5. THE THREE CAPPADOCIANS

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The three Cappadocians are so called because they lived and worked for most of their careers in Cappadocia. The leading figure of the group was Basil; Gregory of Nyssa was his younger brother and Gregory of Nazianzus, a close friend. Both of the latter were to some extent or other under Basil's patronage at important stages in their respective ministries. Moreover, while the two Gregories were brilliant intellects, and Gregory of Nazianzus one of the greatest orators and preachers in the history of the church, Basil was – besides his writings – a significant churchman in his own right, an accomplished organizer and promoter of monasticism.[1]

Basil the Great (330–79)

As Anthony Meredith points out, we know more about Basil than any other ancient writer, with the exception of Cicero and Augustine.[2] He studied rhet-

1. The biographies below are based, in varying degrees, on similar short biographical summaries in my book *Through Western Eyes: Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective* (Fearn: Mentor, 2007), and are used here with permission.
2. A. Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), p. 20.

oric under his father, and then moved to Antioch, to study with the celebrated pagan rhetorician, Libanius, who later taught Chrysostom. Accompanied by Gregory of Nazianzus, he continued his education at Athens, which possibly included the study of science.

Basil was not baptized until 357. Influenced by his sister, Macrina, he developed an ascetic interest. In 360 he came into contact with the portentous Eunomius at a synod in Constantinople; he played a prominent part at the synod and found himself strongly opposing Eunomius, whose theology was close to that of Arius. More skilful than Arius – besides the fact that he was a bishop – and so an extremely formidable adversary, Eunomius held that the Son came into being at a particular point, was created and so of a different being than the Father. This was contrary to Athanasius who supported the Creed of Nicaea, which affirmed that the Son is of the same, identical being as the Father. Basil was at this time not prepared to go as far as Athanasius; the group with which he was connected were known as the *homoiousians*, since they taught that the Son is of a *like* being to the Father, neither identical to him nor different from him.

Basil was consecrated bishop of Caesarea in 370, and tried to remove Eunomius' followers from influence. Since the emperor Valens encouraged the promotion of Arians, this was no easy matter. Simultaneously, Basil was moving closer to an agreement with Athanasius on the Trinity. This he did by a significant semantic proposal. The fourth-century trinitarian crisis had been bedevilled by technical and philosophical terminology. Frequently antagonists spoke past each other, for they used words that had no fixed meaning. Moreover, they used them in differing ways. Athanasius paved the way for a breakthrough when, in his *Tome to the People of Antioch* (*Tomus ad Antiochenos*, 362), he argued that more important than the precise words was the meaning attached to the words. This helped the participants in the debate to ask what each other intended by their language. Basil took the matter a vital step further. The terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* were used in various ways up to this point, often as synonyms. Basil proposed that *ousia* be reserved for the one being of God, while *hypostasis* be used for the way he is three. This gave the tools needed to consider how God is one in distinction from the way he is three. Moreover, Basil freed trinitarian discussion from the straightjacket of philosophical terminology and granted it the flexibility needed for the crisis to be resolved.

Basil wrote voluminously. We have a large collection of his letters, wherein he interacts with a range of figures in the church. His treatise *On the Holy Spirit* was the first on the Holy Spirit in church history, a landmark in the development of trinitarian doctrine, although Athanasius had a few years earlier written an important series of letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit. Basil's book emerged from worship; his liturgical formula had aroused criticism, and

he defended and explained it here. Some have suggested that Basil was reluctant to call the Holy Spirit 'God'; some claim he did not regard him as God, while others consider – with far more justification – that he was cautious on the matter, preferring to preserve the unity of the church as far as possible. However, Basil writes so strongly of the Holy Spirit that it is difficult to make a case for his seeing the Spirit as anyone less than God; the terms he uses for the Spirit demand nothing less than full deity.

Basil is also important for the future development of the theology of the Eastern church. In opposing Eunomius' rationalism – he and his followers held there to be an exact correspondence between divine and human knowledge – he taught the incomprehensibility of God, distinguishing between the being of God (who God is), which is beyond our capacity to know, and the actions of God, which we can know. In this he has been accused of agnosticism.

Basil attended closely to his own diocese. Emperor Valens, the Arian sympathizer, attempting to curtail Basil's growing influence, cut the diocese into two, leaving him with the smaller part, so reducing the number of bishops Basil could appoint. However, as R. P. C. Hanson – himself at one point a bishop – remarks, parting a bishop from his diocese is like trying to tear a dog from a bone. In response, Basil simply doubled the number of episcopal positions under his jurisdiction!

Examples of Basil's preaching can be found in his *Hexaemeron*, on the six days of creation, a series of homilies on the first chapter of Genesis, in which he not only expounds the chapter but interacts with contemporary scientific knowledge. He established hospitals for the poor and promoted monasticism. His monastic rule greatly influenced the later work of St Benedict, who urged his monks to read it in addition to the Bible.[3] Basil was not a supporter of solitary monasticism, of the forms of withdrawal associated with the Egyptian monks. For him, the life of a community was essential, with manual labour an integral part, and care for the poor central to its operation. As Meredith indicates, both Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen wrote on love for the poor, and it is easy to trace the impact of Basil at this point.[4]

His writings include a work against Eunomius, a range of ascetic works and educational treatises. His large collection of letters is written in a fine literary style and ranges across theological, organizational and pastoral matters. He is probably the main source of the Liturgy of St Basil, still used in the Orthodox Church at various feasts.

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3. Ibid., p. 24.
4. Ibid., p. 27.

Gregory of Nyssa (d. c. 394)

Basil's brother, Gregory, may have married, although the experience was apparently an unhappy one. Unlike Basil, he did not travel to receive a wide-ranging education but attributed his learning to Basil's own teaching. He is widely regarded as the most brilliant of the Cappadocians. However, Basil was responsible for his brother's ecclesiastical appointments, although Gregory was singularly ill suited to them. After Valens' division of his diocese, Basil appointed Gregory in 372 to one of the new jurisdictions he created – the tiny and unpretentious see of Nyssa. Three years later, due to Arian intrigues, Gregory was forced into exile, to return in 378.

Around this time, Gregory composed his vast refutation of Eunomius, *Against Eunomius* (*Contra Eunomium*). The first two books of this enormous work were probably written before the Council of Constantinople (381) and read to a select gathering before the council met, while the remainder were completed a couple of years later. He preached the funeral orations for the first moderator of the council, Meletius, who died shortly after it began, also for the emperor's wife in 383, and his younger daughter two years later.[5] He wrote a large number of treatises and homilies, and shared many of his brother's concerns.

In his criticism of Eunomius, Gregory stressed the point – also asserted by Basil – that the being of God is beyond our capacity to define. God is infinite and beyond the grasp of the human mind. By his hair-splitting rationalism, Eunomius was destroying the Christian faith. In contrast, human beings live by faith, and depend on God's revelation. In this, Gregory prepared the ground for the apophatic approach that has come to be characteristic of Eastern theology, especially in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite. This is the idea that knowledge of God is not primarily to be found in positive affirmations about him but by way of negation, not the intellectual negation commonly used in the West, but through abandoning reliance on rational thought in prayer and contemplation.

Gregory was strongly influenced by Platonism, yet the extent to which this is so has been disputed. He had a strong grasp of the materiality of creation, and man as both body and soul, and emphatically teaches the bodily resurrection of Christ. Evil is a privation of the good, as Plotinus argued and as Augustine was famously to teach. When redemption has run its course, evil will disappear and all things will be restored. Redemption itself must display

5. Ibid., pp. 52–53.

the justice of God, and does so by tricking Satan, who had first tricked man. Thus, as Adam was deceived into eating the fruit, so the devil was deceived by the humanity of Christ as bait, his deity being concealed. The devil fell for the bait and swallowed it, and was destroyed in the process.

For Gregory, the ultimate end of redemption is our deification. This occurs by our bodies being transformed by the body of Christ, by coming into contact with the author of eternal life; this takes place in the Eucharist. There Christ unites us with himself so that we may share in incorruptibility and immortality. This is what deification means, not any absorption of humanity into God but its partaking of bodily immortality.

Additionally, Gregory wrote a number of other treatises on the Holy Spirit and in defence of trinitarian doctrine, a number of homilies and works of biblical exegesis, ascetic treatises (including an early book on virginity), and letters.

Gregory Nazianzen (c. 330–91)

Life

Gregory is called by the Eastern church 'the theologian', a title he shares with the apostle John alone. He was born at Arianzus, a country estate belonging to his father, near Nazianzus, probably around 330. His father – also Gregory – had been a member of an obscure heretical sect before becoming a Christian through the influence of his wife, Nonna. Shortly afterwards the elder Gregory was made bishop of Nazianzus. Our Gregory was born after his father's ordination, and the father frequently urged him to ordination saying, 'You have not been so long in life as I have spent in sacrifice.'

Gregory had a wide-ranging education. When thirteen, he and his brother (who became a doctor in the imperial court at Constantinople) were sent to Caesarea in Cappadocia, where he met Basil, who became a lifelong colleague. Later he went to Caesarea in Palestine, to study rhetoric, and then to the university at Alexandria, while Athanasius was bishop, although his time there probably coincided with Athanasius' second exile (340–347). Gregory was in Athens for a longer time.

At Athens from the age of eighteen to past thirty, he renewed acquaintance with Basil. They agreed to renounce the attractions of the city and devote themselves to the church. Basil returned sooner to Cappadocia and monastic seclusion. When Gregory went back, his parents were still alive, his father still a bishop. Gregory divided his time between helping his father with his episcopal duties and spending time in the mountains, at Basil's monastic base, in prayer, meditation, study and manual labour.

With the acclamation of the people of Nazianzus Gregory was probably ordained at Christmas 361, but against his will. Oppressed by what he called this 'tyranny' he fled to Pontus. He returned by the following Easter but when he preached his first sermon, many stayed away in protest. Later he wrote an apology for his flight, saying he shrank from the huge responsibilities thrust upon him against his will.

In 370 Basil was elected bishop of the metropolitan see of Caesarea. When Basil doubled the number of bishops under his jurisdiction, he found a place for Gregory too. However, it was a tiny obscure backwater called Sasima, at a road junction, without water or grass, full of dust, noise and vagabonds. Gregory was furious – but, due to military occupation of the area, very likely never took charge, for his father needed his help at Nazianzus. After his parents' death in 374 Gregory went into seclusion for the rest of his life, except for a short but unhappy spell as bishop of Constantinople, during which he presided briefly at the ecumenical council. He died in 391.

Contemporaries described Gregory as of medium height, pale, with thick hair and a short beard, and conspicuous eyebrows. He had a scar by his right eye and his knees were worn out by excessive kneeling. His asceticism was widely considered overdone. He was cut off from the world and lacked experience of human nature. His love of solitude prevented him from producing the theological output he could have done. But what he did write stands any test. He is the single most quoted author in the East, after the Bible.[6]

Thought

At Constantinople Gregory's main theme was worship of the Trinity. Between 379 and 381 he preached five sermons (the *Theological Orations*) that permanently established his reputation. As one critic put it, 'Critics have rivalled each other in the praises they have heaped upon them, but no praise is so high as that of the many theologians who have found in them their own best thoughts.'[7] Gregory's principal opponents in these sermons were the Eunomians.[8] With

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6. J. Binns, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 72.
7. P. Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* [*NPNF*], 2nd series (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), vol. 7, pp. 333–336; B. Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church*, ed. M. Westerhoff and A. Louth (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1993), pp. 143–144.
8. For what follows, see R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), pp. 157–164.

a strong belief in the capacities of human logic, they maintained we are capable of comprehending God, assuming there to be a univocal relation between the divine and human mind (an identity of meaning for both God and man). For them, the Son is absolutely unlike the Father. God is absolute being, and generation cannot be predicated of him. Because of the correspondence between the mind of God and human reasoning, generation attributable to the Son is to be understood in terms of generation as we know it on the human level. Eternal generation is inconceivable; the Son's generation must have had a beginning. Therefore, there was a time when the Son did not exist. The Son was the first to be created and is the instrument by which God created the world. The Holy Spirit is even further removed from God.

In contrast, Gregory follows the stress of the other two Cappadocians on the incomprehensibility of God. It is impossible for anyone fully to grasp God's nature. We can only speak in negatives. It is difficult to conceive of God but to define him in words is an impossibility. It is one thing to be persuaded of God's existence and quite another to know what he is. On the other hand, God revealed himself, to Abraham, Manoah, Isaiah and Paul. This is true knowledge but is not direct knowledge of God's essence (from *esse*, to be) (*Theological Orations* 3.12). In the same way, our bodily existence prevents us grasping spiritual realities.

Gregory then unfolds his own teaching. He starts by affirming the monarchy (the principle of unity in God). The Cappadocians have been (wrongly) taken to task by some for making the Father the cause of the deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit, by arguing that the Father is the source of the divine essence. Nothing could be further from Gregory's mind. The monarchy is not limited to one person so that, although the persons are numerically distinct there is no severance of essence. The Father is the begetter and emitter, the Son is the begotten, and the Holy Spirit the emission, but this is so in the context of equality of nature, a union of mind, an identity of motion (3.2). The begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit took place beyond time and above reason, for there never was when the Father was not, nor was there such with respect to the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son and the Spirit are from the Father but not after the Father (3.3). To be begotten and to proceed are concurrent with to be (3.9). All this is, of course, beyond our comprehension. Yet this does not negate it, any more than we reject God's existence because we cannot comprehend him (3.8). The begetting of the Son by the Father establishes their identity of nature, for the offspring is of the same nature as the parent (3.10). The thing to note, he says, is that the begetting and being begotten (and, we may add by inference, procession) is a property of the persons (the hypostases), not the one essence (3.12). In the same way, Father does not

denote the essence of God but the relation in which the Father stands to the Son, which also denotes the identity of nature between the Father who begets and the Son who is begotten (3.16). Thus there was never a time when the Father was without the Son, nor the Son without the Father (3.17). Since his opponents were accustomed to cite biblical passages attributing weakness and subordination to the Son, Gregory points to the incarnation as the occasion for such descriptions: 'What is lofty you are to apply to the Godhead . . . but all that is lowly to the composite condition of him who . . . was incarnate' (3.18).[9] He remained God while adding human nature (3.19), while his humanity was united to God and became one person so that we might be made God so far as he is made man.

On the question of the Holy Spirit the *pneumatomachi* (fighters against the Holy Spirit) were the problem. They were followers of Macedonius, a deposed bishop, and were also known as Macedonians. They denied the deity of the Holy Spirit, considering him even more removed from God than the Son. For his part, Gregory makes a point from the theology of deification. In salvation we are made God. But if the Holy Spirit is not from eternity, how can he make me God, or join me with the Godhead (5.4)? Gregory points to the confusion that then existed over the status of the Spirit (5.5). His opponents were asking Gregory to make clear definitions, since they supposed human logic capable of unfolding the truth about God. He replies by saying that with respect to the procession of the Spirit, as with the begetting of the Son, human language about God is not to be understood in a univocal sense (5.7). Thus we are unable to define the procession of the Spirit and the generation of the Son (5.8).

How, then, does the Spirit differ from the Son? The difference of manifestation, or the difference in relations, gives rise to the difference of their names (5.9). Their respective properties (unbegotten, begotten, proceeding) has given them their respective names (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) 'that the distinction of the three persons may be preserved in the one nature . . . of the Godhead'.

Appropriately, Gregory turns to a consideration of worship. The Spirit is the one in whom we worship and in whom we pray. Thus prayer to the Spirit is, in effect, the Spirit offering prayer or adoration to himself. The adoration of the one is adoration of the three, because of the equality of honour and deity between the three (5.12). The questions of the deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit are connected – once the former is acknowledged, the other follows (5.13).

Gregory points to the historical and progressive outworking of revelation to explain the comparative reticence of Scripture concerning the Spirit:

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9. Quotations of *Theological Orations* are from *NPNF*, 2nd series, vol. 7.

> The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of himself. For it was not safe, when the Godhead of the Father was not yet acknowledged, plainly to proclaim the Son; nor when that of the Son was not yet received to burden us further . . . with the Holy Spirit . . .[10]

He also says:

> Now, worship and baptism establish the Spirit's deity for we worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, three persons, one Godhead, undivided in honour and glory . . . for if he is not to be worshipped, how can he deify me by baptism? But if he is to be worshipped, surely he is an object of adoration, and if an object of adoration he must be God.[11]

Gregory, then, has a clear grasp of the distinct persons while holding firmly to the unity of the undivided Godhead. For him, the Trinity was not an abstract puzzle but the heart of the Christian faith and the centre of true worship. 'But when I say God, I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'[12]

Basil

The trinitarian controversy

In *On the Holy Spirit* (*De Spiritu sancto*) 6.13 Basil explains the origin of the controversy in which he had become embroiled. It occurred in the context of the church's worship:

> Our opponents . . . are annoyed with us for completing the doxology to the Only-Begotten together with the Father, and for not separating the Holy Spirit from the Son.
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> The grounds of their indignation are these: The Son, according to them, is not together with the Father, but after the Father. Hence it follows that glory should be ascribed to the Father '*through* him', but not '*with* him'; inasmuch as '*with* him' expresses equality of dignity, while '*through* him', denotes subordination. They further assert that the Spirit is not to be ranked along with the Father and the Son, but under

10. *Theological Orations* 5.26.
11. Ibid. 5.28.
12. *Oration* 38, *On the Theophany, or Birthday of Christ* 8.

> the Son and the Father; not co-ordinated but subordinated; not connumerated but subnumerated.[13]

Eunomius – whose ideas were similar to those of the heretic Arius – held that the Son was created by God and not co-eternal with the Father, nor of identical being to him. Similarly, the Holy Spirit was a creature. This represented a hierarchy, which Basil here opposes. For Basil, both the Son and the Spirit have equal dignity with the Father and so are to be worshipped with him.

Common conceptions of the Holy Spirit

At this time there was a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty about the status of the Holy Spirit. Basil explains this in *On the Holy Spirit* 9.22. Basil himself, as mentioned above, has been considered to be reticent at ascribing full deity to the Spirit, although the evidence I will present indicates he clearly regarded him as God. However, due to the confusion that reigned, he felt a need to present the evidence for the Spirit's status indirectly:

> Let us now investigate what are our common conceptions concerning the Spirit, as well those which have been gathered by us from Holy Scripture concerning it as those which we have received from the unwritten tradition of the Fathers. First of all we ask, who on hearing the titles of the Spirit is not lifted up in soul, who does not raise his conception to the supreme nature? It is called 'Spirit of God', 'Spirit of truth which proceedeth from the Father', 'right Spirit', 'a leading Spirit.' Its proper and peculiar title is 'Holy Spirit'; which is a name specially appropriate to everything that is incorporeal, purely immaterial, and indivisible. So our Lord, when teaching the woman who thought God to be an object of local worship that the incorporeal is incomprehensible, said 'God is a spirit.' On hearing, then, of a spirit, it is impossible to form the idea of a nature circumscribed, subject to change and variation, or at all like the creature. We are compelled to advance in our conceptions to the highest, and to think of an intelligent essence, in power infinite, in magnitude unlimited, unmeasured by times or ages, generous of its good gifts, to whom turn all things needing sanctification, after whom reach all things that live in virtue, as being watered by its inspiration and helped on toward their natural and proper end; perfecting all other things, but itself in nothing lacking; living not as needing restoration, but as supplier of life; not growing by additions but straightway full, self-established, omnipresent, origin of sanctification, light perceptible to the mind, supplying, as were, through itself, illumination to every faculty in the search for truth; by nature unapproachable, apprehended by reason of

13. All quotations of *On the Holy Spirit* are from *NPNF*, 2nd series, vol. 8.

> goodness, filling all things with its power, but communicated only to the worthy; not shared in one measure, but distributing its energy according to 'the proportion of faith'; in essence simple, in powers various, wholly present in each and being wholly everywhere; impassively divided, shared without loss of ceasing to be entire, after the likeness of the sunbeam, whose kindly light falls on him who enjoys it as though it shone for him alone, yet illumines land and sea and mingles with the air. So, too, is the Spirit to every one who receives it, as though given to him alone, and yet it sends forth grace sufficient and full for all mankind, and is enjoyed by all who share it, according to the capacity, not of its power, but of their nature.

The Trinity, the Holy Spirit, baptism and salvation

Basil had been attacked for his doxology. It was precisely in worship and the liturgy, particularly in baptism, that he found evidence of the Spirit's deity. In *On the Holy Spirit* 10.26 he writes:

> Whence is it that we are Christians? Through our faith, would be the universal answer, And in what way are we saved? Plainly because we were regenerate through the grace given in our baptism. How else could we be? And after recognising that this salvation is established through the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, shall we fling away 'that form of doctrine' which we received?

This is so since faith and baptism go together. In 10.28 we read:

> Faith and baptism are two kindred and inseparable ways of salvation; faith is perfected through baptism, baptism is established through faith, and both are completed by the same names. For as we believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, so are we also baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost: first comes the confession, introducing us to salvation, and baptism follows, setting the seal upon our assent.

However, the grace in baptism comes from the Holy Spirit. There is no power inherent in the water; baptismal efficacy comes exclusively from the Spirit. In 10.35 he writes:

> Hence it follows that the answer to our question why the water was associated with the Spirit is clear: the reason is because in baptism two ends were proposed; on the one hand, the destroying of the body of sin, that it may never bear fruit unto death; on the other hand, our living unto the Spirit, and having our fruit in holiness; the water receiving the body as in a tomb figures death, while the Spirit pours in the quickening power, renewing our souls from the deadness of sin unto their original

> life. This then is what it is to be born again of water and of the Spirit, the being made dead being effected in the water, while our life is wrought in us through the Spirit. In three immersions, then, and with three invocations, the great mystery of baptism is performed, to the end that the type of death may be fully figured, and that by the tradition of the divine knowledge the baptised may have their souls enlightened. It follows that if there is any grace in the water, it is not of the nature of the water, but of the presence of the Spirit. For baptism is 'not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God'.

The Holy Spirit and theosis

The Holy Spirit effects salvation, which in the fullest sense results in our being made God – what the Eastern church calls *theosis* (deification), by which we are made partakers of the divine nature, as 2 Peter 1:4 states. This Basil indicates in *On the Holy Spirit* 9.23:

> Hence comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, distribution of good gifts, the heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in God, the being made like to God, and, highest of all, the being made God.

In a remarkable figure of speech, in 26.62, he says that the Holy Spirit is 'the place of them that are being sanctified . . . the special and peculiar place of true worship'. Referring to John 4:21–24, he argues that the place of Christian worship is the Holy Spirit, for 'the Spirit is . . . the place of the saints and the saint is the proper place for the Spirit, offering himself as he does for the indwelling of God, and called God's Temple'. The Spirit is in the saints in different kinds of ways but in relation to the Father and the Son he is not so much in them as with them. Thus even in our own worship the Holy Spirit is inseparable from the Father and the Son.

The Holy Spirit is ranked together with God

Hence, the conclusion Basil reaches is that the Spirit must be ranked on the side of God and not the creatures:

> But the Spirit is ranked together with God, not on account of the emergency of the moment, but on account of the natural fellowship; is not dragged in by us, but invited by the Lord.[14]

14. *On the Holy Spirit* 10.30.

> Let us then revert to the point raised from the outset, that in all things the Holy Spirit is inseparable and wholly incapable of being parted from the Father and the Son.[15]

> Moreover, from the things created at the beginning may be learnt the fellowship of the Spirit with the Father and the Son . . . And in the creation bethink thee first, I pray thee, of the original cause of all things that are made, the Father; of the creative cause, the Son; of the perfecting cause, the Spirit; so that the ministering spirits subsist by the will of the Father, are brought into being by the operation of the Son, and perfected by the presence of the Spirit. Moreover, the perfection of angels is sanctification and continuance in it. And let no one imagine me either to affirm that there are three original hypostases or to allege the operation of the Son to be imperfect. For the first principle of existing things is One, creating through the Son and perfecting through the Spirit. The operation of the Father who worketh all in all is not imperfect, neither is the creating work of the Son incomplete if not perfected by the Spirit. The Father, who creates by His sole will, could not stand in any need of the Son, but nevertheless He wills through the Son; nor could the Son, who works according to the likeness of the Father, need co-operation, but the Son too wills to make perfect through the Spirit. 'For by the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath [the Spirit] of his mouth."[16]

Hypostasis *and* ousia

Basil played a leading role in resolving the trinitarian crisis of the fourth century by distinguishing between the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*. Previously these words, borrowed from Greek philosophy, had been given a range of meanings and were often used as effective synonyms. The result was massive confusion. The church simply did not have the linguistic tools to settle the dispute over how God is both one and three. Eventually, Athanasius recognized that what was of greatest importance was not the words that were used but the meaning of the words. This paved the way for some to realize that others who employed different terminology might after all be intending the same. It was Basil, in *Letter* 214.3–4, who proposed that settled meanings be given to these two words:

> What more serious calumny could there be? What better calculated to disturb the faith of the majority than that some of us could be shewn to assert that there is one

15. Ibid. 16.37.
16. Ibid. 16.38.

hypostasis [roughly corresponding to 'person'] of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost? We distinctly lay down that there is a difference of Persons; but this statement was anticipated by Sabellius, who affirms that God is one by hypostasis, but is described by Scripture in different Persons, according to the requirements of each individual case; sometimes under the name of Father, when there is occasion for this Person; sometimes under the name of Son when there is a descent to human interests . . . ; and sometimes under the Person of Spirit . . . If, then, any among us are shewn to assert that Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one in substance, while we maintain the three perfect Persons, how shall we escape giving clear and incontrovertible proof of the truth of what is being asserted about us?

The non-identity of hypostasis and ousia is, I take it, suggested even by our western brethren. . . . If you ask me to state shortly my own view, I shall state that ousia has the same relation to hypostasis as the common has to the particular. Every one of us both shares in existence by the common term of essence (ousia) and by his own properties is such an one and such an one. In the same manner, in the matter in question, the term ousia is common, like goodness, or Godhead, or any similar attribute; while hypostasis is contemplated in the special property of Fatherhood, Sonship, or the power to sanctify. If then they describe the Persons as being without hypostasis, the statement is *per se* absurd; but if they concede that the Persons exist in real hypostasis as they acknowledge, let them so reckon them that the principle of the homoousion may be preserved in the unity of the Godhead, and that the doctrine preached may be the recognition of true religion, of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in the perfect and complete hypostasis of each of the Persons named.[17]

He explains this further in *Letter* 236.6:

The distinction between ousia and hypostasis is the same as that between the general and the particular; as, for instance, between the animal and the particular man. Wherefore, in the case of the Godhead, we confess one essence or substance so as not to give a variant definition of existence, but we confess a particular hypostasis, in order that our conception of Father, Son and Holy Spirit may be without confusion and clear. If we have no distinct perception of the separate characteristics, namely, fatherhood, sonship, and sanctification, but form our conception of God from the general idea of existence, we cannot possibly give a sound account of our faith. We must, therefore, confess the faith by adding the particular to the common. The Godhead is common; the fatherhood particular. We must therefore combine the two and say, 'I believe in God the Father.' The like course must be pursued in the

17. Quotations from Basil's letters are from *NPNF*, 2nd series, vol. 8.

> confession of the Son; we must combine the particular with the common and say 'I believe in God the Son', so in the case of the Holy Ghost we must make our utterance conform to the appellation and say 'in God the Holy Ghost.'

Order of our knowledge and the order of relations

For Basil, there is a distinction to be drawn between the way we know God and the way the three persons relate to each other in the unity of God's being. The Holy Spirit grants us access *through* Christ the Son *to* the Father, whereas the order in the works and ways of the Trinity is *from* the Father *through* the Son *by* the Spirit. However, this must not be understood as a hierarchy of superiors and inferiors; the Eunomians used the Greek word *taxis* in that way, denoting a hierarchy of both status and being. For Basil the idea was that of a suitable disposition, a fitting arrangement, in which the three are seen as equal in status and identical in being. So, in *On the Holy Spirit* 18.47 he points out the following:

> 'No man knoweth the Father save the Son.' And so 'no man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost.' For it is not said through the Spirit, but by the Spirit, and 'God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth,' as it is written 'in thy light shall we see light', namely by the illumination of the Spirit, 'the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' It results that in Himself He shows the glory of the Only-begotten, and on true worshippers He in Himself bestows the knowledge of God. Thus the way of the knowledge of God lies from One Spirit through the One Son to the One Father, and conversely the natural Goodness and the inherent Holiness and the royal Dignity extend from the Father through the Only-begotten to the Spirit. Thus there is both acknowledgment of the hypostases and the true dogma of the Monarchy is not lost. They on the other hand who support their sub-numeration by talking of first and second and third ought to be informed that into the undefiled theology of Christians they are importing the polytheism of heathen error. No other result can be achieved by the fell device of sub-numeration than the confession of a first, a second, and a third God. For us is sufficient the order prescribed by the Lord. He who confuses this order will be no less guilty of transgressing the law than are the impious heathen.

God's essence is unknowable: we know him through his attributes (energies)

In *Letter* 234 Basil sets out what was to become an axiom of Eastern thought. We cannot know God in his essence, as he is in himself, for he infinitely transcends us. He dwells in light inapproachable. However, we can know him by means of his attributes or energies (*dynameis*, 'powers'). Our knowledge is

therefore limited to his revelation of himself in his creation. This was denied by the Eunomians, who held that human knowledge of God was identical to God's knowledge of himself. This was a rationalist position, with a strong view of the capacities of the human mind but a correspondingly weak view of the supremacy of God:

> Do you worship what you know or what you do not know? If I answer, I worship what I know, they immediately reply, What is the essence of the object of worship? Then, if I confess that I am ignorant of the essence, they turn on me again and say, So you worship you know not what. I answer that the word to know has many meanings. We say that we know the greatness of God, His power, His wisdom, His goodness, His providence over us, and the justness of His judgment; but not His very essence. The question is, therefore, only put for the sake of dispute. For he who denies that he knows the essence does not confess himself to be ignorant of God, because our idea of God is gathered from all the attributes which I have enumerated. But God, he says, is simple, and whatever attribute of Him you have reckoned as knowable is of His essence. But the absurdities involved in this sophism are innumerable. When all these high attributes have been enumerated, are they all names of one essence? And is there the same mutual force in His awfulness and His loving-kindness, His justice and His creative power, His providence and His foreknowledge, and His bestowal of rewards and punishments, His majesty and His providence? In mentioning any one of these do we declare His essence ? If they say, yes, let them not ask if we know the essence of God, but let them enquire of us whether we know God to be awful, or just, or merciful. These we confess that we know. If they say that essence is something distinct, let them not put us in the wrong on the score of simplicity. For they confess themselves that there is a distinction, between the essence and each one of the attributes enumerated. The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.

Unwritten traditions

Basil, in opposing the Eunomians, also has important things to say about the relationship between Scripture and unwritten traditions, which he claims were handed down from the apostles. In *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66 he writes:

> Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us 'in a mystery' by the tradition of the apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force. And these no one will

> gainsay; – no one, at all events, who is even moderately versed in the institutions of the Church. For were we to attempt to reject such customs as have no written authority, on the ground that the importance they possess is small, we should unintentionally injure the Gospel in its very vitals; or, rather, should make our public definition a mere phrase and nothing more. For instance to take the first and most general example, who is there who has taught us in writing to sign with the sign of the cross those who have trusted in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ? What writing has taught us to turn to the east at the prayer? Which of the saints has left us in writing the words of the invocation at the displaying of the bread of the Eucharist and the cup of blessing? For we are not, as is well known, content with what the apostle or the Gospel has recorded, but both in preface and conclusion we add other words as being of great importance to the validity of the ministry and these we derive from unwritten teaching.

Here Basil asserts that the sources of the church's practice are twofold. First, there are those things that are 'derived from written teaching', which is a reference to the Bible, particularly the Gospels and the writings of the apostles. However, by itself written teaching is insufficient. Unwritten traditions originating with the apostles 'have the same force'. If the church were to abandon these traditions, the gospel would be harmed and the church's profession of faith weakened. So the church is not content with the written teaching alone but 'we add other words'. For Basil, as for the Eastern church thereafter, Scripture is part of a larger whole rather than standing alone.

The interpretation of Scripture

It was common in the fourth century for the Old Testament to be interpreted in an allegorical manner. Origen (185–254) was particularly noteworthy as one who sought hidden meanings in the text. In his *On First Principles* (*Peri Archōn*) he argued that the text of the Bible was threefold, in keeping with his trichotomist view of human beings. The straightforward, historical meaning corresponded to the bodily sense, suitable for new believers. The moral significance of the text was for the more mature, while the spiritual meaning was intended for those who had made significant advance in the Christian life. Hence biblical exegesis focused increasingly in penetrating beneath the surface meaning of the text, discovering deeper, spiritual significance. Basil rejected this approach and advocated a simpler, more literal form of interpretation. In his *Hexaemeron* 9.1 he explains this:

> I know the laws of allegory, though less by myself than from the works of others. There are those truly, who do not admit the common sense of the Scriptures, for

> whom water is not water, but some other nature, who see in a plant, a fish, what their fancy wishes, who change the nature of reptiles and of wild beasts to suit their allegories, like the interpreters of dreams who explain visions in sleep to make them serve their own ends. For me grass is grass; plant, fish, wild beast, domestic animal, I take all in the literal sense. 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel.' . . . giving themselves up to the distorted meaning of allegory, [they] have undertaken to give a majesty of their own invention to Scripture. It is to believe themselves wiser than the Holy Spirit, and to bring forth their own ideas under a pretext of exegesis. Let us hear Scripture as it has been written.[18]

Gregory of Nyssa

The simplicity of God

It has often been claimed that the Western church has a strong emphasis on the divine simplicity and that this has hampered its appreciation of God as Trinity. God's simplicity is his being one and indivisible; he is not composed of parts less than the whole of who he is. At times the accusation against the West sticks. Aquinas, for instance, had such a strong stress on the simplicity of God that some have claimed that he found it difficult to do justice to the three persons.[19] However, this passage from Gregory, in his vast *Against Eunomius* (1.19), demonstrates that this doctrine was not the preserve of the Latin West but was equally maintained in the East. Gregory does not yield an inch to Eunomius, whose teaching, Gregory holds, entails a view of God as composed of individual parts. We recall that, for Eunomius, the Son and the Holy Spirit are beings other than the Father, created and neither eternally co-equal nor identical in being:

> But let us still scrutinize his [Eunomius'] words. He declares each of these Beings, whom he has shadowed forth in his exposition, to be single and absolutely one. We believe that the most boorish and simple-minded would not deny that the Divine Nature, blessed and transcendent as it is, was 'single.' That which is viewless, formless, and sizeless, cannot be conceived of as multiform and composite. But it will be clear, upon the very slightest reflection, that this view of the supreme Being as 'simple,' however finely they may talk of it, is quite inconsistent with the system which they have elaborated. For who does not know that, to be exact, simplicity in

18. Ibid.

19. See Letham, *Holy Trinity*, pp. 228–237, and sources cited there.

> the case of the Holy Trinity admits of no degrees. In this case there is no mixture or conflux of qualities to think of; we comprehend a potency without parts and composition; how then, and on what grounds, could any one perceive there are differences of less and more.
>
> If he had been thinking of a Being really single and absolutely one, identical with goodness rather than possessing it, he would not be able to count a greater and a less in it at all.
>
> It is, indeed, difficult to see how a reflecting mind can conceive one infinite to be greater or less than another infinite. So that if he acknowledges the supreme Being to be 'single' and homogenous, let him grant that it is bound up with this universal attribute of simplicity and infinitude. If, on the other hand, he divides and estranges the 'Beings' from each other, conceiving that of the Only-begotten as another than the Father's, and that of the Spirit as another than the Only-begotten, with a 'more' and 'less' in each case, let him be exposed now as granting simplicity in appearance only to the Deity, but in reality proving the composite in Him.[20]

Gregory asserts here that Eunomius cannot hold to simplicity, since, in his teaching, the Son and the Holy Spirit are different beings from the Father. Rather, the doctrine of simplicity requires that all three persons be of the one identical being, indivisible and without composition into parts.

The names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit denote eternal realities and demonstrate the unity of God and the distinctions of the persons

In *Against Eunomius* 2.2 Gregory maintains that God has revealed to us the names we are to use of him. Eunomius instead adopts different names, which he co-opts in the service of his particular views on the persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Gregory holds that Christ gave us the names of the persons. We believe that God has one name, which is distinguished into three; these are relational names, the Father indicating a relation to the Son, and so forth. For Gregory, it is a matter of importance for orthodox theology that it be thought out on the basis of the teaching of Christ rather than something we may propose:

> Since then this doctrine is put forth by the Truth itself, it follows that anything which the inventors of pestilent heresies devise besides to subvert this Divine

20. Quotations of *Against Eunomius* are from Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian* Church [*NPNF*], 2nd series (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), vol. 5.

utterance, – as, for example, calling the Father 'Maker' and 'Creator' of the Son instead of 'Father', and the Son a 'result', a 'creature', a 'product', instead of 'Son', and the Holy Spirit the 'creature of a creature', and the 'product of a product', instead of His proper title the 'Spirit', and whatever those who fight against God are pleased to say of Him, all such fancies we term a denial and violation of the Godhead revealed to us in this doctrine. For once for all we have learned from the Lord, through Whom comes the transformation of our nature from mortality to immortality, – from Him, I say, we have learned what we ought to look at with the eyes of our understanding, – that is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

For while there are many other names by which Deity is indicated in the Historical Books, in the Prophets and in the Law, our Master Christ passes by all these and commits to us these titles as better able to bring us to the faith about the Self-Existent, declaring that it suffices us to cling to the title, 'Father, Son, and Holy Ghost', in order to attain to the apprehension of him who is absolutely Existent, Who is one and yet not one. In regard to essence He is one, wherefore the Lord ordained that we should look to one Name: but in regard to the attributes indicative of the Persons, our belief in Him is distinguished into belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; He is divided without separation and united without confusion. For when we hear the title 'Father' we apprehend the meaning to be this, that the name is not understood with reference to itself alone, but also by its special signification indicates the relation to the Son. For the term 'Father' would have no meaning apart by itself, if 'Son' were not connoted by the utterance of the word 'Father.' When, then, we learnt the name 'Father' we were taught at the same time, by the selfsame title, faith also in the Son. Now since Deity by its very nature is permanently and immutably the same in all that pertains to its essence, nor did it at any time fail to be anything that it now is, nor will it at any future time be anything that it now is not, and since He Who is the very Father was named Father by the Word, and since in the Father the Son is implied, – since these things are so, we of necessity believe that He Who admits no change or alteration in His nature was always entirely what He is now, or, if there is anything which He was not, that He assuredly is not now. Since then He is named Father by the very Word, He assuredly always was Father, and is and will be even as He was.

These names, Gregory argues, are not only given us by Christ as the names of the three persons, but demonstrate both unity of nature and the distinct personal relations. Thus the Father is eternally the Father, and the Son is eternally the Son. The name 'the Father' entails relations and, specifically, 'the Son.' The immutability of God is the key, for he does not change and so as he has named himself so he ever is.

The ineffability of the divine essence

However, that does not mean that we can penetrate to the divine essence (being) so as to know God as he is in himself. Like Basil, Gregory is insistent that God's essence is beyond us; we are given to know what is needed for our salvation, not what we might wish to know to satisfy our curiosity. In *Against Eunomius* 2.3 he spells this out:

> And by this deliverance the Word seems to me to lay down for us this law, that we are to be persuaded that the Divine Essence is ineffable and incomprehensible: for it is plain that the title of Father does not present to us the Essence, but only indicates the relation to the Son. It follows, then, that if it were possible for human nature to be taught the essence of God, He 'who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' would not have suppressed the knowledge upon this matter. But as it is, by saying nothing concerning the Divine Essence, he showed that the knowledge thereof is beyond our power, while when we have learnt that of which we are capable, we stand in no need of the knowledge beyond our capacity, as we have in the profession of faith in the doctrine delivered to us what suffices for our salvation.

Here Gregory's theology is shaped by the gospel and salvation. There are clear bounds beyond which we cannot go and on which we must not speculate. God has provided all we need for our salvation; this should suffice us. He reaffirms this in *Against Eunomius* 3.5. This stress on the ineffability of God's essence was to become a hallmark of Eastern Christianity. Since we cannot know God in himself, rational thought is of itself limited in its capabilities. The knowledge of God is to be found, rather, by way of prayer, mystical contemplation and liturgical practice:

> Now if any one should ask for some interpretation, and description, and explanation of the Divine essence, we are not going to deny that in this kind of wisdom we are unlearned, acknowledging only so much as this, that it is not possible that that which is by nature infinite should be comprehended in any conception expressed by words. The fact that the Divine greatness has no limit is proclaimed by prophecy, which declares expressly that of His splendour, His glory, His holiness, 'there is no end': and if His surroundings have no limit, much more is He Himself in His essence, whatever it may be, comprehended by no limitation in any way.
>
> Accordingly, since the Deity is too excellent and lofty to be expressed in words, we have learnt to honour in silence what transcends speech and thought.
>
> Learning this, therefore, from Paul, we boldly declare that, not only are the

judgments of God too high for those who try to search them out, but that the ways also that lead to the knowledge of Him are even until now untrodden and impassable. For this is what we understand that the Apostle wishes to signify, when he calls the ways that lead to the incomprehensible 'past finding out', showing by the phrase that that knowledge is unattainable by human calculations, and that no one ever yet set his understanding on such a path of reasoning, or showed any trace or sign of an approach, by way of perception, to the things incomprehensible.

Learning these things, then, from the lofty words of the Apostle, we argue, by the passage quoted, in this way: – If His judgments cannot be searched out, and His ways are not traced, and the promise of His good things transcends every representation that our conjectures can frame, by how much more is His actual Godhead higher and loftier, in respect of being unspeakable and unapproachable, than those attributes which are conceived as accompanying it . . .

Generation

The relation of the Son to the Father is by generation. The Father has begotten the Son from eternity. Arius and Eunomius used this to argue that therefore the Son had a beginning. Human generation occurs at a point in time; a father begets a son but before that he is not a father, since his son does not yet exist. Therefore, so the argument went, the Son began to be when the Father begat him. Before that took place God was not the Father and, since the Son came into existence he is not of the same status or being as God. The question Gregory faces in *Against Eunomius* 2.9 is how we are to understand the idea of generation in the context of the relations between the Father and the Son:

For it would be well, I think, to consider in a somewhat careful investigation the exact meaning of the term 'generation'. That this expression conveys the meaning of existing as the result of some cause is plain to all and I suppose there is no need to contend about this point: but since there are different modes of existing as the result of a cause, this difference is what I think ought to receive thorough explanation in our discussion by means of scientific division. Of things which have come into being as the results of some cause we recognize the following differences. Some are the result of material and art, as the fabrics of houses and all other works produced by means of their respective material, where some art gives direction and conducts its purpose to its proper aim. Others are the result of material and nature; for nature orders the generation of animals one from another, effecting her own work by means of the material subsistence in the bodies of the parents; others again are by material efflux. In these the original remains as it was before, and that which flows from it is contemplated by itself, as in the case of the sun and its beam,

or the lamp and its radiance, or of scents and ointments, and the quality given off from them. For these, while remaining undiminished in themselves, have each accompanying them the special and peculiar effect which they naturally produce, as the sun his ray, the lamp its brightness, and perfumes the fragrance which they engender in the air. There is also another kind of generation besides these, where the cause is immaterial and incorporeal, but the generation is sensible and takes place through the instrumentality of the body; I mean the generation of the word by the mind. For the mind being in itself incorporeal begets the word by means of sensible instruments. So many are the differences of the term generation, which we discover in a philosophic view of them, that is itself, so to speak, the result of generation.

And now that we have thus distinguished the various modes of generation, it will be time to remark how the benevolent dispensation of the Holy Spirit, in delivering to us the Divine mysteries, imparts that instruction which transcends reason by such methods as we can receive. For the inspired teaching adopts, in order to set forth the unspeakable power of God, all the forms of generation that human intelligence recognizes, yet without including the corporeal senses attaching to the words. For when it speaks of the creative power, it gives to such an energy the name of generation, because its expression must stoop to our low capacity; it does not, however, convey thereby all that we include in creative generation, as time, place, the furnishing of matter, the fitness of instruments, the design in the things that come into being, but it leaves these, and asserts of God in lofty and magnificent language the creation of all existent things, when it says, 'He spake the word and they were made, He commanded and they were created.' Again when it interprets to us the unspeakable and transcendent existence of the Only-begotten from the Father, as the poverty of human intellect is incapable of receiving doctrines which surpass all power of speech and thought, there too it borrows our language and terms Him 'Son', – a name which our usage assigns to those who are born of matter and nature. But just as Scripture, when speaking of generation by creation, does not in the case of God imply that such generation took place by means of any material, affirming that the power of God's will served for material substance, place, time and all such circumstances, even so here too, when using the term Son, it rejects both all else that human nature remarks in generation here below, – I mean affections and dispositions and the co-operation of time, and the necessity of place, – and, above all, matter, without all which natural generation here below does not take place. But when all such material, temporal and local existence is excluded from the sense of the term 'Son', community of nature alone is left, and for this reason by the title 'Son' is declared, concerning the Only-begotten, the close affinity and genuineness of relationship which mark His manifestation from the Father. And since such a kind of generation was not sufficient to implant in us an adequate notion of the ineffable

> mode of subsistence of the Only-begotten, Scripture avails itself of the third kind of generation to indicate the doctrine of the Son's Divinity, – that kind, namely, which is the result of material efflux, and speaks of him as the 'brightness of glory', the 'savour of ointment', the 'breath of God'; illustrations which in the scientific phraseology we have adopted we ordinarily designate as material efflux. But as in the cases alleged neither the birth of the creation nor force of the term 'Son' admits time, matter, place, or affection, so here too the Scripture employing only the illustration of effulgence and the others that I have mentioned, apart from all material conception, with regard to the Divine fitness of such a mode of generation, shows that we must understand by the significance of this expression, an existence at once derived from and subsisting with the Father.
>
> . . . by such a mode of generation is indicated this alone, that the Son is of the Father and is conceived of along with him, no interval intervening between the Father and his who is of the Father.
>
> . . . he therefore affirms of the Word that He essentially subsisted in the first and blessed nature itself.

Hence, Gregory argues, the primary denotation of generation or begottenness is that the Son is of the same nature as the Father. That the Father begets the Son indicates that the Son is not a creature but of the same kind as the one who begat him.

The Holy Spirit is of the same rank as the Father and the Son

As the conflict shifted in the 370s towards the deity of the Holy Spirit, Gregory joined the fray, with perhaps a more frontal attack than Basil had made:

> We confess that the Holy Spirit is of the same rank as the Father and the Son, so that there is no difference between them in anything . . . We confess that, save his being contemplated as with peculiar attributes in regard of person, the Holy Spirit is indeed from God, and of the Christ, according to Scripture, but that, while not to be confounded with the Father in being never originated, nor with the Son in being the Only-begotten, and while to be regarded separately in certain distinctive properties, he has in all else . . . an exact identity with them.[21]

Against the argument that, since the Spirit was revealed third, he is therefore not to be identified with God, Gregory asserts that it is 'unreasonable

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21. *On the Holy Spirit against the Followers of Macedonius*, 2 *NPNF* 5: 315. All quotations of *On the Holy Spirit against the Followers of Macedonius* are from *NPNF*, 2nd series, vol. 5.

to suppose the numerical order to be a sign of any diminution or essential variation'.[22]

In *Against Eunomius* 2.15 he states this again:

> Accordingly from the identity of operations it results assuredly that the Spirit is not alien from the nature of the Father and the Son. And to the statement that the Spirit accomplishes the operation and teaching of the Father according to the good pleasure of the Son we assent. For the community of nature gives us warrant that the will of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is one, and thus, if the Holy Spirit wills that which seems good to the Son, the community of will clearly points to unity of essence.

The three persons are inseparable

Since the Spirit, together with the Father and the Son, is fully God, he is inseparable from them in the indivisibility of God's simple being :

> We are not to think of the Father as ever parted from the Son, nor to look for the Son as separate from the Holy Spirit. As it is impossible to mount to the Father, unless our thoughts are exalted hither through the Son, so it is impossible also to say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. Therefore Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are to be known only in a perfect Trinity, in closest consequence and union with each other, before all creation, before all the ages, before anything whatever of which we can form an idea. The Father is always Father, and in him the Son, and with the Son the Holy Spirit.[23]

In terms of the relations of the three persons, there is an order between them

> But the fountain of power is the Father, and the power of the Father is the Son, and the spirit of that power is the Holy Spirit.[24]

> There is no interval of separation between the Son and the Holy Spirit . . . so inseparable is the union of the Spirit with the Son.[25]

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22. *On the Holy Spirit against the Followers of Macedonius*, 6; *NPNF* 5: 317.
23. Ibid., 15; *NPNF* 5: 319.
24. Ibid., 15; *NPNF* 5: 320.
25. Ibid., 18; *NPNF* 5: 321.

> You see the revolving circle of glory moving from like to like. The Son is glorified by the Spirit; the Father is glorified by the Son; again, the Son has his glory from the Father; and the Only-begotten thus becomes the glory of the Spirit.[26]

It is clear that Gregory considers this order between the trinitarian persons to be compatible with their unity and identity of being and status. The Father begets the Son, and never vice versa; this belongs to them as persons subsisting in the unity of the indivisible Trinity.

Perichoresis

Since the Son is all that the Father is except for being the Father, it follows that he and the Father indwell one another. As Gerald Bray has described it, they occupy the same infinite divine space.[27] The Son reveals the Father to us, and shares fully in all that the Father is and has. This means, among other things, that the Son is not some second-class god with lesser power than the Father – he is equal in power and glory with the Father:

> For the heir of all things, the maker of the ages, He Who shines with the Father's glory and expresses in Himself the Father's person, has all things that the Father Himself has, and is possessor of all His power, not that the right is transferred from the Father to the Son, but that it at once remains in the Father and resides in the Son. For He Who is in the Father is manifestly in the Father with all His own might, and He Who has the Father in Himself includes all the power and might of the Father. For He has in Himself all the Father, and not merely a part of Him: and He Who has Him entirely assuredly has His power as well.[28]

God reveals himself visibly in creation

In a lengthy section in *Answer to Eunomius*, Book 2, Gregory argues for the priority of visible forms over the verbal. It is worth reproducing this section in full since it is paradigmatic for the more visual form of worship of the Eastern church and raises far-reaching questions concerning the nature of God's revelation in creation and Scripture:

> But, says he, the record of Moses does not lie, and from it we learn that God spake. No! nor is great David of the number of those who lie, and he expressly says: 'The

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26. Ibid., 24; *NPNF* 5: 324.
27. Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), p. 158.
28. *Against Eunomius* 2.6.

heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handy work. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge'; and after saying that the heavens and the firmament declare, and that day and that night showeth knowledge and speech, he adds to what he has said, that 'there is neither speech nor language, and that their voices are not heard.' Yet how can such declaring and showing forth be other than words, and how it that no voice addresses itself to the ear? Is the prophet contradicting himself, or is he stating an impossibility, when he speaks of words without sound, and declaration without language, and announcement without voice? or, is there not rather the very perfection of truth in his teaching, which tells us, in the words which I have quoted, that the declaration of the heavens, and the word shouted forth by the day, is no articulate voice nor language of the lips, but is a revelation of the power of God to those who are capable of hearing it, even though no voice be heard?

What, then, do we think of this passage? For it may be that, if we understand we shall also understand the meaning of Moses. It often happens that Holy Scripture, to enable us more clearly to comprehend a matter to be revealed, makes use of a bodily illustration, as would seem to be the case in this passage from David, who teaches us by what he says that none of the things which are have their being from chance or accident, as some have imagined that our world and all that is therein was framed by fortuitous and undesigned combinations of first elements, and that no Providence penetrated the world. But we are taught that there is a cause of the system and government of the Universe, on whom all nature depends, to whom it owes its origin and cause, towards whom it inclines and moves, and in whom it abides. And since, as saith the Apostle, His eternal power and godhead are understood, being clearly seen through the creation of the world, therefore all creation and, before all, as saith the Scripture, the system of the heavens, declare the wisdom of the Creator in the skill displayed by His works. And this is what it seems to me that he is desirous to set forth, viz. the testimony of the things which do appear to the fact that the worlds were framed with wisdom and skill, and abide for ever by the power of Him who is the Ruler over all. The very heavens, he says, in displaying the wisdom of Him Who made them, all but shout aloud with a voice, and, though without voice, proclaim the wisdom of their Creator. For we can hear as it were words teaching us: 'O men, when ye gaze upon us and behold our beauty and magnitude, and this ceaseless revolution, with its well-ordered and harmonious motion, working in same direction and in the same manner, turn your thoughts to Him Who presides over the system, and, by aid of the beauty which you see, imagine to yourselves the beauty of the Archetype. For in us there is nothing without its Lord, nothing that moves of its own proper motion: but all that appears, or that is conceivable in respect to us, depends on a Power who is inscrutable and sublime.' This is not given in articulate speech, but by the things

> which are seen, and it instils into our minds the knowledge of Divine power more than if speech proclaimed it with a voice. As, then, the heavens declare, though they do not speak, and the firmament shows God's handy-work, yet requires no voice for the purpose, and the day uttereth speech, though there is no speaking, and no one can say that Holy Scripture is in error – in like manner, since both Moses and David have one and the same Teacher, I mean the Holy Spirit, Who says that the fiat went before the creation, we are not told that God is the Creator of words, but of things made known to us by the signification of our words. . .

Note the sentence above, 'This is not given in articulate speech, but by the things which are seen, and it instils into our minds the knowledge of Divine power more than if speech proclaimed it with a voice.' This is a claim pregnant with significance. Gregory argues that what we see is of greater moment than what we hear, that the visible creation is clearer in its articulation of the truth of God than any revelation in words. In asserting this, Gregory also allows a significant scope to the imagination. This basic assumption accounts for the priority of the visual in the worship of the Eastern church. Everywhere in the church building are icons; the worship of the church is seen as the meeting place between heaven and earth, the present worshippers and the transcendent array of saints and angels.[29]

Apostolic tradition

In *Against Eunomius* 4.6 Gregory attacks Eunomius on the grounds that his views are a novelty. In contrast, Gregory has the support of generations reaching back to the apostles. This continuous transmission of apostolic doctrine he believes to stand on its own. In contrast, Eunomius needs all the logical skill he can muster to bolster his argument:

> And let no one interrupt me, by saying that what we confess should also be confirmed by constructive reasoning: for it is enough for proof of our statement, that the tradition has come down to us from our fathers, handed on, like some inheritance, by succession from the apostles and the saints who came after them. They, on the other hand, who change their doctrines to this novelty, would need the support of arguments in abundance, if they were about to bring over to their views, not men light as dust, and unstable, but men of weight and steadiness: but so long as their statement is advanced without being established, and without being proved,

29. Letham, *Through Western Eyes*, pp. 143–152.

> who is so foolish and so brutish as to account the teaching of the evangelists and apostles, and of those who have successively shone like lights in the churches, of less force than this undemonstrated nonsense?

Christ's humanity transformed to what is divine

In *Against Eunomius* 5.3 Gregory considers the effect of the Son of God becoming incarnate on the humanity he assumed. Since this was, and is, the humanity of the Son, it is transformed by that assumption and, after the resurrection, exalted as Lord and Christ:

> We on our part assert that even the body in which He underwent His Passion, by being mingled with the Divine Nature, was made by that commixture to be that which the assuming Nature is. So far are we from entertaining any low idea concerning the Only-begotten God, that if anything belonging to our lowly nature was assumed in His dispensation of love for man, we believe that even this was transformed to what is Divine and incorruptible; but Eunomius makes the suffering of the Cross to be a sign of divergence in essence, in the sense of inferiority, considering, I know not how, the surpassing act of power, by which He was able to perform this, to be an evidence of weakness; failing to perceive the fact that, while nothing which moves according to its own nature is looked upon as surprisingly wonderful, all things that overpass the limitations of their own nature become especially the objects of admiration, and to them every ear is turned, every mind is attentive, in wonder at the marvel. And hence it is that all who preach the word point out the wonderful character of the mystery in this respect – that 'God was manifested in the flesh', that 'the Word was made flesh', that 'the Light shined in darkness', 'the Life tasted death', and all such declarations which the heralds of the faith are wont to make . . .
>
> Who then was 'exalted'? He that was lowly, or he that was the highest? and what else is the lowly, but the humanity? what else is the highest but the divinity? Surely, God needs not to be exalted, seeing that he is the highest. It follows, then, that the Apostle's meaning is that the humanity was exalted: and its exaltation was effected by its becoming Lord and Christ. And this took place after the Passion . . .

Communicatio idiomatum

This raises the question of the reality of Christ's humanity. Gregory immediately deals with the issue in *Against Eunomius* 5.5. The natures of the incarnate Christ remain distinct and retain their integrity. Deity remains deity, and humanity remains humanity; there is no confusion of the two. Yet the characteristics of both are equally attributable to the person of Christ:

But the flesh was not identical with the Godhead, till this too was transformed to the Godhead, so that of necessity one set of attributes befits God the Word, and a different set of attributes befits the 'form of the servant'.

Our contemplation, however, of the respective properties of the flesh and of the Godhead remains free from confusion, so long as each of these is contemplated by itself, as, for example, 'the Word was before the ages, but the flesh came into being in the last times': but one could not reverse this statement, and say that the latter is pretemporal, or that the Word has come into being in the last times. The flesh is of a passible, the Word of an operative nature: and neither is the flesh capable of making the things that are, nor is the power possessed by the Godhead capable of suffering.

So much as this is clear (even if one does not follow the argument into detail), that the blows belong to the servant in whom the Lord was, the honours to the Lord Whom the servant compassed about, so that by reason of contact and the union of natures the proper attributes of each belong to both, as the Lord receives the stripes of the servant, while the servant is glorified with the honour of the Lord; for this is why the Cross is said to be the Cross of the Lord of glory, and why every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

The Godhead 'empties' itself that it may come within the capacity of the Human Nature, and the Human Nature is renewed by becoming Divine through its commixture with the Divine.

And as fire that lies in wood hidden below the surface is often unobserved by the senses of those who see, or even touch it, but is manifest when it blazes up, so too, at His death (which he brought about at his will, who separated his soul from his body, who said to his own Father 'Into Thy hands I commend My Spirit', who, as he says, 'had power to lay it down and had power to take it again'), he who, because he is the Lord of glory, despised that which is shame among men, having concealed, as it were, the flame of his life in his bodily nature, by the dispensation of his death, kindled and inflamed it once more by the power of his own Godhead, fostering into life that which had been brought to death, having infused with the infinity of his divine power that humble first-fruits of our nature, made it also to be that which he himself was – making the servile form to be Lord, and the man born of Mary to be Christ, and him who was crucified through weakness to be Life and power, and making all that is piously conceived to be in God the Word to be also in that which the Word assumed, so that these attributes no longer seem to be in either nature by way of division, but that the perishable nature being, by its commixture with the Divine, made anew in conformity with the nature that overwhelms it, participates in the power of the Godhead, as if one were to say that mixture makes a drop of vinegar mingled in the deep to be sea, by reason that the natural quality of this liquid does not continue in the infinity of that which overwhelms it. This is our doctrine, which does not, as

> Eunomius charges against it, preach a plurality of Christs, but the union of the man with the Divinity.

Gregory antedates the Christological crisis of the next century and so we should not judge him by developments of which he was ignorant. However, it is clear that he affirms both the unity of Christ's person and the integrity of the two natures. The natures are neither confused nor separated. Moreover, the eternal Son is the person who assumes the humanity; the latter is invested with the honour and glory of the Son who assumed it. This was to be the basis of the Christological settlement of the fifth and sixth centuries, and would underlie the Eastern doctrine of deification as the centuries progressed.

Gregory of Nazianzus

Gregory held the Trinity to be absolutely basic to the whole of theology. It is the Christian doctrine of God. He said on more than one occasion, 'But when I say God, I mean Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.'[30]

Generation concerns the relations of the persons, not the divine essence

The doctrine of the Trinity, as it was being forged in the fourth century, entailed huge questions about the relations between the three trinitarian persons. Eunomius argued that talk of the Son's being begotten, or generated, by the Father required a beginning of existence for him. If it was held that the Son is of the same being as the Father, then he must share the Father's characteristic of being unbegotten. Gregory countered this argument by pointing out that the generation of the Son by the Father is a matter involving the relations between them, and so does not impinge on the divine essence. Hence the Father is unbegotten and the Son begotten:

> But, they say, if the Son is the same as the Father in respect of essence, then if the Father is unbegotten, the Son must be so likewise. Quite so – if the essence of God consists in being unbegotten; and so he would be a strange mixture, begottenly unbegotten. If, however, the difference is outside the essence, how

30. *Oration 38 on the Theophany* 8 (also *Oration 45, the Second Oration on Easter* 4). Quotations of Gregory's orations are from *NPNF*, 2nd series, vol. 7.

> can you be so certain in speaking of this? . . . Is it not evident that our enquiry into the nature of the essence of God, if we make it, will have personality absolutely unaffected?[31]

In the final analysis, Gregory insisted, in contrast to Eunomius' rationalism, that generation and procession are both matters beyond us. We cannot give a description of what they respectively entail; to do this we would have to be God, and to try to do so would invite madness. He considers the ineffability of generation and procession: 'What then is procession? Do you tell me what is the unbegottenness of the Father, and I will explain to you the physiology of the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit, and we shall both of us be frenzy-stricken for prying into the mystery of God.'[32]

The relations of the Father and the Son

What we can say, according to Gregory, is that the personal names of the three make known their relations to one another. They are not to be understood after the manner of human relations, in which a man becomes a father and a son begins to be. Instead, they denote identity of nature and signify a certain relation between them. Thus the Son is so called because he is identical in being to the Father, of precisely the same nature. At the same time, the name denotes an order between the two in which the Son, according to his personal relations, is of the Father:

> the Father is not a name either of an essence or an action, most clever sirs. But it is the name of the relation in which the Father stands to the Son, and the Son to the Father. For as with us these names make known a genuine and intimate relation, so, in the case before us too, they denote an identity of nature between him that is begotten and him that begets.[33]

> In my opinion he is called Son because he is identical to the Father in essence; and not only for this reason, but also because he is of him. And he is called Only-begotten, not because he is the only Son and of the Father alone, and only a Son; but also because the manner of his Sonship is peculiar to himself and not shared by bodies.[34]

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31. *Oration 29 on the Son* 12.
32. *Oration 31 on the Holy Spirit* 8.
33. *Oration 29 on the Son* 16.
34. *Oration 30 on the Son* 20.

The Father and the Son are eternally Father and Son

These relations are eternal. They did not begin to be at some point but always were and are. The Father is eternally the Father, and so is always with the Word: 'There never was a time when he was without the Word, or when he was not the Father, or when he was not true, or not wise, or not powerful, or devoid of life, or of splendour, or of goodness.'[35]

The one and the three

That God is triune does not mean that he is divisible into three. He is one being, the three persons each and together fully God. There are no degrees of deity:

> To us there is one God, for the Godhead is One, though we believe in three persons. For one is not more and another less God; nor is one before and another after; nor are they divided in will or parted in power; nor can you find here any of the qualities of divisible things; but the Godhead is, to speak concisely, undivided in separate persons; and there is one mingling of light, as it were of three suns joined to each other. When then we look at the Godhead, or that first cause, or the monarchia, that which we conceive is one; but when we look at the persons in whom the Godhead dwells, and at those who timelessly and with equal glory have their being from the first cause – there are three whom we worship.[36]

In a passage that Calvin in his *Institutes* said 'vastly delights me', from Gregory's *Oration 40 on Holy Baptism* 41, Gregory spells out brilliantly the equal ultimacy of God as one and as three. We note first that each person is God in himself, obviating any idea that the deity of the Son and the Spirit is derived from the Father. Secondly, entailed in this is the idea of the complete mutual indwelling of the three. Thirdly, his method of refocusing from the unity of God to the Trinity of persons and back again, knowledge of the one and the three coincident, is a vital principle:

> This I give you to share, and to defend all your life, the one Godhead and power, found in the three in unity, and comprising the three separately; not unequal, in substances or natures, neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite conjunction of three infinite

35. *Oration 29 on the Son* 17.
36. *Oration 31 on the Holy Spirit* 14.

> ones, each God when considered in himself; as the Father, so the Son; as the Son so the Holy Spirit; the three one God when contemplated together; each God because consubstantial; one God because of the monarchia. No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendour of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one. When I think of any one of the three I think of him as the whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of that one so as to attribute a greater greatness to the rest. When I contemplate the three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light.

No illustrations possible for the Trinity

There are no illustrations of this in creation. Each time such an example is cited, Gregory confesses, it falls short of an accurate depiction of the Trinity. An image or illustration may highlight a particular aspect of God as he has revealed himself, but at other points it will lead us astray:

> I have very carefully considered this matter in my own mind, and have looked at it in every point of view, in order to find some illustration of this most important subject, but I have been unable to discover anything on earth with which to compare the nature of the Godhead. For even if I did happen upon some tiny likeness it escaped me for the most part, and left me down below with my example.[37]

> In a word, there is nothing which presents a standing point in my mind in these illustrations from which to consider the object which I am trying to represent to myself, unless one may indulgently accept one point of the image while rejecting the rest. Finally, then, it seems best to me to let the images and the shadows go, as being deceitful and very far short of the truth.[38]

Faith and reason

These factors, the incomprehensibility of God's being and the inadequacy of humanly derived knowledge to lead us to a right understanding of God, were both unacceptable to Eunomius and his supporters, who had a positive view of the capabilities of the human mind. For Gregory, Eunomius risked undermining the gospel, which requires faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. Gregory concludes with a shot across the bows of the rationalists:

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37. Ibid. 31.
38. Ibid. 33.

> When we leave off believing, and protect ourselves by mere strength of argument, and destroy the claim the Holy Spirit has upon our faith by questionings, . . . what is the result? The weakness of the argument appears to belong to the mystery; and thus elegance of language makes void the cross, as Paul also taught.[39]

Biblical language concerning the lowliness of the Son

Gregory tackles the biblical language about the Son, some of which stresses his humanity, weakness and lowliness. These were cited by Eunomius as reasons to believe that the Son was lesser than the Father. On the contrary, Gregory argues, these passages simply highlight Jesus' human lowliness, his incarnation, without which we could not be saved. Christ was always God; in the incarnation he added human nature for our sake:

> What is lofty you are to apply to the Godhead, and to that nature in him which is superior to sufferings and incorporeal; but all that is lowly to the composite condition of him who for your sake made himself of no reputation and was incarnate.[40]

> What he was he continued to be; what he was not he took to himself . . . While his inferior nature, the humanity, became God, because it was united to God, and became one person because the higher nature prevailed . . . in order that I too might be made God as he is made man. He was born – but he had been begotten: he was born of a woman – but she was a virgin. The first is human, the second divine. In his human nature he had no father, but also in his divine nature no mother.[41]

Here we have the seeds of the later Christological settlement. The person of Christ is one; deity was not abandoned but humanity was added. This was for our salvation, for our deification depends on the assumption of human nature by the Son of God.

The Holy Spirit and deification

This is the point at which the work of the Holy Spirit is so important, in Gregory's view. How could we be deified if the Spirit was less than God; since deification must, by definition, be a work of God, and since the Spirit is the one who makes us to partake of the divine nature, it follows that he is of the status of God, one with the Father and the Son:

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39. *Oration 29 on the Son* 21.
40. Ibid. 18.
41. Ibid. 19.

> If he is not from the beginning, he is in the same rank with myself, even though a little before me; for we are both parted from Godhead by time. If he is the same rank with myself, how can he make me God, or join me with the Godhead?[42]

> For if he is not to be worshipped, how can he deify me by baptism? but if he is to be worshipped, surely he is an object of adoration, and if an object of adoration he must be God; the one is linked to another, a truly golden and saving chain. And indeed from the Spirit comes our new birth, and from the new birth our new creation, and from the new creation our deeper knowledge of the dignity of him from whom it is derived.[43]

Confusion about the identity of the Holy Spirit

The situation in the 360s and 370s was quite confused, Gregory tells us. There were a variety of opinions on the identity of the Spirit, and some preferred to take a non-committal position on the grounds that they did not want to go beyond Scripture:

> But of the wise men amongst ourselves, some have conceived of him as an activity, some as a creature, some as God; and some have been uncertain what to call him, out of reverence for Scripture, they say, as though it did not make the matter clear either way. And therefore they neither worship him, nor treat him with dishonour, but take up a neutral position, or rather a very miserable one, with respect to him.[44]

The deity of the Holy Spirit

However, Gregory has no such qualms. Where Basil had been allusive about the Spirit's identity, although the evidence is overwhelming that he believed him to be God, Gregory is unequivocal: 'What then? Is the Spirit God? Most certainly. Well then, is he consubstantial? Yes, if he is God.'[45]

The Holy Spirit and prayer

Eunomius and his followers pointed to the absence of biblical references to prayer to the Holy Spirit. This, so the argument ran, proved that he was a lesser being than God. If he were God, it would be clear that there were examples of

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42. *Oration 31 on the Holy Spirit* 4.
43. Ibid. 28.
44. Ibid. 5.
45. Ibid. 10.

prayer being made to him and worship offered to him. Gregory will have none of it; all our prayers, he insists, are made in the Spirit, while Jesus teaches that true worship is to be offered in him:

> But, he says, who in ancient or modern times ever worshipped the Spirit? Who ever prayed to him? Where is it written that we ought to worship him or pray to him . . .?
> . . . for the present it will suffice to say that it is the Spirit in whom we worship, and in whom we pray. For Scripture says, God is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth . . . Therefore to adore or to pray to the Spirit seems to me to be simply himself offering prayer or adoration to himself.[46]

Scripture and tradition

Another issue was the paucity of references to the Holy Spirit in comparison with those to the Son and to God as the Father. Why was this so? If he were divine, so Gregory's opponents argued, we should surely find plenty of evidence in the Bible to prove this. They demanded proof texts in support:

> They then who are angry with us on the ground that we are bringing in a strange or interpolated God, viz: – the Holy Ghost, and who fight so very hard for the letter, should know that they are afraid where no fear is; and I would have them clearly understand that their love for the letter is but a cloak for their impiety.[47]

> Over and over again you turn upon us the silence of Scripture. But that it is not a strange doctrine, nor an afterthought, but acknowledged and plainly set forth by the ancients and many of our own day, is already demonstrated by many persons who have treated of this subject, and who have handled the Holy Scriptures, not with indifference or as a mere pastime, but have gone beneath the letter and looked into the inner meaning, and have been deemed worthy to see the hidden beauty, and have been irradiated by the light of knowledge.[48]

This may come as a surprise, perhaps a shock, to some readers. It appears that here the approach taken by Eunomius was a form of biblical fundamentalism. The demand was for chapter and verse from the Bible to prove the point. In contrast, Gregory refuses to play this game. The truth, he says, lies 'beneath the

46. Ibid. 12.
47. Ibid. 3.
48. Ibid. 21.

letter' with 'the inner meaning' of Scripture. Behind this claim lay the events at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. There it was determined to answer Arius with biblical language. However, Arius and his supporters could agree with the biblical expression that the Son was 'from God'; they simply interpreted it differently from the way the orthodox did. As a result, the council searched for terms that could give expression to 'the sense of Scripture', although they were not to be found in the Bible itself. The dispute was, in the first place, about the meaning of biblical language and required other terms by which its inherent meaning could be brought to expression. Ironically, and with brilliance, Gregory after disposing of this argument, brings his oration to its clinching denouement, with a barrage of evidence from the Bible, overwhelming his opponents with a dazzling tour de force!

Development of revelation of the Trinity in the history of redemption

At this point, Gregory introduces an ingenious argument from progressive revelation. God has revealed himself to us gradually rather than all at once. The reason for this is that people would not have been able to understand it if he had made known everything at an early stage. As the history of redemption unfolded, so, bit by bit, did God reveal who he is:

> For the matter stands thus. The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of himself. For it was not safe, when the Godhead of the Father was not yet acknowledged, plainly to proclaim the Son; nor when that of the Son was not yet received to burden us further (if I may use so bold an expression) with the Holy Ghost; lest perhaps people might, like men loaded with food beyond their strength, and presenting eyes as yet too weak to bear it to the sun's light, risk the loss even of that which was within the reach of their powers, but that by gradual additions . . . the light of the Trinity might shine upon the more illuminated.[49]

Criticial evaluation

The contribution of the Cappadocians to the church can hardly be exaggerated. Foremost in significance is, of course, their role in the resolution of the trinitarian controversy of the fourth century. This had wracked the church for

49. Ibid. 26.

decades; its settlement was indispensable for the future progress of the gospel. In the course of their work on this matter they, individually and together, brought about a number of positive developments.

First came the simplification of language and its emancipation from a captivity to philosophical terminology. Basil took the lead here. What he did was to define *ousia* and *hypostasis* clearly, words that had meant different things to different people and had usually been understood in the light of their prior use in Greek philosophy. The Cappadocians used the language but stretched it to give it new meaning derived from the Christian gospel. As a result, they enabled the church to think clearly about how God is both one and three. Since the worship and service of God is integral to the Christian faith, the worth of this contribution is immense.

Secondly, the Cappadocians had a consistent stress on the incomprehensibility of God, with a concomitant restriction of the autonomy of human reason. Whereas Eunomius believed that the human mind retained the ability to think very much as God thinks, the Cappadocians knew that God infinitely transcends his creation. Therefore, it is impossible to encompass him by our own thought. In himself, as he is, he is beyond knowledge. Yet we can know him, as he has chosen to reveal himself to us, on our own level, in his attributes and actions, and in the incarnation of his Son. In this they were striking a blow against the rationalism that lies at the root of all heretical developments that occur in the church.

Thirdly, the Cappadocians' theology was rooted in the worship of the church. That is where Basil was brought into the argument. It is no accident that one of the main liturgies in Orthodoxy is the Liturgy of St Basil. This is where theology, especially the theology of God, to be true to itself, must be rooted. As such, the Cappadocians' interests were driven by prayer and worship, and connected integrally to salvation. One of the key issues was how the Holy Spirit could be anything other than God if we are baptized into the one name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Following this was the kindred question of how the Spirit could deify us if he were not himself God. In short, philosophy was subdued and put to the service of salvation.

Fourthly, the three Cappadocians are a great example of being steadfast for the truth in the midst of opposition. Each stood his ground and contended for the gospel despite the challenges that presented themselves.

Fifthly, Basil and his colleagues point the church to the centrality of the Trinity for faith and worship. This is a vital principle that has been largely lost in the Western church, although it has recently been rediscovered and so presents hopeful signs for the future. For Gregory of Nazianzus, any mention of God was a reference to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Nothing less would suffice. If, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 1, has

it, man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever, this was a focus that can never wear out its welcome.

Sixthly, the principle of the *homoousios* (identity of being) of the Son and the Spirit with the Father was not only crucial in resolving the controversy of the day but is a central truth of the gospel, stressing that the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, is God manifest among us, and so we can trust him absolutely in all that he says, knowing that his message of salvation is nothing less than the eternal determination of the living God. Thank God for Gregory of Nazianzus for hammering this home!

Seventhly, Basil's example demonstrates that a concern for the organization of the church is not necessarily opposed to theology but is a proper outflow from it. Theology takes place in the church; it is not an abstract pursuit but is aimed at salvation, which in God's purpose takes place in and through the church.

Eighthly, Basil in particular exemplified a genuine concern for discipline in the Christian life. Both he and his brother wrote at length on ascetic issues. Basil established a monastic rule that had profound long-term effect. While conservative Protestants may dismiss monasticism, in view of its later corruptions, yet at the time it was a powerful force for the development of the faith. Indeed, in the West it was the monks who helped preserve biblical and theological scholarship in the following centuries in which both were threatened by cultural deprivation.

Ninthly, Basil's strong pastoral concern comes out forcibly in his letters. These cover a wide range of matters, as would be expected for one who was so active as a scholar, theologian, bishop, monastic leader, organizer and pastor. It is noteworthy that in a life marked by conflict with theological and ecclesiastical foes, Basil found time to write letters to the bereaved offering biblical comfort at a time of grief.

On the other hand, there have been some negative developments stemming from aspects of Cappadocian theology. Principal among them is the distinction, later to be developed by Gregory Palamas, between the essence and energies of God. This was based on the Cappadocian argument that we cannot know God in his essence but only in his energies. There are, as I see it, two major problems with this idea.

First, from the historical perspective it is at odds with the writings of Athanasius, who argued that there is no external development of the Father's essence.[50] If there is anything about or surrounding him which completes the essence so that when we say 'Father' we do not signify the invisible and

50. Athanasius, *On the Decrees* 22, in J.-P. Migne (ed.), Patrologiae cursus completus: Series graeca, 162 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 1857–86), vol. 25.

incomprehensible essence 'but something about it' (*peri auton*) we would be blaspheming. When we say 'Father', we denote his essence itself. Hence, for Athanasius, when we deal with the Son we are dealing with God himself, not something that surrounds him but is a kind of forecourt to who he is. In this the Cappadocians began a process that has led to a situation in which Orthodox liturgies are full of petitions to God for mercy but have little in the way of assurance of salvation. It is difficult to see how we can be confident of ultimate salvation, if we cannot deal with God but only his attributes. Historically, the Cappadocians set the Greek church on a different trajectory.

Secondly, underlying this is a fatal theological objection. If the essence–energies distinction were valid it would undermine the incarnation. In Jesus Christ, the eternal Son himself takes a human nature in a personal, indissoluble union. That could not be if the Cappadocian thesis were correct, for the assumed humanity could never be united to the Son himself but only to his energies. If it is impossible for humans to know God as he is in himself it would be impossible for the incarnate Christ, qua humanity, to know God – still less be personally united to him. That would be no incarnation. In short, the Cappadocian distinction points inexorably in a Nestorian direction, in which the deity and humanity of Christ are kept at a distance. Despite their consistent concern for salvation, this development took away some of their gloss.

In summary, there is an enormous amount we can learn from the Cappadocians. As with all of us, there are also pitfalls in their thought that we should avoid. A critical but appreciative reading of these important theologians and churchmen will do a great deal of good in our own day.

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