

Gregory of Nazianzus: Monarchy of the Father as Foundation of Trinity

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Introduction

For about two thousand years, countless theologians tackled the doctrine of the Trinity and wrestled with the concept of what is a Triune God, especially with the role of the Father. Among the countless theologians who wrestled with this doctrine, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, a Cappadocian Father, stands out “for the clarity, the power, and the spiritual depth of his teaching on the Trinity.”¹ Gregory’s thoughts on the Trinity were central in everything he did and it was the driving force of his personal and ecclesiastical life. Because the doctrine of Trinity was so central to Gregory, he never really had an oration specifically on the Trinity, but the different concepts of the Trinity were spread throughout his orations. Moreover, what made Nazianzus’ theology stand out was applying the concept of the Monarchy of Father as the foundation of the Trinity and how the Monarchy of the Father functions as the role that brings the unity in the Trinity.

Context

Theology and Divine Economy

First, before analyzing Gregory of Nazianzus’ understanding of the Monarchy of Father as the foundation of the Trinity, it is crucial to understand some foundational concept of Nazianzus’ theology regarding to the Trinity. The foundational approach of Gregory of Nazianzus’ doctrine of the Trinity can be comprehended as “theology” and “divine economy.” “The central focus of Gregory’s Christology and Pneumatology is to perceive, to confess, and as far as possible to understand the implications of the divinity of the Son and the Spirit as the basis of structure of the Christian life. Through faith one comes to recognize that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, who work together in the economy of salvation, share fully in the Divinity of God

¹ Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013), 187.

the Father. This act of confessing the divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation Gregory typically calls “theology” (θεολογία).² Therefore, “theology” is also known as the doctrine of the Trinity, and the divine economy is the possession of all, the Father, Son, and Spirit, but not in a clear sense to make the unity of three persons. When scholars refer to Gregory’s doctrine of the Trinity, they are not to think about the comprehension of the metaphysics of the Trinity. Instead, Gregory’s thoughts on the Trinity should be considered as the theology of divine economy in the deepest sense.^{3 4}

In Gregory’s articulation of “economy,” he often uses the Greek word οἰκονομία, and this word has significant background that influenced Gregory’s understanding of οἰκονομία. “In ancient Greek οἰκονομία refers to the administration of a household or any purposeful activity, and in Hellenistic rhetorical theory it came to signify the proper arrangement of a discourse. The New Testament writers used οἰκονομία to refer to God’s plan of salvation, which has its focus in Jesus Christ, as well as the commission of God’s grace given to Paul and his stewardship of the mysteries of God; the bishop’s role as God’s steward; the role of all Christians as stewards of God’s grace; literal household management; and the city treasurer.”⁵ For this reason, to Gregory “economy” means God’s governance, administration, and arrangement of the affairs of the created order done in His purposeful way as it had been revealed in the Scripture. Therefore, the way of God’s “economy” has significance to “theology” according to Gregory, so without God’s “economy” there is no “theology.”⁶

² Beeley, *Trinity*, 194.

³ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴ Robert McCoy, “Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity” (final paper, Spring Arbor University, 2015), 1-2.

⁵ Beeley, *Trinity*, 195.

⁶ McCoy, *Gregory*, 2.

The Monarchy of God the Father

Gregory's theology of the divine economy, his doctrine of the Trinity, is composed of several ideas that represent his way of thinking. His view of the monarchy of God the Father lies as one of the greatest idea at the core of Gregory's theology. One of the greatest contributions to this doctrinal statement of Gregory's, regarding to the monarchy of the Father, can be found in Oration 25.15-16:

One God, unbegotten, the Father, and one begotten Lord, his Son, referred to as God when he is mentioned separately, but Lord when he is named in conjunction with the Father, the one term on account of his nature, the other on account of his monarchy; and one Holy Spirit proceeding, or, if you will, going forth from the Father, God to those with the capacity to apprehend things that are interrelated, but in fact resisted by the impious though so recognized by their betters and actually so predicated by the more spiritual. Neither should we place the Father beneath first principle, so as to avoid positing a first of the first, thus necessarily destroying primary existence; nor say that the Son or the Holy Spirit is without beginning. Thus we shall avoid depriving the Father of his special characteristic. Paradoxically, they are not without beginning, and, in a sense, they are: they are not in terms of causation, since they are indeed from God although they are not subsequent to him, just as light is not subsequent to the sun, but they are without beginning in terms of time since they are not subject to it. Otherwise, that which is transitory would be antecedent to things that abide, and that which has no independent existence to things that abide, and that which has no independent existence to things that do.

Neither should we posit three first principles if we want to avoid polytheism of the Greeks, nor a single one, Judaic in its narrowness as well as grudging and ineffectual, whether by positing a self-absorbing deity (the preferred view of those who have the Son issue from the Father only to be absorbed into him again) or by disallowing their natures and stripping them of Godhead, as our current experts like to do, as though the Godhead feared some rival opposition from them or could produce nothing higher than creatures. Likewise, we should not claim that the Son is unbegotten, for the Father is one; nor the Holy Spirit is Son, for the Only-Begotten Son is one. In this way, the divinity of each will be defined in terms of the property that is unique to each, in the case of the Son, his Sonship, in the case of the Holy Spirit, its procession and not sonship. We should believe that the Father is truly a father, a far more truly father, in fact, than we humans are, in that he is uniquely, that is, distinctively so, unlike corporal beings; and that he is alone, that is, without mate, and Father of one alone, is Only-Begotten; and that he is a Father only, not formerly a son; and that he is wholly Father, and father of one wholly his son, as cannot be affirmed of human beings; and that he has been Father from the beginning and did not become Father in the course of things. We should believe that the Son is truly a Son in that he is the only Son and of one

only Father and only in one way and only a son. He is not also Father but is wholly Son, and Son of one who is wholly Father, and has been Son from the beginning, since there was never a time when he began to be a Son, for his divinity is not due to a change of purpose nor his deification to progress in time; otherwise, there would be a time when the one was not a Father and the other not a Son. We should also believe that the Holy Spirit is truly holy in that there is no other like it in quality or manner and in that its holiness is not conferred but is holiness in the absolute, and in that it is not more or less nor did it begin or will it end in time. For what the Father and Son and Holy Spirit have in common is their divinity and the fact that they were not created, while for the Son and the Holy Spirit it is the fact that they are from the Father. In turn, the special characteristic of the Father is his ingenerateness, of the son his generation, and of the Holy Spirit is its procession. But if you seek after the means, what will you leave to them—in the words of Scripture, they alone will know and are known by one another—or also for those of us who will one day receive illumination from on high?⁷

In this writing, he started with a creed-like statement of faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the characteristics of each person; this is very similar to the Nicene Creed we have today.

Gregory must have had a major influence in the writing of the Nicene Creed. “He has been concentrating his efforts on asserting the full divinity of the Son and the Spirit and their coequality with God the Father, against homoian, heterousian, and Pneumatomachian detractors, yet when he gives a summary statement of his own doctrinal position he chooses to emphasize not the triune equality, as we might expect, still less the unity or consubstantiality of the three persons, but rather the unique characteristics of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the interrelations between them.”^{8 9}

From Oration 25, it is clear that Gregory viewed the sole role of God the Father as fountainhead and cause of the Trinity. “Following the New Testament witness, God is first and foremost the Father of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and yet in virtue of their timeless generation

⁷ Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 25,” In *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Select Orations*, Trans. by Martha Vinson, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2003), 170-2.

⁸ Beeley, *Trinity*, 204.

⁹ McCoy, *Gregory*, 5-7.

from the Father, the Son and the Spirit fully share the Father's divine nature and are therefore also God."¹⁰ Hence, Gregory characterizes the three persons by their point of origin and their resulting relationships to one another: the one God is the unbegotten Father of Jesus Christ; the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who is begotten from the Father; and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.¹¹ Bouteneff was able to compare the nature of unbegotten and begotten in the Trinity with the nature of Adam and Seth:

In Oration 31.11, in the fifth *Theological Oration*, Gregory uses Adam to explain the consubstantiality or codivinity of the Holy Spirit. Here the crux is not Adam's unbegottenness but his having "generated" both Eve and Seth, though in different ways. Both Eve and Seth are "derived from" Adam, one as a "portion of Adam," the other as his offspring. Yet both are human beings sharing his same nature, a hope that illustrates the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit from the Father to yield an identity of natures.¹²

As seen in the way that Gregory characterized the three persons, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit originate from the Father. The Son is "God" because of the divine nature in the Son that was from the Father; however, in relationship to the Trinity, the Father is God and the Son is Lord, revealing the monarchy of the Father. The Father possesses a special property that the Son and Holy Spirit do not possess, the Father is "self-existent Divinity, being begotten, uncaused, and without source while the Son and Holy Spirit are not. Therefore, according to Gregory, if one denies the Father's identity as the source or that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not the source of the Father it is equal to denying the existence of God all in all. This idea of the monarchy of God the Father, meaning that He is the "only source" and "sole principle" of the Trinity, rests on the foundation of Gregory's theology.¹³

¹⁰ Beeley, *Trinity*, 204-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹² Peter C. Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 145.

¹³ McCoy, *Gregory*, 7-8.

Furthermore, Oration 20 expounds on the unity and oneness of God and the importance of the monarchy of the Father: “Nor again should we diminish the Father’s status as source, proper to him as Father and generator, since he would be the source of small and worthless things were he not the cause of deity contemplated in Son and Spirit. It is our duty then both to maintain the oneness of God and to confess three individual entities, or Persons, each with his distinctive property.”¹⁴ For Gregory, unity of the Trinity means the Father begetting the Son and sending forth the Spirit, since the Son and Spirit are of the Father, they possess His divinity. For example, Jesus’ statement in John 14:28 about the Father being greater than Him (Jesus Christ), refers to Jesus’ incarnation and how He remains in His divinity from the Father. So Jesus as an incarnate human is considered lower than the Father, but the divinity of the Son is not greater than the Father because the divinity is the Father’s. The same concept applies for the Holy Spirit, the Spirit should be viewed as lower in divinity because the divinity is of the Father.¹⁵

Concerning the unity of the Trinity, “the singular being and work of God, which all three persons are and carry out, constantly originates from the Father and are shared by the Son and the Spirit, because the Father gives it to them and they receive it. For this reason, Gregory repeatedly locates the divine unity not in the common Divinity—as if the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were one God in virtue of being members of the same class, or because they happen to share the same nature—but the monarchy of the Father, by which the Father fully shares his being with the Son and the Spirit.”¹⁶ At the same time, even though it is the source of the Father that gives the three Beings a sense of unity, the Father also is the source of the unique identities of the three Beings as well. Gregory expands this concept in Oration 20 where “it is the Father’s

¹⁴ Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 20,” In *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Select Orations*, Trans. by Martha Vinson, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2003), 111.

¹⁵ McCoy, *Gregory*, 8-9.

¹⁶ Beeley, *Trinity*, 207.

role as the eternal source of the Son and the Spirit, and consequently their respective generations from the Father, which causes all three to be distinct from each other.”¹⁷ There are distinctions between the Father, Son, and Spirit as a result of the divine generation; the Son and Spirit are begotten, but not the Father. Also, the identities of the Father, Son, and Spirit are continually identified by people through their external relationships. However, Gregory warns that this cannot lower the honor of the unity of the Trinity, as when we focus too much on the identities of the individuals that comprise the Trinity. On the other hand, we cannot focus so much on the unity of the Trinity, that we neglect the identities of the individual Beings of the Trinity. If a person does this, it will destroy the Trinity as a whole, and the Trinity deserves to be worshipped and gloried because of the unique identities of the Being that makes one unity because they are the source of one Being.¹⁸

When speaking of the unity and monarchy of the Father, Gregory does not mean that the monarchy of the Father causes disunity because the Father is over the Son and Spirit. Instead, Gregory argues that it is the monarchy of the Father that brings the unity of the Trinity together in equality! The unity is the Father.¹⁹ This means that the ontological equality and essential identity is the result of the Father’s generation in the Son and the Spirit. For that reason, if there is no unity and equality in the Trinity, then it is not even a Trinity according to Gregory. Therefore one could argue that since the Trinity is thought of as relational, there may be a sense that one is better than the others. Gregory argues that this cannot happen because the Son and Spirit could not be without the source, the Father, and it would be disreputable for them to imagine living without the Father. In addition, it is not right to think that “the Father has set the

¹⁷ Ibid., 208.

¹⁸ McCoy, *Gregory*, 9-10.

¹⁹ Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 49.

Trinity in motion because the ordered structure of the relations of origin somehow fades from view, leaving only a purely reciprocal, ‘perichoretic’ exchange of Divinity.”²⁰ Additionally, Gregory emphasizes that the Father’s divine generation of the Son and Spirit is the unity of the Trinity. In Oration 25, Gregory eloquently explains this when he states “unity is worshipped in Trinity and Trinity in unity, both its union and its distinction miraculous.”^{21 22}

It may seem like Gregory gave more attention to the Father than the Son and the Spirit, but this is not necessarily true because “he makes the point explicitly in his most significant expositions and he frequently refers to it in passing, he also refers to it through secondary, derivative concepts, such as the language of consubstantiality.”²³ Gregory was even able to point out Paul’s interchangeable usage of the terms “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” as proof of their consubstantiality.²⁴ The distinct identities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the unity and consubstantiality of the Son and Spirit with the Father are the outcome of the Father’s divine generation. For this reason, “all conceptualizations of the divine unity ultimately refer to the eternal generations and the sharing of the divine nature by the Father with the Son and the Spirit, and to their reference back to God the Father, as do our ideas about the distinctions among the three persons.”^{25 26}

When Gregory summarizes his view of the Trinity in relation to the monarchy of the Father, he views the divine generation that branches from the Father making the Son and Spirit, or in other words, a complete Trinity. The Trinity is not just the reference of the unity of God, but also that each person has his or her own uniqueness just as God as a whole is unique. The

²⁰ Beeley, *Trinity*, 211.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

²² McCoy, *Gregory*, 10.

²³ Beeley, *Trinity*, 213.

²⁴ Oration 34.15

²⁵ Beeley, *Trinity*, 214.

²⁶ McCoy, *Gregory*, 10-11.

monarchy of the Father is the source that gives to the Son and Spirit, the monarchy of the Father empowers all three persons to help each other. It is the generation of God, the Father, which makes the Son and the Spirit “coequal” with the Father and makes God worthy of the glory and honor. And interestingly, this teaching of the Trinity is found in a “narrative” expression of relationship, not systematic. Therefore, “The monarchy of God the Father is thus the foundational principle of Trinitarian logic, the fundamental dynamic that gives meaning to the grammatical aspects of unity and distinctness within the Trinity, and also the basic shape of the divine economy, by which the eternal God is known.”^{27 28}

Conclusion

“It was Gregory of Nazianzus who offered the clearest, most economical, and perhaps the most paradoxical parameters while articulating this Mystery and who most insistently emphasized the centrality of this Trinitarian confession for the whole of Christian life.”²⁹ When Gregory faces the doctrine of the Trinity he does not look at it in regard to the metaphysics, instead he focuses on the “theology” and “economy.” According to Gregory of Nazianzus, the doctrine of the Trinity is “theology” and the “economy” plays a huge part in “theology.” Gregory viewed the Father as the monarch in the relationship of the Divinities, yet all are coequal; the Father is the source of the Son and Holy Spirit, and this is the recipe for the unity in the Trinity. The unity in the Trinity does not mean that God should be viewed as one of the characteristics; instead, each member of Divinity embodies individual characteristics that could not happen if there was no monarchy of the Father and unity of the three. As a pastor and bishop, Gregory used the narrative structure in explaining his theology, and some of his same “theology” is repeated

²⁷ Beeley, *Trinity*, 217.

²⁸ McCoy, *Gregory*, 11.

²⁹ Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 42.

several times, with different wording, so all audiences would understand the beauty of the Trinity.

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