

2.1 *Cappadocian Fathers*

Cappadocian Fathers: Introduction & St. Basil

PATRISTICS

Who Were They?

The Cappadocian Fathers, also traditionally known as the three Cappadocians, were a group of influential Christian theologians who lived in the 4th century AD. They were St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus. In present-day Turkey, the Cappadocia region served as a significant site for early Christian practices, largely due to the missionary efforts of St. Paul. Cappadocians played a pivotal role in shaping early Christian beliefs, particularly the doctrine of the Trinity. They are highly venerated as saints in both Western and Eastern churches.

St. Basil the Great was the oldest of the three Cappadocians. He was born in Caesarea, Cappadocia, in 330 AD. He was a brilliant student and went on to study rhetoric and philosophy in Athens. After his studies, he returned to Caesarea and was ordained a priest. In 370 AD, he was elected bishop of Caesarea.

St. Gregory of Nyssa was born in Nyssa, Cappadocia, around 335 AD. He was the younger brother of St. Basil the Great. He was also a brilliant student and studied rhetoric and philosophy in Athens. After his studies, he returned to Cappadocia and was ordained a priest. In 372 AD, he was elected bishop of Nyssa.

St. Macrina, the older sister of renowned saints St. Basil and St. Gregory of Nyssa, transformed the family's estate into a monastic community. The eldest among St. Macrina's brothers was St. Basil the Great. Another brother, St. Peter of Sebaste, also became a bishop. Their parents, St. Basil the Elder and St. Emmelia of Caesarea, are also recognized as saints.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus was born in Nazianzus, Cappadocia, in 329 AD. He was a close friend of St. Basil the Great. He was also a brilliant student and studied rhetoric and philosophy in Athens. After his studies, he returned to Cappadocia and was ordained a priest. In 380 AD, he was elected Patriarch of Constantinople.

The Cappadocian Fathers were all gifted theologians and made significant contributions to the development of early Christian theology. They are particularly known for their work on the doctrine of the Trinity. They argued that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons but one God. This teaching became the orthodox Christian understanding of the Trinity.

The Cappadocian Fathers were also influential in the development of monasticism. They founded several monasteries and convents in Cappadocia. These monasteries became centers of learning and spirituality.

Contributions to Theology

The Cappadocian Fathers, following in the footsteps of St. Athanasius, who championed Orthodox theology at the Nicene Council, continued the legacy of Orthodox theology. Their aim was to show that Christians could engage in intellectual discussions with Greek-speaking scholars and demonstrate that the Christian faith, while opposing many of the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek philosophers, was a distinct and scientific movement. At its core, Christianity focused on the healing of the human soul and union with God, exemplified by monasticism.

The Cappadocian Fathers made significant contributions to the definition of the Trinity, which was finalized at the First Council of Constantinople in 381. They also played a key role in the development of the final version of the Nicene Creed. Additionally, they made substantial contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity and provided responses to various theological challenges, including those posed by Eunomius, Sabellian Arianism, Apollinaris, and the Macedonians.

Essentially, the Cappadocian Fathers aimed to demonstrate that Christianity could hold its own in intellectual discussions and that it offered a unique and scientific approach to the human soul's healing and union with God. Monasticism served as the epitome of this approach.

Arianism and Semi-Arianism

Following the First Council of Nicea in 325 AD, Arianism, a theological movement that questioned the full divinity of Jesus Christ, persisted within the Christian Church. The Council had established the consubstantiality (homoousios) of the Son (Jesus Christ) with the Father (God), affirming that they shared the same divine substance or essence. However, the controversy surrounding Arianism continued.

Among the dissenting groups were the semi-Arians, who proposed a compromise position. They argued for a "like substance" (homoiousios) view, suggesting that the Son was "like" the Father in essence but not identical or co-eternal. This view contrasted with the outright Arians, who denied the Son's likeness to the Father altogether, considering him a created being rather than divine.

In response to these divergent viewpoints, the Cappadocian Fathers, a group of influential theologians led by St. Basil of Caesarea, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, sought to reconcile the semi-Arians with orthodox Christian doctrine. They employed a now-orthodox formula that emphasized "one substance (ousia) in three persons (hypostaseis)."

St. Basil of Caesarea, a prominent Cappadocian Father, used a Platonic parallel to illustrate this relationship. He proposed that just as three distinct human beings share a common universal, their humanity, so too do the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share a single divine substance while maintaining their distinct personal identities. This formulation acknowledged the distinction between the three persons of the Trinity without compromising their essential unity:

"In a brief statement, I shall say that essence, (ousia) is related to person (hypostasis) as the general to the particular. Each one of us partakes of existence because he shares in ousia while because of his individual properties he is A or B. So, in the case in question, ousia refers to the general conception, like goodness, godhead, or such notions, while hypostasis is observed in the special properties of fatherhood, sonship, and sanctifying power. If then they speak of persons without hypostasis they are talking nonsense, ex hypothesi; but if they admit that the person exists in real hypostasis, as they do acknowledge, let them so number them as to preserve the principles of the homoousios in the unity of the godhead, and proclaim their reverent acknowledgment of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the complete and perfect hypostasis of each person so named."
(Epistle 214.4)

The Cappadocian Fathers' efforts helped to clarify and refine the doctrine of the Trinity, addressing criticisms that the Council of Nicea had obscured the distinction between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By emphasizing the unity of substance alongside the distinctness of persons, they laid the foundation for the orthodox understanding of the Trinity that continues to shape Christian theology today.

St. Basil the Great - Introduction

In the 4th century, as Arianism, semi-Arianism, and Eunomianism gained prominence within Christianity, a champion of faith arose. Amidst this theological landscape, St. Athanasius in Egypt, St. John Chrysostom in Greece, St. Ambrose in Italy, St. Augustine in North Africa, and St. Basil in Asia Minor emerged as staunch defenders of orthodoxy.

Born in 329 AD, St. Basil was nurtured by his sister, St. Macrina, alongside his brothers, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Peter of Sebaste. This extraordinary family, dedicated to serving the Lord, produced bishops and devoted individuals who left an indelible mark on the Church.

Growing up in the ungodly town of Cappadocia, Asia Minor, St. Basil received an exceptional education. His journey took him from Cappadocia to Constantinople and eventually to the prestigious School of Athens, where he forged a lifelong friendship with St. Gregory Nazianzen, also known as St. Gregory the Theologian, whose renowned Gregorian Liturgy we use to this day.

Upon returning to Cappadocia, St. Basil's brilliance shone as a successful lawyer and orator until a pivotal moment when his sister persuaded him to embrace a life of monasticism. Inspired by her spiritual wisdom, he relinquished his worldly possessions, distributing them among the poor. He then embarked on a transformative pilgrimage to Egypt's monasteries, seeking to immerse himself in the monastic way of life.

St. Basil's travels in Egypt left an indelible mark on his soul. He returned to Pontus, determined to establish monastic communities in the region. Drawing inspiration from the Egyptian monasteries, he emphasized quietude, devotion, and hard work as the cornerstones of monastic life. Through his tireless efforts, St. Basil became the first to establish monastic communities in the region, significantly contributing to the spread of Christianity and the preservation of orthodox teachings.

St. Basil the Great- Monastic Life

In his exemplary asceticism, St. Basil organized each day into precise hours dedicated to work, prayers, hymns, and alternating psalmody. His monks observed strict dietary restrictions, limited to a single daily meal of bread, water, and herbs. Sleep was permitted only until midnight, when all arose for further prayer.

His monasteries served as schools of holy faith, banished from the Sees of Asia by imperial decrees. Undeterred, St. Basil embarked on regular circuits of neighboring towns, preaching the Nicene faith to the populace. This practice was not uncommon in the early church, where orthodox

doctrine faced suppression by heretical bishops and magistrates. In such times, monasteries remained steadfast and fearless custodians of truth.

St. Basil's asceticism was renowned for its rigor. He consumed only what was essential for survival, owning just one inner and outer garment. At night, he slept on a hair skin placed directly on the floor. St. Gregory the Theologian described him as "without a wife, without property, without flesh, and almost without blood."

While his severe asceticism weakened his physical frame and health, it also planted the seeds of maladies that would ultimately claim his life in later years. Yet, despite his frail condition, sustained by his resolute will and indomitable spirit, St. Basil tirelessly traveled throughout Asia Minor, exerting monumental efforts in defense of truth.

St. Basil the Great - the Archbishop

In 370 AD, St. Basil became the Archbishop of Cappadocia and the neighboring regions. St. Athanasius conveyed his congratulations to Cappadocia in a letter, expressing that every province should feel envious of having a bishop like St. Basil. Although Emperor Valens attempted to enforce Arianism in the region, he could not intimidate St. Basil. In response, the Emperor dispatched his Prefect, Modestus, to intimidate and threaten St. Basil. The renowned exchange of words between Modestus and St. Basil remains a significant event in history.

St. Basil: *"Have you no other threat? For none of these things can reach me."*

Modestus: *"How indeed is that?"*

St. Basil: *"Because a man who has nothing is beyond the reach of confiscation, unless you demand my tattered rags. Banishment is impossible for me, who do not count any land as my own, but all to be God's, whose guest and dependent I am. As for tortures, what can they do to this body that scarcely exists? Death is my benefactor, who will send me to God all the quicker."*

Modestus: *"No one has ever spoken with such boldness to Modestus."*

St. Basil: *"Perhaps you have never before met a bishop."*

In the face of Basil's unwavering fortitude and defiance of intimidation or threats, the prefect's menacing demeanor transformed into respect and deference. Overwhelmed by St. Basil's fearless attitude, the prefect dismissed him from his presence. Emperor Valens, impressed and intimidated by St. Basil's unwavering faith, decided against employing harsh measures and instead sought to compel Arian bishops into communion with Cappadocia.

During the Epiphany of 372 AD, Valens approached the main church of Caesarea, astonished by what he witnessed. The church was flooded with a sea of worshippers, their synchronized chants resembling soft thunder. The clergy surrounded the altar in a semicircle, and amidst them stood St. Basil, immersed in prayer, utterly unfazed by the emperor's abrupt entrance.

The unearthly majesty of the scene, the awe-inspiring order of the immense throng that resembled angels rather than men, overwhelmed the emperor, causing him to almost faint. He would have fallen to the ground had it not been for a quick-thinking clergyman who seized him for support.

Moved by pity, St. Basil accepted a gift from Valens' trembling hand, engaging him in a discourse on the orthodox faith. However, Arians convinced Valens that St. Basil posed a threat, leading to an order for his exile. To prevent riots, Basil departed at night, but he was apprehended and brought to the palace to pray for Valens' ailing son. Valens' wife attributed the boy's illness to his treatment of St. Basil. St. Basil agreed to pray for the boy on the condition that he be baptized, and the illness miraculously left the child.

Arian bishops insisted he be baptized at an Arian baptism. After the Arians baptized him, the boy again got sick and died the same night. Arians again convinced Valens to exile St. Basil, but everytime he tried to sign, the pen refused to write and then broke in his hand, which scared the emperor to leave the city of Cappadocia altogether. After that incident, Modestus became sick and asked St. Basil to pray for him. St. Basil's prayers healed the Prefect and from then on they became friends and the church in Cappadocia was protected from then on.

St. Basil the Great - Theological Works

At the age of fifty, he succumbed to a liver illness, leaving behind an immense body of work. Among his notable contributions, the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil holds particular significance for us Copts, as it remains in use to this day.

Against Eunomius

This text, comprising five books, serves as a refutation of the heresy propagated by Eunomius. The crux of this heresy lies in the catchphrase, "we believe that ingenerateness or unbegottenness constitutes the essence of God." This implies that "begotten" denotes inferiority and dissimilarity. Consequently, since the Son is described as "only-begotten," He is deemed lesser than the Father, who alone stands supreme in His unbegottenness.

St. Basil elucidates that Eunomius erroneously conflates God's un-begottenness, which is a mere negative title we ascribe to Him, with God's essence, a concept that transcends human understanding and expression. St. Basil cites St. Paul's words: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!" If the great apostle himself experienced vertigo while contemplating God's majesty, what arrogance is it for others to claim that they have fully comprehended His essence?

"It is a terrible thing for us to coin names for Him to whom God has given a 'name which is above every other name.' We must not add to or subtract from what is delivered to us by the Spirit. Things are not made for names but names for things."

On the Holy Spirit

In 325 AD, the Nicene Creed concluded with "we believe in the Holy Spirit," leaving the church's understanding of the Holy Spirit's divinity and role undefined. During the ensuing 56 years, an Arian faction emerged, denying both the divinity of the Son and the Spirit, leading to their designation as "Pneumatomachoi" or "fighters against the Spirit."

However, at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, this deficiency was addressed when the clause "the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified" was added to the creed, providing a clearer affirmation of the Holy Spirit's divinity.

St. Basil, in particular, had a profound understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in the Christian faith. He believed that through the Holy Spirit, believers experienced restoration to paradise, ascension to the kingdom of heaven, adoption as God's sons, and the ability to call God their Father. He also emphasized the Spirit's role in granting believers grace, being called "children of light," sharing in eternal glory, and inheriting the fullness of blessings in both this world and the world to come.

The Hexameron

The 'Six Days of Creation', commonly referred to as the hexameron, stands as a remarkable collection of nine homilies delivered by St. Basil the Great during the solemn period of Lent. These homilies focused on the profound subject of the universe's origin, as recounted in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis.

St. Basil's hexameron was not an isolated work within the patristic tradition. Numerous other prominent Church Fathers also composed their own series of homilies on the first six days of creation. Notable among these were St. John Chrysostom, whose eloquent discourses captivated his listeners,

St. Gregory of Nyssa, whose philosophical insights illuminated the text, St. Ambrose of Milan, whose practical applications were relatable, and Bede the Venerable, whose historical and allegorical interpretations enriched understanding.

This widespread attention to the first six days of Genesis reflects the profound reverence that the early Church Fathers held for the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. They viewed these books as divinely inspired and authoritative, containing essential truths about God, creation, and humanity.

As a product of St. Basil's rigorous Athenian education, the hexameron exhibits a remarkable depth of analysis. He delved into a laborious examination of every verse and word of the creation narrative, leaving no detail unconsidered. St. Basil's aim was not merely to provide a superficial explanation of the text but to uncover its profound theological and philosophical implications.

St. Basil's hexameron was highly acclaimed during his lifetime and beyond. It was considered his most celebrated work, earning him widespread recognition as a gifted exegete and theologian. His homilies continue to captivate readers today, offering a timeless exploration of the wonder and mystery of creation and inspiring a deeper appreciation for the wisdom and beauty of Scripture.

The Letters

Throughout his lifetime, St. Basil engaged in an extensive correspondence with a diverse range of individuals, encompassing both friends and adversaries of the Christian faith. These letters serve as invaluable artifacts of Basilian literature, offering a vivid and firsthand glimpse into the saint's personal life and the historical events of his era.

The subject matter covered in these letters is remarkably varied, reflecting St. Basil's wide-ranging interests and expertise. They have been categorized into several distinct categories:

Letter Type	Description
Historical Letters	Provide insights into significant historical events and developments of St. Basil's time, such as the Arian controversy, the Council of Nicaea, and the political and social landscape of the Roman Empire.
Dogmatic Letters	Explore and expound on various doctrinal and theological issues, defending orthodox beliefs and refuting heretical teachings. Address topics such as the nature of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the relationship between faith and reason.

Moral and Ascetic Letters	Offer guidance and instruction on Christian living. Discuss virtues such as humility, charity, and temperance, emphasizing the importance of self-discipline, prayer, and detachment from worldly desires.
Disciplinary Letters	Address matters of church discipline and administration. Provide practical advice on issues such as the selection and training of clergy, the resolution of disputes among believers, and the maintenance of church order.
Consolatory Letters	Offer comfort and support to individuals facing various challenges and hardships. Demonstrate empathy and compassion, reminding recipients of the hope and strength found in faith.
Commendatory Letters	Recommend individuals for positions of trust and responsibility within the church or society. Highlight their virtues, abilities, and commitment to Christian principles.
Familiar Letters	Reveal a more personal side of St. Basil, as he corresponds with friends and family members. Provide glimpses into his daily life, his relationships, and his thoughts on various personal matters.

The letters of St. Basil transcend their historical context, offering timeless wisdom and guidance to believers across generations. They illuminate the saint's profound intellect, unwavering faith, and compassionate heart, making them a cherished resource for those seeking spiritual nourishment and deeper understanding of the Christian faith.

St. Basil the Great - Works of Mercy

St. Basil, known for his unwavering commitment to assisting the marginalized and needy, dedicated his life to serving the poor and needy. His philanthropic endeavors extended beyond the boundaries of Caesarea, reaching across Cappadocia and beyond. He established numerous hospitals, refuges, orphanages, and harbors of safety for various vulnerable populations.

One of his most notable philanthropic establishments was an enormous hospital for the poor in Caesarea, the capital city of Cappadocia. This hospital was a testament to St. Basil's unwavering commitment to providing comprehensive care for the sick and impoverished. The hospital featured a church, an episcopal residence, rooms for the clergy, hospices for the sick and poor, and even workshops for artisans and laborers.

Understanding the unique needs of individuals, St. Basil ensured that the hospital had a specialized department dedicated to the care of lepers. He personally tended to these individuals, demonstrating his deep compassion and unwavering dedication to serving the most marginalized

members of society. The hospital, due to its immense size, became renowned as the "New Town" and later "Basileiad."

However, St. Basil's philanthropic work was not without its challenges. His enemies, envious of his influence and popularity, used the hospital as a pretext to denounce him to the governor. They falsely accused him of attempting to seize undue power for himself. St. Basil, with his characteristic wisdom and eloquence, defended himself by reminding the governor that the hospital's existence and services were in the best interests of the community. He emphasized that his sole intention was to alleviate suffering and provide a haven for those in need.

St. Basil's unwavering commitment to serving the poor and needy, exemplified by the establishment of the hospital in Caesarea, continues to inspire generations. His legacy serves as a reminder of the transformative power of compassion, service, and the ability to make a lasting impact on the lives of others.



Review Questions

1. Who were the three Cappadocians? (A: St. Basil the Great, his younger brother: Gregory of Nyssa, and a close friend, St. Gregory of Nazianzus.)
2. When was the Creed written up? (A: 325 AD)
3. What heresy did St. Basil fight against? (A: The heresy by Eunomius.)
4. What are The 'Six Days of Creation' also known as? (A: The hexameron.)
5. True or false? St. Basil and Modestus had a famous exchange. (A: True)
6. Name one of St. Basil's accomplishments. (A: He wrote our most used Divine Liturgy.)
7. Name three aspects of St. Basil's asceticism and how rigorous it was. (A: He ate only what was necessary, owned one inner and one outer garment, and at night he slept in hair skin on the floor.)
8. Which emperor could *not* stand up to St. Basil regarding Arianism? (A: Emperor Valens)
9. Name some of his works of mercy. (A: He was always serving the poor and needy. He built many hospitals for the poor, refuges for virgins, orphanages, as well as harbors of safety for slaves.)
10. What was St. Basil's, "New Town," establishment later named? (A: Basileiad)



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