

WITH REFERENCE TO ATHANASIUS, BASIL OF CAESAREA AND
GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, CONSIDER THE PASTORAL
IMPLICATIONS OF THEIR DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY.

Introduction

Noticeably, the word 'Trinity' is never mentioned explicitly in Scripture, and the absence of a clearly-presented and carefully-articulated doctrine within the canon has led to suggestions that it is not Biblical. Indeed, those who follow the teachings of Islam label Christians as pantheistic, whilst others simply harass believers in the Trinitarian God as illogical. However, despite this apparent incoherence and the challenges delivered to orthodox Christians regarding the Trinity, this doctrine remains absolutely fundamental to the Christian faith.

The doctrine of the Trinity is alluded to throughout both testaments of the canon, but it is true that the language of the doctrine is of human origin. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the doctrine is untrue or unbiblical. Rather, over a period of four hundred years this doctrine was carefully refined in the midst of heresy and frequent persecution of dissenters. Both theological and pastoral concerns were intrinsic in the defence of what would become orthodox Trinitarian theology because the issues of our modern church, such as assurance of salvation, forgiveness of sins, morality in an increasingly hedonistic world and how we can have reconciliation with God, all find their answer in the Trinitarian nature of God. Therefore, for our churches, there is vital wisdom to be gleaned from a careful study of how the Church Fathers allowed the doctrine of the Trinity to speak into the pastoral situations of their churches.

Methodology

This paper will study three 4th Century Church Fathers' understanding of the Trinity and endeavor to elucidate how their theology of God impacted their pastoral wisdom and insight.

The Fathers being studied are Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus. For each Father it will be important to firstly place them correctly inside their own context, noting specifically what heresies they were addressing; then, secondly, articulating their specific Trinitarian theology. Thirdly, for each Father it will be made clear how their theology of the Trinity impacts pastoral ministry.

Subsequently, drawing from that study, this paper will then articulate how their insights can be made applicable to the church today, clearly presenting the importance of Trinitarian theology as the fundamental doctrine for pastoral ministry and pastoral care. Finally, this paper will present a further reflection on this study before concluding with a clear summation of the arguments presented.

Context

These Fathers lived and wrote during the Arian controversy. Arius was a Libyan-born priest in Alexandria and was the primary proponent of a theology that distinguished the deity of the Father from the deity of the Son. Norris explains that Arius' intention was to leave 'the monotheism of his Christianity intact'¹ whilst answering the confusion about the mathematics of God. He did this by arguing that, 'the Son did not exist before time,'² and that 'the Son of God was a secondary divinity, not of the same nature as the Father.'³ Barnes is also helpful in articulating the doctrine of Arius as he concisely notes that the followers of Arius, 'believe that there was a time when the Son was not, that the Son is not God's very Word, Wisdom or Power, and that the Son is a creature and thing made.'⁴ Further to this, Kelly notes four clear arguments presented by Arius: 'First, the Son must be a creature...Secondly as a creature the Son must have

¹ Norris, Frederick W., 'Greek Christianities', *The Cambridge History of Christianity Constantine to c. 600*, edited by Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (Cambridge University Press, New York), 2007, p. 73.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Barnes, Michael R., 'The Fourth Century As Trinitarian Canon', *Christian Origins Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, edited by Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (Routledge, New York), 1998, p. 55.

had a beginning...Thirdly, the Son can have no communion with, and indeed no direct knowledge of, His Father...Fourthly, the Son must be liable to change and even sin.’⁵ The result of this teaching was popular: ‘Arianism grew in Alexandria among a number of Christians. Priests elsewhere in the empire agreed with Arius.’⁶ This doctrine of *subordinationism* was attacked by Alexander of Alexandria and led to the removal of Arius’ ordination to the priesthood. Eventually the controversy drew the attention of Constantine who forced an ecumenical council at Nicea whereupon the theology of Alexander won the day, although Arius was by no means going to recant. Rather, in time, his exile was revoked and he was invited back by Constantine until his death, and his theology persevered with varying success for years.

Athanasius: One Man Against The World

Context

In the midst of this fracas was Athanasius. Alexander was the primary opponent of Arius initially. Upon Alexander’s death, however, Athanasius became bishop and was a fierce proponent of the Nicene theology that was to become the foundation for ‘orthodoxy’. As Norris poetically phrases it, ‘[Athanasius] appeared to be the rock from which Nicene orthodoxy was hewn.’⁷

Trinitarian Thought

The debate into which Athanasius waded was a highly important one. For Athanasius, the central tenet of the debate came to be the word *homoousios*, meaning ‘of the same being’ as applied to the Son and Spirit with regards to the Father. The result of Arius’ theology was to ‘reduce the Son to a demigod’⁸ and as such was adding to the delineation between Father and

⁵ Kelly, J.N.D., *Early Christian Doctrines* (Harper Collins, San Francisco), 1978, pp. 227-228.

⁶ Norris, ‘Greek Christianities’, p. 73.

⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

⁸ Kelly, *Christian Doctrines*, p. 230.

Son as Father and Son by now ascribing the difference between Creator and creature. Indeed, for Athanasius, this was ‘verging...on polytheism’⁹ because the Son would therefore be in a subset of divinities, god-like but not God, human-like but not human.

In defence of what would become ‘Nicene’ theology, Athanasius responded to the fourfold heresy of Arius with a ‘triple onslaught based on the Church’s living faith and experience.’¹⁰ Firstly he believed that, ‘Arianism undermined the Christian doctrine of God’¹¹ by ‘virtually reintroducing polytheism.’¹² He then logically surmised that the practice of the church to baptize in the name of the Son and Spirit was nonsensical unless they were God:

When we are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we are made children of God, not of the gods. For the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is the Lord God of hosts. There is one divinity and one God, in three hypostases.¹³

The third, and arguably most pastoral, point was that ‘it undermined the Christian idea of redemption in Christ, since only if the Mediator was Himself divine could man hope to re-establish fellowship with God.’¹⁴ These arguments were enshrined in the Nicene Creed (although not Athanasius’ directly, he is known for their robust defence), which stated,

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.¹⁵

⁹ Ibid., p. 231.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 233.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation and Against the Arians*, 10, taken from, *Ancient Christian Doctrine Volume 1: We Believe in One God*, edited by Gerald L. Bray (IVP Academic, Downers Grove), 2009, p. 51.

¹⁴ Kelly, *Christian Doctrines*, p. 233.

¹⁵ Nicene Creed, taken from < <http://www.creeds.net/ancient/nicene.htm>>, accessed on 22/10/2015.

The importance of *homoousios* can scarcely be overestimated, for ‘as later theologians perceived, since the divine nature is immaterial and indivisible, it follows that the Persons of the Godhead Who share it must have, or rather be, one identical substance.’¹⁶ Furthermore, rather than suggesting that the Trinity shares one nature, Athanasius argued that,

The Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is both holy and perfect and contains nothing alien or additional to the faith. It is not a mixture of the Creator and his creatures but is in its entirety possessed of the power to create and bring into being. Each member of the Trinity is like the others and shares the same divine nature, just as each one participates in the single action and activity of God.¹⁷

The purpose of this anti-Arian statement is demonstrative of Athanasius’ wider theology: the Son and Spirit must be as the Father is in nature, for they do the things that only God can do, therefore they must be God. As he says elsewhere, ‘If the Son does what the Father does, and if what he creates is the creation of the Father, but at the same time the Son is the Father’s creation, then either the Son will have created himself, which is absurd and impossible, or else he will not be a creature of the Father.’¹⁸ With regards to the Spirit, Kelly writes that Athanasius argued that, ‘the Spirit is fully divine, consubstantial with the Father and the son,’¹⁹ because, ‘while creatures come from nothingness...the spirit comes from God, bestows sanctification and life, and is immutable, omnipresent and unique.’²⁰ Therefore, the Trinity, in Athanasius’ thought can be summarized thus: ‘The Godhead...exists eternally as a Triad of Persons...sharing one identical and indivisible substance or essence. All three persons...are possessed of one and the same activity.’²¹

¹⁶ Kelly, *Christian Doctrines*, p. 234.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *Four Letters To Serapion* I. 28, p.6.

¹⁸ Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.21, p.81.

¹⁹ Kelly, *Christian Doctrines*, p.257.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Pastoral Implications

As Kelly astutely notes, the dangers of Arianism have vast implications for the common Christian. Eusebius, defender of Arius, ‘reflects Origen in his most subordinationist mood, and his overriding interest is cosmological rather than soteriological.’²² In contrast, however, Athanasius’ theology has redemption as the pinnacle of God’s gracious plan (after His own glory). He writes, ‘If the properties of the flesh had not been ascribed to the Word, humans would not have been thoroughly freed from them.’²³ The implications are clear: if the Word is not fully God, then His manifestation in the flesh is inconsequential as an effective remedy to the consequences of sin over humanity. Rather, the Word must be God in the fullest sense of the divine so that our salvation is not only secured but assured.

With regards to the personal holiness and obedience of the believer, Athanasius argued that the Trinitarian nature of baptism was fundamental in arguing for the divinity of the Son and Spirit as noted above. However the deeper, pastoral point to be made from this is also evident in his writings. Specifically, the doctrine and purpose of the indwelling Spirit is at risk if one were to undermine the Trinity: ‘When the Holy Spirit comes to us, the Son and the Father also come to dwell with us...If the Holy Spirit were a creature, the Lord would not have linked him to the Father, because that would have led to an imbalance in the Trinity.’²⁴ The incisive pastoral point here is that the believer is marked by the presence of the Spirit who indwells him as promised in Ezekiel 37. If the Spirit is not part of the Trinity, then the promises in Ezekiel 37 and Jeremiah 31 have not been fulfilled in their entirety and therefore the hope of being sanctified by the work of the Spirit in our lives and hearts cannot be a reality.

²² Ibid., p. 225.

²³ Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 3.33, p.92.

²⁴ Athanasius, *Letters To Serapion*, p.78.

Basil of Caesarea: Pastor-Theologian

Context

Whilst Athanasius was a lynchpin that brought that debate to the fore, it was the Cappadocians who ‘cautiously and circumspectly’ completed the task.²⁵ A point to note is that although the Nicene Creed had an extensive section on the substance and nature of the Son, it simply stated, ‘And we believe in the Holy Spirit.’²⁶ Elowsky suggests that, ‘there was...a certain genius, however, in this short confession. By confessing faith in the Holy Spirit, the creed did not go beyond Scripture, but it did include the Spirit in a ‘decisive Trinitarian context.’²⁷ This small brick was to be the foundation for the development of the orthodox defence of the Trinitarian nature of the Spirit alongside Father and Son.

For Basil, who was the towering figure of the Cappadocian Fathers, the journey to understanding the Spirit as a Person of the Trinity was a conclusion arrived at over time. The Cappadocians were ‘a large party of moderates’²⁸ who were ‘unhappy with the term *homoousios*’²⁹ preferring phrases such as ‘like the Father in all things.’ Nevertheless, this group moved closer to the teaching of Athanasius and Nicea, culminating at the Council of Alexandria in 362. Basil was a member of the ‘homoiousios (literally ‘of like substance’)³⁰ party initially.

Basil and Gregory collaborated and undertook debates with Arian leaders, answering, amongst the theological discrepancies, the charge that they, ‘bring in an alien God not written about in Scripture.’³¹ In confrontations with radical Arian theologians, it soon became clear that

²⁵ Kelly, *Christian Doctrines*, p. 258.

²⁶ Nicene Creed, taken from < <http://www.creeds.net/ancient/nicene.htm>>, accessed on 22/10/2015.

²⁷ Elowsky, Joel C., *Ancient Christian Doctrine Volume 3: We Believe in the Holy Spirit* (IVP Academic, Downers Grove), p. xxiii.

²⁸ Rusch, William G., *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Fortune Press, Philadelphia), 1980, p. 26.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Wilkin, Robert Louis, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (Yale University Press, New Haven), 2003, p. 102.

terminology was vital in creating a solid theology. As a result Basil learnt that it was necessary to keep the two terms ‘substance’ and ‘hypostasis’ apart.³² Nevertheless, he wrote that he and his theological bedfellows were the ‘heirs of those who at Nicaea issued the great proclamation of true religion,’³³ and makes clear that although ‘their doctrine has been generally received without cavil...the word *consubstantial*, reluctantly accepted by some, is still not universally admitted.’³⁴

Trinitarian Thought

The Neo-Arians appealed to the concept of *ousia* as a definitive proof against the *homoousia* of the Son and the Spirit, because, they argued, the ‘substance of the Father was grasped precisely with the concept of unbegottenness. By contrast, the substance of the Son was not unbegottenness, but begottenness and thus was totally dissimilar to the substance of the Father.’³⁵ Basil rightly countered by noting that created beings cannot comprehend the *substance* of God, but can only comment on the revealed *attributes* of God. This means that the term ‘unbegotten’ speaks of *how* God is but not *what* he is in his substance; we are forming a certain notion of God, but have not exhaustively grasped his *substance*.³⁶ In fact, and on the contrary to the claims of Aetius and Eunomius, these very terms are the characterizations of the hypostasis of the Father and Son:

There is here a diametrical opposition. Therefore those who suppose generacy and ingeneracy to be within the category of substance find themselves in absurdities...For the substance, like characters or forms, make a distinction within the common nature by these individualizing characters, while they do not split up the unity of nature...It is the nature of special properties to display a difference within the identity of the substance, and it

³² Dunzl, Franz, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (T&T Clark, New York), 2007, p. 106.

³³ Basil, *Letter 52.1*, taken from, *Ancient Christian Doctrine Volume 2: We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ*, edited by John Anthony McGuckin (IVP Academic, Downers Grove), p.71.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wilkin, *Christian Thought*, p. 106.

³⁶ Ibid.

frequently happens that these special properties are mutually contrary and utterly distinct, without destroying the unity of the substance.³⁷

Taking this argument even farther and to its logical conclusion, Basil writes,

And anyone who speaks of the begotten as of a different *ousia* from the begetter also speaks of two gods. He thereby introduces polytheism because of the unlikeness of *ousia*.³⁸

Rather than accepting the charge of ‘introducing an alien god’ Basil masterfully demonstrated that his doctrine of the Trinity is the accurate portrayal of ‘one source and one being derived from that source; one archetype and one image.’³⁹

Consequently, relying upon the foundation of the Son’s Oneness with the Father, Basil was the proponent of a ‘new test’⁴⁰ in which he argued that the Spirit must be ‘recognized as intrinsically holy, one with ‘the divine and blessed nature’, inseparable...from Father and Son.’⁴¹ As is evident, this acknowledgement that the Spirit shares the attribute of holiness (and later the same glory, honour and worship) with Father and Son means that the Spirit *must* be accepted as God. Although, therefore, not formulated in a creedal way, his position was clearly Athanasian in depth. Basil’s major contributions to this particular theological dispute are helpfully summed up by Kelly:

The high-lights of his arguments are (a) the testimony of Scripture to the Spirit’s greatness and dignity, and to the power and vastness of His operation; (b) His association with the Father and the Son in whatever They accomplish, especially in the work of sanctification and deifications; (c) His personal relation to both Father and Son.⁴²

These arguments are similar to those made concerning the deity of the Son, yet are not wholly dependent upon the same logic. After all, the Spirit *is* distinct from Father and Son just as the Son is distinct from the Father; yet by definitively arguing that He acts in the way that God acts,

³⁷ Basil, *Against Eunomius* 11.28, p.63.

³⁸ Basil, *Homily 24.4, Christian Doctrine Volume 2*, p.72.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁴⁰ Kelly, *Christian Doctrines*, p. 260.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 261.

with God, and that His relation to Father and Son is personal, Basil makes clear that the very things that make the Spirit distinct are things that force us to accept His divinity and thus His Personhood in the Godhead, as Dunzl relates:

Accordingly the two terms ‘substance’ and ‘hypostasis’ can no longer be used interchangeably; they are to be kept apart had have two different meanings. Their term ‘substance’ relates to what is common to Father and Son, what is *general*, whereas the term ‘hypostasis’ denotes what is *particular* to Father and Son, i.e. what makes the Father *the Father* and the Son *the Son*.⁴³

This is vital to grasp, because this formed the basis of the answer to the Neo-Arians. ‘The *what* of the divine substance...is the same in the case of Father, Son and Spirit, but *how* these three possess the same divine substance differs.’⁴⁴ The unity of God is seen in that the ‘only difference between the three divine *hypostases* (but not concerning their substance) is the unbegottenness of the Father, the begottenness of the Son and the procession of the Spirit from the Father.’⁴⁵ Critically, however, ‘by ‘begetting’ and ‘procession’ the Son and Spirit are eternally bound up with the Father, so a separation of the three hypostases cannot be imagined.’⁴⁶ Therefore Basil laid the foundation for the creedal formula that demands the Holy Spirit be understood as a fully divine Person in the Godhead, equal, yet distinct, with Father and Son.

Pastoral Implications

Basil’s theology of the Trinity is important in a world where education is so highly prioritized. His realization that there are limits to human understanding, demonstrated by challenging the Arian position that they had identified the *substance* of God within His attributes, reminds us that we are created beings and are wholly reliant upon what God reveals about Himself. There are things about God in the Trinity that we cannot, and perhaps will never, grasp, because we are finite beings and God is infinite. This humbling point that distinguishes clearly

⁴³ Dunzl, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 107.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

the creator-creature distinction must primarily drive us to our knees in prayerful communion with God as we ask for His Spirit to illuminate our hearts to the Words of God found in Scripture. As a logical corollary therefore, we must then turn to Scripture to learn about God; who He is, how He chooses to reveal Himself and what He says about us.

Secondly, the insight that, as the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, He is eternally bound together *with* Father and Son is critical for our understanding of the efficacious nature of His power in our lives to sanctify us. Although Basil never explicitly calls the Spirit God, His theology leaves no room to say otherwise. And it is this great truth that encourages us when temptation to sin comes. The Spirit is within us, fully God and fully capable to empower us to overcome the temptation to sin, and thereby bring us through the temptation to victory. When we sin, therefore, it is not because we are *unable* to forego the sin, but rather that we have *chosen* to accept the lie that we are enslaved. ‘The Spirit that is within us is greater than that which is in the world,’⁴⁷ after all. Pastorally, this is significant to every believer of every age, because we all struggle with sin. The great truth Basil presents is that God, through Christ, has delivered us from captivity and punishment to sin, and the Holy Spirit is the enforcer of that freedom, if we choose to accept His strength in that struggle.

Gregory of Nazianzus: A Recalcitrant Pastor

Context

If Athanasius was the lynchpin for the debate on the Holy Spirit, and Basil was the bulwark of defence, Gregory of Nazianzus was the theological heavyweight going on the offensive. Beeley comments on Nazianzus, saying, ‘[he] played the leading role in articulating what would become the orthodox doctrine of the Spirit, and consequently of the Trinity as a whole.’⁴⁸ The need for a robust theology of the Holy Spirit was due to the ‘unsatisfactory

⁴⁷ 1 John 4:4.

⁴⁸ Beeley, Christopher, A., *The Pneumatology of Oratio 31, God in Early Christian Thought Essays In Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, edited by McGowan, Andrew B., Daley, Brian, E. and Gaden, Timothy, J (Brill,

treatment of the Holy Spirit by the Council of Constantinople⁴⁹ whose articulation of the Holy Spirit was scarcely more than the language of Basil in codified form.⁵⁰ In contrast, the statements regarding the Son were added to in a concentrated effort to highlight both the divinity and the humanity of Christ. Of the Spirit however, was merely said this: ‘And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets.’⁵¹ Although certainly unambiguous to the divinity of the Holy Spirit, it left many questions unanswered as to the *ousia* and *hypostatic* relation of the Spirit with the Father and Son. As a result, it was lacking the ‘unifying’ requirements that the Council had now imposed upon the bishops regarding the Son.

Trinitarian Thought

In his *Oration 31* Gregory initially answers the question about whether the Scripture calls the Spirit ‘God’, and since he allows that it does not, he then appeals to the ‘spirit versus the letter of Scripture.’⁵² The purpose he has is to demonstrate that ‘it is not logically *impossible* for the Spirit to be God and consubstantial with the Father.’⁵³ His argument continues, where he demonstrates that, although Scripture does not call the Father ‘unbegotten’ everyone agrees that He is. Therefore, he argues,

Again, where do you get your Unbegotten and Unoriginate, those two citadels of your position, or we our Immortal? Show me these in so many words, or we shall either set them aside, or erase them as not contained in Scripture; and you are slain by your own principle.⁵⁴

Boston), 2009, p. 152.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed <<http://www.antiochian.org/674>> accessed on 10/23/2015.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Beeley, Pneumatology of Oration 31, *Early Christian Thought*, p. 155.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31.24*, taken from <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310231.htm>> accessed on 10/23/2015.

Having established the hermeneutic principle that the spirit of the Scripture is required to grasp the full meaning, Gregory then presented his argument as to why the Scripture is silent on this matter:

The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the Deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit Himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of Himself. For it was not safe, when the Godhead of the Father was not yet acknowledged, plainly to proclaim the Son; nor when that of the Son was not yet received to burden us further (if I may use so bold an expression) with the Holy Ghost.⁵⁵

The fundamental endeavour of this argument is to highlight the purpose of the revelation of the Spirit, as Beeley notes: ‘For Gregory, God’s self-revelation as Father, and then as Son, and then holy Spirit reflects an increase in the intensity of the revelation so that each successive stage prepares the recipients for the next one.’⁵⁶ The culmination of this must be that, ‘The direct revelation of the Spirit to the church is therefore the apex of the human encounter with God thus far.’⁵⁷ The Apostle John makes this clear when he records Jesus telling the disciples that if He does not leave the ‘Helper will not come to you.’⁵⁸ The role of this helper is to ‘convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement’⁵⁹ and specifically to, ‘guide you into all the truth’⁶⁰ that they could not then bear.⁶¹

Nevertheless, after this argument has hit its mark, Gregory’s 29th article from *Oration 31* is a comprehensive list of where the Spirit is active in demonstrating His deity by action, if not by literal pronouncement. Having deconstructed the arguments that present Scripture as the reason why the Spirit should not be considered God and then clearly given a firm argument for

⁵⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁶ Beeley, Pneumatology of Oration 31, *Early Christian Thought*, p. 157.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ John 16:7.

⁵⁹ John 16:8.

⁶⁰ John 16:13.

⁶¹ John 16:12.

the opposite fact, he then reaches a climax in his rhetoric where he presents why the deity of the Spirit is essential to the human situation:

For if He is not to be worshipped, how can He deify me by Baptism? But if He is to be worshipped, surely He is an Object of adoration, and if an Object of adoration He must be God; the one is linked to the other, a truly golden and saving chain. And indeed from the Spirit comes our New Birth, and from the New Birth our new creation, and from the new creation our deeper knowledge of the dignity of Him from Whom it is derived.⁶²

Gregory thus not only says that the Spirit is involved in God's work, but that as a fully divine Person within the Godhead, our salvation, sanctification, regeneration and hope of eternal life rests as much on His application of the work of Christ as the actual work of Christ itself. Without either the atoning death on the cross or the application of it to sinful souls by the Spirit, that individual is still dead in their sin.

Pastoral Implications

As noted, the contribution of Gregory to a consistent hermeneutic was earthshattering for the arguments of his opponents. As a theologian, he demonstrated that God was logical in His self-revelation, not simply in the *how* of His revelation (progressively), but also the *why* of His revelation (in the way that He revealed Himself). Readers of Scripture need to seek the guidance of the Spirit so that they are able to understand the Spirit of truth, and not simply remain on the surface of the text. Otherwise one will never grasp the fullness of the nature of God, for He has chosen to reveal Himself in a certain way. For our generation, the call is no different. Scripture has not changed, nor has the Spirit's willingness to reveal Christ to us through the Word, for (a) God is unchanging and (b) He delights to glorify the Father and the Son. The pastoral significance of this is twofold: first, we must seek to read the Scripture humbly and prayerfully, with the Spirit's help. Secondly, because the Spirit is our guide, we can have confidence that Scripture is sufficient for our trials and questions. He is not afraid of our frustration, not confounded by our confusion nor unable to work with even the dullest instruments. Scripture is

⁶² Gregory, *Oration 31.28*.

sufficient because it is God-breathed, and also because God Himself assists us in understanding it.

We need the Spirit. Gregory makes this abundantly clear. Just as he expounded that what Christ ‘has not assumed, he has not healed’⁶³ we must also assent to the fact that what the Spirit has not applied, we have not received. Therefore, if we are believers in Christ, we can have confidence that the Spirit is at work in us to perfect us and to prepare us so that we are made ready for the day of His return. The work of the Spirit orchestrates our regeneration, confirms our security, obtains our sanctification and prepares us for the fulfilment of our hope in Christ. Indeed, echoing the words of Christ, it is actually *better* for us that Christ ascended because the vast power of the Holy Spirit across all believers of all ages could then be sent out to declare the glory of the Father and Son to all the globe.

The highest pastoral wisdom Gregory gives is also the most fundamental to us. A ministry seeking to be effective must be founded upon the doctrine of the Trinity. As Beeley notes, ‘the chief aim of pastoral ministry is the administration of the doctrine of the Trinity.’⁶⁴ He exhorts his own congregation to ‘keep the confession of Father, Son and Holy Spirit firm and intact,’ making sure that their doctrine and conduct are in accord with each other.⁶⁵ For him, the doctrine of the Trinity was not, indeed could not be, merely an intellectual knowledge, but must permeate throughout the soul, the heart and the will bringing about sanctification as the knowledge of God impacts our desires and crushes our sinfulness. As he says in Oration 2,

I, to crown all, with what we are to think of the original and blessed Trinity. Now this involves a very great risk to those who are charged with the illumination of others, if they are to avoid contracting their doctrine to a single Person, from fear of polytheism, and so leave us empty terms, if we suppose the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit to be one and the same Person only: or, on the other hand, severing It into three.⁶⁶

⁶³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letter 101*, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, in *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 7 (Christian Literature Co., London) 1984.

⁶⁴ Beeley, Christopher, A., *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford University Press, New York), 2008, p.266.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁶⁶ Gregory of Naziansus, *Oration 2.36*, taken from < <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310202.htm>>

Indeed, ‘the doctrine of the Trinity represents the very meaning of the Christian life, and so it is also the essence and the unifying element of pastoral ministry.’⁶⁷ The application of the theology to the congregation is the joyous duty of the Christian pastor: ‘The ministry of Christian pastors and priests is founded upon and fulfilled in theological doctrine, which they administer by adapting themselves to the variable and unpredictable circumstances of human life.’⁶⁸ For our church today, the doctrine of the Trinity is in danger of being forgotten as pastors struggle with being ‘interesting’ and where congregations struggle with the transmission of information through verbal communication. Yet Gregory’s theology of the Trinity demands that rather than give in and forego preaching, we preach the Trinity in the circumstance in which we find ourselves, trusting that the Gospel is the power to save because the work of the Mediator was sufficient, and the power of the Spirit is able to bring even the most hardened of sinners to repentance. The Trinity is not simply a doctrine of Christianity, it is the foundation of our faith. When we begin to comprehend God, we begin to comprehend truth, and the truth will set us free.⁶⁹

A Further Pastoral Reflection

One of the helpful ways in which the Fathers’ developing understanding of the Trinity can be instructive to our own church situations today is in dialogue with Islam. Although it certainly requires time, patience and, above all, relationship with Muslims to have fruitful discussion about the Gospel, their stumbling block is typically the Trinity. However, a faithful theology of the Trinity, applied well, taught sensitively and articulated carefully can also be the foundation for their conversion.

accessed on 10/29/2015

⁶⁷ Beeley, *Trinity and Knowledge of God.*, p. 269.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁶⁹ John 8:32.

As the Fathers have shown, God is simple, and God is three Persons in one Being. This actually makes more sense than the Islamic perception of monotheism for the following reason. If Allah is merciful then he is dependent upon his creation to *be* merciful. However, if God in His Triune unity is love, then whether He has created beings upon which to express His love or not is inconsequential because He is, in Himself, fully and perfectly loving. He is not defined by His creation, nor does He *need* His creation to *be* loving. Rather, His love for creation emanates from His love within Himself. Evangelistically, therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity is important in articulating the difference between competing claims of monotheism and actually heightens our appreciation for who God is, rather than diminishing it as some might claim. The lessons learnt by the Fathers combating Arianism (which share startling similarities with Islam) can be most instructive to our evangelistic endeavours today.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has interacted with the Trinitarian thought of the Church Fathers and drawn specific pastoral implications from them, with specific consideration to the progression of their understanding of the Godhead. In considering the thought of Athanasius, it was demonstrated that the pastoral significance of his theology was that, as the Son need to be God to be the atonement, we need the Spirit to be divine as well. Although Athanasius had not fully explained this, it was clear that salvation, for him, hinged upon the unity of the Godhead working together and acting as one to bring about the rescue of a sinner.

When studying Basil, it was found that although similar, the pastoral implications drawn from his thought had a slightly developed nuance over Athanasius'. Acknowledging that there are limits to human knowledge is a vital part of any Christian's worldview; not in an effort to shy away from seeking truth, but to encourage questions so long as we have the humility to realise that there are some things God has not chosen to reveal, and others that we are simply incapable of comprehending. The limits of reason is pastorally important for our generation because we seek to *own* knowledge and use knowledge as a way to 'deify' ourselves. Basil, on

the contrary, speaks of God as the unknowable. We are beholden to Him for any knowledge. Furthermore, it was suggested that Basil added to our understanding of the work of the Spirit, highlighting that the Christian has power to resist evil because we have the Spirit within us. As Christians who are all-too susceptible to the lies of sin, we need reminded that the Spirit empowers us to have victory if we cling to His application of the work of Jesus at the cross.

Gregory taught that it is important to grasp how we read Scripture, allowing the Spirit to guide us in that endeavour. As we must have a hermeneutic that enables us to penetrate the surface level of Scripture, we must seek the Spirit to reveal the mysteries of God and the glory of Christ to us that we may be brought to worship. It was also suggested that, whilst Athanasius and Basil taught the need for the Spirit, Basil was the foremost voice in declaring our utter dependence upon the Spirit for salvation, and indeed that without His efficacious application of the work of Christ to bring about regeneration, and in our sanctification, we remain hopeless. The Spirit is the Agent of salvation and the Minister of the covenant to believers, and this paper proved that the work of the Spirit is better than the presence of Christ because His work is more far-reaching than the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. It was also shown that Gregory himself saw pastoral ministry as the application of the Trinity, because faith in the Triune God impacts every aspect of life. Finally this paper took the combined teachings of the Fathers and used them to highlight practical implications of their Trinitarian theology today in evangelism.

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