

The Trinitarian Theology of St. Basil of Caesarea

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In defining the Holy Trinity as we Orthodox understand it today, it is important to view the contributions of the Cappadocian Fathers. In particular, one must be familiar with St. Basil of Caesarea and his Trinitarian theology. This essay will explore the primary contribution of St. Basil towards clarifying the ambiguous terminology put forth by the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. and therefore gain insight into his Trinitarian theology.

The Council of Nicea was convened in an effort to end the Arian heresy which subordinated the Son and made him a created being of a different essence than God the Father. The Nicean council succeeded in having the term *homoousios* added to the creed of Nicea to define the relationship of Father and Son in the Trinity. Unfortunately, this term was unclear since *ousia* was also a synonym of the term *hypostasis*. The creed of this famous council reflects this fact stating, "But as for those...who assert that the Son of God is from a different *hypostasis* or substance [*ousia*]... these the Catholic Church anathematizes."¹

The Niceans, Athanasius in particular, had no technical way to express the distinctness of the persons in the Trinity. In other words, the Trinity's essence (*ousia*) is one, and they are three - but three what? Athanasius' troubles lay in the fact that for him, there was little if any difference in these terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*.² This is illustrated in his Ad Afros Epistola Synodica where he writes, "...now subsistence (*hypostasis*) is essence (*ousia*), and nothing else but very being...."³ Athanasius

¹JND Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1978), pg. 232.

²ibid, pg. 246-7.

³St. Athanasius, *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria* in Vol. 4 of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), pg. 490.

reproaches the Arians for saying that the Son is of another *hypostasis* (in other words *ousia* or nature/essence for Athanasius) than the Father.⁴ Because of this fundamental lack of differentiating terms, Athanasius may appear to be venturing dangerously close to the Sabellian heresy (modalism) where the one divine being (one essence) exists not in 3 distinct persons, but in 3 different modes of action. Athanasius was uneasily aware of this fact, but was handicapped by the lack of the words to distinguish what God is as Three from what God is as One.⁵

Decades later, from Cappadocia in Asia Minor, St. Basil was forced to define the above terms in his battle against the Neo-Arians. Coming from a completely different theological background than Athanasius, Basil would help to settle the ambiguity created by the use of *homoousios* in Nicea. Thus, St. Basil's distinguished contribution to Trinitarian theology was his clarification of the vocabulary that was being used - *hypostasis* and *ousia*.⁶

Early in his career, St. Basil had doubts about using the term *homoousios*. In fact, this term had three very different meanings apart from being a synonym for *hypostasis*. First, it could be understood as meaning derived from a pre-existent essence - like copper coins are derived from a lump of pre-existent copper. Second, it could be understood as the Trinity together constituting a divine generic essence, i.e. Father + Son + Holy Spirit = Divine Ousia. Lastly, in a "Gnostic" sense, it could be understood as referring to a fragment of the original divine essence - like a slice of cheese off of the original block.

As a result of the confusion over this term, Basil was friendly towards Basil of Ancyra and

⁴Hanson, RPC, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318 - 381 A.D.* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1988) pg. 440.

⁵ibid, pg. 443.

⁶ibid, pg. 690.

the Homoiousian, or Semi-Arian, party. They also were against the use of the term *homoousios* because of its tendencies toward Sabellianism. They preferred to use phraseology such as "...the Father is a cause of an essence like him..."⁷ or "...a living being similar in essence."⁸ Their theology was one of derivation meaning that if the Father begets the Son, then the Son is of an essence similar to the Father. Very often, the *homoiousian* terminology was exactly what Athanasius was attempting to state from the pro-Nicea, *homoousian* side of the argument.

Basil's contribution was to eliminate the synonymic meanings of *ousia* and *hypostasis* as they related to the Trinity. The relation of the two words as synonyms depended on the usage of the primary and/or secondary understandings of these two terms. The primary definition of *ousia* being that which one encounters (specific thing) and the secondary definition being the abstract commonality (generic essence). Similarly *hypostasis* in its primary definition meant the underlying essence (generic) and the secondary definition being a particular object or person (specific).

Defining *hypostasis* and *ousia* Basil states,

...*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 *ousia*, and, by his properties, is such an one and such an one. In the same manner...the term *ousia* is common, like goodness, or Godhead, or any similar attribute, while *hypostasis* is contemplated in the property of Fatherhood, Sonship or the power of Sanctification.⁹

St. Basil has applied this secondary definition of the term *ousia* to mean that which is common

⁷Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 73.3.8.

⁸*ibid*, 73.4.2.

⁹St. Basil, *Basil: Letters and Select Works* in Vol. 8 of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans, MI, 1991), Epistle 214.4.

among the three persons of the Trinity.¹⁰ The distinct sets of recognizable properties form the basis for his understanding of *hypostasis*¹¹ (secondary definition of the term) and St. Basil is then able to describe the Godhead as one *ousia* in three *hypostases*. In defining these terms, Basil also rejected the use of the term *prosopon* which meant "mask", or "set of characteristics". He stated,

Those who say that *ousia* and *hypostasis* are the same, are forced to confess only different *prosopa*, and in hesitating to speak of three *hypostases*, find that they have failed to avoid the error of Sabellius.¹²

In doing this, St. Basil argued against the usage of the term *prosopon* in Trinitarian theology to avoid modalist tendencies.

Importantly, St. Basil (like St. Athanasius before him) also states that the term *homoousios* implies a derivative sense. He argues that the Father and Son are not *homoousios* to each other for this would make them "brothers". Rather, "when both the cause and that which has its origin from that cause are of the same nature, then they are called *homoousios*."¹³ Unlike coins, which are *homoousios* to each other and thus are "brothers", the Son is *homoousios* to the Father because all that He has He receives from the Father. In doing this, St. Basil effectively preserves the understanding of the monarchia of God the Father (He is the source of all things) without subordinating the *ousia* of the Son, or the Spirit, to the Father from whom they originate.¹⁴

Lastly, Basil avoids the temptation to understand the Trinity as three separate Gods. He

¹⁰Boris Bobrinsky, *The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition*, (Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), pg. 234.

¹¹Hanson, pg 699.

¹²St. Basil, Ep.236.6.

¹³St. Basil, Ep. 52.

¹⁴Hanson, pg. 699.

does this by explaining that the unity of the Godhead lies not in mathematics but in the essence stating,

When the Lord taught us the doctrine of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, He did not make arithmetic a part of this gift! He did not say, 'In the first, second, or third' or 'In one, two and three'. (...) There is one God and Father, one Only-Begotten Son, and one Holy Spirit...we will not let ignorant arithmetic lead us to polytheism.¹⁵

Rather he states, that the divine Persons exist in a *perichoresis* (interpenetration) or a "community of nature"¹⁶ and likens it to the emperor and his image. One does not speak of two emperors, but knows that even though they are distinct that they are also one. This same understanding he applies to the Trinity that is at the same time both One and Three. Besides this community of nature, St. Basil also states that the Trinity exists together in communion of nature where "the union lies in the communion of the Godhead."¹⁷

In conclusion, we see that St. Basil's Trinitarian theology was forged in battle against the Neo-Arian heresy extant in the Church at that time. In formulating his trinitarian theology, Basil was able - through means completely different than Athanasius - to arrive at the same understanding of the Trinity that Athanasius and the pro-Nicean party were attempting to do. In his elaborations of the understanding of *hypostasis* and *ousia*, Basil revealed his understanding of the Godhead as one in *ousia* (the level at which there is unity) yet three in *hypostasis* (the level at which there is distinction). St. Basil then was able to maintain the oneness and monarchia of God the Father without subordination of the Son. The unity of the Godhead was maintained by his understanding of the oneness of the community of the three persons of the Trinity. St. Basil's Trinitarian theology of

¹⁵St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 44 (Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980).

¹⁶ibid, 45.

¹⁷ibid, 44-45.

one essence, one God, and one community has become the standard for Eastern Orthodox understanding of the Holy Trinity. Thus, based on his outstanding elaboration of Trinitarian theology, Basil is rightly called "Church Father", "Saint", and "the Great."