

BASIL'S LIFE: AN OVERVIEW

Basil the Confident Man of God

In the second half of the fourth century, the Arian Emperor Valens sought to strike terror in the hearts of the bishops committed to Nicene theology. He persecuted them, banished them, and even martyred a few of them. As Valens began to target Caesarea, one key person stood in his way—Basil, a man of remarkable integrity, profound ministry accomplishments, and such confidence in God that he was able to defy an emperor.

Emperor Valens charged an imperial official by the name of Modestus to demand that Basil communicate and cooperate with the Arian bishops. Modestus summoned Basil, demanding to know how he could ‘dare, as no other dares, to resist and oppose so great a potentate?’¹ Basil inquired about basis of the accusation, to which Modestus replied that he had ‘refused to respect the religion of your sovereign, when all others have yielded and submitted themselves.’² In a play on words that demonstrates the difference between God and the emperor, Basil stated that he could not submit, ‘because this is not the

1 Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Panegyric on St. Basil* 48 (NPNF² 7:411).

2 *Ibid.*

will of my real Sovereign, nor can I, who am the creature of God, and bidden myself to be God, submit to worship any creature.³

As the conversation continued, Modestus grew impatient and angry with Basil. Harshly Modestus screamed, 'What? Have you no fear of my authority?'⁴ The imperial officer continued to rage about 'the resources of [his] power.'⁵ At this point, Basil inquired of the man's actual power. What power and what resources did the Prefect Modestus have that could persuade Basil to cooperate with the emperor's demands? Modestus replied with a scare tactic: 'Confiscation, banishment, torture, death.'⁶ Basil answered, 'Have you no other threat? For none of these can reach me.' How could this be? Basil revealed the depth of his commitment to God when he stated:

Because a man who has nothing is beyond the reach of confiscation; unless you demand my tattered rags, and the few books, which are my only possessions. Banishment is impossible for me, who am confined by no limit of place, counting my own neither the land where I now dwell, nor all of that into which I may be hurled; or, rather, counting it all God's whose guest and dependent I am. As for tortures, what hold can they have upon one whose body has ceased to be? Unless you mean the first stroke, for this alone is in your power. Death is my benefactor, for it will send me the sooner to God, for Whom I live, and exist, and have all but died, and to Whom I have long been hastening.⁷

Unsure of how to reply, Modestus simply stated that no man had ever spoken to him in such a way. Basil's reply is a classic statement in the annals of Christianity: 'Perhaps you have never

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

met with a Bishop.⁸ Here we see the mettle of a man prepared by God to confront the political and ecclesiastical culture of the era.

The Roman Empire in the Fourth Century

This conversation between Modestus and Basil was one outworking of the major political changes that had swept over the Roman Empire in previous decades. During the first quarter of the fourth century, the accession of Constantine to the imperial throne in 306 completely transformed the political environment. Constantine played a vital role in the cultural legitimization of the Christian faith.⁹

After the famous battle of the Milvian Bridge, which took place in October of 312, Constantine possessed an undisputed mastery of the Western Roman Empire. Previously, an imperial power struggle had developed between Constantine and Maxentius. Constantine decided to attack Maxentius at Rome. As Constantine advanced toward the city, he remained unaware of the superior military resources of his enemy on and at the Milvian Bridge. Constantine turned to the Christian God for help. Bruce Shelley has commented on this moment as follows: 'In a dream, he saw a cross in the sky and the words, "In this sign conquer."' When on 28 October 312 he achieved his brilliant victory over the troops of Maxentius, Constantine looked upon his success as proof of the power of Christ and the superiority of the Christian religion.'¹⁰

As a result of the battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan. The Edict decreed religious toleration for Christianity. At the time, the Roman Empire had two rulers: 1) Constantine, who favored the Christians and tolerated the

8 *Ibid.*

9 Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 108.

10 Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1982), 108.

pagans, and ruled in the West; and 2) Licinius, who favored the pagans and tolerated the Christians, and ruled in the East. By 325, Constantine had become the undisputed emperor of the entire Roman world.

Constantine's leadership proved beneficial to help advance the church. As a result, Christians enjoyed more freedom than at any previous point in history. Constantine exempted the clergy from military duty, abolished laws that were offensive to Christians, emancipated Christian slaves, and enjoined Sunday as a day of worship. The leadership of Constantine politically secured a united Roman Empire, with both East and West enjoying a relatively tranquil and peaceful life.¹¹

Fourth-Century Ecclesiological Conflict: Arianism

Scholar Harold Brown writes, 'No sooner had Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, gained complete control of the empire than he found the church—which he had hoped would help him reunite his vast domain—riven by bitter conflict.'¹² The Church now neared a period of intense theological debate. The following few sections review the ideas and influences of Arianism and the Council of Nicaea.

A prominent theological debate during this period centered upon the views of Arius, the presbyter of the Baucalis Church in Alexandria. As William Rusch notes, 'The outset of the controversy, probably in about the year 319, was caused by Arius's preaching.'¹³ The content of Arius's sermons served as the founding blocks for the heresy later known as Arianism.

11 Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity: From Constantine the Great to Gregory the Great A.D. 311–590*, History of the Christian Church, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 83–85.

12 Brown, *Heresies*, 107–108.

13 William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), 17.

In particular, the Alexandrian presbyter adhered to a deviant position concerning the nature of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Louis Berkhof describes Arius's views of Christ when he writes, 'His dominant idea was the monotheistic principle of the Monarchians, that there is only one unbegotten God, one unoriginated Being.'¹⁵ Arius thus attempted to preserve the monotheism of God by relegating the Son to the class of creatures. Arius emphasized the differences between the essence of the Father and that of the Son. Arius pushed this difference to its logical conclusion: The Son was a created being. In a letter to Alexander, Arius wrote the following:

God being the cause of all is without beginning, most alone; but the Son, begotten by the Father, created and founded before the ages, was not before He was begotten. Rather, the Son begotten timelessly, alone was caused to subsist by the Father. For he is not everlasting or co-everlasting or unbegotten with the Father. Nor does He have being with the Father, as certain individuals mention things relatively and bring into the discussion two unbegotten causes.¹⁶

We can summarize the Arian doctrine in three main points:

1. The Son is a creature.
2. The Son had a beginning.
3. The Son does not have direct knowledge of God the Father.

Arius preserved the monotheism of God the Father. Yet, in doing so, he forfeited the co-eternal and consubstantial nature of the Son. Arius introduced a half-god, half-man into the Christian

14 For more on Arius and the influence of Arianism, see the following: Michel R. Barnes and Daniel H. Williams, eds., *Arianism After Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993); Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

15 Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 84.

16 Arius, *Letter to Alexander* in Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 31–32.