

# Gregory of Nazianzus, *Pastoral Theology*

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Too many pastors leave the ministry because of frustration or fatigue, and too many think about leaving too often. Pastors need regular reminders to persevere with the right perspective in the work of being God's stewards. It is important for pastors to feel the weight of responsibility and yet recognize that it is a desirable task. One way for pastors to consider their calling and work is to read the work of pastors from history. I want to introduce you to Gregory of Nazianzus and his sermon on pastoral ministry, which was his written defense of fleeing the call to ministry.

Gregory's father, Gregory the Elder, was the pastor of Nazianzus and appointed his son to the ministry hoping that he would be his successor. Gregory, the son, was an academic and had recently been baptized. His plan was to enjoy a quiet, contemplative monastic life with his friend Basil. Gregory fled from his father's appointment, which was to be on Christmas day 361, but returned by Easter 362. Upon returning to the church, he wrote a sermon defending his decision to flee because he knew the church was already busy gossiping about him.<sup>1</sup> In his defense, he explains that he left for his own personal reasons. What is helpful for us is how he defines the work of the pastor. Gregory helps us see how pastoral ministry is necessary labor, and requires both good character and the ability to teach the most demanding subject matter—the Triune God.

## NEED

Gregory first explains that his decision to flee was cowardice because the appointment conflicted with his desire for the monastic life where he would need to only talk to himself and God.<sup>2</sup> He knew the life of the church would be full of turmoil if he were to accept the call to ministry. In light of the difficulty and desire for solitude, however, he came to the conclusion that it is “better for the whole church to grow than the one, just as it is better to have a whole park rather than one tree.”<sup>3</sup> He was willing to submit to the pastoral call because he considered the work important and necessary for the benefit of others.

He argues that the role of pastor is needed because the church needs to learn how to submit to God’s rule. He contrasts this good rule with anarchy and disorder, both of which he believes are easily achievable. The pastor continues the gospel ministry of Jesus, who came to restore man from sin that he would once again be under God’s rule. The pastoral rule cannot achieve the highest good, which is freedom from all sin, but can accomplish what Gregory considers the second-best, restoration from sin.<sup>4</sup> Gregory reasons that if everyone shirked the duty of pastoral work, the church would be halted in pursuing restoration. The pastor is called to steward God’s Word in order to help believers grow closer to God, as they learn to submit more readily to his good rule.

Gregory states that ruling over livestock is difficult, and that being ruled over is difficult, but nothing is more difficult than ruling over others. That work demands much of the pastor because he must diligently study God’s Word, excel in virtue, and know how to best apply God’s Word to the various problems of different kinds of people. He reasons that those who are devoted to the study of divine things should “ascend to rule from being ruled.”<sup>5</sup> This is similar to how other vocations work in that a craftsman or shipman takes on more and more responsibility as he matures and learns the skills required.

The need for pastors to establish God’s rule is probably not something we consider enough within the church and as pastors. Paul tells Titus that he was left to finish putting the church in proper order, which meant teaching sound doctrine and the godliness that accords with it. Pastors serve a necessary role in leading the body to submit to God’s rule which means they are restored as image bearers as they grow in virtue.

## PIETY

Gregory is most concerned about what the ministry would require of him with regard to his virtue. He doubts his qualification “to rule the flock or herd, or to have authority over the souls of men.”<sup>6</sup> He fears he might be added to the number of pastors who “with unwashed hands ... intrude into the most holy office” and desire a “means of a livelihood instead of a pattern of virtue, or an absolute authority instead of a ministry of which we must give an account.”<sup>7</sup> His conclusion is that too many pastors are “pitiable as regards piety.”<sup>8</sup>

Gregory insists that to lead others to walk in the way of Christ, the pastor must repent of sin, grow in godliness, and learn how to teach others to follow Christ. Before he can govern the souls of men, he must first learn to submit rightly to a shepherd and to have his soul duly cleansed.<sup>9</sup>

A man must himself first be cleansed, before cleansing others; himself become wise, that he may make others wise; become light, and then give light; draw near to God, and so bring others near; be hallowed, then hallow them; be possessed of hands to lead other by the hand of wisdom to give advice.<sup>10</sup>

His conclusion is how deadly it would be for the pastor and the church if “we undertake to heal others, while ourselves are full of sores.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Gregory, the pastor must not only have the virtues he desires to see in others, but must also excel in these virtues. He likens the pastor to one who ascends the mountain to behold God’s glory. His role is to go before the people so as to drag them up with him to see and delight in God who has saved them.<sup>12</sup> A pastor can only lead God’s people to know God as he himself knows God by pursuing him in godliness. He uses the imagery of Sinai as a warning of how dangerous it is for someone to approach God with impurity and to lead others to do the same, “Before a man has gained sufficient purity of mind, and far surpassed his fellows in nearness to God, I do not think it is safe for him to be entrusted with the rule over souls, or the office of mediator between God and man.”<sup>13</sup>

Gregory highlights the difficulty of pastoral work by demonstrating how difficult it is to remove vice from others and instruct them in virtue. He believes “wickedness always has the advantage over goodness” because

virtue is “rare and difficult.” He likens virtue to trying to start a fire with green wood because men are “ready and disposed to join in evil.”<sup>14</sup> He is concerned that men judge themselves too often by comparing themselves to their neighbors, rather than measuring their success by the standard of the Most High.<sup>15</sup>

When preaching at the church of Anastasia during the Council of Constantinople, Gregory is concerned that discussions about the doctrine of God are too common and warns that everyone should not take up the work of the theologian. His concern is that God is being discussed in a casual way among people whose sinful practices would keep them from knowing him. He insists that to talk about God correctly, one must first be pure.<sup>16</sup> He does not discourage right thinking about God, rather he exhorts the church “it is more important that we think about God than that we should breathe.”<sup>17</sup>

Gregory later emphasizes the importance of teaching the right doctrine, but insists that first, the pastor must be prepared to model right living before others. He unites the need to live godly lives with the ability to see God’s glory in such a way that it is impossible to truly teach God’s people about him without the godliness that allows you to know him. The pastor’s virtue is “that the gospel should make its way, no less by their character than by their preaching.”<sup>18</sup>

Today, the church is blessed with the retrieval of the classical doctrine of God and the Trinity from the church fathers. The recent retrieval must also emphasize the fathers’ clear instruction regarding the importance of purity and virtue in order to know God and make him known. For Gregory, there is no knowledge of God without purity and virtue. A key verse for Gregory in defense against Arianism is Matthew 5:8, “blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” He argues that their doctrine is perverted because their hearts are not pure. The church needs pastors who are pursuing holiness so that they can lead others in the same path to see and know the God who is Holy.

## **THEOLOGIAN**

Gregory of Nazianzus has been given the title, “The Theologian.” His most well-known works are his theological orations that were delivered while serving as pastor of Anastasia in Constantinople in 381 AD while the council

was taking place. He had a significant influence not only on the doctrine of the Trinity that was defended at the council, but also paved the way for the next significant controversy in the church regarding the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ. He declares that the “distribution of the word’ is the first and last of the pastor’s duties<sup>19</sup> and that “the very best order of beginning every speech and action, is to begin from God, and to end in God.”<sup>20</sup> This is the high calling of the pastor and requires intelligence, skill, and labor.<sup>21</sup>

The teaching ministry requires theological understanding to recognize and instruct concerning “the types of truths, the covenants, the first and second coming of Christ, his incarnation, sufferings and dissolution, with the resurrection, the last day, the judgment and recompense, whether sad or glorious.”<sup>22</sup> The most important doctrine for Gregory is “the original (supreme) and blessed Trinity.”<sup>23</sup> When beginning the Second Theological Oration (28) on God, he states that he first had to prepare the soul in Oration 27 by first impressing upon the soul the truths from Scripture. As he approaches the doctrine of the Trinity, he prays that the Father would approve of the teaching, the Son would give aid, and the Holy Spirit might inspire, as well as the one single Godhead enlighten it.<sup>24</sup> He trusts the clarity of God’s Word while also recognizing it is God who must assist the preacher who seeks to illuminate the minds of others with His Word.

The pastor’s highest calling is to present God in his fullness. Gregory warns that those charged with illuminating the doctrine of God for others are at great risk. He warns that the pastor must avoid contracting the persons of the Godhead so that there is only one, which would be Modalism, or severing the three so that there would be three diverse and divided gods that would not be equal, which would be the problem in Arianism.<sup>25</sup> He argues from the names God has given that the Father cannot be robbed of his fatherhood by estranging his Son and ranking him with creation.<sup>26</sup> He concludes with the instruction, “For both the unity of the Godhead must be preserved, and the Trinity of Persons confessed, each with his own property.”<sup>27</sup>

Gregory’s teaching brought clarity regarding how Scripture must be read together in what we now call biblical theology and systematic theology. Regarding the former, he demonstrates progressive revelation of God’s nature in that the Father was clear in the Old Testament and the Son vague; that in the New Testament age the Son was made clear and the Spirit was

vague; but now in the age of the church the Spirit is also fully manifested.<sup>28</sup> His contribution to systematic theology is seen in how he demonstrates the need to reason with Scripture using Scripture. This is in contrast to heretics, who only repeat one verse without reasoning how it relates to and is informed by other texts.

He introduces rules for reading Scripture most clearly in the third Theological Oration (29) when defending the deity of the Son. He instructs the church that the more sublime and exalted expressions should be applied to his deity and the expressions that correspond to bodily experiences should correspond to his humanity because he became incarnate and was made man.<sup>29</sup> He determines that whatever is said to be caused is to refer to Jesus' manhood, and whatever is said to be absolute and unoriginate refers to his deity.<sup>30</sup> This is one of the first clear examples of using Scripture's own categories to establish rules for reading Scripture. The significance of the rule is to protect the deity of the Son because the passages about his humanity had been wrongly applied to his deity so as to deny it. He provides a robust list of examples of how the correct reading of texts demonstrates clarity for the Son's full deity and humanity.

He was begotten—yet he was already begotten—of a woman. And yet she was a virgin. That it was from a woman makes it human, that she was a virgin makes it divine. On earth he has no father, but in heaven no mother. All this is part of his Godhead... As man he was baptized, but he absolved sins as God; he needed no purification rites himself—his purpose was to hallow water. As man he was put to the test, but as God he came through victorious—yes, bids us good cheer, because he has conquered the world. He hungered—yet he fed thousands... He was tired—yet he is the rest of the weary and the burdened... He is buried, yet he rises again. He goes down to Hades, hey he leads souls up, ascends to heaven, and will come to judge quick and dead, and to probe discussions like these. If the first set of expressions starts you going astray, the second set takes your errors away.<sup>31</sup>

As a theologian, he sought to make God known from his Word by understanding him more fully from his Word. In this way, Gregory is a model for pastoral ministry in how he approaches God with reverence and a clear trust in God's own revelation. His preaching demonstrates this reverence by

making God the focus of his sermons and by seeking to present him in the fullest way. His sermons also instruct the church in how they should seek to know God by rightly reading his Word.

### **PHYSICIAN OF THE SOUL**

Gregory's sermon is most well-known for comparing the work of a pastor to a medical physician and introducing the metaphor "physician for the soul." He states that if a man could free himself of all vice and reach the greatest heights of virtue, and excel in the work of a theologian, the task of the pastor would still have great difficulty, "for the guiding of man, the most variable and manifold of all creatures, seems to me in very deed the art of arts and science of sciences."<sup>32</sup> Comparing the pastoral work to a physician who treats bodies, he states that it is more laborious and has greater consequences. The body, by nature, dissolves and is perishable whereas the soul comes from God and is eternal.

The first significant obstacle that makes this work difficult is how varied every human being is in their personalities, desires, habits, experiences, emotions, and behaviors. Gregory acknowledges the difficult work of the physician who must pay attention to time, age, and seasons as he diagnoses the cause of sickness so as to prescribe the medicine that will heal. He argues the pastor's work is more difficult because he must diagnose and cure "habits, passions, lives, wills, and whatever else is within us, by banishing from our compound nature everything brutal and fierce, and introducing and establishing in their stead what is gentle and dear to God."<sup>33</sup> The healing of the body often has a simple and clear diagnosis and prescription, but the healing of the soul is more complicated and requires a greater understanding of what is needed to establish healthy virtues.

The second significant obstacle to the work is that sinners are difficult patients who often work against the pastor's help that would lead to their own healing. He argues the physician of the soul is more difficult because men who seek physical healing recognize their need and desire the cure. This is in contrast to the spiritual state of men, which is often self-deceived or deceiving because they do not want to lose the vice in repentance and add virtue. He observes that men too often hide away their sins or make excuses for it.<sup>34</sup> The physician of the soul "far exceeds in toilsomeness and

consequential in worth” because it is “concerned with the hidden man in the heart, and our warfare is directed against the adversary and foe within us.”<sup>35</sup> The pastor must know how to diagnose sins when the patient is unwilling to cooperate and convince them that they must receive medicine that they do not see as necessary.

Gregory concludes that,

the scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is his image, if it abides, to take it by the hand, if it is in danger, or restore it, if ruined, to make Christ dwell in the heart by the Spirit: and, in short, to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon, one who belongs to the heavenly host.<sup>36</sup>

In this sermon we see how he diagnoses three different kinds of patients with three different kinds of actions. If someone is abiding in Christ, to lead them by the hand to draw closer to God; if someone is in danger, to help restore them which means leading them to repent of the sins that have corrupted him. The third is and if someone is ruined, the goal is to help them receive Christ in their hearts by the Spirit. This kind of need to practice diagnosis and prescription is also seen in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 where Paul calls the church to “admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak.” Pastors must be skilled to identify the problem and apply the right remedy.

Gregory’s goal as a pastor is to help lead the patient to know and see God. The art of pastoring helps believers find restoration through repentance so that they are not only renewed as image bearers, but are also becoming more like Christ, who is the true and exact image of God. His call to give the soul wings and to deify reflects his belief that sanctification leads to godly character and the restoration of the patient’s position as image bearer of God and also allows man to see God more fully.

The pastor should feel overwhelmed by the nature and consequences of this work. Gregory’s next section gives comfort by articulating that God has united himself with man to bring about this healing. In one of his classic poetic summaries of biblical theology, he shows how God has come to unite himself with man to destroy our idolatry.



This is the reason for the generation and the virgin, for the manger and Bethlehem; the generation on behalf of creation, the virgin on behalf of the woman, Bethlehem because of Eden, the manger because of the garden, small and visible things on behalf of great and hidden things.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Gregory directs the pastor to proclaim God from his Word faithfully so as to help believers draw closer to God. Not only does this mean rightly dividing the Word, it also means that the pastor rightly diagnoses the problem and then applies the right prescription. Gregory presents the pastorate as men of low estate who have been entrusted to proclaim Jesus as the “Lamb and the Shepherd” and “who overcame him who had overcome.”<sup>38</sup> This is demanding, but necessary labor. The work of leading others to God requires that pastors themselves have learned to practice the virtues that can help the church grow closer to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus Oration 2: *In Defense of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, After His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly Offices*, trans. C. G. Browne and J. E. Swallow in *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), 204-227.

<sup>2</sup> Oration 2.7, 429.

<sup>3</sup> Oration 12.4, 246.

<sup>4</sup> Oration 2.4, 428.

<sup>5</sup> Oration 2.5,

<sup>6</sup> Oration 2.9, 430.

<sup>7</sup> Oration 2.8, 430.

<sup>8</sup> Oration 2.8, 430.

<sup>9</sup> Oration 2.78, 458.

<sup>10</sup> Oration 2.71, 455-6.

<sup>11</sup> Oration 2.13, 432.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus Oration 29.2-3 (*The Third Theological Oration: On the Son*) in *On God and Christ* (trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham; Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Press, 2002), 70-71.

<sup>13</sup> Oration 2.91, 462.

<sup>14</sup> Oration 2.11-12, 431.

<sup>15</sup> Oration 2.14, 432.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus Oration 27.3 (*The First Theological Oration: Introductory*), in *On God and Christ* (trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham; Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Press, 2002), 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> Oration 27.4, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Oration 2.69, 455.

<sup>19</sup> Oration 2.5, 440.

<sup>20</sup> Oration 2.1, 204.

- <sup>21</sup> Oration 2.36, 440.  
<sup>22</sup> Oration 2.36, 440.  
<sup>23</sup> Oration 2.36, 440.  
<sup>24</sup> Oration 28.1, 37.  
<sup>25</sup> Oration 2.36, 440-1.  
<sup>26</sup> Oration 2.38, 441.  
<sup>27</sup> Oration 2.38, 441.  
<sup>28</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus Oration 31.26-27 (*The Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit*) in *On God and Christ* (trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham; Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Press, 2002), 137-138.  
<sup>29</sup> Oration 29.18, 86.  
<sup>30</sup> Oration 29.2, 70.  
<sup>31</sup> Oration 29.19-20, 86-87.  
<sup>32</sup> Oration 2.16, 433.  
<sup>33</sup> Oration 2.18, 434.  
<sup>34</sup> Oration 2.20, 434.  
<sup>35</sup> Oration 2.21, 435.  
<sup>36</sup> Oration 2.23, 435.  
<sup>37</sup> Oration 2.24, 436.  
<sup>38</sup> Oration 2.24, 436.