

Cappadocians and Constantinople

This lesson is entitled “Three Theologians, Two Emperors, and a Church Council.” As you can tell from the title, I am trying to combine a number of ideas together, which are important items that we need to consider. By the fourth century Rome was the most important church in the West. But Constantinople, which was the most important church in the East, was in some ways even more important than Rome at that point. The three theologians I am going to talk about are the Great Cappadocians, who come from a land very close to Constantinople. The two emperors ruled in the new capital of Rome, which was Constantinople. And the second ecumenical council took place in Constantinople. So as far as geography is concerned, our topics today are people and events that took place near the great city of Constantinople.

One of those theologians whom we will study is Gregory of Nazianzus. As we begin I will use the words of a prayer, which we sometimes use as a hymn, from this ancient Eastern church father, Gregory of Nazianzus. Let us pray.

“O Light that knew no dawn, that shines to endless day, all things in earth and heaven are lustered by Thy ray. No eye can to Thy throne ascend, nor mind Thy brightness comprehend. In supplication meek, to Thee I bend the knee. O Christ, when Thou shalt come in love, remember me. And in Thy kingdom by Thy grace grant me a humble servant’s place. Thy grace O Father give, I humbly Thee implore. And let Thy mercy bless Thy servant more and more. All grace and glory be to Thee, from age to age eternally. Amen.”

We speak of “the Great Cappadocians.” Cappadocia was an area on the Black Sea not far from Constantinople in Asia. These men—one of whom was Gregory of Nazianzus—along with a woman named Macrina, were great people who led the church in many ways during the fourth century. We think of the fourth century as the golden age of Greek—or Eastern—orthodoxy because during that time were Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and John Chrysostom, the great preacher of Constantinople. So even today when the Greek or Eastern Orthodox Church thinks of their golden age they are likely to focus on the fourth century. In the Western church on the Roman Catholic side, it is probably the thirteenth century that they think of, with Thomas Aquinas and the other great medieval theologians. On the Protestant side in the West, it is certainly the sixteenth century, during the time of Luther and Calvin, which is thought of as the golden age. But for the Eastern church, even today, it is the fourth century. And these Cappadocians continue to be honored and revered names in the Eastern church.

There were two brothers among the Great Cappadocians, one named Basil and the other Gregory. We call Basil, Basil of Caesarea, since he spent part of his ministry there and was bishop of that city. And we call Gregory, Basil’s brother, Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory was born in 335, which puts him just 10 years after the great council in Nicea. Gregory is the fellow who gives us that unforgettable account of the way in which everyday life in the fourth century was permeated with theology, particularly discussions about the issues raised in Nicea. Everyone had an opinion, it seems. Gregory said about Constantinople, “Garment sellers, money changers, food vendors, they are all at it. If you ask for change, they philosophize about the begotten and the unbegotten. If you inquire about the price of bread, the answer is that the Father is greater and the Son inferior. If you say to the attendant, ‘Is my bath ready?’ He tells you that the Son was made out of nothing.”

For a long time Gregory seemed to drift through life without much focus or aim, without either a career or much religion. But he eventually found a very deep faith and became a theologian. He is a kind of

poet-theologian. When you read the theology from Gregory of Nyssa, it is hard to know whether you are reading theology or poetry. One of his books is called *The Life of Moses*, and it is a very intriguing book. It is not only about Moses, but also about many other things. Gregory said, “Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it.” It is language like that that makes me describe Gregory as not only a theologian but also a poet.

Gregory’s older brother by about six years was Basil. And Basil had a friend who was also named Gregory, so we call him Gregory of Nazianzus to distinguish him from Gregory of Nyssa. Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus met as students while they were studying in Athens. Later they lived together as monks in Cappadocia. Basil wrote the rule for monasteries that is still the standard rule for monasteries in the Orthodox world today, just as the rule of Benedict of Nursia is the standard rule for monastic life in the West.

Basil and Gregory of Nyssa had an older sister whose name was Macrina. It was actually Macrina who did much to shape the faith and the callings of her two brothers. She too wrote books on theology. Her brother Gregory wrote *The Life of Macrina* in which he tells of this remarkable woman who was his sister. Macrina also founded monasteries just as her brother Gregory did.

That is a quick biographical sketch of these four people whom we can call the Great Cappadocians. Let me summarize very briefly some of the themes in their writings. One of the important themes that comes through when reading the Cappadocians is the mystery of the Godhead. Nicea had already happened and had given us words to use when we think about the Trinity, which was itself a new word—one God in three persons, *homoousios*, begotten not made. All those words came into orthodoxy as important descriptions of the doctrine of God. But most theologians, including the Cappadocians, insisted that those words do not empty the Godhead of its mystery. The words simply point to parameters that we must use to understand orthodox teaching about God. But the mystery of God, the depth of God, and the mystery of the Trinity is still there.

There was one fourth century theologian, though not a very important one, whose name was Eunomius. He taught that you can know almost everything that can be known about God. But people did not follow him in that teaching. The idea remained that the Godhead is still full of mystery and that we know God, not in His essence, but in His works and in His revelation. That was the prevailing view both in the East and the West. Particularly in the East, however, the emphasis on the mystery and the hiddenness of God became very central to theology. It was so much the case that *apophatic* theology, or a theology of darkness, or negative theology, became an important aspect of Eastern theology. That is an issue we will consider later. Eastern theology always insists that Western theology knows too much and that we should have stopped long ago in attempting to probe into the mysteries of the Godhead. So the idea of the mystery of the Godhead and the importance of protecting that from curiosity is clearly set forth in the quotations of Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus.

A great contribution of the Cappadocians was to help the church, after it had focused on the person of Christ and His relationship to the Father, begin to think about the Holy Spirit. The Council of Nicea did not say much about the Holy Spirit. It just said, “We believe in the Holy Spirit.” The focus was on the *homoousios* of the Son and the Father. The Holy Spirit was simply affirmed as an object of faith, but not explored more fully. As we come to the writings of the Cappadocians, particularly the writings of Basil of Caesarea who wrote a book called, *On the Holy Spirit*, we see the church beginning to think of exactly how the Holy Spirit relates to the other two persons of the Godhead. The writings of the Cappadocians help to prepare for the decision of the second ecumenical council in Constantinople in 381 that the Holy Spirit is of the same substance as the Father and the Son.

Another important contribution of the Cappadocians was to help the church begin to think about the person of Christ. We will soon notice in our study that, after the doctrine of the Trinity, it was the doctrine of Christ that agitated the church. Various heresies developed and finally a consensus was reached at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. But much of the background for that consensus came from the writings of the Cappadocians. Gregory of Nazianzus, for instance, wrote, "That which He has not assumed, He has not healed. But that which is united to His Godhead is also saved." That sentence insists on the full humanity of Christ as a guarantee of our salvation. It is interesting that, in terms of soteriology, Athanasius wrote, "If Christ is not God, we are not saved." That is one of the important points of his book, *On the Incarnation of the Divine Word*. If Christ is not God, we are not saved, because it takes God to save us. So the doctrine of the deity of Christ is tied to soteriology. Gregory agrees with that, but he adds, "If Christ is not man, we are not saved." And I am sure Athanasius would have agreed with him. So the church begins to move toward a better understanding of the full deity of Christ but also of the necessity for the full humanity of Christ. Those two ideas brought together will find their classic expression in the middle ages in the writing by St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, Why the God-Man. Certainly the writings of the Cappadocians helped prepare the way for the decision of Chalcedon, which did affirm the true and complete humanity of Christ.

One other aspect of the lives of the Cappadocians that I would like to mention is their care for the needy. Basil was called Basil the Great. Many people in church history are called "the Great," and I have always been interested in how they got that name. Sometimes later church historians determined that a particular person was very important so they started calling him "the Great." Or important figures in the contemporary world will look on a certain figure as great and so he will be called "the Great." But Basil was called "the Great" not by the great and mighty but by the poor and needy. He was called Basil the Great by the people who lived in Caesarea because he was so concerned about them. He founded hospitals, orphanages, and houses for the poor. Shortly before becoming bishop of Caesarea he gave away much of his inheritance in famine relief and served food to the destitute. So, poor people said, "This is a great man." From that point on, Basil has been called Basil the Great. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote a book called *On the Love of the Poor* in which he supported Basil's soup kitchens by asking the rich to express their gratitude to God in gracious giving to the poor without prejudging the needy. With the Cappadocians you have theology, poetry, and social concern mixed in intriguing ways.

We also need to consider the emperors. We know that Constantine became a Christian, baptized on his deathbed. He legalized Christianity in the Roman world and everything changed. But Constantine died in 337, and there was a period of great agitation and confusion after his death because he had three sons, all of whom wanted to be emperor. For a while, the empire was divided among the three sons. Eventually one of the three, Constantius, became the sole emperor. When Constantius died in 361, he was succeeded by a close relative whose name was Julian. And we always add something to Julian's name. He is Julian the Apostate. This man, born in a Christian family, grew up as a Christian, but when he was 20 years old he publicly renounced Christianity and converted to paganism. That was 10 years before he became emperor. We have seen many people converting from paganism to Christianity, but here is a man who went the other way, from Christianity to paganism.

Why did he do that? One church historian has explained that Christianity fell apart for Julian when he realized the contradiction between the words of Constantine's sons and their actions. The sons of Constantine were all professing Christians, as their father had been. But they did not act like it. For example, the sons of Constantine saw to it that all of Julian's family was assassinated because there was a claim to the throne from that side too. In order to protect their own succession, they simply eliminated Julian's parents and relatives. No wonder he did not think much of Christianity when he saw professing

Christians acting that way. It is a sad story, although there is one tiny bright spot about it. According to tradition, Julian was saved as a baby because some Christians took him and hid him so that the sons of Constantine could not kill him. But he grew up to despise Christianity, and he worked very hard to try to overthrow it. He wanted to reestablish the old syncretism that had ruled before the Christians. He even wanted to bring Judaism into the mix. He thought it would be fine to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple and have Jehovah as one of the pantheon of other gods and goddesses. He worked very hard to try to accomplish his aim, but he found it extremely difficult. He said that the problem with trying to overthrow Christianity was that Christians, whom he called “impious Galileans,” were so much involved in good works. That was in contradiction to what he saw in the family of Constantine. But he could see that all Christians were not like those Christians. He said, “They not only take care of their poor; they take care of our poor as well.” He saw that they not only provided love and food and care for Christians, but they also took care of those who were not Christians. That set him back in his attempt to overthrow Christianity.

In the providence of God, Julian the Apostate was not an emperor very long—only about two years. He died in battle in 363, fighting the Persians. The Persians were the most formidable opponent of the Romans during the fourth century. That was one reason why Constantine moved the capital east to Constantinople, in order to be closer to the eastern border of the empire to try to keep the Persians out. Julian was leading his army in battle with the Persians when he received a mortal wound. According to tradition, in his last moment in life on the battlefield he cried out, “Thou hast conquered, O Galilean.” I am not sure that he said that, but it was certainly true. As soon as Julian died, the empire went back to protecting Christianity as it had done before he took the throne.

We need to think of one other emperor in the fourth century. The three big names in the fourth century are Constantine, Julian, and Theodosius. There were other emperors, but those are the important ones. Theodosius became emperor in 379. With Theodosius we have another important change. Constantine had simply legalized Christianity. Theodosius established Christianity as the only official religion of the Roman Empire. By the time we come to Theodosius at the end of the fourth century, the tables are totally turned. At the beginning of the century, Christians were outlawed and persecuted. By the end of the century, Christianity was established and the pagans were persecuted. Theodosius destroyed the pagan temples. He passed laws against heresies. So it was not only necessary to be a Christian, but also to be an orthodox Christian. With Theodosius we move into a period that we can call “Christendom,” in which state and religion are very closely allied, and in which laws will prohibit the practice of other religions or even the practice of heretical Christianity. Christendom extends all the way to the time of the Reformation and beyond.

I have introduced three wonderful theologians, or four counting Macrina, and two emperors. One emperor tried to destroy Christianity. The other, in trying to protect Christianity, actually did more to damage it than Julian did. That combination of church and state is going to have serious repercussions in the years to come. Now we come to the second ecumenical council. It is important to know these early church councils. Nicea was the first, in 325. The second is the Council of Constantinople in 381. It was called by Theodosius, the emperor.

The main issue that was discussed there was the deity of the Holy Spirit. The Council of Nicea simply added the words, “And we believe also in one Holy Spirit.” It did not explain further how the Holy Spirit relates to the Father and the Son. It was at the Council of Constantinople that we receive some very familiar words, which are now part of the Nicene Creed that we use in our churches today. When we use the Nicene Creed today, it is not the creed of Nicea in 325. It is rather the expanded version of 381. It is the creed of Nicea and Constantinople. It includes these words, “The Holy Spirit, the Lord,

Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son, is together worshiped and together glorified.” That statement was intended to say, and it does say, although people continued to add to it in various ways, that the church applies the concept of *homoousios* now to the Spirit as it had already applied that concept to the Son.

That statement also uses the word “proceeds” to describe the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Father. Remember that at Nicea part of that creed was that the Son is begotten of the Father. I have said that statement serves to show the distinction between the Father and the Son. The word “begotten” does not mean “made.” The Son is eternal and equal to the Father. But that word “begotten,” which can conjure up other images in our mind, was used in Nicea to simply say that the Son is not Father. The word that is used for the Holy Spirit to make that distinction is the word “proceeds.” The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. These words do not indicate differences in the divine essence, but simply help us understand something of the distinction among the divine persons or the relationship in which they stand to each other.

I have said that our commonly used Nicene Creed is the creed that was affirmed at Constantinople. There is another creed, the Athanasian Creed, that is easy to confuse with the Nicene Creed. You may have heard of the Athanasian Creed. It is also known by its opening words in Latin, *Quicumque vult*, which is, “Whoever wishes to be saved.” According to J. N. D. Kelley, an expert on early Christian creeds, we know two things for sure about the Athanasian Creed. First, it was not by Athanasius. Second, it was not a creed. Although it bears his name, it was not by Athanasius, for it is composed long after his life, probably in the fifth or sixth century by some highly skilled theologian, maybe in France or Spain. It was composed in Latin. And it is not really a creed in the sense that it is not really a short summary. It is a longer summary. It is a kind of technical summary of the teaching of the councils and the church in the first five centuries. It also has a very negative tone. Nicea and Constantinople insist on orthodoxy, but the Athanasian Creed begins with warnings against apostasy or heresy. In other words, in the usual way in which it is said, the creed begins by saying, “Whoever wants to be saved should above all hold fast to the true Christian faith.” That statement is often followed with a kind of response that says, “Whoever does not keep this faith whole and pure, without a doubt, will perish eternally.” The creed goes back and forth that way with many warnings about not holding to Nicene orthodoxy. I am not saying that is a bad thing. But there is a different tone in the Athanasian Creed than the more positive and perhaps more joyful ascriptions of the teaching of the doctrine of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the earlier statements from Nicea and Constantinople. “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8).

Now let me address some remaining questions about some of the topics I have covered in this lesson. Sometimes people ask how the pagans were persecuted during the time of Theodosius. This was done mainly in the destruction of their temples, which sometimes caused riots. You can understand the pagans would resist that sort of thing as the emperor would order the destruction of a temple in Greece or Egypt. When there was resistance, the arm of the state came down heavy upon the pagans. Thus pagans were killed in those clashes with authorities. The persecution of pagans was not exactly like that carried out by Diocletian or some of the other emperors before Christianity was accepted. There was some physical death as a result of clashes with the police. But mostly it was that pagans found themselves like Christians had been earlier in the century, shut out of public office or disadvantaged in some other ways. It is rather strange that the fourth century started one way and ended another way. As we go through the rest of the middle ages, the laws against heresies will become ever tougher. Eventually Justinian will close the philosophical schools in Athens. That is an important landmark in this history that comes in the sixth century.

Some have asked if there were any emperors other than Julian who opposed Christianity. Immediately after Julian there was an emperor named Jovan. He restored everything to what it had been under Constantius, the son of Constantine. So with Julian, there was only a two year break in which the emperor was not Christian, and he tried very hard to revert the empire back to paganism. After that two year period, all the remaining emperors supported Christianity. After a while, there were no more emperors in Rome. During this time, while the main emperor ruled in Constantinople, there was a sub-emperor in Rome. He was supposed to hold together what was happening in the western part of the empire, but without much power. Into that Roman vacuum will step the pope, who will gain a great deal of temporal power, and not just spiritual power. The pope will become the most important figure in the West after the emperor has moved far away to the city of Constantinople.

Some wonder if there was a Christian response to the pagan persecution. In other words, were there Christians who tried to stop the persecutions of pagans? Yes, there was some response. Ambrose, the great bishop in Milan, even rebuked an emperor for persecuting the Jews. There were some Christians who did not approve. Fortunately, we know that some raised their voices against the persecution of Jews and pagans. I expect that even Ambrose would not have opposed the idea of laws requiring Christian commitment. But he did not want physical persecution against those who did not follow those laws. For the most part, however, such persecution was accepted. Christians liked being in power, and at least it was much better than being persecuted. At this time begins the growth of the nominal Christian state, which becomes a problem for us, because it becomes difficult to separate that from the real church and real Christianity. Everything that goes by the name "Christian" is not Christian, and that goes for church history. You must understand that from this point on when I say, "Christian," I do not always mean born again, devout, Bible loving, or Calvinist. The word becomes generalized, and for that reason it becomes despised by many people, and sometimes for proper reasons.