

Introduction: Basil and Knowledge of God

If Basil of Caesarea receives mention in a standard course of lectures on Christian theology or history, it is as the first person to write a dedicated discourse on the Holy Spirit. Ironically, the primary question about Basil for scholars is whether he fully believed in the divinity of the Holy Spirit himself. Was he harboring a reticence to view the Spirit as fully God? This question is raised by his own closest colleagues, who expressed frustration that Basil would not speak of the Holy Spirit as God in no uncertain terms.

Basil did regard the Holy Spirit as fully divine and an equal Person of the Holy Trinity. However, Basil refused to use philosophical terminology to make this point. He refused to be pushed into stating things in terms not found in Scripture. Why should paradigms of philosophy constructed by the human mind be regarded as more effective for proving the divinity of the Holy Spirit than what the Spirit himself has revealed through divine act and Holy Scripture? Why should Christian leaders be pushed into theological sloganeering about something as important as the being and action of the Divine Trinity?

Basil argued for the divinity of the Holy Spirit under a theological paradigm we could call “illumination.” Using the overstretched philosophical rationalism of his opponent Eunomius as a foil, Basil argued that God is unknown in his essence but made known through his activities. Three primary activities of the Spirit convinced Basil that the Holy Spirit is fully divine: spiritual illumination at baptism, creation, and the inspiration of Scripture. Each of these will be explored in the coming chapters. In Basil’s view, to be in the Holy Spirit is to be in the light of God where knowledge of God is possible; the Spirit illumines the mind to understand what has been disclosed and therefore what can be professed of the knowledge of God. What Basil called illumination, later theologians would come to refer to as a theology of revelation.

At the critical moment, a group emerged in Cappadocia able to articulate a defense of what has become an unequivocal essential in Christian theology for the church: that God is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one divinity in three Persons. The story of how the Cappadocians bested the heresies opposed to them has been rehearsed many times since the fifth century. Recent investigations of Arius, Aetius, and Eunomius have offered a new look at

these counterparties. These studies have helped scholars recognize the potential viability of the Non- and Anti-Nicene movements and their foundations in biblical and patristic writings, serving to illustrate the true heat of the battle over the authority of the Nicene Creed and its vision of the Trinity, and the critical importance of this moment in the history of Christian dogmatics. In the story of the Cappadocian conquest, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa are each granted their place. Basil is portrayed as a powerful ecclesiast but a limited theologian, stammering forward into the issue of the Holy Spirit for polemical reasons but falling short of what finally needed to be said. Gregory of Nazianzus was open with declaring that the Holy Spirit is God. Basil refrained. Basil's younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa, was left with the task of defending the frailties of Basil's writings in order to retain his ecclesial authority for posterity. In the pages that follow, I reshape this telling of history by offering a more accurate understanding of the theological concerns and capabilities of Basil of Caesarea.

Historians err either by conflating these three figures into one voice and ignoring their distinctive personal contributions, or by exaggerating their differences to glorify one thinker over the others. At present there is need for more careful differentiation. After the rediscovery of the importance of Gregory of Nyssa to the development of Christian thought in the middle of the twentieth century, Gregory came to be regarded as the primary voice of Cappadocian thought.¹ Gregory of Nazianzus is enjoying renewed interest as a biblical theologian who presents his thought in sermons and orations steeped in the Scriptures. Basil remains the bishop. No deep thinker or careful orator, so the theme goes, Basil is the one who pulled the political strings and exercised the power of his authority to give the Cappadocians a voice on the world stage and to secure the political will for an eventual Pro-Nicene victory. But if this is so, why were Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa so confident in Basil?

1. The explosion of interest in Gregory of Nyssa in the middle of the twentieth century was instrumental in reshaping the field of patristic scholarship. Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac emphasized biblically engaged texts for Sources Chrétiennes, and ushered in an era of understanding patristic theology as a product of argument over the meaning of the Bible rather than as a series of propositions superseding one another, or theses and antitheses in progression. See, for example: Robert Wilken, "In *Dominico Eloquentia*: Learning the Lord's Style of Language" *Communio* 24 (1997): 846–66; Charles Kannengiesser, "A Key for the Future of Patristics: The 'Senses' of Scripture," in *In Dominico Eloquentia—In Lordly Eloquence*, ed. Paul Blowers, et al (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 90–106. Bibliography on interest in Gregory of Nyssa is found in Michel Barnes, *The Power of God: Δύναμις in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 220n1, and Brooks Otis, "Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System" *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958): 97n1.

They claimed that Basil was the spearhead of their movement and had shown them the way forward.² The role of Basil the (less theologically sophisticated) bishop can certainly be argued, but there was also an aroma of Christian faith shared by the Gregories that they attributed to Basil, and before him to Macrina, his older sister. There was something in the theological and spiritual perspective of Basil that inspired. Recent studies, the present case included, is taking a more careful look at the contribution of Basil and how he inspired his Cappadocian colleagues. There is more to this man than has been recovered.

One consistent message in the writings of Basil is that human language is limited and a word does not necessarily disclose the nature of a thing. When a word is uttered, it references the essence of the thing spoken about, but does not entirely characterize the thing referred; in fact, it does not even fully convey the thought of the speaker. A person stands between the utterance and the thought with hopeful anticipation that the words move the mind in the proper direction toward the thing itself. Human language so characterized, and subject to the limitations of its grammar, is inadequate to convey the knowledge of God. If every human statement in every language in every time was summed up together, “even if all minds, in fact, should combine their researches and all tongues would concur in their utterance, never, as I have said, could anyone achieve a worthy result.”³ Wearing by the Trinitarian debates with their parsing of terms better left to philosophers, and discouraged by his early failures at debating over these terms, Basil sought to recapture a tone for theological discourse seasoned with reverence and mystery. Basil reminded his friend and his brother—or else they learned together from Origen and others—that theology is a limited science, responding to the revealed knowledge of God with a discipline of speaking only that which has been given, and recognizing that all claims are contingent upon divine action. The words used in theological discourse are signs, leading the mind toward a

2. Gregory of Nyssa writes that the wisdom he received from his older brother is too large to be contained within his heart (*On the Making of Man* pref; PG 44, 125B), and when he expounds upon the *Hexaemeron*, he points out that the seeds of his thought were planted by Basil: “The teacher’s few words effect an increase—such appropriate utterances derive from a lofty philosophy; it is not the ear but the tree according to which the kingdom of heaven was compared, that is, a mustard seed. . . . I follow the example of a tiny sprout whose sap has been stirred up by the wisdom of our wise teacher and will attempt to grow into a branch. Although it has already been planted, it is my responsibility to water it.” (*On the Hexaemeron*; PG 44, 61A–64A). Gregory of Nyssa privileges the original idea as more important than its development. Gregory of Nazianzus praises Basil’s preaching and teaching as “a trumpet penetrating the immensity of space, a voice of God encompassing the world, or a universal earthquake . . . his voice and mind were all of these.” *Funerary Oration on St. Basil, Oration 43.65.5–10* (SC: 268).

3. Basil, *Concerning Faith* (prologue 8) 3 (PG 31, 684B; Wagner: 63)

referent that cannot be comprehended and toward truths that are ultimately ineffable.⁴ The theologian can point toward the sun but cannot bear to look into its light.

Not that Basil claimed God is unknown. Far from it. But in an environment where men like Eunomius were claiming to comprehend the essence of divine being the way a mathematician comprehends the Pythagorean theorem, or a carpenter comprehends the structure of an apple cart, Basil argued that something more mysterious is going on in the knowledge of God. God can be known, but only as God has revealed, only as God discloses self-revelation in the context of a proper relationship with the recipient of revelation. That is, only within the paradigms set and monitored, allowed and managed by God the Holy Spirit. In short, Basil spoke of knowledge of God only within the confines of illumination.

The fourth century is marked with multiple parties in the church claiming to arrange themselves around theories of divine essence in the relationship between the Father and the Son. By the time Basil emerged on the scene, there were distinguishable parties over a wide range of convictions. There were Anhomoians, or Heterousians like Aetius and Eunomius who were faithful to the theology of Arius in arguing that the Father, Son and Spirit are different “essentially.” Homoians like Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia claimed that the Son is like the Father in all things according to the Scriptures, but would say no more. Homoiousians such as Basil of Ancyra and Meletius of Antioch claimed only a likeness of essence. But the Homoousians were striving to promote the Nicene position of Athanasius, claiming the authority and heritage of the great council of 325. Finally, there were modalists who claimed that the appearance of the Son was merely a temporary extension of the divine monad.⁵

4. This principle is found in Basil's treatise *Against Eunomius*: “Since whatever the theologians appear to have recorded about the essence of God has been expressed in figurative language (τροπολογία) or even in allegories (ἀλληγορία), the words carry us toward other meanings. If someone contentiously stands on the mere letter, taking it at its simple meaning without rightly examining it, then he . . . will grow old in abject poverty, without any worthy concept of God . . . since it has been demonstrated that the essence of God is incomprehensible to human nature and completely ineffable (ἀπεριώνητος ἀνθρώπου φύσει καὶ ἄρρητος παντελῶς ἢ οὐσία τοῦ θεοῦ).” *Eun.* 1.14.20–27, 45–47 (SC 1:222–24); cf. *Concerning Baptism* 1.2.5. Philip Rousseau writes, “He pointed out that what gave even little words their importance was their δύναμις—literally, their power: the momentum, as it were, that carried the hearer or reader from sign to meaning.” *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 122.

5. I refer the reader who seeks detailed engagement with these parties to Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 133–86, and then also to extended treatments of this period in: R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988),

Until recently, historical interest in Basil has centered on the development of his position from an affiliation with the Homoiousion group to a Pro-Nicene, or Homoousion position. Although he was reticent about applying rigorous terminology, the slogans that Basil did accept changed in the course of his career.⁶ Early letters to Apollinarius of Laodicea (*Epp.* 361–64) express deep concerns about the appropriateness of the term *homoousios*, while later works argue forcefully for this vocabulary. Explanations of this development can be organized under three primary perspectives. The first is the argument that Basil followed Basil of Ancyra in the doctrine of “like according to essence” (ὅμοις κατ’ οὐσίαν) and found a way to create political confluence behind that notion, by loosening the meaning of the Nicene “consubstantial” (ὁμοούσιος) terminology, and creating the so-called Neo-Nicene movement. The second group is those scholars who see Basil as flirting with the “like-in-essence” (ὁμοιοούσιος) party, but becoming convinced by Athanasius to devote himself to the Nicene “consubstantial/*homoousios*” party in the mid 360s. The final group, and the most recent, is those who argue that Basil is an example of Pro-Niceneism emerging in Asia Minor as it simultaneously emerged in the Latin West and in the East. Note that these studies approach Basil’s writings primarily to find relevant allusions to the raging battles of theological and political parties organized around terminologies of divine essence, but this work finds that Basil is distinctly resistant to being classified under those rubrics. Basil’s relation to terminologically determined groups has been the subject of a few monographs under the same theme.⁷ All the while, Basil’s own position was developing

181–398; Thomas A. Kopecek, *A History of Neo-Arianism*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979), 133–360; John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. Two: *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 61–122.

6. Manlio Simonetti, *La Crisi Ariana nel IV Secolo* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1975), 401–34; Kopecek, *Neo-Arianism*, 361–440; Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church*, trans. M. Westerhoff, ed. A. Louth (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 142–43; Behr, *Nicene*, 264–65; Ayres, *Nicaea*, 187–243. These scholars follow the interpretation of Harnack, who first suggested that Basil was affiliated with the *homoiousion* position of Basil of Ancyra at the beginning of his career, prior to arguing forcefully for Nicea. Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol 2, 5th ed. (Tübingen, 1931), 259–84. See also: Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol 3 (Utrecht/Antwerp: Spectrum Publishers, 1960), 230. A helpful summary of these viewpoints, and defense of the term Pro-Nicene, is offered by Ayres, *Nicaea*, 236–40.

7. Volker Drecoll, *Die Entwicklung der Trinitätslehre des Basilius von Cäsarea: Sein Weg von Homöusianer zum Neonizäner*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 66 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1996); Bernard Sesboüé, *Saint Basile et la Trinité, un acte théologique au IV^e siècle* (Paris: Desclée, 1998); Stephen Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea: A Synthesis of Greek Thought and Biblical Truth* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007). Other scholarship has

in a different direction entirely, in fact, along a different axis intersecting the plane from the dimension of revelation and illumination. These terms of divine essence do not define Basil's position. Basil developed his own position founded on his faithfulness to revealed text and divine act.

Therefore, it is not the purpose of what follows to satisfy the debate concerning which group of theologians defined by terminologies of divine essence is the group to which Basil properly belongs. Basil was attempting to change the terms of the debate. If we are going to speak of "development" in Basil's Trinitarian theology, it cannot be reduced to simply "switching parties."⁸ Basil first tried to find his place among the groups as they stood. This position is best represented by his *Epistle* 361, in which he expresses his concerns about the term ὁμοιούσιος:

So then if anyone should speak of the essence of the Father as a noetic light, eternal and unbegotten, then he should speak also of the essence of the Only-Begotten as a noetic light, eternal and unbegotten. It seems to me that the phrase *invariably similar* [ἀπαράλλακτως ὁμοίου] fits better for such a meaning than *consubstantial* [ὁμοουσίου].⁹

But soon Basil realized that while all of these groups formed around various claims about the essence of God, he was himself becoming convinced that the claim to know the essence of God at all was impious and was the source of the discord and fracture of the body of Christ. So, he said, "It is proper for the very essence of God to be incomprehensible to everyone except the Only-Begotten and the Holy Spirit," and if we are to claim to know anything of the essence of God, it is only "that we receive comprehension of his perfect goodness and wisdom when we are led up from the activities [ἐνεργειῶν] of God to gain a conception [σύνεσις] of the maker through the things he has made."¹⁰

explored Basil's activity in the Neo-Arian disputes in wholly sociopolitical terms. See, for example, the three-part series of Raymond Van Dam, *Kingdom of Snow: Roman Rule and Greek Culture in Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), *Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), and *Families and Friends in Late Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); see also Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

8. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea: A Guide to His Life and Doctrine* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 12.

9. Basil, *Ep.* 361.27–31 (Courtonne 3:221). Cf. Ayres, *Nicaea*, 188–91.

10. *Eun.* 1.14.14–19 (SC 1:220).

The turning point came when the young, accomplished master of rhetoric made his first entry into theological debate, thrust forward to confront Aetius and Eunomius at Constantinople in 360 AD. For all the promise and hope vested in him, Basil failed so miserably that he spent the next few years withdrawn from the public sphere. This event is explored further in chapter 4. It was then that Basil's confidence in rhetoric was irreparably fractured. After 360, he no longer wished to strike a blow for those who properly claimed knowledge of God's essence, but instead began to articulate a theology that respected the mystery of God's essence and returned to a humble recognition of the natural limitations of human logic. Basil believed this would not only maintain the integrity of Christian worship, but ultimately heal the church of its polemical divisions.¹¹

Recent studies of the Pro-Nicene movement and the role of the Cappadocians have brought penetrating insights into the nature of Trinitarian theology. None of them have answered the most enduring question about Basil, however: Why did Basil stop short of calling the Holy Spirit God or using the word *homoousios* of the Spirit? Some scholars claim that Basil did not, in fact, believe that the Holy Spirit was truly God in the same way that the Father and the Son are God.¹² Benoît Pruche and others say that Basil demonstrated an economy of language for the sake of the unity of the church,¹³ and none could dispute that even at the height of the battle over the Trinity few men surpassed Basil in ecumenical hope.¹⁴ Basil's terminological reserve remains a mystery. In what follows, I hope to lift a layer of that fog by claiming that Basil's failure to employ certain terminologies was intentional, and it was intended to argue for, not against, the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The following study argues that

11. Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil*, 19.

12. Anthony Meredith, "The Pneumatology of the Cappadocian Fathers and the Creed of Constantinople," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 48 (1981): 205, but later retracted in *The Cappadocians* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 33. Christopher Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 298–301.

13. Benoît Pruche, *Basile de Césarée: Sur le Saint-Esprit*, SC 17 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 102.

14. "Is there not a far greater obligation then upon the whole Church of God to be zealous in maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? . . . It is so obviously and undeniably essential for unity to be fully realized in the whole Church at once, according to the will of Christ in the Holy Spirit, and, on the other hand, disobedience to God through mutual discord is so dangerous and fatal." *On the Judgment of God 4* (PG 31, 660C–661A; Wagner, 42–43). Bernard Sesboüé writes: "Il se fait aussi l'apôtre de l'unité : sa passion constante est de restaurer dans la communion de la foi le tissu des communautés chrétiennes de l'Orient, plusieurs fois déchiré par la crise arienne. Se le terme n'était pas anachronique en ce sens, on pourrait le présenter comme le témoin et le prophète de l'attitude ecuménique." *Saint Basile: Contre Eunome*, vol 1, SC 299 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1982), 46.

Basil sought to reclaim the wonder of revelation in theology, and used language sparingly in a manner sometimes misunderstood by his peers. Basil said all that could be said and laid the rest of his hopes, and confidence, on the work of the Holy Spirit in the minds of his readers to draw the necessary conclusions—that is, to draw the reader into a pious posture of worship before the revelation of the knowledge of God. Basil articulates a theology that is dependent on the personal presence of the divine, a true theology of illumination in which the very ground and grammar of theological discourse must remain dependent upon the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit. For Basil, the reach of the claims of theology surrounding the terminologies of divine essence had surpassed their grasp and humility needed to be restored.¹⁵

Basil's argument for the divinity of the Holy Spirit works by illustrating what the Holy Spirit does. The Holy Spirit illumines and sanctifies the baptized. The Holy Spirit completes and perfects creation from the beginning of time to its end and illumines the mind of the believer to understand the message of its order. The Holy Spirit inspires the Scriptures and governs their understanding in the church.¹⁶ Making no claim to know the essence of God, Basil also leaves no doubt that the Holy Spirit has revealed his divinity through his actions. Only God does what only God can do.

15. Basil wrote of humility: "O that man had abided in the glory he had from God and retained a genuine rather than a false dignity, made great by the power of God, brightened by divine wisdom, ever enjoying eternal life and its benefits. But since he turned from the desire for divine glory, expecting to find something greater, and strove after what cannot be attained, he lost what was possible for him to hold, his salvation most of all and the cure for his ills. The restoration to his original state can be found only in practicing humility and not pretending to claim some glory through his own efforts, but seeking to receive from God." *On Humility* 1 (PG 31, 525AB).

16. I do not wish to associate modern theories of plenary inspiration with the attitude of the fathers. The point is that the coherence of the Old and New Testaments rests in patristic theology upon the singular personality of the Spirit of God. "On the nature and extent of inspiration ancient Christian writers speak with an absence of reserve which is not in accordance with our present estimate. The Holy Scriptures were regarded as the writings of the Holy Spirit; any who did not believe that they were spoken by the Spirit was counted an unbeliever." Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 383. Cf. Basil, *Concerning Baptism* 2.4.