



PAIDEIA CENTER

FOR THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLESHIP

DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE

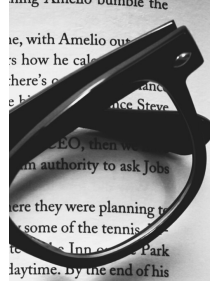


GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS,
THE FIVE THEOLOGICAL ORATIONS



DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE

GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS,
The Five Theological Orations



INTRODUCTION

Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390) has been known as “Gregory the Theologian” for most of Christian history. With Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, he is known as one of the three great “Cappadocian Fathers” of the fourth century. He served as bishop of Constantinople late in life. He was also a poet (of over 18,000 verses) and an ascetic (who retired late in life to seclusion). He was an exponent of central ideas of early Christian theology. He not only developed the pathway of Christian self-denial or discipleship, but he also regularly spoke of union with Christ and its salvific power: “Let us seek to be like Christ, because Christ also became like us: to become gods through him since he himself, through us, became a man. He took the worst upon himself to make us a gift of the best” (Oration 1.5; see also Orations 39.13 and 45.10).

He is perhaps most widely known for his teaching on the triune God. In Constantinople he had found himself in the theological minority regarding the doctrine of God. His opponents in these homilies are the “Anomeans” or “Eunomians” (followers of Eunomius, 335-393). They speak of the Father generating or creating the Son, through whom the Spirit and then all other things are generated or created. The Council of Constantinople (381) would respond to this and other trinitarian errors by expanding the earlier Nicene Creed (325). While Gregory the Theologian wished they had said more regarding the person of the Holy Spirit and though he eventually needed to resign his post in Constantinople, his theology was influential in shaping that creedal document. These five theological orations were his defense of the Nicene position over against the local majority in summer and autumn 380. Alongside earlier treatises by Athanasius, homilies by Gregory of Nyssa and Basil, and later writings by Augustine, these orations are emblematic of what we sometimes call “Pro-Nicene theology.”

ing Amelio double the
knew
temporarily, and I wasn't even sure it was legal. I didn't know what
wanted to do. I was enjoying spending more time with my family. I was
torn. I knew Apple was a mess, so I wondered: Do I want to give up
this nice lifestyle that I have? What are all the Pixar shareholders going
to think? I talked to people I respected. I finally called Andy Grove at
about eight one Saturday morning—too early. I gave him the pros and
the cons, and in the middle he stopped me and said, “Steve, I don't give
a shit about Apple.” I was stunned. It was then I realized that I *do* give a
shit about Apple—I started it and it is a good thing to have in the world.
That was when I decided to go back on a temporary basis to help them
hire a CEO.

The claim that he was enjoying spending more time with his fam
was not convincing. He was never destined to win a Father of the
trophy, even when he had spare time on his hands. He was get
better at paying heed to his children, especially Reed, but his pri
focus was on his work. He was frequently aloof from his two you
daughters, estranged again from Lisa, and often prickly as a husb
So what was the real reason for his hesitancy in taking ov
Apple? For all of his willfulness and insatiable desire to control th
Jobs was indecisive and reticent when he felt unsure about somet
He craved perfection, and he was not always good at figuring out
to settle for something less. He did not like to wrestle with com
ity or make accommodations. This was true in products, design
furnishings for the house. It was also true when it came to per
commitments. If he knew for sure a course of action was right, h
unstoppable. But if he had doubts, he sometimes withdrew, pref
not to think about things that did not perfectly suit him. As hap
when Amelio had asked him what role he wanted to play, Jobs
go silent and ignore situations that made him uncomfortable.
This attitude arose partly out of his tendency to see the wo
binary terms. A person was either a hero or a bozo, a product was

What was essential to these “Pro-Nicene” theologians? “These theologies were not identical, but shared a common commitment to the beliefs that God was one power, nature, and activity; that there could be no degrees in divinity; that the divine persons were irreducible although all sharers in the divine being without any ontological hierarchy; that human beings would always fail to comprehend God and that one could only make progress toward knowledge and love of God through entering a discipline and practice that would reshape the imagination” (Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, p. 434; see also p. 236). As we study these orations, we learn not only about *who* early Christians thought God and Christ were revealed to be but also *how* they are revealed and known. We learn not just the content of theology (*who* God is) but something of the context for good Christian theology (*how* we may know God).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

If you or any participants want to read further on Gregory the Theologian, here are recommended resources:

John McGuckin, “Perceiving Light from Light in Light: The Trinitarian Theology of St. Gregory the Theologian,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39 (1994): 7-32

John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

For further analysis of the fourth century and Trinitarian developments, the best short summary is Michel René Barnes, “The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon,” in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric, and Community* (ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones; London: Routledge, 1998), 47-67. Works by Khaled Anatolios’s *Retrieving Nicaea*, Lewis Ayres’s *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, and John Behr’s *The Nicene Faith* provide excellent further analyses. A free Zondervan Academic e-book with entries by Ayres, Fred Sanders, and others on *Pro-Nicene Theology* can be found [here](#).



1ST MONTH

The First Theological Oration (#27): An Introductory Sermon against the Eunomians

This first homily includes ten sections that are prompted by warnings in 1 & 2 Timothy about itching ears and vain words. The text focuses on the practice of theology and the person or character of the theologian.

- Gregory expresses moral concern about his opponents in sections 1-2.
- Then he describes the moral and spiritual context of theology in section 3. Theology is “not for everyone” and “reserved for certain occasions” (pp. 26-27). Notice that he explores further here when it is appropriate, who should participate, what aspects of theology are appropriately investigated, and to what limit such topics might be investigated.
- Then he attests the importance of continual meditation as well as discussing theology in due season and not otherwise (section 4). He clarifies this twofold concern: “So it is not continual remembrance of God I seek to discourage, but continual discussion of theology” (p. 28).
- Section 4 reiterates his concern that Christian theological exploration ought to proceed in distinctly Christian ways: “Let us conduct our debates within our frontiers, and not be carried away to Egypt or dragged off to Assyria” (p. 28).
- Gregory warns against engaging with those operating in bad faith (section 6).
- His concerns regarding character and behavior are not focused solely on his opponents. In section 7 he can differentiate between the “swine” on the other side and his own sin, and yet he does go on to say that “the next step to take is to look at ourselves and to smooth the theologian in us, like a statue, into beauty” (p. 30).
 - Section 7 includes a range of diagnostic questions for self-analysis. Gregory expects all to undergo the process of transformation (*catharsis*).
 - Gregory elsewhere demonstrates that his concern about spiritual and moral maturity is not just an exhortation for others, much less a standard he thinks he has already achieved. He wrote one poem that is illustrative: “You have a task, my soul, a great task if you so desire. Scrutinize yourself seriously, your being, your destiny; where you came from and where you must find rest; seek to know whether it is life that you are living or if it is something more. You have a task, my soul, so purify your life: please consider God and his mysteries, investigate what existed before this universe and what it is for you, where you came from and what your destiny will be. This is your task, my soul; therefore, purify your life” (*Historical Poems*, 2.1.78).

- Sections 8 and 9 sketch a sober vision of theological discipleship. In section 8 Gregory describes the “way of goodness” as being “one” or singular (as revealed by God) and being “narrow” (pp. 31-32). In section 9, Gregory reminds teachers that even if they have progressed theologically, they ought to beware of weaker or less mature Christians who are still on the way and prone to error (pp. 32-33).
- He concludes section 10 and the homily with these words: “But of God himself the knowledge we shall have in this life will be little, though soon after it will perhaps be more perfect, in the same Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be glory for ever and ever” (34).

It is helpful to see that this first oration is summarized at the beginning of the second oration: “Last time we used theology to cleanse the theologian. We glanced at his character, his audience, the occasion and range of his theorizing. We saw that his character should be undimmed, making for a perception of light by light; that his audience should be serious-minded, to ensure that the word shall be no sterile sowing in sterile ground; that the right occasion is when we own an inner stillness away from the outward whirl, avoiding all fitful checks to the spirit; and that the range should be that of our God-given capacity” (p. 37).

•

The Second Theological Oration (#28): On the Doctrine of God

This second oration is significantly longer and comes in 31 sections. It is addressed specifically to the doctrine of God and *what kind of knowledge* we can have of the true God (p. 37).

- Notice that ascent language marks the beginning of the oration itself in section 2 (p. 37: “I eagerly ascend the mount ... that I may enter the cloud and company with God”). In sections 2-3 Gregory uses Moses as a model for growth and knowledge of God. He mentions a number of characters from the Exodus account (Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, the Elders), and each ascends as far as his own purity allows. Others – the “multitude” and the “unworthy” – dare not even approach.
- “The obvious belongs to the crowd waiting below, the hidden to the few who attain the height” (p. 38).
- In section 4 Gregory modifies the language of a philosopher to say that knowing God is more difficult even than speaking of God (p. 39). Not only that, but he also adds that our knowledge of creation is likewise possessed as a “mere outline” (p. 40).
- In sections 6-8 Gregory focuses on ways that arguments based on causality are limited precisely because God does not exist in the physical or material world.

Gregory is very concerned about the limits of language for talking of God.

Christopher Beeley says of his opposition to Eunomius: “in his view, Eunomius’s real error is that he selectively ... elevates unbegottenness above all other attributes, to the point of making it the very definition of God’s essence and the one quality that encompasses all others and exactly expresses the entirety of what God is, with no remainder. As a result, Eunomius in effect claims to know God’s essence completely” (*Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, p. 93).

•

In section 16 he returns to ascent: “reason took us up in our desire for God” (p. 49). This metaphor had not been referenced since sections 2-3 discussed Moses’s ascent, but it will be a constant reference point in the remainder of the oration (and very explicitly in spots like section 28). Section 17 describes what is known, what will be known, and how to think of relative knowledge now.

- “No one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in his nature and essence” (p. 49).
- “We shall, in time to come, ‘know even as we are known’” (p. 50).
- “But for the present what reaches us is a scant emanation ... reckoned knowledge in the full sense, not because it really was so, but by the contrast of relative strengths” (p. 50).

Gregory then expounds the stories of those who ascended to know God in notable ways; Enosh, Noah, and Jacob (section 18); Elijah, Manoah, Peter, and Ezekiel (section 19); Paul (section 20); and then Paul, Solomon, and David (section 21).

- In section 22 he turns again to his own knowledge (having considered these exemplars from the Bible in sections 18-21). Much of the final third of the oration fixes on showing the difficulty of even knowing the created world well, whether we speak of land and its occupants (sections 22-23, 25-26), the seas (sections 24, 27), or the skies (sections 28-30).
- At the very end of section 31, he states his goal: “it [reason] has been engaged in a struggle to prove that even the nature of beings on the second level is too much for our minds, let alone God’s primal and unique, not to say all-transcending nature” (pp. 63-64).

Discussion Prompts

- Gregory describes theology as an investigation that is massively shaped by one’s character. In what ways do we or don’t we operate with a similar assumption today?

Much is made in the second oration of ascent to God. How is this metaphor crucial for what it means to be with and to know God? And how does the descent of God (which is less notable here) further add to our understanding of life with and knowledge of God?

- He says that our knowledge of ourselves is also massively limited. What is the significance of that kind of humility regarding self-knowledge or self-awareness?

-

2ND MONTH



The Third Theological Oration (#29): On the Son

- The first section addresses the task ahead in homilies three and four: to present a case for pro-Nicene orthodoxy and then to argue against opponents.
- The next fifteen sections offer an analytic reflection on Father and Son language (sections 2-16).
- Then Gregory turns to exegetical data that suggests the Son's divinity or equality with the Father (section 17) and then references that might be taken to suggest his subordination or inequality with the Father (section 18).
- "It is not a hard task to clear away the stumbling block that the literal text of Scripture contains—that is, if your stumbling is real and not just willful malice. In sum: you must predicate the more sublime expressions of the Godhead, of the nature which transcends bodily experiences, and the lowlier ones of the compound, of him who because of you was emptied, became incarnate and (to use equally valid language) was 'made man'" (p. 86).
- Sections 19 and 20 then present a host of seemingly paradoxical statements regarding Christ (pp. 86-88).
- The summary maxim: "If the first set of expressions starts you going astray, the second set takes your error away" (p. 88).
- The power of paradox will be taken up further by Cyril of Alexandria in the early fifth century as he opposes the Nestorians. See especially Paul Gavrilyuk, "God's Impassible Suffering in the Flesh: The Promise of Paradoxical Christology," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, pp. 127-149.
- The fourth homily summarizes this section's point: "We have now established a general, and I believe, clear solution, satisfactory to people of sound sense—the solution, I mean, of allocating the more elevated, the more distinctly divine expressions of Scripture to the Godhead, the humbler and more human to the New Adam, God passible for our sake over against sin" (Oration 30.1, p. 93).
- Section 21 concludes the oration. He addresses faith and reason, error and fullness. Interesting, he repeatedly locates the error of the opponents as foreshortening the fullness of the divine mysteries (where "reason gives way in the face of the vastness of the realities," p. 88), while the appropriate and orthodox response "gives fullness to our reasoning" (p. 89).

The Fourth Theological Oration (#30): On the Son

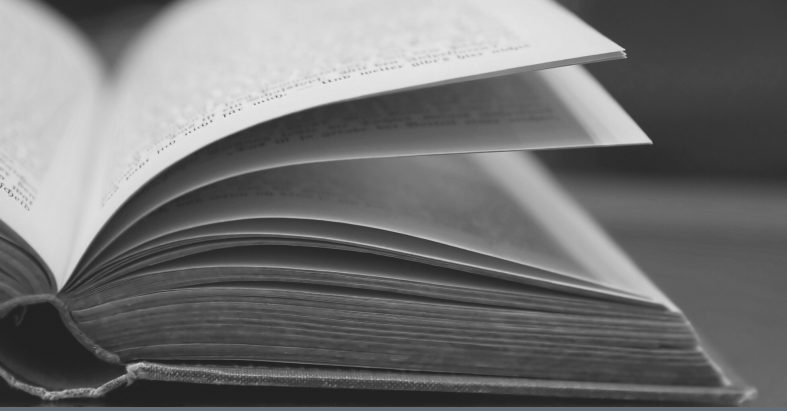
- If the third homily focused on the two types of statements found in Scripture first in theory and second in terms of lists of statements, then this fourth homily will linger more patiently over a few key passages (section 1).
- Sections 2-16 analyze ten such passages which, it has been argued, define the Son as being less than the Father in some fashion.

He then pursues “the deep significance of each of the titles applied to the Son” (p. 107).

- - First descriptor: “Our starting-point must be the fact that God cannot be named” (p. 107).
Second descriptor: “Our noblest theologian is not one who has discovered the whole—our earthly shackles do not permit us the whole—but one whose mental image is by comparison fuller, who has gathered in his mind a richer picture, outline, or whatever we call it, of the truth” (pp. 107-108). Notice that the emphasis on “fullness” reappears (like in Oration 29.21 on p. 89).
- Sections 18-19 address (1) names for the Godhead as such, whether “He Who Is,” “God,” or “Lord” which refer to the divine essence/being (p. 108), (2) that class of names belonging to God’s power (pp. 108-109), or (3) that class of names belonging to God’s “providential ordering of the world” (pp. 108-109). “These names are shared” by all three divine persons (p. 109).
- Section 20 turns to names for the Son according to his Deity (pp. 109-111), while section 21 analyzes names for the Son according to his humanity (pp. 111-112).
- The oration concludes with this exhortation: “There you have the Son’s titles. Walk like God through all that are sublime, and with a fellow-feeling through all that involve the body; but better, treat all as God does, so that you may ascend from below to become God, because he came down from above for us. Above all, keep hold of this truth and apply it to all the loftier and lowlier names and you will never fail: Jesus Christ in body and spirit the same, yesterday, today, and forever. Amen” (p. 112).

Discussion Prompts

- Gregory tries to give us some hermeneutical principles for reading the gospels especially in the third oration. What are they? How would you use them on particular texts?
- In the third oration (sections 19-20 especially) he presses on the need for seemingly paradoxical language about Christ. Why is this necessary? How does this shape how we think of Christ, how we read Scripture, and how we understand God?
- He looks to the various titles of the Son in the fourth oration (sections 18-19). Which ones are most emphasized in your own experience, church, or tradition? To what effect? Which ones are less emphasized? To what effect? How might reclaiming the wider range of titles fill out your or your church’s understanding of the Son?



3RD MONTH

The Fifth Theological Oration (#31): On the Holy Spirit

- What of the Spirit? Sections 1 and 3 speak of how “strange” the doctrine of the Spirit seems to many.
- Section 2 identifies “something especially difficult in the doctrine of the Spirit” along the lines of intellectual or doctrinal exhaustion at this point (pp. 117-118).

Nonetheless, “strange” though it may seem and tiring though it may be, Gregory has “such confidence in the Godhead of the Spirit, that, rash though some may find it, we shall begin our exposition by applying identical expressions to the Three” (p. 118). He then explores the Spirit’s eternity (section 4) and existence (section 5).

- In another place (Oration 41.9 on Pentecost) Gregory says this: “the Spirit always is participated in but does not participate, perfects but is not perfected, fills but is not filled, sanctifies but is not sanctified, deifies but is not deified.”
- “It is their difference in, so to say, ‘manifestation’ or mutual relationship, which has caused the difference in names ... No, the language here gives no grounds for any deficiency, for any subordination in being ... The aim is to safeguard the distinctness of the three hypostases within the single nature and quality of the Godhead” (section 9, p. 123).

Gregory then explores how multiple persons can share a substance (sections 10-11), what evidence we have for worship of the Spirit (section 12), and then – just where he says “our sermon has reached the fundamental point” – whether this affirmation of the deity of the Spirit doesn’t lead to affirming three gods (sections 13-20, see esp. section 13, pp. 126, 127).

- “To express it succinctly, the Godhead exists undivided in beings divided” (p. 127). As God, they exist undivided (or, we might say, distinguished); as beings, they exist divided (or, we might say again, distinguished).
- Avoiding tritheism and modalism alike is the challenge explored in these sections.

Michel René Barnes has argued, “fourth-century Trinitarian orthodoxy was the net product of rejecting modalism’s claim as the necessary cost for defeating subordinationism” (“The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon,” p. 62).

He comes back to the question of what it means for something to be “in the Bible” (section 21, p. 133).

- “Some things mentioned in the Bible are not factual; some factual things are not mentioned; some nonfactual things receive no mention there; some things are both factual and mentioned” (p. 133).
- Gregory explores hermeneutical principles (section 22), shows the difficulty of being a consistent Biblicist (section 23), and then turns to ask why the Spirit only appears explicitly late in the Bible (in the NT).

To address why the Spirit is explicitly revealed late, he must give a glimpse of his understanding of redemptive history found in section 25 (running through section 28): he itemizes “two remarkable transformations of the human way of life in the course of the world’s history” and then points to a “third” yet to come (p. 136).

- “the first was the transition from idols to the Law”; he later points out that this “shaking” (a term from Heb. 12) thins out human imaginings (p. 137);
 - “the second, from the Law to the Gospel”: he later points out that “here, growth towards perfection comes through additions” (p. 137)
 - “the third shaking,” the change from this present state of things to what lies unmoved, unshaken, beyond.”
- Gregory concludes the oration by reflecting on the validity and value of images for the Godhead (sections 31-33). He examines several live options (the source, spring, and river, or the sun, the sunbeam, and light) before concluding that “it was best to say ‘goodbye’ to images and shadows, deceptive and utterly inadequate as they are to express the reality” (p. 143).

Discussion Prompts

- Gregory suggests knowing the Spirit well is “especially difficult” (even relative to knowing the Father and the Son). Is this true? If so, do you agree because of his reasons or other reasons?
- One of the most significant Trinitarian statements of the whole book appears here: “To express it succinctly, the Godhead exists undivided in beings divided” (p. 127). How can we paraphrase this? How can we unpack its meaning and its significance? What does the word “undivided” signify? What does “divided” signify? In saying both, we are obviously entering into a seeming paradox of sorts.

Gregory talks about how the Law was a time for stripping away bad ideas about God through his self-revelation and how the Gospel is then a time for adding new knowledge about God through further self-revelation (p. 137). Is this helpful for thinking about the OT and the NT, the old covenant and the new covenant, the law and the gospel? If so, how does that shape how we read the OT especially? In your own context, which struggle or struggles are most pressing and in what ways?

•