



St. Gregory Nazianzus: A Helmsman for Those Who Would Theologize

Plato once said, “To know God is hard, to describe him impossible;”^[1] to which the Christian Church Father “St. Gregory the Theologian” responded centuries later, “To tell of God is not possible ... but to know him is even less possible.”(Or. 28.4) He goes on to say that language can impart some knowledge to those who would hear, but “to mentally grasp so great a matter is utterly beyond real possibility,” at least for those of us cloaked as we are in flesh. So what is the point of all the words written on the topic?

Gregory addresses the subject of “theology,” in a series of orations that he delivered (most likely) in the summer of 380 while he was Patriarch of Constantinople. These are known as the “Five Theological Orations”^[2] and are probably his best known writings. They deal with the nature and content of “theology.” They are basically a summary of classical Greek patristic thought, and address the requirements for speaking in a meaningful way about the divine reality, derived from the Scriptures. According to Brian Daley^[3], these writings remain early Christianity’s “classic and most comprehensive expression of the late fourth century’s new consciousness of

God, as three ‘hypostases,’ three irreducibly and inseparably related poles of being, who form together—precisely in their relatedness—the single, ineffable, ontologically foundational ‘substance’ Christians adore as ultimate and immediate reality.”

These theological treatises were written in large part to combat the heresies of the Arian descendants, the Eunomians. The Eunomians were a 4th century sect of Arians who expressed the view that Jesus was of a different nature and in no way like God the Father.[4] Gregory and the other Cappadocians spilled a lot of ink combating these heresies. Gregory’s first two theological orations, give guidance towards proper theologizing, that will both lead us towards truth, and keep us safe from falling into dangerous heresy.

Gregory’s first Theological Oration, is an attempt to “protect” theology and put limits and restrictions on it. Gregory begins this oration (Oration 27) with an attack on those who attempt to “theologize” inappropriately. He quotes scripture against their “pride,” “itchy ears,” their delight in “profane and vain babblings” and their “contradictions of knowledge falsely so-called.” He criticizes their “versatile tongues” and “resourcefulness in attacking doctrines nobler and worthier than their own.” (Or 27.1) He is not only characterizing “the insatiable desire for theological debate,” but setting the stage for what he sees as true theologizing. But he’s not quite through railing against his antagonists.

Gregory in a somewhat humorous passage compares his opponents to wrestling promoters. “They are like the promoters of wrestling bouts in the theatres, and not even the sort of bouts that are conducted in accordance with the rules of the sport and lead to the victory of one of the antagonists, but the sort which are stage managed to give the uncritical spectators visual sensations and compel their applause.” (Or 27.2) Gregory could have been talking about the WWF! He is somewhat harsh, but his tone is about to turn a little more gentle.

Gregory then attempts to be pastoral. He says that he is “moved with fatherly compassion.” (Or. 27.2) He tells them that they should not be surprised to if what he says is “contrary to your expectations and contrary to your ways.” But he cannot help but throw some shots at the same time, saying that they have “... an attitude which is too naïve and pretentious: I would not offend you by saying stupid and arrogant.” Yes, good thing he didn’t say that, he might have offended them!

Gregory is certainly not afraid of offending and in the 3rd section of this oration, he makes some exclusive remarks that would definitely offend people today. According to Gregory, “Discussion of theology is not for everyone.” This is quite offensive to our modern culture that doesn’t like to think that anything is off limits to anybody. But Gregory states,

“Nor ... is it for every occasion, or every audience; neither are all its aspects open to inquiry. 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 the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul. For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look on the sun's brightness." (Or. 27.3)

To Gregory, theology is serious business; nothing to be messed around with. Only those who have been "tested" and have "found a sound footing in study" should theologize. Because it is dangerous, it is most important that they are being purified in "body and soul." He goes on to qualify who should theologize and when it should take place.

So, when is the right time to theologize? When we are free from the mire and noise "outside," and our *nous* is not confused by "illusory, wandering images" that would lead us to mix the fine with the ugly and the "sweet" with the "slime." Gregory says that what is important is that we need to "be still," for its as the Psalmist says, "Be still and know God." (Ps. 45:11) We should not be discussing theology in the marketplace, or with the television on, as just one more diversion. We need to be still so God can illumine us from within to that we may understand His truths. Then we can "judge uprightly." (Or. 27.3)

Gregory then asks, "Who should listen to theology?" He answers, "Those for whom it is a serious undertaking, not just another subject like any other for entertaining small talk, after the races, the theatre, songs, food and sex." Again, he was disheartened by those who counted theology as just one more thing among their many amusements.

Finally he addresses what aspects of theology should be explored and what areas should be restricted: "Only objects in our grasp, and only to the limit of the experience and capacity of our audience." Food is good, but if you eat too much it will injure you. Some loads are too heavy to carry. What is needed but too much of it floods the earth. "We too must guard against the danger ... of our discourse may so oppress and overtax our hearers as actually to impair the powers they had before." (Or. 27.3) It seems Gregory sees our ability to comprehend on a spectrum; Christian leaders should consider their own ability to comprehend, based upon their "experience and capacity," but also their audience.

In the fourth section, he strives to make it clear, that he is not talking about being mindful of God. We should all be mindful of Him at all times, from most learned pastor to smallest child. "... It is not continual remembrance of God I seek to discourage, but continual discussion of theology." (Or. 27.4) And he is not against the discussion of theology, but only when its "untimely" or goes on to excess. Laughter is unseemly at a funeral as are tears at a drinking party. We should be careful not to cast our pearls before swine.

Gregory goes on to discuss how even their arguments should be governed by rules of decorum, using wild horses as a metaphor as they "spit out the bit" and "run wide of the turning post." Rather, St. Gregory admonishes we should "conduct our debates within our frontiers and not be carried away to Egypt or dragged off to Assyria. Let us not 'sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land.'" Basically, "Let even our contentiousness be governed by rules." (Or. 27.5) There are rules that govern the

most base of human affairs, so it stands to reason that our highest speech, that having to do with God and our relationship to Him, should be conducted appropriately.

The rest of Oration 27 is more undercutting of the Eunomians authority to interpret the Scripture. He asks how this discussion should be interpreted by one who “subscribes to a creed of adulteries and infanticides, who worships the passions, who is incapable of conceiving of anything higher than the body ...” (Or. 27.6) In the concluding chapters, he leads his opponents through a dialectic question and answer finally rebuking them with St. Paul’s reproach, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets?”

He teases them about what he thinks they should be speculating about: the universe, matter, the soul, etc... in which he says, “... to hit the mark is not useless, to miss it is not dangerous. But God Himself we should refrain from speculating on, as in this life we have so little knowledge to go on.

So the first oration addressed who should theologize, and when, where and what about. Or as Gregory says in the first line of his Second Theological Oration, he “used theology to cleanse the theologian.” He says that we are now prepared to go with him, up the mount to discuss the doctrine of God. He says that if any follow him, they must be like Aaron, while those who are less purified must stand at a distance. Gregory was certainly not a fan of egalitarianism nor embarrassed by hierarchy.

In chapter 3 of the second theological oration, Gregory articulates the experience of “entering the cloud of knowledge of God” like Moses. “I penetrated the cloud, became enclosed on it, detached from matter and material things and concentrated, so far as might be, in myself.” (Or. 28.3) This is no philosophical pondering of truth that he is talking about here. “I scarcely saw the averted figure of God, and this whilst sheltering in the rock, God the word incarnate for us.” Gregory says that this is the only way you can speak of God; this “averted figure.” For not only does God’s peace pass all understanding, so does exact knowledge of even His creation. (Or 28.5) So what can we hope to accomplish through deduction?

Deductive logic plays little role in discerning the Divine. “What can your conception of the Divine be if you rely on all the methods of deductive argument? To what conclusion will closely-scrutinized argument bring you, you most rational of theologians, who boast over infinity? (Or. 28.7) Once again, he stresses that knowledge of God is not a mental or intellectual activity. God is more than just ideas set down on paper, and argued over.

But Gregory seems to be no fan of apophatic, or negative, theology either, the approach embraced by so many Orthodox theologians in the ages to come. “A person who tells you what God is not but fails to tell you what he is, is rather like someone who, asked what twice five are, answers ‘not two, not three, not four, not five, not twenty, not thirty, no number, in short, under ten or over ten. He is does not deny it is ten, but he is also not settling the questioner’s mind with a firm answer. It is much simpler, much briefer, to indicate all that something is not by indicating what it is, than to reveal what it is by denying what it is not.” It doesn’t seem like he is discounting the apophatic approach all together. He is simply saying the negative

approach is useless if you also don't have something positive to say.

In this day where adherents in thousands of Christian sects, [5] fearlessly speculate about God, particularly the Logos Incarnate, the Man Jesus Christ, Gregory's voice (and that of the other Church Fathers) is needed to help us find our way knowing God and finding our union with Him. Gregory shows us how to theologize and warns us from the dangers of going into it without undergoing preparation and purification. There is an Evil One who in the past has "caught at their unguided longing to search for God, meaning to divert power to himself and cheat that desire of theirs—it was like taking a blind man's hand when he is eager to find the road. He pushed them headlong down a variety of cliffs." (Or. 28.15) St. Gregory would have us follow reason in our pursuit of God, refusing "to travel without guide or helmsman."

[1] Plato *Timaeus*, 28c.

[2] Or Orations 27-31 in his greater corpus.

[3] Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 17

[4] Disimilarists

[5] Or quite divorced from any other assembly of believers and therefore all on their own

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