternally from the Father.

The *First letter of Clement* and other early writings predating 150 AD begin to affirm, extra-biblically, the doctrine of the Trinity, but only in simple form.<sup>6</sup> A theologically precise way of speaking about the Trinity will need to be developed as history continues because of the many ways that theologians would attempt to explain the Trinity. The theological dispute in consideration here that the Cappadocian fathers would later take up begins in 320 AD rising out of Alexandria just five years before the Council of Nicea. Basil Studer, Professor of Early Church History and Patristics at the *Pontifical Athenaeum S. Anselmo* in Rome explains:

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:18b-19. *Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press).

<sup>4</sup> Modalism states that the persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are only modes of the one God and are not true persons.

<sup>5</sup> Rusch, William, ed., *Arius's Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Studer, Basil. *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press), 22-23.

“About 320 [AD] a theological dispute arose in Alexandria, initiated by Arius, a presbyter of the Church there, which therefore has come to be known in the history of dogma as the Arian controversy ... The Origenist tendency, which goes back to the third-century Alexandrine theologians, but was also influenced by Lucian of Antioch, Arius’ teacher.”<sup>7</sup> Arius would defend his theology, and Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, would defend the biblical position that Jesus was God.

Arius denied the divinity of Christ, not out of a sense of maliciousness or contempt for the Christian faith, but simply in searching for a way to explain the sovereignty and nature of God. As the Church struggled to find ways to explain the Deposit of Faith that had been handed on to her from Christ and the apostles, many heresies developed along side of doctrinal truth. Many of our Catholic dogmas in history arise out of such conflicts where two or more opposing intellectual movements fight for the claim of orthodoxy. Arianism is no different, though Arius found himself on the wrong side of the battle and ultimately refused to recant his position.

Arius placed Origen’s *Logos* on the side of creation, Studer goes on to explain, and in doing so subordinated the Son to the Father. If the Son is created, then he cannot be the Creator. This would make the Trinitarian language we use today impossible as we profess Jesus to be one God with the Father. Alexander, who rejected such theology, would side with other anti-Origenists to oppose Arius.<sup>8</sup> For Arius, the Son cannot be God, but only created by God, proceeding from God before all else, but still not begotten in divine eternity. In this way Arius misinterpreted Origen and lead himself deeper into error.

The Nicene Council was convened after the conversion of Constantine, a happy day for Christians who suffered under the persecution of many former emperors in Rome until his Edict

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<sup>7</sup> Studer, 102-103.

<sup>8</sup> Studer, 103.

of Milan in 313. The now-converted Constantine had a real interest in protecting the Church and putting down heresy for the good of his empire. Historian Henry Chadwick explains that after the disturbance between Arius and Alexander of Alexandria had grown he opened the first ecumenical council at Nicea to answer the question of the nature of Christ.<sup>9</sup> The council was attended by 220 bishops and was solemnly opened on May 20, 325. It declared that the Son “is of one substance with the Father.”<sup>10</sup> The term *homoousios* was adopted, but not without some ambiguity. Various interpretations by both parties for Alexander and Eusebius of Caesarea allowed all but two bishops to sign the document.

Since the council had left room for interpretation, Athanasius became the first to take up the mantle of orthodoxy, and after him the Cappadocians. They would be champions of the orthodox faith and their work would lead to the near death of Arianism for close to a thousand years until its resurgence in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Arianism would not be suppressed until 381 under Theodosius I, and in the meantime, Arians would gain many followers and continue to preach Arianism under tolerant political leaders. Athanasius though would succeed Alexander in 328. Chadwick states that his “mind was dedicated to the defense of his church and to the absolute exclusion of heresy and schism.”<sup>11</sup> He would refuse Constantine’s request to readmit Arius to communion with the Church, but would at the same time win the emperor over. Due though to his rough treatment of Arians, a synod at Tyre in 335 had Athanasius deposed and excommunicated by the Eusebian party.<sup>12</sup> Athanasius would experience several episodes of being allowed to return to his See only to be exiled again.

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<sup>9</sup> Chadwick, Henry. *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin), 129-131.

<sup>10</sup> Chadwick, 130.

<sup>11</sup> Chadwick, 134.

<sup>12</sup> Hanson, R.P.C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 261-262. Hanson also notes that all of the charges leveled against Athanasius none were for doctrinal irregularities or heresy. His behavior and his refusal to appear at the Council of Caesarea were likely the reasons for his disposal and excommunication.

With Athanasius exiled and away from his See, Arianism continued to advance. Arius died, according to Athanasius, in the same manner of Judas Iscariot<sup>13</sup> -- but with the death of Constantine in 337, Arian theology would prosper even further.

“The Arian controversy had developed into an imminent split between the East and West. The East resented the Roman claim to superior jurisdiction, for which they could see no justification. On the other side, the West distrusted the Greeks for being so clever, and for using language which when translated into Latin sounded uncommonly like tritheism, since ‘three *hypostases*’ came into Latin as ‘three *sustantiae*.’<sup>14</sup>

This quarreling would continue for decades and Jerome would declare, “the world awoke to find itself Arian” around 380. While Nicene orthodoxy stated that the Son was “begotten, not made,” approved theological precision in explaining the Trinity was left wanting. Athanasius would defend the orthodox faith in his *Letters to Serapion*, affirming again that the Holy Spirit, as well as the Father and the Son are of one substance. The language of the time shows that “the only natural Greek word for expressing the distinctness of the Son from the Father was *hypostasis*...Origen had spoken of three *hypostases*...But the pluralistic language of ‘three *hypostases*’ had been disliked by Marcellus of Ancyra and Eustace of Antioch; and Athanasius himself consistently avoided the expression before the sixties.”<sup>15</sup> Should the term “three *hypostasis*” and “one *ousia*” be used? What was the correct terminology? Athanasius would die in 373 AD, having done much to defend the orthodox faith from the Arians, but the work would have to continue. Here the Cappadocians step in and we will review their lives and work up to the time of the Council of Constantinople.

“His generation would be nothing great if it was grasped by you ~~by you~~ who do not know even your own generation or have grasped some little part of it-so little that you are ashamed to

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<sup>13</sup> Chadwick, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Chadwick, 138.

<sup>15</sup> Chadwick, 146.

“speak-then do you suppose that you know all? The things of God transcend all things...”<sup>16</sup> Admitting with Gregory of Nazianzus the complexity and transcendence of the doctrine of the Trinity is a good starting point to understanding the life and work of these fathers. Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus make up the three Cappadocian fathers. They are deeply revered in both the East and the West. Basil is considered a Doctor of the Church in the West and he and Gregory of Nazianzus are given the title “Great Hierarch” in the East by both the Orthodox and Eastern Catholics.

Basil of Caesarea was born in 330 AD to a prosperous family. He moved to Caesarea in 365 and there was immersed in the worlds of Greek thought and Christian liturgy and theology. Whereas Athanasius and Arius were considered the faces of their respective positions, Basil and Valens were figures for each side of the Arian controversy and each fought each other for the soul of the Christian faith.<sup>17</sup> John Behr explains the decision that would have to be made. “Then, in December 359, Basil was put forward by Eustathius and Basil of Ancyra as their representative in a public debate with Aetius in Constantinople...the teaching of Aetius, who denied that the Son was like the Father according to essence, a denial which [was taken] as an affirmation that the Son is ‘dissimilar’ to the Father.”<sup>18</sup> Was the Son same in substance, was he like in substance, was he similar in substance, was he dissimilar in substance? There are various ways and different language used to explain the Trinity just as with the doctrines of Christ and the Eucharist.

Basil would at first, as I mentioned, have a preference for *homoiousios* (of similar substance), but would finally settle on *homoousios* (same substance) for the relation of the Father to the Son. Dr. Stephen Hildebrand explains: “In 360 he was suspicious of the word, not

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<sup>16</sup> Rusch, *Gregory of Nazianzus's Third Theological Oration concerning the Son*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> Rousseau, Philip. *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Behr, John. *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press), 263-264.

knowing how it could be rightly predicated of the Father and the Son; indeed at this time he preferred “unalterably like according to substance” (*homoios kat’ ousian akribôs aparallaktôs*). After his correspondence with Apollinaris, and probably after having written *Against Eunomius*, Basil preferred *homoousios*.<sup>19</sup> If the Arians were to be left no room to deny the divinity of Jesus, Basil would have to use the strongest language he knew to show that the Father and the Son were of the same substance. Anything less could subordinate the Son to the Father in an unacceptable way.

Through eloquent writing and argumentation, Basil and the other Cappadocian fathers settled on more language that we still use today to talk about the Trinity in defense of the Christian faith. For Basil, the use of *homoousios* is later put beside the use of two more terms – *prosôpon* and *hypostasis* – to safeguard what is plural in God. For Basil, there are three *prosôpon* or *hypostases* and one *ousia* in the Trinity.<sup>20</sup> There are three persons and one God.

“Basil lived in two worlds: that of ancient Greek culture and learning (*paideia*) and that of the Christian faith, lived in the liturgy and expressed in the Scripture. His work as a bishop, theologian, and preacher was in large part to make these two worlds one. He brought the ways of the Greeks into the higher order of Christian Providence. This means not only that Basil could make some use of metaphysics and ethics, but also that he could adopt ways of analyzing arguments, of refuting opponents, and of persuading others of his view of the Christian faith.”<sup>21</sup>

Basil did not do this work alone, though it was a family affair. Where Basil was doing his theological work and filling vacant seats with orthodox candidates, his younger brother, bishop of Nyssa, was doing his own writing that would assist in the development of the faith.<sup>22</sup>

Historically, Gregory of Nyssa contributed to the defeat of Arianism through his theological writings. “The revelation of ‘the God made known upon the cross’ as Gregory of

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<sup>19</sup> Hildebrand, 76-77.

<sup>20</sup> Hildebrand, 189. See also Chadwick, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Hildebrand, 188.

<sup>22</sup> Chadwick, 148.



Nyssa put it, is the cornerstone of all Christian theology.”<sup>23</sup> While Gregory did much to advance the theology of Jesus as God through his theology of the cross, Behr admits that little is known about his life, unlike his brother.<sup>24</sup> He studied under Basil between 335-357, where he taught rhetoric at Caesarea. Behr states that he was consecrated as bishop of Nyssa in 372, but that he was sent into exile in 373 as he did not make for a good bishop.<sup>25</sup> After Basil’s death in 379, he came into his own, returned to ecclesiastical affairs, and began to write extensively. Gregory of Nyssa participated in the Council of Constantinople along with Gregory of Nazianzus. Of his many writings, *On the Divinity of the Son and the Spirit* in 383 proved to be important for our orthodox faith as well as *On the Trinity* and *That there are not Three Gods*. In the later he states: “we say that the men are so many and that not all are ‘one,’ but in reference to the divine nature the arguments of doctrine rejects the multitude of gods and counting the *hypostases* does not admit a plural meaning.”<sup>26</sup> We do not know as much historically about Gregory of Nyssa as we do the other two Cappadocian fathers, but he certainly contributed much in the battle against an Arian understanding of the faith in his writings.

Gregory of Nazianzus, friend of the Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, is also a towering theological figure in the Church. Chosen to lead the second ecumenical Council of Constantinople after the death of the first bishop to preside, Meletius of Antioch, he lead the Church to orthodoxy and crushed Arianism. In 372 he was elevated to bishop of Sasima by Basil, but due to a conflict with Anthimos of Tyana he settled in Nazianzus to assist his father as

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<sup>23</sup> Behr, 477.

<sup>24</sup> Behr, 409.

<sup>25</sup> Behr, 410.

<sup>26</sup> Rusch, *The Letter of Gregory of Nyssa to Ablabius*, 150.

auxiliary bishop.<sup>27</sup> He later moved on to Constantinople though and there participated in the council.

Gregory debated Neo-Arians while at Constantinople after traveling there in 379 as a missionary bishop at the request of Meletius to champion orthodoxy for the Nicene faith.<sup>28</sup> He and Theodosius wished to see heretics ejected out of the city and the Nicene faith confirmed. Theodosius called the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople and it opened in May of 380. The theology of Maximus, who Gregory had so much trouble with in his debates, was rejected early on in the council.<sup>29</sup>

Gregory struggled through the council, not only to fully uphold the divinity of the Son and his equal essence with the Father, but to have the Spirit also recognized as a person of the Trinity. He felt that many bishops were ignorant of theology and wanted to compromise.<sup>30</sup> He was able to put down opposing bishops and those who sided with Arius. He was not completely satisfied with the results though. In the end he felt that even the creed as it stands today was a compromise and that the *filioque* does not unambiguously defend the nature of “*Homoousion* to the Spirit.” He was finally forced to resign his post and made a speech of resignation at the council during his last session there.<sup>31</sup> The council continued as Gregory went into a self-imposed exile where he worked on his writings and made sure they were in as wide of circulation as possible.<sup>32</sup> He died in 390.

The council itself marked an official end of the Arian attempt to capture the Church and it was in no small part due to the work of the Cappacodian fathers who so tirelessly defended the

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<sup>27</sup> McGuckin, John. *St Gregory of Nazianzus* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press), ix.

<sup>28</sup> Ruether, Rosemary. *Gregory of Nazianzus: Rhetor and Philosopher*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 42.

<sup>29</sup> McGuckin, 350.

<sup>30</sup> McGuckin, 354-355.

<sup>31</sup> McGuckin, 359.

<sup>32</sup> McGuckin, 369.

faith both in their writings and in their work in their perspective Sees. We now recognize in the creed that we believe “in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, God from God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” The true faith of the Church was victorious.

“The council [of Constantinople] reaffirmed the Nicene faith in the sense that it reasserted the Nicene keyword ‘identical in essence’. But the actual creed promulgated by the council was differently worded from that of Nicaea, and had a cautiously worded article concerning the Holy Spirit. This reflected the argument of Basil of Caesarea that in the liturgy the Holy Spirit is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son, and that the difference between the Son and the Spirit is to be seen in that while the Son is ‘begotten of the Father,’ the Holy Spirit ‘proceeds from the Father.’”<sup>33</sup>

The Cappacodian fathers were not alone in defending the faith in a time when Arianism had taken so many bishops and faithful away from the true faith, but they contributed a significant amount and through their work and the work of Athanasius the council defined the doctrine of the Trinity in a theological-precise language that ensures fidelity to the true nature of God. Even if our human way of speaking of God is imperfect in these words, it is at least not erroneous. The Cappacodian fathers would be recognized and looked to again in future councils and their spiritual heritage remains a great treasure for the Church.

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<sup>33</sup> Chadwick, 150-151.

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