

Gregory of Nyssa: Trinity – Not Tri-Deity ~ The Grammar of Divinity

—by Brian J. Orr

[1] <https://credomag.com/article/the-grammar-of-divinity-on-theology/>

[2] <http://www.readreflectwrite.com/2020/12/gregory-of-nyssa-trinitynot-tri-deity.html>

Gregory, a bishop of Nyssa in 371, was part of the Cappadocian trio, who was instrumental in the development of Trinitarian orthodoxy. His theological prowess proved vital in response to the Arian and Sabellian heresies. *Key* to Gregory’s theology we find “an emergence of a pro-Nicene ‘grammar’ of divinity through his developed account of divine power,” [1] conceived through a nature-power-activity formulation revealed in the created order and articulated in Scripture. Understanding the Triune God in this manner afforded a conception of the Trinity that was logical and thoroughly biblical. And this letter is paradigmatic on Gregory’s account of the divine nature.

Not Three Gods

To Ablabius, though short, is a polemical address whereby Gregory lays out a complex argument in response to the claim that three Divine persons equal three gods. Basically put, Ablabius (his opponent, to whom the letter is addressed) charges Gregory with teaching that there are “three Gods.” It is an objection that many of us might have thought about or maybe have had to explain to others, even a Jehovah’s Witness. Gregory’s Trinitarian (Eastern) theology differs from the Western view, most notably in its *monarchial* form, [2] which was consistent with many of the early church fathers. The Eastern view posited that in order to affirm One God, there has to be *One* God. And, as that one God—the Father, which Scripture and the early creeds of the church affirm, is the source from which the Son and the Spirit come. [3] We moderns see such language and think Gregory is drifting away from a Trinitarian doctrine. However, that is not the case. The Son and the Spirit are of the same nature as the Father. According to Gregory, when the divine persons are referenced *together* in the NT, we see an order in the Godhead: the One God, the Father and One Lord, Jesus Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 8:6). For Gregory, what classifies all three to be of the same nature is their power and activity as manifested in creation and Scripture. And this letter details Gregory’s development of this argument in order to demonstrate that we believe in One God, not three Gods.

The Grammar of Divinity

The crucial issue in the debate concerns the *grammar* of divinity. Lewis Ayres points out that “the fourth century controversies are, in part, easily misunderstood if they are conceived as concentrating on the question ‘is the Son (and the Spirit) divine?’”^[4] It was understood that that the Father was the *arche*, the Source, from which the Son and the Spirit come. The challenge, then, was in accepting that the Son was truly the same nature as the Father. The divine essence was understood to be simple and inseparable. Therefore, to affirm “real” distinction in the divine essence, where the persons exist as individual *hypostases* was problematic.^[5] As noted, it is the grammar of divinity that needs developing. Gregory’s approach marks a broad shift in pro-Nicene theology in its discussion of the Son being *homoousios* with the Father, *sharing* the divine essence, while both the Son and Spirit coming from the Father and acting in creation.^[6] On the surface, Ablabius’ charge seems valid. How is our belief in a Triune God consistent with monotheism?

Gregory begins his letter by stating Ablabius’ argument, which goes like this: Peter, James, and John, being in one human nature, are called three men: and there is no absurdity in describing those who are united in nature, if they are more than one, by the plural number of the name derived from their nature. If, then, in the above case, custom admits this, and no one forbids us to speak of those who are two as two, or those who are more than two as three, how is it that in the case of our statements of the mysteries of the Faith, though confessing the Three Persons, and acknowledging no difference of nature between them, we are in some sense at variance with our confession, when we say that the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is one, and yet forbid men to say “there are three Gods”? (*Ad Abl.*, 331).

Gregory is very forthright about the difficulty of this issue. We have a language problem. We enumerate the Divine Persons but do not admit the plurality, as we would Peter, James, and John. We would say they have the same nature as humans, but we designate them as distinct beings from each other. Thus, we have three men; whereas, when it comes to Persons of the Godhead each having the divine nature, we *do not* have three Gods. Gregory delineates this further. When we speak of men, we say Luke is a man or Stephen is a man, but we don’t say Stephen is Luke or Luke is Stephen. There’s a separation of persons—beings, though having the common nature of man they are considered separate from each other. “Man” isn’t proper to Luke; it is common to him, as it is to Stephen, and any other man that has lived, lives, or will live. The nature of man is inseparable, not capable of increase or decrease. Although it appears in a plurality, it is nevertheless complete and not divided with the individuals—Stephen and Luke—who participate in it.

Speaking Truthfully

Gregory points out that the challenge is in the manner of how we speak about people. We refer to groups (people, army, or a mob) in the singular. Though understood to be a plurality, “man” is still considered one, even though the one nature of “man” is exhibited to us as a plurality. As it pertains to God, we have to confess that God is One according to Scripture (Deut 6:4) though the name “Godhead” extends through the Holy Trinity. The disparity lies in that we know it is improper, “in the case of human nature, . . . to extend the name of the nature by the mark of plurality” (*Ad Abl.*, 332). Even though an army is made up of a plurality, the human nature is only one; it is not multiplied. Thus, with God, it is improper for us to associate the name Godhead with the divine nature because, as Scripture teaches us, the divine nature is “unnamable and unspeakable.” So, whatever name we use to speak of the divine nature, such names cannot signify the nature itself. What does Gregory mean by that?

Gregory writes:

For we say, it may be, that the Deity is incorruptible, or powerful, or whatever else we are accustomed to say of Him. But in each of these terms we find a peculiar sense, fit to be understood or asserted of the Divine nature, yet not expressing that which that nature is in its essence. For the subject, whatever it may be, is incorruptible: but our conception of incorruptibility is this,—that that which is, is not resolved into decay: so, when we say that He is incorruptible, we declare what His nature does not suffer, but we do not express what that is which does not suffer corruption. (*Ad Abl.*, 332–3).

We do not perceive divinity directly. Rather, we do so by a process of what Gregory calls *epinoia*, or the process of abstracting conceptions or reflecting on the things about God, based upon what he has revealed to us in creation and Scripture—which provides us a guiding grammar to speak *analogously*, though truthfully, about God. However, we maintain the understanding that we cannot know God in the truest sense. Somehow, we can “touch” God; however, he always remains unknown.^[7] Gregory says this process of *epinoia* is continual. Elsewhere he writes, “But in applying such appellations to the Divine essence, ‘which passeth all understanding,’ we do not seek to glory in it by the names we employ, but to guide our own selves by the aid of such terms towards the comprehension of the things which are hidden” (*Cont. Eun.* 13, 265).^[8]

Godhead is a Name

Gregory notes that we use the name “Godhead” to describe God’s activity (his nature is unknown to us), as watching over us, seeing, or beholding. The Three Persons are ascribed each of these activities in Scripture. In Psalm 84:9, David says, of the Father, “See, O God our defender,” in which sight is a proper operation of God. In Matthew 9:4,

Jesus sees the thoughts of those who condemn him, questioning his power to pardon sinners. And the classic passage of Ananias and Saphira lying to Peter (Acts 5:3), in which the Holy Spirit is the true witness of this act, in that he was aware of their secret actions, sharing with Peter what he observed (*Ad Abl.*, 333). In Gregory's analyses of the term "Godhead," whereby each member of the Trinity is engaged in the same activity of seeing, he concludes that "if the activities are the same, then the power which gave rise to them is the same and the ineffable divine nature in which that power is inherent must also be one." [9]

But Gregory admits that his argument is not satisfactory. The "three Gods" claim still has relevance because mankind, having the same nature, does the same things proper to humanity, which are appropriately spoken of as three (e.g., three orators; three shoemakers). Understanding this issue, Gregory moves on to bring the apparent contradiction to a close. As it pertains to the common example of humanity, we understand that each of those activities are done by separate individuals, "according to the special character of [each one's] operation." And therefore, Gregory writes, these "pursuits" would be considered many. However, as it pertains to the divine nature, Gregory writes,

we do not similarly learn that the Father does anything by Himself in which the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son has any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit; but every operation which extends from God to the Creation and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the name derived from the operation is not divided with regard to the number of those who fulfil it, because the action of each concerning anything is not separate and peculiar, but whatever comes to pass, in reference either to the acts of His providence for us, or to the government and constitution of the universe, comes to pass by the action of the Three, yet what does come to pass is not three things (*Ad Abl.*, 334).

Gregory is illuminating to us that the Trinity has an order, from which the divine activity (*energia*) of the Three Persons, is *one motion*, communicated from the Father, through the Son, and to the Spirit. The divine nature is unknown, but we see the divine operations carried out by one power, leading to a conception of an undivided Godhead. Gregory deploys a helpful phrase from nature, which speaks of the power and action of God "issuing from the Father as from a spring, brought into operation by the Son, and perfecting its grace by the power of the Spirit" (*Ad Abl.*, 334). In phrasing his understanding of God's divine activity, demonstrating his power and character, Gregory addresses the "Three Gods" problem, in that God's activity is not individuated as we would see in human natures. God's activity as observed in creation and narrated in

Scripture, reveals *One* power, which always works without delay according to the motion of the Divine will “by a unitary causal sequenced activity of the three persons.”^[10]

“Godhead” is a name. It is an appellation given to the unlimited and incomprehensible Divine nature. Gregory notes “that the Deity is above every name: and ‘Godhead’ is a name” (*Ad Abl.*, 335). In revisiting the error—applying the name of a nature to denote a multitude—Gregory emphasizes the point that Scripture never speaks of God as Gods. Nature is indivisible; however, Gregory writes, Scripture names “men” in the plural “because no one is by a figure of speech led astray in his conceptions to imagine a multitude of humanities or supposes that many human natures are indicated by the fact that the name expressive of nature is used in the plural” (*Ad Abl.*, 336). As it pertains to Scripture’s reference to God: “The Father is God: the Son is God: and yet by the same proclamation God is One, because no difference either of nature or of operation is contemplated in the Godhead.” The Lord our God is One Lord, with Scripture declaring the Only-begotten Son as God from the Father, but we do not have two Gods. The reason for our proclamation that God is One, Gregory writes, is because “no difference either of nature or of operation is contemplated in the Godhead.” Ayres succinctly puts it: “The sequence of the one divine action *ad extra* reflects the nature and order of God’s internal generation, and in both the same sequence of causality is operative.”^[11]

As he comes to a close in his letter to Ablabius, Gregory addresses the matter of the distinction of Persons. The matter looms overhead because of the *human* (weakness?) understanding of individuation. The Persons are distinguished from each other: One, the Father, is the *without* Cause; the Only-begotten is directly from the First Cause, with the Spirit proceeding from the Father through the Son. Gregory notes,

But in speaking of “cause,” and “of the cause,” we do not by these words denote nature (for no one would give the same definition of “cause” and of “nature”), but we indicate the difference in manner of existence. For when we say that one is “caused,” and that the other is “without cause,” we do not divide the nature by the word “cause,” but only indicate the fact that the Son does not exist without generation, nor the Father by generation (*Ad Abl.*, 336).

His point is that generation presents the mode of existence; but *what* exists is not indicated by the phrase *generation*. The phrase *begotten*, as applied to the Son, teaches us the mode of his existence and how we are to conceive of him, but it does not tell us *what* he is. And in recognizing as such, the *grammar of divinity*, allows us to acknowledge a distinction in the Trinity, whereby One *is* the Cause, and another is *of* the Cause, and “we can no longer be accused of confounding the definition of the Persons by the community of nature” (*Ad Abl.*, 336).

And Gregory concludes his letter to Ablabius:

Thus, since on the one hand the idea of cause differentiates the Persons of the Holy Trinity, declaring that one exists without a Cause, and another is of the Cause; and since on the one hand the Divine nature is apprehended by every conception as unchangeable and undivided, for these reasons we properly declare the Godhead to be one, and God to be one, and employ in the singular all other names which express Divine attributes (*Ad Abl.*, 336).

Conclusion

Gregory set out to delineate a Trinitarian doctrine that was logical yet derived from Holy Scripture. His dynamic line of argumentation, whereby the *energeia*—the activity and power of God as observed in a causal “from–through–in” order by each of the Persons, cogently and coherently articulating a *monarchial* formula of divine power and activity *from* God the Father, mediated *through* the Only Begotten Son, and *in* the Spirit. The Triune God, therefore, is not Tri-deity.

Endnotes

[1] Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as Seen in To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods,” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (October 2002): 446.

[2] This letter, however, is not the broadest treatment of Gregory’s *monarchia* Trinitarian theology. Rather, it is an acute summary of his theology which undergirds his response to Abablius. See his *Catechetical Orations 1–4*.

[3] With the intentions of advancing an ecclesial response against the Arian claim that Christ was a created being, a sixth-century church council in Toledo, Spain, added the word *filioque* (*and the Son*) to a creed describing the procession of the Holy Spirit, thereby affirming that the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father *and the Son* (John 14:26; 15:26). The Eastern church objected to the addition, because it was a speculative move beyond what Scripture teaches about the Spirit. While there were other factors, this controversy initiated the formal Schism of 1054 between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. The debate pertains to the problem of affirming Jesus as the Source, equal to the Father, in sending the Spirit. Reason being, in order to be monotheists, there can only be one source, who is the Father. If Jesus is the source as the Father is, then we have two Gods. For an accessible summary of the *filioque* controversy, see Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Publishing, 2004), 201–20.

[4] Ayres, “On Not Three People,” 449.

[5] In a letter to his brother Peter, Gregory analyzes the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*, providing the clearest understanding and use of these terms in the Cappadocian’s theology. “Letter 35 *To Peter His Own Brother on the Divine Ousia and Hypostasis (Ad Petrum 1)*” in Anna M. Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters: Introduction, Translation and Commentary, Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters* (Brill, 2006).

[6] Ayres, “On Not Three People,” 450, 51.

[7] *Ibid.*, 456.

[8] *Ibid.*, 457.

[9] *Ibid.*, 459.

[10] *Ibid.*, 462.

[11] *Ibid.*, 463.

End.

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