**Gregory of Nazianzus’ Five Theological Orations**

“Knowing this, then, myself, and knowing that no one is worthy of the great God, who is both victim and high priest, unless one has first offered oneself to God as a living sacrifice, or rather has become a holy, living temple of the living God, how should I be hasty to engage myself in speaking concerning God, or approve anyone who might engage himself to use such words in a rash way? To desire such a thing is not praiseworthy, and to attempt it strikes fear in the heart!”—Oration 20, *On Theology and the Appointment of Bishops*

According to the Church Fathers, to teach theology requires first and foremost purity of heart; to rashly attempt to deal with the truths of God is to risk distorting them and speaking them for selfish reasons. How might we take this warning seriously? Consider the following prayer:

Holy God our Governor, give us a song that will honor you, words that will bring you delight, and a heart that will offer them in humility. We know we come to the very edge of our words when we speak of you, your mysterious Being beyond us yet revealed to us by your scripture. Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, who is to come, teach us to defend the deposit of truth and to do so with careful words, even as your servant Gregory’s example reminds us. May we speak wisely and well of you, God in Three Persons, world without end. Amen.

If we were to pray it seriously, how might this change the way we approach the subject of the Trinity or the two-natures of Christ? What might God do for us?

Overview of Gregory’s Trinitarian Thought

“The unity of God would, in my view, be preserved if both the Son and the Spirit refer back to one cause, without being synthesized or fused with it, and if they share one and the same movement and will of the Divinity.”—Oration 20

“What is honored among us is monarchy—not a monarchy that is delimited by a single person . . . but one that is held together by an equal dignity of nature, a common accord of will, and an identity of action, and by the convergence to the One of the things that come from it. . . . . so that while there is a difference in number, there is no division in essence.”—Oration 23

* Purification of the body and soul is necessary to know God; knowing God is both a gift of grace and a product of human effort. The reverence of fear prepares us for contemplation lest we cross the line and shipwreck ourselves with presumption.
* Between the fully contemplative way of the monks and the life of active service, there is a middle way of study and service.
* We need analogical terms to express God’s greatness and are dependent upon the corporeal to think as humans. We cannot know God except by the means he has revealed (on the slant, so to speak). Yet while we now know in part, in the eschaton, we will know him face-to-face.
* Theosis (a term Gregory coined, but not the concept) is participation in the divine life of the Trinity or the transformative change of salvation ending in a state of exaltedness and union, though never violating God’s aseity.
* The doctrine of the Trinity is the theology of how the divine economy has shown God’s actions in history and what this reveals of the Godhead’s nature. Knowledge of the Trinity increases the believer’s participation in the Triune life of salvation.
* The Father and the Son are relational terms, as is the Holy Spirit’s procession from the Father.
* The preexistent divine Son of God took on human nature and became the God-man. The full divinity of Christ is necessary for our salvation, as is his full humanity. He fully assumed our humanity with no loss to his divinity. (What he did not assume, he did not save.) As he is infinite God, the Son can assume finite humanity with no loss to himself or conflict.
* The Holy Spirit is not a creature and to say so is to undercut the economy of salvation. The Holy Spirit is homoousion with the Father, and while scripture is silent in directly calling the Spirit God, God’s attributes and actions are repeatedly attributed to him.
* The Holy Spirit, as the custodian of the Church, has made his divinity more obvious in the life of the faithful since Pentecost.
* The identity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all anchored in the Ungenerate Father as source and cause (logically not temporally). There is no fourth source of identity behind the Father. Therefore, the unity of the Trinity is in the monarchy of the Father and not in a shared class of deity (as if they were aggregates). The monarchy of the Father, rather than conflicting with the equality of the Trinity, makes their equality possible and does not end in modalism.

Oration 27, *Against the Eunomians*

Oration 27 is in many ways an introduction of Gregory, as much as it is the topic of debate. Gregory is setting out the proper approach to theology to suggest that this is the ideal for which he strives, while the Eunomians, those of the “dissimilar” party, have not pursued this end, as evidenced by their argumentative nature and their misleading of the faithful.

Sec. 1—The use and misuse of words, reason, and truth

Sec. 2—The character of creators of controversy

Sec. 3—The true conditions for theological study (A portrait of the Christian philosopher)

Sec. 4—Practicing the presence of God

Secs. 5-6—What is a proper debate before the pagan world?

Sec. 7—Proper beauty and order in our rhetoric requires moral discipline and control

Sec. 8—A mock examination

Sec. 9—The problem of electing too quickly Christian orators

Sec. 10—Closing thoughts (Untrained apologists should not attempt to teach theology.)

Discussion Questions

1. Like “On My Own Verses,” Oration 27 sets out a particular ideal for the use of words and the discipline of one’s life. How do sections 1, 3, and 7 compare with the poem?
2. What wisdom does the oration have to offer on theological controversies?
3. What role does humor and mockery play in the oration?
4. Do the highly declamatory expectations of Second Period Hellenic oration undercut the insights of Gregory in other areas? Explain.

Oration 28, *On the Doctrine of God*

Oration 28 could almost be titled “On God the Creator” since a large portion of the speech is given to the meaning of creation in relation to its Creator. But the oration could also be titled “On God the Ineffable” since a foundational principle for any language about God is recognizing the analogical limits of that language. In many ways, the core of Gregory’s argument is that humans may not know the mysterious nature of God except through the gifts of his creation, and creation speaks loudly of its Creator.

Sec. 1—Brief summary of the last oration and a transition to the new topic.

Secs. 2-4—Ascending the mountain of contemplation means realizing that we cannot know the mysterious nature of God. Only created things make our knowledge possible.

Sec. 5—The difficulty of even knowing the actual nature of the creation.

Sec. 6—The creation clearly has a Creator.

Sec. 7—God is non-corporeal and indivisible in (triune) simplicity.

Secs. 8-10—God is omnipresent, without spatial limits. The negative language of what God is not also obligates to say something of what he is, yet this quickly reveals the limits of human reason.

Sec. 11—A brief apology for why Gregory has begun this way.

Secs. 12-13—We are not angels; it is impossible for us to reason except via created things.

Secs. 14-15—False worship of created things and of human baseness

Sec. 16—Reason leads us to conclude that creation has a Designer.

Sec. 17—A very Platonic passage—we won’t know the nature/essence of God until the eschaton.

Secs. 18—20—A catalogue of those who “beheld” God.

Sec. 21—Philosophy is unable to penetrate the glorious mystery of God’s being.

Sec. 22—Questions regarding the metaphysical structure of the senses.

Secs. 23-31—An encomium that reviews the order of Creation: the fish and the birds (24); land animals and their homes (25); plants and their uses; fountains (26); the seas and their boundaries (27); atmosphere and light (28); the stars and the sun (29); the sun and the moon (30); the angelic orders (31).

Discussion Guide

1. How would you analyze the tension between the desire to contemplate God and the knowledge that he is beyond our understanding?
2. In section 5, Gregory distinguishes between “conviction of a thing’s existence” and the “knowledge of *what* it is”?
3. What makes it important that Gregory stresses the non-corporeal nature of God?
4. Likewise, what makes it important that he stresses the limits of reason and philosophy when it comes to knowing God?
5. Sections 23-31 are a rapid tour of the physical and heavenly creation. What do these passages suggest about patristic Christian views of the natural world?
6. How do the creation passages allude to God’s questioning of Job?
7. To what end does Gregory include scripture quotations (and a few classical allusions) in these sections?

Orations 29-30, *On the Son*

Orations 29 and 30 are at the heart of the theological debate with the Eunomians. The first deals primarily with various logical objections they raise to the full deity of the Son, while the second deals with scriptural exegetical debates. At the heart of the logical rebuttal is the insistence that God the Father’s relationship to God the Son is logical and not-temporal and analogical and not earthly. At the heart of the exegetical rebuttal is the key that passages that exalt Christ refer to his divinity, while those which limit him or lower him refer to his humanity.

29 Sec. 1—An introduction to the method and pattern of his rebuttal

29 Sec. 2—Why Gregory will limit himself to the biblical language of “generation,” “begottenness,” and procession.

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| Sec. 3 | So *when* did these last two originate? | Mistakes logical priority for temporal priority |
| Sec. 4 | How then can the process of begetting not involve being subject to change? | Because God is non-corporeal and not time-bound. |
| Sec. 5 | Can anyone be a “father” without beginning to be one? | He is eternally Father without beginning. Scripture often uses time-bound language to make a non-temporal point. |
| Secs. 6-8 | Has the Father begotten the Son voluntarily or involuntarily? | A foolish distinction: God is not somehow separate from his will and the language of begottenness is analogical. |
| Sec. 9 | The Son either existed or did not when the Father begot him. | Another example of trying to reduce the eternal nature of God to temporal existence. |
| Secs. 10-11 | The generate and ingenerate are not the same so Father and Son cannot be the same. | God is simple in his unity, being of one substance. God’s generation is neither time-bound nor without substance. |
| Sec. 12 | If the Son and the Father are the same substance, then the Son would have to be unbegotten as well. | Ingeneracy and generacy are relational analogies within the Godhead. |
| Sec. 13 | Begetting must have a beginning and an ending | True deity must be eternal, but even the angels have a beginning and no ending. |
| Sec. 14 | Why should not the names be the same and used in the proper sense in either case? | The irony here is that the debate is over the Father and the Son not being equally God. |
| Sec. 15 | Cause must be by nature and therefore be superior. | Logical casual superiority does not imply that the deity’s substance is superiority itself. |
| Sec. 16 | “Father” is either a designation of substance or activity. | Father and Son are relational terms within the Triune life that imply each other. |

29 Secs. 17-20—Gregory begins to examine the biblical evidence. He argues that the textual evidence for the Son’s high nature and deity all refer to his divine nature, while those texts that refer to his subordination to the Father or to his limitations refer to his human nature. Section 20 in particular is a beautiful set of paradoxical meditations.

29 Sec. 21—Closing thought: “Faith is what gives fullness to our reasoning.” A plea to be reunited with the Trinity.

30 Sec. 1—Introduction to a closer rebuttal of scriptural arguments.

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| Sec. 2 | Proverbs 8:22—“The Lord created me at the beginning of his ways for his works.” | Gregory doesn’t argue that the passage is simply a personification of wisdom in general; instead, he argues that the passage does apply to Christ. He argues that a passage that implies a lesser position must therefore speak of his humanity in expectation. |
| Sec. 3 | Isaiah 49 (LXX), etc. | The language of slavery speaks to the humility of the Incarnation |
| Secs. 4-5 | I Corinthians 15—“He must reign until. . .” | This speaks of the Messianic mission not the eternal reign of God. Christ submits to God here on our behalf as our stand-in. |
| Sec. 6 | Christ learning obedience passages | As the Word he has neither been obedient nor disobedient, but as the human Jesus he identifies perfectly with our need for obedience. |
| Secs. 7-8 | John 20:17--“My God and your God” | “Superiority belongs to the cause and equality to the nature.” Again, this is a relationship identifying an aspect of his humanity, not his divinity. |
| Sec. 9 | What Christ receives—various passages | These refer again to his humanity, but most of these are not qualities that would be false to see as inherent in his divinity already. |
| Secs. 10-11 | John 15:9--“The Son can do nothing of himself. . .” | The meaning here is that the Son refuses to do anything at odds with the Father. The Word of the Father stands in a similar eternal relationship with shared equal authority. |
| Sec. 12 | John 6:38—“coming down by the will of the one who sent him.” | The shared will of the Father and the Son are not in opposition but in constant cooperation. |
| Sec. 13 | John 17:3; Mark 10:8—“None is good except God alone.” | Each is a statement of God being the only god. |
| Sec. 14 | Hebrews7:25—“Ever living to make intercession for us.” | Christ’s role as mediator is not a slavish begging within the Godhead but a metaphoric assurance that we may endure because God is for us. |
| Secs. 15-16 | Mark 13:32—“No one knows the last day except the Father” | The human Jesus is limited as a human being would be, while the divine Wisdom knows as God’s primal Nature. |

30 Secs. 17-21—A longer exploration of the titles of God and of the titles of Christ in scripture. Section 18 focuses on the I AM of God. Section 19 looks at titles of power and of providence. Section 20 focuses on titles that apply to the divinity of Jesus, while section 21 looks at those that speak of his humanity.

Discussion Questions

1. What would you say is the combined effect of these two orations? How do they shape you and your thinking as a reader?
2. Do you find any of Gregory’s logical arguments more or less convincing than others?
3. Likewise, do you find any of his scriptural readings more or less assured?
4. Why is it important that both orations end with more poetic meditations on their subjects?
5. What makes the non-temporal and non-spatial nature of God such an important key to Gregory’s claims about the divinity of the Son?
6. Likewise, what makes his exegetical rule (high passages speak of Christ’s deity, lowly passages of his humanity) an important method for interpretation?
7. Why are the Father and the Son relational (and analogical) terms?

Oration 31, *On the Holy Spirit*

In speaking of the deity of the Holy Spirit, Oration 31 combines approaches that Gregory applied to the Son’s deity in Orations 29 and 30. He addresses both the logical objections and the exegetical debates. Herein, Gregory sets out clearly the language of consubstantiality and of three hypostases.

Secs. 1-2—Gregory opens the matter of the Holy Spirit by suggesting that the issue has been confused and made wearisome by the confusion of objections, many simply for the sake of objecting.

Sec. 3—The problem of defending the letter with the wrong motives. In God’s light we see the light of the triune nature.

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| Sec. 4 | ‘When” did the Spirit come into existence? | There is no “when” in God. God the Holy Spirit must be eternal or he is only a highly exalted being and not able to impart to us holiness. |
| Secs. 5-6 | The Spirit is an activity, a characteristic of substance, or unknown. | How can he act without a personality to enact his motivated actions? An attribute of substance cannot be one we would be baptized into. |
| Sec. 7 | The Holy Spirit must be unregenerate and another Father or begotten and another Son. | This is simply to confuse issues. We have no comparable biblical language to use of the Holy Spirit. We need not extend gendered pronouns, such as the neutral or the feminine to the Holy Spirit, to justify other biological metaphors. |
| Sec. 8 | There is no midway term between ingeneracy and generacy. | But there is—“procession.” And the procession of the Holy Spirit guarantees his difference from the Son who is begotten. |
| Sec. 9 | The Holy Spirit must be less than the Son or he would be a Son. | Each member of the Godhead is not the other two, so the diversity and unity of the trinity is safeguarded. The Ungenerate Father is not the Begotten Son is not the processing Holy Spirit and yet all are one Godhead in quality and substance. |
| Secs. 10-11 | But doesn’t one procession and one begotten end up with two Gods? | One must understand the Triune Godhead as sharing one substance. Gregory attempts an analogy involving Adam, Eve, and Seth but cautions that it can be misused, as can any analogical language. |
| Sec. 12 | But in the past who has worshiped or prayed to the Spirit? | Will answer this question more fully under the biblical exegetical sections, but he points out to worship God in Spirit and truth already implies the Spirit’s role in presenting prayer and worship to himself. His role in creation should warn us not to downgrade the Son or the Holy Spirit. |
| Sec. 13-14 | But if we use “God” of each are we not worshiping three Gods? | Ironic that this question comes from those who recognize the deity of the Son! “We have one God because we have a single Godhead” divided neither in will nor in power. |
| Secs. 15-16 | But don’t the pagans have a godhead of many gods? | The pagan gods (which are demons) have neither the holy character nor the unity in substance of the Godhead. |
| Sec. 17 | Consubstantial things are aggregates. | The oneness of God is not an aggregate of separate elements. |
| Sec. 18 | Being indicated singularly means they are not consubstantial. | Gregory musters examples of how things can be numbered but share relations. |
| Secs. 19-20 | Things that are counted together in this way are nouns not qualities. | Gregory reduces this claim to absurdity by pointing out the ways that nouns can speak of overlapping aspects or of how titles can be used to speak of the same person. |

Secs.21-24—Gregory now switches to the question of the Holy Spirit in scripture. He takes a four-fold approach to the topic:

1. Non-factual things in scripture (sec. 22): God is pictured as corporeal and subject to change when neither is the case.
2. Factual things not in scripture (sec. 23a): Theological terms, such as “ingenerate,” “unoriginated”
3. Non-factual things not in scripture (sec. 23b): “Deity is evil” and so on.
4. Factual things in scripture (sec. 24): clear titles addressing divinity

Secs. 25-27—Makes the case for doctrinal development, such as God the Son was more clearly revealed in the New Testament than in the Old, so God may have allowed the question of the Son’s divinity to be worked out before the issue of the Holy Spirit’s arose in the present.

Sec. 28—Quotes Gregory the Wonderworker’s dictum: “three persons, One Godhead undivided. . .” and makes the case that the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism points to his adoration and his adoration to his divinity.

Sec. 29—An extended list of the biblical texts that support the Spirit’s deity.

Sec. 30—Gregory’s exegetical rule that exalted expressions concerning the Spirit apply to his deity, while less exalted statement apply to his processional sending to us upon earth.

Secs. 31-33—Addresses some particular misunderstandings of his analogies: there is no temporal succession or mutual disruption, no numerical succession, and no reduction of the Son or Spirit to potentials in the Godhead. Neither is there any change, instability, or disruption in God.

Discussion Questions

1. How similar or different is Gregory’s defense of the Holy Spirit’s deity from that of the Son’s?
2. Why does Gregory devote such space to answering the logical objections of detractors?
3. How does Gregory’s formulation safeguard the doctrine of the Trinity?
4. Do you find his argument about doctrinal progress convincing?
5. What is the combined effect of his arguments?

Letters 101-102, To Cledonius

Written in his retirement in 382, the first letter to Cledonius offers the brunt of Gregory’s answer to the Apollinarian party. The heart of his answer is that Christ must be fully human, and this includes a complete human mind. The divine mind does not need, in a spatial, temporal way, to push out the human mind of Jesus. What is not assumed by Christ cannot be healed.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important that Christ not only be fully God, but also fully human?
2. Are Gregory and Apollinarius theologically nick-picking? Why and/or why not?
3. Why does Gregory take the time to promote ten anathemas in section 5 of the first letter? Are they all equally important?
4. In the second letter, why does Gregory stress that Christ needed a human mind if he were tempted yet without sin?