

BASIL OF CAESAREA, GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS AND PASTORAL CARE.

Introduction

Pastoral care is a topic rarely taught in our modern era because so much of it relies upon experience: experience of people and experience of the power of God at work in and through His people. The idea of *teaching* pastoral care almost seems oxymoronic therefore, in the sense that you cannot teach experience. However the congregants under the charge of watchful shepherds want, expect and need their shepherds to be able and willing to provide deep, theological, practical and, above all, lovingly Christ-centred pastoral care. Despite our current perception that it cannot be taught, there is a recognition that simply ‘jumping in’ isn’t acceptable either. Thus, this self-imposed ‘catch 22’ appears to be paradoxical. How can we provide pastoral care, particularly at the start of ministry, if we must rely upon experience that we have not yet been able to garner? In answer to that question, we can look to the saints of history, and learn from their experience. Whilst it may be true that pastoral care for each unique situation cannot be taught, the principles will be the same because humanity, sin and the Gospel remain the same. This paper will present the pastoral theology of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus in an attempt to demonstrate that pastoral care can be a subject taught in principle and can prepare us for sensitive situations, even if not providing a formula for each possible scenario we may encounter.

Methodology

In this paper I will present the pastoral wisdom and actions of Basil of Caesarea, discerning the principle of pastoral care that was the foundation of his ministry, before considering how this worked in practice. I will then consider the theology of Gregory of

Nazianzus, noting especially his words in Oration 2 regarding the importance of the Trinitarian nature of God as the foundation to be equipped pastorally.

Context

The Trinitarian controversies were exceptionally volatile during the lifetimes of both Cyril and Gregory, two of the three Cappadocian Fathers. The primary issue during the Trinitarian debates can be summarized by the word ‘deity’. God the Father was always accepted as fully, wholly and eternally God. The Son, however, was not. This debate came to its fullest intensity by the time of Athanasius whose arguments against the Arian group eventually triumphed, leading to the Council of Nicea wherein the Son was explicitly proclaimed divine as the Father was divine. In due course, therefore, the next question was regarding the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Was He, too, fully divine like the Father and Son, or in what way should the Spirit be considered, understood and spoken of? The answer to both these questions were heavily debated by members of the churches throughout the Roman Empire.

So heated were these debates that Gregory of Nyssa, the third Cappadocian Father, said, that, ‘If you ask anyone in Constantinople for change, he will start discussing with you whether the Son is begotten or unbegotten. If you ask about the quality of bread, you will get the answer, ‘The Father is Greater, the Son is less!’¹ However, despite the importance of these debates, and the ferocious polemic they brought about, the underlying issue was not theological ‘point-scoring’ but a deep, pastoral concern for the Christian life of holiness and, especially, salvation. As one Father said of Christ, ‘What He has not assumed, He has not healed.’² These debates were not merely about one ‘brand’ of Christianity over another, a preference-driven choice, but were decisions that would have cosmic ramifications for the salvation of the individuals professing faith in God. Pastoral significance and necessity drove these debates

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, taken from Catherwood, Christopher, *Church History*, (Crossway: Illinois), 2007, p.49.

² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Critique of Apollinarianism* accessed <http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/gregoryofnaz_critique_of_apollinarianism.htm> on 12/10/2015.

because these were questions for which the answers truly mattered, not only in that era, but for all believers for all time.

Basil of Caesarea

Theological Principle of Pastoral Care

Basil came from a wealthy Christian family. He, and his brother, understood the Gospel in such a way that it meant the accumulation of wealth at the expense of others was forbidden, and rather than accumulating wealth simply for the sake of it, they chose to utilize wealth with Gospel understanding. Gregory noted the importance of pastoral care (which will be addressed below), but it is clear that they all shared this theological position. Gregory encouraged, ‘Christians to care for the poor and lepers because Jesus Christ died for them.’³ He, and Basil, took great care to be ‘concerned about the downtrodden’⁴ because of the Gospel. For them, the Gospel presented the model of both love and sacrifice. The Son gave up His wealth, His rights and privileges to come and rescue sinners, such as they were, and so they, if they were to follow Christ, had to do the same.

Pastoral care from the bishop was derived from salvation, in Christ, applied by the Spirit as willed by the Father. It was the certainty of this knowledge that gave basil the confidence in the world as a man of authority: because he knew God’s salvation through the united will of God in three Persons, nothing could cause him to fear. He defined baptism, and therefore by implication, salvation thus:

As then baptism has been given us by the Saviour, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, so, in accordance with our baptism, we make the confession of the creed, and our doxology in accordance with our creed.⁵

³ Norris, Frederick, W., *Cambridge History of Christianity, Constantine to c. 600*, (Cambridge University Press, New York), 2007, p.81.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Basil, *Letter 159*, translated by Blomfield Jackson, taken from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian literature Company), 1890-1900), Volume 8, p. 212.

As this was the case, he was able to confidently declare that, ‘What then is by nature holy as the Father is by nature holy, and the Son by nature holy, we do not ourselves allow to be separated and severed from the divine and blessed Trinity, nor accept those who rashly reckon it as part of creation.’⁶ The principle here is clear: those who properly understand God, and who He is in Himself, will be able to take confidence in the faith they have been given in Christ by the Spirit. It was this resolution that enable him to tartly respond to Valens’ prefect, who was threatening him, ‘All that I have that you can confiscate are these rags and a few books. Nor can you exile me, for wherever you send me, I shall be God’s guest. As to tortures you should know that my body is already dead in Christ and death would be a great boon to me, leading me sooner to God.’⁷ Upon expressing his surprise at being spoken to thus, Basil responded that, ‘Perhaps that is because you have never met a true bishop,’⁸ implying that the Arian bishops the prefect would know were not true bishops because they did not have the foundational confidence Basil had discovered in the will and purpose of God as a Trinitarian God.

It was this theological principle, Norris suggests, that, ‘provided the rationale and the fund-raising effort behind the great social project that Basil built outside Cappadocian Caesarea,’⁹ which brings us to the first, and most known, example of Basil’s pastoral care.

Pastoral Care in Salvation

‘Thus God’s blessings reach us through the Son, Who works in each case with greater speed than words can describe,’¹⁰ wrote Basil in his defense of Nicene theology. The reason why this is of critical importance, moreso than preserving the Gospel-portrait found in human marriage, or even in preserving the doctrine of the sanctity of life by providing social care, is

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gonzalez, Justo L., *The Story of Christianity Vol 1*, (Harper Collins, New York), 1984, p. 185.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Norris, *Christianity*, p. 81.

¹⁰ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press: New York), 1980, p.38.

because, for Basil, everything pastorally finds purpose in the triune nature of God. He writes later that, ‘the one aim of the whole band of these enemies of sound doctrine is to shake the faith of Christ down to its foundations, by utterly levelling apostolic tradition to the ground.’¹¹ The rupture that Arianism tried to bring into the Godhead was not merely a disagreement on the philosophical and theological nature of God, but had salvific implications for Basil, and therefore had material, spiritual and cosmic connotations. As he wrote later,

What makes us Christians? ‘Our faith,’ everyone would answer. How are we saved? Obviously through the regenerating grace of baptism. How else could we be? We are confirmed in our understanding that salvation comes through Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Shall we cast away the standard of teaching we received? This would surely be grounds for great sorrow; if we now reject what we accepted at baptism, we will be found to be further away from our salvation than when we first believed.¹²

The pastoral care that Basil gave to society, to married couples and in other circumstances for which there is not space to elucidate, was grounded in the Trinitarian nature of God. Because God the Father willed that His divine Son become flesh, live a perfect life and die for sinners, rise again and ascend to heaven in majesty, then sent the Holy Spirit to apply and confirm this redemptive work to us, we are able and confident that the power of sin over us has been broken, and we are no longer enslaved to sin. Therefore, Basil argues, the sinner’s greatest hope is not in self, is not in theology *in and of itself*, but in the nature of the three Persons within the Godhead working out our salvation both immediately and eternally. All the difficulties we face, all the trials and pain that come to us, can be viewed through the lens of the God-man and the Spirit, ensuring that we fear no man, no angel, no demon, no circumstance nor trial because God is sovereignly in control. Giving up on God as Triune is the greatest danger imaginable for a professing believer, not a temporal thing as found in the world. Heresy kills the soul, as he poetically notes later saying, ‘Entire churches are dashed and shattered on the sunken reefs of subtle heresy, whole other enemies of the Spirit of salvation have seized the helm and made

¹¹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹² Ibid.

shipwreck of the faith.¹³ Rather than lose the apostolic doctrine, and therefore hope, Basil urged his readers that, ‘It would be utterly miserable that the Spirit is blasphemed and true religion is wrecked so easily by these men, while we, having such a mighty patron and protector, hesitate to defend a doctrine which has been maintain in unbroken sequence from the days of the fathers until now.’¹⁴ Surely that is Basil’s greatest contribution to pastoral care: reminding us that salvation has eternal ramifications, and our present trials and troubles only seek to prepare us who truly believe for the day of our death when we will be glorified and transformed to be like Him.

Case Study: Pastoral Care in Society

Basil arrived in Caesarea during a famine, caused by extremely inclement weather. The result was that food, where it could be found, was purchased by the wealthy and hoarded, leaving the most vulnerable ever more vulnerable. This was anathema to the wealthy Basil, and as a result he, ‘preached against such practices, and sold all his properties in order to feed the poor.’¹⁵ In due course Basil established a location outside the immediate vicinity of the city that provided assistance to those who were in need. Admittedly, however, although this ‘social project’ became a hospital for any who were ill and in need during a widespread famine, it ought not to be overlooked that it was Basil’s initial intention for it to be a ‘way station for pilgrims’¹⁶ wherein they could find ‘lodging, food and any necessary medical treatment’.¹⁷ It was because of Basil’s management and overall vision that, in a time of crisis, he was able to reach out to the community with these resources. His hospice was so successful that, ‘Emperor Valens...eventually sent funds because he knew the hospice could efficiently help in ways his

¹³ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁵ Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, p. 184.

¹⁶ Norris, *Christianity*, p. 81.

¹⁷ Ibid.

own administration could not.’¹⁸ The pastoral nature of Basil ultimately led to much greater influence of the church in Caesarea because it became clear that the Christian community was a servant of the wider community, and the model Christ gave was being reimagined for a different circumstance. As a result, it is true that, of Basil, it could be said that,

his interests were not exclusively theological: he denounced and excommunicated those who owned houses of prostitution, he worked to secure justice for the poor against those who oppressed them, and he severely disciplined clergy who used their office to accumulate money or to live too well at the expense of the faithful.¹⁹

Although perhaps it should be argued that his social endeavours were drawn from his theology, and not a separate part of his overall work.

Case Study: Pastoral Care in Marriage

Perhaps for any pastor, the biggest pastoral challenges are found in the realm of sexuality. The bond of marriage, especially, is noted for the completeness and lifelong nature of the union, sealed through the exclusivity of the covenant act of sex. Thus when adultery is committed, the sin is more egregious than merely against the spouse, but it is against a very picture of the Gospel. Basil, as a bishop, had to deal with numerous sexual perfidies, and his dogmatic thoughts were eventually adopted as canon law in the Roman Catholic Church. Norris says, ‘Basil...composed three letters to Bishop Amphilochius of Iconium in which he discussed a series of rulings that he had inherited from his predecessors.’²⁰ These rulings against the adulterer suggested a penance of ‘fifteen years of exclusions from communion spent in the successive classes of penitents.’²¹ Pastorally, therefore, although not apparently rooted in the Gospel to bring about reconciliation, Basil continued the practice that demonstrated the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Kiefer, James, E., taken from < <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/186.html>> accessed on 12/05/2015.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 587

²¹ Ibid.

seriousness of adultery. This does bear pastoral significance because the act of adultery is a dangerous sin that impacts the couple, the family and the entire community.

The nature of Roman law regarding adultery, however, was not objective. For Romans, it was a female action to commit adultery, but the male action was considered fornication, and although noting the inconsistent logic, Basil failed to challenge it: ‘Therefore the wife will receive her husband when he returns from fornication, but the husband will dismiss the polluted woman from his house.’²² Unlike Basil, however, and perhaps with greater awareness and sensitivity (and less administrative responsibility), Gregory of Nazianzus said, ‘I do not accept this legislation; I do not approve this custom. They who made the law were men, and therefore their legislation is hard on women.’²³ This failure of Basil to defend women who have been so gravely sinned against could be considered a stain on his pastoral record, and in many ways ought to be so; however the punishment for fornication in his mind was 7 years of penance, which, admittedly not 14, was certainly a substantial amount of time. It would be unfair to conclude from this double standard that he was misogynistic or that he didn’t believe adultery committed by men to be extremely sinful. Yet, nevertheless, one cannot help but draw some parallels to the hypocrisy of Pharisee-led mob bringing only the woman caught in adultery to Jesus, as recorded in John 8.

Gregory of Nazianzus

Theological Principle of Pastoral Care

Unlike Basil, whose theology of pastoral care must be pieced together from his various deeds and works, Gregory wrote an entire oration devoted to the work of the bishop as a pastoral care giver. Although his theology was of paramount importance (indeed not only for the Cappadocians, but for all Christendom), ‘Gregory Nazianzen is one of the foremost pastoral

²² Basil, *Canon 21*, taken from Norris, *Christianity*, p. 588.

²³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 37.6*, taken from Norris, *Christianity*, p. 588.

theologians of the early church.²⁴ As with Basil, Gregory's foundation for pastoral care was God as a Trinity: 'Since the doctrine of the Trinity...takes place within the divine economy in the age of the Church, it involves the Church's pastoral and teaching ministry in an integral way.'²⁵ In fact, as Winslow argues, 'Rather than finding...praxis opposed to each other, he regarded them as parallel concepts, mutually interdependent, not mutually exclusive.'²⁶ As with Basil, therefore, it is clear that Oration 2 provides a theological framework not only for pastoral ministry, but for all ministry, according to Gregory: 'And so our law and our lawgiver enjoin upon us most strictly that we should tend the flock not by constraint but willingly.'²⁷ To find a concise definition, Gregory himself provides it in *Oration 9*,

For the effective exercise of my pastoral office, which tears them away from the world, leads them to God, exhausts their body, adds them to the Spirit, turns away from the darkness, glories in the light, drives away predators, draws together the fold, guards against precipices and desert solitudes, helps it reach the mountains and high places.²⁸

Pastoral Care for the Sinner

Oration 2 swiftly delves into the rationale for pastoral care, contrasting the spiritual nature of pastoral care with the medicinal nature of physical care, and Gregory summarizes his argument by suggesting that, 'Our office as physicians far exceeds in toilsomeness, and consequently in worth, that which is confined to the body,'²⁹ because 'the whole of our treatment

²⁴ Beeley, Christopher, A., *Theology and Pastoral Leadership*, *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 1 (2009), p. 22. , taken from York, Barry J., 'Trinitarianism in the Pastoral Theology of Gregory Nazianzen,' *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal*, Vol. 1 Issue 2, 2015, p. 60.

²⁵ Beeley, Christopher, A., *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light*, (Oxford University Press, USA), 2008, p. 235. , taken from York, Barry J., 'Trinitarianism in the Pastoral Theology of Gregory Nazianzen,' *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal*, Vol. 1 Issue 2, 2015, p. 60.

²⁶ Winslow, Donald F., 'Gregory of Nazianzus and Love for the Poor,' *Anglican Theological Review* 47, no. 4 (1965), p. 351., taken from York, Barry J., 'Trinitarianism in the Pastoral Theology of Gregory Nazianzen,' *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal*, Vol. 1 Issue 2, 2015, p. 60.

²⁷ Gregory, *Oration 2.15*, taken from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310202.htm> accessed on 12/05/2015.

²⁸ Gregory, *Oration 9.3*, taken from *The Fathers of the Church: Select Orations*, (Cua Press, Washington, DC), 2003, p. 23.

²⁹ Gregory, *Oration 2.21*.

and exertion is concerned with the hidden man of the heart, and our warfare is directed against that adversary...within us, who uses ourselves as his weapons against ourselves, and...hands us over to the death of sin.³⁰ Evidently therefore, Gregory believes that the root of pastoral care is found in the revealing of sin and the treatment of sin, for which there is only one medicine: the Gospel: 'In opposition then, to these foes we are in need of great and perfect faith, and of still greater co-operation on the part of God.'³¹

However, it would do a disservice to Gregory to simply assume that pastoral care meant solely the destruction of the sinful nature. Rather, pastoral care included that as part of the higher purpose of the pastor, which was,

to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image, if it abides, to take it by the hand, if it is in danger, or restore it, if ruined, to make Christ to dwell in the heart by the Spirit: and, in short, to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon one who belongs to the heavenly host.³²

Evidently the purpose of pastoral care is to shepherd the flock of Christ, over which the Bishop and Presbyters are placed, into greater sanctification so that they may be presented to Christ as spotless one day in the future. This, he argues, (meaning the sanctification of the people of God) explains the Law, the Prophets, the Incarnation and Passion, the work of the Spirit and the reason for the church. Indeed, the work of pastoral care finds its ultimate fulfilment when a saint passes from this life into eternity, prepared and guarded by their spiritual leaders, 'upon whose efforts is staked the salvation of a soul, a being blessed and immortal, and destined for undying chastisement or praise, for its vice or virtue.'³³

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 22.

³³ Ibid., 28.

Case Study: Pastoral Care for the Poor

Gregory, like Basil, saw pastoral care as something that ought to impact society, and not be something solely exclusively for the church, and also like Basil, this was something that was rooted in the foundational theology of the Gospel. In *Oration 14*, he argued that, ‘we are all poor and needy where divine grace is concerned,’³⁴ and therefore all Christians ought to give generously to the poor ‘that you may become rich in the kingdom.’³⁵ He then walks through a list of ways in which the Christian can show the love of Christ in a pastorally caring and sensitive way, including hospitality, brotherly love, being longsuffering, zeal and even through solitude and quiet. The pastoral heart of Nazianzus was not simply in doing all he could to care for church and society, but to call his listeners and readers to take up their cross, like Christ had modelled, and to become Christ to the world. He appeals to Jesus’ own actions to make this call clear, saying, ‘The witness is Jesus, who willed not only to be called our brother but also to suffer on our behalf,’³⁶ and again,

Yes, what of ourselves, who have been given so great a model of sympathy and compassion? What will our attitude towards these people be...Dismiss them as corpses, execrable, the vilest of beasts and creatures that crawl? Most certainly not...these actions become neither ourselves, the flock of Christ.³⁷

As with Basil, however, pastoral care was intrinsically tied up with salvation. He writes that, ‘Each of these [good works of pastoral care] forms a single road to salvation, which has as its certain destination one of the blessed and everlasting abodes,’³⁸ which is the reason why, ‘We must, then, open our hearts to all the poor and to all those who are victims of disaster

³⁴ Gregory, *Oration 14.1*, taken from, *Fathers of the Church*, p. 39.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 2, p. 40.

³⁷ Ibid., 15, p. 49.

³⁸ Ibid., 5, p. 42.

from whatever cause.’³⁹ There can be no alternative, for, ‘All alike deserve our pity and look to our hands just as we look to the hands of God whenever we are in need of something.’⁴⁰

This brings us to the final consideration for Gregory. His pastoral care was to be undertaken by men able and willing to give it, requiring their salvation, their knowledge of the Gospel and their Godly reputation must be above standard. He writes that the pastor, ‘must himself be cleansed, before cleansing others...draw near to God, and so bring others near.’⁴¹ Of Gregory, this is known to be true, for he sought the discipleship and growth in the Godliness of others above political office or financial gain. After resigning the Patriarchy of Constantinople amidst controversy, he ‘returned to his homeland, where he spent his time composing hymns and devoted himself to his pastoral duties.’⁴² This, perhaps, is the hallmark of one who fully understands the Gospel. As with Basil, Gregory understood that the temporal trials of this world, as painful as they may be (and he knew his fair share), were not going to diminish the reward of one who faithfully made it to the end of the race, ready to meet Christ. Arguably, that is the culmination for a saint who has been under the pastoral care of a bishop or elder such as Basil or Gregory, and perhaps therein lies the success pastors ought to seek: souls prepared and ready for glory.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has considered the theological foundation of pastoral care as understood by Basil and Gregory, noting that for both of these Fathers, pastoral care was intrinsically linked with the doctrine of God and the Incarnation of Christ in the Gospel. Without this foundation, their pastoral care would have been diminished. This paper then considered case studies of each Father, noting where they disagreed, whilst also protecting their separate concepts

³⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

⁴¹ Gregory, *Oration 2.71*.

⁴² Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, p. 188.

of pastoral care that stem from the same source and understanding. This paper found that, although one cannot easily formulate a clinical answer that covers a range of pastoral issues that is correct in every circumstance, it is nevertheless true that, ultimately, the Gospel is the cornerstone of faith and sustenance for the Christian, and therefore to remind the brother struggling of the hope he has in the Gospel is the most pastorally sensitive and caring thing one can do. Both Basil and Gregory modelled this, and from this we can learn how to be better pastors of the flocks over which we are entrusted.

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