

SAINT BASIL'S DEBT TO SAINT PAUL

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Introduction

By all accounts, the influence of St. Paul on Christian doctrine and discipline—on the whole way of Christian life—has been enormous. In modern times, one's mind might first be drawn to the various Protestant denominations, especially Lutheranism with its distinctive interpretation of St. Paul's teaching on salvation by faith, justification by faith alone apart from works. It was, of course, his study of Paul's letter to the Romans and the theological *novum* that he discovered there that both brought Luther relief from the spiritual angst he had been suffering and set in motion the principles that would unfold over the course of the Reformation, at least in its Lutheran form.

When we turn our minds to the ancient Church, we might first think of St. Augustine, on whom St. Paul exercised a profound and obvious influence. Augustine's friend and mentor Simplician, successor of St. Ambrose as bishop of Milan, had asked Augustine for an explanation of Romans 7 and Romans 9, and Augustine's response proved to be foundational for his teachings on grace and predestination,¹ teachings for which he himself became famous (or infamous, depending on where one stands) and through which he has formed and exercised and vexed countless theologians and churchmen, from Prosper of Aquitaine and Fulgentius of Ruspe in earlier times, to the great medieval minds such as Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham, to the sixteenth-century movements of Jansenism and Calvinism, which themselves have inspired controversies that extend to the present day.²

All this is to say that it is easy to overlook the significant ways in which St. Paul had impressed St. Basil. While Basil is revered especially in the East—with Gregory of Nazianzus, the "Theologian," and John Chrysostom, he forms a holy triumvirate—he is not the first father to come to mind when

¹ Just how foundational depends on where one stands on the disputed question of whether Augustine's thought on grace and predestination remained fundamentally consistent over the course of his career or, rather, experienced a profound and radical shift in 396, when he wrestled with Rom 7 and 9 in *To Simplician*. Most scholars hold the latter position; see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), for a representative example. The former position is best seen in Carol Harrison's *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² One could think here of the nature–grace controversy centering around Henri de Lubac.

it comes to the question of Pauline influence. I hope to show that this initial impression is misleading. In this essay, I will explore two principal areas of influence: St. Basil's moral and ascetic thought and his theology of the Holy Spirit.³ Here we will see Basil bringing the thought of Paul to bear on the problems and issues that he faced in the fourth century. Before we proceed, one caveat is in order. We cannot expect to find a one-sided or exclusive influence of St. Paul. That is to say that Basil held the other sacred authors in just as high authority as Paul, and the ideas that he seems to have culled even primarily from St. Paul he can also find in contemplation on the writings of the other New Testament authors.

St. Paul's Influence on Basil's Ascetic Thought

Pastoral Problems Consequent on the Constantinian Turning Point

In order to frame properly Basil's understanding of the ascetic life, we begin not with Paul or Basil, but with Constantine. The conversion of Constantine in 312 marked a significant moment for the life of the Church, and it was a mixed blessing. On the positive side, there is the obvious fact of freedom from persecution. The Roman persecution of Christians was sporadic in both time and place, as well as varied in intensity. Nevertheless, to be a Christian could be fraught with risk and danger, especially during the reign of particularly anti-Christian emperors such as Decius, who, in 250–251, instituted the first of the three systematic persecutions, Valerian, whose systematic persecution occurred in 257–258 (and took St. Cyprian's life), and Diocletian, whose systematic persecution from 303 to 311, the "Great Persecution," proved to be the empire's last effort to extinguish Christianity. This freedom from persecution is no small benefit, of course, but many of the other benefits that Christians received came at a cost.

In short, the price of imperial support for Christianity was meddling and secularization. Immediately after Christianity's legalization, the Donatists, who had gone into schism a few years earlier over a disputed episcopal election in Carthage, appealed to Constantine for help in their grievance against the North African Church. A few years later, and more significantly, Constantine and his successors intervened in the Arian crisis. Such interventions were mixed and could be either helpful or harmful, depending on the theological convictions of the emperor. It was an emperor, Theodosius I, who helped to bring an end to the Arian Controversy at the end of the fourth century, but it

³ For this essay, I have drawn on my previous work on St. Basil: *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea: A Synthesis of Greek Thought and Biblical Truth* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007); *Basil of Caesarea, Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014); and *Basil of Caesarea, Early Church Fathers* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

was also an emperor, Theodosius II, who attempted to impose monophysitism on the Church during the fifth-century Christological controversy.⁴ This is not the place to offer overall judgments on the value of imperial intervention, but it seems obvious enough that such interventions had both positive and negative effects. We could simply add that Basil himself felt both kinds of effects. Once a bishop, he found that he was able to win from secular authorities certain benefits, such as tax relief for a widow or monetary support for his charitable efforts in Caesarea;⁵ but he also struggled against Emperor Valens's attempt to diminish his sphere of influence when Valens essentially gave half of Basil's diocesan territory to a rival bishop.

Constantine's conversion not only began various sorts of imperial interventions in the affairs of the Church but also created a wave of secularization. The various enfranchisements that he and his successors offered to the Church—some civil powers for bishops, tax breaks of various sorts, gifts of land and churches, laws against heresy and paganism, and so on—made it attractive in a worldly way to become a Christian or a Christian bishop. As a result, the fourth-century Church began to feel two acute pastoral problems. First, very large numbers of Christians were reluctant to embrace the rigors of the Christian life, and so indefinitely put off baptism and the instruction that would accompany baptism. Thus the vast majority of ordinary Christians did not practice the faith and often remained more or less pagan in their manner of life. Along with other contributing factors, this eventually brought the Church's penitential system (which had taken shape over the course of the third-century debates about whether or not the Church had the authority to remit postbaptismal serious sin) into crisis and opened the way in the sixth century for the transition from a reconciliation that was largely public, able to be received only once, and accompanied by very severe penances to one that was private, able to be received repeatedly, and accompanied by more moderate (in comparison) penances.⁶

⁴ For a deeper treatment of the Trinitarian controversy, there are three fine starting points. See R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy*, 318–381 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); John Behr, *The Nicene Faith* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004); and Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a deeper treatment of the Christological controversy, see John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010).

⁵ See Basil, Epistle 107 and Epistle 108, in *Saint Basil: The Letters*, trans. Roy J. DeFeerri, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926–1934).

⁶ The classic text on the practice of second penance is Bernhard Poschmann, *Paenitentia secunda: die kirchliche Busse im ältesten Christentum bis Cyprian und Origenes: Eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1940). See also Poschmann, *Die abendländische Kirchenbusse im Ausgang des christlichen Altertums* (Munich: Josef Kösel and Friedrich Pustet, 1928).

The second pastoral problem that became serious as a result of Christianity's new found imperial favor was the prevalence of clerical corruption. Imperial benefits had attracted some men to ecclesiastical office for the wrong reasons. Thus, in the fourth century, we see some of the first conciliar canons against such abuses. The Council of Nicaea, for example, legislated that pagan converts cannot be advanced immediately to the presbyterate or episcopate upon baptism (can. 2), that clergy not have a female housekeeper unless she be a mother, sister, or aunt (can. 3), that a man not be made a bishop against the wishes of the metropolitan (can. 6), and that clergy "who chase greediness and have a sordid love of gain" may not charge interest on a loan (can. 17).⁷ That the problem did not diminish is clear from the canons of Chalcedon (451), wherein it is set out that bishops may not perform ordinations for money (can. 2), that clergy may not become essentially property managers for the sake of worldly gain (can. 3), that a cleric cannot simultaneously hold ecclesiastic office in two different cities (can. 10), and that clerics may not seize the possessions of a bishop upon his death (can. 22).⁸

The Solution in Asceticism

The secularization of the Church, in turn, fed the spirit of monasticism that so flourished in the fourth and fifth centuries. Moreover, this ascetic impulse can be seen not only in the great ascetics and ascetic communities, but also in individual Christian families. There was, in addition to the asceticism of figures such as Antony and Pachomius, a domestic asceticism that was marked, above all, by charity toward the poor and the study of Scripture. Basil and his family lived out this domestic asceticism.

In his work *The Life of Macrina*, which is really a long letter, Gregory of Nyssa gives us a magnificent window into their family life. Basil and Gregory's sister, Macrina, seems to have been the family's spiritual center, and she strove for a piety deeper than the family's common ascetic life. Although she had aspired to consecrate herself completely to God, Macrina demurred to the wishes of her parents and consented to be engaged to be married late in the 330s. Before she could marry, however, her fiancé died, and this gave Macrina a way out. It was the custom at the time that a woman could be essentially made to marry once, but could not be made to marry a second time.⁹ Upon the death of her fiancé, Macrina invoked her right not to marry again and

⁷ See William G. Rusch, ed. and trans., "The Canons of Nicaea, A.D. 325," in *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980).

⁸ See "Chalcedon, 451," trans. Robert Butterworth, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner et al., vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 87–100.

⁹ In fact, second marriage—marriage after the death of a spouse, called by Basil "bigamy"—was very much frowned upon. Basil's canons that deal with the administration of penance

determined to be a consecrated widow and, in her case, a consecrated virgin. When her parents broached the subject of marriage, "she would say that it was improper, indeed unlawful, for her not to embrace a marriage which had been concluded for her once and for all by her father and to be forced instead to look to another when marriage, like birth and death, is by nature something that only happens once."¹⁰ Macrina reasoned that her fiancé was not dead, but as if on a journey, and that she must be faithful to him.

It is important to note here that such a decision on the part of Macrina radically changed her relationship to her family. In the Christian East (but not the West), the embrace of the ascetic life meant the abandonment of class distinctions so that the holding of slaves was incompatible with the life that was intended to mirror as closely as possible the life of heaven, wherein, of course, there is no slavery. Thus Gregory tells us that Macrina became, essentially, a servant or slave to her mother, "fulfilling in all things the service that was needed, even frequently preparing bread with her own hands for her mother," a servile task, one infers, that she would not have done before her consecration.¹¹ When Macrina succeeded finally in winning her mother to the ascetic life, she led her "to her own standard of humility [and] prepared her to put herself on an equal footing with the community of maidens, so as to share on equal terms with them one table, bed, and all the needs of life, with every difference of rank eliminated from their lives."¹²

It was not only his sister Macrina, who sought out a deeper ascetic life in advance of Basil, but also his brother Naucratius. Though a talented rhetorician, Naucratius devoted himself to the ascetic life of "solitude and poverty."¹³ He lived in the woods with Chrysaphius, a former slave and now friend,¹⁴ and the two of them provided food for a community of poor and sick old people. Naucratius and Chrysaphius tragically died in a hunting accident that shook Basil's whole family.

For a while it seemed that Basil would not follow the example of Macrina and Naucratius. Gregory of Nyssa writes that when Basil came home from school in Athens (355–356), "he was monstrously conceited about his skill in rhetoric, contemptuous of every high reputation and exalted beyond the

for particular sins call for some intense penances for second marriage. See Epistle 188, can. 4; Epistle 217, can. 80.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina* 5, trans. Kevin Corrigan (Toronto: Peregrina, 1998), 24–25.

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina* 5 (p. 25).

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina* 11 (p. 29).

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina* 8 (p. 27).

¹⁴ Here, again, we see the abandonment of class distinction entailed in the ascetic life.

leading lights of the province by his self-importance.”¹⁵ Basil admits that he had labored on the path to worldly success: he aspired to be a rhetor, that most prestigious and respected position in ancient society. In retrospect, however, Basil saw his intense study of rhetoric as time lavished on vanity and futility. “I occupied myself,” he writes, “with the acquirement of the precepts of that wisdom made foolish by God [and] one day arising as from a deep sleep I looked out upon the marvelous light of the truth of the gospel, and beheld the uselessness of the wisdom ‘of the princes of this world that come to naught’ [1 Cor 2:6].”¹⁶

Basil seems to have come home from school in Athens prematurely. At any rate, he returned home while his dear friend Gregory of Nazianzus went on for further studies in Alexandria. Anna Silvas conjectures, very reasonably, that it was the death of Naucratiuss that brought Basil home from Athens.¹⁷ Soon thereafter Macrina converted him to the ascetic life. Gregory of Nyssa writes that Macrina won Basil “so swiftly . . . to the ideal of philosophy that he renounced worldly appearance, showed contempt for the admiration of rhetorical ability and went over of his own accord to this active life of manual labor, preparing for himself by means of his complete poverty a way of life which would tend without impediment towards virtue.”¹⁸

This turning to the ascetic life entailed, we have already intimated, a turning to Scripture. For Basil, the ascetic life was nothing other than a life led according to the commandments and counsels set out in the Bible. The Scriptures, for Basil, are the directions that we must observe in order to please God, as he says in Epistle 22. He sees the Scriptures as divine help and instruction given to Christians so that they might learn and, having learned, remind themselves of the way of life that is pleasing to God. This is the purpose of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that all of Basil’s ascetic writings are nothing but the attempt to apply the teaching of the Scriptures to every aspect of life,

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 6 (p. 26).

¹⁶ Basil, Epistle 223.2.

¹⁷ See Anna Silvas, *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 68. In Epistle 1, Basil tells Eustathius of Sebaste that he left Athens “owing to the repute of your philosophy” (1:3). This need not contradict Silvas’s view that Basil left Athens because of the death of Naucratiuss, especially when we take it together with the evidence in the *Life of Macrina*. Basil may here be singling out one in a confluence of factors that brought him to leave Athens: his agreement with Gregory of Nazianzus to pursue philosophy (see Gregory, Epistle 1, in Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistulae*, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, in Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, 435–482 [NPNF, 2, 7, (1893; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994)]; the death of Naucratiuss; the example and counsel of Macrina; and his knowledge of Eustathius of Sebaste, with whom and with whose way of life, it seems obvious, Basil was familiar as he studied in Athens.

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 6 (p. 26).

large and small. One of the implications here is that Basil's understanding of the ascetic life grew over time as new questions arose, and he realized with increasing clarity what it means to lead a life inspired by Scripture.

St. Paul and Basil's Ascetic Thought

With all the larger context in place—the conversion of Constantine and its secularizing affect upon the Church and the significance of Basil's adoption of the ascetic life for his view of Scripture—we can turn to the influence of St. Paul upon Basil's ascetic thought. Basil's understanding of the ascetic life grew from a simple desire to live the Gospel into a very complex community that was governed by many persons in many offices and marked by a number of different relationships. There is one relationship, however, that is fundamental and primary, one that is key to all the others, one without which the entire edifice of Basil's ascetic community crumbles. The members of Basil's community enjoyed a common life that was structured around a single basic relationship: the seniors or elders and, for lack of a better word, the subordinates. The point is really a very simple one, though it gets worked out in myriad concrete and complex ways: those more experienced in the spiritual life, those further on the path to holiness, have the ability, the obligation, and the need to lead the less experienced into deeper communion with God. The primary way, moreover, whereby the senior ascetics fulfill this obligation and need is through the giving of counsel, what Basil so often calls the "charism of the word." It is here that we see the profound influence of St. Paul, for in 1 Corinthians he speaks of the "varieties of gifts [*diaireseis*]" (1 Cor 12:4), the "word of wisdom [*logos sophias*]," and the "word of knowledge [*logos gnōseōs*]" (1 Cor 12:8).¹⁹ St. Paul is very emphatic that these gifts, the charism of the word, come from the Spirit. This means, for St. Basil, that the relationship of authority created by the charism of the word manifests God's intention for the basic structure of that human community that most effectively secures the salvation of men. We might put the matter emphatically by saying that God himself creates the monastic community by inspiring some with words of wisdom and knowledge and others to listen to and obey these words.

The basic relationship of authority created by God's gift of a word explains the very existence of all Basil's ascetic writings. While it may be an exaggeration to say that had Paul not written 1 Corinthians 12, Basil would not have developed an ascetic life and written upon it, St. Paul's words are nevertheless an important guide for Basil. He is not the sort of thinker whose entire thought hangs upon a single text, but one who forms his overall vision and direction by taking all the texts seriously. We might think of the Scriptures as a vast night sky filled with stars that a sailor uses to navigate his

¹⁹ The RSV has "utterance" instead of "word."

journey across the sea. No star is ignored, but some are brighter than others. 1 Corinthians 12 is one of these brighter stars. Basil writes of those entrusted with the charism of the word that:

[They] have the capacity to *speak* and to listen *with knowledge* (see 2 Tim 2:15; Heb 5:13) in a way that builds up the faith. For the Apostle teaches plainly that not everyone has the capacity for the word, but that this charism belongs only to a few, when he says: *For through the Spirit one is given the word of wisdom, another the word of knowledge* (1 Cor 12:8) and elsewhere: *that he may be able to encourage with sound teaching and refute those who contradict* (Titus 1:9).²⁰

Thus, Basil is the experienced Christian whose advice in matters of holiness, virtue, sin, and the interpretation of Scripture is sought out by others. Indeed, we can think of the *Ascetica* as nothing but a collection of such questions and Basil's answers to them, a collection of "words" on the various questions that arose in the ascetic life: practical questions like those that surround admission, dress, diet and so on; theological or scriptural questions; and spiritual questions about how to progress in the life of holiness. One such question and its answer bear directly on Basil's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12. The monks had asked how it could be that the Lord called his disciples "senseless" (Matt 15:16–17) if the Lord gives wisdom (Prov 2:6) and, through the Spirit, gives words of wisdom and knowledge (1 Cor 12:8). Here is Basil's answer:

If one knows the goodness of God who wills that *all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim 2:4) and has learned the providential care of the Holy Spirit, who distributes (to each) and activates the charisms of God, then one realizes that the slowness of the understanding does not come from the reluctance of the bestower (of the gifts), but from the faithlessness of the beneficiaries.²¹

Basil's whole ascetic corpus can be reduced to a Pauline charism of the word.

There is another side to the basic relationship of authority that drives the whole of Basil's ascetic thought: the monks must confess to their spiritual guides and obey their advice. Here Basil relies on St. Paul, but less heavily. He cites Romans 15 to make the point that those stronger in the spiritual life ought to care for the weaker, but texts like Matthew 18 are more important

²⁰ Basil, *Longer Rules* 32.2, in Silvas, *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great*, 234.

²¹ Basil, *Shorter Rules* 248 in Silvas, *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great*, 408.

here.²² "According to the Lord's command (Matt 18:15–17) every sin must be brought before the one who presides, either by the sinner himself or by those who have become aware of the sin."²³

St. Paul and St. Basil on the Spirit

While Basil sought the help of St. Paul in the discernment of all manner of ascetic and moral questions, only some of which we hit upon in the previous section, he also turned to him for guidance on the great controversies of the day over the identity of the Son and the Spirit.

The Basic Narrative of the Controversy

Historically speaking, we can, in short compass, place before our minds the basic narrative. Around 318 the presbyter Arius and his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, had a falling out over their respective beliefs about the Son of God. It is possible that tension preexisted this falling out, especially in the event that Arius had ties with the Meletians, a schismatic group that, like the Donatists, arose because of the controverted acts of a bishop in a time of persecution, but all this is somewhat speculative.²⁴ Arius felt persecuted by Alexander for disagreeing with him:

We do not agree with him when he states in public, "Always God always Son," "At the same time Father, at the same time Son," "The Son ingenerably coexists with God," "Ever-begotten, ungenerated-created, neither in thought nor in some moment of time does God precede the Son," "Always God always Son," "The Son is from God himself."²⁵

²² See *Shorter Rules* 229 (p. 389), wherein the question is whether or not one should confess to all or only before particular persons. Basil responds:

The confession of sins has the same principle as revealing a (wound or) disease of the body (to a physician). Just as human beings do not uncover the diseases (or wounds) of the body to any and everyone, but only to those experienced in treating them, so also confession of sins ought to be made only before those capable of curing them (and applying remedies) in accordance with what is written: You *who are stronger, carry the weaknesses of the weak*, that is, bear away and carry them off by means of treatment (Rom 15:1).

²³ Basil, *Longer Rules* 46 (p. 259).

²⁴ Meletius was scandalized to discover that Peter of Alexandria had gone into hiding during the Diocletian persecution and, so, took it upon himself to ordain some presbyters. Needless to say, these presbyters struggled to establish communion with Peter upon his return.

²⁵ Arius, *Letter to Eusebius* 2, in Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 29.

Alexander, for his part, thought that Arius made the Son into a creature like the creatures when he denied his eternal existence. The dispute soon spread as both Arius and Alexander appealed to like minds for support. Constantine intervened and called a council at Antioch in 325 with a follow-up at Nicaea. At both, Arius was thoroughly refuted. As often happened with an imperial-backed council, however, the conciliar unity masked a persistent theological rift. Thus in various ways, those whose thought was comfortable with the language of the Nicene creed (for example, Marcellus of Ancyra and Athanasius of Alexandria) and those whose teaching was uneasy about it (for example, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea) continued to opposed each other. This ongoing struggle itself resulted in a series of councils, too many to enumerate here, but the councils were of two types. Some sought the way of definition and clarity and clearly identified one theological position to defend and another to oppose.²⁶ Others, however, sought the way of compromise and accommodation by insisting on creedal formulae that all (or most), in spite of very different theological allegiances, could sign, even if under imperial duress.²⁷ Neither approach, however, succeeded in unifying the Church around a common confession about the Son.

Matters only worsened when, in the 350s, the divinity of the Spirit became also a matter of controversy. Athanasius was the first to take up the defense of the Spirit with his *Letters to Serapion*, and Basil followed with his third book of *Against Eunomius* in the early 360s and his greatest theological treatise, *On the Holy Spirit*, in the 370s. Unity was finally able to be achieved through the Council of Constantinople in 381, largely because of the great theological work of the Cappadocians before the council and the strong arm of Emperor Theodosius after it. The Cappadocians sympathized with the concerns of both the supporters and opponents of Nicaea and yet were able to correct the theological mistakes (or, at least, not to make them) on both sides. The supporters, of course, saw clearly that the Son could not bring us to the Father and show us the Father were he not truly equal to him, but they were, at least in language and by reputation, open to the charge of modalism. The opponents of Nicaea saw clearly that the Son must be distinct from the Father, but they were too insensitive to the dangers of subordinationism and outright polytheism. The Cappadocians were perfectly poised to strike a middle course, and the coercive measures of Theodosius succeeded where earlier imperial efforts at coercion failed precisely because of the important advances towards true unity that had already taken place.

²⁶ Sardica/Philippopolis (343), Antioch (341), and Alexandria (362) would be good examples.

²⁷ The best example here would be the Council of Constantinople (381).

Eustathius and the Spirit-Fighters

This theological accomplishment of St. Basil and the other Cappadocians was driven, of course, by study, explanation, and argument over Scripture. Let us, then, zoom in on a particular part of the foregoing narrative so as to highlight how the study of St. Paul brought Basil to a deeper contemplation of the Spirit. We must begin with the mysterious figure of Eustathius of Sebaste, for it is Eustathius' mistakes that Basil directly refutes in *On the Holy Spirit*. Eustathius may have been a friend of Basil's family and certainly exercised a spiritual and theological influence upon him. Born around 300, he belonged to the generation before Basil's and, so, was a father-figure to him. The son of bishop Eulalius of Sebaste,²⁸ Eustathius was a leader in both formal and domestic asceticism and advanced the former in the Roman provinces of Armenia, Paphlagonia, and Pontus.²⁹ He established "a society of monks," Sozomen says, but he also seems to have had a deep connection with St. Basil's family, and presumably other similar families.³⁰

As a young man, Eustathius had fallen into an ascetic extremism of sorts, whereby he and his followers condemned marriage, wealth, and the institutional Church. He was condemned at the Synod of Gangra (340–341) and repented. Eustathius seems to have suffered little from his condemnation and subsequent repentance, as he became renowned for his persuasive speech and holy life. He had certainly captured Basil's attention and affection, but his theology was difficult for Basil to pin down, and it can be perplexing for us, too. We know that Eustathius attended the synod of Ancyra that was called by Basil of Ancyra, the father of so-called "Semi-Arianism," and that he signed that synod's letter. This means, then, that Eustathius was a non-Nicene, but one that recognized the problems with the doctrine of the radical Arian Eunomius and tried to address them. We know too that Eustathius attended the Synod of Lampsacus in 364 and was part of an embassy sent to Rome to establish communion with Pope Liberius. Liberius refused to admit them on the grounds that they were "Arian" and rejected the Nicene Creed. Eustathius and company "replied that by change of sentiment they had acknowledged the truth . . . and avowed the Son to be in every way 'like the Father': moreover that they considered the terms 'like' (*homoios*) and *homoousios* to have

²⁸ Socrates Scholasticus, apparently erroneously, places Eulalius in Caesarea. As Silvas mentions (*Asketikon*, 53), scholars since the time of F. Loofs place him in Sebaste (see Loofs, *Eustathius von Sebaste und die Chronologie der Basiliius-Briefe* [Halle: Niemeyer, 1898]).

²⁹ See Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.14, trans. Edward Walford, rev. Chester D. Hartranft in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter, NPNF), 2nd ser., vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).

³⁰ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.14 (p. 293).

precisely the same import.”³¹ Liberius then demanded a written confession, and the embassy produced the synodal letter of Lampsacus, Smyrna, “and other places,” in which they quoted the entire Nicene Creed. Thus, in 357 at Ancyra, Eustathius rejected Eunomius but also Nicaea, and in 364, he rejected Eunomius but embraced Nicaea. Eustathius reaffirmed his commitment to Nicaea in 372 at Basil’s request,³² but then he suddenly renounced Nicaea and rejected the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Basil himself finds the behavior of Eustathius very difficult to explain. He came to the simple conclusion that he was fickle in faith.

Eustathius’s character aside, we do have a sense of the rationale that lay behind the Pneumatomachian faith that he last professed. Basil tells us in *On the Holy Spirit* that his opponents reject the divinity of the Holy Spirit on the grounds that they cannot find it in the Scriptures. The Spirit-fighters, writes Basil, “are like true debtors [who] cry out for proofs from the Scriptures and dismiss the non-scriptural witness of the fathers as worthless.”³³ Or again, “They do not stop babbling up and down that to give glory with the Holy Spirit is unattested and non-scriptural, and the like.”³⁴

St. Paul and St. Basil on Order and Rank in the Trinity

There are two fundamental issues on which Basil disagrees with Eustathius, and on both, St. Paul provided him with the key. The first is the proper way to construe the order, the relationships among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the second is the rank of the Spirit. As we will see, the two issues are related. We see these two themes intertwined in the opening section of *On the Holy Spirit*, but at first glance, Basil’s choice of a starting point seems both esoteric and tedious. He opens *On the Holy Spirit* with a report of an argument over prepositions. He has been criticized for using the doxology “Glory to the Father, with the Son, together with the Holy Spirit,”³⁵ rather than the purportedly more scriptural and clearly Pauline “Glory to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.” Basil’s opponents charge him with deviating from the usage of Scripture (essentially St. Paul), and Basil takes up the challenge to show that he is innocent of the charge.

This exoneration involves Basil in the task of sorting out patterns in Paul’s use of prepositions predicated of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and

³¹ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.12, anonymously translated, revised by A. C. Zenos in NPNE, ser. 2, 2:100–101.

³² See Basil, Epistle 125.

³³ St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* 10.25, trans. Stephen M. Hildebrand in *On the Holy Spirit*, Popular Patristics (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 56.

³⁴ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.68 (p. 107).

³⁵ There are two Greek words for “with”: *meta* and *syn*. Basil gives glory to the Father *meta* the Son, *syn* the Holy Spirit.

discerning what these patterns might mean. First, Basil points out that while “through whom” is predicated of the Son, it is also predicated of the Father and the Spirit.³⁶ Moreover, “from whom” is predicated not only of the Father but also of the Son and the Holy Spirit.³⁷ Finally, Basil makes a similar point about “in”: it is used of all three persons.³⁸ While he cites other sacred authors, the texts of St. Paul dominate here.

Basil then unfolds the significance of St. Paul's use of prepositions: far from the examination being an esoteric and tedious exercise, the patterns in St. Paul's speech about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reveal to us the very order that exists among the persons and the relationship among them. St. Paul has taught us how to think about and speak about the role of the Spirit in the *economy*, on the one hand, and the relation of the Spirit to the Father and the Son in *theology*, on the other. Of course, Basil uses the economy–theology distinction in this account of the Son, and here, everything turns on the Incarnation. While the Spirit obviously was not incarnate, Basil still uses the distinction between economy and theology to offer a sound explanation of him and his activity. Some scriptural texts, according to Basil, are theological, and so refer to the Spirit's eternal relationship with the Father and the Son, while others are economic and denote, as Basil says, “the grace given to us.”³⁹

Basil uses the distinction between theology and economy to defend his doxology: “Glory to the Father, with the Son, together with the Holy Spirit.” “Why,” Basil reports the question of his opponents, “why, . . . if the word ‘in’ is peculiarly suitable for the Spirit and is quite enough for our every thought about him—why, then, do you introduce this new word by saying ‘with the Holy Spirit’ instead of ‘in the Holy Spirit’?”⁴⁰ Basil responds that each phrase “contributes to true religion”: “in,” Basil offers, describes well “what concerns us,” “the grace given to us,”⁴¹ and “the grace that works in those who share it”;⁴² “with” describes “the Spirit's communion with God,” his dignity,⁴³ “his pre-temporal existence,” and “his unceasing abiding with the Father and the Son” in eternal union.⁴⁴

We can put Basil's point here in more technical language. When we speak of the Spirit's actions on behalf of man's salvation, we speak *economically*

³⁶ See Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 5.8 and 5.10 (pp. 35–37).

³⁷ See Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 5.9 (p. 36).

³⁸ See Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 5.11 (p. 37).

³⁹ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.68 (p. 107).

⁴⁰ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 26.65 (p. 103–4).

⁴¹ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.68 (p. 107).

⁴² Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 25.63 (p. 102).

⁴³ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.68 (p. 107).

⁴⁴ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 25.63 (p. 101–2).

and give glory to the Father, through the Son, *in* the Spirit. When we speak, however, of the Spirit's eternal communion with the Father and the Son and his nature and dignity, we speak *theologically* and give glory to the Father, with the Son, together with the Holy Spirit, or to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The whole point of the theology–economy distinction is that it opens us to the truths about God (in himself and in relation to us) communicated in Scripture. The approach of the Spirit-fighters, in Basil's mind, both blinds them to the truth about the Spirit and ruins his salvific work. They take economic texts theologically, without distinction, and so come away with a distorted view of both the dignity and the work of the Holy Spirit. Basil addresses this Pneumatomachian hermeneutic in *On the Holy Spirit*. He reports their objection that the Spirit is not divine because “he intercedes for us” (Rom 8:26–27).⁴⁵ Basil first points out that their logic would also apply to the Only-Begotten, and then asks:

Surely it is not the case, then, that because the Spirit is in you—if indeed he is in you at all—or that because he teaches and guides us who have been blinded to choose what profits us, you should diminish the pious and lawful glory owed to him?⁴⁶

The Pneumatomachians have made the divine benefactor's love for man the occasion of ingratitude.⁴⁷

On the Holy Spirit was not the first time Basil had worked out an understanding of the economy with the help of Paul. In *On Baptism*, written between 372 and 375,⁴⁸ Basil expounds the meaning of the triple immersion, immersion in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We find here no startling surprises in Basil's teaching; his exposition of the triple immersion is an outstanding example of the order that he sees both in the Trinity and in the way in which we relate to it.

The first point of note is that Basil begins with the Holy Spirit, for he is our first point of contact, our entrance to communion with the Son and the Father. Just as parent and child are of the same nature, so “we who are born of

⁴⁵ See Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 19.50 (p. 86).

⁴⁶ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 19.50.

⁴⁷ Basil, See *On the Holy Spirit* 19.50.

⁴⁸ See Paul Fedwick, “A Chronology of the Life and Works of Basil of Caesarea,” in *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic, A Sixteenth-Hundredth Anniversary Symposium*, ed. Paul Fedwick (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981), 9–19, at 15. Fedwick notes that references to *On Judgment* (*On Baptism* 2.5) and *Longer Rules* place it after those works but that it antedates the *Hypotyposis vitae asceticae* (15n83).

the Spirit are, necessarily, spirit."⁴⁹ Basil immediately qualifies this statement, for we cannot be divine as the Spirit is divine: we are spirit not according to the incomprehensible glory of the Holy Spirit, but according to the glory that "is in the distribution to every man for his profit of the gifts of God, through his Christ."⁵⁰ Drawing heavily on St. Paul, Basil goes on to describe what it means for us to become spirit by our birth from the Spirit. We will enjoy the fruits of the Spirit: charity, joy, peace, and patience (Gal 5:22). Our inner person will be renewed, we will walk in the Spirit, and we will confess that Jesus is Lord (Eph 3:14–16; Gal 5:25; 1 Cor 12:3). Our conversation will be in heaven, and we will keep the company of only the holy (Phil 3:20; Ps 101[100]:5–7; 1 Cor 5:11). Once we are baptized in the name of the Spirit, we can be baptized in the name of the Son:

And so, planted together with Christ in the likeness of his death, baptized in the Name of the Holy Spirit, born anew as to the inner man in newness of mind, and built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, we may be made worthy to be baptized in the Name of the Only-begotten Son of God.⁵¹

Baptism in the Spirit renews us in such a way that we merit the grace to put on Christ. Basil uses the image of a drawing tablet to explain Colossians 3:11. No matter what the tablet is made of—gold, or wood, or silver—the likeness of the king can be drawn upon it. So, whether one is Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, Scythian or barbarian—no matter the "material"—the image, the drawing is the same. Having "put off the old man with his deeds in the blood of Christ," the one baptized in the name of the Son lives "by Christ's teaching in the Holy Spirit" and "has put on the new, created according to God in justice and holiness of truth, and is renewed unto knowledge according to the very image of the Creator."⁵²

Putting on Christ brings one into relationship and communion with the Father, and Basil describes this communion as one of sonship and love. "When the soul has been clothed with the Son of God," he writes, "it becomes worthy of the final and perfect stage and is baptized in the Name of the Father himself of our Lord Jesus Christ, who . . . gave the power to be made sons of

⁴⁹ Basil, *On Baptism* 1.2, in *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, trans. M. Monica Wagner, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 9:377. See John 3:6.

⁵⁰ Basil, *On Baptism* 1.2 (p. 377).

⁵¹ Basil, *On Baptism* 1.2 (p. 379).

⁵² Basil, *On Baptism* 1.2 (p. 380).

God.”⁵³ Christ, Basil claims, gives us the grace to keep his commands—that is, the grace to love him. And, as the Lord himself has told us, if we love him, then the Father will love us (John 14:23). Sonship, then, whether ours or Jesus’s, is a matter of love, according to Basil, and love is a matter of keeping Jesus’s commandments. We see here why Basil stresses so often, so emphatically, and even so harshly the importance of keeping all the commandments. As he puts it, “the observance of the commandments is the essential sign of love,” and “without love, even the most effective action of the glorious gifts of grace and . . . faith itself . . . will be of no avail.”⁵⁴

What is the significance of Basil’s explanation here of baptism in the triple name? First, the sequence of baptisms is not a temporal order, but an economic one. In the temporal order, of course, baptism in the name of the Father comes first, but in the order of salvation, for Basil, we first relate to the Spirit, and through the Spirit, to the Son, and through the Son, to the Father. Basil himself does not comment here on why he inverted the baptismal formula, and one gets the impression that he offers here his reflexive and customary understanding of salvation. In his polemic with the Spirit-fighters, he comes to stress the economic order of the Spirit, Son, and Father as the inverse of the theological order of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I would like to point out one more Pauline idea wherein we can see this Trinitarian order that we have been considering. Paul led Basil to realize the inherent connection among the persons of the Trinity and to acknowledge the truth that we cannot be related to one of the persons of the Trinity without being related to the other two. We could not, for example, be baptized or saved in one of the persons alone. We could not be baptized in the Father alone because we cannot know or see the Father without the Son (John 14:9). Why, then can we not be baptized in only the Father and the Son, with the Son mediating to us the knowledge of the Father? The reason is that, just as the Son is the mediator without whom one cannot have access to the Father, so too the Spirit is the mediator without whom he cannot have access to the Son. In the words of Scripture, “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). This verse and the idea behind it are quite significant in Basil’s theology. 1 Corinthians 12:3 captures, for Basil, the essence of the relationship between the Spirit and the Father and the Son. As many of Basil’s arguments go, the Spirit is divine because he is illuminator, sanctifier, and ruler. But the Holy Spirit cannot perform these divine activities unless he is joined to the Father and Son, or rather to the Father through the Son. The thought expressed by 1 Corinthians 12:3, 1 Corinthians 12:10, and other texts makes clear not only that the Son and the Spirit are joined, but also how

⁵³ Basil, *On Baptism* 1.2 (p. 380).

⁵⁴ Basil, *On Baptism* 1.2 (p. 381).

they are joined: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." Just as Basil explains the role of the Son in largely epistemic terms ("He who has seen me has seen the Father" [John 14:9]), so also with the role of the Holy Spirit. No one can have sanctifying knowledge, no one can confess the Son, without the Spirit. Not only does this explain the Spirit's relationship to the Father and the Son; it also forms one of Basil's most powerful arguments for the Spirit's divinity: the Spirit is divine, since he epistemically unites the baptized to the Father through the Son. It is because he does this that he can be called illuminator, sanctifier, and ruler.

As was mentioned above, for Basil, a man must be morally cleansed before the Spirit can abide with him. As Basil writes, "the Spirit illuminates those who have been cleansed from every stain and makes them spiritual by means of communion with himself."⁵⁵ But once this cleansing is done, the human soul enters a relationship with the Spirit, and thereby with the Father and the Son. "Just like the sun," writes Basil, "he will use the eye that has been cleansed to show you in himself the image of the invisible, and in the blessed vision of the image you will see the unspeakable beauty of the archetype."⁵⁶ That is to say, in the Spirit, we have knowledge of the Son, and in the Son, knowledge of the Father. Basil does not cite the Scriptures at all in this passage, but this idea (of the Spirit's epistemic role) is central to his understanding of the Spirit, and when he does turn to find the support of the Scriptures for this idea, he turns largely to St. Paul.

We can see this turning to St. Paul in his argument for the divinity of the Holy Spirit from the creation of angels. "In their creation," Basil writes, "consider for me the initial cause of their existence (the Father), the Maker (the Son), the Perfector (the Spirit)."⁵⁷ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, according to Basil, each have a distinctive role in creation: the Father commands, the Son creates, and the Spirit sanctifies.⁵⁸ Even though angels "are perfected not by their making progress but at the moment of their very creation," they are not created in such a way that they have holiness by nature. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit who makes them holy.⁵⁹ In fact, if the divinity of the Holy Spirit is denied, then so too is the very holiness of the angels. Here Basil argues from the Scriptures:

If you drag down the Spirit by this way of thinking, destroyed will be the choirs of angels and the dominions of

⁵⁵ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 9.23 (p. 54).

⁵⁶ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 9.23 (p. 54).

⁵⁷ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38 (p. 70–71).

⁵⁸ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38 (p. 70–71).

⁵⁹ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38 (p. 73).

archangels, and everything will be confounded—their life will be lawless, orderless, and indeterminate. How could the angels say “Glory to God in the highest” (Luke 2:14), unless they have been empowered by the Spirit? “No one is able to say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit, and no one who speaks in the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed’” (1 Cor 12:3).⁶⁰

Basil continues the argument. The Spirit gave Gabriel foreknowledge (see Luke 1:11, 26–37).⁶¹ The Spirit gave wisdom to the angel who interpreted Daniel’s vision (see Dan 9:22–27; 10:10–12:13).⁶² Because only the Spirit reveals mysteries (see 1 Cor 2:10), angels cannot experience the blessed life of beholding the face of the Father without him (see Col 1:16).⁶³ The Father “cannot be beheld without the Spirit.”⁶⁴ Here again, Basil combines holiness with spiritual sight. To be holy is to behold the Father in the Spirit. Basil cites 1 Corinthians 12:3 in the course of his scriptural argument for the divinity of the Spirit from the holiness of angels, and one can see that this text expresses the key to understanding the rank and role of the Holy Spirit: his presence is necessary for one to have blessed knowledge or know holiness. 1 Corinthians 12:3, however, is accompanied by another Scripture that contains the same basic idea, 1 Corinthians 2:10 (“God has revealed to us through the Spirit”).

According to Basil, men are saved only by beholding the Father and they can behold the Father only in the Son, his image, and in turn, they can behold the image only in the Holy Spirit. Basil writes:

When through his illuminating power we fix our eyes on the beauty of the image of the unseen God, and through the image are led up to the more than beautiful vision of the archetype, his Spirit of knowledge is somehow inseparably present. He supplies to those who love to see the truth the power to see the image in himself.⁶⁵

It is important to note that the Spirit is not the image of the Son; he does not communicate knowledge of the Son by offering us an image of the Son to look at. Rather, the Spirit is the light by which one sees the image. He is not looked at, but it is he in whom and by whom one sees. After Basil gives this brief but

⁶⁰ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38 (p. 72).

⁶¹ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38.

⁶² Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38.

⁶³ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38.

⁶⁴ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38.

⁶⁵ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 18.47 (p. 82).

powerful statement of the way of our salvation, he cites two scriptural texts: "No one knows the Father except the Son" (Matt 11:27); and "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). For Matthew 11:27, Basil could have just as easily written, "he who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). These two ideas, expressed by Matthew 11:27 and 1 Corinthians 12:3, capture the essence of Basil's arguments for the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, respectively. Human beings know that the Son is divine because he communicates to them the divine knowledge of the Father, and they know that the Spirit is divine because, without him, they cannot have the divine knowledge of the Father through the Son.

Conclusion

When one thinks of the achievement of St. Basil the Great and what through him God has given to us who come after him, three things come to mind: the liturgy that bears his name, his particular form of asceticism, and his teaching on the Holy Spirit. We have explored in this essay the great effect that St. Paul had upon Basil in regard to these last two. Of course, Basil did not devote himself wholly to the study of St. Paul to the neglect of the rest of the Bible. Even still, Paul has left a clear mark on Basil's asceticism and pneumatology. Paul was, for Basil, a master of Christian life and thought, and Basil sought to learn from him something of the depth and richness of Christianity. There was no effort on Basil's part to uncover the "historical Paul" or to limit his own thought and practice to precisely those disciplines and teachings to which Paul had subscribed in the first decades of Christianity. Basil made no attempt to "recover" Paul, for it had not occurred to him that Paul had been lost. Rather, by divine inspiration the words of Paul were very much still alive and as relevant as ever to Christians seeking to lead a life according to the Gospel. The fact that Paul's meaning was not obvious, that Basil had to read and contemplate Paul's text, that he had to actively apply Paul's words to his own life and struggles did not contradict these truths. So much was to be expected. Indeed, Basil's reading of Paul has born great fruit: a rich understanding of the mutual dependence and charity that mark the ascetic life and a profound understanding of the saving activity of the Spirit and his intimate relationship with the Father and the Son.

