

Gregory as a Model of Theological Interpretation

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DAN TREIER'S *Introducing Theological Interpretation* describes what has become the new emphasis in evangelical hermeneutics. Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS) is distinguished by a number of values or characteristics.¹ First, TIS is marked by the text being read as a Word for the church today. Second, TIS is a practice prescribed to all believers and is to be exercised in the life of the church, not just the academy. Third, TIS is reading the text with the purpose of growing in virtue and character. Reading God's Word

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should change the values, desires, and character of the believer as he is confronted by God. Fourth, TIS prioritizes a theological reading of the text instead of anthropological or man-centered reading. Man should seek to learn about God, what he has said and done, when reading the Bible instead of mere self-discovery. Fifth, TIS recognizes the need for a ruled reading of Scripture. This refers to following the traditions of the church and letting Scripture interpret Scripture. Sixth, TIS is a reaction against a modernistic hermeneutic and a return to premodern principles of interpretation. These last two are

part of a retrieval movement that looks to the past interpreters of Scripture to learn from their models and practice.

My purpose is to contribute to the TIS movement by providing an example of a theological interpreter from the Fathers.² Treier's work focuses upon returning to the premodern reading of Scripture, but provides limited interaction with premodern theologians.³ I will present how Gregory of Nazianzus models a ruled reading of Scripture and how he developed a grammar for how the church could more faithfully worship the God revealed in Scripture.⁴ The first half will summarize Gregory's rules for the theologian. These are principles and practices that Gregory prescribed to qualify and regulate the theologian. The second half of the paper will demonstrate how Gregory practiced a ruled-reading of Scripture that is both Trinitarian and Christological.

Gregory of Nazianzus is a model of TIS for reasons other than receiving the title "The Theologian."⁵ First, the nature of his writings lends itself to orthodoxy and orthopraxy. They are not diatribes or tracts, but sermons and poems that are meant to lead the church in worship.⁶ Second, his

polemical context makes him an excellent model for theology today. One of his chief opponents, Eunomius, claims to have absolute knowledge of God's nature. Gregory's arguments against Eunomius reveal a careful balance between man's limitations in what he can know about God and the clarity with which God has revealed himself.⁷ Third, his theology has stood the test of time, especially his contributions in the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology. He models how a pastor can lead his congregation to better understand these difficult doctrines which will lead to a more faithful worship of the Triune God who has saved them. Fourth, he gives equal attention to the subject matter of theology, God, and the theologian. His sermons kept God at the center while also recognizing that God must be approached according to his Word and standards. Finally, and most importantly, he brings Scripture, dogma, tradition, spirituality, and philosophy into a close relation that exemplifies how the classical model of faith seeking understanding should be practiced.⁸

RULES FOR THEOLOGIAN

One of Gregory's fears in the *Theological Orations* is that the great mystery of the faith would become a social accomplishment where religion is reduced to solving conundrums.⁹ His conclusion is that any confession of God must be "governed by rules."¹⁰ Brian Daley argues that Gregory's intent is to provide a way for the church to profess God in a way "consistent with Scripture and the Church's tradition of faith."¹¹ The confession's intent is not to explain God and his salvation, but to guard the paradoxes and mysteries. In order to ensure this he provides a number of rules concerning the nature of God and the capacity of man.

GOD IS BOUNDLESS IN BEING

Only God knows himself perfectly so that the church's confession is always partial. Gregory states, "The Divine, then, is boundless and difficult to contemplate; the only thing completely comprehensible about it is its boundlessness—

even though some think that the fact of its simple nature makes it either completely incomprehensible or perfectly comprehensible!"¹² Eunomius taught that God was perfectly knowable and Gregory responds that man comprehending God places boundaries upon God. Gregory upheld the orthodox position that God's essence is incomprehensible and ineffable for man because God is infinite, holy, and greater than anything man can imagine.¹³ God is infinite and cannot be comprehended by finite man because the carnal mind cannot comprehend a spiritual nature.¹⁴

This limitation does not mean that man is not supposed to pursue a true vision of God. Rather, Gregory believes that speaking about God is the primary purpose of a sermon, "for indeed the very best order of beginning every speech and action, is to begin from God, and to end in God."¹⁵ Also, Gregory exhorts his church, "It is more important that we should remember God than that we should breathe: indeed, if one may say so, we should do nothing else besides."¹⁶ Gregory's goal is to mark off what cannot be said about God so that the church can boldly assert what is revealed so that salvation and worship are protected.¹⁷

Gregory's doctrine of the knowledge of God has two basic parts.¹⁸ The first part is *apophatic* as the theologian can only conclude *that* God is and must guard against *what* he is not. The second is *kataphatic* and asserts what can be known from God's revelation.¹⁹ A proper retrieval of the past must keep the dynamic of *apophatic* and *kataphatic* theology recognizing how they must be related to one another. Gregory models a faith seeking understanding model because he begins with what is revealed and then seeks to articulate what is revealed with confessions or grammars.

Gregory's contrast between *theologia* and *oikonomia* is helpful in distinguishing what can and cannot be known about God. The first relates to the immanent Trinity or God as he is in himself, and the latter his economic Trinity, God as he has revealed himself. Underlying this principle is the belief that God reveals himself truly, but not

exhaustively. He gives the analogy of climbing a mountain to see God and declares “when I looked closer, I saw not the first and unmingled nature, known to itself—to the Trinity I mean; not that which abides within the first veil, and is hidden by the cherubim; but only that nature, which at last reaches us.”²⁰ The nature of God or the immanent Trinity is beyond man, but God has made himself known in his activities of creating, saving, and revealing. The beginning point of theology is the economy of God and from the economy one makes assertions about the immanent, but the immanent is beyond the reach of man’s cognitive capacity.

God’s Triune nature can be known because he has revealed himself through his relationship with creation. His actions reveal him truly, but do not give a complete knowledge of his nature. Much of Gregory’s arguments for the deity of the Son and Spirit derive from the titles they have been given in Scripture and their inseparable actions.²¹ These particular arguments are seen at the end of *Oration 30* and *Oration 31*. In arguing for the deity of the Holy Spirit, Gregory makes his claim clear, “All that God actively performs, he performs.”²² The activities that only God can perform include creating, revealing God, and saving man. The Son and Spirit are clearly divine because they cooperate with the Father in these activities.

Limiting what can be said about God is important because Gregory’s opponents, the Neo-Arians, approach God rationally believing they have comprehended the totality of God. Gregory responded by limiting the theologian’s claims because the best he can do is to collect a fragmentary perception of God’s nature from his images.²³ The limited revelation should promote a humility concerning what kind of statements can be made about God.²⁴ This does not mean all confessions should be held loosely because the revelation provided is clear enough for Gregory to claim to be on the “Royal Road.”²⁵ The Royal Road is the way of godliness that avoids the extreme positions of heresies in a proper pursuit of God.²⁶ Gregory

believed Scripture was clear enough when revealing mysteries to separate orthodoxy from heresy. His confessions for the full deity of the Son and the Spirit are the strongest in the fourth century while he also recognized that the theologian will go “insane” trying to comprehend the eternal generation and procession.²⁷

Thus far the theologian’s work is limited by who God is and how he has revealed himself. This is important in relation to TIS because God must be the central focus of theology so that the church is called to worship him who is greater than their greatest thought. The two must be kept in proper tension because the theologian must be bold to proclaim difficult truths such as the Trinity and yet humble enough to be content simply to defend the mystery revealed in Scripture rather than try to describe God in himself.²⁸ Many have characterized the last century as one dominated by science, and this emphasis has influenced theology as contemporary theology values the ability to explain the mystery so that the church can understand.²⁹ This is in contrast with the premodern faith exemplified by Gregory that valued the ability to protect the mystery so that the church can worship.

MAN IS BOUND IN HIS SPEECH

Gregory insists that theological claims must be limited because the human mind is incapable of comprehending God and human language is inadequate to explain God.³⁰ Knowing God is not a rational discipline nor can the Scriptures be understood by reason alone.³¹ Gregory’s argument against Eunomius focuses upon how their different theories of language lead to two differing visions of God. Eunomius believed that when he knew the name of an object in nature, he could comprehend the nature. When Eunomius knew the name for God, unbegotten, he had comprehended the divine essence and defined in such a way that the begotten one could not be confessed as God.³²

Gregory must guard against Eunomius’s claim

to have a perfect knowledge of God while also affirming that God has revealed himself for the church to confess the mysterious paradox of the Trinity. In *Oration 37.2*, Gregory explains that the problem Eunomius finds in his doctrine is largely due to the weakness of language.

I have fallen into human language. For how can so great be said of the absolute, and how can that which is without quantity be called such? But pardon the word, for I am speaking of the greatest things with a limited instrument. And that great and long-suffering and formless and bodiless nature will endure this, namely, my words as if of a body, and weaker than truth. For if he condescended to flesh, he will also endure such language.³³

Another example shows that Gregory believes language is capable of communicating truths about God if the confessions follow God's revelation of himself. He evaluates the confusion over the East and West using different terms and concludes that both traditions articulate the same orthodox confession.³⁴ His conclusion is that the language of the West is impoverished and their confession would be laughable if not pious. The terms each tradition used are different, but the meaning of and orthodox doctrine are the same. This conclusion is only possible if one believes God has provided a reliable revelation of his Triune nature. The referential theory allows for various models or formulas as long as the necessary Trinitarian convictions are protected. Nothing can express the mystery of the Trinity perfectly, but each grammar must set up proper boundaries that protect and articulate what is known about God.³⁵ God has revealed himself enough to be praised properly, but God is too great and man too limited for man to describe him completely.³⁶

Gregory's theory of language was referential or what is today considered analogical.³⁷ The terms the church uses (such as person and essence) cannot fully describe God, but it is necessary for the

church to have a clear grammar for articulating the mysteries of God. Gregory criticizes Eunomius for beginning with a concept that is not biblical, the name "unbegotten," and making this the rule for what is known about God. Gregory begins with the revealed names, Father and Son, and what Scripture says about each person in his doctrine of the Trinity. The terms do not give the church an absolute knowledge of God, but a proper way of confessing him according to his revelation. This beginning point exemplifies starting with God's revelation. Confessions can use terms such as nature and person in a limited way to provide clarity, but their purpose is limited to affirming and guarding what is revealed. Gregory follows the traditional method of "faith seeking understanding" and "thinking God's thoughts after him."

GOD MUST BE KNOWN ACCORDING TO HOW HE REVEALED HIMSELF

Gregory's understanding of God's revelation is also regulated by an eschatological progression. His doctrine of how man sees God is based upon how God has revealed himself progressively through redemptive-history. The Father was manifested as God clearly in the Old Testament, the Son obscurely. The New Testament manifests the Son's deity and suggests the Spirit's, and now the experience of true believers indwelt by the Spirit should clearly demonstrate the Spirit's deity.³⁸ A more perfect knowledge of the Triune God is the future hope of all believers: "we have the promise that one day we shall know to the degree we are known."³⁹ The dim vision man possesses will become a perfect vision when he sees the Triune God face to face.⁴⁰

In his explanation of how the church sees God from Psalm 36, "In your light we see light," he argues from each divine person being described as light and revealing the other persons.⁴¹ The conclusion is that it is only in and through the persons of the Trinity that we can ever know the Triune God. The process of the economic Trinity

determines how believers will ascend in knowing the three persons, “knowing the Father in the Son, the Son in the Holy Spirit.”⁴² Gregory confesses, referring to the Holy Trinity, “which we worship, which we glorify, whose existence is intimately bound up with our own through our worship of the Father in the Son and of the Son in the Spirit.”⁴³ The Spirit must renew and adopt the believer to begin what Gregory calls “the golden chain of salvation” that then leads the believer to the Son and then to the Father. Gregory insists that a full confession of the Trinity was necessary for salvation and spirituality. He exemplified the emphasis on how each person has a specific role in revealing the entirety of the Godhead in a prayer opening his *Theological Orations*, “that the Father may approve, the Son aid, and the Holy Spirit inspire it—or rather that the single Godhead’s single radiance, by mysterious paradox one in its distinctions and distinct in its connectedness, may enlighten it.”⁴⁴

GOD IS ONLY KNOWN BY THE PURE IN HEART

Similar to TIS promoting a virtue ethic as essential to reading Scripture, Gregory made a Trinitarian spirituality a prerequisite for reading Scripture and discussing God properly.⁴⁵ Gregory regulates who should discuss theology because of man’s fallen nature.⁴⁶

Discussion of theology is not for everyone ... nor is it for every occasion, or every audience.... It must be reserved for certain occasions, for certain audiences, and certain limits must be observed. It is not for all people, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at least are undergoing, purification of body and soul, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness.⁴⁷

Man’s eyes have been darkened by sin and corruption so that they cannot see the light of God

perfectly. This is why Gregory limits the conversation about theology to include only those who have purified themselves and are seeking a pure vision of God.⁴⁸

The call to purity began with rightly understanding God according to his revelation and was complete when one casts off his carnal thinking and living. McGuckin argues that Gregory “defines the nature of theology as an invitation to ascent given by God only to the purified and elected souls.”⁴⁹ God is pure and holy, and only the pure in heart will see him (Mt 5:8).⁵⁰ Gregory speaks of approaching God like Moses approached the holy mountain.⁵¹ The more pure the theologian, the closer he is drawn to God, “his place matching his purity.”⁵² This is important for the pastor because he must be close to God in order to lead others closer to God with him. Before he can teach others about God, he must first purify himself so that he might see the light of God. This means anyone seeking to know God must be “molded and molding others by Holy Scripture.”⁵³

Purification is essential to spirituality because one cannot see God because God is pure, “where there is *purification*, there is illumination; and illumination is the fulfillment of desire for those eager to share in the greatest things—or in the Greatest Thing, or in that which is beyond the Great.”⁵⁴ He further explains the importance of illumination as it relates to the theologian needing to purify himself before taking on the task of theology,

Illumination is the splendor of souls, the conversion of the life, the question put to the Godward conscience. It is the aid of our weakness, the renunciation of the flesh, the following of the Spirit, the fellowship of the Word, the improvement of the creature, the overwhelming of sin, the participation of light, the dissolution of darkness. It is the carriage to God, the dying with Christ, the perfecting of the mind, the bulwark of the Faith, the key of the Kingdom of heaven, the

change of life, the removal of slavery, the loosing of chains, the remodeling of the whole man.⁵⁵

Theology has an experiential aspect because the believer “ascends” closer to God as he casts off sin which then allows him to have better vision of God.

Gregory serves as an extreme example of emphasizing purity by taking a vow of silence until he could first purify himself.⁵⁶ The need for purity is seen throughout his sermons on the pastoral ministry and summed up well in the following: “But before we rise above [the world of matter that drags me down] as far as possible and sufficiently purify our ears and minds, I think it is dangerous either to accept the responsibility for other souls or to take up theology.”⁵⁷ The theologian’s purpose is to see God as he is and the more one is purified of false images, the more he is able to see “light with light and the more brighter through the more dim.”⁵⁸

Gregory’s spirituality includes the concept of virtue that TIS emphasizes. He argues that the pastor “must not only wipe out the traces of vice from his soul, but also inscribe better [virtues].”⁵⁹ Gregory exhorts his church, “Seek to keep the commandments, walk in his statutes. Conduct is the stepping stone of contemplation.”⁶⁰ In contrast with vice which is “easily accessible and the road to corruption wide,” virtue is what makes someone a true theologian.⁶¹ He explains the necessity of a virtuous life in relation to worshipping the true God:

If one has nurtured some good qualities that has molded his character, transgression becomes more difficult than becoming good in the first place, for every virtue that is firmly rooted by time and reason becomes second nature, as does the love within us too, with which we worship the true love and which we have folded to our hearts in love and adopted as the guiding principle for all our existence.⁶²

Virtue is a conduct learned from discipline and duty, which not only leads to a pious life, but more importantly, true worship and love for God.

RULED READING OF SCRIPTURE

In the words of Gregory, “Now that we have purified the theologian, come, let us talk a little about God too.”⁶³ Knowing God from his revelation is now possible because the theologian has been prepared. Gregory’s contention with Eunomius is that his interpretation “robs the written words of their sense.”⁶⁴ Gregory states that it is his vice that keeps Eunomius from seeing what the literal text of Scripture contains.⁶⁵ The contention is not simply a difference of how to read Scripture, but is tied to the hope of salvation. In response to Eunomius’s interpretation of texts in which he claim the Son is not fully divine, Gregory argues, “one could easily go through each of these expressions in detail and give a truly religious interpretation.”⁶⁶ This reference to a religious interpretation is Gregory’s method of interpreting all of Scripture together as a whole with the purpose of arriving at a purified vision of God. Gregory must protect both natures of Christ “in order that I might be made God to the same extent that he was made man.”⁶⁷ Examples from Gregory’s *Fourth Theological Oration, On The Son*, will demonstrate how Gregory interpreted Scripture with Scripture and employed a ruled reading of Scripture.

READING THE WORDS OF SCRIPTURE

In *Oration 30.4* Gregory shows the importance of allowing the proper sense of a word to be derived from the text itself. Eunomius argues from 1 Cor 15:25, “He must reign until,” and Ps 110:1, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool,” to prove that the Son has a temporal reign and that it will end in contrast to the reign of the true God. Eunomius’s argument is based upon the term “until” having the same sense regardless of context. This interpretation follows from his theory of language whereas Gregory sees that Eunomius’s interpretation misses the differ-

ent contexts and usages of the term. Eunomius's interpretation is based upon the word, "God," being a reference to the Father alone in contrast to the Son in 1 Cor 15:24. The Son is reigning only until he hands the kingdom over to God, which is the Father alone.

Gregory responds by explaining that 1 Corinthians 15 states that he will reign until God is all in all—God being a reference to the Trinity as a whole in contrast to the Father alone.⁶⁸ Gregory recognizes that "until" could have reference to an event or have a temporal sense, and opts for the former interpretation. The reign is eternal and does not contradict Psalm 110 because the event that ends that reign is the submission of his enemies, at which point he would no longer reign over them in the same way. He also introduces into the argument Luke 1:33 that provides clarity on the reign of Christ, "there is no end of his royal rule." When all of these texts on Christ's reign are taken into consideration, the conclusion is that "until" is referring to the Son's reign here on earth that will change in the eschaton. The reign is not temporal, but eternal. The "until" simply refers to the event of the Triune God putting the world back into perfect order and thus a different reign begins.

In this argument, Gregory models how to read Scripture properly via both Scripture and the rule of faith. The reference to God cannot be God the Father because this would deny the Son's inclusion into the divine community and eternal reign.⁶⁹ He safeguards what has been handed down, but it is not merely repeating a creed. His vision of God is from all of Scripture, and his hermeneutic protects him from losing sight of the forest for the trees, or a pure vision of the Triune God from a single text. Gregory appears to take more care in reading the texts in context and reads all of Scripture as the work of one author. His ability to read all of Scripture together gives him his Archimedean point to defeat the Eunomian reading by taking clearer texts and demanding that all of the passages that speak of Christ's rule must be understood together. G. L. Prestige points out that

one of the key distinguishing marks between the orthodox theologians and the heretical is that the former "showed a far profounder sense of the need to interpret the Scriptures as a whole by comparing one passage with another."⁷⁰ He argues that the orthodox demonstrated an ability to reason how Scripture interprets Scripture as the heretical theologians tended toward equivocating on technical terms and a "parrot repetition of biblical texts."⁷¹ First Corinthians 15:25-28 is a difficult text for theologians still today, but Gregory is able to reason through its difficulties with simple rules such as how the word "God" can be a reference to the entire Trinity or to the Father alone given the context of the passage.⁷²

READING SCRIPTURE WITH THEOLOGICAL CONVICTIONS

One of the key emphases in Gregory's *Fourth Theological Oration* is arguing how Scripture should be read according to the rule that guides the reader to, "allocate the more elevated, the more distinctly divine expressions of Scripture to the Godhead, the humbler and more human to the New Adam, God passible for our sake."⁷³ The rule is meant to protect the church's confession of Jesus' divine and human natures.⁷⁴ It simultaneously determines the content of theology and how Scripture should be interpreted. The rule is a necessary solution to the variety of teachings from Scripture because Eunomius is emphasizing certain texts out of context to argue that Jesus was not fully divine.

Gregory begins explaining how this rule works from one of the most controversial texts for the Trinity during the fourth century, Prov 8:22, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his ways for his work."⁷⁵ Gregory applies a further qualification in order to apply the rule above to this passage, "Whatever we come across with a causal implication we will attribute to the humanity; what is absolute and free of cause we will reckon to the Godhead."⁷⁶ Gregory proposes that Prov 8:25, "Before the mountains were settled in place,

before the hills, I was given birth,” presents the divine nature of the Son. The Son’s being begotten refers to his personal existence which simultaneously distinguishes him from the Father and establishes his full deity. He thus concludes that the Son’s human generation is being spoken of in verse 22 and his “primal and less comprehensible” generation in verse 25.⁷⁷ The section explaining this interpretation elucidates its importance. Speaking of the Son he states, “He was actually subject as a slave to flesh, to birth, and to our human experiences, held captive as we are by sin, he was subject to all he saved.”⁷⁸ The text was without question Christological. What Gregory supplies is an interpretation that takes into consideration the two natures of Christ and the salvific importance of these two natures being united in the Son.

This interpretation demonstrates Gregory’s ability to interpret this controversial text in light of numerous doctrines. He keeps salvation at the forefront of the debate while constantly thinking through the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines in this interpretation. He is careful in his confession of the Son’s deity not to make the divinity of the Son dependent on another because the divine nature must be simple and uncaused. The begetting language is left within the realm of mystery as it is a unique begetting (without passion, time, or material). The creating language is easily applied to the humanity of Christ so that Solomon now speaks of both natures in Christ. He does not read the text in isolation, but reads it in light of other texts and doctrines that are more clearly revealed later in redemptive history.

A final example of Gregory applying a ruled reading concerns Eunomius wrongly interpreting the Son calling the Father “greater,” and the expression “my God and your God.” Gregory argues that the greater cannot simply refer to Christ’s human nature declaring God greater because this would be trivial and obvious. Rather, the Son’s confession that the Father is greater must be understood within the Trinitarian rela-

tionships. Gregory provides another rule concerning causal relations within the Trinitarian relations to protect the distinction of the Father and Son, “The superiority belongs to the cause and the equality to the nature.”⁷⁹ Causation here is referring to the persons within the Godhead where Gregory is taking the “greater” statement literally, but not according to the nature or Godhead. Rather it would be an explanation of the relationship between the Father and Son that is based upon the latter being eternally begotten. The Father is the first and the cause within the persons, but this language is limited to the personal existence of each, not their divinity.

In both cases Gregory protects the divine nature from having any causal notions. The human nature of Christ certainly has an origin, and thus any reference to the Son’s nature that implies causation is attributed to the human nature. The Trinitarian relations have distinguishing characteristics that are unique to each person. One of Gregory’s primary ways of distinguishing the Father and Son is the Father’s *Monarchia* and begetting of the Son which gives him preeminence among the persons with reference to relationship, not nature. The language of Scripture is complicated, yet clear, concerning the Son because he is spoken of in so many ways. He is the Father’s Son, truly God, truly man, and God incarnate. Each of these must be placed within their proper place. A series of rules regulates how the different proclamations describe Christ accurately while defending his true identity in each case. This is a religious reading as Scripture is interpreted with Scripture with the end result of purifying the mind and drawing the heart closer to God.

CONCLUSION

TIS has presented principles that can potentially help evangelicals have a richer interpretation of Scripture that better serves the church. Emphasizing a theocentric interpretation and exercising a robust hermeneutic that takes all of Scripture and every doctrine into consideration will be an

improvement over the typical modernistic hermeneutic that tended to be myopic in scope. One of the concerns with TIS is how its principles will be defined and exercised. I fear that there is a potential danger in the principles remaining vague and loosely defined which, in the end, leads to a corresponding vague theology, which will ultimately not help the church. I have presented Gregory of Nazianzus as a model for what TIS has proposed because he models a clarity in his interpretation and doctrine that focuses upon leading the church into worship. His theology and interpretation avoids overly simplistic approaches by wrestling with God's revelation and man's limited capacity. The objective of this article is modest in that I have only demonstrated Gregory's method of "religious interpretation" with regard to what can be said about God and how he interprets Scripture with Scripture in light of all other doctrines understood from Scripture. His ability to reason through Scripture and doctrine together makes him a model for TIS.

Gregory models how Scripture must be interpreted in light of Scripture. Gregory recognizes that the study and confession of God must be based upon how God has revealed himself. Gregory has confidence in God and his ability to speak in Scripture. Scripture was the primary source for doctrine and had to be considered as a whole. His ability to interpret the numerous parts of Scripture together led to his ability to lead the church in confessing the most important and controversial doctrines of the Trinity, Christology, and salvation. These three doctrines were interrelated within Scripture and had to be confessed in light of one another. His doctrine and grammar was careful, precise, and only added clarifying terms to help the church boldly confess the God of their salvation.

TIS has adopted the rule of faith as a hermeneutical principle. No doubt, the rule of faith has been defined and functioned differently over its long history, but at its most basic level it means reading Scripture in light of the doctrines that

have been handed down through the tradition, particularly the tradition associated with Trinitarian and Christological confession. Gregory declares that he must "guard the truth that he has received from his fathers."⁸⁰ There were certain doctrines that were being challenged in his day that he understood to be essential for Christian belief and practice. The foremost being the doctrine of the Trinity being tied to the practice of baptism. When arguing for these doctrines that had been handed down, Gregory never appeals to tradition or creeds. His arguments are always from Scripture and he primarily emphasizes scriptural language only using other grammatical safeguards when necessary.⁸¹ Interpretation cannot be an exercise in isolation so that the wheel is always reinvented. He exercises a clear restraint in being clever and novel in his doctrine while also providing a fresh interpretation of the primary texts of Scripture.

Gregory recognizes that doctrine functions grammatically so that the confessions do not become primary sources. Gregory is clear that human minds and language are incapable of comprehending God. Man is too finite, sinful, and weak to ever grasp the infinite power and majesty of God. This restrained his confessions from moving farther than what was revealed in Scripture. He employed extra-biblical terms, but made their function clear. They were there to safeguard what was revealed. They were necessary because of heresy but did not add anything to the doctrine itself. Man must strive to confess and communicate God according to his revelation as closely as possible, but the grammars, metaphors, and analogies were always limited. This is why *kataphatic* and *apophatic* theology must go hand-in-hand. What is revealed must be positively affirmed, and what cannot be said about God based upon what is revealed must be denied so that the infinite, spiritual nature of God is protected and not treated like hard science.

A particular example of separating the grammar of doctrine from the content of doctrine is

found in Gregory's argument against Eunomius where he does not allow the term "unbegotten" to become a primary source in forming the doctrine of God. A similar problem is becoming more prevalent among evangelicals where the grammatical term "person" is sometimes treated as a primary source. "Person" is a grammar established by the church and is only a term used to keep the three persons of the Godhead distinct. The definition of "person" does not inform doctrine; it only safeguards what is revealed. Theologians must be careful not to let the organizers and safeguards of doctrine become primary over the content of Scripture. When forming confessions of the one "person" and two "natures" of the Son or the three "persons" and one "nature" of the Trinity, scriptural terminology must define what "person" and "nature" mean rather than the modern use of the terms defining the Godhead and the incarnate God.

Gregory's sermons focused upon God for the benefit of the church. His arguments for the deity of the Son and Spirit are based upon what they have done for believers and how believers can experience their work. He continually reminds his church that a denial of their deity is a denial of hope and salvation. Since the persons of the Godhead work inseparably, the believer must depend upon them together. His theology started with the economy and attempted to say what must be said about the immanent Trinity based upon what the "persons" do in creating, revealing, and saving. This approach provides appropriate humility and generosity in theology while also giving the church clear, definite doctrine that must be believed for salvation.

A practical way this study could help pastors lead their churches is to help them value the clarity of Scripture on the most important doctrines. The doctrines of the Trinity and Christology are often assumed and not taught well in the church. If doing expositional preaching, pastors should highlight these doctrines when in passages such as Matthew 4, Galatians 4, Romans 8, 1 Corinthians

8, and many others. All three persons of the Trinity are mentioned together working toward the same end. Reciting the confession in the service will help them think about the Triune God they are worshipping, but seeing the text reveal the three will give them confidence in God and his Word. A confession that these doctrines are mysterious while clear will help the church worship with more clarity, honesty, and humility. Gregory is just one of many men that could be used to help lead a church to worship the Triune God more intentionally.

Another aspect of the study that I hope will challenge pastors is Gregory being a model of emphasizing spirituality. Pastors should read his *Oration 2, A Defense for his Flight from the Pastorate*. It is a challenging portrait of spirituality and pastoral ministry. Pastors should lead the church by modeling virtue and godliness and making God great, so the church is drawn closer to him. Knowing God is not a purely intellectual discipline. Doctrines must be tied to a change in desires, beliefs, and actions. The two natures of Christ are necessary in the confession because they must be combined in the Son in order to accomplish our salvation. It is necessary for hope, perseverance, and loving other believers with grace and humility. The three persons are necessary in the confession because the Father has sent his Son to die for us and the Spirit to convict and lead us. An emphasis on spirituality that is grounded in the Holy Spirit being the indwelling power of the Triune God protects discipleship from being moralism and self-righteousness. A better vision of God leads to a desire for more purity, and more purity should lead to a better vision of God.

ENDNOTES

¹Found in Dan Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) and Kevin Vanhoozer, "Introduction: What is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin

Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

²Gregory's father was the bishop at Nazianzus and was sent away to receive rhetorical education in Athens and Alexandria. He tried to escape the call to ministry numerous times because he was afraid of its high demands. He replaced his father as bishop in Nazianzus but spent considerable time pursuing the monastic life of meditation. It appears he was most happy at a monastery in Seleucia and served as bishop only out of duty to God, family, and friends. The most significant works of Gregory for our concern are his theological orations given while bishop in Constantinople. Here he oversaw the preceding of the Constantinople Council and set the standard for Orthodoxy. He shares the title "the theologian" only with the apostle John for his contributions to the orthodox faith. Christopher Beeley declares, "Gregory of Nazianzus stands out among Christian theologians of every generation for the clarity, the power, and the spiritual depth of his teaching on the Trinity. More than any theologian before him, he understands the Trinity to be the content, the structure, and standard of the Christian faith." Christopher Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* (New York: Oxford University, 2008). He states that "for Gregory the doctrine of the Trinity is not only the essential expression of the Christian life; in an important sense it is that life" (187).

³He uses the example of how the *imago dei* has been interpreted by Augustine, Calvin, and Barth to demonstrate the practice of TIS.

⁴Ayres defines grammatical doctrine as the "matrix of principles and rules for theological discourse ... so that one runs the least amount of risk of speaking unworthily of God" (Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* [New York: Oxford University, 2004], 52). Ayres argues that grammar "does not function as a sufficient description, but rather as a tool for articulating the basic statements of Trinitarian belief that Augustine takes to be a matter of revelation" (69). For a contemporary proposal of how doctrine functions grammatically see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). The

grammatical rules constitute a model when they collaborate and are consistent with one another. A model, therefore, is judged by how well its grammar or rules avoid heresy and present a unified doctrine of the Trinity.

⁵Other titles include virtuous ascetic, exalted contemplative, brilliant orator, mystic poet, fierce apologist, holy bishop, divine theologian. These come from the Menaion. Rufinus described Gregory as "a man incomparable in all things ... who offered to the church the most radiant light of the knowledge of Christ." See J. A. McGuckin, "The Vision of God in St Gregory of Nazianzus," *Studia Patristica* 33 (1996): 145. Rogich provides a helpful look into the nature of theology that Gregory exemplified. It was one of experience, humility, contemplation and service. He provides a rich study of why Gregory has been exalted as "the Theologian." Daniel Rogich, "The Development of a Theologian according to Saint Gregory the Theologian," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39 (1994): 63-81.

⁶John A. McGuckin points out that his richest theology is found in his confessions and hymns of praise ("Perceiving Light from Light in Light" [*Oration* 31.3]: The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Gregory the Theologian" *GOTR* 39 [1994]: 17). He goes on to describe Gregory's theology as "wholly confessional, that is, doxological, in character and soteriological in its import" (*Ibid.*, 18). "For Gregory, the Trinity is a dynamic and soteriological experience, the beauty of God experienced in the liturgy of prayer and expressed in the church's confession of praise" (*ibid.*). Norris comments that his orations are all liturgical, "He breathes in worship and breathes out theology." Frederick Norris, "Gregory the Theologian," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1993): 474. Norris comments on his theology being "for and from the church." "Wonder, Worship, and Writ: Christological Exegesis," *Ex Audit* 7 (1991): 64. His autobiographical poem, *On His Own Life*, is a unique contribution as he contemplates his life in view of God. It is similar to Augustine's *Confessions* in this way.

⁷Beyond having a contribution to the contemporary debate over the nature of language, esp. theological

language, Gregory serves as a mediator in many of the early church's debates. McGuckin calls Gregory a "synthesizing theological midwife" that reconciles the church in the times of some of its deepest need. See John A. McGuckin, *Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2001), 111.

⁸Frederick Norris says his main concern is "what Scripture itself says and what the church in its worship has been doing." Norris has also called Gregory a model of how to meditate on variety of scripture and bring it together ("Wonder, Worship, and Writ: Patristic Christology," 59, 65). Hanson calls Gregory a common sense exegete and Norris comments that his exegesis is "grammatical and theological." See R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988): 846.

⁹*Orations 27.1-5*. All translations of the *Theological Orations* (27-31) are from *On God and Christ* (trans. Frederick Willism and Lionel Wickham; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 2002). *Orations 6, 19, 20, 23, 24* are from *The Father of the Early Church: A New Translation* (trans. Martha Vinson in *Fathers of The Church* 107; Washington: Catholic University of America, 2003). *Orations 38, 39, and 42* are from Brian Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (New York: Routledge, 2006). *Orations 2, 21, 34, and 40* are from *S. Gregory of Nazianzus, Archbishop of Constantinople* (Select Orations and Select Letters, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series [NPNF2], vol. 7; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

¹⁰*Or. 27.5*.

¹¹Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 41.

¹²*Or. 38.7*.

¹³"No one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in his nature and essence" (*Or. 28.17*), and "Meaning by this that even a vision of God is too much for men let alone God's nature" (*Or. 28.19*). McGuckin states that Gregory "begins the theological task quite decidedly from the perspective that God is unknowable; that is inconceivable and incomprehensible in his nature" (*Gregory of Nazianzus*, 12).

¹⁴*Or. 29.13*.

¹⁵*Or. 2.1*.

¹⁶*Or. 27.4*.

¹⁷*Or. 27.3-5*.

¹⁸The point of this is that comprehension of the object of knowledge should be effected both by negation of what the thing is not and also by positive assertion of what it is (*Or. 28.9*). There is a great difference in being able to know something exists and knowing what something is (*Or. 28.5*). Frederick Norris recognizes this balance between God being ineffable while truly revealing himself, "because God in his nature is incomprehensible and yet is revealed sufficiently, theology will never be amenable to tight syllogistic systems. Its subject is not open to that kind of investigation," ("Gregory the Theologian," 478).

McGuckin explains that the apophatic and kataphatic are leftover from Athanasius' doctrine, "a fundamental legacy of Christianity, and widely apparent in the Scripture themselves ("The Vision of God in St Gregory of Nazianzus" 146)." "Gregory is insisting that the Unknowable can be known by creatures without thereby ceasing to the Unknowable"—this supposed "Cappadocian achievement" is really an "otherwise unremarkable re-statement of the basic axiom of the Alexandrian theological tradition" (*ibid.*, 148).

¹⁹Donald Winslow explains this distinction well and applies it to Gregory's Christology in "Christology and Exegesis in the Cappadocians" *Church History* 40 (1971): 394ff.

²⁰*Or. 28.3*. This type of knowledge is distinguished today by the terms immanent and economic. There is a clear difference between the two that guards against the second half of Rahner's Rule, but a clear affirmation of the first, "the economic is the immanent." The economic accurately reveals the immanent, but only partially. Gregory explains that when we try to look at the Deity absolutely we must proceed, "as best we can collecting fragmentary perception of it from its images?" In *Or. 28.21*, Gregory cites David proclaiming God's judgments too wonderful for him, too excellent for him to grasp, and Paul when he claims, "We know in part what we prophecy in

part” (Or. 28.20).

²¹Or. 31. 29-30 and 29.19. For a full treatment of the significance of inseparable actions as a key to a Trinitarian reading of Scripture, see Lewis Ayers, “Remember That You are Catholic” (serm. 52.2): Augustine on the Unity of the Triune God,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8.1 (2000): 39-82.

²²Or. 31.29.

²³Or. 28.13. He also argues this from Paul’s declaration, “We know in part what we prophecy in part,” (Or. 28.20).

²⁴A complete revelation is compared to looking at the sun. Our eyes are too weak and sinful to look directly into the sun. The rays are even more than we can ever hope to apprehend.

²⁵Or. 42.16, “But we walk the middle, royal road, where the experts tell us the pursuit of virtue is to be found.”

²⁶The heresies were Eunomianism or Neo-Arianism and Sabellianism.

²⁷His confession was eventually adopted, but he argued that Constantinople should declare the Spirit *homoousios*, but they threw him out as the head of the council for this strong position.

²⁸Or. 2.38. Daley states, “The reason for this title [The Theologian] is clearly Gregory’s urgent championing of a Trinitarian conception of God and his insistent care to articulate a theological terminology—indeed a theological grammar—for speaking of God in a way consistent with Scripture and the Church’s tradition of faith” (Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 41).

²⁹Bertrand Russell observes that Modernity is marked by “the diminishing authority of the church, and the increasing authority of science” (Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* [Touchstone, 1967], 491).

³⁰Or. 28.3. See Norris “Wonder, Worship and Writ: Patristic Exegesis,” 64.

³¹Or. 28.11, “that the divine nature cannot be apprehended by human reason, and that we cannot even represent to ourselves all its greatness.” McGuckin observes that the first principle of the *Theological Orations* is, “theology proper is radically restricted as far as human beings are concerned, and cannot be accessed by logic or illumined by material anal-

ogies” (*St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, 305). Frederick Norris argues that, for Gregory, “Faith is what leads us, faith gives fullness to our reasoning...Human minds are too small to ferret out the inner recesses of God.” “Theological argument is enthymematic. It takes claims and knows that they can be organized to make compelling appeals” (“Gregory the Theologian,” 474).

³²Eunomius, “Since the names are different, the essences are different as well” (Apol. 1.12, 24). See R. A. Norris Jr., *Father Gives Fullness to Reasoning* (Leiden: Ball, 1991), 149. See also Or. 28.4 where Gregory argues “for language may show the known if not adequately, at least faintly, to a person not total deaf and dull of mind.” Eunomius has a Platonic theory of language “that names determine essence” so that when Eunomius knows the name of God, unbegotten and simple, anything that does not share this name does not belong to the community. See also Socrates Scholasticus, *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates* (London: S. Bagster, 1844, IV.7).

³³Or. 37.2.

³⁴“For we use in a godly manner the terms one *ousia* and three hypostases, the one to denote the nature of the Godhead, the other the unique characteristics of the three; the Italians mean the same, but owing to the scantiness of their vocabulary, and its poverty of terms, they are unable to distinguish between Essence and hypostasis, and therefore introduce the term Persons, to avoid being understood to assert three Essences. The result, were it not pious, would be laughable” (Or. 21.35).

³⁵McGuckin observes that this insistence on silence for what cannot be spoken of is even stronger than Wittgenstein. The most important difference is that for Gregory is not caused by ignorance or inarticulation, but it is rooted in “religious wonder” and the mystery of God (*St Gregory of Nazianzus*, 305).

³⁶See Or. 28.17 where Gregory states “no one has yet discovered or even shall discover what God is in his nature and essence” One cannot define the undefinable, but the church knows enough from his revelation to continually have his praise on their lips.

³⁷Gregory follows the Aristotelian theory of language

that affirms that “reality is prior and language follows” (Norris, *Father Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 149). G. L. Prestige recognizes that for Gregory “the transcendence of the Godhead surpasses the powers of ordinary discourse” (*God in Patristic Thought* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008], 237). Gregory also tightens up the way language can be used so that it can not be used in theological discourse outside of how it is used in the secular world.

³⁸Or. 31.26. An interesting aspect of this progression is the experiential as a basis for proof of the Spirit’s deity. The perfect Trinity is seen in this dispensation of God’s progressive revelation because the church experiences its power.

³⁹“But of God himself the knowledge we shall have in this life will be little, though soon after it will perhaps be more perfect, in the same Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be glory forever and ever amen.” Gregory explains this progression from 1 Corinthians, “[Paul] says that he sees in a mirror dimly, but that there is a time when he will see face to face” (Or. 20.12).

⁴⁰Or. 29.21. See also Or. 31.25. There is another aspect of his eschatological progression where the theologian must be able to distinguish the difference between the two covenants of salvation history, the law and grace. The believer who lives in the covenant of grace is waiting for the unshakeable kingdom where he will see God face to face. See McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, 308-09.

⁴¹“This is the meaning of David’s prophetic vision: “In your light we shall see light.” We receive the Son’s light from the Father’s light in the light of the Spirit. That is what we ourselves have seen and what we now proclaim—it is the plain and simple explanation of the Trinity” (Or. 31.3).

⁴²Or. 6.22.

⁴³Or. 24.19.

⁴⁴Or. 28.1.

⁴⁵Gregory makes a clear connection for seeing God rightly and attaining the final vision with being pure in Or. 29.12. He prays that Eunomius will be inspired by the Spirit to see Christ rightly and that the Nicene party will be saved by the Trinity, “abiding pure and blameless until the more complete revelation of what

we long for in Christ himself, our Lord, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

⁴⁶“For language may show the known if not adequately, at least faintly, to a person not totally deaf and dull of mind” (Or. 28.4).

⁴⁷Or. 27.3.

⁴⁸Or. 27.3. The crowds in Constantinople had been discussing the controversy over the Trinity as casually as amusement and entertaining small-talk.

⁴⁹McGuckin, “In Your Light,” 13. See McGuckin on how this ascent demands man overcoming his “materially based consciousness” in order to “transcend material limitations, when the soul is invited back to God to its true spiritual nature and destiny in communion with God.” This is in contrast with Horton who dismisses the idea of ascent as a modernistic concept (Michael Horton, *Lord and Servant* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 11-13).

⁵⁰Or. 28.2-3.

⁵¹“It was truly a great thing for them simply to hear God’s voice, and this only after they had been thoroughly purified” (Or. 20.2).

⁵²Or. 28.2.

⁵³Or. 2.1.

⁵⁴Or. 39.8. Daley’s translation has “cleansing” and I have replaced it with “purification.” See also Or. 23. 11, “Our minds and our human condition are such that a knowledge of the relationship and disposition of these members with regard to one another is reserved for the Holy Trinity itself alone and those purified souls to whom the Trinity may make revelation either now or in the future.”

⁵⁵Or. 40. 2.

⁵⁶Or. 6.1: “It was then I set a bridle on my lips, which were not in any case inclined to speak, because I thought that the priorities of the Spirit were first to purify myself through the philosophy that resides in action; next, to open the mouth of my mind and draw in the Spirit; then to utter a godly theme and to speak of God’s perfect wisdom among them that are perfect.” See also Or. 19.1-3. “When I realized that nothing I said was able to curb popular talk or the current all-pervasive passion to speak and lecture on the things of the Spirit without the inspiration of the

Spirit, I embarked on another course—a better one.” Gregory says that theology properly done spurs the theologian to listen more than speak (*Or.* 32.21).

⁵⁷*Or.* 20.1. His desire was “to block out his senses, severing all ties with the flesh and the world ... to live the life that transcends visible nature ... and be and ever come to be a spotless mirror, as it were, of God and the divine, capturing light with light ... and finally attain the blessed goal, our mirrors shattered by the reality of the truth.” Gregory goes on to state, “In fact, this is why one must purify oneself and then enter into converse with the pure if we are not to share the same fate as Monoah” (*Or.* 6.4).

⁵⁸*Or.* 20.1.

⁵⁹*Or.* 2.14.

⁶⁰*Or.* 20.12.

⁶¹*Or.* 23.1.

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³*Or.* 20.5.

⁶⁴*Or.* 30.1.

⁶⁵*Or.* 29.18.

⁶⁶*Or.* 29.18.

⁶⁷*Or.* 29.19.

⁶⁸*Or.* 30.6.

⁶⁹*Or.* 30.6.

⁷⁰Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 147. See also Thomas Kopecek, *A History of Neo-Arianism* (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979), 434.

⁷¹Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 153. According to Prestige, the Orthodox “showed a far profounder sense of the need to interpret the Scriptures as a whole by comparing one passage with another” (*ibid.*, 147).

⁷²See Paul Russell, “St. Gregory’s Exegeses Against the Arians, Still a Viable Christian Tool” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39 (1994): 123-30, for a more thorough explanation of how Gregory interprets this text.

⁷³*Or.* 30.1. See also 29.18, “You must predicate the more sublime expressions of the Godhead, of the nature which transcends bodily experiences, and the lower ones of the compound, of him who because of you was emptied, became incarnate and (to use valid

language) was “made man.”

⁷⁴There is similarity between what Gregory is accomplishing with this rule and what the earliest creeds were seeking to accomplish. The Nicene and Apostle’s Creeds stated what the church believes concerning Jesus’ historic birth and death while also protecting his divine nature. There is no direct connection to the wording of these creeds, but Gregory was an adamant defender of the Nicene Creed, and it is probable that the Creed helped inform this rule.

⁷⁵*Or.* 30.2. “The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old” (ESV).

⁷⁶*Or.* 30.2.

⁷⁷This particular passage is an excellent test case for theological interpretation. The modernistic hermeneutic would have denied any Christological implications because it would not have been the author’s intent and the genre does not lend itself to a theological reading. There should be some question concerning if Gregory is creating rules to read Scripture according to his paradigm or if this is a ruled reading derived from a broader Christological reading of all of Scripture. The justification for Gregory’s reading would be the unity of Scripture and Paul declaring Christ to be the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24). Origen explained that Christ is the Creator and source of all existence in virtue of his being Wisdom. As Wisdom Jesus is the Logos and “constructive system of knowledge and ideas concerning the universe” (*On St John* 1.19). See Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 118.

⁷⁸*Or.* 30.3.

⁷⁹*Or.* 30.7.

⁸⁰*Or.* 6.22.

⁸¹This differs from Basil who argued for the deity of the Spirit from tradition because he did not think Scripture was abundantly clear on the position. Basil was more of a political leader, Gregory more of a dogmatic leader. Thankfully, for the tradition, Gregory’s practice and doctrine became the norm.