

Basil the Great

Introduction Part 1 – Why Should We Care about Basil the Great?

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"Basil started out for his life's work with the equipment of the most liberal education which the age could supply. He had studied Greek literature, rhetoric, and philosophy under the most famous teachers." —Blomfield Jackson

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This introduction comes from the Cave's
The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education.

Introduction Part 1

Why Should We Care about Basil the Great?

HAVE YOU EVER wondered how it is that someone comes to be called "the Great"? Interestingly, we don't encounter any figures with this epithet in philosophy, science, or business. There's no Aristotle the Great, for instance, even though the breadth and depth of his investigations certainly deserve it, if anyone's do. Newton was never called Isaac the Great, nor did anyone ever suggest—to Latinize his name—*Einsteinus Magnus* as another Albert was much earlier called *Albertus Magnus* (Albert the Great). And what about Thomas Edison the Great? Or Henry Ford the Great? Or Steve Jobs the Great? (Imagine the possible title of a biography: *Steve the Great: Computer*

Mastermind.) No—not a one has won the title. For examples of people called "the Great," we have to turn back in time and to the realms of politics and religion.

In politics it seems that men who conquer, unify, and rule with great power are counted great. Reaching back to the earliest accounts, there was Cyrus the Great, who conquered much of the ancient Near East, unifying it under the Persian Empire. Later there was Alexander the Great, the Macedonian ruler who conquered the Persian Empire in the name of the Greeks—the same Greeks who had been harassed by the Persians for nearly two hundred years. When the Romans came along and mastered the Greeks, their

empire consequently stretched as far as the borders of the old Persian Empire. It was so large, in fact, that in some respects it became unmanageable to govern by one emperor alone. So it was that the emperor Diocletian effectively, if not formally, divided the Roman Empire toward the end of the third century AD. Nevertheless, the emperor Constantine the Great begged to differ with this division. And so, after conquering and winning control of the whole empire, he reestablished unity under his own powerful rule (hence, “the Great”).

In the realm of religion, greatness has to do with the scope and subject matter of teaching, as well as personal influence and lifestyle. Take, for example, Anthony the Great, the “Father of Monks.” Not only did he sell all and give to the poor, as Jesus advised, but he lived such a radical life that he inspired whole generations of men and women to follow him into the desert in pursuit of a uniquely simple way of life.

Scanning over to the other half of the Roman Empire, there was Pope Leo the Great, who was judged so not only for his teaching (he is considered a “Doctor of the Church” by Roman Catholics) but also for his courage in facing Attila the Hun. Leo persuaded the aggressor to leave Italy when he was poised to invade Rome in 452 AD. Finally, Albert the Great—the same *Albertus Magnus* from a moment ago—led a devoutly religious life as a Dominican friar, studying and writing about theology, philosophy, and science. Among other accomplishments, his commentaries on Aristotle and his engagement with Islamic thinkers made him tower above other Medieval scholars.

But why Basil the Great? He was called “Great” very early on by both Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. Exploring why he was honored in this way will help us understand why so many over time have cared about this man who lived and taught greatly in the fourth century AD.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT BASIL THE GREAT?

The first reason why we should care about Basil is because many others have been intensely interested in and influenced by him over the past nearly two thousand years—many of the highest minds and greatest souls, certainly within the fields of Christian philosophy, theology, and practice. In short, Basil has long been awash with attention and admiration that has, in turn, shaped whole worlds of thought and activity.

Take, for instance, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, who possessed a great philosophical mind in his own right. Introduced to the Greek classics by Basil, Gregory praised him for the immense store of his wealth in learning, what he termed Basil’s “Egyptian wealth,” and for using it for the benefit of the people of the Church.¹ Without Basil the Great, there would likely have been no Gregory of Nyssa and his more philosophical musings that have also had their own widespread impact.

Although the same may not be said of another Gregory, Basil’s dear friend Gregory of Nazianzus (alternatively called Gregory Nazianzen), Basil

nevertheless served at times as the great and massive object around which the latter Gregory orbited. In the oration celebrating his friend, Gregory of Nazianzus lauds Basil’s high level of education. “What branch of learning did he not traverse?” he asks. “Who had such power in rhetoric . . . in grammar . . . in philosophy?”—as well as astronomy, geometry, and medicine.² And yet, whereas Gregory himself admits that he “attained to happiness” in Athens, which had been to him “a city truly of gold and the patroness of all that is good,” Basil, though taking full advantage of the opportunities of learning there, judged Athens “an empty happiness.”³ His true pursuit, reports Gregory,

was philosophy, and breaking away from the world, and fellowship with God—by means of concerning himself amid things below with things above, and winning, where all is unstable and fluctuating, the things that are stable and remain.⁴

It was Basil’s influence that ultimately pulled Gregory

of Nazianzus away from Athens and in the direction of a different life than he would have otherwise led—an ecclesial and reflective life with its own long-term impact.⁵

In terms of inspiration, and aside from the two Gregories, Basil influenced many Christian thinkers in both the eastern and western Roman Empire. Among them, and somewhat randomly, we may count Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo in the West, as well as Amphilochius of Iconium and Maximus the Confessor in the East. Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas cited Basil's teaching on "the beginning of time" in creation in his own account of the instantaneous, successionless moment of creation.⁶ Even later, when John Calvin attempted to imagine the earliest form of the Church aside from that found in the Acts of the Apostles, it was the "ancient form of the Church" depicted in the writings of "[John] Chrysostom and Basil, among the Greeks" as well as in those of certain Latin fathers that best helped him grasp what it was like.⁷

Though examples may be multiplied, suffice to say that today Basil is considered a "Doctor of the Church" among Roman Catholics, and he carries just as much weight among the eastern Orthodox, where he is counted "a renowned and bright star" and "the revealer of heavenly mysteries."⁸ Why? it may be asked. The reasons are many. It is for his defense of Christian orthodoxy against Arianism. It is for his instruction on the Trinity, and, more specifically, on the Holy Spirit in his work *On the Holy Spirit*. It is for his cosmology and his teaching on creation in the *Hexameron*. And this is not to mention the significant contributions he made to the organization of monasticism and to the divine liturgy, his example in serving the poor and the sick, and, finally, the simplicity of his life.

Gregory of Nazianzus compared Basil the Great to the sun beautifully traversing the sky.⁹ The image is fitting. Basil shone the light of truth as he understood and experienced it—the truth that he gathered from both Christian and non-Christian sources. It's a point that brings us to the second reason why we should care about Basil, for his role in preserving and

promoting non-Christian sources of knowledge and wisdom.

Basil was a man who, in many ways, straddled two worlds. Even though he ended up living much of his life in an atmosphere of Christian feeling, thinking, and acting, he was nevertheless formed by the "pagan" world of Greece and Rome, that which was, as he termed it, "outside" the Church. Basil's education was traditional. It followed the great works of the ancient past going back hundreds of years—as many as a thousand years in the case of Homer and Hesiod—to the most outstanding writings of the chief thinkers of Greece and Rome: the poets and playwrights, the historians and orators, and, most significantly, the philosophers.

Because he straddled the Christian and the non-Christian worlds in this way, Basil at some point had to rationalize how the two worlds fit together—if at all. I say "if at all" because there was a whole line of Christian thinkers who believed that Christian thinking should have nothing to do with non-Christian thinking—which is to say with Greek and Latin literature, whether in the form of poetry or philosophy. Tertullian was among these.¹⁰ As for the teachings of the Greek philosophers—of those who followed Plato, Aristotle, the Cynics, Epicurus, the Stoics, and others—Tertullian called them "the doctrines of men and of demons produced for itching ears of the spirit of this world's wisdom." Most famously he queried, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?"¹¹ Even so, Tertullian recognized the necessity of "secular studies," of "literary erudition," for the purpose of pursuing "divine studies."¹²

Many other Christian thinkers took a far more positive view. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, recognized the great advantage of education in "that external culture which many Christians ill-judgingly abhor."¹³ Basil agreed—so much so that he wrote a work, the one we have here in hand, explaining how one might benefit from reading Greek literature. Such writings offer a "preliminary training" for the soul. We must, he said, "be initiated into these outside writers if the notion of the good and the beautiful is to

remain with us for all time.” The point was to learn from “what is useful” in terms of wisdom and the example of a virtuous life.¹⁴

Writing mid-twentieth century, the scholar of Greek education Werner Jaeger judged that “Basil’s famous oration on the study of Greek literature and poetry . . . was the charter of all Christian higher education for centuries to come.”¹⁵ This means that Basil’s view on the value of non-Christian thinking and literature for Christians became the dominant view as the centuries passed by to the present. So much so, that Pope John XXIII in 1962 declared in his Apostolic Constitution *Veterum Sapientia* (Ancient Wisdom) that

The wisdom of the ancient world, enshrined in Greek and Roman literature, and the truly memorable teaching of ancient peoples, served, surely, to herald the dawn of the Gospel that God’s Son . . . proclaimed on earth. Such was the view of the Church Fathers and Doctors. In these outstanding literary monuments of antiquity, they recognized man’s spiritual preparation for the supernatural riches that Jesus Christ communicated to mankind “to give history its fulfillment.” Thus the inauguration of Christianity did not mean the obliteration of man’s past achievements. Nothing was lost that was in any way true, just, noble and beautiful.

Of course, as there is now, there was a third option relative to literature when Basil was alive. If what we may term the “Christian literature alone” and the “Christian augmented by non-Christian literature” positions were those most often held by Christians, there were others—including former Christians—who opted for a third “non-Christian literature alone” position. The most famous of these was the short-lived Roman emperor Julian. Educated alongside Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus in Athens, Julian grew up a Christian, but he later gave up Christianity in order to return to and gain sustenance alone from the non-Christian traditions of the past. For this he was later called “the Apostate” (read, *not* “the Great”).

Though in different terms, perhaps, the same options relative to learning and knowledge are available to us today: faith alone, reason alone, or both; religion alone, science alone, or both. Fortunately, for those of us who have faith and care to check the “both” box, men such as Basil the Great led the way in demonstrating how we might go about reaping a useful, beneficial harvest from what Tertullian simply and somewhat unhelpfully called “secular learning.”

This is the third reason why we should care about Basil the Great. Not only did he contribute to the preservation of ancient forms of learning by saying “yes” to non-Christian literature but he also showed readers *how* to say yes to such a literature—how to read a literature that was not, strictly speaking, one’s own. In this way, he showed all readers—whether religious or not—how to be tolerant. We are able to do this, he advised, by highlighting that which is good, true, and beautiful in a work rather than demanding a purity of ideology, so to speak, tailor-made for our own way of thinking and our own set of beliefs. This is not to say he tolerated everything in every work. Not at all. In fact, he advised readers not to hand the “rudders of their minds” over to an author indiscriminately. “Instead,” he counseled, “you should accept from them only what is useful, and know what to disregard.”¹⁶ Still, his general approach, his general assumption, we might say, was positive—the positive expectation to find something worthwhile.

One final point. Although Basil was not the earliest of Christian thinkers and writers, not by nearly three centuries, he nevertheless represents the voice of early Christianity. In common parlance, he is a “Father of the Church,” that is, a significant and esteemed teacher from the first seven centuries of the Church’s existence. If we wish to understand, therefore, how early Christians thought and approached life, we would do well to listen to Basil. And certainly, if we wish to understand how early Christians interacted with non-Christians and their literature, then Basil is our man.

So, then, who was Basil?

So ends this item. See you in **another Cave reading or item.**

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NOTES

- ¹ See Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. by Everett Ferguson and Abraham J. Malherbe (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 4; 81.
- ² Gregory of Nazianzus, *On Basil the Great*, *Oration* 43.23.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 43.14; 18.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.13.
- ⁵ See *Ibid.*, 43.24 where Gregory reports that his “longing desire” for Basil caused him to leave Athens (after Basil had already left) and “rush to my mate.”
- ⁶ See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, *Book Two: Creation*, trans. by James F. Anderson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 56-58.
- ⁷ See John Dillenberger, ed. *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1975), 92.
- ⁸ See “St. Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia” (www.oca.org).
- ⁹ See the implicit comparisons in Gregory of Nazianzus, *On Basil the Great*, *Oration* 43.2 and 66.
- ¹⁰ To one degree or another, others included Saint Paul, Theophilus of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and Jerome. Gregory of Nazianzus recognized there were “many” such Christians. See Gregory of Nazianzus, *On Basil the Great*, *Oration* 43.11.
- ¹¹ Tertullian, *Prescription against the Heretics* 7.
- ¹² Tertullian, *Of Idolatry* 10.
- ¹³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On Basil the Great*, *Oration* 43.11.
- ¹⁴ See Basil, *How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature* 1.5; 2.6-7.
- ¹⁵ Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 81.
- ¹⁶ Basil, *How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature* 1.5.

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