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**AND WHO IS THE SPIRIT?  
BASIL OF CAESAREA'S LETTERS TO THE CHURCH AT TARSUS**

BY

MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN

Prominent in the last years of Basil of Caesarea's life was his quarrel with his old friend, Eustathius of Sebaste, over the nature and status of the Holy Spirit. Eustathius had been instrumental in Basil's conversion and for a short time had acted as his mentor in the Christian life. But he was no theologian and although he was quite orthodox with regard to the Son, his view of the Spirit left much to be desired. For instance, when the question of the Spirit's deity was raised at a synod in 364 Eustathius is reputed to have said: "I neither chose to name the Holy Spirit God nor dare to call him a creature".<sup>1</sup> Thus, when Basil's episcopal colleagues, Theodotus of Nicopolis and Meletius of Antioch, questioned the orthodoxy of Eustathius' pneumatological position, Basil was compelled to confront his friend and in the subsequent debate between the two men the inadequacy of Eustathius' views about the Spirit was revealed. Indeed by 377 Basil recognized in Eustathius one of the most dangerous enemies of the Church.<sup>2</sup> Yet, even before his dispute with Eustathius, the bishop of Caesarea was concerned about the presence of heretical views about the Spirit in the Christian communities of western Asia Minor. Evidence of this concern is provided in his *Letters* 113 and 114,<sup>3</sup> both of which were written during 372 to members of the Christian community at Tarsus in *Cilicia prima*.<sup>4</sup>

Following the death of Silvanus, the bishop of Tarsus, in 369,<sup>5</sup> there appeared in the community certain Pneumatomachi, who maintained that the Holy Spirit is a creature. However, other believers within the community, convinced of the Spirit's deity, were unwilling to remain in communion with any who did not explicitly subscribe to their view of the Spirit. When these orthodox "zealots" wrote to Basil for his advice, Basil replied with a plea for tolerance. This letter has been transmitted as *Letter* 113 in the Basilian corpus and runs as follows:<sup>6</sup>

When I met this man [i.e., the bearer of the letter], I was very thankful to the holy God, for through his visit God has comforted me in my many af-

flictions and through him has clearly showed me your love. For I have all but observed in the purpose of this one man the zeal of all of you on behalf of the truth. He will inform you of what we discussed with one another in private; but what your Charity should learn from me is as follows.

The present circumstances hold a great propensity for the destruction of the churches, of which I have been aware for some time now. Edification of the Church and correction of error, sympathy towards the weak and protection of those brethren who are sound are all non-existent. Moreover, there is no remedy available either to heal this sickness which plagues us or to prevent that which threatens. All in all the condition of the Church is like that of an old coat (to use an unambiguous example, even if it appears somewhat trite), which is easily torn by the slightest occasion of use and which cannot be restored to its original strength. Consequently, in such circumstances, there is a need for great zeal and much diligence, so that the churches might receive some benefit. And a benefit it is that these parts which have long been separated be united again. Now union would occur if we were willing to show indulgence to those who are weaker, where we can do so without harm to souls. Therefore, since many voices have been raised against the Holy Spirit and many tongues have been whetted to blasphemy against him, I ask you, in so far as you can, to reduce the blasphemers to a small number and receive into communion those who do not say that the Holy Spirit is a creature. Thus, the blasphemers may be left alone, and either become ashamed and return to the truth or remain in their sin and become discredited because of their small number. Hence, let us seek nothing more beyond proposing the faith of Nicaea to those brothers who wish to join us. And if they accept that, then let us demand also that they must not call the Holy Spirit a creature and that those who do so should not be received into communion. But I do not think it is appropriate to ask for anything beyond these requirements. For I am convinced that if something more needs to be added for clarification, the Lord, who in all things works for the good of those who love him [Rom 8:28], will grant it through the continued sharing of the same way of life and through peaceful discussions [τῆ χρονιωτέρα συνδιαγωγῆ καὶ τῆ ἀφιλονείκῳ συγγυμνασίᾳ].<sup>7</sup>

Basil concurs with the opinion of the orthodox zealots of Tarsus that zeal is good, but, he stresses, only so long as it is directed towards a worthy goal. Due to the dissension and disregard for other believers which already characterizes the Church, Basil is convinced that such a goal does not entail further fragmentation, which would be the case if Basil's addressees had their way. Rather, their efforts should be directed towards the unification of all who are not clearly heretical. But this unification can only come about if those to whom Basil writes, and others of similar zeal, are willing to accommodate themselves to those whose beliefs are not as settled. Basil then proceeds to indicate how this

principle is to be put into practice. Basil's addressees should receive into communion all who confess the Nicene creed and who refuse to describe the Spirit as a creature. In this way those who are openly blaspheming the Spirit will be discredited due to their small numbers. The way in which Basil concludes this letter is especially noteworthy. From his own personal experience of the means by which the Spirit imparts doctrinal truth Basil urges the recipients of this letter to be more patient with others who have not yet attained to where they stand. As they continue to worship and dialogue together, God will be gently at work in their midst giving both clarification and illumination about who the Spirit is. Basil here reveals his deep trust in the sovereignty of God which reminds one of earlier Christian authors like the Apostle Paul.<sup>8</sup>

In the second letter to the community at Tarsus, *Letter 114*, Basil addresses a certain Cyriacus, the leader of a group whose pneumatological position is not as clear-cut as that of the recipients of *Letter 113*. Hermann Dörries considered Cyriacus to be the spokesman for those who were undecided with regard to the nature and status of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> Jean Gribomont takes a similar position when he states that Cyriacus maintained the moderate position held by the Homoiousian Silvanus of Tarsus who had died in 369.<sup>10</sup> Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, however, is of the opinion that Cyriacus was not merely a Homoiousian, but probably the leader of the Pneumatomachi at Tarsus.<sup>11</sup> A decision as to which of these judgments is correct requires a fresh examination of *Letter 114*.

Basil opens the letter with a brief eulogy on peace and then proceeds to the issue at hand, the question of the Spirit.

What need is there to tell those who are the sons of peace how great the benefit of peace is? But since this great and wonderful blessing, which is eagerly desired by all who love the Lord, is in danger of becoming a mere term, "because wickedness has increased and the love of many has now grown cold" [Mt 24:12], I am of the opinion that those who are genuine and true servants of the Lord ought to have this one goal: the re-unification of the churches which "in many and various ways" [Heb 1:1] have been divided from one another. If I also should attempt to accomplish this goal, it would be unjust to accuse me of being an inquisitive busybody. For nothing is more characteristic of the Christian than to be a peacemaker; for this reason, the reward which the Lord has promised us for it is the highest [cf. Mt 5:9].

Now, I have met the brothers and I have observed their great love for the brethren and especially their love for you, their even greater love for Christ, and their scrupulousness and firmness with regard to the faith.

Moreover, they are especially zealous to achieve both of the following goals: neither to be separated from your love nor to abandon the sound faith. I have accepted their good intentions. Therefore, I am writing to your Reverence, imploring you with all love to regard them as genuine allies and partners in all of your concern for the Church. Furthermore, I have made myself answerable to them for your orthodoxy, that you also, by the grace of God, in your zeal for the truth are prepared for whatever you must suffer for the sake of true doctrine.

I am personally convinced that the following conditions are not opposed to your beliefs and are sufficient to give full assurance to the brothers of whom I have just spoken: that you confess the faith which was set forth by our Fathers at Nicaea, and that you reject none of its statements, keeping in mind that the three hundred and eighteen, who came together without contention, did not speak without the action [ἐνέργεια] of the Holy Spirit. And that you add to that profession of faith the requirement that one must not speak of the Holy Spirit as a creature, nor have communion with any who do so, in order that the Church of God might be pure, having no tares intermingled with it.

When this assurance has been given to them by your Mercifulness, they are ready to exhibit the proper submission to you. On behalf of the brothers I myself promise that they will in no way oppose you, but will show you the highest degree of discipline when your Perfection has offered them this one thing for which they ask.<sup>12</sup>

The aim of this letter was to effect a reconciliation between its recipients and the orthodox zealots addressed in *Letter* 113.<sup>13</sup> For, after the statement that one of the distinctive features of an authentic Christian existence is the desire for peace within the Church of God, Basil attempts to show how this hallmark can become a reality in the life of the believers at Tarsus. Basil first of all points out that the orthodox zealots were not only concerned about correct doctrine but also about their relationship with Cyriacus and those whom he represents.<sup>14</sup> Thus, though they were not prepared to endorse an erroneous concept of the Spirit, they were anxious to avoid a schism.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, Basil had assured the orthodox zealots that Cyriacus and his friends did indeed hold an orthodox view of the Spirit. Basil now asks Cyriacus and his friends to repay his trust in them by confessing the Nicene creed without the omission of any of its statements, and by refusing to describe the Spirit as a creature. The remark that those who composed the creed of Nicaea were inspired by the Holy Spirit reinforces Basil's insistence that Cyriacus and his friends omit none of the propositions of the Nicene creed.<sup>16</sup> A true theology of the Godhead must be based upon the conception of God that is expressed in this creed. As Hauschild rightly

notes, this remark is intended to elicit an acknowledgement that the Son is one in being [ὁμοούσιος] with the Father, from which it can be concluded that Cyriacus and his colleagues probably came from the Homoiousian background.<sup>17</sup> But were they Pneumatomachi, as Hauschild also maintains?

As noted above, *Letter* 114 opens with a eulogy on peace, in which Basil describes the recipients of the letter as “sons of peace”. While it is not precisely clear what Basil wishes to convey by the use of this term, surely the context intimates that Cyriacus and his associates were men who were well acquainted with the benefits of ecclesiastical peace. There is nothing to indicate that Basil believes that Cyriacus and his friends were endeavouring to destroy the peace of the Church. In fact, Basil seems to assume that they honestly desire to be devoted servants of the Lord. Thus, he exhorts them to demonstrate the authenticity of their Christian discipleship by being peacemakers in a day “when the love of many has grown cold” [Mt 24:12].<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, it is apparent that Cyriacus and his colleagues did not consider the Spirit to be a creature. Basil would not have stated that he was convinced that a denial of the Spirit’s creatureliness was acceptable to them if he knew otherwise. Furthermore, from the irenic tone of Basil’s letter to Cyriacus and his friends it is highly unlikely that they are to be identified with the “blasphemers” whom Basil castigates in *Letter* 113 for their low view of the Spirit.

Of course, as Hauschild points out, the pneumatology of Cyriacus and his friends could be akin to that of Eustathius of Sebaste and his followers,<sup>19</sup> or that of the Pneumatomachi addressed in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Against the Macedonians*.<sup>20</sup> Both of these groups insisted that the Spirit should be considered neither a creature nor a member of the Godhead. Either of these groups could have easily accepted the negative requirement with regard to the Holy Spirit which Basil sets forth in *Letters* 113 and 114. Yet, if Hauschild is right, then these two letters would presuppose the existence of at least two different Pneumatomachian groups in the community of Tarsus: Cyriacus and his colleagues, whose pneumatological position was similar to that of Eustathius of Sebaste or that of the Pneumatomachi addressed by Nysen, and a second group, who asserted that the Spirit is a creature.

But rather than posit the existence of two different Pneumatomachian groups within the community of Tarsus, for which there is no real evidence, it seems better to regard Cyriacus and his colleagues as

Homoiousians who were undecided with regard to the question of the Spirit's nature and status. This situation is understandable when it is remembered that most of the Homoiousians were content to simply affirm the reality of the distinct hypostasis of the Spirit. Even in the dogmatic letter of George of Laodicea, which contains the fullest extant description of the Homoiousian concept of the Spirit, the nature of the Spirit is not clearly explicated.<sup>21</sup> According to this letter:<sup>22</sup>

The Spirit, who is not considered the Son, has his own subsistence... For the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but the Holy Spirit, who is given to believers by the Father through the Son... [Moreover,] the Holy Spirit, whom the Scripture call the "Paraclete", has his existence from the Father through the Son.

None of these statements provide definite information about the Homoiousian view of the Spirit's nature and status.<sup>23</sup> The statement that the Spirit "is given to believers by the Father through the Son" may indicate that the Spirit was essentially regarded as a gift by the Homoiousians.<sup>24</sup> However, such a view was compatible with later descriptions of the Spirit which were both orthodox and heterodox.<sup>25</sup> Based on the assumption that Cyriacus and his colleagues were Homoiousians, their adherence to a view of the Spirit similar to that of George's dogmatic letter would have rendered them unreceptive both to the stringent demands made by the orthodox zealots and to the assertions of those who regarded the Spirit as a creature. On the other hand, the vague pneumatology of the Homoiousians would have given little positive material which Cyriacus and his colleagues could have utilized to arrive at a decision about the Spirit's nature and status. Basil's *Letter* 114 provided an answer to their dilemma.

Did Basil's irenic advice with regard to the question of the Spirit succeed in bringing peace to the community of Tarsus? Unfortunately, this question cannot be answered, since there is no further information about the course of the conflict in Tarsus. Hauschild has shown that both *Cilicia prima* and *Cilicia secunda* were heavily infested with Pneumatomachi and those sympathetic to their cause,<sup>26</sup> and it may well be the case that Cyriacus and his colleagues went over to the Pneumatomachi. But, whatever the outcome, the election of Diodore, whom Basil held in high regard,<sup>27</sup> as bishop of Tarsus in 378 assured the victory of the orthodox doctrine of the Spirit in that community.<sup>28</sup> For Diodore, an opponent of the Pneumatomachian position from the very beginning of the struggle over the question of the Spirit's nature,<sup>29</sup> was

among the eleven bishops whom the emperor Theodosius designated as guarantors of the orthodox faith in an edict published on July 30, 381.<sup>30</sup> This edict, a confirmation of the dogmatic conclusions of the Council of Constantinople, recognized as orthodox only those bishops who were in communion with the eleven guarantors and who confessed that:<sup>31</sup>

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are  
of one majesty and virtue, of the same glory,  
and of one splendour.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.45 (PG 67.360A-B).

<sup>2</sup> *Letter* 263.3 (Courtonne, III, 123-124).

<sup>3</sup> Courtonne, II, 16-19.

<sup>4</sup> For the date, see P. J. Fedwick, *The Church and the Charisma of Leadership in Basil of Caesarea* (Toronto 1979) 145. *Letter* 105 (Courtonne, II, 6-7) could also be cited in connection with this early concern about the growth of the Pneumatomachi in western Asia Minor. In this letter, Basil warns the daughters of Count Terence, a Christian interested in theological and ecclesial questions, to avoid communion with those who called the Spirit a creature or reduced him to the rank of a creature.

<sup>5</sup> For the date of Silvanus' death, see Friedrich Loofs, *Eustathius von Sebaste und die Chronologie der Basilius-Briefe* (Halle A.S. 1898) 50. For a discussion of Silvanus' career and especially his thought about the Spirit, see Michael A.G. Haykin, 'ΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΣ ΣΙΛΟΥΑΝΟΣ: Silvanus of Tarsus and His View of the Spirit', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 36 (1982) 261-274.

<sup>6</sup> Courtonne, II, 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> For the translation of τῆ ἀφιλοεικῶ συγγυμνασίᾳ by "through peaceful discussions", see Hermann Dörries, *De Spiritu Sancto. Der Beitrag des Basilius zum Abschluss des trinitarischen Dogmas* (Göttingen 1956) 20; Courtonne, II, 17.

<sup>8</sup> See also the analysis of this letter by Jean Gribomont, 'Intransigence and Irenicism in Saint Basil's 'De Spiritu Sancto'', *Word and Spirit*, I (1979) 117-118.

<sup>9</sup> *De Spiritu Sancto*, 19. Cf. also the opinion of Joseph de Ghellinck, 'Un Cas de conscience dans les conflits trinitaires sur le Saint-Esprit' in his *Patristique et Moyen Âge* (Gembloux 1948) III, 325.

<sup>10</sup> 'Intransigence and Irenicism', 116.

<sup>11</sup> 'Die Pneumatomachen. Eine Untersuchung zur Dogmengeschichte des vierten Jahrhunderts' (Theological dissertation, Hamburg 1967) 191, n.1; 215. See also his trans., *Basilius von Caesarea: Briefe* (Stuttgart 1973) II, 160, nn. 53, 56. In fact, Hauschild believes that if Silvanus had lived long enough he too would have been numbered among the Pneumatomachi of western Asia Minor. See 'Pneumatomachen', 215, n.3. But, cf. the author's 'ΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΣ ΣΙΛΟΥΑΝΟΣ', *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Courtonne, II, 17-19.

<sup>13</sup> Hauschild, *Briefe*, II, 160, n. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Cyriacus was probably a presbyter in the Church at Tarsus. See Prudent Maran, *Vita S. Basilii* 12.6 (PG 29. livA-B); Benoit Pruche, ed. and trans., *Basile de Césarée: Sur le Saint-Esprit* (Paris 1968) 101. Hauschild ('Pneumatomachen', 215; *Briefe*, II, 160, nn. 56,

60) believes, however, that Cyriacus was the bishop of Tarsus, the successor of Silvanus. This appears unlikely in light of the fact that *Letter* 34 (Courtonne, I, 77), written in 369 shortly after the death of Silvanus, indicates that the see of Tarsus had been occupied by a Homoian. During the reign of Valens, when a see was occupied by a Homoian, it was not uncommon for a group of presbyters to perform the functions of a bishop. See Fedwick, *Charisma*, 47 and n.45.

<sup>15</sup> Dörries (*De Spiritu Sancto*, 20) rightly stresses that at this point the conflict over the Spirit only threatened to destroy the unity of the community at Tarsus; it had not yet resulted in a schism.

<sup>16</sup> On Basil's belief in the inspiration of the Fathers at Nicaea, see Dörries, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 166; H.J. Sieben, *Die Konzilsidee der alten Kirche* (Paderborn/Munich/Vienna/Zürich 1979) 220.

<sup>17</sup> *Briefe*, II, 160, nn. 56, 58.

<sup>18</sup> On Basil's high regard for ecclesiastical peace, see *Letters* 97 (Courtonne, I, 211); 128.1 (Courtonne, II, 37). For his use of Mt 24:12 to describe the doctrinal and ecclesiastical confusion of his times, see *Letters* 91 (Courtonne, I, 197); 141.2 (Courtonne, II, 64); 172 (Courtonne, II, 107); 191 (Courtonne, II, 145); 203.3 (Courtonne, II, 170-171); 258.1 (Courtonne, III, 100); *On the Holy Spirit* 30.78 (PG 32.216B-C). See also the comments of Courtonne, *Lettres*, II, 107, n. 1; 171, n. 1; III, 100, n. 1; Fedwick, *Charisma*, 62 and n. 114: 106-107.

<sup>19</sup> *Briefe*, II, 160, n. 59. On the pneumatology of Eustathius and his followers, see Hauschild, 'Pneumatomen', 39-52, 217-224. An excellent summary of Eustathius' pneumatology is found in Hauschild, 'Eustathios von Sebaste', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 10 (1982) 548-549. However, cf. the comments of A.M. Ritter, 'Literarische Berichte und Anzeigen: W.D. Hauschild: Die Pneumatomen. Eine Untersuchung zur Dogmengeschichte des vierten Jahrhunderts', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 80 (1969) 404-406.

<sup>20</sup> On the pneumatology of these Pneumatomen, see Hauschild, 'Pneumatomen', 70-74.

<sup>21</sup> This letter is preserved in Epiphanius, *Refutation of All the Heresies* 73.12-22 (PG 42.425A-444C).

<sup>22</sup> *Refutation of All the Heresies* 73.16 (PG 42.433A, B).

<sup>23</sup> Hauschild, 'Pneumatomen', 187.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>25</sup> See Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 24.57 (PG 32.173A-C). Eustathius of Sebaste maintained that since the Spirit is described in the Scriptures as a gift from God, then he should not be accorded the same honour as God; for the gift is not to receive the same honour as the Giver (see Dörries, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 83; Hauschild, 'Pneumatomen', 48, 50). In his reply to this argument in *On the Holy Spirit* 24.57, Basil concedes that the Scriptures do indeed describe the Spirit as a gift. However, he argues, they also call the Son a gift (he cites Rom 8:32 and 1 Cor 2:11). If Eustathius' reasoning about the terms "gift" and "giver" is applied to the Son, then the Scriptural designation of the Son as a gift must mean that he too is inferior to the Father. Thus, the use of the term "gift" by Eustathius as an argument for the rejection of the Spirit's right to the same honour as the Father and the Son, means that the Son, whom the Scriptures also describe as a gift, is brought into dishonour. From Basil's point of view, such reasoning is the height of ingratitude, for it makes the goodness of God an occasion for blasphemy.

<sup>26</sup> 'Pneumatomachen', 215-216.

<sup>27</sup> See *Letter* 244.3 (Courtonne III, 77). See also *Letters* 135 (Courtonne, II, 49-51); 160 (Courtonne II, 88-92); Edmund Venables, 'Diodorus (3)', *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, I (1877), 837.

<sup>28</sup> For the date of Diodore's election, see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Utrecht/Antwerp/Westminster, Maryland: 1960), III, 397; Luise Abramowski, 'Diodore de Tarse', *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclesiastiques*, XIV (1960), 497.

<sup>29</sup> See Basil, *Letter* 99.3 (Courtonne, I, 216-217); Hauschild, *Briefe*, II, 157, n. 2; 165, n. 113. On Diodore's pneumatology, see Rudolf Abramowski, 'Untersuchungen zur Diodor von Tarsus', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 30 (1931), 254; 257, n. 2; 258; A. de Halleux, 'La Profession de l'Esprit-Saint dans le symbole de Constantinople', *Revue Théologique de Louvain*, 10 (1979), 17-18, n. 70. Diodore is said to have written a work on the Holy Spirit against the Pneumatomachi, but, unfortunately, this treatise is no longer extant (see Quasten, *Patrology*, III, 400). Cyril of Alexandria [*Letter* 45 (PG 77.229A)] maintained that Diodore was a Pneumatomachian before he threw in his lot with the orthodox. However, the fact that he wrote a work against the Pneumatomachi along with the fact that he was closely associated with Meletius of Antioch and Basil in their struggle against Eustathius demonstrate the absurdity of this charge.

<sup>30</sup> *The Theodosian Code* 16.1.3.

<sup>31</sup> Trans. Clyde Pharr, *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmundian Constitutions* (Princeton 1952), 440.

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