



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

### **Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)**

#### **Lesson 17 – The Life and Teachings of the Three Cappadocians**

The battle for the orthodox teaching of the Trinity and Jesus Christ against Arianism continued after the death of Athanasius. Emperors who supported the Arian heresy followed Julian the Apostate. In 379 AD the capital city of Constantinople did not have a single church or congregation that was not Arian. But God supplied a number of leaders from Cappadocia (southern Turkey today) who upheld the truth of Scripture and carried on the testimony of Athanasius to the next generation.

By this time there were Christians who could look back to having Christian parents and Christian grandparents. A lawyer named Basil, the son of parents who had escaped persecution by hiding in the forest, married the daughter of a martyr. They raised their daughter Macrina and their sons Basil, Naucratus, and Gregory as Christians. When the man whom Macrina was to marry suddenly died, Macrina devoted herself to the monastic life. Her sickly brother Basil was given the best education of the age. He learned from teachers in Caesarea, Antioch, Constantinople, and Athens. But Basil's education puffed him up and made him arrogant, and he strayed from his Christian roots. Macrina tried to persuade him to read Christian books rather than pagan ones, but she had little influence on him until their brother Naucratus died. Then both Macrina and Basil devoted themselves to lives of withdrawal and contemplation and prayer.

Basil's good friend Gregory of Nazianzus joined Basil. They set up rules for community life in the monastery, and Basil became known as Basil the Great. He was the father of Eastern monasticism. But the church at Caesarea needed a leader like Basil, and soon he was chosen as the bishop of Caesarea after the former bishop died. The city was divided between the Nicene party and the Arian party. Basil was a firm supporter of Nicene doctrine, and the Arian Emperor Valens tried to bring him down. But Basil held his ground. He supported the doctrines of the Nicene Creed through his writings and his testimony. Eventually this teaching prevailed, even though he, like Athanasius, died before the Council of Constantinople in 381 established the Nicene doctrine as the official teaching of the church.

Basil and Macrina had a younger brother named Gregory, who is called Gregory of Nyssa to distinguish him from his brother Basil's good friend, Gregory of Nazianzus. Gregory of Nyssa was married and took up the monastic life only after the death of his wife. He wrote a pamphlet *On Virginity* in which he showed that the monastic life was preferable to marriage, because a monk did not have to endure having his wife go through childbirth and possible death and a monk could devote himself to study and prayer. This was a typical opinion of the

time, and many of the Christian leaders of that era, including Athanasius, did not fully realize that marriage was a precious gift of God with the special benefit of having the opportunity to train children as Christians from childhood.

His brother Basil took Gregory away from the monastic life, however, and made him the bishop of Nyssa, where it was necessary for him to contend against the strong Arian party and the Arian Emperor Valens. Gregory was able to attend the Council of Constantinople in 381 where he was regarded as a leader of the Nicene party. The new emperor, Theodosius (379-395), chose Gregory of Nyssa as his theological adviser. In this role, Gregory of Nyssa had to travel throughout the empire. Later he was able to return to the monastic life, which he much preferred.

Meanwhile Basil's good friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, enjoyed the monastic life with Basil for a time, but later he was pressed into duty as a pastor, and he preached a famous sermon on the duties of a pastor. But when many of his close relatives died, Gregory again withdrew into monastic life for a time. But finally he left the solitary life and founded an orthodox congregation in Constantinople, which was the stronghold of Arianism. The Arians persecuted him and even interrupted his church services, but Gregory remained firm and strengthened his congregation by means of hymns.

When Emperor Theodosius entered Constantinople, he expelled all of his advisers who were Arians, and befriended Gregory. When Gregory visited the cathedral of St. Sophia with the emperor, a ray of bright sunlight happened to come down on Gregory, and the people understood this to mean that Gregory was God's choice to be the bishop of Constantinople. The bishop of Constantinople by this time was considered to be one of the patriarchs or leaders of the Eastern Church. As such, Gregory of Nazianzus presided over the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Emperor Theodosius had summoned the Council of Constantinople to finally settle the Arian controversy, which had continued since 325, when the original Nicene Creed was adopted. Since Gregory was still the bishop of Nazianzus, his opponents called for him to be dismissed as bishop. He was happy to resign since he preferred a simpler life.

The Council of Constantinople adopted the enlarged Nicene Creed, which now included a much larger section on the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed became the definitive Christian confession on the doctrine of the Trinity, and it is still part of our Lutheran confession today. We can thank our God for giving His Church the three great Cappadocians and sister Macrina as champions of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity to stand against the Arians, who continued to reject the teaching that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, equal to the Father.

### **The Second Confession or The Nicene Creed**

(as it is found in the *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 22-23)

*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things, seen and unseen.*

*And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all the ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father, through whom all things were made. For us human beings and for our salvation He came down from the heavens, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became a human being. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered death, and was buried. On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; He ascended into the heavens and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He is coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead. There will be no end to His kingdom.*

*And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. In one holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come. Amen.*

**Questions:**

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1. Which city in the empire became a stronghold of Arianism?
2. Who are the three great Cappadocians?
3. What led Basil the Great to become so proud and arrogant?
4. Who tried to lead Basil away from pagan learning to Christian truth?
5. Why was the false teaching of the Arians so dangerous?
6. What led Basil to leave the monastic life and become a bishop?
7. What views did Gregory of Nyssa have concerning married life?
8. Why did Gregory of Nyssa do much traveling, contrary to his desires?
9. Why did Gregory of Nazianzus find it difficult to live in Constantinople?
10. What new age began when Theodosius became the emperor?
11. What was accomplished at the Council of Constantinople of 381?
12. What advantage did the Arians have over the orthodox in most years since 325?
13. How can we tell whether the Arians or the orthodox were right?
14. What section was added to the original Nicene Creed in 381?

