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A PASTORAL FRIENDSHIP (1)

BASIL OF CAESAREA AND EUSEBIUS OF SAMOSATA
(4TH CENTURY)

Sometimes, the towering giants of church history can feel as close to us as a star in a neighboring galaxy. They're out there somewhere in the distance and an extraordinary sight to behold with proper magnification equipment, but they have virtually nothing to do with our actual lives. For a majority of normal, terrestrial-type pastors, we fear the heroes of history feel as distant as their stories are encouraging. But that's entirely the wrong perspective. Even the most well-known men were Holy-Spirit-empowered clay pots who needed God's grace every bit as much as we do. In fact, the evidence of their dependence on friendship is proof of their frailty and humanity. In this first of two chapters focusing on church history we offer an example of pastoral friendship involving two noteworthy men.

In the fourth century, a number of key Christian authors, like Basil of Caesarea (c. 330–379), Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–389), John Chrysostom (347–407), and especially Augustine (354–430), began to write extensively about the

subject of friendship.¹ For instance, Gregory Nazianzus, who was for a brief period of time from 379–381 the bishop of Constantinople, highlighted the importance of friendship when he stated: ‘If anyone were to ask me, “What is the best thing in life?,” I would answer, “Friends.”’² Chrysostom, in a sermon that he preached in Constantinople around 402 on 1 Thessalonians 2, similarly affirmed the necessity of friendship: ‘It were better for us that the sun should be extinguished, than to be deprived of friends; better to live in darkness, than to be without friends. ... I speak of spiritual friends, who prefer nothing to friendship.’³ To have true, spiritual friends, though, is something of a rarity, according to Chrysostom. In his words:

If I were speaking of any plant growing in India, of which no one had ever had any experience, no speech would avail to represent it, though I should utter ten thousand words. So also now whatever things I say [about friendship], I say in vain, for no one will be able to understand me. This is a plant that is planted in heaven, having for its branches not heavy-clustered pearls, but a virtuous life, which is far superior. ... The pleasure of friendship excels all others, even if you compare it with the sweetness of honey. For that satiates, but a friend never does, so long as he is a friend; nay, the desire of

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1. Caroline White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
 2. Cited White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*, p. 70.
 3. John Chrysostom, Homily 2 on *1 Thessalonians* (Patrologia Graeca 42.404), trans. John A. Broadus in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889), revised Kevin Knight (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230402.htm>), altered.

him rather increases, and such pleasure never admits of satiety. Indeed, a friend is sweeter than the present life.⁴

In this chapter, we look at one early Christian friendship in particular, that of Basil of Caesarea in Cappadocia with Eusebius of Samosata (310/330–380). Nineteen extant letters of Basil to Eusebius reveal the extent to which the Cappadocian pastor-theologian came to rely upon Eusebius first as a spiritual mentor, then confidant and companion in prayer. In seeking to understand their friendship, Basil clearly drew upon such biblical patterns of friendship as that of Paul and Timothy, which, like that of Eusebius and Basil, began with an older man mentoring a younger but developed into a friendship of equals. In a time of theological controversy and ecclesial confusion, Basil found enormous help in the letters and prayers of Eusebius.

The End of Basil's Friendship with Eustathius of Sebaste

By 376 Basil of Caesarea's (c. 329–379) long-standing friendship with another friend, his mentor Eustathius, bishop of Sebaste (c. 300–c. 377), had completely disintegrated.⁵ His relationship with Eustathius had been one

4. Chrysostom, Homily 2 on *1 Thessalonians* (Patrologia Graeca 42.405-406), trans. Broadus, revised Knight (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230402.htm>), altered. I have compared this translation with the Greek and adapted it in a few places, following White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*, p. 92.

5. For Basil's life and thought, see especially Paul Jonathan Fedwick, *The Church and the Charisma of Leadership in Basil of Caesarea* (1979 ed.; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, n.d.); Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea: A Guide to His Life and Doctrine* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

of the most significant friendships of his life and stretched back twenty years to the time of Basil's conversion in the mid-350s. At the very beginning of his Christian life, Basil had purposely sought out men whose lives were marked by godliness and whom he could regard, in his own words, as 'fathers and guides of my soul on the journey to God.'⁶ Eustathius was initially such a man, but by the late 360s and early 370s it became apparent to Basil that there were such large differences between them when it came to Trinitarian doctrine that their friendship could not progress any further.

Eustathius was largely unconcerned about questions of dogma such as the nature and status of the Holy Spirit, and it was undoubtedly because he was not a theologian that none of his writings have been transmitted. Eustathius appears to have been quite happy to affirm the original Nicene Creed, which essentially said nothing about the Holy Spirit beyond 'We believe in the Holy Spirit.' Eustathius had a deep aversion to expanding it to include a dogmatic assertion with regard to the Spirit. He was committed essentially to

On Eustathius and his pneumatology, see especially Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Spirit of God: The Exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), p. 27, n. 86. On Eustathius' career, see also C.A. Frazee, 'Anatolian Asceticism in the Fourth Century: Eustathios of Sebastea and Basil of Caesarea,' *The Catholic Historical Review* 66 (1980): pp. 16–33; J. Gribomont, 'Eustathius of Sebaste' in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), vol. 1, p. 882.

6. Letter 204.6. All translations of Basil's works are by the author unless otherwise indicated. The Greek text used has been that of the four volumes of Roy J. Deferrari, *Saint Basil: The Letters* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/London: William Heinemann, 1926–1934).

a Binitarianism that was hostile to any conglorification of the Spirit with the Father and the Son. His refusal to take a clear stance on the Spirit's deity is well captured by a remark he reputedly uttered at a synod in 364 when the question of the Spirit's ontological status was raised: 'I neither choose to name the Holy Spirit God nor dare to call Him a creature.'⁷

Basil retained his friendship with Eustathius, though, in part with the hope of bringing his old friend around to a robust confession of the Spirit's deity. Basil's irenicism, though, made his own orthodoxy suspect to some. In late 372 and early 373, Theodotus of Nicopolis (d. 375), a leading bishop in northern Asia Minor, began to pressure Basil to clarify his own position on the Spirit as well as his relationship with Eustathius. Meletius of Antioch (d. 381), another key supporter of the Nicene Creed, shared Theodotus' view.⁸ Basil, by associating with a suspected heretic, was himself dogmatically suspect! Basil found himself in an unenviable position. On the one hand, he was beginning to be criticized by a circle of Eustathius' followers for doctrinal convictions regarding the Spirit that were increasingly unacceptable to many of Eustathius' theological partisans. On the other hand, his close ties to Eustathius were making him dogmatically suspect to a number of his episcopal colleagues and some of his monastic friends.⁹

During the summer of 373 Basil began to pressure Eustathius to commit himself to a more robust Trini-

7. Socrates, *Church History* 2.45.

8. For Meletius' theological views, see Haykin, *Spirit of God*, pp. 33–7.

9. Haykin, *Spirit of God*, pp. 31–6.

tarianism. After two meetings Basil was actually sanguine about Eustathius' theological orientation. As he told Eusebius of Samosata, who, as shall be seen, would replace Eustathius in the 370s as Basil's chief mentor and friend: 'we found, with God's help, that he was sincerely following the entirety of the orthodox faith.'¹⁰ At the second of these meetings, in August of 373, Eustathius signed a statement of faith in which he affirmed:

[We] must anathematize all who call the Holy Spirit a creature, and all who so think; all who do not confess that he is holy by nature, as the Father is holy by nature and the Son is holy by nature, and refuse him his place in the blessed divine nature. Our not separating him from Father and Son is a proof of our right of mind. For we are bound to be baptized in the terms we have received and to profess belief in the terms in which we are baptized, and as we have professed belief in, so to give glory to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹¹

That fall, though, when Eustathius was to ratify this statement of faith at a meeting with Theodotus and Meletius, he failed to show. Instead, he renounced his signature on the statement and, at a series of Pneumatomachian synods, denounced what he described as the doctrinal innovations of Basil and openly slandered him as a Sabellian.¹² Basil was so stunned by this turn of

10. Basil, *Letter* 98.

11. Basil, *Letter* 125.3.

12. For details, see Haykin, *Spirit of God*, pp. 38-9.

events and the betrayal by one of his closest friends that, in his words, 'my heart was crushed.'¹³

During this difficult time, it was another friendship, namely that with Eusebius of Samosata, that was a source of theological strength and spiritual encouragement for the bishop of Caesarea during the most difficult, though extremely fruitful, period of his life.¹⁴

Basil's Friendship with Eusebius of Samosata

Given the fact that by 361 Eusebius was already regarded as 'a bishop of great moral authority,'¹⁵ his birth should be placed probably in the first two decades of the fourth century.¹⁶ He became the bishop of Samosata, a city of military and political significance on the upper Euphrates River about 150 miles north-east of Antioch on the Orontes, probably in the 350s. The first extant letter of Basil

13. Basil, *Letter 244.4*.

14. The key ancient sources for Eusebius' life are Theodoret, *Church History* 2.27–28; 4.12–13; 5.4; and Sozomen, *Church History* 6.4. For more recent studies, see Henry Robert Reynolds, 'Eusebius (77), bishop of Samosata' in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature*, ed. Henry Wace and William Piercy (London: John Murray, 1911), pp. 342-3; Markus Vinzent, 'Eusebius of Samosata (Saint)' in *Religion Past & Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 4:667; J. Gribomont, 'Eusebius of Samosata' in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Di Berardino, 1:880.

15. Gribomont, 'Eusebius of Samosata,' p. 880. In Letter 98, dated summer 373, Basil refers to Eusebius' 'venerable age.'

16. Gribomont, 'Eusebius of Samosata,' p. 880. In the words of Raymond Van Dam, Eusebius 'belonged to the generation of Basil's father' (*Families and Friends in Late Roman Cappadocia* [Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003], p. 35).

to Eusebius was written in either the latter months of 368 or shortly after the advent of 369 and in a lapidary conclusion Basil identified the bishop of Samosata as a spiritual mentor. Basil told Eusebius that he longed to be filled with the 'great treasures of wisdom' that his correspondent possessed.¹⁷ Presumably the two men had met one another personally before this letter. When Basil was ordained bishop of Caesarea in the fall of 370, Eusebius made the journey from Samosata to take part in the episcopal election. Gregory of Nazianzus, who had strongly urged Eusebius to attend, recalled Eusebius' presence as one that filled the hearts of the congregation at Caesarea with 'courage and joy.'¹⁸ Basil would also have been deeply encouraged that such a 'noble guardian of the Faith and watchful ruler of the churches,' as he once called Eusebius, made the arduous journey to lend his support to Basil.¹⁹ Basil wrote again to Eusebius a few months after this ordination, either in December 370 or January of the following year. In this letter he informed Eusebius that he was not only looking forward to the coming of spring after two months of heavy snowfalls that had kept the Cappadocians indoors for much of the time, but was hopeful that Eusebius could revisit Caesarea so that he and his church might 'gain new strength through his good teaching.'²⁰

17. Basil, *Letter 27*.

18. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letters 42 and 44*.

19. Basil, *Letter 136*.

20. Basil, *Letter 48*.

In two further letters from the summer of 373, Basil addressed Eusebius as the ‘most God-beloved Father,’ another indication that Basil considered Eusebius to be his spiritual mentor.²¹ That summer or autumn Basil again wrote to Eusebius and told him that he was eager to meet with him so as to ‘consult about many things and learn many things.’ In fact, Basil continued, he knew of no one like Eusebius who had ‘such perfect wisdom and experience garnered from many labours for the churches.’²² The following year, Basil again commended Eusebius, this time for his foresight and zeal for the spiritual health of the churches in their part of the Empire, ‘writing letters, visiting them in person, leaving no act undone, no word unspoken.’²³

Although they were rare, Basil clearly treasured his actual face-to-face meetings with Eusebius.²⁴ And yet, he was also thankful that when they could not meet, they could still speak to one another through the medium of the letter. There were times when Basil felt that their letters to one another were like shadows compared to the reality of actually meeting.²⁵ Nonetheless, when one of Eusebius’ letters arrived at a particularly difficult juncture in Basil’s life, he compared its effect upon him to the way sailors must feel when, in rough seas, they see ‘a beacon fire kindled from afar’ on dry land.²⁶

21. Basil, *Letter* 98.2; 128.2.

22. Basil, *Letter* 138.2.

23. Basil, *Letter* 136.2.

24. See references to such in Basil, *Letter* 27, 34, 48, 95, 127, 136, 138, 145, and 162. See also Basil’s letter to Eusebius’ nephew, Antiochus, *Letter* 146.

25. Basil, *Letter* 162.

26. Basil, *Letter* 100.

During the pneumatological debates of the 370s that saw the total collapse of his friendship with Eustathius, Basil came to rely deeply upon Eusebius as both mentor and friend. Raymond Van Dam has rightly noted that during this decade the two men came to share ‘a deep emotional bond.’²⁷ A powerful illustration of this bond is seen in a letter that Basil wrote to Eusebius in the early 370s. When one of Basil’s other friends, Silvanus, who was bishop of Tarsus, died in 369, there appeared in this city certain individuals who maintained that the Spirit belongs to the creaturely realm. Basil turned to Eusebius for advice and wisdom to deal with the situation as it was threatening to blow the whole church there apart.²⁸ Now, Basil had a number of ongoing medical conditions, which he frequently mentioned in his letters to Eusebius,²⁹ and as such he had a multitude of medical illustrations at hand that he employed in various ways in his letters. In this letter Basil likened relief from the distress caused by the pneumatological quarrel in the Tarsus church to anesthetic drugs given by doctors to patients suffering intolerable pain. Where was he to find similar relief from the spiritual distress caused by the quarrels at Tarsus? Basil suggested two sources—first, prayer and then, contemplation of the person of Eusebius. With regard to the latter he wrote:

27. Van Dam, *Families and Friends*, p. 36.

28. Basil, Letter 34. For details regarding the theological crisis in Tarsus at this time, see Basil, *Letters* 113–4. Also see Michael A.G. Haykin, ‘And Who is the Spirit? Basil of Caesarea’s Letters to the Church at Tarsus,’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987), 377–85.

29. In the following letters to Eusebius, for example, Basil related to his friend details of his various illnesses: *Letter* 30, 34, 100, 136, 138, 141, 145, 162, 198, 237.

Though we are indeed distressed, we experience this consolation: that we can contemplate your kindness and alleviate the soul's distress by thinking of you and remembering you. For just as the eyes, after looking intently at glistening objects, obtain some relief by turning back to blues and greens, so also, to our souls, the memory of your gentleness and gracefulness is like a gentle touch that wipes away the pain. ... May the Lord graciously grant you to us and to his churches for the benefit of our life and correction of our souls, and may he count me worthy of another beneficial meeting with you.³⁰

Basil's language here is yet further evidence of the fact that he clearly regarded Eusebius as a spiritual mentor, one whose wisdom would not only benefit the Church but also Basil personally. Basil used a chromatic illustration to drive home to Eusebius the benefit he had derived from him. After one's eyes have looked at a brilliant object—and here Basil probably had in mind the sun—it was difficult to focus, and it was a relief to look at the blue sea and green vegetation of this world. Similarly, Basil found relief from preoccupation with the problems of the Tarsus church by thinking about the kindness of Eusebius.

During their correspondence Basil frequently mentioned his need for and appreciation of Eusebius' prayers.³¹ For example, in the autumn of 373, Basil sought Eusebius' advice regarding three specific issues: how best to respond to certain Western bishops regarding the resolution of a schism

30. Basil, *Letter 34*.

31. See, for example, Basil, *Letter 27, 30, 100, 141, 162, and 239.1*.

in Antioch, how to help those in Sebaste who had rejected what Basil called the ‘festering ulcer of Eustathius’ wicked doctrine,’ and how to fulfill a request for Basil to appoint a bishop in the city of Iconium though the city lay outside of his diocese.³² Illness prevented Basil from meeting with Eusebius in person, and thus he asked his mentor to send him written answers to the three queries. But if he did not have time to do that, then Basil wanted him to pray:

Pray that what is pleasing to the Lord may come into my mind. And in your synod request that we be remembered, and pray for us yourself, and also include the people as you pray, that we might be counted worthy to serve so as to please the Lord in the days and hours of our pilgrimage that remain.³³

One of Basil’s last extant letters to Eusebius was written two years later in the fall of 375. In the previous year the Homoean Emperor Valens (328–378) had removed a number of Nicene bishops from their charges, among them Eusebius, who had been banished to Thrace.³⁴ Eusebius could no longer shepherd his people in person but, in Basil’s words, he could still engage in ‘earnest prayer on behalf of the churches,’ even as Moses had prayed unceasingly during Israel’s battle with the Amalekites.³⁵ This comparison with Moses was among the highest compliments that Basil could give to Eusebius, for Basil

32. Basil, *Letter* 138.2.

33. Basil, *Letter* 138.2.

34. Theodoret, *Church History* vol. 4, pp. 12-13.

35. Basil, *Letter* 241.

regarded the Israelite leader as ‘a paragon of self-sacrificial love, contemplation, [and] nearness to God.’³⁶

Conclusion

After the break with Eustathius of Sebaste in the mid-370s, Basil found himself compelled to write his masterly work on the deity of the Holy Spirit, *On the Holy Spirit*, which is the first theological treatise dedicated to the person of the Holy Spirit. It is a milestone work in the history of Christian doctrine. This is all well known. What is not well known, though, is that sustaining and helping Basil through this time was his friendship with Eusebius of Samosata, a Moses-like prayer-warrior and mentor to Basil. We’ll grant that few in any generation will write a treatise that persists in influence 1,600 years from now, but every pastor of every generation will need a Moses-like prayer-warrior and friend. Learn from Basil and invest your energy in cultivating friendship.

36. Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 62.