

December 2009

"Breaking Ground" A look at the Impact of the Cappadocian Fathers on the Establishment of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit During the Transition Between the Council of Nigeria (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381).

Frederick J. Flo
St. John Fisher College

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Flo, Frederick J. (2009) ""Breaking Ground" A look at the Impact of the Cappadocian Fathers on the Establishment of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit During the Transition Between the Council of Nigeria (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381).," *Verbum*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol7/iss1/11>

This document is posted at <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol7/iss1/11> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

"Breaking Ground" A look at the Impact of the Cappadocian Fathers on the Establishment of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit During the Transition Between the Council of Nicaea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381).

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"At the center of Christian dogma lies the worship of the Holy Trinity. Naturally, with every central focus comes controversy. Throughout history, the interpretation of the Trinity has created a tremendous amount of debate. Opposition to specific interpretation is expected as numerous philosophies are bound to rise due to the simple truth that the reality of God can never be fully comprehended by human efforts. Therefore, with the nature and essence of God being left for definition to a finite source, disagreements about the true nature of God are inevitable."



Frederick J. Flo

“Breaking Ground”

*A LOOK AT THE IMPACT OF THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS ON THE
ESTABLISHMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT DURING THE
TRANSITION BETWEEN THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA (325) AND THE COUNCIL OF
CONSTANTINOPLE (381).*

*“The way of the knowledge of God lies from One Spirit through the One Son to
the One Father, and conversely the natural goodness and the inherent holiness
and the royal dignity extend from the Father through the only-begotten Son to the
Spirit”*

-St. Basil (De Spiritu Sancto)

At the center of Christian dogma lies the worship of the Holy Trinity. Naturally, with every central focus comes controversy. Throughout history, the interpretation of the Trinity has created a tremendous amount of debate. Opposition to specific interpretation is expected as numerous philosophies are bound to rise due to the simple truth that the reality of God can never be fully comprehended by human efforts. Therefore, with the nature and essence of God being left for definition to a finite source, disagreements about the true nature of God are inevitable.

Debate on the Trinity has historically been focused between the relationship of God, the Father, with his Son, Jesus Christ. Very little attention was given to the Holy Spirit. With so much tension and emotion involved with the discussions about our Savior, Jesus Christ, the concepts surrounding the Holy Spirit were often overlooked. The Arian Controversy, which divided the Church from before the Council of Nicaea in 325 until after Council of Constantinople in 381, was placed in the spotlight leaving the divinity of the Holy Spirit in the shadow. Eventually, these two questions would ultimately blend together, centuries later, into the Filioque Controversy.

The cause of confusion mainly stemmed from the interpretation or misinterpretation of important terms like *ousia* (substance, essence) and *hypostasis* or *prosopon* (Latin, persona) (Bobrinskoy). The use of such concepts became clear through the works of the three great Cappadocian fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. It was the Cappadocian fathers who defined the Holy Spirit as understood today in Christian Doctrine.

The development of the Trinity took on several stages. First, Jesus Christ our Lord was recognized as fully divine, followed by the recognition of the full divinity of the Spirit, and lastly with the formulation and clarification of the Trinity doctrine (McGrath). The Trinity could not have evolved without the issue of the divinity of Christ being settled first. The establishment of Jesus Christ as fully divine and human was essential for a true clarification and understanding of the Holy Spirit. This step was acknowledged by one of the Cappadocian fathers, Gregory of Nazianzen, who wrote:

The Old Testament preached the Father openly and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament revealed the Son, and hinted at the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit dwells in us, and is revealed more clearly to us. It was not proper to preach the Son openly, while the divinity of the Father had not yet been admitted. Nor was it proper to accept the Holy Spirit before the divinity of the Son had been acknowledged...Instead, by gradual advances and...partial ascents, we should move forward and increase in clarity, so that the light of the Trinity should shine.

(McGrath)

With so little to reference for clarification in the Bible, it is understandable that theologians looked to define a highly referenced figure, Jesus Christ, before the Spirit. After all, it is through the incarnation that we experience God.

The Holy Spirit's status was very questionable between the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381. The transition from the first to the second marked one of the most fundamental eras in Church history. At the

First Ecumenical Council, the pressing theological problem of the Father and Logos relationship was defined. Jesus Christ was confirmed to be of the same substance (*homoousios*) as the Father. The Son was professed as “from the *ousia* of the Father, through whom all things came into existence, things in heaven and things on earth.”(Constantelos) Jesus was described incarnationally as he “came down” and eschatologically, as He “will come to judge the living and the dead” (Congar). This held that Jesus was truly the Son of God, but not less than God and comes from God, but was not created by the Father. He is coeternal with the Father. The ruling of Jesus Christ as consubstantial with the Father and therefore Divine marked a glorious victory for theologians against the Arians. Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, was a key ringleader in the forefront against Arian views. According to Athanasius, “identity of substance between Father and Son was an absolute necessity. Since God (in Christ) became man so that man could become God, without precise identification of the substance of Father and Son man’s salvation would be impossible” (Kung/Moltmann).

Nicaea’s proclamation on Christ’s divinity still created turmoil. The terms, *ousia*, *homoousios*, and *hypostasis* left a clouded definition among scholars. *Ousia* was being used as “being,” “reality,” “essence,” or “substance” (O’Collins). There was fear that by using these terms, the unity of the *ousia* was expressed in a manner where there was no personal distinction between the Father and the Logos. The other problem with *homoousios* was the meaning of *homo*, “the same,” as opposed to *homoi*, “of a similar essence” (O’Collins). The intention of the Nicene Creed was to express the identity of God as one being in which they share the same essence as two particular subjects. The

threat of *hypostasis* laid in the differentiation of three personas where misinterpretation could eventually lead to polytheism. Essentially those who failed to acknowledge the essence of God were ultimately worshiping three Gods and those who failed to make any distinction were returning to the Jewish monotheistic God. Eventually, the clarification of the terms and their application towards a doctrinal understanding of the Holy Trinity can be attributed to the works of the Cappadocian fathers. In a letter St. Basil stated:

It is indispensable to clearly understand that, as he who fails to confess the identity of essence (*ousia*) falls into polytheism, so he who refuses to grant the distinction of the hypostaseis is carried away into Judaism...Sabellius...said that the same God...was metamorphosed as the need of the moment required, and spoken of now as Father, now as Son, and now as Holy Spirit. (O'Collins)

Even with the divinity of the Logos being defined, most theologians still possessed some idea of subordination among the Trinity. Although *homoousios* applied to the Son, some interpreted the ruling as the Father initiating and the Son responding, implying some sense of hierarchy. The consequences of these views essentially placed the Holy Spirit at the bottom of the ladder. At this time, the Holy Spirit was considered an inferior being and often referred to as a creature of the Son (McDonnell). St. Basil spoke against such nonsense proclaiming, "He did not make arithmetic a part of revelation...[because] inaccessible realities remain beyond numbering" (McDonnell). Other extreme views held that the Spirit of the Old Testament was different than the one

mentioned in the New Testament. Even with the inclusion of the phrase in the Nicene Creed, "...and in the Holy Spirit," which ultimately committed the Church to acknowledging some sort of divine character of the Spirit, little interest was given to pneumatology until roughly 35 years after the First Council (Geanakoplos).

Three main factors were of significance in establishing the divinity of the Holy Spirit during the transition from the Council at Nicaea to the Council of Constantinople (McGrath). The focal point of the Trinitarian argument, particularly in regards to Basil of Caesarea and Athanasius, came in the case of the Baptismal formula. Christians are baptized in the name of "the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." In his Letter to Serapion, Athanasius argued that the baptismal formula revealed to us in Mathew 28:18-20 clearly points to the Spirit sharing in the same divinity as the Father and the Son. Basil argued that this formula was a symbol of the inseparability of the Trinity. A second factor was that scripture applied all the titles of God to the Spirit with the exception of "unbegotten." Gregory of Nazianzen stressed the word "holy" when describing the Spirit proclaiming that this holiness was a direct result of the nature of the Spirit rather than some greater source. A third factor stems from sanctification and nature. The *Letters to Serapion* and *Against the Arians* argued that the one who sanctifies is not of the same nature as the one who is sanctified; the Holy Spirit is holy by nature of God and not by participation; the three persons are perfectly one and, therefore, the Spirit cannot be a creature; the divine nature of the Father is given through the Son in the Holy Spirit; the role of the Son and the Spirit in creation; and, finally, the Son as image, reflection, and splendor of the Father (McDonnell). St. Basil's point was that the Spirit makes creatures

both to be like God and to be God which is ultimately a characteristic of a persona of divine nature (McGrath). Basil stressed the divine nature and powers of the Spirit when he stated:

All who are in need of sanctification turn to the Spirit; all those seek him who live by virtue, for his breath refreshes them and comes to their aid in the pursuit of their natural and proper end. Capable of perfecting others, the Spirit himself lacks nothing. He is not a being who needs to restore his strength, but himself supplies life...and shares the gifts of grace, heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in God, being made like God and-the greatest of them all-being made God. (McGrath)

The qualities of “supplying life” and “lacking nothing” are very powerful characteristics worthy only of a divine nature.

The Cappadocian fathers worked extremely hard to convert the Semi-Arian to Orthodox based upon the three principles mentioned above combined with one basic formula of “three persons (*hypostases*) in one substance (*ousia*). While the semi-Arians taught that the Son is of like substance (*homoiousios*), the Arians taught that the Son was like (*homoean*) the father (Congar). Both parties were even more internally divided concerning the definition of the substance of the Holy Spirit. The Cappadocians explicitly recognized a distinction between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit while simultaneously proclaiming their unity. In St. Basil’s work, *Contra Eunomius*, he argued that the Son is co-eternal with the Father and thus could not be created, ultimately establishing the

Logos and the Holy Spirit as having the same essence/substance of the Father (Lewis).

Basil wrote:

“In a brief statement, I shall say that essence (*ousia*) is related to subsistence (*hypostasis*) as the general to the particular. Each one of us partakes of existence because he shares in ousia while because of his individual properties he is A or B. So, in the case in question, ousia refers to the general conception, like goodness, god-head, or such notions, while hypostasis is observed in the special properties of fatherhood, sonship, and sanctifying power. If then they speak of persons without hypostasis they are talking nonsense, *ex hypothesi*; but if they admit that the person exists in real hypostasis, as they do acknowledge, let them so number them as to preserve the principles of the homoousion in the unity of the godhead, and proclaim their reverent acknowledgment of Father, son, and Holy spirit, in the complete and perfect hypostasis of each person so named.” (Dorman)

In his writings, Basil made sense of the doctrines that were established at Nicaea, while still distinguishing the position from that of modalism. The result of Basil’s work was essentially the disappearance of Arian and semi-Arian opposition from the Church.

The angle that St. Basil took to approach the problem of the Holy Spirit’s equality was different from his direct, straightforward position on the Logos. Basil was shy to use the term *homoousios* and although he felt strongly that the Spirit was of equal nature

within the Trinity, he hesitantly used phrases such as “rendering the same honor” (McDonnell). His boldest statement was, “the Son is acknowledged to be consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, and the Holy Spirit is numbered with them and adored with equal honor (*homotimos*). His argument was the Holy Spirit is divine in nature and that the Trinity represented an equality of persons, but he chose to take a very discrete and indirect approach to his preaching. Basil never came out and directly said that the Holy Spirit is God but did work around such bold statements in order to “win the weak.” His lack of firm stance was a pastoral strategy that Athanasius described as “being weak in order to win the weak” (McDonnell). During this tumultuous time, many people were scared of such bold teaching professed by the Cappadocians. St. Basil’s tactics allowed him to safeguard the unity of the Church and establish support and conversion within the weak, all without compromising the substance of the faith of the Trinity (McDonnell).

Gregory of Nazianzen also aimed his writing at defending Orthodox beliefs but mainly contributed to a better understanding of the Trinity as a whole. He focused on the internal relation of the three persons and insisted that:

God is three in regard to distinctive properties, or subsistence (*hypostases*) or, if you like, persons (*prosôpa*); for we shall not quarrel about the names, as long as the terms lead to the same conception. He is one in respect of the category of substance, that is, of godhead. The Godhead is distinguished, so to say, without distinctions, and is joined in one without abolishing the distinctions. The Godhead is one in three, and the three are one. The

Godhead has its being in the three; or, to speak more accurately, the God head is the three. We must avoid any notion of superiority or inferiority between the Persons; nor must we turn the union into a confusion, or the distinction into a difference of natures. We must keep equally aloof from the Sabellian identification [one substance but three activities in the Godhead] and the Arian differentiation errors diametrically opposed, but equally irreverent. (Dorman)

However, unlike St. Basil, Gregory did not take such an indirect approach on the Spirit. Gregory of Nazianzen was not shy of “the word” (McDonnell). He definitively stated that the Spirit is God. He affirmed this in his affirmation of consubstantiality:

The name of the one who is without a beginning is Father; the name of the beginning is Son; the name of the one who is with the beginning is Holy Spirit. Each is God by reason of consubstantiality; the Three are God by reason of monarchy. Nature is one in the Three; it is God. What makes their unity, however, is the Father, on whom the others depend, not in order to be confused or mixed, but in order to be united. (Dorman)

Gregory of Nazianzen’s opponents cried out that he was proposing “a rival God” (McDonnell). Gregory responded by elaborating on a doctrine of unfolding within the Bible. Gregory argued a progressive revelation. In the Old Testament there was a clear showing of the Father and very little mention of the Son. In the New Testament, Jesus was revealed with a small glimpse of the Holy Spirit. Gregory *felt* that you could not

have introduced the Son until the Father was fully embraced. If the Son is revealed in the New Testament, the fullest revelation of the Spirit comes beyond the scriptures and is here with us now. Gregory proclaimed that the “fullest revelation of the Spirit outside of the scriptures as a necessary and fulfilling inference from what had gone before” (McDonnell, Lewis). He developed this idea with his hallmark word, “*theosis*” (divinization), in which revelation is an ongoing process. Furthermore, his preaching focused around salvation. After all, we are all inspired by the Holy Spirit in whom we share in the divine nature through acts such as Baptism. The Holy Spirit must be God since it is only God that can bring us salvation (McDonnell).

When St. Basil died prior to the Council of Constantinople, his fight was taken up by his brother, Gregory of Nyssa (Congar). Gregory of Nyssa based his argument on the Baptismal formula as well; however, he developed it further claiming the formation and perfection of the Christian with Christ as a model is the work of a sanctifying Spirit (Congar). Gregory based his arguments on action. He felt that godhead signifies action rather than rank or nature. He proclaimed the Holy Spirit divine based on the Spirit's procession from the Son and on the actions taken. Gregory summarized his view:

We are not told that the Father does anything by himself in which the Son does not co-operate; or that the Son has any isolated activity, apart from the Holy Spirit. All activities which extend from God to creation are described by different names, in accordance with the different ways in which they are presented to our thought: but every activity originates from the Father, proceeds

through the Son, and is brought to fulfillment in the Holy Spirit. (Dorman)

Gregory of Nyssa formulated his teachings on source and procession. He taught that God was a life giving force and is the only source (*pege*), root (*rhiza*), principle (*arche*) and cause (*aitia*) in which both the Son and the Spirit proceed from (Kung/Multmann). Although such teaching did get Gregory in trouble with the issue of *hierarchy*, his angle on cooperation among actions and lack of isolated activity within the Trinity contributed towards an equilateral nature.

The result of the Cappadocian fathers' struggle turned into a victory at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381. The Cappadocian fathers' primary influence on the Council was that we cannot know the eternal generation of the Son or the eternal procession of the Spirit, but we can deduce from revelation that they are distinct, yet unified through procession (*Alfs*). The Second Council adopted the term "*ekporeusis*" (procession), which ultimately affirmed the individuality of the Holy Spirit. Gregory of Nazianzen at the Council of 381 faced grave opposition. Gregory silenced them by referring to the New Testament where the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father" (Geanakoplos). Gregory mocked his opponents: "Tell me what position will you assign to that which proceeds?...Or perhaps you have taken that word out of your Gospels for the sake of your third Testament, the Holy Ghost, which proceeds from the Father; who, in as much as he proceeds from that source, is no creature" (Geanakoplos).

The result was the expansion of the Nicene Creed. Amplifications were made to the first and second articles. The additions "eternally begotten," "maker of heaven and

earth,” and “by the power of the Holy Spirit He was born of the Virgin Mary and became man” were indispensable to the true nature of the Trinity (Constantelos). However, in regards to the Holy Spirit, true progress was made through additions to the third article where the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed reads:

The Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, Who is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son, Who spoke through the prophets: and in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism for the remission of sins. We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen. (Geanakoplos)

Although the Council did not use the words *homoousios* of the Spirit and did not apply the word “God,” the Spirit’s existence was established as a separate person. The intent and logic is clear. If the Holy Spirit is to be co-worshiped and co-glorified with the Father and the Son, then the Spirit is God (McDonnell).

The Cappadocian fathers ended a crisis, and quieted a controversy. Divisions over doctrine within the Church would continue but for the most part, the Cappadocians laid the groundwork that was central to all Christian faith. They are essentially the fathers of the Trinity. For, without them, there would be no true understanding. They took an impossible task and philosophically and theologically broke it down as humanly as possible. Gregory of Nazianzen attempted to express the complexity of his task when he wrote:

I, [Gregory], will explain to you the physiology of the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit. And we shall, both of us, be frenzy-stricken for prying into the mystery of God. And who are we to do these things, we who cannot even see what lies at our feet, or number the sand of the sea, or the drops of rain, or the days of eternity, much less enter into the depths of God and supply an account of that nature which is so unspeakable and transcending all words. (Constantelos)

The Cappadocian Fathers laid the groundwork for Trinitarian Theology, ultimately shaping our understanding of God. Their influences on Christology and Pneumatology cannot be properly expressed by words. Their struggles ultimately opened up the eyes of all Christians to the wonders and beauty of the Holy Spirit. This beauty lies within its gift. God is the Father and Jesus is the Giver, making the Holy Spirit the gift. We obtain our existence from God, and participate in this grace through Jesus, by means of the Spirit who makes us holy (Bobrinskoy). The gift of the spirit is ultimately the condition in which we may experience the Word, who himself is the Image of the Father.

Bibliography

- Lewis, Warren. Witnesses to the Holy Spirit. Valley Forge, PA: 1978.
- Alfs, Matthew. Concepts of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Minneapolis, MN: 1984.
- Bobrinskoy, Boris. "The Indwelling of the Spirit in Christ 'Pneumatic Christology' in the Cappadocian Fathers." St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly 28(1984): 49-65.
- Constantelos, Demetrios. "Toward The Convocation of The Second Ecumenical Synod." Greek Orthodox Theological 27(1982): 395-405.
- Congar, Yves. I Believe in the Holy Spirit. 2nd. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1979.
- Dorman, Marianne. "ARIANISM, MACEDONIANISM , APOLLINARIANISM AND THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS." 28 Nov 2008
<<http://mariannedorman.homestead.com/CappadocianFathers.html>>.
- Ettlinger, Gerald. "The Holy Spirit in the theology of the Second Ecumenical Synod and in the undivided church.." Greek Orthodox Theological 27(1982): 431-440.
- Geanakoplos, Deno. "The Second Ecumenical Synod of Constantinople(381): Proceedings and Theology of the Holy Spirit." Greek Orthodox Theological 27(1982): 407-429.
- Kung/Multman, Conflicts About the Holy Spirit. New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1979.
- McDonnell, Kilian. The Other Hand Of God. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003.
- McGrath, Allister. Theology: The Basics. 2nd. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004.
- O'Collins, Gerald. The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999.