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**“The brilliance of the rainbow”:
Athanasius of Alexandria, the Cappadocian Fathers,
and the defence of the doctrine of the Trinity¹**

Among the greatest achievements of the early church is the forging of the doctrine of the Trinity. It received classical expression in the fourth-century creedal statement known to history as the Nicene Creed, in which Jesus Christ is unequivocally declared to be “true God” and “of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father” and the Holy Spirit is said to be the “Lord and Giver of life,” who “together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified.”² Some historians have argued that this document represents the apex of the Hellenization of the church’s teaching, in which fourth-century Christianity traded in the vitality of the New Testament church’s experience of God for a cold philosophical formula. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. The Nicene Creed served to sum up a long process of reflection that actually had its origins in the Christian communities of the first century. As Douglas Ottati, an American professor of theology who teaches in Richmond, Virginia, has recently put it: “Trinitarian theology continues a biblically initiated exploration.”³ Or, in the words of an earlier twentieth-century theologian, Benjamin B. Warfield: the “doctrine of the Trinity lies in Scripture in solution; when it is crystallized from its solvent it does not cease to be Scriptural, but only comes into clearer view.”⁴

The New Testament basis of the Nicene Creed

Let’s look more closely at the New Testament evidence behind these assertions by Ottati and Warfield. Consider, for instance, the numerous passages in the Pauline corpus where Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are linked together as co-sources of the blessings that belong to believers in Christ. For example, there is the way in which Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, traces the various manifestations of God’s grace in the church first to

¹ Portions of this article have already appeared as “Defenders of the faith: 2. Athanasius of Alexandria and the challenge of Arianism”, *Evangelical Times*, 33, No.4 (April 1998), 7; “Defenders of the faith: 3. Basil of Caesarea and the deity of the Holy Spirit”, *Evangelical Times*, 33, No.5 (May 1998), 7; and “Knowing and Adoring the Triune God”, *The Gospel Witness*, 80, No.7 (January 2002), 8-12. They have been used here by permission. The entirety of this article is to appear, DV, in a forthcoming book by the author on early Christian Apologetics. Translations are those of the author unless otherwise indicated.

² As we will note below, what is generally known as the Nicene Creed was actually drawn up in 381 at the Council of Constantinople and is technically the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. The original Nicene Creed, issued by the Council of Nicaea in 325, said nothing about the Holy Spirit beyond the statement “[We believe] in the Holy Spirit.” When the deity of the Spirit was subsequently questioned in the 360s and 370s—also discussed below—it was deemed necessary to expand the Nicene Creed to include a statement about the deity of the Holy Spirit. In the end this expansion involved the drafting of a new creedal statement at the Council of Constantinople. Apart from the article relating to the Spirit, though, there is no major difference between the two creeds.

³ “Being trinitarian: The shape of saving faith”, *The Christian Century*, 112, No. 32 (November 8, 1995), 1045.

⁴ “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity” in his *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1952), 22.

the Spirit, then to the Lord Jesus, and finally to God: “There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.” One should not regard the three phrases “diversities of gifts,” “differences of ministries,” and “diversities of activities” as three separate items. Rather, these are three different ways of looking at the same thing: the gifts of the Spirit as they manifest themselves in the life of a Christian community. Paul’s interest here is clearly demonstrating that the diversity of gifts in the church is traceable back to one and the same God. Paul is not seeking to argue for the reality of the Trinity. Yet, he surely assumes that the Spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Father are one.⁵

We see the same assumption at work in Ephesians 4:4-6, where Paul outlines the Trinitarian basis of walking worthily of the Christian calling. After giving the exhortation to his readers in Ephesians 4:1 to “walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,” the Apostle spells out what this entails in verses 2-3 and then in verses 4-6 he gives the basis for this exhortation. “There is one body and one Spirit,” he writes, “just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” To be sure, Paul is not seeking to develop a doctrine of the Trinity—how Spirit, Son and Father are one God. Yet, it is clear that his, and his readers’, experience of God in the Christian life can only be adequately expressed in Trinitarian terms.⁶

In Titus 3:4-6 we have yet another Trinitarian passage. In verse 3 Paul begins with a particularly vivid description of the way both he and his hearers once were: “foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving [that is, enslaved to] various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.” Totally unable to extricate themselves from this state, it was God alone who enabled them to break free. Thus, we read in verses 4-6: “When the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour.” There are certainly phrases in this passage that are not the easiest to understand. The phrase “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,” for example, has been the subject of much debate, though it is probably best understood as that inner cleansing which the Holy Spirit effects when he regenerates and renews the mind and heart of the new convert.⁷

What is clear, though, is that it is God, the Saviour, who saves men and women from bondage to sin and hate. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Christ also is described as our “Saviour,” the identical term which is given to God the Father. God saves sinners but not and never apart from Christ. To describe Christ as Saviour is surely an implicit confession of his deity. But the Spirit also must be divine, for it is through his being poured out upon sinners that they are actually converted. If Christ and the Spirit are anything less than God, then the affirmation at the beginning of the passage that it is God who saves makes no sense.

⁵ Warfield, “Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity”, 47-48; Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 161-163.

⁶ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 699-705.

⁷ See James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit. A re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in relation to Pentecostalism today* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1970), 165-170.

Then there is the benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:13: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” New Testament scholar Gordon Fee believes that this “benediction is the most profound theological moment in the Pauline corpus.”⁸ It captures, on the one hand, the heart of Paul’s doctrine of salvation: God’s loving determination to save his people through the Lord Jesus Christ’s suffering and death, the supreme and concrete manifestation of God’s grace, and the ongoing appropriation of that grace through the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, Fee notes that 2 Corinthians 13:13 serves as an entrance-way into Paul’s understanding of God. The grace of God that lies at the base of the Christian life is only found in Christ and through the Spirit. For Paul, to truly encounter God in a meaningful way is to deal with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Fee puts it well when he states for Paul “to be Christian one must finally understand God in a Trinitarian way.”⁹

In other parts of the New Testament the same phenomenon is to be observed. In the letters outside of the Pauline corpus “it is everywhere assumed that the redemptive activities of God rest on a threefold source in God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ Peter can speak of God’s saints in various regions of Asia Minor as being “chosen and destined by God the Father, and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood” (1 Peter 1:2). Jude writes his brief letter to encourage his readers to stand against apostasy by praying in the Holy Spirit, keeping themselves in the love of God, and waiting for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 20-21). The author of Revelation asks for the seven churches to whom he writes “grace ... and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:4-5).¹¹

Particularly rich in Trinitarian language is the Gospel of John.¹² Early on in the gospel, we are told that God has given the Spirit in unlimited measure to Jesus, for “the Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands” (John 3:34-35). In the Farewell Discourse, John 14-16, Jesus tells his disciples: “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). Other verses in this section of John’s gospel, however, assert that Jesus will be the One who will send the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7). The Spirit is being sent in the place of Jesus as “another Advocate” (John 14:16), but it is only through the Spirit’s presence in the disciples’ lives that Jesus, and the Father, are also present (John 14:23). Like the other New Testament authors John does not use the word “Trinity”—that word was not invented until the late second century when the North African theologian Tertullian coined it—but all of the elements of Trinitarian faith are clearly here.¹³

⁸ *God’s Empowering Presence*, 363.

⁹ *God’s Empowering Presence*, 363-364. Other Pauline passages which could be mentioned include Galatians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; Ephesians 2:18; 3:14-17.

¹⁰ Warfield, “Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity”, 48.

¹¹ For the identification of the “seven Spirits” as a symbolic allusion to the Holy Spirit, see Richard J. Bauckham, “The Role of the Spirit in the Apocalypse”, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 52 (1980), 75-7.

¹² For a good discussion of the reliability of the Trinitarian teaching of this gospel, see Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons. A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 194-8.

¹³ D. A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus. An Exposition of John 14-17* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 49-50.

Matthew 28:19

Finally, there is the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19: “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.” Here, we find the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit coordinated in such a way as to imply their equality. The little conjunction “and” that artlessly links them together indicates that here we are dealing with three co-equal, and therefore divine, subjects. This is reinforced by the observation made by the great fourth-century defender of the doctrine of the Trinity, Athanasius of Alexandria (c.298-373)—of whom more below—that it would be very odd for baptism to be into the name of “God and a creature.”¹⁴

Second, it is noteworthy that the baptismal formula does not say “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” There is a definite article used before each of the three: “in the name of *the* Father and *the* Son and *the* Holy Spirit.” The former might be taken to mean that the three are simply designations of one and same Person. But that is the heresy of Modalism, which essentially suggests that the different members of the Godhead are actually masks put on successively by one and the same person during various stages of divine activity. No, the use of the definite article on each occasion helps safeguard the fact that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are indeed three distinct persons.

Nor does the baptismal formula 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.¹⁵ In other words, neither this passage nor the other New Testament texts we have looked at above compromises the monotheism that the Apostolic Church had inherited from the Old Testament. Christianity does not believe in three separate gods! There is one God. Thus, we are baptized into “the name”—singular—“of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Arius and Arianism

Not only does the New Testament then provide clear warrant for the direction that theological reflection upon the nature of God took in fourth-century orthodoxy, but it should also be recognized that the men who stood behind the Nicene Creed were not primarily philosophers. They were active pastors in the church of their day, men who sought to be faithful witnesses to the teaching of the Scriptures. Uppermost in their minds was the way in which any other teaching about the nature of God imperiled the way of salvation.

Now, until the beginning of the fourth century an implicit Trinitarianism prevailed in the Church. Numerous examples of this fact could be cited. Let the two following suffice. One is a portion of a third-century hymn discovered in the 1920s at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, a few miles west of the Nile.

May none of God’s wonderful works

¹⁴ See Alwyn Petersen, *Athanasius* (Ridgefield, Connecticut/Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 1995), 186-189.

¹⁵ Warfield, “Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity”, 41-45.

keep silence, night or morning.
Bright stars, high mountains, the depths of the seas,
sources of rushing rivers:
may all these break into song as we sing
to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
May all the angels in the heavens reply.
Amen! Amen! Amen!
Power, praise, honour, eternal glory to God,
the only Giver of grace.
Amen! Amen! Amen!¹⁶

The other comes from the writings of Gregory Thaumaturgus (c.210/215-c.270/275), who studied under Origen (c.185-154), the well-known Alexandrian theologian and exegete, and later was an evangelist in the region of Pontus in what is now Turkey. In a small treatise written for a certain Philagrius, and which is extant only in a Syriac translation, Gregory could declare:

[T]he divine and indivisible substance of God is undivided and single in form; ...[but] the Son is never divided from the Father, not the Holy Spirit again from the latter...For as no division or cleft is conceived of between mind and idea and soul, so neither is cleft or division conceived of between the Holy Spirit and the Saviour and the Father...¹⁷

At the beginning of the fourth century, though, there arose a rejection of Christ's full deity, and by implication, a rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity. Through the teaching of an elder of the church at Alexandria in Egypt by the name of Arius (fl.318-325) the church throughout the Roman Empire was plunged into a lengthy, bitter controversy about the person of Christ. Arius was born around 282. Of his career before 318 little certain is known. In 318 he began to propagate views which caused no small stir in the Egyptian and Libyan Christian community.

Arius claimed that only the Father was truly God. As he wrote in a letter to Alexander (died 328), the bishop of Alexandria, God the Father alone, "the cause of all, is without beginning." The Son was created by the Father as "an immutable and unchangeable perfect creature," and thus is "not everlasting or co-everlasting with the Father."¹⁸ In Arius' words: "the Son has a beginning, but God is without beginning."¹⁹ For Arius there was a time when the Son did not exist, a time when it is inappropriate to call God "Father." As for the Holy Spirit, by Arius' reckoning, he was even less divine than the Son, for he was the first of the creatures made by the Son.

¹⁶ Cited Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 47.

¹⁷ *To Philagrius, on Consubstantiality* [trans. Michael Slusser, *St. Gregory Thaumaturgus: Life and Works* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 176-177].

¹⁸ *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria* [trans. William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 31-32].

¹⁹ Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia* (trans. Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 29-30).

Arius claimed to be following Scripture, and it is important to note that this is where the key battle had to be fought. He cited texts like John 14:28—“my Father is greater than I”—or Colossians 1:15—where Christ is called “the firstborn of every creature”—to buttress his position. But given what we have already noted in this article regarding the New Testament doctrine of God, was his theology a true interpretation of the entire scope of the Scriptural witness about God and Christ and the Holy Spirit? Arius was also deeply fearful of Modalism, the perspective that all but eliminated any distinction between the persons of the Godhead. In seeking to avoid the heresy of Modalism, though, he fell into the equally pernicious error of denying the deity of the Son and the Spirit.

Alexander’s initial response was to emphasise that the Son was indeed as eternal as God the Father. According to Arius, Alexander taught, “Always God always Son,” that is the Son is co-eternal with the Father.²⁰ Thus there never was a time when the Father was without his Son. As such, he must be fully God.

Alexander summoned Arius to a meeting of all the church leaders of Alexandria and urged him to reconsider his views. Arius refused. An open breach was now unavoidable. In 321 Alexander convened a council of about one hundred elders from Egypt and Libya, which drew up a creed that repudiated Arius’ novel views. When Arius and those who supported him refused to accept this document, the council had no choice but to excommunicate them. But Arius had no intention of letting things rest. He began to correspond with other church leaders outside of North Africa and thus took the definitive step that spread the conflict to the rest of church in the eastern Roman Empire.

What was especially difficult about this conflict was the “slippery” nature of Arius’ views. For instance, he could call Jesus “God.” But what he meant by this term was very different from what Alexander and his orthodox friends meant by the term. For Arius, Jesus was “God” but not fully God like the Father. Arius did not consider him the eternal God, sharing in all the attributes of the Father. In Arius’ theology, the Son is really a creature, though the highest of all creatures.

The Council of Nicaea (325) and its creed

Eventually a Council was called in the summer of 325 to provide definite closure on the issue. Around 220 bishops and elders attended, most of them from churches in the eastern Roman Empire. They drew up a creedal statement that sought to end the dispute, a creed known to historians as the Nicene Creed. It runs as follows:

We believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the being of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the dead;

²⁰ Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia* (trans. Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 29-30).

And in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say, “There was when he was not,” and, “Before being born he was not,” and that “He came into existence out of nothing,” or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or being, or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.²¹

At the heart of this statement it is unequivocally declared that the Lord Jesus Christ is “true God of true God, begotten not made, of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father.” In other words, the Son is truly God in whatever sense the Father is God. The key phrase in this creed is undoubtedly the statement that the Son is “of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father.” Here, the full deity of the Son is asserted, the term *homoousios* emphasising the fact that the Son shares the very being of Father. Whatever belongs to and characterises God the Father belongs to and characterises the Son. He is not a creature, contrary to the view of Arius and his fellow Arians.

It should be noted that the creed says nothing about the Spirit’s being divine. This was due to the fact that the heart of the controversy lay with regard to the nature of the Son. Something explicit in this regard, though, needed to be confessed about the Spirit. But as we shall see, this confession would not come without further controversy.

In spite of what those who drafted this creed hoped, the Nicene Creed did not end the controversy begun by Arius’ teaching. Eusebius of Nicomedia (died c.342), a worldly-wise ecclesiastical politician and supporter of Arius, had the ear of the professing Christian emperor, Constantine. Convincing Constantine that the condemnation of Arianism was far too harsh, various Arian leaders and even Arius were brought back into favour and the leading enthusiasts for Nicaea sent packing. Among the latter was the great defender of orthodoxy in the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria.

Athanasius of Alexandria and the defence of the deity of the Son

Alexander of Alexandria had died in 328, and was succeeded by Athanasius as bishop of Alexandria.²² Probably a native Egyptian—he was mocked, for example, as “the black dwarf”—he was a theological genius. Until his death in 373 he was the most formidable opponent of Arianism in the Roman Empire.

Yet, this defence was not without much personal suffering. No less than five times he was exiled from Alexandria, four of them definitely for his commitment to the theology of the Nicene creed. One of his exiles was at the hands of the emperor Julian the Apostate (332-363), who disliked Athanasius simply because of the latter’s commitment to Christianity.

Athanasius’ theology is well seen in some letters that he wrote to a friend, Serapion of Thmuis (died after 362), in 358 and 359, while on the run from Arian persecution. From

²¹ Trans. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd ed.; Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1972), 215-216, altered.

²² On the life and thought of Athanasius, see especially Petersen, *Athanasius*. For the issues raised by the Arian controversy, see Colin Gunton, “And in One Lord, Jesus Christ...Begotten, Not Made” in Christopher Seitz, ed., *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 35-38.

John 16:15—Jesus’ statement that “all that belongs to the Father is mine”—and John 17:10—Jesus’ words to the Father, “all you have is mine”—Athanasius reasons that the Son shares all of the divine attributes of the Father. “The Father is light,” he writes, “the Son is radiance and true light. The Father is true God; the Son is true God.”²³ John 16:15, Athanasius further notes, could never have been said by a creature, no matter how highly exalted a being. It is only appropriate from the mouth of one who “one in being with the Father.” Thus Athanasius sums up: “of that which the Father has, there is nothing which does not belong to the Son.” It is thus “impious” to say that “the Son is a creature.”²⁴

Arianism, Athanasius rightly saw, also imperilled the heart of the Christian gospel. Since salvation is of God, and God alone, then Christ, the mediator of that salvation, must be God. If Christ were a creature, as Arius claimed, then he could not save us, for a creature—no matter how perfect—cannot save another creature.

The entire church owes this “black dwarf” a great debt. His dogged determination to be faithful to his divine Lord led to the slogan *Athanasius contra mundum*, “Athanasius against the world.” Athanasius refused to give way to political pressure and physical force from a succession of Arian emperors, for he rightly believed the faith of Nicaea to be that of the Scriptures.

Athanasius died in 373. He did not live to see the victory against Arianism. His mantle fell upon the shoulders of another Greek-speaking theologian, Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379). Johannes Quasten has described Basil as “a second Athanasius in the defense of orthodoxy.”²⁵ Basil argued in relation to the Holy Spirit what Athanasius had argued in relation to the Son: the Spirit is fully God and shares all of the divine characteristics of the Father and the Son.

Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379)

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 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.²⁶ Central to our knowledge of his life is a marvellous collection of some 350 letters. Basil was born around 330 in the Roman province of Cappadocia (now central Turkey). His family were 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

²³ *Letter to Serapion 2.2* [trans. C.R.B. Shapland, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit* (London: Epworth Press, 1951), 153].

²⁴ *Letter to Serapion 2.2-3* (trans. Shapland, *Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 153-154).

²⁵ Cited 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, No.1 (Spring 2001), 65.

²⁶ On Basil, see especially Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994).

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. Of Basil's eight siblings we know the names of five: Macrina (c.327-c.379), 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, and then, in 350 or so, he went to study in Athens, where he became a close friend of Gregory of Nazianzus (c.329-c.389), who, along with Basil, and his brother Gregory of Nyssa, are sometimes called 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. So it was in that same year that Basil was converted. In his own words: "I wasted nearly all of my youth in the vain labour 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."²⁷

Basil's conversion to Christ was also a conversion to a monastic lifestyle. Basil never had the impression 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, many were now flocking into the church for 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 apart from those attached to the Roman army—aided the victims of drought and famine, insisted on ministers living holy lives, was fearless in denouncing 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. As we have already noted, Athanasius, the great defender of Trinitarian Christianity, had died in 373. Basil inherited his mantle. Arianism, which Athanasius had combatted, was still widespread in the eastern Mediterranean. There is little doubt that Basil played a key role in the victory of orthodox Trinitarianism over Arianism, which denied the deity of both the Son and the Holy Spirit, in this region of the Roman Empire. For instance, in one of his earliest books, written around 363 or 364, Basil attacked the views of 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

²⁷ *Letter 223.2.*

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 controversy between Basil and Eustathius, from one perspective a part of the larger Arian controversy, has become known as the Pneumatomachian controversy.

Eustathius’ 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 within the Spirit-filled person, One who produced holiness.²⁸ 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”!²⁹

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 in which it was 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 honour 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.³⁰

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.

²⁸ Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, “Eustathius von Sebaste”, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 10 (1982), 548-549. On Eustathius and his theological position, 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), 24-49, *passim*.

²⁹ Socrates, *Church History* 2.45.

³⁰ Basil, *Letter* 125.3.

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 crisscrossed what is now modern Turkey denouncing Basil, and claiming that the bishop of Caesarea was a Modalist, one who believed that there were 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 able 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.³¹

Finally, he simply felt that he had to speak. His words were those of the one most important books of the entire patristic period, *On the Holy Spirit*.

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 recognized as God and glorified together with the Father and the Son (chapters 9-27). The baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19, which we noted above, is vital to his argument, for it reveals that the Spirit is inseparable from the divine being of the Father and the Son.³² Ranked alongside, not below, them, the Spirit 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 Corinthians 2:10), something only that One who is fully divine could do.³³ He enables men and women to confess the true identity of Christ and worship him (1 Corinthians 12:3).³⁴ 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 (Psalm 139:7), an attribute possessed only by God.³⁵ And he is implicitly called “God” by Peter (Acts 5:3-4).³⁶

³¹ Letter 244.4.

³² *On the Holy Spirit* 10.24; 10.26; 12.28; 13.30; 17.43; 18.44.

³³ *On the Holy Spirit* 16.40; 24.56.

³⁴ *On the Holy Spirit* 18.47.

³⁵ *On the Holy Spirit* 23.54.

³⁶ *On the Holy Spirit* 16.37.

In chapter 9, which introduces Basil's study of the Spirit's person and work in Scripture, Basil states by way of anticipation 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 fullness, 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.³⁷

Basil died on January 1, 379, worn out by hard work and illness, the latter probably associated with the 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."³⁸ His final recorded statement on the question of the Trinity was given in a letter written in 376 or 377 to Epiphanius of Salamis.

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' 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."³⁹ This passage is important for a couple of 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, Basil thinks that this explanation entails an expansion of the third article of the Nicene creed.

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 defence of the Spirit's essential deity into the creedal statement issued by this council, namely, the Niceno-constantinopolitan Creed. It is this creed that is normally called 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 rôle in the drawing up of the statement on the Spirit.⁴⁰ 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

³⁷ *On the Holy Spirit* 9.22-23.

³⁸ *Broken Lights and Mended Lives. Theology and Common Life in the Early Church* (University Park/London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 46.

³⁹ *Letter* 258.2.

⁴⁰ See Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 193-201.

prophets.” The confession of the Spirit as Lord, a divine title in the Scriptures, and he being worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son, clearly speak of the Spirit’s deity.

Also 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 entitled “On the difference between *ousia* [being] and *hypostasis* [person].”⁴¹

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 colours; and yet the various bright tints of its dye are imperceptibly intermingled, hiding from our eyes the point of contact of the different colours with each other. As a result, between the blue and the flame-colour, or the flame-colour and the purple, or the purple and the amber, the space which both mingles and separates the two colours cannot be discerned. For when the rays of all the colours 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 colour 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 colours 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 colours 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.⁴²

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 thus has resort to an illustration from the created realm, the rainbow. When a rainbow is seen clearly in the sky, the various colours 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 colour begins and another ends. Similarly, the individual members of the Godhead can be distinguished in their

⁴¹ This work has been preserved among the letters of Basil as *Letter* 38. Recent scholarship, though, has clearly shown that the work is from the pen of Gregory.

⁴² *Letter* 38.5.

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 the Cappadocian Fathers and Athanasius of Alexandria would have appreciated:

Almighty God! to thee
Be endless honours done,
The undivided Three,
And the mysterious One:
Where reason fails
With all her powers,
There faith prevails
And love adores.⁴³

Further reading

An excellent overview of the life and thought of Athanasius can be found in Alwyn Petersen, *Athanasius* (Ridgefield, Connecticut/Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 1995). For Basil, see Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994). For the thought of the Cappadocians in general, see Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995). For 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, No.1 (Spring 2001), 65-84.

⁴³ "We give immortal praise", stanza 4.