

Cappadocian Fathers

The **Cappadocian Fathers** are **Basil the Great** (330-379), who was bishop of **Caesarea**; Basil's younger brother **Gregory of Nyssa** (c.332-395), who was bishop of **Nyssa**; and a close friend, **Gregory of Nazianzus** (329-389), who became **Patriarch of Constantinople**.^[1] The **Cappadocia** region, in modern-day **Turkey**, was an early site of **Christian activity**, with several missions by **Paul** in this region.

The Cappadocian Fathers advanced the development of early **Christian theology**, for example the doctrine of the **Trinity**,^[2] and are highly respected as saints in both **Western and Eastern churches**.

1 Biographical background

An older sister of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, **Macrina**, became a nun and converted the family's estate into a monastic community. Abbess **Macrina** there fostered the education and development of the three Cappadocians by providing a peaceful shelter for study and meditation. Basil the Great was the second oldest of **Macrina's** brothers, the eldest being the famous **Christian jurist Naucratius**, and another brother, **Peter**, also became a bishop [Note: an alternate Wikipedia contribution here:;^[3] credits **Gregory of Nyssa** as having stated that **Naucratius** was the second oldest brother. Clarification needed] . The grandparents had been martyrs, and their mother was also recognized as a saint. ^[3]

2 Theological contributions

The three scholars set out to demonstrate that Christians could hold their own in conversations with learned **Greek-speaking intellectuals** and that **Christian faith**, while it was against many of the ideas of **Plato and Aristotle** (and other **Greek philosophers**), was an almost scientific and distinctive movement with the healing of the soul of man and his union with **God** at its center—one best represented by **monasticism**. They made major contributions to the definition of the **Trinity** finalized at the **First Council of Constantinople** in 381 and the final version of the **Nicene Creed**, finalised there.

They made key contributions to the doctrine of the **Trinity** and to the responses to **Arianism** and **Apollinarianism**.^[4]

Subsequent to the **First Council of Nicea**, **Arianism** did not simply disappear. The Council of Nicea had asserted

that the Son was of the same substance (**homoousios**) as the Father. The semi-Arians taught that the Son is of like substance with the Father (**homoiousios**) as against the outright Arians who taught that the Son was not like the Father, but had been created, and was therefore not God. So the Son was held to be *like* the Father but not of the same essence as the Father.

The Cappadocians worked to bring these semi-Arians back to the orthodox cause. In their writings they made extensive use of the (now orthodox) formula "one substance (**ousia**) in three persons (**hypostaseis**)".^[5] The relationship is understandable, argued Basil of Caesarea, in a parallel drawn from **Platonism**: any three human beings are each individual persons and all share a common universal, their humanity. The formulation explicitly acknowledged a distinction between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, (a distinction that Nicea had been accused of blurring), but at the same time insisting on their essential unity.

Thus Basil wrote:

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

Basil thus attempted to do justice to the doctrinal definitions of Nicea while at the same time distinguishing the Nicene position from **modalism**, which had been **Arius's** original charge against **Pope Alexander** in the Nicene controversy. The outcome was that **Arianism** and semi-Arianism virtually disappeared from the church.

It is also important to note that the Cappadocians



Gregory the Theologian (Fresco from Kariye Camii, Istanbul).

held a higher view of women than many of their contemporaries.^[6]

While the Cappadocians shared many traits, each one exhibited particular strengths. Scholars note that Basil was “the man of action”, Gregory of Nazianzus “the orator” and Gregory of Nyssa “the thinker”.^[7]



Icon of Gregory of Nyssa (14th century fresco, Chora Church, Istanbul).

3 See also

Cappadocian Fathers

- Basil of Caesarea
- Gregory of Nazianzus
- Gregory of Nyssa

others

- Amphilochius of Iconium
- Peter of Sebaste
- Three Holy Hierarchs: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom.

4 Notes

[1] “Commentary on Song of Songs; Letter on the Soul; Letter on Ascesis and the Monastic Life”. World Digital Library. Retrieved 6 March 2013.

[2] McGrath 1998, p. 22

[3] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naucratius>

[4] McGrath 1998, Chapter 1

[5] McGrath 1998, p. 66

[6] Beagon 1995, pp. 165–166

[7] Quasten 1962, pp. 204, 236, 254, as quoted in Børtnes (, p. 10)

5 References

- Beagon, Philip (May 1995), “The Cappadocian Fathers, Women, and Ecclesiastical Politics”, *Vigillae Christianae* (Brill) **49** (2): 165–179, doi:10.1163/157007295X00167, JSTOR 1584393
- McGrath, Alister (1998), *Historical theology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 22, ISBN 0631208437
- Quasten, Johannes (1962), *Patrology* **3**, Utrecht-Antwerp: Spectrum Publishers, ISBN 0870610864

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6.1 Text

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