

The Atonement in Gregory of Nyssa

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The Tyndale Lecture in Historical Theology, 1963.

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HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS

(based on *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*)

BASIL OF CAESAREA (Basil the Great, c. 330-379)

Brother of Gregory of Nyssa and Macrina, and one of ten children. He was educated at Caesarea, Constantinople and Athens in the best pagan and Christian culture of the day (hence his interest in combining philosophy and Christianity). He became a hermit by the river Iris in 358, where he renewed his friendship with Gregory of Nazianzus. In 364 he left retirement to defend orthodoxy against the Arian emperor Valens—typical of his permanent championship of orthodoxy. In 370 he succeeded Eusebius (not the Church-historian) as bishop of Caesarea, where he remained until his death in c. 379.

GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS (329-389)

Known as The Theologian, was son of the bishop of Nazianzus in Cappadocia. He was a contemporary of Basil at the University of Athens, became a priest c. 362 and in 372 was consecrated to the see of Sasima. In 379 he was invited to Constantinople, where his preaching restored the Nicene faith. Accepting the see of Constantinople for some months, he resigned to retire to Nazianzus and then to his own estate.

GREGORY OF NYSSA (c. 330-395)

The younger brother of Basil, was destined for an ecclesiastical career, but lost his interest in the things of the Spirit and became a rhetorician for a time. Hence the permanent influence of the school-room on his thought. E. R. Hardy argues that he was married, but the evidence is not conclusive. Influenced by a dream, he returned to his first vocation and entered a monastery. He was made a bishop of Nyssa in 371, was deposed by the Arians in 376 on some trumped-up charges and was in exile until the death of Valens in 378. He travelled much and was in great demand as a preacher. His return to his diocese in 378 was triumphal. The following year was one of personal sorrow, since it saw the death of Basil and Macrina. That year he attended the Council of Antioch and the next he was elected bishop of Sebaste, though he protested against the election. At the Council of Constantinople in 381 he championed the Nicene cause. After much travel, he was present at another Council at Constantinople in 394 and it seems that he died soon after.

He was acquainted with Platonist and neo-Platonist speculation and was an outstanding exegete, orator and ascetical writer. Among his works are Polemical Treatises and Exegetical and Ascetical books. The *Catechetical Oration* expounds in a popular way the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, redemption and the sacraments. His commentary on the Life of Moses owes much to Origen and his mystical and allegorical interpretation of Scripture.

The great contribution of the Cappadocians to the history of the Christian Church was that they were the chief influence that led to the final defeat of Arianism. Thereafter the doctrine of atonement could be built on solid foundations. Their special interest was in appealing to all that was best in the secular culture of their day and relating it to the Christian religion.

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INTRODUCTION

Theology is a science which must by its nature be 'existential'; and the Cappadocians would subscribe to the view that any theological enquiry that had no immediate practical aim was useless. Before embarking upon a discussion of technical matters, therefore, we ought to establish the value of making a study such as this at the present time.

No apology is needed for seeking further illumination about the atonement, the central Christian doctrine. But why Gregory of Nyssa? There seems to be very little work on him in English. This is in strong contrast to an intense interest throughout the Middle Ages: about 1,200 manuscripts of his work have survived—a vast number. But the lack of English interest might in itself argue that others have felt that he contains nothing of pressing value for this generation. What is to be said in his defence?

Gregory lived in the most significant century in the history of the Christian Church. Had Arianism prevailed, there would be no Church today. Externally at peace, the Christian community was now in some way recognized by the state: this meant that she had time to define her position on the main theological issues. The Cappadocian Fathers had the educational and spiritual equipment with which to meet the needs of that century; and their vast resources of theological and philosophical wisdom can still enrich the life of the Church today.

But this enquiry has ecumenical as well as scholarly and historical value. Gregory belonged to the Greek part of the Church, which today would be called the Eastern Orthodox. We in the West are woefully ignorant of the thought-forms and outlook of our brethren in the East. Perhaps the present study may contribute towards further understanding. It has seemed to me, as I have studied Gregory, that all the orthodox writers in the Lutheran and Reformed churches would be glad to stand in the tradition of the Cappadocians; and the Romanists, like the Orthodox, would include them among their saints. How do they achieve this ecumenicity? How do they appeal to the priestly and prophetic, the sacramental and evangelical, the corporate and individual at the same time? Of course, it would be

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easy to do this by glossing over the problems; but the Cappadocians refuse to do this. They seem freely to acknowledge different sides of the truth, but they do not make divisions within the Church between supporters of each. In fact they accept all sides of the truth with

remarkable humility. And now that the Church has experienced at least four centuries of emphasis on different aspects of the truth, there is much that she could learn from these 'evangelical catholics'.

Besides straddling denominational barriers, Gregory seems to contain truths that one would normally expect to find emphasized in opposing schools of theology (and perhaps these barriers are of greater significance today than those of denomination). In many ways a Barthian and a Thomist would be at home with this Father, as might a Calvinist and an Arminian. And again it is not because he was unaware of the contradictory emphases, but because it seemed to him that both aspects of the truth are present in Scripture and that therefore both need to be emphasized. It will be claimed that in his large view of both the Scriptures and the atonement, Gregory has much to teach our generation. The biblical foundations for all Gregory's doctrines may be far more sound than many of us might initially be ready to admit.

Any study of Gregory must begin with an acknowledgment of the philosophical speculation among his Christian predecessors. Ignatius, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen and Athanasius, besides the other two Cappadocians, all exercised an enormous influence upon his thought, especially Origen, that intellectual giant. The undercurrents of religious thinking in the contemporary pagan world must also have affected his presentation of the truth. But here we can study neither of these influences, nor can we more than glance at his treatment of the Scriptures, which are his most important source of doctrine. In a fuller treatment, we should obviously touch upon all these matters; and we should also need to look at his ideas about grace.¹ In this present study we confine ourselves to his treatment of the nature of humanity, the purpose of the incarnation, divinization and purification, and the sacraments.

I. THE NATURE OF HUMANITY

Fallen human nature is a frequent theme in Gregory, as it is in all the Fathers. But in what sense is it fallen?² Gregory seems uncertain how far humanity has fallen from grace and how far it still retains the divine image.³ We must therefore examine his doctrine of sin and evil, forces which our Lord combats by His life, death and resurrection.

THE FALL

It is clear that, when dealing with the extent of the Fall, Gregory will not consistently hold the view either that it has affected every part of human nature or that its results are only partial. The use of the term '(divine) mixture' seems to indicate that men still have within themselves both the divine principle and (therefore) immortality. The eighth chapter of the *Catechetical Oration* provides much of the evidence both ways. On the one side he teaches that death does not and cannot touch the soul,⁴ that the thinking nature is somehow superior to the senses;⁵ and

¹ A. S. Dunstone, 'The Meaning of Grace in Gregory of Nyssa', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1962.

² The philosopher, the educationalist, the economist and the politician (especially the Marxist) are all prepared in their different ways to talk of fallen human nature; but they do not normally mean what a Christian means.

³ Gn. 1:26-27 is one of the most evocative texts to all the Fathers. See also the modern French studies in the 'image' in Gregory, mentioned in the Bibliography.

⁴ 46, 5.

⁵ 44, 12.

that mortality has no hold on the inward man and does not touch the divine nature itself.⁶ At the end of the chapter, however, he makes it clear that there is something radically wrong with the ‘thinking-part’ of man;⁷ and earlier he unites soul with body in the dreary picture of the state of fallen man.⁸ Gregory is certain that all men are in fact sinful: chapter six could be called a description of the rolling stone of evil. But it may be doubted whether his view of evil and hence of sin should be taken seriously, especially as he stands within the Platonic tradition.⁹

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Gregory was well aware that our Lord was engaged in a real warfare; but the references to the devil, the opponent, the enemy and the demons seem to lose some of their significance from the fact that he expresses his belief that even they will be saved. If so, then the fact that they can be saved would argue for their unreality as permanent forces of evil. But the clearest traces of the Platonic doctrine of the unreality of evil are in the frequent occurrences of the word ἁμαρτία. As often as not, it is best translated ‘mistake’: it usually seems to be a failure of the intellect; and it is always considered from the point of view of the harm that it has done to man.¹⁰ While there is a thoroughly scriptural emphasis on original sin and its hold upon human nature, yet paradoxically there is at times more than a suggestion of the Socratic doctrine that if a man only knows what is best he will inevitably choose it. Humanity is thus pitiable, rather than culpable. There seems to be little sense of deliberate disobedience to the divine imperative and the resulting offence to the holy majesty of God. There is thus an ambiguity in Gregory’s references to sin and evil, which must colour his doctrine about the extent of the effects of the Fall. Working with a Greek psychology, he was able, as Paul was not, to regard the ‘thinking-part’ of man as still divine. Humanity, though in a sad state, is yet viewed optimistically.

A Western Christian might well wonder whether there is any doctrine of atonement in Gregory at all. The probable explanation of that reaction is that so much of our atonement-theology is coloured by the sixth chapter of Isaiah. The tendency would therefore be to say to Gregory ‘Nondum considerasti quanti sit ponderis peccatum’. A citise study of the text of the Cappadocians and other Eastern Christians seems to suggest that the answer that would come to such an objection is ‘Nondum considerasti quanti sit ponderis mors’. Death is the direct result of sin and it is prevalent among those who were

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⁶ 44, 1-3.

⁷ 51, 18-20.

⁸ 25, 8. This is the age-old question in theology, raging today between the Thomists and the Barthians, whether the soul suffered in the Fall along with the body, and therefore whether the soul has an innate immortality.

⁹ The expression ‘non-being’ occurs at least seven times in the *Catechetical Oration*, in the second instance referring explicitly to that which is evil (33, 6; 40, 6; 75, 9; 81, 10; 83, 5; 84, 2; 99, 3; 158, 2). ‘Non-being does not have substantial existence.’ There are two questions here, whether one can intelligibly talk of Non-Being as against non-being, and whether, if one can, it may be equated with evil. Professor Ramsey of Oxford is typical of many modern philosophers who altogether deny the ontological reality of Non-Being, arguing that there is an exact analogy with Alice, who saw Nobody on the road. Gregory is hamstrung on these questions by his implicit acceptance of the Platonic doctrine that that which has Being must also be eternal (82-83). He adds to this the biblical assumption that in the final reign of God all evil will be consigned to the lake of fire—and thus comes to the conclusion that since it is not eternal, evil is not ontologically real. But must something be eternal to be included within the category of Being?—an assumption still made today, e.g. by Tillich in *The Courage to Be*, pp. 30-31. The significance of the discussion here is that if Gregory really believes that a thing must be eternal to be real, then for him evil must be unreal.

¹⁰ But it is the Unitarians who have always been more concerned with curing the results of sin, rather than the sin itself; and Gregory was always an unrelenting opponent of those heretics.

destined for life and immortality. And so an examination of some of the more important occurrences of the word 'death' should give a better clue to the atonement-theology of Gregory.

DEATH, THE RESULT OF THE FALL

One of the many characteristics of the Godhead is that God does not admit within Himself evil, death or corruption;¹¹ and Gregory seems to have believed that He could not admit into fellowship with Himself any being tainted with this foul and degrading disease. If so, then we have an exact parallel to the predominantly Western doctrine that the holy God cannot admit to fellowship with Himself any being that is tainted with the disease of sin. To be free from death is virtually equated with being outside the power of the Enemy.¹² This horror of death, present throughout the Eastern Fathers, is a healthy reminder of the Pauline doctrine that the last enemy is death: it accords with the patristic exegesis of Jesus' angry tears at the tomb of Lazarus;¹³ and it is a useful antidote to those who sing of the 'narrow stream of death'¹⁴ and fail to recognize how serious it is that that which was created for immortality should be subject to corruption.¹⁵ One might say that the Western emphasis is on the culpability of sin, while Gregory stresses the culpability of death.¹⁶

CORPORATE GUILT

So far then we have seen that Gregory takes a view of sin and evil that is perhaps more Platonic than Christian; but he brings us back to the biblical teaching when he reminds us of the horror of death. One other of Gregory's presuppositions must be noted before we can intelligibly embark on a discussion of his doctrine of the atonement. Human nature is viewed as an entity. The object of Christ's redemptive work is normally mankind, or man, rather than men. This commonplace of Greek theology needs to be repeated today in Western Europe,

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since we do not think so much in terms of the group as of the individual.¹⁷ Suffice it to say here that there seems to be an alternative, however naïve, to the view that Christ died either for

¹¹ *Catechetical Oration*, 12, 14-13, 1.

¹² 96, 6.

¹³ Jn. 11: 33-35, though *cf.* Hoskyns on the passage.

¹⁴ C. Wesley, from 'Come, let us join our friends above'.

¹⁵ While, however, welcoming this emphasis, one must recognize that Gregory may have taken one step too many in the argument: since death is the opposite of βίος (life) and since it is also the opposite in another sense of ζωή (life), it seems to be assumed that because our Lord won the victory over death, He made available not only βίος, but also ζωή to all men. Failure to distinguish between βίος and ζωή has spoilt other theologies than Gregory's.

¹⁶ 93, 4-8; 94, 13-14.

¹⁷ One can thus understand much more easily how the Orthodox Church can flourish in Russia, since both Orthodox and Communist thought works in terms of the group, as of course did most of the biblical writers. It is interesting also that the other part of the Church that flourishes in Russia is the Baptist, whose emphasis would most likely be on the other truth. This is just another aspect of the great controversy within Christendom between the universal and the particular. *Cf. e.g.* W. Robinson, 'The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality', *Beiheft, Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, lxvi; J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body*, S.C.M., London, 1952 with criticism by J. Barr in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, S.C.M., London, 1961.

humanity or for individuals: advocates of both views seem ready to accept the compromise that Christ died for the Church.

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II. THE PURPOSE OF THE INCARNATION

Humanity has fallen and needs to be restored to purity and life. True God became true Man in order that men might become divine. The incarnation is concerned with salvation, at least to judge from Gregory's frequent use of the $\sigma\omega\tau$ -root; and we now examine some of the instances. It will be assumed that in the New Testament there is a fourfold division of the root into present, future, aorist and perfect;¹⁸ and it will also be assumed that no doctrine of redemption is complete without some recognition of each of the four elements. All four aspects of the verb are present in Gregory; and having studied the voice and tense in which he uses it, we should better understand his view of the atonement as process and event.

SALVATION

The *Catechetical Oration* is written in order that the Church might be filled by the addition of those who are being saved in the present.¹⁹ Correspondingly our Lord is the 'Saving One'.²⁰ There is no case in it of the verb in the future tense, but this is no proof that the idea of future salvation is absent. He speaks of those who have hope of a (future) salvation;²¹ and our Lord leads the way for our salvation—an idea which suggests process rather than event.²²

The aorist is the most common tense for this verb in Gregory's writings. He marvels at the divine decision to save mankind;²³ and he believes that the purpose of the incarnation is that by Christ's assumption and divinization of flesh, all that share in it might be saved.²⁴ This seems to suggest that something happened to humanity at the incarnation (though one must beware of forcing semantics into theology). There is only one occurrence of the perfect in the whole book, but that is a most significant one: 'The revelation of the truth teaches us that God made man in the beginning and has saved him now that he has fallen.'²⁵

The examination of the use of this one Greek word²⁶ has suggested

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that Gregory views salvation as both process and event—which I believe also to be the biblical view. But there is a difference to be noted from the usual evangelical interpretation: Gregory uses the event-tenses only of humanity as a whole, but when he thinks of individuals he always

¹⁸ e.g. 1 Cor. 1:18; Jn. 10:9; Rom. 8:24; Eph. 2:5.

¹⁹ 1.3; cf. 141, 3; 159, 5.

²⁰ 142, 3.

²¹ 158, 1; cf. 142, 1.

²² 132, 9; 133, 13; 131, 5 and 11.

²³ 79, 21; 90, 10; 94, 5-6.

²⁴ 130, 3-5.

²⁵ 52, 6.

²⁶ It will have appeared that the writer believes in the importance of careful lexicographical examination of important words in both the New Testament and the Fathers.

uses the process-tenses. There seems to be biblical evidence for the view that all Christians are already saved as individuals and that through those saved individuals Christ is saving the world. One way of expressing the difference between Gregory and some Westerners on this point is to say that he believes that Christ has saved humanity and is saving individuals, whereas some Westerners think that Christ has saved individuals and is saving humanity.

THE INCARNATION AND SALVATION

Against this background of the need for salvation, obviously so important in the eyes of Gregory, we can examine his teaching on the way in which the incarnation brought salvation to men.

‘Nothing short of a revelation of God in His goodness is adequate if man is to know the essential nature of God.’²⁷ Man was grovelling in the darkness and only the Light of the world could pierce that darkness. Gregory is not talking of self-improvement: he is claiming (as against Greek philosophy and all its modern successors) that without the incarnation man could not reach the divine blessedness.

Equally biblical is the favourite doctrine among the Greeks that the Son of God became Son of man in order that the sons of men might become sons of God. ‘Divinization’, as we shall see, is a most important theme in the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers.

Allied to this, though not identical, since now the hereafter is concerned,²⁸ is the fact that Christ is the first-fruits from the dead.²⁹ He joined His divine Nature to our nature, that ours might be freed from death by becoming divine: His journey back from death becomes for human nature the starting-point of its return to immortal life.³⁰

In chapter sixteen of the *Catechetical Oration*, he propounds the interesting view that the purpose of the union of God and man was to effect the eternal union of body and soul in mankind.³¹ The significance of the doctrine is that here the biblical theologian wins the victory

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over the Platonist, since no Greek philosopher would have ever attached such importance to the body.

In chapters 22-24 a bargain with the devil is contemplated. Behind the picture is the biblical belief that Adam sold himself and all his descendants into the power of the enemy. The legal implication of this contract is that it would have been unjust even for God to have stolen man back from his master.³² Man had lost his freedom and the devil had the right to demand a ransom for the return of that freedom. He chose Christ as the ransom; but in His flesh the

²⁷ Srawley, p. 15 (n).

²⁸ Some might doubt the propriety of the division, and would claim support for their doubts in the Fourth Gospel, especially its use of ζῶν.

²⁹ 1 Cor. 15:15 one of the authorities on which chapter 25 of the *Catechetical Oration* is based for its biblical teaching on Christ as the first-fruits from the dead.

³⁰ 96, 8.

³¹ 70, 14-71, 3.

³² Hobbes himself would have been unashamed of this remorselessly logical view of kingship.

Godhead was veiled; Christ could not be held by the forces of evil, so that not only was man freed, but in addition the Redeemer returned to heaven: thus the devil was deprived of both prisoner and ransom.³³

Harnack³⁴ is justified in his judgment that Gregory presents a mainly remedial view of the atonement. 'Healing', 'wound', 'medicine' and 'therapy' all occur in one sentence.³⁵ The basic premiss of all this thought is that 'All that Christ assumes He heals'. This is the converse of original sin: Gregory seems to picture a graph in which humanity descends until the time of the Christ, after which it must ascend.³⁶

In spite of all the healing miracles of our Lord and His command to His disciples to continue this work of healing, it must be doubted whether there is any biblical evidence for this view of the atonement. For where does the death of Christ come into this dispensation? Gregory rarely treats this theme in isolation; but it will be seen that this defect is at least partially remedied in his doctrine about baptism.

The heart of his doctrine about the incarnation would seem to be that Christ took upon Himself all the limitations and wretchedness of humanity, in order to make available to men the fullness of life with God. Whereas many would say that Christ took upon Himself the sin of man, Gregory would say that He took upon Himself the results

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of man's sin (if the two ought to be distinguished). Just as Paul would say that God 'made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him',³⁷ so Gregory might have said 'God made Him to be death for us, who knew no death, that we might be made the immortality of God in Him'. The one seems more concerned with the culpability of the disease and the other with the misfortune of those who suffer from it.

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III. DIVINIZATION AND PURIFICATION

So far we have looked at Gregory's attitude to human nature and his emphasis on the divine initiative in salvation.³⁸ But some may have doubted whether his treatment of sin is sufficiently

³³ The 'fish-hook' analogy seems to be one of the few parts of Gregory's teaching that has even been heard of by many theological students. But what is its importance for Gregory's main teaching? Dr. Gervare Mathew, of Blackfriars Oxford, argues that this metaphor is one of Gregory's concessions to 'popular theology', that his own thought ran on a higher level, but that he was occasionally prepared (in a popular treatise) to make use of ideas borrowed from pagan thought. Accepted solely as a metaphor of the divine victory in Christ, I would say that it is legitimate—or rather at least as legitimate as many of the pictures used by orthodox evangelical preachers today to illustrate the doctrine of the atonement.

³⁴ A. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, London, 1897. Vol. III, pp. 276-310.

³⁵ 46, 8-10.

³⁶ We have sixteen more centuries' proof than Gregory had that humanity does not seem to have been healed.

³⁷ 2 Cor. 5: 21. In spite of all the learned attempts to prove that Paul (because of his Hebrew background) 'must' have meant here 'a sacrifice for sin', rather than 'sin' (attempts coloured rather by theological presuppositions than by genuine exegesis), I still would think that he might have said 'sacrifice for sin' if he had really meant it. However, this example shows how theologians of the Hebrew tradition might more easily come to a synthesis than those brought up in the analytical Greek tradition.

³⁸ This is even more fully revealed in the study of his use of the word 'grace'.

biblical. This theme may be studied further by an examination of what he says about divinization and purification.

DIVINIZATION

That the Lord came to give humanity a share in the divine, will, he thinks, be admitted even by Eunomius.³⁹ The zenith of His glory is that He gives to sinners a share in His own divinity.⁴⁰ Ἐνωσις is another word that attempts to describe this deification of humanity.⁴¹ In a passage in the *De Professione Christiana* Gregory actually defines Christianity as a copying of the divine nature and proceeds to answer the objection that man cannot reach the perfection which our Lord demanded.⁴² The earthly can become heavenly, but this is only possible through the divine activity.⁴³ Even the psalmist foresaw the possibility that man should receive the divine nature into his own.⁴⁴ It is wonderful that that which is subject to death and decay should be allowed to have the same name as that which is by nature immortal.⁴⁵ There is a most interesting selection of συν- compounds which summarizes Gregory's thoughts on how man on earth can live the life of heaven.⁴⁶

The Christian, then, for Gregory, is involved in a progress that includes deification while still on earth and leads to full union with the Godhead hereafter.⁴⁷ But how is this blessed state to be achieved? The Gnostic and the theosophical Platonist both give answers to that

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question that are basically different from that of the Christian, the one with a hopeless fatalism, the other with an optimism which history has, I believe, proved to be ungrounded. Gregory joins with all orthodox Christians in avoiding both these false doctrines. The mortal and immortal are, for him, opposites; and it is made clear in the *Dissertation on the Pater Noster* that of these opposites the one cannot 'produce' the other.⁴⁸ Therefore some other account must be given of this remarkable metamorphosis in human nature. In Gregory's eyes it is achieved through divine grace; but before this can be received, something else must happen, which he calls κάθαρσις. And it will be argued here that even in places where purification is not specifically mentioned, there is an implication that without it, divinization is impossible.

³⁹ 2, 720ab.

⁴⁰ 1, 1044c.

⁴¹ 2, 705a; 220c; 708c; 733b; 380c; 3, 288b.

⁴² 3, 224-245c,d.

⁴³ 3, 224-245c,d.

⁴⁴ 1, 1248a.

⁴⁵ 3, 251c.

⁴⁶ συναπτ-, συμφυία, συγγενής (3, 277c-280b): We are crucified with the Lord, live with Him, are glorified and reign with Him (x, 413c; cf. 3, 680,fin.). Other examples. are at 3, 692a, c; 245d; 693a; 2,220c; and x, 8,48b. This large collection of συν- compounds reminds one of that group in Ephesians 3: 6. Having noticed this connection, the writer was led to wonder whether in fact Gregory has not a closer affinity in outlook and thought-form with Ephesians than with any other New Testament book. One might compare with the Epistle his eschatology, doctrine of the church and child-like hopefulness.

⁴⁷ For which the technical word is θέωσις.

⁴⁸ There is surely here a recollection and refutation of the doctrine propounded in the *Phaedo* that just as the darkness at dawn 'produces' light and the cold when a brazier comes 'produces' heat, so mortality 'produces' immortality.

A distinction must first be made between two kinds of κάθαρσις, the one which man may acquire by his own efforts and the other a gift from God. The first does not need religion; and it is idle to deny that many non-Christians have freed themselves from slavery to the senses. Gregory, however, is talking of the other kind, since there is much evidence, especially from the *Homily on the Pure in Heart*, that he cannot conceive of purity except as a gift from God.

PURIFICATION

There is a true virginity which purifies from every stain of sin,⁴⁹ but it is available only to those ‘with whom the grace of God co-operates’.⁵⁰ At the end of the *De Oratione Dominica* comes an interesting proof of the Trinity: the Son, having purified men from sin, sits at the right hand of the Father, and it is the Spirit who continues to purify. Mark 2: 10 is quoted and the deduction is drawn that the Father forgives sins, the Son takes away the sin of the world and the Holy Spirit purifies from the stains of sin.⁵¹ The purification comes through the baptismal bath.⁵² This statement could have been made in the context of any of the prevalent mystery-religions, at least in the first and second centuries of our era; but it is perhaps here that we can see most clearly the difference between the Christian and the pagan view of κάθαρσις. To the one it is a good work: to the other it is a declaration (among other things) of the amazing grace of Him who

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has effected the lustration.⁵³ The proof that Gregory held a non-automatic view of the process of purification is his willingness to discuss the possibility of becoming pure:⁵⁴ this is of no interest to the philosopher; for the Christian there is no question of greater importance.

The result of purification is purity. This is closely connected with ‘virginity’ and ‘freedom-from-passion’,⁵⁵ concepts beloved of the Greek Fathers. Purity gives the soul an eye by which it is empowered to see God:⁵⁶ through it we are able to turn away from all that is created, to Him who alone is uncreated and therefore incorruptible.⁵⁷ It also means freedom from the senses; and Gregory emphasizes the possibility of sharing here and now in the life of heaven: this joy is not reserved until after death.

We may mention here, under purification and divinization, a large group of words whose prefixed preposition is in itself indicative of change. The μετα- compounds are exactly correlative to the συν- compounds noticed above: men are removed from all that is human, changeable and sinful and share in the life that is sinless and eternal.⁵⁸ All these words are

⁴⁹ 3, 317c.

⁵⁰ 3, 320c.

⁵¹ 1, 1160a and d.

⁵² 1, 724b

⁵³ This theme will be further developed in the next section. While one must be suspicious of trying to prove too much by grammar, it is worthy of note that the subject of καθάρω is usually God and that it is the perfect passive that is usually applied to men (3, 341c; 360c; 364c).

⁵⁴ 1, 1268a, b.

⁵⁵ ἀπάθεια is quite untranslatable.

⁵⁶ 3, 360c.

⁵⁷ 3, 289c-292a.

⁵⁸ μεταποίησις, μεταβολή, μετααστοιχείωσις, μετακόσμησις, μετάληψις, μεταμόρφωσις.

ways of describing a transformation of human nature that is both a prelude to and a part of the process of divinization.

FORGIVENESS

Gregory Nazianzen believed that we are ‘purged in so far as we are illuminated’.⁵⁹ It could therefore be argued that for him forgiveness is seen as illumination and participation with the divine. His namesake also thinks in these terms. ‘If then, leaving this earthbound darkness, we live in the heavenly sphere, we shall become like light⁶⁰ approaching the true light of Christ; and if the true light that shines in darkness comes down to us, we too shall be light, as the Lord says of His disciples (provided, that is, no stain of evil comes to our heart and blots out the grace of our light).’⁶¹ Although the actual word is not used, one can see within this scheme of ideas the place for the concept of forgiveness: Gregory thinks of sin and evil as the forces of darkness which stand as barrier between God and man: only when the darkness and blindness

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have been removed can there be full fellowship between the two. It is moreover abundantly clear that there is only One who is thus able to illumine the people that sit in darkness: He lived in the realm of light before the incarnation and He never left that realm throughout His earthly pilgrimage. For Gregory, light, like purity, is a gift from God.

The question in our minds at the beginning of this section was ‘How far does divinization imply purification?’ We have examined both these words in Gregory’s works; it appears that for him the aim of human life is becoming and remaining like the Deity, being united with Him, being made divine,⁶² for which the short-hand is *θεώσις*. But before such divinization is possible, there must be a change in state, describable by one of the *μετα*- compounds, or called salvation, or illumination, the short-hand for which is *κάθαρσις*. It is impossible to be at one with the Deity unless man has first been cleansed from all that is unlike Him. The conclusion follows that purification is not only an essential prelude to, but one might almost say a part of, divinization.

There is no occurrence of the word ‘forgiveness’ in the *Catechetical Oration*; but our examination of purification and divinization would seem to show that the idea lies behind much of Gregory’s thought about the relations between God and man. In so far as forgiveness suggests two opposing forces with some barrier between, divinization includes the abolition of the middle wall of partition.

This section may be concluded with a quotation from the *Oration on the Pater Noster*. Gregory recalls the parable of the Loving Father—the clearest example in the New Testament of restoration to full fellowship without any open mention of forgiveness. (This parable is thus beloved and abused by those who deny that the doctrine of the atonement is the most important theme in the Bible.) ‘In the story... the Word reveals the sad plight of humanity, telling of his apostasy into luxury. God does not lead him back to his original felicity until... he ponders the

⁵⁹ Oration 39.

⁶⁰ This seems to be the best translation of *φωτοειδεῖς*.

⁶¹ 3, 368a, b.

⁶² This is the ‘being with’ of Mt. 28, the ‘being in’ of Jn. 17 and the ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me’ of Gal. 2.

words of repentance, “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you”. He would not have added... “sin against heaven” if he had not been persuaded that heaven was his natural home and that by departing thence he had committed sin. It is for this reason that his concern for such a confession makes his Father welcome him.’

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IV. THE SACRAMENTS

Most students of the atonement would argue that no full appreciation of an author’s doctrine is possible without a study of his views on the two dominical sacraments. Though this is probably true for all within the main stream of Christian tradition, it applies especially to the Greek Fathers. (The *locus classicus* for all subsequent discussion of baptism is the sixth chapter of Romans; and it may transpire that Gregory’s treatment of this chapter is more rigorous and literal than many Westerns would like to allow.) We shall attempt an examination of what he believes to be the nature and effect of baptism.

The water of baptism wipes off the stain which covered the image of God: it is alive and springs up into eternal life, so that we are again renewed.⁶³ There is a collection of quotations centred around water-symbolism: though they do not all refer to baptism in the original,⁶⁴ Gregory gives them such a context.⁶⁵

Besides removing the ‘old man’ as a filthy garment, the river of grace produces fruits of the Spirit. This Johannine conjunction of ‘water’ and ‘Spirit’ is repeated in a passage where he says that ‘He intended, through the birth from above, to make us sons of the day and sons of the light by water and Spirit—we who formerly were by nature sons of wrath; and so He Himself led the way for such a birth... all who are born to life of this spiritual birth thus become brothers of Him who first was reborn by water and Spirit’.⁶⁶ Rebirth through the ‘washing of regeneration’⁶⁷ is surely a direct recollection of the Pastorals.

Baptism makes men sons of God. It would seem that the water is the only antidote to the fires of hell: if an angel despises the grace of the blessed Giver, Gregory doubts whether he would be permitted within the sphere of the divine love; and how much less a man! He will be like the rich man in the parable who pleads for some water to quench his thirst in hell.⁶⁸ But there seem to be adequate safeguards

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against the ‘mechanical’ interpretation of the sacrament. In the *Catechetical Oration* it is urged that faith is as important as the water⁶⁹ and in the *De Baptismo* the blessing of the priest is joined to the faith of the recipient, and both are regarded as necessary conditions for the

⁶³ 1, 1197c; 3, 600a.

⁶⁴ 3, 581a; 593c, d.

⁶⁵ Whatever might have been the mind of the Fourth Evangelist, it seems unlikely that the Samaritan woman would have thought of baptism in her conversation with the Lord.

⁶⁶ 3, 420d; 276c; 592c, d.

⁶⁷ 3, 583a; Titus 3: 5.

⁶⁸ 3, 424b, c.

⁶⁹ 140, 9-10.

efficacy of the sacrament.⁷⁰ In fact a study of the meanings of faith in Gregory would lead to the conclusion that of the six New Testament meanings,⁷¹ the mainly Pauline idea of saving faith is not the least represented.⁷² For Gregory there is no inconcinnity between faith and symbol.

Baptism gives illumination. It brings with it a real change in the whole of a man's outlook and activity.⁷³ When a man is baptized he ceases from adultery, drunkenness, lying and uncharitableness, and manifests the fruits of the Spirit.⁷⁴

Such are the effects of the sacrament. It remains to examine Gregory's view of its nature.

In a word baptism is *συνθάνατος* with the Lord, although I have not yet found this term in his writings.⁷⁵ The initiate dies with the Lord to sin.⁷⁶ The baptized person has also died with the Lord to mortality: he has passed out of the sphere of decline and now progresses back to the heavenly state. This is one particular aspect of the general Cappadocian doctrine that from the Fall to the incarnation mankind grew progressively worse, but since the inauguration of the age of grace has been growing progressively better. Baptism means leaving prison (*i.e.* the shadowy dwellings of sin, whose warder is the devil) and entering the free life of the children of God.⁷⁷

All these descriptions of baptism could be summed up as 'receiving the Spirit' or passing whilst still on earth into the sphere where they are already 'like the angels'.⁷⁸ Christians are marching to the promised land.⁷⁹ Christ has taken back to Himself the flock of the Enemy.⁸⁰ It must be emphasized that all this is possible only because the Lord

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of glory emptied Himself and came down to share in human life; and because by taking upon Himself all the consequences of man's sin He removed its root. We share in all this and take it upon ourselves when we go down with Him to the waters of baptism; the passion is there mystically and vicariously re-enacted.⁸¹

But this is not only a personal matter: baptism joins a man to the people of God (though Gregory is chary of using the Pauline word *σῶμα* to express the mutual indwelling of believers

⁷⁰ 3, 421, *fin.*

⁷¹ Commented on *e.g.* in my *What is Faith?*, Independent Press, London, 1962.

⁷² 1, 509b; 773d; 1024c; 2, 665b; 832b; 1320c-21b; 3, 269a.

⁷³ One might compare some mission fields today where the change after (adult) baptism is far greater than in a Christianized England.

⁷⁴ 3, 596c; 597c.

⁷⁵ But *cf.* 1, 940b, c.

⁷⁶ 3, 413b. The precise meaning of this popular phrase is not often given. In Gregory it seems to mean the following: death is the last and heaviest demand that sin can make upon any man; when therefore that demand has been satisfied, no further 'legal' claim against him can be made by this demonic force. To put the same point another way, the divine penalty imposed upon the sinner is death, and so when he has already gone down to death with Christ, in baptism, the penalty is fully paid.

⁷⁷ 3, 417c; 580a; 600a.

⁷⁸ 3, 381a; 580a; 600b.

⁷⁹ 3, 597b.

⁸⁰ 3, 589c.

⁸¹ 3, 593b.

in one another and in Christ⁸²). With all the blessings of baptism, the Christian takes upon himself the responsibilities of membership of the body of Christ.⁸³

The atonement is complete when we are united with Christ and all His people in the sacrament of baptism. That which is complete is sustained by our feeding continually upon Christ in the other sacrament. Even this language is somewhat suspect, since probably for Gregory, as for most of the thinkers of the early Church, there were not two (or more) sacraments, but one single mystery with different manifestations, the one which cannot be repeated, and the other which reminds believers again of the whole process.⁸⁴ This unity was portrayed dramatically for all to see at the central festival of the Church's year: on Easter Day, the catechumens were baptized and welcomed into the full fellowship of the Church, and received their first communion; the excommunicate were taken back into the body of believers and ordinands were commissioned for the task for which the Church had separated them. The symbol of the grapes could be used of baptism, yet in ecclesiastical art it normally refers to the eucharist. A common theme in the fourth century is the pole carried by two men with a bunch of grapes hanging from its centre—a Christian interpretation of the spies bringing present promise of the joys of the promised land. Sunday by Sunday the believer enjoys the foretaste of heaven which is pure and undivided fellowship with the whole Church on earth and in heaven and with Him who effected this atonement.⁸⁵

It is impossible to over-estimate the importance for Gregory of the incarnation: 'being united with life implies having a share in it.'⁸⁶ 'Nothing else than the body which showed itself superior to death could also become the source of life.'⁸⁷ 'The reason that God, when He

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revealed Himself, united Himself with our mortal nature, was to deify humanity by this close relation with deity. In consequence, by means of His flesh which is constituted by bread and wine He implants Himself in all believers, following out the plan of grace. He united Himself with their bodies, so that mankind too, by its union with the Immortal, might partake of incorruptibility.'⁸⁸ Gregory shared with St. John and the authors of the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Hebrews the belief that the heavenly sphere is not only superimposed upon the earthly, but actually impinges upon it. This is made possible solely by the redemption won through the life, death and resurrection of Him who was both man and God.

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CONCLUSION

In this conclusion an attempt will be made to sum up Gregory's views on the atonement, to gauge the relative importance for this doctrine of the four influences mentioned in the Introduction—church tradition, Greek higher education, popular thought and the Scriptures; and lastly to estimate the original contribution of Gregory himself.

⁸² Possibly because of heretical misinterpretations?

⁸³ 3, 421c; 580a.

⁸⁴ See F. L. Cross, *1 Peter—a Paschal Liturgy*, Mowbray, London, 1954.

⁸⁵ Cf. G. Mathew, 'The Origins of Eucharistic Symbolism', *Dominican Studies*, 1937.

⁸⁶ *Catechetical Orations*, 542, 2.

⁸⁷ 142, 14-143, 1.

⁸⁸ 151, 10-152, 6.

There was a time when man had been like God: in what might be called a psychosomatic unity he lived the full life that God had intended for him, of autarchy, 'passionless existence' and grace. Not content with this, he was deceived by the enemy of souls into aiming at an illusory higher objective. In doing this man lost his freedom and became a slave of Satan; and a worse result was that since body and soul had both fallen, they became separated. As a result death intervened and laid its claim upon the body and even upon that which is by nature immortal the soul. This was disastrous in itself, but the sin and death which thus entered were also a barrier between man and God: man could no longer see Him nor talk with Him, no longer live in uninterrupted communion with the Father. (As a result of this he also lost his ability to live at peace with his brethren.) Man was pitiable—a constant and acknowledged note in all Greek theology—but he was not only pitiable, he was also to blame, having spoilt God's earth, broken the covenant and insulted the Lord of glory. Though this culpability may be less emphasized than a Westerner might desire, it is yet inescapable in the text of Gregory; and therefore, so long as this guilt remained, man's state would also remain sad and it would be impossible to be at one with God.

Man of himself was and is unable to pull himself back to that state of original bliss that was the object of many Greek philosophers and of all Christians. Every attempt by even the best of men was bound to fail, for the force of the enemy is too strong for fallen humanity. But with God all things are possible. Though He could have sent an angel to our race, He in fact came down in His own Person to our situation to effect our redemption.⁸⁹ God Himself came down to the

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squalor that was humanity and, by coming, was able to do two things which no-one else could have done: He remained sinless, living a life which was both human and outside the sphere where sin had any dominion; and because of this He was able to share His victory over sin with all who come to Him in faith. One way of expressing this is to say that Christ was able to impute to others His own righteousness: the other way of describing it leads to a satisfactory demythologizing of the 'ransom' ideas, including the 'fish-hook' analogy. Christ made Himself subject to all the limitations which the devil imposed upon mankind, while never falling down and worshipping him, and in exchange was able to demand man's release. To consummate the life which ransomed humanity, He faced the last enemy and came out of the battle triumphant; He was thus able to impute to all who share in Him the immortality which was His alone after the fall of mankind. Man, free now from the fear of death, cleansed from the guilt of sin and being released from its power, is able to be at peace with God his Father.

The atonement is based securely in the historical facts of the life, death and resurrection in Palestine of the Son of God. But Gregory is realist enough to know that this, though complete in itself, can be but the beginning of the atonement. He must go on to ask how this can be applied to the individual believer. Faith for him is the bridge between the finished work of Christ and the redemption of the Christian. Then comes the sacrament of baptism, by which the purification that Christ has secured is transferred to every person who in faith receives it. Baptism is the outward and visible sign of a grace which in fourth century Cappadocia was by no means invisible. Through the power of Christ, the believer gave up all that belonged to the

⁸⁹ One of the reasons for the insistence on the divinity of the Son was that it seemed to the Cappadocians (as it has always seemed to the orthodox) that if it were not God Himself in the flesh who lived, died and rose again, then the atonement is not secure.

old life, there being a real change in his life and thought. After this bodily manifestation of a change of heart, the newly created body is sustained by the eucharist, through which the incarnate life of the Lord Jesus Christ is lived again. Here too one cannot but notice the centrality of the incarnation without which this sacramental grace would be impossible. The whole process of re-presenting the life of the Lord is the work of grace: through it man is brought again to that status which he was intended to hold, that of a ransomed son of God.

If all this is present in Gregory, there can be no question about the source of his atonement-theology. No philosopher could so easily harp upon the culpability of human nature before the divine majesty of the Godhead; and even his pitiability would, have been denied by the optimists among the neo-Platonists; they would have regarded us

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as sufficient of ourselves to help ourselves. With them, as with the scientific humanists of the nineteenth century, it is a question of progressive freedom from the limitations of time and space: for Gregory it is a question of re-birth. It would not be difficult to describe this distinction as one of degree rather than of kind, and to argue that ultimately the philosopher and the Christian are saying the same thing. The argument is incapable of proof either way; but I would assert both that the Bible sees improvement as different in kind from conversion and also that Gregory shares this view. Philosophy is subordinated to the Scriptures, and even Church tradition is less to the fore than in many of the Fathers: in fact while he was obviously not unaware of their contribution to theology and biblical exegesis, there are strikingly few direct references. Of his four sources, then, it seems that the Scriptures are the predominant and formative influence. He is clearly at ease in all the different parts of the Bible. From the Old Testament he is especially prone to quote the Psalms, Song of Solomon, Isaiah and Genesis. He will use all the New Testament books gladly; but it seems to the writer that there is a special affinity between his thought and that of both Paul and the Fourth Gospel (particularly the Prologue). Gregory was first and foremost a theologian who based his teaching on the whole of the Bible.

It remains to estimate his own personal contribution to work on the atonement. The first characteristic which stands out in all his writings is optimism. The Word of the Lord goes forth conquering and to conquer; He will soon have covered the earth with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. Seventeen centuries of opposition to the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ have not damped the ardour of evangelists with an equally sure faith in the power of God's grace. Were this optimism centred upon man and based in his innate ability to rise to the higher life, it would be a denial of the doctrine of the Fall—a doctrine which holds so important a place in the thought of the early Church; but its source is the grace of the benevolent Creator and Redeemer of men. This child-like faith in God's irresistible plan to bring His whole salvation to His whole earth Gregory shares with the writer to the Ephesians and with Origen.

He was also able to draw for his theology upon his practical experience as a pastor and church administrator. In fact the purpose of all his work would seem to be to bring help and encouragement to his ordinary parishioners; and he asked of them only the training that they would have received from the local διδάσκαλος. Gregory

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would certainly have been more intelligible to his semi-educated contemporaries than many present-day theologians are to people whose only education has been at a secondary or grammar school. It is in this contact with the 'ordinary man' that we must see the source of what has been called his popular catechetical teaching. His own thought ran at a higher level, but in order to make himself intelligible to his readers he would adopt concepts such as that of the 'fish-hook' which were then current, and adapt them to his service.

Another aspect of Gregory's personality expressed in his doctrine is his idea of 'true virginity', an idea which would, I imagine, have appeared to his contemporaries to have been highly individual. The Christian is to 'keep himself unspotted from the world', while being fully involved in it. There can always arise—and there had probably then arisen—a dangerous and unbiblical dichotomy between 'holy people' who lived in monasteries away from the business of the world, and those who did not make such a renunciation, continuing, almost apologetically, to live in it: the former were first-class, the latter decidedly inferior Christians. Influenced yet once again by Origen, Gregory insists on the fact that Christ has redeemed every part of human life from child-birth to death: he would have maintained that one can be as truly a Christian at a factory bench as in a hermit's cell—a motif, be it noted, from the Synoptic Gospels. This is another way of saying that Gregory loved the people among whom he worked and ministered; and desired that they too should share in the atonement that Christ had secured for all His brethren.

In what ways, then, was Gregory's teaching an advance on that of his predecessors? First, there seems to be a steady return to biblical truths, especially where they differ from the views of neo-Platonism. In this Gregory is in advance of Clement and Origen. Second, Gregory seems happy to combine 'popular teaching' with 'deep theology'. Third, the Cappadocians were stout defenders of Nicene orthodoxy: in fact 'the classic Christian definition of the godhead as Three Persons and One Substance is the fruit of Cappadocian thinking';⁹⁰ and wherever orthodox thinking on the Trinity prevails, it is likely that a biblical doctrine of the atonement will follow. Beyond these three points one could only say that there seems to be a return to truths presented in the Bible.

One of Gregory's heroes was Moses, who spoiled the Egyptians and gave what he received to the people of God. Gregory himself spoiled the treasures of Greek philosophy in order to give to the people of

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God an understanding of the truths of the Bible. Of the atonement he presents an all-round picture of the descent from grace and the return made possible only through the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God. The only failure is to bring out fully and at all places the centrality of the cross. Apart from this, there is presented in Gregory, and especially in the *Catechetical Oration*, a true picture of the biblical teaching on the atonement, showing how the Son of God became Son of man in order that the sons of men might become sons of God.

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⁹⁰ Hardy, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

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This lecture was originally published by The Tyndale Press in 1964.

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