Palmer Bandy

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The Cappadocian Fathers

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Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 1-16

Basil wrote one of his first treatises on the Trinity, *Against Eunomius*, sometime in the early 360’s, only later to write a specific treatise concerning the deity of the Holy Spirit around 373-375AD. He writes *On the Holy Spirit* in response to the request of Amphilochius, the bishop of Iconium,[[1]](#footnote-1) that he provide “clear teaching” on the proper way to speak about the Holy Spirit.

Basil begins by justifying the necessity and properness for those who are truly seeking knowledge of God to inquire into the smallest details of speech about God, for “likeness to God…cannot be had without knowledge, and knowledge comes from teaching. Speech, though, is the beginning of teaching, and the parts of speech are syllables and words. So, the investigation of syllables does not fall outside the goal [of our calling].”[[2]](#footnote-2) In these words, Basil captures with impressive brevity the necessity of linguistic precision in theological reflection. Knowledge is a necessary (though not, it seems, sufficient)[[3]](#footnote-3) condition for increasing in “likeness to God,” and knowledge is mediated through language, which is made up of many component parts. This conviction is largely what motivates Basil’s investigation into Scripture’s use of prepositions with reference to the Holy Spirit. Do we agree with this conviction of Basil, and if so, how should this influence our speech about God, whether in discussions, teaching, or prayer?

In his public prayers as bishop, Basil would sometimes pray “to the Father, with the Son together with the Holy Spirit,” and other times he would pray “to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.” Among those who heard him pray in this way, some thought that Basil’s variant usages of prepositions gave them grounds for positing that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are different “in nature.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Underlying their reasoning is a premise similar to one that Basil refuted approximately ten years earlier in *Against Eunomius*: in that work, he primarily refuted Eunomius’ claim that names signify essence; in this work, he is refuting the broader claim that “things that are expressed differently are different in nature.” A representative example of this type of reasoning applied to Scripture is Aetius’ interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8:6, leading him and those who agree to conclude “from whom” designates the creator, “through whom” his instrument, and “in whom” the time or the place.

Basil claims that his opponents’ philosophy of language, specifically regarding the distinctions indicated by prepositions, is sourced from pagans. In response to this, Basil concedes “that the Word of Truth has often made use of these terms”—that is, the lexical forms and attendant conventional meanings of such terms—“but we say that the freedom of the Spirit is in no way enslaved to the trivialities of the Pagans.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In other words, Scripture determines the meaning of its own terms. He offers up numerous citations from Scripture in which the prepositional phrases “from whom,” “through whom,” and “in whom” are each used of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Moreover, sometimes “through whom” is used to have the same meaning as “from whom.”

Basil moves on to giving arguments for the equality of the Father and Son in glory, honor, and dignity. It is absurd to think that the Son can temporally come *after* (Gk. *meta* in the accusative) the Father, since he is the Creator of all things, existing before time existed. He returns to an argument he made from John 1:1 in book two of *Against Eunomius*: first, thoughts cannot get beyond “was”; and second, the imagination cannot go further than “the beginning.” What is interesting in this section is the apparent development in Basil’s thought concerning the dignity of the Son. In *Against Eunomius*, he wrote that the Son was second/lesser than the Father in both rank and dignity, but here he describes the Son as he “who has been united to the Father in nature, in glory, and in dignity.”[[6]](#footnote-6) In addition, he refutes those who were accusing him of inventing new ways to speak about God by saying that “with whom” is fittingly predicated of the Son.

Basil eventually narrows his focus to the Holy Spirit, briefly examining the various names that Scripture ascribes to him and then responding to objections that the Holy Spirit is of a different nature and therefore lesser than the Father and the Son. Basil’s belief that “salvation is established through the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit” convinces him that the Spirit must be one with the Father and the Son. One’s initiation into the church through confession of and baptism in the threefold name leads him to write: “I testify to anyone who refuses the Spirit that his faith in the Father and the Son, which he cannot have without the simultaneous presence of the Spirit, will become fruitless for him.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Baptism is clearly central to Basil’s argument that the Spirit must be equal to the Father and the Son. Why do you think this is? With our understanding of baptism, are we able to adopt the same sort of arguments?

In chapter sixteen, Basil seeks to establish the unity of the Spirit with the Father and the Son. He cites the story of Annanias and Sapphira in Acts 5 as a clear testimony of the Spirit’s divinity, for “sins against God and against the Holy Spirit are the same thing.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The Spirit is present at creation, as Psalm 32:6 indicates, and he was intimately associated with the incarnate Word in history, being “joined to the very flesh of the Lord as his anointing” (Jn. 1:33; Lk. 3:22). In addition, Basil writes, the Holy Spirit will be present at the final judgment. But this last point is less clearly drawn from a particular Scriptural passage: what, then, is the theological reasoning underlying this claim?

1. Iconium is located in modern day Turkey (the roughly western half of which was known in ancient times as Asia Minor) and was one of the cities in which Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel, as recorded in Acts 14:1-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *On the Holy Spirit*, 1.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From what is quoted, Basil seems not to consider “likeness to God” a purely intellectual matter. Although “likeness to God…cannot be had *without* knowledge,” this is not the same as saying that knowledge alone is able to effect likeness to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *On the Holy Spirit,* 2.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 6.15 (pg. 42) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 11.27. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 16.37. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)