

# STUDIES OF THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

Essays honoring Robert S. Paul  
on his Sixty-fifth Birthday

Edited by  
Horton Davies



PICKWICK PUBLICATIONS  
Allison Park, Pennsylvania  
1983

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**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**  
Main entry under title:

**Studies of the church in history.**

(Pittsburgh theological monographs. New series ; 5)

1. Theology—Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Paul, Robert S.—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Davies, Horton. II. Paul, Robert S. III. Title. IV. Series.

BR50.S84 1983 270.8 83-9715

ISBN 0-915138-55-7

## UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE CHURCH IN THE CAPPADOCIANS

Donald A. Sykes

The Cappadocians form a significant group among 4th century Greek theologians, regarding themselves as legitimate successors of Athanasius. Basil of Caesarea was acknowledged as leader by the other two major writers, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, developing as he did a churchmanship which was to prove very influential. [1]

In one aspect **Basil** may be represented as the straightforward man of affairs, whether ecclesiastical or secular. Yet another side of him wants to withdraw, physically and mentally, from the active world. This is why one of the most energetic bishops of his century is a pioneer of monastic practice. The ways in which Basil attempted to resolve this tension cannot here be explored, [2] beyond my remarking that a passion for order is fundamental to both sides of his life. Absorbed as he was to become in the maintenance of the visible structure of the church, Basil would never have considered himself at variance with what he wrote in his celebrated **Address to Young Men**: [3] "We, my children, in no wise conceive this life of ours to be an object of value in any respect, nor do we consider anything good at all, or so designate it, which makes its contribution to this life of ours only." The "other life" is what matters and the present is no more than preparation. [4] For some people, or for particular periods in individual people's lives, the preparation is best undertaken in isolation. It is fairly clear that Basil was sometimes inclined to find in this life the ideal way, [5] and this might seem to undervalue the Christian profession of ordinary members of congregations, business men, say, and the priests whose lives are taken up with them. Are they less "real" Christians than those whose withdrawn lives might seem to bring them closer to the "real" world beyond this? (Cf. Basil's contrast of "shadows and dreams" with "reality." [6]) For Basil however any such absolute

restriction of pure apprehension to particular groups or individuals could not be conceived without irreparable loss to the church. It is within the church that this purity must find its context. If it is not present as an interacting, rather than an isolated element, there can be no meaning in the unity which was for Basil an overwhelming concern.

A glance at Basil's life discloses that a great deal of his attention was taken up with the condition of the visible church as expressed through its structure. He defended its tangible unity extensively and passionately against the splits of doctrinal dissension, being deeply affected by the prospect of churches "constantly drifting into a worse condition." [7] Basil had a clear enough idea of what the church should be like. For one thing, he believed it had a recognizably continuous tradition, given sharp formulation by the Council of Nicaea [8] and open to further limited clarification by such people as himself. But clarification is not to be confused with innovation. Nothing which Nicaea laid down and nothing which its defenders maintained was new. When unity is destroyed (torn like an old cloak [9]), reconciliation can be effected only if the full implication of the tradition is drawn out. It is, he claims, on the basis of a Nicene Creed, which in turn rests on tradition stretching back to scripture, that he is able to call for acknowledgment that the Holy Spirit is not a creature and to make this a test of correct belief. The orthodox church consists of those who accept Nicaea in its expanded or clarified form. [10] Within this pattern the bishop has a primary responsibility to preserve the truth within his own church and thus to contribute to the homonoia and semphonia of the whole church. The Church at large had a corresponding duty to support individual communities and bishops. One reason for Basil's great respect for Athanasius arises from the Alexandrian bishop's part in the interplay of individual and great church. Basil praises him as exercising a responsibility for all churches [11] and would wish to emulate him in his own vast correspondence. Convinced, for instance, that the true church at Antioch is represented by Meletius, Basil seeks to uphold him by a network of orthodox connections. He writes to Athanasius, hoping to use his reputation in the West to commend the cause of Meletius to Rome. [12] But when, in a situation of intricate exchange and elaborate misunderstanding, Pope Damasus supported the rival candidate Paulinus, Basil stuck to his understanding and continued to see in it the true center of unity for the church at Antioch. He can ignore the disdainful attitude of Damasus. "If the Lord has been reconciled to us, what further assistance do we need?" [13] Such an outburst, understandable as an expression of frustration, and of the autocratic side of his nature, is not wholly typical of Basil's way. It may be necessary to act uncompromisingly against what is seen as outright error. But it is no less essential to the church that its unity should be maintained by conciliation and the progressive removal of misunder-

standing. It was natural for Basil to hope for solidarity with Rome which had a good record in remaining firm against Arianism. We may assume some reluctance on Basil's part in rejecting an opinion emanating from its bishop. Yet ultimately Basil felt compelled to stand by the authority he derived from his own development of Nicene orthodoxy. In some ways his appeal to the Roman bishop is parallel to his appeal to the Emperor Valentinian: he would welcome the support of both, but would not change his view if he failed to secure it.

The energy Basil showed in church affairs extended beyond what many churchmen would have regarded as their proper sphere of duty. Particularly after he became Bishop of Caesarea in 370, he defended both the involvement of the church in the life of the empire and its independence of the empire. The church has a right to its own organization, he wrote, defending himself to a provincial governor, [14] and this in no way infringes the prerogatives of the state. When a complex agency of social services (accommodation, medical care and the like) is set up through Basil's initiative--a whole New Caesarea--this is justified as an intrinsically Christian, properly ecclesiastical enterprise. At the same time, Basil wishes for a definable connection with the state. He can claim protection, calling on officials for favorable consideration, applauding the attitude of an administrator of whom he could write: "[He] is a true guardian of justice, easy of access for the victims of injustice, terrible to lawbreakers, fair to both poor and rich, and, greatest of all, [he] was for restoring Christianity to its ancient honour." [15] Having seen the effect of an Arian sympathizer in the person of the Emperor Valens, he might consider the advantage of securing Valentinian's adhesion to the orthodox side. But the emphasis would fall on the responsibility of an emperor before God to uphold the true faith, the determination of which lies within the church.

In all this there is a recurrent stress on active responsibility. Basil clearly felt that he and others were constantly called to act for the preservation of the church and this accounts for his periods of despondency when he feels the inadequacy of what has been done in the face of heretical opposition. But there is another side to Basil's understanding of the place of the church in the pattern of providence. The determination of events is not ultimately governed by his and other people's energy: Basil is not prepared to abandon history to purely human agency. The struggle for truth within the church has to be seen within a pattern in which the devil is the promoter of discord [16] within the overall structure of divine providence. His confidence in the church as a community with a destiny beyond vicissitude is expressed in *hex.4.7*. [17] Like the ocean, "the church enjoys a profound calm and the malicious spirits cannot trouble it with the breath

of heresy." This confidence fits well with his contemplative, monastic bent, in tension with the energetic activist life of the bishop and man of affairs. The Holy Spirit then becomes not merely an object of correct belief to be campaigned for by the defenders of the true faith. It is the Spirit who, within the dispensation of the Trinity, gives life and energy to the church; the Spirit is the structure of the church. "Is it not plain and incontestable that the ordering of the church is effected through the Spirit?" [18] This is the counter-balance to the vigor of human activity, the union of the Spirit with human purpose [19] which gives authenticity in the present life and continuity with the eternal world.

Basil went a long way toward resolving the tension between the active life of the church leader and social improver and the contemplative, ascetic way. His friend Gregory Nazianzen found resolution far more difficult. Though he briefly held one of the highest positions in the church, as Bishop of Constantinople at the time when the city was host to one of the most important of church councils in 381, all his ecclesiastical offices were reluctantly accepted, uneasily held, abandoned at the earliest opportunity. He was a man of curious contrasts, taking obvious delight in the attention attracted by his carefully-wrought sermons before crowded congregations in the eastern capital, yet longing for seclusion and frequently finding it. But all the time he was very much a churchman. Despite the self-absorbed musings in verse which often occupied his periods of withdrawal, he never allowed his solitariness, physical or mental, to block his awareness of belonging to the whole church, indeed to the whole of humanity.

His thought often turns to the question of salvation. The work of Christ was directed to all men. When Gregory writes in or.30.6 "He takes me wholly, with all my infirmities" [20] he considers himself primarily as a representative human being. This sense of the universal man lies behind what he has to say about the universal church. In his personal relationships Gregory can show great respect for non-Christians, [21] so long as they are prepared to live peaceably alongside the church. Conversely, the attacks he made upon the memory of the Emperor Julian who had attempted to subvert Christianity are among the bitterest ever made on an enemy of the faith. [22] For the place of the church is unique in world history, unique in the history of salvation. It is the sole focus of the faith. If all men are saved in Christ, they can come to know it only if the church faithfully communicates the truth of Christian theology. To do this, it must in some real sense be the truth. This is strikingly expressed in language which relates the church directly to the divine being and functions. The church is to be a harmonious whole, not simply because this is humanly desirable, but because the church must actively represent to the world the harmony of the Trinity and the harmony of creation. [23] The doctrine of the Trinity is frequently to be found

as the animating point of Gregory's theology. To maintain its very identity, the church must maintain the unity in trinity of the Godhead.

Gregory had then a very powerful sense of the unity of the church, based as it was upon theological rather than practical necessity. The present church is united with the heavenly in the praise of God; [24] his hearers are to think of themselves as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. [25] For all the rhetorical effect of these and similar passages, they refer to a dimension of reality in his thinking. But the primary area in which unity has to be sought is in the church existing on earth. Here there ought to be a coincidence of unity in teaching and in church office, [26] with an integrated structure of church life guaranteed by the acceptance of a single system of doctrine. As we have seen, Gregory is prepared to act towards people outside the church in a fairly open, amenable way. But churchmen he regards as under strict obligation and he feels justified in demanding absolute conformity. It is into a faith that Christians have been baptized and this faith can and must be given demonstrable shape. This, he believes, is to be found in the legitimate interpretation of the faith formulated at Nicaea. Arians of whatever brand break the unity, despising the one narrow way, [27] by violating the central faith, and all other heretical teachers follow them. It is tragic, Gregory believes, that a community which, more than any other, has broken the barriers of race and class, should invent new ones. [28] Dissension cuts like a plough. [29] Time and again, the argument comes back to the unity of God. There must be semphonia or homonoia in the church to correspond with the divine harmony. [30] Or the imagery of the Body of Christ is used to the same effect.

Unity for Gregory could be maintained only through the acceptance of authority. In one sense this was the creed of the Nicene Council taken as a summary of true apostolic faith. But in another way this answer seemed to him insufficiently concrete and it is here that the priest in the local congregation finds his place. For it is noticeable that, whereas the Nicene faith itself issued from an assembly of bishops, Gregory is very uncertain about the function of subsequent assemblies in defending it. Though for a time he attempted to guide the Council of Constantinople which came to be thought of as continuing the work of Nicaea, generally his point of unity is to be sought in the individual church, specifically in its bishop. In him is found a concentration of authority in precise proportion to his doctrinal fidelity. The figure of the Body is developed: the true bishop is the soul of his church, according to divine ordinance. [31] He should be a many-sided man, answering the needs of a variety of people. But primarily he should be a ruler [32] by whom baptism is administered and the faith preserved. Though Gregory is at some pains to emphasize

the responsibility of the whole Christian people for the deposit of true faith, [33] there is still a distinct teaching office, essential to the existence of the church and fundamentally belonging to the bishop. Without this, the flock will disintegrate. [34]

Gregory had frequent experience, he felt, of the failure of the true faith, when bishops abandoned orthodoxy for heretical lines of thought. His easily disturbed temperament could be brought almost to the point of despair, as he wonders whether God had abandoned his providential care of the church, [35] as Macedonian and Apollinarian calamities assail it. Gregory may fall back upon his vision of the heavenly church as the ultimate comfort, but he still has recourse to more immediate help. Distrusting a proliferation of councils ("I never have and can never honour anything above the Nicene faith," [36]) he was prepared to accept Constantinople, with its firm exclusions, as providing a necessary protection for the earlier council. He was also prepared to accept the backing of the Empire in upholding its provisions [37] and defending the orthodox church. Yet he is still eager to assert the church's independence in other ways. The church should have separate jurisdiction in ecclesiastical affairs. He argues for powers parallel to those of the state. In another mood he can yearn for an ideal Christian life entirely separate from the everyday political and economic world. "What concern have you with Caesar and his affairs?" [38]

It is not difficult to find in Nazianzen vacillations. He believed deeply in the church's unity in doctrine and practice and was nonplussed and distressed by shortcomings. Yet for all his vagaries and uncertainties about how the oneness of the church should be maintained, he held firmly to the belief that unity was essential to its being.

Gregory of Nyssa, Basil's younger brother, was even less inclined than his friend Nazianzen to participate as a bishop in the active life of the church and certainly had no more obvious talents for this work, in which he none the less became involved. Though a talented writer, trained in oratory, he gained less satisfaction than Nazianzen from public preaching and showed greater capacity for the speculative exploratory probing of the Christian mystery in a life of solitude. On the other hand, he did not disdain political influence on behalf of orthodoxy and was prepared to write panegyrics on the death of members of the royal house. [39] Nor is he lacking in awareness of the corporate being of the church.

There is a good deal in Gregory's writing which supports a straightforward understanding of the church as an institution with definable parameters and recognizable ways of proceeding. He is clear that the faith is central to the church's existence. When he writes against Eunomius, he emerges not as a remote theologian, concerned to ascertain the truth on a christological

point, but as an ecclesiastical writer fearing for the very identity of the church. Equally, when he deals with baptism and eucharist, he emphasizes the church context of all his teaching. The "affinity and likeness" between disciple and master which is expressed in baptism is integral with the three fold immersion traditionally practiced by all orthodox Christians. [40] (The Eunomians were accused of abandoning the practice, exposing their inadequate theology. It is essential for Gregory that the church is the teacher of belief in the Trinity. [41]) The Christian is thus incorporated into the Body of Christ and enters an area of shared responsibility. The Catechetical Oration is written to assist Christian teachers in the vital duty of building up the church by presenting the faith as at once reasonable and based upon the authority of tradition. It is within the church that scripture can be claimed to hold an unassailable place as the guide and arbiter of Christian doctrine. [42]

A tension however may be detected in Gregory's thought. For it undoubtedly contains a strong individualist element which might seem to go against the corporate understanding of the Christian community. As in Origen, so in Gregory, the Bride in the Song of Songs may be either the individual soul or the church. It may be argued that Gregory places such weight on the first that the second interpretation is attenuated. [43] He writes with great intensity of the knowledge of God to be gained by the soul as it ascends in purity and persistence. Yet the individual vocation is not meant to displace the corporate: the vision of God as he is, in so far as it is granted to an individual, need not be divisive. Such a vision, for all its intensely individual character, will be in accord with the God-given revelation of his nature which is open, at varying levels, to all Christians. It may be that Gregory does not do enough to integrate into the life of the church the experience of the Christian who, while remaining within the present life, is privileged to ascend to something of the condition of the next. There is no theoretical antithesis, no avowal of Christian gnosticism. But as Gregory writes of the ascent of the soul, he seems not to see how this solitary and ultimately incommunicable journey may isolate from the community which shares a different degree of understanding. On the other side, it may be said that passages which equate the Bride with the church, while not coordinated with the interpretation of the soul, do speak strongly for instance of the church's unity with Christ, [44] of a close link between knowledge of God and the church, [45] and Gregory applies the imagery of crowning to the church. [46]

There is however another tension in Gregory's thought, not between corporate and individual, but between two ways of understanding the corporate. If all men are joined to Christ through the deification of human nature which results from the Incarnation, [47] how does Gregory see the specific place of the church? His answer tends to stress the sacraments of baptism and eucharist

as the ways Christ has appointed for the continuation of his work: these make effective the union of God and man.

Finally, we must see the ultimate context of Nyssen's writings on the church in his Origenistic belief in the final consummation in which all will be saved, albeit after long pains. Here will be the final harmony with God in which all shall share, [49] the true goal of divine willed unity in which the church has through the ages had its part.

In their writings on the church, the Cappadocians show a pattern familiar in other parts of their theological work, in that we find sufficient unity of conception and detail to make it reasonable to consider them as a group, while at the same time evincing sufficient independence and diversity as to call for differentiation in understanding.

## NOTES

1. Basil of Caesarea, c. 330 - 379; Gregory of Nazianzus, c. 330 - c. 390; Gregory of Nyssa, c. 330 - c. 395.

2. Cf. H. von Campenhausen, **The Fathers of the Greek Church** (ET 1963), 84-100. Nazianzen is dealt with on 101-114 and Nyssen on 115-125. See also Quasten, **Patrology** Vol. 3, (ET 1960), 203-296, together with P. F. Fedwick, **The Church and the Charisma of Leadership in Basil of Caesarea** (1979), E. Bellini, **La Chiesa nel Mistero della Salvezza in San Gregorio Nazianzeno** (1970), F. Trisoglio, **San Gregorio di Nazianzo in un quarantennio di studi (1925-1965)** (*Rivista lasalliana* 1973), c. XXIV 'Ecclesiologia', 367-377 and c. XXV 'Sacerdozio', 379-383, R. M. Hübner, **Die Einheit des Leibes Christi bei Gregor von Nyssa** (1974).

3. Migne, **Patrologia Graeca** (hereafter referred to as 'M') 31, 565B. This work is translated in the Loeb series by R. J. Deferrari, **St. Basil: the Letters** (1934), Vol. IV. Translations are taken from this version. It has also been edited by N. G. Wilson under the title **Saint Basil on the Value of Greek Literature** (1975).

The text reads: hēmeis hō paides ouden einai chrēma pantapasi ton anthrōpon bion touton hupolambanomen, out agathon ti nomizomen hōtōs, out onomazomen, ho ten syntelean ēmin achi toutou parachetai. (Loeb 380; Wilson 20f.)

4. *Ibid.*, 565 B-C; Loeb 380-2; Wilson 20, line 10. . . . kai pros heterou biou paraskeuēn hapanta prattomen.

5. *ep.* 22, M. 32.288B ff.; ed. Courtonne (1957), Vol. I, 52ff.; Loeb Vol. I, 128ff.

6. Address II. M. 31.565C; Loeb 382ff.; Wilson 20, lines 20ff.

7. ep. 30, M. 32.513B; Courtonne, Vol. I, 72, lines 17ff.; Loeb 176f.  
 . . . dei de pro to cheiron ton pragmatōn huperreontōn.

8. ep. 113, M. 32.528A; Courtonne Vol. II, 17, lines 32ff.; Loeb Vol. II, 224, lines 1ff.

9. Ibid., 525C; Courtonne 16, lines 16f.; Loeb 222, lines 12f.

10. ep. 125, M. 32.545B ff.; Courtonne Vol. II, 30ff.; Loeb Vol. II, 258ff.  
 Note especially 545C (31, lines 16–19; 260, lines 18–21): . . . kata ta rēmata ta hupo tōn paterōn hemon ekstesthenta en tē Nikaia kai kata tēn ygios hypo tōn rēmatōn toutōn emphainomenēn dianoiān.

11. ep. 69, M. 32.429B ff.; Courtonne Vol. I, 161ff.; Loeb Vol. II, 38ff.

12. ep. 66, M. 32.424A ff.; Courtonne Vol. I, 156ff.; Loeb Vol. II, 26ff.

13. ep. 239, M. 32.893B; Courtonne Vol. III, 60 line 12 – 61 line 2; Loeb Vol. III, 418, lines 14–16: kai gar ean men hilasthē hēmin ho kyrios, pois heteras prosthēkēs deometha.

14. ep. 94, M. 32.485B ff; Courtonne Vol I, 204ff.; Loeb Vol. II, 148ff.

15. ep. 96, M. 32.492B; Courtonne, Vol. I, 209, lines 15ff.; Loeb Vol. I, 158, lines 11ff.

16. ep. 99, M. 32.504B; Courtonne Vol. I, 218, lines 25ff.; Loeb Vol. II, 182, lines 9f.

17. M. 29.93C; ed. Giet (1949) 274ff. The words apply to his own church but may well be turned to the wider community.

18. **De Spiritu Sancto** 16.39, M. 32.141B; Garnier and Maran, 2 ed. Gaume (1739), 3.34; ed. G. F. H. Johnston (1892), 84, lines 2f. hē de tēs ekklēsias daakosmēsis ouchi saphos kai anantirrētōs dia tou Pneumatōs energieitai.

19. ep. 227, M. 32.852C; Courtonne Vol. III, 30, lines 17ff.; Loeb Vol. III, 344, lines 14ff.

20. or. 30.6, M. 36.109C; ed. Mason (1899), 116, lines 1ff.; ed. Gally (Discours 27–31, 1978), 236.

For Gregory's doctrine of salvation, see H. Althaus, **Die Heilslehre des Heiligen Gregor von Nazianz** (1972) and D. F. Winslow, **The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus** (1979).

21. One such was probably Nemesius to whom he addresses one of his poems (carm. 2.2.7, M. 27.1551A–1577A) and epistles 198–201 (M. 37.324C–329A;

ed. Gallay (Budé, 1967) Vol. II, 90-93; ed. Gallay (**Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte**, 1969) 143-146.

22. Cf. or. 4 and 5, passim (M. 35.532A-720A). Other references are given in M.-M. Hauser-Meury, **Prosopographie zu den Schriften Gregors von Nazianz** (1960) 101-9.

23. Cf. Bellini, op. cit. 75f.

24. or. 39.11, M. 36.345B ff.

25. or. 45.23, M. 36.653C ff.

26. or. 21.8, M. 35.1089B ff.

27. or. 27.8, M. 36.21C; Mason 14, lines 14ff.; Gallay 90.

28. or. 6.8, M. 35.732A f. Cf. especially: to mesotoichon tou phragmou.

29. Ibid., 1, 721A.

30. Ibid. 12, 737A ff.

31. or. 2.3, M. 35.409B.

32. Ibid., 44f., 452B ff.

33. or. 40.41, M. 36.417A ff.

34. or. 42.2, M. 36.460A.

35. ep. 202.1, M. 37.329B; ed. Gallay, Jourgon **Lettres Théologiques** (1974) 87.

36. ep. 102.1, M. 37.193C; Gallay, Jourgon, 70.

37. ep. 125, M. 37.217C ff.; GCS 92 f.; Budé Vol. II, 15f.

38. or. 40.19, M. 36.384A. Cf. ep. 185, M.37.304B; GCS 134, line 15, Budé 76, line 11: ti koinon ziphei kai pneumat.

39. E.g., The Empress Placilla. oratio funebris de Placilla M. 46.864C ff. Cf. Campenhausen op. cit., 119.

40. oratio catechetica 35, M. 45.85D ff.; ed. Srawley (1903) 129, lines 9ff. Note the expressions to suggenes and homophulon (88A; 130, line 5).

41. Eun. 1.19, M. 45.520D; ed. W. Jaeger I (1960) 94, lines 1ff.

42. anim. et res. M. 46.49C f.

43. Cf. Quasten **Patrology** Vol. 3, 266.
44. hom. 4 in Cant., M. 44.836D; Jaeger VI (1960) 108f.
45. hom. 7 in Cant., M. 44.908B; Jaeger 205, lines 6ff.
46. Ibid., 916C ff.; 213f.
10. 47. or. catech. 27, M. 45.69C f.; Srawley, 101, line 10ff. - 102, line
48. Ibid., 26.68D ff.; 99 lines 4ff.
49. or. catech. 26, M. 45.68D ff.; Srawley 99, lines 4ff.