

HEROES AND HERETICS:
An 8-Week Course on Early Church History

WEEK 7 **February 28, 2016**
Teacher: **Pastor Pickens**

Basil – Theology in Action

Life:

We know a significant amount about Basil. We know this through his own writings and the writings of others. 311 of his letters remain. Also, his friend and his brother wrote about his life after his passing.

Basil was born into a Christian home in either A.D. 329 or 330 most likely at Caesarea in Cappadocia.¹ Basil and his brothers and sisters were at least the third generation of a deeply committed Christian family. The grandparents of Basil on his father's (also named Basil) side of the family had suffered persecution under the Roman Emperor Maximinus II (Diocletian), and on his mother's (Emmelia) side his grandparents were martyred before she met his father. Throughout his childhood Basil was surrounded by men and women who were children of confessors and martyrs.

Basil was one of ten children, five boys and five girls, however, the oldest boy died while he was still an infant. Basil was the oldest of the four remaining boys. The next son in line was Naucratius, who was a popular Christian yet died while he was still a young man. The third son, who is recognized alongside of Basil as one of the three Cappadocian Fathers, was Gregory who would later become the Bishop of Nyssa. The last son and youngest of all the siblings was Peter, who would later become Bishop of Sebasteia. The only daughter whose name is known today was the oldest daughter and oldest sibling, Macrina. Gregory, Basil's brother, refers to her as Saint Macrina in his writings.

As a child and continuing on into his years as a young adult much of Basil's life was dedicated to his education. While he was still young Basil went to live and study with his grandmother on property owned by his family in a small village named Annesi, which is not far from Neocaesarea.² After this and after the death of his father while he was still in his youth Basil was sent to school in Caesarea in 340. While studying in Caesarea Basil met Gregory of Nazianzus, who would later be recognized alongside of Basil and his brother as one of the three Cappadocian Fathers.

Throughout the years Basil and Gregory became dear friends and from their letters to one another it's evident that their friendship was both deep and broad. It was broad in that in every area of life Basil and Gregory seemed to find a companion in one another who shared similar beliefs and passions, most notably in the spheres of education and religion. Yet at the same time it was deep in that they were completely open with one another, sharing their joys and concerns with each other. One place where this can be seen is in a letter from Basil to Gregory dated around 358, where Basil pours out his emotions as one might only dare to do in his own private journal: "I am like travellers at sea, who have never gone a voyage before, and are distressed and seasick, who quarrel with the ship because it is so big and makes such a tossing, and, when they get out of it into the pinnacle or dingey, are everywhere and always seasick and distressed... I carry my own troubles with me, and so everywhere I am in the midst of similar discomforts."³

After his time spent in Caesarea Basil went to Constantinople in order to continue his education. His education in Constantinople focused on rhetoric and philosophy.⁴ From there Basil went on to continue his education in Athens in 351. Prior to Basil's own arrival at Athens Gregory of Nazianzus had already begun his own studies in Athens. Their time and studies together in Athens was a period that bound Basil and Gregory more closely to one another in their friendship than ever before. Both academically and spiritually Basil and Gregory were able to unite in their common beliefs. During their studies in Athens Basil and Gregory also met and interacted with Julian who would later come to be known as the apostate Emperor.

¹ Philip Shaff. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II, Volume 8* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1895), xiii.

² Philip Shaff. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II, Volume 8* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1895), xiv.

³ Philip Shaff. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II, Volume 8* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1895), 110.

⁴ Philip Shaff. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II, Volume 8* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1895), xv.

In 356 Basil completed his formal education and returned home to Caesarea, where he taught academically for a time. However, in 357 Basil's life took a significant turn. At this point in time Basil was led to the truth of the gospel of Christ and immediately decided to pursue a monastic life and was baptized and ordained as a reader in the church.⁵ Basil spent the next couple years of his life abroad, travelling from monastery to monastery until he returned home and established his own monastery around 359. Basil never entertained the idea that all Christian should live a monastic life. However, in a time when many were joining the church for the purpose of ease of life (Christianity becoming the widely tolerated religion) he did understand monasteries to be a place where reform would take place in the church. At this point in time Basil's father had passed away and his mother and oldest sister Macrina came to live at the monastery that he had established.

Basil continued his secluded monastic life at his monastery for the next five years; however, all around him a great war was being fought over the Christian doctrine of Christ. Over the course of time his friend Gregory joined him in the monastic life. This war is now referred to as the Arian controversy. The controversy began early in the fourth century with a presbyter named Arius and his Bishop Alexander in Alexandria. The controversy all resolved around the person and identity of Jesus Christ. Arius stated that Jesus was of similar substance to God the Father and that there was a time when Jesus was not, or did not exist. Arius's primary opponent in the controversy was a young presbyter named Athanasius. Athanasius argued the exact opposite of Arius, that Jesus was of the same substance as the Father and that he was the eternally begotten Son. The controversy continued to the point that both parties were fighting passionately for their own opinion and schisms began to arise within the church.

At this point in time Constantine had recently been named the sole Emperor of Rome and schisms within his empire were one thing that he could not afford. Therefore, in order to unite the church Constantine called for the first ecumenical council. In 325 the council convened at Nicaea and decided almost unanimously in favor of Athanasius's position. Arius and the few followers that remained alongside of him were exiled for their beliefs.

At this point it would seem that the controversy was done and orthodox theology had prevailed, yet this was not the case. Over the next several decades the war continued to be fought. The primary reason that the war continued to be waged was due to the rise and fall of new emperors. As different emperors controlled different areas of the Roman Empire Arianism would at times prevail. Over the decades emperors would rise who were sympathetic toward the views of Arius and as they did the bishops who were unwilling to subscribe to the views of Arius were exiled. Athanasius himself was exiled six times for his resolve not to abandon Christian doctrine and spent much of his life living in exile.⁶

This same war that Athanasius was fighting against Arianism continued into the lifetime of Basil. While Basil was living his secluded monastic life he participated in the controversy through his writings. Much of the writing that Basil did while in seclusion was in the form of letters. Basil would write to the friends that he had who were active in the church and in the Arian controversy encouraging them and instructing them in true Christian doctrine, which was stated in a creed produced by the Council of Nicaea and by Athanasius in his own works.

Yet sitting on the sidelines of the Controversy was not something that Basil was allowed to continue for long. In 364 Basil's secluded monastic life was brought to a halt when he was called to the position of presbyter. Basil did not accept the role of presbyter entirely willfully, but rather it was a role into which he was more or less forced. When the church leaders who supported the views of the Council of Nicaea and Athanasius got a hold of some of the anti-Arian documents that Basil had produced they realized that he could be a key figure in the controversy and pulled him into action.

However, once Basil was brought into the role of presbyter he fulfilled his duties in a profoundly active manner. One of the things that Basil continued to do once he was brought into the more formal role of a presbyter was to write against the heresies of both Arius and Eunomius. Whereas the heresy of Arius was of a more subtle nature, saying that Jesus was of similar substance to the Father, Eunomius went even farther to say that Jesus was of a different substance than the Father.⁷ Three of the books which Basil wrote were even entitled "Books Against Eunomius," needless to say the titles of books were more easily decided upon in the early centuries than they are now. Alongside of his writings as presbyter Basil also concerned himself and the church with acts of charity.

⁵ Philip Shaff. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II, Volume 8* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1895), xvii.

⁶ Roland H. Bainton. *Early Christianity* (Malabar, Krieger Publishing Company, 1984), 68-69.

⁷ Stephen J. Nichols. *For Us and for Our Salvation* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2007), 61.

“Probably the great hospital for the housing and relief of travellers and the poor, which he established in the suburbs of Caesarea, was planned, if not begun, in the latter years of his presbyterate.”⁸

Yet Basil’s active role within the controversy and within the church did not end with his being a presbyter. In 370 Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea passed away and it was Basil who was elected to fill his position. With his election to Bishop Basil took an even more active role in the war that was being waged over the doctrine of Christ. Once elected Basil began to debate with and challenge the other bishops who held to the views of Arius. Not only did Basil take up the cause to fight for a truly biblical doctrine of Christ but as a Bishop he also took up the duty of regularly preaching to the congregation of Caesarea. Just as the rest of Basil’s life had come to revolve around the doctrine of the person of Christ so also in his preaching Basil set out to establish the true identity of Jesus Christ. As if these responsibilities were not enough, as Bishop Basil continued to fight against Arians and Eunomists in his writings.

When Basil was elected as a Bishop the Emperor over Caesarea at the time was Valens. Valens was one of the Roman Emperors who supported the beliefs of Arius. Because of his harsh words against Arianism the government and Arians threatened Basil with torture, exile, and even death.⁹ However, Basil was not the type of man to shy away from conflict simply because he knew it was going to be difficult. Basil knew what it was that he was fighting for; he knew that the person and identity of Jesus Christ was, and would always be, an essential doctrine in the Christian faith.

No matter how active Basil was in his position as a Bishop he always remained aware of his own limitations as a single man. Basil knew that the battle which had been fought in the church over the past decades was not a fight that he could win on his own. For this reason Basil called for support from his brother Gregory and his dear friend Gregory. Basil installed both his brother and his friend as bishops within the church in order to fight alongside of himself. While neither Gregory was excited about being called to the office of bishop both accepted the call and joined the fight in the end. Neither Gregory was as active a bishop as Basil, however, each contributed according to their own gifts and talents. Gregory of Nazianzus (friend, who also presided over the Council of Constantinople) is commonly recognized as the orator of the group, whereas Gregory of Nyssa (brother) is commonly recognized as the deep theologian of the group.

Together these three Cappadocian Fathers fought against the heresies that had arisen during their time concerning the doctrine of Christ. Throughout Basil’s years as Bishop he had to fight against these heresies. Another of the difficulties that Basil faced throughout his years as Bishop was being in regularly poor health. It was not until 378 that Basil and his comrades began to experience a great deal of victory in the war that they had been waging. The main contribution to the victories that they experience at this point in time was due to the death of Emperor Valens who supported the Arians. However, it was shortly after this point that Basil’s poor health caught up with him. In the year 379 Saint Basil became sick and passed away.

Thought:

Basil’s main contribution to the church becomes clear once an overview of his life is understood. Throughout his years Basil sought to establish within the church a true and biblical doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ. Although Basil passed away in 379 only two years later in 381 another ecumenical council convened and decided upon the Nicene Creed as a statement of belief for the church. What the Nicene Creed says concerning the person of Christ is that: “We [the Church] believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father.”¹⁰ While Basil was not alive when the church decided upon the Nicene Creed as her statement of faith, this does not mean that he made no contribution toward that end.

Certainly in the Nicene Creed the contribution of Athanasius shines through. It was Athanasius who dedicated his life to fighting for the doctrine that Jesus is the eternally begotten Son of God, and “of one substance with the Father.”¹¹ However, by the time that the Nicene Creed was completed Athanasius had also passed away. If Athanasius is seen as the one who started the fight against Arius and for a true doctrine of the person of Jesus

⁸ Philip Shaff. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II, Volume 8* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1895), xxi.

⁹ Philip Shaff. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II, Volume 8* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1895), xxiii.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Nichols. *For Us and for Our Salvation* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2007), 55.

¹¹ Stephen J. Nichols. *For Us and for Our Salvation* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2007), 55.

Christ then Basil and the other two Cappadocian Fathers should be viewed as the ones who carried on Athanasius' work and finished the fight after his death. If the controversy is viewed as a nail being driven into a board then Athanasius would be the man who started the nail and drove it a great deal into the board, however, the Cappadocian Fathers would be the ones who put the finishing strikes on the head of the nail and finished the job.

Basil understood Christianity to be an intrinsically humbling religion. His high view of Christ also led to a recognition of need. Salvation is in Jesus Christ alone. We are justified by faith in Christ. This means that to be a Christian is to cast oneself in humility upon God's grace and strength.

"Why...do you glory in your goods as if they were your own instead of giving thanks to the Giver for His gifts? "For what do you have that you have not received? And if you received, why do you glory as if you had not received it?" [1 Cor. 4:7]. You have not known God by reason of your righteousness, but God has known you by reason of his goodness. "After that you have known God," says the Apostle, "or rather are known by God." You did not apprehend Christ because of your virtue, but Christ apprehended you by his coming."¹²

Along similar lines Basil made a great contribution to the Church's understanding of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity. What is perhaps the most well-known literary work of Basil is entitled *De Spiritu Sancto or On the Holy Spirit*. In this work Basil makes clear the controversy that is going on in the church during his lifetime. Throughout the work Basil speaks marvelously and profoundly about the person and work of the Holy Spirit in such a way that it leaves no doubt as to the identity of the Holy Spirit as one of the three persons of the Godhead. "True Christianity is both orthodoxy and "orthopraxy," and both of these, for Basil, are rooted in the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit. As such, it is not surprising that Basil also played a key role in the articulation of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity."¹³ In this work Basil pushes for the church to embrace the doctrine of the Trinity just as passionately as he pushed for the church to embrace a true doctrine of the person of Christ. Basil's work *On the Holy Spirit* is "a robust defense of Trinitarianism in light of the Arian controversy."¹⁴

Basil writes: "In worship the Holy Spirit is inseparable from the Father and the Son. For dissociated from him you will not worship at all; but being in him you cannot by any means separate him from God, and more than you can sever the light from things seen, for it is impossible to see the image of God, except by the illumination of the Spirit. And he who gazes upon the image cannot sever the light from the image, for the cause of vision is of necessity seen together with the things we see. So then...through the illumination of the Spirit we behold the effulgence of the glory of God; and through the impress we are led up to him of whom he is the impress and exact representation."¹⁵

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, Light of lights, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead. Whose kingdom shall have no end. And we believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

Take Away:

It is difficult to say enough about the value of Basil's contribution to the church in both his own generation and in the generations to follow. In the person and work of Saint Basil one sees a man who was willing to risk everything he had, including his own life, for the sake of proclaiming and establishing truth. In terms of doctrine there are few more important than the doctrine of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, which are the two primary doctrines to which Basil dedicated his life.

¹² Haykin, Michael A. G. *Rediscovering the Church Fathers* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2011), 114.

¹³ Haykin, Michael A. G. *Rediscovering the Church Fathers* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2011), 117.

¹⁴ Stephen J. Nichols. *For Us and for Our Salvation* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2007), 84.

¹⁵ Haykin, Michael A. G. *Rediscovering the Church Fathers* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2011), 124.

Graeme Goldsworthy in his book *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* writes that: “We can say that, while not all Scripture is the gospel, all Scripture is related to the gospel that is its center.”¹⁶ Throughout his book Goldsworthy makes clear the reality that the gospel centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Another point that Goldsworthy makes in his book is that Scripture can only be properly interpreted when one properly understands the person and work of Christ. “Hence the ultimate interpretation and meaning of everything is found only in Christ. This includes every text of the Bible.”¹⁷

Not only does the entire Christian faith rest and build upon the person and work of Jesus Christ but all of Scripture centers upon the person and work of Christ. If an improper doctrine of Christ is accepted then true Christianity is abandoned. It’s clear that Basil and his companions understood this reality and were in no way willing to abandon a biblical doctrine of their Lord and Savior. The doctrine of Christ that Athanasius, Basil, and the other Cappadocian Fathers fought for is the same doctrine that the Church accepts and cherishes to this day, and the same doctrine for which the Church must always contend.

The basic doctrines of Christ that Basil and his companions contended for were that Jesus is both fully man and fully God in one person, and that he is eternally related to the Father as the Son. These doctrines are so sweet because they flow from the word of God. However, Basil also dedicated his time to another essential doctrine of the Christian faith – the doctrine of the Trinity. Basil in his work *On the Holy Spirit* proclaims the doctrine of the Trinity, yet unlike many in his era and prior to his era he does so without any hint of subordination. Basil is clear that Father, Son, and Spirit are all “one God, the same in substance and equal in power and glory.”¹⁸ “We glorify the Holy Ghost together with the Father and the Son, from the conviction that He is not separated from the Divine Nature; for that which is foreign by nature does not share in the same honors.”¹⁹ Already in the fourth century Basil was proclaiming a doctrine of a united and yet distinct Triune God which is still being taught in Christian Churches today.

We should take a long view in some struggles. Some battles will last far longer than we would like. However, many of the battles are deserving of every ounce of energy and effort put into them.

When men and women spend their lives contending for these truths it helps to better understand how valuable these truths are. They passionately defended the person and work of Christ and the Spirit. These must be essential truths. These were truths valuable enough to contend for and deserving of our joy and rumination.

Further Resources:

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¹⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy. *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2006), 63.

¹⁷ Graeme Goldsworthy. *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2006), 63.

¹⁸ Douglas Kelly and Philip Rollinson. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1986), 6.

¹⁹ Placher, William C. *Readings in the History of Christian Theology, Vol. 1* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1988), 57.