

The Cappadocian Fathers

Richard C. Gamble, ThD

*Experience: Professor of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary*



In our last lecture, we began an analysis of the Cappadocian fathers. They received that name because of the area of Asia Minor that is their home area, Cappadocia. Remember the names of the three fathers? You have Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. It's the last father that we heard about as we saw the banner for orthodoxy being picked up by him with the death of Athanasius as he, like Athanasius, struggled for keeping the full rights of our King and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We noticed at the end of our last lecture some important similarities in all of their teaching concerning the nature of the Godhead, and let's quickly remind ourselves once again what they taught. We saw that they held that important twofold structure concerning the nature of the Godhead that we've talked about as we analyzed Athanasius, that God is both single and yet diverse. God is monad and yet three, and all three Cappadocians hold that proper teaching as well. The Godhead for them exists as a unity, and He exists in three modes of being or three hypostases. And that's what we went over last time, and this time, in this lecture, we're going to take a look at what that word *hypostasis* means. What do the Cappadocians mean when they talk about a mode of being?

We talked about the Father being the source of the Godhead, the one from whom the other two persons of the Godhead come out of or generate from. He is the fulcrum from which the other two persons have their movement. He is the point of commencement for them, and so it's always to be remembered concerning the Cappadocians that as the monad is worshipped, the triad is also worshipped. As the Father is seen as full God, so the Son and the Spirit must be seen also as fully God. The Father is the source of the other two persons; nevertheless, the other two persons are distinct from the Father. The distinction of the *hypostasis*, on the other hand, does not remove the oneness of the nature of the Godhead.

As we conclude the general looking at the Cappadocian conception of the Trinity, we move on into new areas, beginning now new material from our last lecture. The Son abides and lives in the Father, and the Father possesses or holds all that is the Son's. So the Son makes the Father known and the, to use the word of the Cappadocians, the *hypostasis* of the Father is recognizable in the Son. The Godhead is undivided and yet divided into three persons. He is undivided in that there is within the three hypostases, an identity of nature. So there is one God who has three hypostases, distinct hypostases, yet each one of the *hypostasis* of the Godhead is identical in nature to the other ones. We should remind ourselves that there's no subordination of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son, but the Spirit is consubstantial with the Father and the Son.

How about this idea of unity within the Trinity? What is meant by the Cappadocians as they say that the Godhead is divided into persons? Again these terms are all very familiar to us. We are very comfortable with the idea of God, the Holy Spirit, as the third person of the Trinity. We've been confessing that for many, many years, but put yourself back in the time of the Cappadocian fathers and remind yourselves that these terms are just being developed, they are just being fully worked out. The hammer is still striking the hot metal on the anvil of doctrine.

First of all, again obviously, there are three persons in the Godhead. How is that person defined? What is one of the identifying marks of the Godhead? One of the identifying marks of the Godhead then is plurality. As we look at the different members of this Cappadocian family, we see that, for example, for Basil the Great, there is a plurality of individual persons in the Godhead, but there are other particularities as well. These particularities are referred to by him as "identifying particularities," and I would ask you to write that down as a technical term—identifying particularities. These identifying particularities are modes of relations of being. It's easy to see the connection between Basil's thought and that of Alexander of Alexandria some time earlier. Alexander of Alexandria maintained that the identifying particularities of the Father is that He is ungenerated; that was the hallmark of the Father in contrast to the Son, who was generated. And Basil identifies the particularities of the Father as Fatherhood, and he identifies the main particularity of the Son as Sonship, and the Holy Spirit's main identifying particularity as sanctification. Once again we see nothing earthshaking in this definition. What we have here is clearly a presentation of the scriptural data, but it's an important

move in that that scriptural data are becoming well defined, that these technical terms like “identifying particularities” are being discussed and that the theologians are feeling comfortable with that type of language.

These identifying particularities are related to the very important Trinitarian advance made by the Cappadocians to the more precise definition of the Greek words *ousia* and *hypostasis*—*ousia* and *hypostasis*. I mentioned in an earlier lecture that at that earlier time the words *ousia* and *hypostasis* seen even in the Nicene Creed are used interchangeably. They are considered to be synonyms, but the Cappadocians, as they wrestle with the details of Trinitarian theology, begin to add nuances to these important technical terms. And so they begin to talk about the *hypostasis* of the Godhead and the *ousia* of the Godhead being related to each other, so that the *hypostasis* of the Godhead is the *ousia* of the Godhead determined by its identifying particularities. If that’s hard to understand right now, that’s okay. It will become easier as we go on.

So for the Cappadocians, the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by their origin and relation to each other. That’s easier to understand, isn’t it? The persons of the Trinity are distinguished by their origin and relation to each other. And so we can think of it in these terms. The person Father, the person Son, the person Spirit does not represent the being of God, but rather it represents a mode of relation or mode in the existence of God.

We need to stop for a minute and think about what we’ve learned. We’ve *ousia* and *hypostasis* and we’ve stuck in the word *person*, and that’s exactly what we need to do. The general understanding of the nature of the Godhead, which is one, within that unified Godhead, there are three persons. How do those persons define themselves? They define themselves in their mutual relationships to each other. The Father is understood in His Fatherhood. He is the one who generates the Son. The Son is understood in terms of His being generated from the Father, and He is understood as the Son, and these two persons as an example must be seen not in terms of some independent external existence but rather in terms of how they relate to each other. That’s the movement of advance in Trinitarian theology at this point.

Before we go on to analyze this, we need to see the advance being made over Nicene theology. As we see the words *hypostasis* and

ousia as being defined, we need to be very careful, and some charges have been made against the Cappadocians that they are too advanced. In other words, sometimes the charge has been made that they're too subtle, that they could even be tritheists as they talk about the importance of the differences between the three persons of the Trinity. Certainly they're not easy to understand. We can comprehend how the charge of being too subtle has been laid to them, but some of the nineteenth-century history of doctrine textbooks have laid false charges against them in terms of being tritheists. What they're doing is expanding our base of knowledge founded upon the Scriptures concerning the differences between the Trinity. We must never forget that in the Cappadocian theology the unity is always understood as well.

I hope things are clear concerning the general thrust of the Cappadocian theology. What I'd like to do to elaborate further is take a quick examination of the three different fathers themselves and see how they moved on chronologically, see how they built upon the thought of the predecessor so that we have in the end an excellent advance in the nature of Trinitarian theology. Let's begin with Basil's Trinitarian formulations. He was wrestling with these words *ousia* and *hypostasis*, and being grounded in the Greek philosophical tradition, that is, knowing technical Greek philosophical terms, he said that the *ousia* of the Godhead might be understood by that Greek word *universal* and *hypostasis* might be understood by that Greek word *particular*. And so the hypostases of the Godhead are determined by their identifying particularities. Now what does that mean? He gives us a very clear example that's easy to understand. This means that each human being represents the universal man, and the different human beings are recognized by their personal characteristics, and this distinction is analogous to that of the Godhead.

If we were in a classroom together, what I would do is to have two of you stand up, and I would point out that both of you are perhaps men and that one of you has blue eyes and blond hair and the other one of you has brown eyes and dark hair. As we would look at you, we would recognize you both to be men, but we would see that you are different—one of you has one color hair and eyes; another another color hair and eyes. Perhaps one of you is 6 foot 4 and the other of you is 5 foot 4 and you both weigh 250 pounds. So it would be very easy to see as we're walking down the hall that there is person A and there is person B. You're both men, but you have identifying particularities. One's tall, the other's short. One has blue eyes, the other has brown eyes. Basil thinks that this is

a good analogy for the differences within the Trinity. Both are God, but both are recognizably, or we should probably take three people, each one is recognizable, as being distinct from the other. Different human beings are recognized by their own personal characteristics.

This clarified definition of *ousia* and *hypostasis* enables Basil to give us the statement which all of us take for granted. One *ousia* and three *hypostases* is the acceptable way of explaining the nature of the Trinity, and he did that in Greek, *Ena ousia treis hypostaseis*—one *ousia*, three *hypostases*. And this clarification was Basil's chief contribution to Trinitarian theology. The Godhead is one *ousia* and three hypostases.

As we've been talking about the nature of the Trinity, we've seen that the object of most debate and discussion has concerned the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit has not received an extensive amount of analysis. Basil, seeing that lack, picks up the ball and carries it, especially as he begins to observe how we can understand the nature of the Holy Spirit. In the earlier part of his theological career, he abstained from discussing the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but later as he became more mature as a theologian, as he understood these important distinctions better and better, he was very clear that the Holy Spirit is inseparable from the Father and the Son and should be given full and complete worship as we do to the Father and the Son. Basil regards the Holy Spirit as fully and completely God, and he gave an argument for the deity of the Holy Spirit; our textbook by Kelly on page 261 gives us the best summary of Basil's argument. Kelly tells us this: "That according to Basil, the testimony of Scripture to the Spirit's greatness and dignity and to the power and vastness of His operation is one argument for the full deity of the Spirit. Also His association with the Father and the Son in whatever they accomplish and especially in the work of sanctification and deification, also underlines that full deity, and lastly, His personal relation to both the Father and the Son, that unique relationship fully underlines His deity."

In the polemics of his time, Basil had to face the question that if the Holy Spirit were *homousios* with the Father, then He must be a second son. Now doesn't that sound a little strange? It's not so strange if you think backwards chronologically. In the fights concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son, the argument was made that if the Son is fully divine, fully of the same essence of the Father, you can't talk about Jesus being the

Son of the Father; rather you've got to talk in terms of brothers. And that argument was later worked through and dismissed, so poor old Basil had to face the same question with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. He is a second son instead of a third person. But Basil very wisely replies to this question, and his answer is once again a step in the right direction in terms of hammering out this doctrine. Basil knew that the Scriptures said that the Holy Spirit is not generated like the Son, but that through the Son, the Spirit receives divine qualities from the Father as well. Now here we begin to see a movement that is slightly different in the Eastern church from the Western church, which will be another source of discussion and strife.

Basil is maintaining that the Son proceeds from the Father and the Holy Spirit basically proceeds from the Son, and later on we're going to see that there's going to be discussion as to whether the Father generates the Son and the Spirit, or just the Son. But the point to remember now is that Basil says, No, with the third person of the Trinity, we see the distinctions between the second and the third, and we can clearly identify the particularities of that third person of the Trinity, and therefore we don't need to speak of two sons of the Father. Basil, you helped us a lot, but we need to go ahead now to look at the next Cappadocian father who follows chronologically and that's Gregory of Nazianzus.

Comparing his theology with that of Basil the Great, it's been noted that there's a much stronger emphasis on the unity of the Godhead, the one sovereign God on the one hand and yet a much clearer definition of the divine relations between the persons of the Trinity, and I think that's correct. In Gregory's Trinity teaching, the three persons of the Godhead have one nature, and as in Basil, the Father is the source of the unity of the Trinity. Gregory also teaches that Christ was completely a man and completely God. The importance of Gregory's teaching concerning Christ should be noted especially in that he is the first of the Greek theologians to apply the Trinitarian terminology to the Christological formula. So for Gregory, Christ is one person, although He Himself has two natures. They meet in one. They are united in essence. In other words, not only does Gregory clarify the relationship between the Father and the Son, but he further clarifies the relationship of the human and divine natures in Christ Himself, and so that's a second advance that he's making there as well.

Gregory also contributed to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. He advanced the definition submitted by Basil concerning the

character of the three persons. For him they are that the Father is ungenerated, or He is the one who is always generating, and that the Son is the one from whom the Father comes or is the one who is always generated. And the Holy Spirit, and this is the slight distinction between Gregory and the earlier Cappadocian theology in Basil, the distinction or the difference is especially with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and he maintains that the main characteristic of the Spirit is not so much sanctification, because you know that it's the Holy Spirit that sanctifies the church, but rather the characteristic should perhaps be seen as procession as the main identifying particularity of the Holy Spirit.

Contrary to Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus does not hesitate in fully defining and giving full treatment to the Holy Spirit as fully divine. He also asserts that the Holy Spirit is consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with the Son. Gregory finds scriptural arguments to support his contention that the Holy Spirit is God, but he also asserts that the Holy Spirit discloses His deity as He lives within us. This is an interesting and important argument as well. In discussing the nature of the Holy Spirit, Gregory exercises admirable restraint in his theological speculation when he asserts that he is content with the scriptural pronouncement concerning the procession of the Holy Spirit. And I personally like his restraint. He says, The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, that's His main identifying particularity. What that procession means, Gregory lifts up his hands and says, I don't know. I don't have sufficient data to make a judgment on that. I just know that that's what the Scriptures teach. And so that restraint is a welcomed one in the field of theological speculation.

We should point out that Gregory of Nazianzus asserts (I've been talking about the distinctions of the Godhead) completely and fully the unity of the Godhead; that is, in their essence, the three persons are indistinguishable because they have identical substance. Those are the first two Cappadocians. The third and most important Cappadocian for the development of the doctrine of the Trinity is Gregory of Nyssa. It's apparent that we recognize his superiority immediately, and when we compare him with the other two Cappadocian fathers, his speculation concerning the nature of the Trinity is the most advanced.

He believes that the Father begets the Son and the Father is Him from whom the Spirit proceeds. So we have a begetting in terms of the relationship to the Son and a procession in terms of the Spirit. These three persons share the unity of nature from their

identity of activity. There's a slight change, and I hope you noticed the nuancing. They have an identity of activity. That important teaching is later going to be picked up by perhaps the greatest Trinitarian theologian of the Latin part of the church, Augustine of Hippo.

Gregory of Nyssa's emphasis upon the Godhead's unity in activity is extremely important, and it is a major breakthrough in terms of theological development. It permits him to observe that the analogy of the Trinity with two men or three men as being unified and yet diverse breaks down. In other words, the analogy that Basil gives us breaks down because in the Godhead none of the persons act independently of the others. So imagine ourselves once again in the classroom situation. You three volunteers who stood in front of the class now have to come forward again. Remember one of you is tall, one of you is short, one has brown eyes, one has blue eyes, and then we have a third person as well to represent the third person of the Trinity. What I would ask the first one of you to do is to scratch his head. That sounds like a silly thing to do, but as he scratches his head, the other two people might not feel the urge to scratch their heads. Then I would have maybe the second person jump up and down. The first and the third persons wouldn't necessarily feel like jumping up and down.

The point is that in the Trinity as one person does something, there is a complete unity of activity in these three persons. In other words, person number 1 who is standing there scratching his head might be extremely embarrassed. He doesn't want to be in front of you scratching his head. He looks silly. The other two people might not know that he's embarrassed, but in the Godhead, all thought and all activity is completely unified so that the third person who is doing nothing but standing there knows exactly what the first person is thinking, what he is doing, and he's completely in agreement with the activity of the first person. And that's where Basil's analogy, according to Gregory of Nyssa, breaks down. There is a unity in humanity as three men are standing there. There are identifying particularities, Gregory tells us, but the point where the analogy is not good and therefore not helpful for the Trinity is that the analogy of human beings cannot express that true unity that is still inherent in the Godhead.

So that is an extremely important advance. Augustine again is going to talk about that some as he tries to find other analogies, and what we're going to find as students of this time period that none of the analogies that the Cappadocians attempt to create

or even that Augustine attempts to create can perfectly speak of the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can understand that relationship, and yet in many ways for us our mental abilities seem to be such that we cannot fully enter in to the beauty and even the mystery of how three persons who are completely God can be different and yet completely united. There is no perfect analogy here on the earth.

So there is that slight difference between Basil of Caesarea and the later advancements made by Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory follows the Cappadocian theology in maintaining that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each completely God. He also asserts that the Holy Spirit is consubstantial with the Father. Again, no advance there. We also find that in his analysis of the Holy Spirit, this emphasis upon the shared nature of all three persons is explicitly articulated. He says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and receives from the Son. Once again, that's a change from Basil's articulation. He also maintains that there is an identity of energy which passes through all three persons, and so as he looks at the differences and yet the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit, the differences, the distinctions must be seen in his words "in the eminent mutual relations that they have with each other"—the eminent mutual relations. Those are words that we commonly use in our vocabulary, but they are very helpful for us. How do we understand the distinctions between them? They must be defined, the three persons of the Trinity, must be defined in terms of each other. No perfect analogy here. They must be defined in terms of their mutual, that is, holding in common, relations, and we understand the word *relation*, how they interact with each other, and eminent means within the unity.

So the Father is the cause of the other two persons. The Son is directly produced by the Father and is therefore the only begotten, and the Spirit is related to the Son as cause to effect. The Son acts as an agent in subordination to the Father who is the fountainhead of the Trinity in the production of the Spirit. In conclusion, we can see that Gregory of Nyssa teaches the full consubstantiality of the Holy Spirit, as well as His procession from the Father, and makes a deeper study of his relation to the Son than had the other two Cappadocian fathers.

I hope your patience has borne with me through this rather complex discussion. It's very important for us to understand what the Cappadocians are teaching. And hopefully as you've been listening to me, although I might have used technical terms that

are not common in our vocabulary, still I think that if you reflect upon what has been said, you'll find that there's very little that's new. In other words, this is a part of our Christian heritage as we've thought about the nature of the Trinity. In the first part of our Christian walk, as we are beginning to think about Christ, we don't often think about the nature of the relationships between the Father, Son, and Spirit, but especially as we are preparing for Christian ministry, especially as we need to give an account for the hope that is within us, especially as we encounter those who are outside of our tradition, outside of the teaching that we perhaps received as children, so we need to be able to explain these complex relationships between the Father, Son, and Spirit. So the Cappadocians provide for us extremely helpful, practical information.

What I would like to ask you to do is take a few moments, reflect upon what the Cappadocians have taught, and bring that into your memory banks so that you can explain this teaching, and this would be a good exam question, that you can explain this teaching in a clear and simple manner to someone who does not have a Christian background. As we think about our relationship with the Jewish or the Muslim community, these questions are extremely important.

The last Greek father whom we'll investigate before we turn to the Latin East is a fellow with a very interesting name, Epiphanius of Salamis. I told you in an earlier lecture that I had one joke for this course, and I just thought of my second joke, so you're now getting two for the price of one. One time as I was lecturing students precisely at this point in the lecture my wife was due with our first child. And after our child was born, I had heard that there was a debate among the students in the class as to whether if I had a boy his name would be Epiphanius. Fortunately I had a girl, and my wife was not confronted with this possibility of having a son named Epiphanius, but the students were convinced that there was a good chance that Epiphanius Gamble would be born if my wife had a boy at this time. Anyway, Epiphanius of Salamis died in 403, and Epiphanius did not give the great theological instruction to us as had done the Cappadocians, but he too was a good pastor who reflected upon the Scriptures. And he saw a new twist in terms of biblical argumentation for the full divinity of the three persons of the Trinity, which is in itself not an overly convincing argument, but he reminds us that the angels in various places through the Scripture from the Old Testament through the New as they are in heaven pronounce what's called the *trisagion*, the

trisagion, in Greek the three times holy statement. As the angels are before the face of God, we see the Scriptures telling us that they are saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.” And that *trisagion*, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” is an important part now of all the liturgy of the Eastern church, especially the Eastern Orthodox Church, and he maintained that the angels are addressing each one of the three persons of the Trinity and that’s why they say, “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

Epiphanius in one of his writings called *The Ancoratus* fully affirms the deity of the Son and the Spirit and the consubstantiality of the Son and the Spirit with the Father. Concerning their mode of origin, the Holy Spirit is from both the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is of the same substance as the Father and the Son.

Let me summarize now the teaching of the Cappadocians, and what I would like to do is to have you listen carefully and make notes concerning this information which will provide a capsule summary and hopefully make all the many details that I’ve talked about in the last few minutes clear. Point 1 concerning the Cappadocian fathers—the Godhead, the general characteristics of their teaching. They maintain the unity of essence of the Godhead, yet three persons. And the capsule statement for the Cappadocian doctrine of the Trinity is this: There is one Godhead who exists simultaneously in three modes of being or hypostases. The Father is the source of the other two persons, and yet as they analyze the Trinity, they begin their analysis from the three hypostases. That’s the general characteristic.

Point 2—the unity within the Trinity, and I’ll have four subpoints for those of you making detailed notes. They talk about the identifying particularities, and the first of this identifying particularity is plurality, that there is more than one. In Basil, point 2, these particularities are given the technical term of identifying particularities. How do we define identifying particularities? Point 3—identifying particularities are modes of being, and that’s the word for *hypostasis*. An identifying particularity is the *hypostasis* and that is a mode of being.

And point 4 is the “therefore.” Therefore, the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by their origin and relation to each other; that is, there identifying particularities. Let me say it again. Therefore, the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by their origin and relation to each other. Where’s the Trinitarian advance here? The Trinitarian advance comes with the definition of the Trinity

itself. They give, which can be summarized, each *hypostasis* of the Godhead is the *ousia* of the Godhead determined by its identifying particularities. Now take that home with you. That's very important for us to understand as we see the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Cappadocian fathers.

We begin a new section of our lecture by turning to the Latin and the Latin-speaking or the Western church fathers. The point of importance in this part of our lectures will be our analysis of the great theologian Augustine of Hippo, also known as Saint Augustine. As I'm lecturing I always think that St. Augustine is a nice city in Florida, but there was a theologian whose name was Augustine, and he lived in North Africa, the area of Hippo, so I'll be referring to him as Augustine. But for those of you who have an English background, it's not the same Augustine that was a missionary to England. This is Augustine of Hippo, 354 to 430, so everything that I'll be talking about now is to lead us to the important analysis of Augustine of Hippo.

The first name that you should know is Frobenius of Agen, which is a city in southern France, who died after 392. Not much original about him, especially in terms of his Trinitarian speculation. He reflects Western Trinitarian thought. He says that the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father and wants to preserve the unity of those two persons. He maintains that the Spirit is also God, the third person of the Trinity, and yet the Trinity is also one. Much more important than Frobenius is the great church father, Ambrose.

Ambrose was bishop of the city of Milan in Italy. He was the teacher of Augustine, had great contact with him personally, and yet in many ways their Trinitarian teaching is different. Ambrose affirms, like Frobenius, that the three persons of the Trinity are united in substance and divinity. And Ambrose will be the object of our next lecture. An interesting person, an interesting teaching to Augustine, certainly a great church father who had a pastor's heart as large as any other pastor's heart that we've come into contact. And we'll begin our next lecture with our study of Ambrose.